



Belgium's "Truth Commission" on its overseas colonial legacy: An expressivist analysis of transitional justice in consolidated democracies

Tine Destrooper

To cite this article: Tine Destrooper (2023) Belgium's "Truth Commission" on its overseas colonial legacy: An expressivist analysis of transitional justice in consolidated democracies, *Journal of Human Rights*, 22:2, 158-173, DOI: [10.1080/14754835.2022.2042220](https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2022.2042220)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2022.2042220>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC



Published online: 16 May 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1500




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Belgium's "Truth Commission" on its overseas colonial legacy: An expressivist analysis of transitional justice in consolidated democracies

Tine Destrooper 



Ghent University

ABSTRACT

In the summer of 2020, the Belgian Parliament established a Special Parliamentary Commission tasked with launching an enquiry into Belgium's overseas colonial legacy and reflecting on appropriate reparations. It was the first consolidated democracy to establish a truth commission to investigate the historical and ongoing injustices related to *overseas* colonialism. In this article, I argue in favor of treating this commission as a truth commission and focus on the extra-legal and expressivist functions of truth commissions to understand potential long-term and indirect effects of this initiative. The central premise is that justice processes can shape and create meaning systems that gain the status of "truth" and can come to dominate how we understand and organize ourselves and our social world. In the descriptive section, I use primary sources to examine the genesis, mandate, composition, first steps, and reception of the commission's work, foregrounding critical voices. In the analytical section, I examine whether the commission is indeed furthering a thick kind of accountability or whether, instead, it risks cementing and contributing to epistemic injustices. As such, the article provides a detailed overview of a commission that has been scantily covered in academic literature, as well as contributing to the debate about potentially unforeseen effects of using transitional justice processes such as truth commissions in consolidated democracies.

Introduction

In the summer of 2020, the Belgian Parliament established a Special Parliamentary Commission tasked with launching an enquiry into Belgium's overseas colonial legacy and reflecting on appropriate reparations. In the public debate, the commission soon became known as a truth commission (Cessou, 2020). Truth commissions are commonly established in postconflict and postauthoritarian contexts, most notably to deal with legacies of large-scale conflict-related violence (Hayner, 2011). Also in consolidated democracies, however, several truth commissions have been established to address a history of large-scale human rights violations that took place in the context of settler colonialism (Dancy et al., 2010). Belgium, however, was the first former colonizer to establish within its own institutions a truth commission dealing with its overseas colonial legacy.¹

CONTACT Tine Destrooper  tine.destrooper@ugent.be  Human Rights Center, Ghent University, Universiteitsstraat 4, 9000 Gent, Belgium

© 2022 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

From the outset, the commission has been heavily critiqued by those questioning how any kind of meaningful and legitimate engagement with Belgium's colonial past, and the effects thereof in the present, would be possible, given the commission's broad and overly ambitious mandate, initial composition, and short timeline (e.g., Nsai, 2020; Rutazibwa, 2020). This article builds on that critique and examines whether the commission has the potential to further some form of accountability or justice, or whether, on the contrary, it is bound to cement or even further certain forms of preexisting epistemic injustice.

To examine this question, I first introduce the lens of expressivism in the context of truth commissions, before showing that the Belgian Commission fits the functional definition of a truth commission. Then, in the empirical section, I offer a detailed description of the genesis, mandate, composition, and first steps of this commission. I also engage with the reactions to this commission, showing that a lack of victim- and stakeholder involvement, as well as limited outreach to broader audiences, explain both the public skepticism as well as the consequent difficulty of realizing its self-declared normative objectives. In the discussion I examine the implicit and explicit moral messages expressed by this institution and the effects these have on the potential for bringing about some form of accountability broadly understood.

This analysis is grounded in empirical as well as normative expressivism; that is, it examines how meaning is—implicitly or explicitly—conveyed through the actions of formalized institutions as well as being rooted in the assumption that sending messages to the public in order to realize a certain result is an explicit goal of these institutions. My work interrogates whether and how institutions can use their expressive potential to play a transformative role (Meijers & Glasius, 2016). Both empirical and normative expressivism are thus relevant to understanding the Belgian case, because interpreting the limits and effects of normative expressivism hinges on an accurate analysis of empirical expressivism. In sum, the analytical lens of expressivism is used to examine the central question of this article regarding this commission's potential to further some form of accountability and justice.²

The expressive function of transitional justice processes

I analyze the Belgian Truth Commission as an instance of transitional justice in a consolidated democracy. Transitional justice as a field of scholarship and practice is concerned with questions related to the legacy of large-scale violence and has become the dominant paradigm to address these legacies of violence and to disrupt the dynamics that contribute to violent conflict (Shaw & Waldorf, 2010). Whereas the past is defined by violence, transitional justice normatively postulates that recognition of and accountability for past wrongs are necessary to engender a more peaceful and just future (Quinn, 2014).

Having its roots in postconflict and postauthoritarian contexts, transitional justice soon developed into a set of widely disseminated norms, standards, and policy templates, which encompass a broad range of mechanisms and initiatives as diverse as truth telling, criminal (and other) accountability mechanisms, (collective) reparations, official apologies, and institutional and constitutional reform.

The comprehensiveness and versatility of transitional justice's multitude of mechanisms, combined with its normative ambition of consolidating democracy and contributing to just societies, made the paradigm appealing in a much broader range of contexts than the typical cases for which it was developed (Sharp, 2015). Also, states beyond those in transition, including consolidated democracies, have increasingly begun to adopt transitional justice mechanisms, in part because of the normative appeal of these mechanisms (Destrooper et al., 2021). Indeed, considering that a central ambition of transitional justice is providing a response to past massive human rights violations, and considering that most states have experienced such abuses in living memory, any state could be a candidate for transitional justice measures (Winston, 2020b).

One of the many consequences of the current expansion of transitional justice interventions to atypical contexts is that the notion of accountability, which lies at the heart transitional justice, has come to mean different things. Accountability for most transitional justice scholars today no longer refers to mere instances of holding (individual) perpetrators (criminally) accountable, but also to a thicker and broader idea that goes well beyond criminal and individual accountability and that includes acknowledgment, redress, apologies, and social responsibility (McEvoy, 2007), all of which could be thought of as extra-legal dimensions and forms of accountability. This growing attention to extra-legal dimensions of accountability made a focus on the expressive function of transitional justice processes more pertinent and added to the idea of transitional justice as a communicative and definitional project (Miller 2008).

