Conclusion

Doing Damage, or Re-Writing Central West Africa

How to investigate a discursive presence, such as the "Congo", that keeps emerging in a heterogeneous corpus of African American texts, but has been ignored as a major topic within (African) American intellectual circles throughout the last two hundred years? This book chose to take a Foucauldian approach (cf. Introduction) through which a substantial amount of (African) American texts and practices were assembled that possessed at least one commonality: They produced utterances about the Congo. These texts and practices were then read "widely" and "closely" against and alongside one another, showing that the Congo discourse in which many texts operated determined to a great extent what and how they communicated. Through constant critical evaluation and an ongoing combination of many analytic categories – specifically race, class, gender, ethnicity, and capitalism, with class as the most systematic thread – this book's approach enabled an empirically-led theoretization of the Congo, leading to the neologism "Congoism".

Congoism, as a term, has its roots in 19th-century America, as was shown in the First Chapter. If anything, the emergence of a discursive phenomenon like Congoism echoes the longue durée influence that discourses in general can have – my book truly attests to the power of discourse in general and the U.S. American Congo discourse in particular. Congoism's discursive forms may have altered, its epistemic foundation may have changed, but its function has remained similar throughout the decades: Designating what "we", bourgeois subjects, do not want to be and do not want to be framed as: dysfunctional, alienating, savage, ugly, enslaved. As was shown throughout the book, Congoism proved extremely malleable in its form, epitomized by the ever-changing (but also ever-returning) topoi of the Congo-as-Slave, the Congo-as-Savage, the Congo-as-Darkness, the Congo-as-the-Vital, and the Congo-as-Resource. Congoism thus functioned as, to paraphrase Foucault, a discursive truth regime of rejection – both of internal and external Others.

One central Congoist strategy, starting in antebellum America, has been the Congo's separation from, and unification with, the signifier "Africa". The strategy of evoking an "African" homogeneity, while at the same time dividing it into favorable and less favorable regions, recurs in many works by African American intellectuals. Another strategy has been the constant catering to the epistemic mainstream, whatever it happened to be. Congoism is an extremely conformist discourse, which attaches itself to the intellectual standard and forces the Congo to fit into the frameworks provided by it. This turned the Congo into a recognizable and convincing signifier that reflected the dominant knowledge paradigms – from classicism and romanticism in the First Chapter to science in the Second and postmodernism in the Third.

Congoism also thrived on the strategy of hierarchization. Paradigms of objectivity and firsthand observation (in the First and Second Chapters), as well as self-reflectivity and meta-critical stances towards the Congo text production within one's own intellectual circle (as seen in the Third Chapter), provided clarity as to where Central West Africa should be placed in comparison to "us". This unbridgeable distance between "us" and "them", along with the continuation of an asserted closeness to the Congolese, are revealed by and produced through the aforementioned topoi and through modes of narration, such as tongue-in-cheekiness: Suggestions of closeness through humorous encounters merely override the more overtly paternalistic base of Congoism, as was shown from the Second Chapter onward. The attempts to break through the dismissive American Congo discourse have been noticeable, especially in the Third Chapter, which investigated whether identity-based (and genre-oriented) text selection can open up spaces of dissent, but showed that both men and women, American-born and Congo-born African Americans, activists, and journalists participated in the reproduction of Congoism. Reproduction was thus far more common than effective opposition through strategies of "negation", "reversal", "everydaying", or "meta-reflection"

This book has also demonstrated to what extent (Black) American intellectuals have been grappling with the Congo for centuries in an ongoing and confrontational dialog with white American and European intellectual discourse. This transnational and transcultural aspect has continued to exist up to the present day. What has changed since 1800 are the authors – those, in short, who actually produce Congoism (against the backdrop of a large, dismissive Congo archive), despite their attempts to treat the Congo fairly. Due to past and present activisms, as well as globalization and changing schools of thought, the American cultural mainstream has undeniably become more diverse.

This is reflected in the highly profitable Congo book industry, which is now permeated by POC ("people of color") – a term that designates non-white racial or ethnic minorities that are tied together through the experience or threat of racism (Ha/Lauré al-Samarei/Mysorekar 2007: 12). If one searches "Congo" on Amazon.com, for instance, bestselling white American writers are listed alongside lesser-known Black and foreign-born ones. Michael Crighton's popular novel Congo shows up at the top of the Amazon list, together with the Ngwalas' Congo: Spirit of Darkness (cf. Third Chapter). In the non-fiction department, one finds a travelogue by the Indian-born Anjan Sundaram titled Stringer: A Reporter's Journey in the Congo, general histories like the Belgian journalist-author David Van Reybrouck's Congo: The Epic Story of a People, Michael Deibert's 2003 The Democratic Republic of Congo: Between Hope and Despair, a new edition of Arthur Conan Doyle's 1900 critique of the Congo Free State, titled The Crime of the Congo, and Jason Stearns's 2011 Dancing in the Glory of Monsters (cf. First Chapter).

The current diversity among authors writing on the Congo is a continuation of the transcultural aspect of Congoism. The dichotomous, dismissive character of Congoism continues, as well – tropes of hope and despair, darkness and light persevere, as the titles mentioned above already suggest. Congoism clearly cuts through geography, time, and identity. Congolese, Black Americans, American Congolese, Indian Americans, and Belgian writers do not engage in the Congo discourse in ways that differ all that radically from earlier times, it seems. While these monographs exist predominantly outside the immediate realm of the African American intellectual community, a discussion of these books, and Van Reybrouck's Congo history in particular, will help to reveal the broader contemporary relevance of this study and will, once again, underscore the transcultural and transnational aspects and connections of Congoism. African American intellectuals, as was shown, interacted very actively with each other, but also with major schools of historic thought and with their socio-political environments. Individual white Euro-American intellectuals exercised a massive influence on Black intellectuals, who, in turn, have often acknowledged the effect of white American and European discourses and traditions on their own Congo writing. What holds true for African American intellectuals also proves relevant to a great extent for white Euro-American ones, it seems. This is due to the fact that Congo authors – both in the past and in the present – tend to base their texts on similar epistemological convictions and sources, leading to a very similar discourse.

One book in particular embodies this stasis, namely David Van Reybrouck's Congo: The History of an Epic People, published in English in 2014, which truly mines U.S. American sources. Van Reybrouck's book is a model example of how

historical works from outside the U.S. incorporate and reflect the Congo discourses within the U.S. Van Reybrouck actively acknowledges the American influence on the Central West African Congo in numerous instances, ranging from the fact that "[W]ords like steamer and boy, due in part to the influence of British and American missionaries, never disappeared" (2014: 63) to the very explicit mentioning of U.S. political influence and the presence and effect of Black political discourse and individuals in the Congo (e.g. Bishop William Taylor, ibid: 48; Marcus Garvey, ibid: 150; Du Bois, ibid: 180; Obama ibid: 174 and 533-534). The references to the United States continue throughout, culminating in quotes which, for instance, link the "colonial city" in the Congo with urban settings in the United States: "There was more space and freedom, the distances were greater, the lanes broader, the lots roomier. From the very start, these cities were planned with the automobile in mind. It had something American about it, many whites felt" (ibid: 166). The author continues the comparison by stating: "Léopoldville with its various urban nuclei but no clear city center looked more like Los Angeles than like the medieval towns of Belgium or the 19th-century middle-class neighborhoods of Brussels or Antwerp" (ibid).[1]Van Reybrouck even frames W.E.B. Du Bois as a "radical American civil rights activist" (ibid: 180) – thus echoing the ongoing internal categorization that takes place within African American activist circles. This highlights the extent to which the author is part and parcel of an American discourse, consciously or unconsciously.

In what follows, this book will be discussed in relation to this book's findings on the African American Congo discourse. Although it is certainly true that Van Reybrouck writes against a very different background than African American intellectuals have done in the last two hundred years, it is equally true that strong overlaps in rhetoric, epistemic attitudes, and sources do systematically occur. Again, this is mainly determined by the archives that the author mines. According to Foucault, historical sources are primarily indicators for, and reflectors of, the social conditions under which they were produced. By analyzing sources in a Foucauldian manner, fundamental aspects of social relationships may be revealed. "Why have certain discourses been produced and not others?" is a central question here; the same is true for Van Reybrouck.

In the four years since its first Dutch/Flemish edition in 2010 (originally titled Congo: een geschiedenis/Congo: A History), Van Reybrouck's book has become a phenomenal success in terms of sales and critical acclaim. The book has been translated into six languages so far (English, French, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, and

1 This kind of comparison appears in the book, e.g. "Léopoldville in those years was a kind of New Orleans" (Van Reybrouck 2014: 168).