After decades of scant academic attention, this communicative and expressive function of justice processes has recently become the focal point of several discussions at the intersection of various disciplines (Stahn, 2020). These discussions are pinned on the idea that, justice processes—implicitly or explicitly—express a vision about a justice ideal. They send a message about what is considered a crime, what we find (un)acceptable, what causes moral outrage, and what kind of justice can be aspired to (Miller, 2008). They have norm-setting power and create a “common cognitive orientation and shared assumption” (Goodman, 2013). By simultaneously directing and constraining our actions, perceptions, and experiences, they shape how we understand justice, which can (re)affirm or contest existing ideas and categories of justice (Giles, 2019).

The central premise here is that justice processes can shape and create meaning systems that can gain the status of “truth” and that can come to dominate how we understand and organize ourselves as well as our social world (Weedon, 1999). At the same time, alternative processes and practices can become sites of contestation, at which hegemonic discourses and practices are challenged and resisted. It is therefore important to also examine and understand those discourses and practices that seek to resist omissions and epistemic injustice. This is why the empirical section explicitly foregrounds the voices of those actors skeptical of the commission’s work and proposing alternatives to it. Indeed, even if certain actors have more access to, and certain structures more impact on, those processes that shape how people perceive and experience the world around them, they never have a monopoly over meaning making or norm setting, and they exist in a pluralistic environment, in which other initiatives exist that challenge the borders of our current justice imagination and that can generate beneficial epistemic friction by foregrounding alternatives (Herremans & Destrooper, 2021; Medina, 2018).

Thus, just like judicial proceedings, semijudicial and semilegal initiatives, such as truth commissions, can play an expressive role in that they can (1) contribute to the development of a normative vocabulary, which can become the dominant language to talk about justice (see also Aloisi & Meernik, 2017; Teitel, 2014), and (2) send an aspirational message about the norms and values that are deemed most relevant in a society (Meijers & Glasius, 2016). Also, historical truth commissions, which concern themselves in the first place with establishing the historical truth about past harms, can be considered to have this normative, forward-looking, and expressive function (Sarkin, 2018).

Zinaida Miller (2008, p. 291) highlighted the extent to which these processes can demarcate “the boundaries of acceptable demands”: The framing and prioritization used during the design, establishment, and functioning of a truth commission can function in a gate-keeping manner to push certain issues off the agenda—namely, those that do not fit the legally instantiated mandate or the imaginary horizon of what can be done within this mandate (McEvoy, 2007). This means that the omission of certain issues may have effects well beyond the operation of that commission. As such, it is crucial to examine which issues are given due consideration, who may speak, and who is silenced, as this affects “what was and will be viewed in society as a crime and a moral outrage” (Miller, 2008, p. 281).

A first step toward realizing a transformative role is thus to avoid omissions, as the failure to acknowledge certain types of injustice or certain victims exacerbates the primary injustice experienced by victims by disregarding their experiences and hampering their access to the justice system and their potential to seek some form of accountability. Beyond this, justice processes may also serve a more ambitious agenda of affirming and foregrounding victims' needs, rights, and expectations.

Precisely because they are not neutral bodies, the mandate, design, and operational practice of truth commissions—including the Belgian one—are often subject to heavy debate and are characterized by tensions between various actors with diverse, and sometimes mutually exclusive, priorities and understandings of human rights. For this reason, instead of looking at intentions, it is analytically more useful to analyze truth commissions from an expressivist perspective, as this allows for a more detailed consideration of how a commission's work is received, and how it can potentially affect changes in the human rights discourse and practice in the short and long term. Even in a case in which truth commissions are installed as a mere tactical concession or in which various considerations are at play, they may still allow stakeholders to capitalize on the momentum and the rhetoric of the truth commission to push for more respect for human rights and, in the long run, consolidate the rhetoric of human rights within the political establishment (Schimmelfennig, 2001; Winston, 2020a, p. 4). As such, a truth commission can potentially further human rights because of its expressive function, even when it is installed as a tactical concession. In such a case, however, positive effects are likely to be more indirect (e.g., facilitating social mobilization, providing new information, drawing the attention of international allies who can support domestic groups; see Risse et al., 1999; Winston, 2020a, p. 5).

This article therefore complemented the focus on the Belgian Truth Commission's own first months of operation with a focus on how it was received and how critical voices responded to it to resist omission and exclusion—and have, to some extent, already been successful in doing so. First, however, I ask whether it makes sense to approach the Belgian case as “truth commission” within the transitional justice framework.

Approaching the Belgian case as a truth commission

Soon after it was established, the commission dealing with the “Belgian colonial past in Congo (1908–1960), Rwanda, and Burundi (1919–1962), the impact thereof, and the appropriate response to this” (Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, 2020a, author's translation) came to be labeled the Belgian Truth (and Reconciliation) Commission, even if that is not the formal title of this parliamentary commission (Cessou, 2020).

These kinds of parliamentary commissions of inquiry are not a new phenomenon in consolidated democracies. They can cover a broad range of issues, some of which are not related to the domain of transitional justice at all (e.g., commissions investigating tax fraud),³ whereas others arguably move more explicitly into the realm of transitional justice without using that rhetoric (e.g., the 1999 Belgian parliamentary commission investigating the circumstances of Patrice Lumumba's murder (Verdoolaege & Kerstens, 2004)). Using the rhetoric of transitional justice to refer to these commission in consolidated democracies is a relatively new phenomenon, however (Pallí-Asperó, 2022).

This can be confusing. On one hand, no two truth commissions are the same; on the other, truth commissions may share several attributes with other kinds of commissions of inquiry, and there can be debate over whether specific commissions qualify as truth commissions or not. I rely on the operational definition proposed by Hayner (2011) to argue that the Belgian Commission can indeed be identified as truth commission, in the sense that (1) its focus is on the past; (2) it investigates a pattern of abuses over a period of time, rather than a specific event; (3) it is a temporary body, completing its work with the submission of a report; and (4) it is officially

sanctioned by the state. This definition does not limit truth commissions to circumstances of regime change or to the immediate postconflict period, which is analytically useful, given the pattern of countries increasingly making use of truth commissions in recent years (Dancy et al., 2010).

Regarding the first condition, I will not elaborate on the temporal dimension here, but elsewhere I have argued in favor of lengthening both the period during which a truth commission is active as well as the timeframe investigated, so as to also be able to acknowledge and investigate root causes of violence, and so as to better facilitate the simultaneous forward- and backward-looking function of truth commissions (De Haan & Destrooper, 2021). Given the fact that “the past” under consideration here is a distant past, Hayner’s (2011) more accurate notion of a “historical truth commission” adequately describes the Belgian Commission.