German) and has been awarded numerous prestigious prizes, such as the 2010 Libris Geschiedenis Prijs (Netherlands and Flanders), the 2012 Prix Médicis essai (France), and the 2012 NDR Kultur Sachbuchpreis (Germany). In the Low Countries, the book was an instant hit, published to coincide with the celebrations of fifty years of Congolese independence. More than 150.000 copies were sold within less than half a year, a substantial amount in the Benelux (Geysels and Van Baelen 2010).

Merging the research qualities of an academic, the writing skills of an acclaimed novelist, and the interviewing skills of a journalist, Van Reybrouck produced a work that continuously walks the line between various text genres, as well as that between fact and imagination. The book's perceived "newness" was constituted by the many aesthetic and empathetic aspects in Van Reybrouck's writing (cf. Van Hove 2011). Supporters of the book frequently emphasized the beauty of its language and composition, as well as its "empathy" (e.g. Hendrickx 2010).

Van Reybrouck's work also impressed reviewers because of his heterogeneous source material, combining scholarly works and "personal stories", as The New York Times wrote (Ledgard 2014: n.p.). In his review for The Washington Post, Martin Meredith emphasized the legitimacy of the author's claims by highlighting Van Reybrouck's "10 visits to the country" in which he "managed to find Congolese veterans with memories of early white missionaries and colonial officials, and tales of religious uprisings and resistance movements" (2014: n.p.). Meredith continues to praise the work by mentioning that "his witnesses from more modern times included musicians, footballers, political activists, warlords and child soldiers. The result of all this is a vivid panorama of one of the most tormented lands in the world" (ibid). Eyewitness epistemology, as discussed in previous chapters, convinced the reviewers that Van Reybrouck's book should be taken seriously, a claim that I have questioned throughout.

The anecdotal quality of Congo: The Epic Story of a People is also responsible for the book's appeal. Van Reybrouck openly went for the small stories within "history", including his own father's, who worked as an engineer in secessionist Katanga (Van Reybrouck 2010b: n.p.). Despite this inclination toward the anecdotal, Van Reybrouck indicated in his interviews that he did not wish to shy away from constructing more traditional "big stories" (ibid: n.p.). The author positioned himself in this context explicitly in opposition to postmodernist writing, which tends to stay "close to one self, to tell one's own little story, hoping that out of all these images and fragments some mosaic-like picture will emerge" (ibid). A final element of perceived newness was Van Reybrouck's open break with the "traditional narrative schemes" of Belgian and Dutch Congo historiography (ibid). This post-ideological

writing caused the author to distance himself from researchers like De Witte and Hochschild who, according to Van Reybrouck, write in "an old school, left-wing engagement which brought with it a certain black-white thinking" (ibid).

Van Reybrouck's post-ideological approach does not produce a wholly uncritical history, however. Congoism and critique are not mutually exclusive. "To at least challenge the Eurocentrism that I would doubtlessly find on my path" (2014: 2), he writes, Van Reybrouck promises to be critical towards "the shaky compass" of written sources (ibid: 4). These written sources, according to the author, have tended to tell Central West African history only starting from colonialism onward (an observation this work shares). "To place Congo's history in the hands of a European. How Eurocentric can one be?" (ibid: 16), Van Reybrouck asks rhetorically. In contrast to these earlier accounts, the author begins his history in the prehistoric Congo and counters Eurocentric history by tackling Congoist language, amongst other phenomena: "If a heart of darkness existed [in the pre-colonial Congo], it was sooner to be found in the ignorance with which white explorers viewed the area than in the area itself. Darkness, too, is in the eye of the beholder" (ibid). The author also embraces an anti-Eurocentrism by occasionally integrating contemporary urban Congo history, as well as history works by "Congolese voices", into his story (ibid: 2).

Who are these Congolese that Van Reybrouck cites? He mentions Congolese academics (ibid: 561), along with "everyday people whose lives had been marked by the broader scope of history" (ibid: 3). In doing the latter, Van Reybrouck announces that his narrative is a "bottom-up history", based on interviews "with those whose perspectives usually do not make it into the written sources" (ibid: 563). Van Reybrouck hoped that this "archive" (ibid) of "local perspectives" (ibid: 3) would provide new insights and "a fuller, more tangible picture than textual information does" (ibid). To ensure the accuracy of those Congolese voices, Van Reybrouck restricted his interviews to the material aspects of "ordinary lives" (i.e. what Congolese "had eaten [...] the clothes they'd worn, what their house looked like"). This kind of non-textual information often exhibits greater permanence than remembered opinions and attitudes, according to the author: "Nothing is so contemporary as our memories" (ibid).