Regarding the second condition, it should be noted that truth commissions tend to prioritize personal integrity rights violations, some of which happened at the hands of state actors. Violations of economic and social rights are less commonly investigated by these bodies (Ochoa Sanchez, 2019). The mandate of the Belgian Commission, however, does explicitly pay attention to social and economic rights.

Regarding the third condition, I concur with Dancy et al (2010), who argued that the submission of a report is best considered a goal of truth commission work, not a necessary qualification. They argued that, although “investigation” implies the publication of a report, or some form of pronouncement of findings, the investigative function itself is the more important factor to consider. In the Belgian case, it is too early to judge whether such a report will materialize, but it is explicitly foreseen in the commission’s mandate.

Regarding the fourth condition, the official authority establishing the commission in this case is the federal Parliament. This is important because state institutions do something that informal initiatives do not: They bestow the “state’s stamp” and the symbolic authority that comes along with it (Andreetta, 2020, p. 7). This is clearly illustrated when comparing this parliamentary commission with initiatives such as “De Waarheidscommissie” (the Truth Commission), a hybrid multiple-day performative theater project taking place in a Belgian court room, with the involvement of several of the experts who are now affiliated to the formal truth commission, and examining the use of human zoos during the World Exhibition of 1958 (Ben Chika, 2013). Although some of the stated intentions and practices of this performance resemble those of a formal truth commission, it should be clear that the fact that it was not state-sanctioned crucially sets this initiative apart from the current commission.

Operationally, the formal Belgian Commission thus meets all the criteria of a truth commission. It is important to remark, however, that these criteria cover neither the approach employed by the commission in its investigation nor the intended effects, both of which can take on multiple forms. I would nuance this by arguing that at least *stated* intentions are important to examine from the perspective of an expressivist analysis, as this allows us to examine why states say they are undertaking these efforts—that is, what normativity they subscribe to, and what the effect is of this rhetoric (Winston, 2020b).

Intentions may be undisclosed in mandates, but interviews and public discourse often shed light on the intentions. In recent cases of truth commissions operating in consolidated democracies, a transitional justice frame has often—implicitly or explicitly—been adopted in the public discourse surrounding the commission. This public discourse has revolved around the promotion of human rights, the establishment of inclusive democracies, and offering redress for past harm. Even if we would assume that these stated intentions are not initiators’ genuine intentions, following an expressivist logic, this rhetoric of justice, reconciliation, human rights, and accountability in the public discourse—genuine or not—is still capable of setting in motion or consolidating certain dynamics by means of rhetorical entrapment (Schimmelfennig, 2001).

This consideration is particularly relevant in the context of truth commissions, which have been established by governments both in typically transitional states and in consolidated democracies alike to deal with legacies of widespread human rights abuses (Hayner, 2011). They have been imbued with a range of normative objectives revolving around the improvement of human rights. These objectives range from illuminating a version of the truth that is different from the one espoused by the regime to allowing victims to regain a sense of dignity in the face of their injustices by providing testimony or even to provide information that can facilitate institutional reform, reparation orders, or the opening of criminal cases against perpetrators (Winston, 2020a, p. 2). In the next section, I explore in more detail the genesis, mandate (including stated intentions), composition, and first steps of the Belgian Commission before focusing on how these were received by actors seeking justice for colonial harm.

A truth commission shaping up at breakneck speed

The crucial question regarding the Belgian Commission is whether something that looks, feels, and operates like a truth commission is likely to contribute to the normative goals of a truth commission, notably when it comes to offering some form of justice and accountability. As argued, and in line with the general outlook of truth commissions, I approach accountability in a broader sense here than strictly individual or criminal accountability, and underscore the idea that accountability comes in many different forms. This thicker understanding of accountability is particularly relevant in the case of historical commissions with broad mandates through which former wrongdoers are unlikely to face criminal trial.

The examination in this section is based on primary sources, media coverage of the commission, and public statements and press releases by experts. Given the ongoing nature of the process, it is not possible to make claims about whether and how the commission has formally achieved the tasks foreseen in its mandate. Instead, this article examines the commission's work so far and what its long-term effects may be.

Genesis

The commission was established on June 17, 2020 (a day before the eight-week parliamentary recess), following a proposal for resolution by the two Green parties and one by the Flemish Christian-Democrats (Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, 2020b; Belgische Senaat, 2020).⁴ Its establishment came as a relative surprise, given that diaspora actors and civil society organization (CSOs) had already been pushing Belgium to deal with its colonial past in a systematic manner for the past half-century with little institutional result, and a 2017 bill laid before Parliament on a memorial workplan to establish facts around the involvement of Belgian institutions in the Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi had fallen on deaf ears. The momentum created by several domestic and international dynamics can explain the decision to install this commission in the summer of 2020.

In terms of international pressure, the document establishing the commission explicitly cited the report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent as a driver (Human Rights Council, 2019). This report called for an initiative to establish the facts about the involvement of various Belgian institutions in the colonization of Burundi, the Congo, and Rwanda (paragraph 32) and called for a truth commission to be installed (paragraph 751).

McGonigle Leyh (2020, p. 2) also cited the influence of the international Black Lives Matter movement, "calling for citizens to become informed about their rights and to mobilise and take action around legal reforms aimed at State accountability" in the domain of human rights and racism, and crafting and recrafting the "dialogue with the political, social, and cultural imperatives of the present." Domestically, the Black Lives Matter movement took forward the work of CSOs and diaspora groups who had been pushing for this conversation for half a century. The most visible protests were

directed against the continued uncontextualized and glorifying presence of Leopold II in the public domain and against police brutality and other forms of institutionalized racism. On June 30, 2020, this momentum also resulted in an official letter from the Belgian king expressing “deep regret” over the atrocities in the Congo under Leopold II. Even if not a formal apology, this was the first instance of the royal family acknowledging colonial harm and atrocities (Vergauwen 2020). This illustrates the extent to which international pressure can add to and amplify social mobilization domestically, and as such, potentially help promote the diffusion of human rights norms (Risse, 2017).⁵

Mandate and objectives

The mandate of the commission is vast and focuses on truth and reconciliation. It tasks the commission with (1) providing clarity about Congo Free State (1885–1908) as well as the colonial past of the Belgian state (1908–1960/1962), (2) investigating the impact of Belgian state and non-state actors in these three countries (1885–1962), (3) examining the economic impact of the colonization on Belgium as well as the three countries, (4) formulating recommendations about how to deal with this past, (5) proposing reconciliation initiatives, and (6) making recommendations about how to improve this in the future (Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, 2020a).⁶ The law foresaw that the commission has 12 months to report back to Parliament (extendable after review) about all of these matters.

Interestingly, the mandate explicitly adopts the rhetoric (truth and reconciliation) and logic (following the pillar structure) of transitional justice. Also in public pronouncements, this rhetoric can be observed. In an interview with the chairperson of the commission, Wouter De Vriendt, he cited the need for an “official discourse in which we condemn the exploitation of colonialism and acknowledge Belgium’s responsibility” as one of the main reasons for installing the commission, further citing the need to “formulate recommendations about restitution, colonial statues in the public space, and an anti-racism policy,” insisting, equally, on the requirement of a formal national apology and not shying away from the (monetary) reparation debate. He further added that the aim of the commission is to “write history,” “acknowledge the past,” and “be an example for other former colonizers” in terms of how they can deal with their past (Verberckmoes, 2020). As such, both the mandate and the commissioners’ public pronouncements explicitly position this commission within the normative objectives of transitional justice revolving around the promotion of human rights and offering redress for past harm.

Composition

The commission itself is composed of 17 members, proportionally representing the parties in the Parliament (including five members representing Flemish nationalist and far-right parties). The law also foresees that a scientific committee of 10 affiliated experts will support the commissioners.⁷ These experts were appointed amid an acrimonious controversy over the composition of this expert body.

A leaked advisory note about whom to invite to this expert group, written by AfricaMuseum Director Guido Gryseels and National Archivist Karel Velle upon request of the Parliament, was heavily critiqued by many diaspora organization because of the relative absence of diaspora actors and organizations from the proposed experts, as well as because of the exclusive focus on historians as experts, the disregard for victims’ voices, and the fact that both proposed chairpersons were men.⁸ In response to the critique from civil society, the Parliament foregrounded contact with diaspora organizations more explicitly, and eventually invited a more diverse group of experts (Grymonprez, 2020). Despite half of the experts currently being of Congolese, Rwandan, or Burundian descent and one of them explicitly representing the Congolese diaspora, the composition continues to be critiqued (see below).

First steps

The 10 affiliated experts, appointed in August 2020, were tasked to submit their first report to the commission two months later. This report was to cover (1) the state of the art of scientific research on all the matters mentioned in the mandate, across the four countries (including the historical truth, the effect of colonialism on the postcolonial period, racism, xenophobia, and intolerance); (2) a mapping of the archives in the four countries; (3) a mapping of the scientific consensus; (4) the identification of knowledge gaps and proposed research to be carried out by the commission during the remainder of its mandate to fill these gaps; (5) a *status questionis* of divulgation activities for existing knowledge; (6) a mapping of all the symbolic and other actions regarding the colonial past that have been undertaken, both in Belgium and in other countries; and (7) a mapping of all the actors relevant from a reconciliation point of view (Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, 2020a, paragraph 7). This report would serve as an inspiration for the commission in developing its operational model, the topics to be dealt with, and the persons to be heard.

To draft this report, the affiliated experts consulted nonaffiliated experts on a number of topics, “hoping that the commission would, subsequently, take this into account” (personal communication). The initial survey was sent to nonaffiliated experts at the end of the working day on September 21, for a report due October 1. Following an extension granted by the commission, nonaffiliated experts were given four additional weeks to respond to the survey. This whole exercise was illustrative of how not only the establishment but also the first months of work were happening at breakneck speed, which did not allow for any kind of meaningful stakeholder consultation or involvement.⁹

Substantively, the survey covered topics such as history and truth, reconciliation, reparation, “relation between colonialism and racism,” valorization and education, and participation. The categories themselves and the questions within them were more representative of standardized interpretations of model transitional justice than of the perspectives of diaspora groups who had been mobilizing around this issue for decades. The mostly closed questions in the “reconciliation” section, for example, explicitly enquired what would be needed to arrive at reconciliation: truth, justice, reparation, institutional reforms, apologies, or acknowledgment of suffering? Also, the “reparation” section reflected the logic of model transitional justice, listing as possible reparation measures the restitution of goods, (psychological) rehabilitation, financial compensation, symbolic reparations, and regulations addressing root causes of ongoing harm. On the contrary, in surveying the relation between colonialism and racism or when enquiring about relevant initiatives in the domain of education, the survey was more open-ended and reflective of the concerns voiced by diaspora and CSO.

Reception

Although some voices have been cautiously optimistic about the work of the commission and have welcomed the initiative, the immensity of this commission’s task, combined with the composition of the expert group, the breakneck speed at which the commission was aiming to work, and the approach it adopted met with great resistance and sometimes outright rejection of several diaspora groups and CSOs, who had been mobilizing for decades to demand a more sincere and comprehensive way of dealing with Belgium’s colonial legacy, but who were now deprived of meaningful participation.¹⁰ This rejection and skepticism on the side of many stakeholders is particularly relevant when considering the expressivist function of bodies like truth commissions, as they shape the way in which implicit or explicit messages are received (see below).

As Olivia Rutazibwa (2020) argued, “Once we place the expert witnesses at the centre of our understanding of expertise, it becomes clear that the extreme speed with which this initiative was

launched is untenable.” Others saw it as a “cosmetic operation at the service of the status quo” (Cessou, 2020, author’s translation). Rutazibwa was one of the most vocal skeptics of the commission.¹¹ In an open letter responding to the invitation to join the group of affiliated experts, she argued that “the timeline, pace, agenda and sequence of the proceedings” endangered its core objectives, adding that “this initiative and those who took it, suffer from a huge deficit of legitimacy, competence and insight.” Her critique also concerned the virtual absence of diaspora representatives in the initiative-taking as well as agenda-setting stage, and the extent to which these groups, who have been demanding a nationwide dialogue, have been invisibilized from the various constitutive steps of the commission and robbed of their right of initiative. This critique came to shape much of the public debate and the narrative of critical CSOs and stakeholders, whose main critique revolved around the fact that diaspora actors and organizations were now included, but were not treated on an equal footing, casting them as diaspora rather than as experts (Belga, 2020).

This was also the core argument of another prominent critical voice in the public debate, Nadia Nsayi, who argued that the involvement of critical Black experts was crucial, not just because they were the ones most affected and put the issue on the agenda, but also because they would ensure that the broad mandate of the commission would be operationalized in ways relevant to victims, diaspora, and relevant stakeholders—that is, as more than a mandate for historical (academic) research, but as an opportunity to bring the existing knowledge together in a way that allows for “historical conclusions” (Nsayi, 2020).¹² Nsayi also problematized the lack of clarity over the commission’s mandate, arguing that this, too, challenged its support and legitimacy.