Thus, throughout his Introduction, Van Reybrouck applies several strategies of critique that had been taken up by African Americans in previous decades. Like Lynn Nottage, he highlights the "everyday"; like John Williams, he rejects the topos of Heart of Darkness and underlines the existence of a modern Congo; like Malcolm X, Van Reybrouck clearly espouses a critical meta-perspective on Congo discourse. However, it is also in the same manner as many African American intellec-

tuals that Van Reybrouck's well-intentioned announcements crumble in the course of his Congo history. Forceful rhetorical rejection and offhanded reproduction of Congoism have been bedfellows all along, as was shown in previous chapters. And so it goes with Congo: The Epic Story of a People.

Overtly rejecting the Conradian Congo analogies is one thing; stepping outside of this rhetoric (and the discourse and archive it belongs to) itself is quite another, as Van Reybrouck's work proves (like that of many Black intellectuals before him). Van Reybrouck's introduction frequently reproduces reductive Congo imagery, for instance. For Van Reybrouck, the Congo river flows into the Atlantic as "someone who slashes his wrists and holds them under water – but then eternally" (ibid: 2); Kinshasa is compared to a "termite queen, swollen to grotesquery and shuddering with commotion" (ibid: 4); the equatorial forest he likens to a "head of a broccoli" (ibid: 12); the map of the Congo resembles "a balloon" (ibid: 8); and manioc roots sold on the markets remind the author of "sawed off tusks [...] as though the subsoil is barring its teeth, angry and fearful as a baboon" (ibid: 5). This ironic, animalistic rhetoric is lent strength by his systematic use of comparisons. The "peaceful maritime delta" of the Nile is contrasted with the violent one of the Congo (ibid: 2); The Democratic Republic of the Congo's capital is compared to its twin sister Brazzaville, which is "smaller, fresher, shinier" than Kinshasa (ibid: 4), and whose soil is black, not red, "as in other parts of Africa" (ibid: 5). To round off these rather random comparisons, Van Reybrouck contrasts the rural Congo of the sixteenth century with Renaissance-era Italy (ibid: 20). The message of Congolese backwardness can hardly be overlooked, a message this book has focused upon in the Congo archive throughout the last 200 years.

Failing infrastructure and the awkward clothing of Congolese are reappearing topoi in Van Reybrouck's work, a fascination he shares with African American works (cf. the Third Chapter) and the other books on the Amazon.com list, as we will see. Dysfunctional roads and inadequate train services justify Van Reybrouck's rule of thumb that "a journey that took one hour during the colonial period now corresponds to a full day's travel" (ibid: 15); (bleak) postcolonial times are thus pitted up against a (better) colonial period. This implicit privileging of colonial aspects returns throughout the story. Van Reybrouck's rule of thumb echoes the Belgian "model colony" discourse mentioned in the Introduction – a discourse which highlights the structural progressiveness of the Belgian Congo without mentioning that this relied upon forced or poorly paid labor by, for instance, Congolese cantonniers who kept the roads free (cf. Butcher 2008: 138). Thus, Van Reybrouck's implicit charge against the Congo – why has everything gone downhill since colonialist times? – is very much part of an internal Belgian discussion (just as African Ameri-

can Congo discourses and topoi had been). At this point, if not earlier, Van Reybrouck proves intimately bound up in Belgian ideological negotiations about the meaning of the Congo.

There is a strong class element in Van Reybrouck's focus on the real-and-imagined struggle with Congolese public infrastructure, too. Failing infrastructure is such a dominant topos because it goes against the grain of major bourgeois values, such as efficiency, regularity, continuity, and precision, as Moretti has it (2013: 18). On an epistemic plain, the ongoing attention directed at damaged roads is the expression of how private and public commodities became the new "principle of bourgeois validity: "consensus has been increasingly built on things, not men – let alone principles", as Moretti framed it (ibid: 21). Commodities (new and "whole" ones, favorably) confer legitimacy on Van Reybrouck. If these things are not there, as is the case with the Congo, the place tends to become illegitimate.