Furthermore, it has been argued that the legitimacy and usefulness of this commission should not and cannot lie in its uncovering of a historical “truth,” which is already known (Vangroenweghe, 2020), but that it would only be able to gain legitimacy and relevance if it were to (1) move beyond this truth-seeking function and also relate its work to the work of addressing ongoing social and economic injustices and (2) ensure “a radical shift and dislocation of power in this conversation and the initiatives that will follow” (Rutazibwa, 2020).

These critiques can be read as instances of epistemic resistance and inscribe themselves in a transformative perspective of transitional justice, which argues that transitional justice should not only be about accountability for past harm, but also, and essentially, about changing the epistemological and socio-economic foundations that facilitated that harm to happen in the first place (Gready & Robins, 2014; Tarusarira, 2019). This is the focus of the next section.

A commission furthering thick accountability or cementing epistemic injustice?

In this section, I start from the CSO critique that the timeline, pace, agenda, and composition of the commission endanger its core objectives. To this end I ask whether (and, if so, how) this commission has the potential to contribute to certain forms of accountability and justice. I do so by taking an expressivist approach and asking whether sufficient thought has gone into the question of what messages the current way of proceeding sends about how commissioners think of accountability and human rights principles and how sensitive they are to matters of epistemic injustice. When examining the concerns of civil society through this lens, we can distinguish between concerns over the process and, related to this, concerns over outcomes.

When looking at the process, the descriptive section above suggests that hardly any of the criteria commonly cited as core elements of human rights-sensitive projects (such as recognizing people as key actors in their own development, rather than passive recipients; prioritizing participation; adopting empowering operational models; including all stakeholders in the situation analysis; and developing and sustaining strategic partnerships (see UNDP, 2000) have been taken into account in the initial stage of conception and operation of the Belgian Commission. Notably, the limited attention for participation, for recognizing of people as key actors, and for the

development of strategic partnerships is striking and threatens the commission's legitimacy and ability to weigh on the debate. This, of course, does not in and of itself mean that concerns over human rights were absent from the work of the commission or, indeed, that commissioners or experts did not care about them. Instead, unfamiliarity with the best practices and an eagerness to move fast on the side of commissioners may better explain why these elements were absent.

Even under these circumstances, however, positive outcomes could hypothetically still come about in an indirect or intermediate manner. A commission could, for example, strengthen the capacity and motivation of other—international or domestic—human rights and social justice actors. For this to happen, however, stakeholder involvement (ideally) and transparency (at a minimum) are particularly important. Winston (2020a) has argued that those initiatives most likely to contribute to the advancement of human rights are the ones that enable information to move freely among stakeholders, so that they can use this information in their own further mobilization. Yet, whether this dynamic is likely to materialize in the Belgian case is questionable, considering the initial exclusion and current skepticism of many civil society organizations, and considering the commission's inattention to transparency.¹³

Then still, from an expressivist point of view, it is important to acknowledge that dynamics of rhetorical entrapment and socialization might still trigger certain changes in the sense that rhetorically promoting certain values and norms related to human rights and social justice might put policymakers in a position where they are increasingly expected to, and held accountable for, living up to these promises, also if the initial process within which that normative framework was presented does not itself reflect these norms yet. The current rhetoric might, in other words, shape the expectations and parameters for future processes of a similar nature. Along these lines, it could be argued that, despite the important shortcomings foregrounded by critics, this initiative could become an opening and a window of opportunity to (1) spark the societal debate about this issue as a first step toward broader acknowledgment of the ongoing consequences of colonial harm and historical and contemporary racism and (2) advocate for some form of accountability—legal or other.

Additionally, in a more indirect sense but not less relevant from an expressivist point of view, the very establishment of this commission sends a message about what a society finds acceptable or unacceptable (historical) injustice, and thereby, in this case, indicates that Belgium's colonial legacy is now formally considered unacceptable. As such, it reinforces the political and societal momentum that it is itself an outcome of and might, in this sense, empower other actors to take their struggles forward.

Thus, there are several ways in which the extra-legal expressivist potential of this commission might further existing struggles for justice and thick forms of accountability in this domain. Yet, despite these potential contributions, the way in which the process is organized may also have unforeseen effects in terms of contributing to or cementing certain injustices—notably, epistemic injustice. If this commission should indeed be read as an effort to further justice, we should consider its effect not only in terms of (thick) accountability, (social) justice, or (human) rights, but also in terms of epistemic (in)justice (Tarusarira, 2019).

In this context, Rutazibwa (2020) called into question the potential of the commission to disrupt in any significant way the epistemological bedrock, as well as the socio-economic conditions underlying the historical and ongoing harm related to colonization and racism, given that it did not “launch an open call to the communities concerned about who they would like to put forward for an expert group and what they think the sequence and content of this decolonial initiative should be.” Also the critiques of CSOs that diaspora actors are not included as experts but as diaspora is illustrative of a reluctance to acknowledge “the other” as a knower (de Sousa Santos, 2018). Which message is this sending? Which biases does it representative? And should we see this as form of epistemic injustice?

Epistemic injustice can take the shape of testimonial or hermeneutical injustice (Wouters, 2020). Testimonial injustice refers to giving deflated levels of credibility to a speaker's word because of certain characteristics he or she possesses. This is, for example, what happens when experts from the diaspora are not included as experts but as diaspora, which gives their voices a different weight and meaning. Hermeneutical injustice, on the contrary, renders it impossible for subjects to share interests or concerns that do not fit the parameters of legibility of the dominant paradigm. In the broad domain of justice, this dominant justice paradigm is often rooted in legal practice's episteme of rationality, stability, and predictability, which has its merit but may also crowd out narratives with different epistemic underpinnings (McEvoy, 2007). As José Medina (2018) argued, narratives rooted in this dominant paradigm may "produce active ignorance by circulating distorted scripts," thus contributing to a form of epistemic injustice. These distorted scripts may lead to a failure to acknowledge certain types of injustice, thus exacerbating the primary injustice experienced by victims by disregarding their experiences.

Not acknowledging certain actors as knowers or not acknowledging certain injustices as such always entails some kind of omission. These omissions are not without consequence; nor are they random. It is important to better understand the nature and structural causes and consequences of these omissions, as well as the risks inherent in the omission of certain topics, actors, or narratives (Herremans & Destrooper, 2021). These omissions push certain actors and topics to the margins of the discourse and narrow the ways in which we think about justice, potentially excluding some of the paradigms most relevant to victims and key stakeholders (also see Miller, 2008). This, too, can constitute an epistemic injustice to the extent that certain issues or voices are more likely to be erased from justice narratives than others. This has also been the fear and concern in the Belgian case, in which the exclusion of certain actors and groups went hand in hand with the exclusion of their perspectives from the development of the workplan and prioritization strategy.

These omissions may be consequences of implicit social processes shaped by discourses that structure our knowledge and attention, and that invisibilize everything that does not fit the existing horizon of intelligibility (Vazquez, 2011). They may, however, also be consequences of discernible choices of discernible actors. This is important to acknowledge, as it foregrounds the agency of institutional justice actors who, in the words of Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, p. 897), can act as norm entrepreneurs who "create issues by using language that names, interprets, and dramatizes them." These justice actors may themselves take up various positions, possess various characteristics, or be organized in different epistemic communities of elites with shared interests (Schmidt, 2008) and may act in power-affirming or power-contesting ways. Distinguishing between cases of omission in which a discernible actor can and cannot be identified allows for a more meticulous analysis of how justice discourses operate and how they can reproduce or contribute to (epistemic) injustices when they result in distorted narratives that challenge our ability to imagine the kind of justice to which those concerned most aspire (Herremans & Destrooper, 2021).

In the case of the Belgian Truth Commission, both dynamics have been at play. Some forms of omission—of issues as well as actors—were clearly related to choices made by members of Parliament, commissioners, and affiliated experts during the conception and first weeks of operation of the commission, when there was hardly any involvement of diaspora groups and decisions were made in a top-down manner. In a more indirect way, omissions also happened due to the prohibitively broad mandate of the commission combined with its foreseen short lifespan, which required a prioritization and sequencing that are not neutral but reflect dominant paradigms (e.g., prioritizing knowledge about historical facts over addressing its ramifications on the lives of people today). Both kinds of omissions can interfere with consciousness formation and justice mobilization as well as leading to self-censoring of victims or activists. As a result, several dominant diaspora groups withdrew their support and adopted a strategy of nonengagement in response to these omissions.

In sum, and building on the distinction between empirical and normative expressivism above, in the Belgian case, it is clear that the critics of the current approach of the commission start from the normative expressivist position that justice narratives produced by this kind of commission must seek to transform society and accommodate the complex, volatile, and multilayered realities and demands of victims of injustice. These voices, therefore, denounce the implicit and explicit messages expressed by the commission for falling short of this.

Conclusion

In addition to offering a descriptive overview of the genesis, mandate, composition, first months of operation, and reactions to the Belgian Truth Commission, this article analyzed the potentially unforeseen effects of this commission by examining its expressivist function.

The commission meets all of the functional criteria of a truth commission proposed by Hayner (2011) and fits the evolution of transitional justice mechanisms increasingly expanding toward atypical contexts. Despite decades of activism, the commission was installed rather unexpectedly in response to several domestic and international events that generated momentum, but that were by no means unavoidable: Their political impact if a commission had not been established would likely have been modest, and the establishment of the commission did not signify the end of, for example, Black Lives Matter protests in Belgium.

The swiftness of the decision and unfamiliarity with the intricacies of truth commissions on the side of some of its early adopters may explain some of the most significant shortcomings described here. At the same time, the analysis lays bare the extent to which this has so far been a formal, top-down exercise taking place within the existing regime of legitimacy and within the dominant epistemological framework. This suggests that it is hard to suspect the commission's initiators of a truly transformative agenda. An interest in some form of recognition, without necessarily wanting to risk a genuine disruption of the status quo, is more likely to have been a driving force. This is not, *a priori*, out of sync with the central aims of transitional justice, but it does explain the vivid critiques from diaspora and CSOs who had been mobilizing for half a century and who problematized the commission's approach, composition, and legitimacy, and the extent to which these are unlikely to lead to thicker forms of accountability or societal transformation, or to the deconstruction of existing epistemic and other injustices.

While acknowledging the pertinence of this concern, I have nevertheless argued that even under the current circumstances, the work of the commission could have a more far-reaching impact than can be gauged at present, if we consider its expressivist potential. It could generate momentum as well as a dynamic of rhetorical entrapment or socialization that could provide breeding grounds for further struggles for justice and thick accountability that may then have more potential to disrupt the status quo, lead to more transformative justice efforts, and challenge epistemic injustice.

Notes

1. Several truth commissions in former colonies already opened up the black box of colonial legacies in their own work—for example, the temporally extended mandate of the Tunisian truth commission (e.g., El Gantri, 2015) or the unilateral Greenlandic initiative regarding the Danish colonial period. None of these, however, had the support of the former colonial power.
2. Epistemic injustice refers to a specific form of injustice done to someone in their capacity as a knower, for example, when prejudice gives lower credibility to a speaker's testimony (see Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2018).
3. The Tunisian Truth and Dignity Commission is an exception in which a truth-seeking body explicitly linked tax fraud to human rights violations in the context of transitional justice (e.g., Vathauer & Weipert-Fenner, 2017).