Van Reybrouck's depiction of the Congolese is permeated with strategies of commodification. In his text, we also find the recurring topos of "friendship" encountered in the accounts of 19th-century Black travelers or in texts of female anti-rape activists, for instance. In the same vein as these missionaries and activists, the distance between Van Reybrouck and his interview partners is revealed and reinforced throughout by his rhetoric. This underlines repeatedly the lack of connection between those involved. The author's narrative reveals that the class distance between him and the Congolese in fact precludes any form of truthful communication. A case in point is the friendship of the author with Nkasi, allegedly born in 1882, whom Van Reybrouck visits at home a number of times. Van Reybrouck considers Nkasi and his family as quintessentially "poor people", however – people without whole commodities. Their relationship is thus mediated through things; things that are missing, things that are broken, things that Van Reybrouck brings as gifts, as "poverty cannot be combated with powdered milk alone" (ibid: 26). Tellingly, Nkasi is introduced in Van Reybrouck's narrative with reference to his "scratched lenses", which are "attached to his head with a rubber band" (ibid: 10). Descriptions of Nkasi's family members are limited to their taste for soft drinks and cheap Euro-American clothes. "One of them had a sweater that read Miami Champs", Van Reybrouck observes (ibid: 10). Congolese people are judged, tongue-in-cheek, through their relationship with "things".

Van Reybrouck also reproduces Congoism by losing sight of, or interest in, his own principles of knowledge production. We have seen this among Black intellectuals, too, by, for instance, calling for Black unity while simultaneously abjecting, ignoring, and reducing the Congo Blacks. Van Reybrouck's treatment of Patrice Lumumba illustrates how this operates in his own text. In the introduction, the au-

thor proclaims his interest in using the Congolese as an oral archive for obtaining information on material traces of the past. This principle breaks down in the characterization of Lumumba. Van Reybrouck talked to Jamais Kolonga, for instance, who is a Congolese musician and participant-eyewitness of Congo's independence ceremonies, during the course of which Kolonga contrasts the "calm, cultivated, and respectful" president Kasavubu with the "irresponsible" prime minister Lumumba (ibid: 274-275). Van Reybrouck qualifies Kolonga offhandedly as ethnically biased because he was "a native of Bas-Congo" (ibid: 274). But the author nevertheless cites Kolonga's opinion in a lengthy passage. This kind of knowledge production contradicts Van Reybrouck's own historical approach, in which he professes to use Congolese eyewitnesses as a source for material factuality alone, not for their opinions. Kolonga suggests in his conversation with the author that his opinion is more than just the voice of one person: It also stands for the opinion of "old people in Bas-Congo", who regard Lumumba as "empty-headed, affected, and rude" (ibid: 275).

Kolonga's account is a typical instance of a native informant who is allowed to speak about topics he cannot judge properly because they are beyond his knowledge horizon (cf. previous chapter, too). Van Reybrouck does assert that "fourteen million people rarely share the same opinion" (ibid: 274), but these words prove to be rather empty. Through Van Reybrouck's source selection from an already deeply flawed Congo archive, Congolese are ultimately homogenized and portrayed as speaking in a single voice critical of Lumumba. In a list of rather negative quotes, Kolonga's opinion is strengthened by and aligned with Euro-American voices, such as the Belgian chief commander General Émile Janssens and American deputy secretary of state Douglas Dillon. The latter called Lumumba "messianic" and "irrational" – a judgment which was shared by many news media in the 60s (cf. previous chapter) – while the former is said to have evaluatd the prime minister as follows: "moral character: none; intellectual character: entirely superficial; physical character: his nervous system made him seem more feline than human" (ibid: 301). Subpersonhood "made in the U.S." thus finds its way without any critical footnote into Van Reybrouck's account, again highlighting the transtemporal and transcultural quality of Congoism that makes it so difficult for individual writers to escape it.

Against this background of a "normalized" Congo discourse as well as a "standardized" way of dealing with a flawed Congo archive, Van Reybrouck's Lumumba account barely meets the standard of a trustworthy historical depiction. If racist caricatures of Lumumba's opponents turn out to be acceptable historical utterances, it is worth trying to map out some of the potential processes involved in this depiction of a democratically elected, brutally murdered prime minister. One potential reason

for Van Reybrouck's framing of Lumumba lies in the author's opposition to critical historians such as De Witte and Hochchild. This reveals itself in interviews (cf. above), as well as in writing. The author tends to implicitly differentiate or contradict the openly partisan narratives of De Witte (who turned the prime minister into a heroic, revolutionary figure). Van Reybrouck's Lumumba story thus becomes a way to position himself against ideological others, in much the same fashion as earlier Black intellectuals.