4. Both resolutions emphasized the function of historical research, respectively requesting “to carry out research that establishes the facts that allow for an acknowledgement of the involvement of the Belgian institutions in the colonization of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, and the “scientific research on the colonial past of Belgium.”
5. In Risse’s model, sustained mobilization may result in small openings created by the government, which have the potential to mobilize and empower the domestic actors working for human rights and justice, and which may eventually result in policy change and broader uptake of the human rights discourse. After a long period of domestic socialization, Risse argued that these new human rights norms may simply become part of the state’s regular practice.
6. The latter is further specified as (1) mapping which valuable archives exist that are currently not open to the public, (2) identifying those historical facts (e.g., human rights violations) over which there is consensus, (3) determining what the most important existing and future research questions are, (4) identifying how to translate these insights to educational curricula, (5) mapping which awareness-raising efforts already exist, (6) identifying which misunderstandings are still widely shared and the impact thereof, (7) proposing methods for reconciling various groups involved, (8) determining whether official apologies and symbolic actions (e.g., regarding memorialization) are perceived as relevant by stakeholders, (9) projecting what the effect of concrete government initiatives is, and (10) assessing whether victims can be involved in the research (and which legal or financial repercussions this would have; Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2020a).
7. The current members are Dr. Zana Mathieu Etambala (KMMA, KU Leuven), Dr. Gillian Mathys (UGent), Prof. Dr. Elikia M’Bokolo (EHESS, Université Kinshasa), Anne Wetsi Mpoma (representative diaspora organization Bamko), Mgr. Jean-Louis Nahimana (former chairperson Burundian truth commission), Dr. Pierre-Luc Plasman (UC Louvain), Prof. Dr. Valérie Rosoux (Egmont Institute and UC Louvain), Martien Schotsmans (lawyer and reconciliation expert), Laure Uwase (lawyer and member Jambo News), and Prof. Dr. Sarah Van Beurden (Ohio State University).
8. A letter to the Commission of Foreign Affairs, signed by 30 Congolese, Burundese, and Ugandese diaspora organizations and several individual actors, read that “in light of the sexism, racism and disrespect expressed by the AfricaMuseum ... we believe that the museum is incompetent in the domain of post-colonial truth, reparation, justice and restitutions” (Belga, 2020, author’s translation).
9. At the time of writing (spring 2021), the report had still not been submitted to the commission.
10. I do not engage with the attacks coming from far-right parties and their constituents, as these are analytically less relevant because they reflect populist rhetoric for quick political gain and, as such, say little about the practice of transitional justice or how it is perceived. Moreover, the commission was relatively absent from the rhetoric of the far-right party, which found itself caught between its antimonarchist and anti-Wallonia rhetoric (which would logically have to lead them to endorse this commission because of its narrative that Belgium’s colonial past is, in essence, the past of French-speaking Belgium and of the royal family) and its racist, anti-leftist, anti-“political correctness” rhetoric. The latter dominated, but this tension made it an uneasy theme to mobilize around.
11. Rutazibwa is a lecturer at Portsmouth University, a former full-time journalist at *Mo*Magazine*, and a regular commentator in Belgian newspapers and weeklies.
12. The discussion over whether the focus should be on historical research or on reconciliation also stirred the academic community, with 58 academics pleading for more (academic) historical research before even considering a public debate or reconciliation (Balace et al., 2020) and others responding to this call by arguing that this would only further delay the process and that, on the contrary, there should be a political and public debate first to determine what we need more research on, before embarking on that research (Willems et al., 2020).
13. Lack of transparency can be observed in the fact that the first advisory note commissioned by the Parliament was treated as confidential, that consulted external experts were not told who else was being consulted, that even basic information about the commission is hard to retrieve on the website of the federal parliament, that only limited outreach toward diaspora and civil society organizations is happening, that to date the status of the archives of the Colonial Secret Services is still unclear, and that it is unclear what will happen with the records of the commission itself.

Funding

This article is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme [Grant agreement No. ERC-2018-STG- 804154].

Notes on contributor

Tine Destrooper is an ERC-award-winning associate professor at the Faculty of Law and Criminology of Ghent University and a member of the Human Rights Center at Ghent University. She is the director of Justice Visions. Her research focuses on victim participation in transitional justice. Previously, she held academic positions at New York University, the European University Institute, Leiden University, Wissenschaftskolleg Berlin, and the Universities of Antwerp and Leuven. She was also the director of the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice at New York University's Law School.

ORCID

Tine Destrooper  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0781-2971>

References

- Aloisi, R., & Meernik, J. (2017). *Judgement day: Judicial decision making at the international criminal tribunals*. Cambridge University Press.
- Andreetta, S. (2020). The symbolic power of the state: Inheritance disputes and litigants' judicial trajectories in Cotonou. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 43(1), 5–20. doi:10.1111/plar.12341
- Balace, F., et al. (2020, August 17). Eerst het onderzoek, dan het debat. De Standaard. https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200816_97578124
- Belga (2020, 16 July). La commission spéciale de la Chambre sur la mémoire du colonialisme officiellement installée. La Libre Belgique. <https://www.lalibre.be/belgique/politique-belge/la-commission-speciale-de-la-chambre-sur-la-memoire-du-colonialisme-officiellement-installee-5f106e107b50a677fbf20538>
- Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers (2020a). *Bijzondere commissie belast met het onderzoek over Congo-Vrijstaat (1885–1908) en het Belgisch koloniaal verleden in Congo (1908–1960). Rwanda en Burundi (1919–1962), de impact hiervan en de gevolgen die hieraan dienen gegeven te worden* (Vol. DOC 55 1462/001). Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers.
- Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers (2020b). *Voorstel van resolutie over het uitvoeren van een onderzoek om de feiten vast te stellen en de betrokkenheid te erkennen van de diverse Belgische instellingen in de kolonisatie van Congo, Rwanda en Burundi* (2e zitting van de 55e zittingsperiode ed. Vol. DOC 55 1334/001). Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers.
- Ben Chika, C. (2013). *De Waarheidscommissie*. Action Zoo Humaine.
- Cessou, S. (2020, 12 July). Passé colonial de la Belgique: la «Commission vérité et réconciliation» est-elle mal partie? <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200712-belgique-colonisation-commission-v%C3%A9rit%C3%A9-r%C3%A9conciliation-cvr-mal-partie?ref=tw>
- Dancy, G., Kim, H., & Wiebelhaus-Brahm, E. (2010). The turn to truth: Trends in truth commission experimentation. *Journal of Human Rights*, 9(1), 45–64. doi:10.1080/14754830903530326
- De Haan, M., & Destrooper, T. (2021). Rethinking transitional temporalities in Chile. *International Journal of Restorative Justice* 4(2), 206–228.
- de Sousa Santos, B. (2018). *The end of the cognitive empire: The coming of age of epistemologies of the South*. Duke University Press.
- Destrooper, T., Gissel, L. E., & Carlson, K. B. (Eds.). (2021). *Innovation and Consolidation in Transitional Justice: Learning from paradigmatic contexts*. Cambridge University Press.
- El Gantri, R. (2015). *Tunisia in transition: One year after the creation of the truth and dignity commission*. International Centre for Transitional Justice. <https://www.ictj.org/publication/tunisia-transition-one-year-after-creation-truth-dignity-commission>
- Finemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). International norm dynamics and political change. *International Organization*, 52(4), 887–917. doi:10.1162/002081898550789
- Fricke, M. (2007). *Epistemic justice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.
- Giles, H. (2019). Toward a theory of justicecraft: Language, narratives, and justice in restorative community conversations. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 22(3), 257–279. doi:10.1080/10282580.2019.1644626
- Goodman, R. (2013). *Socializing states: Promoting human rights through international law*. Oxford University Press.
- Gready, P., & Robins, S. (2014). From transitional to transformative justice. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 8(3), 339–361. doi:10.1093/ijtj/iju013
- Grymonprez, S. (2020, July 13). Diaspora zet Congocommissie meteen onder hoogspanning. De Standaard. https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200712_97565989
- Hayner, P. (2011). *Unspeakable truths: Transitional justice and the challenge of truth commissions* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