Congo-born scholar Valentin Mudimbe describes Van Reybrouck's book on its back cover as a "well-documented and passionate narrative which reads like a novel. [...] As an eye, a judge, and a witness, a talented writer testifies" (ibid: n.p.). With this kind of praise, Van Reybrouck's book is fictionalized ("narrative", "novel", "writer") and rendered simultaneously a well-researched effort ("well-documented"; "witness"). Despite the author's explicit critique of postmodernist historians, Van Reybrouck seems to end up as one himself. Due to this variety of attitudes, De Witte's careful analysis of Van Reybrouck's many factual mistakes can thus be met with silence (cf. De Witte 2020).

Unverifiable stories produced by Congolese permeate Van Reybrouck's history – similar to the many Black historians in the past – and are dealt with as if they were authoritative narratives. Thus, Nkasi figures prominently in Van Reybrouck's book, as does the man who stole the Belgian king's sword during the Congo's independence festivities. Van Reybrouck seems to realize that he is on thin ice with respect to the reliability of his informants: "Ngwadi's fantasy knew no bounds", the author states about the man who claims to have stolen the king's sword (2014: 277). To counteract the danger of integrating a voice that is "talking rubbish" (as Butcher put it in his own account, 2008: 109) Van Reybrouck puts the 1882-born Nkasi to the test to figure out whether he is indeed "one of the oldest people ever. In the Congo, no less" (2014: 7), where the average life expectancy barely scratches 50 and whether he is telling the truth by means of "check and double check" (ibid). With this in mind, Van Reybrouck's account becomes a relevant example of how Congo writing has been rendered superficially postmodern, but remains modernist at heart (cf. also the previous chapter). Van Reybrouck indicates that the structural questions raised by postmodernist thinkers remain unaddressed and unresolved, including those relating to binary thinking, rationality, the "grand narratives" of progressive development, and the fraught relation between reality and language. Van Reybrouck's particular use of interviews, eyewitness accounts, and his own observations deeply depends, so it seems, on a "logocentric" belief (as Derrida would have it; cf. Butler 2002: 15-23) in terms of the correspondence of "voice" and reality.

Van Reybrouck's history tends to be as inconsistent and paradoxical as many offered by Black American intellectuals. His deep investment in the "will to truth" and the "will to knowledge", to paraphrase Foucault in his History of Sexuality (1998: 12-13), leads to a writing attitude of hubris, and to the authorial self-confidence in knowing for sure (despite the impossibility of this claim). In the same vein as Herskovits in the Second Chapter, Van Reybrouck recognizes the inherent limitations of knowledge production as a whole as pertains to the Congo, but produces alleged truths nevertheless. Other authors on the Amazon list do so, too. Stearns's Dancing in the Glory of Monsters provides a case study of certainty in the midst of deep-rooted doubts. The number of times that Stearns relativizes his own knowledge is telling.[2] Despite this theoretical recognition of the complexity of producing truthful Congo texts, Stearns insist on knowing in the end. And that is the whole point of Congoism: Claiming to know despite the impossibility of knowing. Stearns "knows", for instance, that the horror stories he recorded in the Congo – including well-known topoi of cannibalism, rape, senseless murder, and other savagery (Stearns 2011: 6, 28, 263) – all happened as they were told to him: "All of these stories are true" (ibid: 328). This paradoxical espousal of massive doubt, on the one hand, and absolute certainty about one's own ability to speak truthfully about the Congo, on the other, is quite typical of contemporary Congoism.