- Herremans, B., & Destrooper, T. (2021). Stirring the justice imagination: Countering the invisibilization and erasure of syrian victims' justice narratives. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 15(3), 576–595. doi:10.1093/ijtj/ijab025
- Human Rights Council (2019). *Report of the working group of experts on people of African descent - visit to Belgium*. <https://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/8085339.06936646.html>:
- McEvoy, K. (2007). Beyond legalism: Towards a thicker understanding of transitional justice. *Journal of Law and Society*, 34(4), 411–440. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6478.2007.00399.x
- McGonigle Leyh, B. (2020). Imperatives of the present: Black Lives Matter and the politics of memory and memorialization. *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, 38(4), 239–245. doi:10.1177/0924051920967541
- Medina, J. (2018). *The epistemology of resistance: Gender and racial oppression, epistemic injustice, and resistant imaginations*. Oxford University Press.
- Meijers, T., & Glasius, M. (2016). Trials as messages of justice: What should be expected of international criminal courts? *Ethics & International Affairs*, 30(4), 429–447. doi:10.1017/S089267941600040X
- Miller, Z. (2008). Effects of invisibility. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 2(3), 266–291. doi:10.1093/ijtj/ijn022
- Nsai, N. (2020, July 2). Betrek kritische zwarte experts en organisaties bij de commissie over het koloniaal verleden. *De Morgen*. <https://www.demorgen.be/meningen/betrek-kritische-zwarte-experts-en-organisaties-bij-de-commissie-over-het-koloniaal-verleden~bce61132/>
- Ochoa Sanchez, J. C. (2019). Economic and social rights and truth commissions. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 23(9), 1470–1493. doi:10.1080/13642987.2019.1613380
- Pallí-Asperó, C. (2022). *Clarifying the past: understanding historical commissions in conflicted and divided Societies*. Routledge.
- Quinn, J. (2014). Whither the “transition” of transnational justice? *Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Rights Law*, 8(1), 63–79.
- Risse, T. (2017). *Domestic politics and norm diffusion in international relations: Ideas do not float freely*. Routledge.
- Risse, T., Ropp, S., & Sikkink, K. (Eds.). (1999). *The power of human rights: International norms and domestic change*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rutazibwa, O. (2020). *Invitation to join the group of experts for the Special Commission responsible for investigating the Congo-Free State (1885–1908) and the Belgian colonial past in the Congo (1908–1960), Rwanda and Burundi (1919–1962), and the impacts and implications*. <https://oliviarutazibwa.wordpress.com/2020/07/21/congo-commissie-why-i-will-not-participate-in-the-expert-group/>
- Sarkin, J. (2018). Redesigning the definition of a truth commission, but also designing a forward-looking non-prescriptive definition to make them potentially more successful. *Human Rights Review*, 19(3), 349–368. doi:10.1007/s12142-018-0509-3
- Schimmelfennig, F. (2001). The community trap: Liberal norms, rhetorical action, and the eastern enlargement of the European Union. *International Organization*, 55(1), 47–80. doi:10.1162/002081801551414
- Schmidt, V. (2008). Discursive institutionalism: The explanatory power of ideas and discourse. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11(1), 303–326. doi:10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060606.135342
- Senaat, B. (2020). *Voorstel van resolutie betreffende een wetenschappelijk onderzoek naar het koloniaal verleden van België*. Belgische Senaat.
- Sharp, D. (2015). Emancipating transitional justice from the bonds of the paradigmatic transition. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 9(1), 150–169. doi:10.1093/ijtj/iju021
- Shaw, R., & Waldorf, L. (Eds.). (2010). *Localizing transitional justice*. Stanford University Press.
- Stahn, C. (2020). *Justice as message: Expressivist foundations of international criminal justice*. Oxford University Press.
- Tarusarira, J. (2019). The anatomy of apology and forgiveness: Towards transformative apology and forgiveness. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 13(2), 206–224. doi:10.1093/ijtj/ijz006
- Teitel, R. (2014). *Globalizing transitional justice*. Oxford University Press.
- UNDP (2000). *A human rights-based approach to development programming in UNDP – adding the missing link*. United Nations Development Program.
- Vangroenweghe, D. (2020, 27 June) ‘Een waarheidscommissie? De waarheid is al gekend’/Interviewer: M. Reynebeau & K. Vidal. 60 Jaar Congo Series, De Standaard.
- Vatthauer, J.-P., & Weipert-Fenner, I. (2017). *The quest for social justice in Tunisia: socioeconomic protest and political democratization post 2011* (Vol. 143). Hessische Stiftung Friedens- und Konfliktforschung: PRIF reports.
- Vazquez, R. (2011). Translation as erasure: Thoughts on modernity's epistemic violence. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 24(1), 27–44.
- Verberckmoes, Y. (2020, 17 July). Politiek mijnenveld, maar historische kans, Interview with Wouter De Vriendt. *De Morgen*, 6.
- Verdoolaege, A., & Kerstens, P. (2004). The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Belgian Lumumba Commission: A comparison. *Africa Today*, 50(3), 75–91. doi:10.1353/at.2004.0036

- Vergauwen, E. (2020, 30 June). Brief koning Filip krijg internationale weerklink: 'Spijt maar geen excuses.' *De Standaard*. https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200630_95125247
- Weedon, C. (1999). *Feminism, theory, and the politics of difference*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Willems, E., Bevernage, B., Mestdag, E., & Bruno De Wever en Romain Landmeters. (2020, 24 August). De verlamme angst van de historicus. *Der Standaard*. https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200823_97714965
- Winston, C. (2020a). Truth commissions as tactical concessions: The curious case of Idi Amin. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 25(2), 251–273. doi:10.1080/13642987.2020.1773439
- Winston, C. (2020b). Words count: Discourse and the quantitative analysis of international norms. *Journal of Human Rights*, 19(1), 138–151. doi:10.1080/14754835.2019.1671180
- Wouters, D. (2020). There was this goat: The archive for justice as a remedy for epistemic injustices in truth commissions. *International Journal of Human Rights*, 25(1), 493–508. doi:10.1080/13642987.2020.1822336