The works on the Amazon.com list attest to Congoism's continued existence and "common sense" status. To step outside it proves more challenging than staying within it. Congoism is not an inevitable fate, however. It is possible both to recognize and to address it through historical awareness, skeptical reading and writing strategies, and the careful scrutiny of subtle and overt Othering processes through racial, classed, and gendered perspectives. The works on the Amazon.com list prove that change is possible. If postmodernism taught most of the authors appearing on it anything, it is to believe in the power of language. Stearns has gone the furthest in addressing the historicity, depth, ideology, and scope of Congo rhetoric. In his role as a critic, Stearns stresses the complexity of the Congo, which "eludes simple definition, with many interlocking narrative strands" (ibid: 5). With this in

2 A selection of examples: "It is difficult to separate Mariam's myth from reality" (Stearns 2011: 99); "It is difficult to tell how well war stories separate fact from fiction" (ibid: 124); "As always in the Congo, the myth reveals a bit of the man, but not much" (ibid: 219); "Of course, this is not what really happened. The truth is buried under hundreds of competing rumors and may never be entirely uncovered" (ibid: 308); "Sometimes it seems that by crossing the border into the Congo one abandons any sort of Archimedean perspective on truth and becomes caught up in a web of rumors and allegations, as if the country itself were the stuff of some postmodern fiction" (ibid: 282).

mind, he criticizes, among other actors, corporate media for ignoring and simplifying the Congo (ibid: 5-6, 327).[3]

Like Lynn Nottage (cf. last chapter), Stearns gives an example of how language works through particular words, for instance through the concept of "chaos" (a concept constantly invoked in other works as well; cf. the last chapter). "The words 'chaos', 'mess', and 'confusion' recurred in my discussions with the general," Stearns writes, "they contrasted with his refrain that all he tried to do during this time was obey orders and uphold discipline. They were two conflicting ways of absolving himself from responsibility, but also means of coping morally and psychologically with the killing around him" (ibid: 19-20). Passages such as these, along with the epitaph by Mbembe in the concluding chapter, suggest that Stearns is more than aware of the importance of how one captures the Congo through language, as well as the role language plays in constituting realities and how pervaded it is by personal and ideological interests.

To have read Mbembe, as Stearns seems to have done, is not enough, however. First of all, because Mbembe himself is speaks about Africa in general, and not the Congo specifically (a problem of homogenization within postcolonial theory, as was suggested in my Introduction). Secondly, because Stearns constantly reproduces the very problem that Mbembe criticizes – the metaphorical use of Africa as "generally of lesser value, little importance and poor quality" (qtd. in Stearns 327). The author's attempt to depict the Congo in terms of a "joint humanity" (to paraphrase Mbembe) and not as "the abject mess" that "western media" has made it to be (ibid: 327) crumbles within the first few pages of Stearns's account. Various strategies of irony and ridicule creep into the author's depiction of the Congo.

Stearns focuses constantly on plastic flip-flops, for instance. Numerous people of rank are described as wearing them – from ministers and community leaders to President Kabila (ibid: 59, 132, 187). Stearns's Boasian proclamation (cf. previous chapter) of understanding the Congo "on its own terms" (ibid: 328) collapses in his own perpetual flip-flopping in his relation to the Congo. Flip-flops matter. To explicitly discuss Congo's leaders as wearing sandals also ridicules their politics. The concentration on flip-flops frames them, moreover, as unsteady, cheap, and untrustworthy. The literal meaning of flip-flops (in the sense of president Kabila wearing an open sandal that is) is overshadowed by its metaphoric meaning (flip-flopping as in suddenly changing to an opposite opinion). Flip-flops reinforce the idea of Kabila's awkwardness and unsuitability as President, as he is depicted as having been "superstitious" and as having had some "funny ideas" anyway. "Don't

3 This media critique is, as was discussed in the previous chapter, increasingly becoming the standard in Congo storytelling.

wear flip-flops at roadblocks", as one of Kabil''s former child soldiers mentions in his interview with Stearns (ibid: 151). Stearns's suggestion that even the Congolese air is filled "with the rumble of thousands of flip-flops and bare feet on the hot tarmac" (ibid: 14) turns Kabila's flip-flopping into a broader Congolese phenomenon. The overall effect is that this so-called literal truth is shown, on closer inspection, to be metaphorical.

How to avoid Congoism? Reflecting earnestly on one's language use is a way of confronting one's own beliefs, motivations, and limitations. An analogy, an explanation, or a metaphor that sounds inappropriate in the depiction of Euro-American regions is likely inadequate for the Congo as well. Reflecting on language ideally leads to transcending the metaphysics of presence, or the unshakable confidence held by many authors in language as a reliable mirror of present Congolese reality. One way in which this belief manifests itself is the infatuation of many Congo writers with capturing truth and reality by visiting the place. This is and remains deeply flawed against the background of the importance of textuality for almost all books about the Congo available on Amazon.com.

Many contemporary eyewitness reports, most prominently Van Reybrouck's work, highlight a serious engagement with Euro-American texts on the Congo before and after their interviews with Congolese. Like 19th-century Black Congo missionaries such as William Sheppard, traveling to the Congo must thus be considered a deeply intertextual occupation. This has resulted in the ongoing reproduction of historically contingent Congo discourse – interests, rhetoric, and infatuations will be shared and updated, and sometimes even rejected. At the same time, intertextuality reduces the Congolese to providers of soundbites and interesting couleur locale in accounts that could have been written without them. It is true that the subaltern speaks in these books. But who is there to listen and understand, really, as was also addressed in the previous chapter?

The production of Congo knowledge has reached a degree of epistemic complexity that resists the typical writing process of reading-critiquing-experiencing-writing. This process places the Congo interpreter front and center – not the vicious, historically entrenched, and politically entangled Congo discourse. This kind of hermeneutic understanding, according to Shklar, "makes sense only if there is a known and closed whole, which can be understood in terms of its own parts" (2004: 657–658). The works on the Amazon.com list suggest that neither the whole nor the parts have been understood by these many bestselling or academic authors, however, thus rendering this hermeneutic process obsolete. Interviewing Congolese will not enable a break-through, either. Due to the widespread acceptance and dissemi-

nation of Congoism by many Congolese, talking to them is far from a matter of mining sources that enable a way out of Congoism.

Instances of how Congolese reproduce past discourse on themselves are provided by the work of Thomas Turner. In Turner's experience, many Congolese tend to describe their "diversity in terms of a taxonomy that derives from 19th-century European raciology" (2013: 75). This is also relevant in the postcolonial era, in which the Congolese inherited a state with a colonial economy of forced or poorly paid labor and white supremacist schooling (ibid: 9)." Congolese leaders (of which Mobutu and Joseph Kabila are the most prominent examples) have been willing to pander to the ethnic prejudices and preferences of Euro-American elites in order to secure their power (ibid: 40). Many authors take the ethnic discourse of many Congolese at face value, however, while ignoring other, more valid or fruitful categories of analysis. The fragmentation of the Congolese social landscape into the urban super-rich and rural super-poor can hardly be overlooked, but remains insufficiently discussed (Trefon 2011: 109).

The epistemic complexities of Congolese knowledge production and subjectivity remain deeply unacknowledged by many contemporary authors. "Extreme secrecy, discreet but constant surveillance [...] the manipulation of rumor" (ibid: 18) are contrivances that often seem to escape the attention of Euro-American authors in their communication with, and representation of, Congolese. After decades of propaganda and the ongoing destruction of archives and other forms of information (ibid: 97), Congolese "have low expectations on being informed of trivial matters and even lower expectations regarding important national issues", according to Trefon (ibid: 112). He continues: "Even fairly well-documented events are relegated to the realm of suspicion and disbelief, such as the circumstances surrounding the murder of Patrice Lumumba" (ibid). Congolese communication often boils down to "cultivating confusion and misunderstanding, reformulating official explanations with updated ones and sending conflicting messages are clearly identifiable trends" (ibid).

None of these communicative aspects are addressed by the authors mentioned above. On the contrary – even many of the well-known problems of fieldwork are neglected in the final version of their books. Fieldwork is hardly ever portrayed as "a period of deep frustration, disappointment and confusion, sometimes even of bitter tears," as Blommaert and Dong assert, adding that "people contradict each other, and just when you think you found the key to the whole thing, the whole thing changes again" (2011: 25). This is particularly true of fieldwork in the Congo, which mostly takes place in "doubly" traumatic postwar contexts. Congolese were already traumatized by structural violence before the full-blown wars compounded

it and tore communities apart through fear, resentment, jealousy, and rage (Turner 2013: 137-138).

Without a more modest understanding of the possibility of "knowing" the Congo, there can be no way out of Congoism. The will to truth and the push for knowledge has to be suspended, rejected, or replaced by more modest expectations of the ability to understand the Congo. To represent the Congo can also mean not writing at all. There is hardly a way around this suggestion, given the complexities of discussing the Congo. And if one must write, the attempt should indeed not be, as Fabian has it, to avoid doing damage to Central West Africa" (2000a: 260). Instead, one should try to "do damage" to the manner in which the Congo is discussed – "to shake, subvert, and alter at least those ideological certainties" that have contributed to the overt and silent sanctioning of imperialism in its many forms (ibid).