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- 1 When reading *Recalling the Belgian Congo* it is good to bear in mind what Sherry Ortner wrote in 1995: “The anthropologist and the historian are charged with representing the lives of people who are living or once lived, and as we attempt to push these people into the molds of our texts, they push back.” Ortner’s text provides a possible keying for Dembour’s first book as an ethnography of resistance—and its double: co-authorship. The dialectic process of “pushing” and “pushing back” effects a series of repositionings both in the researcher and in the researched. This book is a field report of these discursive relocations and of an author trying to find therein a heuristically productive and a morally responsible space for herself as an anthropologist and as a public figure.
- 2 The book tells of encounters between a junior, female anthropologist and a number of elder Belgian men, formerly civil servants in the territorial service of the colonial administration of the Belgian Congo. The encounters with the former “territorials” set off when the author still had a rather different research project in mind: a reconstruction of “law in the Belgian Congo” dedicated to analysing how colonial law, however racist and unjust, contributed to the legitimisation of the colonial enterprise by/for the coloniser. Had Dembour pursued this project, she would have put herself in line with a tradition of Belgian historiography featuring authors such as Guy De Boeck, Daniel Vangroenweghe, Jules Marchal, Ludo Martens, and Ludo De Witte. It concerns a group of postcolonial writers who are strongly committed to telling “the other side” of

the colonial story and therefore draw on new and hard evidence in unheard voices and official but suppressed or hidden documents. Although these “dissident” historians consider themselves as counterhegemonic, for ex-colonials they form part of a large majority whose anti-colonialism, a former colonial once wrote, was being incited by “the media, with the aid of certain theoreticians of our ‘grandes écoles’ and leftist circles”.

- 3 The story in chapter 3 (“My project”) precisely tells about the divide within contemporary Belgian society between a “moral majority” and an apprehensive minority of former colonials. The latter perceive decolonisation as a rushed process in which they (were) identified with a national project from which the majority at home distanced itself. Within this gradually popularising anti-colonial discourse, the ex-colonials became objectified as an “other”. The newly decolonised Belgians gradually internalised this discursive de-humanisation by adopting “colonialists” as an autonym. “Colonialists” signals, among other things, their identification with the colonial project, and somehow grasps their imputed incapacity for sincerely representing and evaluating the past they lived. Dembour detects this inclination in her own attitude, when during the first stages of her research, she realises that she dismisses most of their accounts as improbable.
- 4 In chapter 4 (“Their expectations”) she tries to come to grips with “the atmosphere of misunderstanding which the territorials feel surrounds them”. In a situation of epistemological paranoia the ex-colonials welcome the patient listener and make the scientific mission of the researcher into theirs, in the sense that they propose to tell the “whole story” including the bits of their past experiences which they feel could throw a bad light on them. Much to the credit of the author, she finely explores the manifold ramifications of the *observers’ effect* she triggers. The realisation of being partly appropriated (as researcher) by her interviewees, and her confrontation (as alleged member of the anti-colonial majority) with the territorials’ extreme distrust for any outsider’s point of view, articulates nicely with Dembour’s option for a reflexive and dialogical method. From their side, the former colonials take this unique occasion to partly reappropriate their history through the mediation of a researcher who is both seen as a public figure and a custodian of objectivity.
- 5 This “complicity” based on mutual appropriation, sparks off the dialogues in which the work of remembering and forgetting, communication and misunderstanding is closely monitored by the researcher (chapters 5 & 6). The author is particularly observant when it comes to detecting contradictions and paradoxes such as the respondents’ claim that they mixed easily with their administered while one cannot miss the fact that constructing difference and authority was among their most important preoccupations. Contrary to what one could expect, such contradictions are not readily reified as “ideological constructs” but delicately investigated in splendid paragraphs such as “the idiom of prestige”.
- 6 Nonetheless, difference of opinion remained. Respondents were given chapters of the present book to read and they objected. One informant, “Milnaert”, went as far as sending three hours of taped comments, which formed the main basis for the last chapter (ch. 7 “Their Response”). Whether a direct quote or a paraphrase, Dembour summarises Milnaert’s main critique in the quite arresting sentence : “The forest was indiscernible even if the trees were recognisable.” He clearly appreciated the way in which individual voices were given due space and attention (recognition), but thought

that the overall picture was deficient. When trying to pinpoint the main deficiencies more contradictions crops up. One finds ex-colonials trying to regain agency, to find back recognition as—in Touraine’s terms—full subjects. “Milnaert” is reported stressing that the territorials were above all men of action not of “discourse”. The indexicality of this statement should not be underestimated. In the research situation “Milnaert” found himself *reduced* to an informant, a speaker whose words (“discourse”) were being represented. In spite of the active role he saw for himself as an intellectual—a role fully acknowledged by the author—he found himself trapped in his predicament as a “colonialist”, as a represented, a judged “other”. Nevertheless, the quest for agency is equally frustrated by the picture the territorials’ make of themselves as insignificant parts of a larger system, as workers in a vast factory, as implementers of sometimes impossible policies.

- 7 Chapters 6 & 7 lay bare the unwillingness of both the researcher and the respondents to accept each other’s truths ; both parties keep resisting. In its entire structure the book is organised on the dialectics of—in Ortner’s terms— pushing (ch. 3 “My project” ; ch. 6 “My story”) and pushing back (ch. 4 “Their expectations” ; ch. 7 “Their response”)—a to-and-fro segmented by preliminary considerations (ch. 1 & 2), a general assessment of the interviews (ch. 5) and the conclusion (ch. 8).
- 8 The author goes to considerable lengths in order to meet Hastrup’s challenge of an ethnography “infiltrating the self-description” of the former colonials—a process which simultaneously infiltrates her own practice and discourse as an ethnographer. It leaves one longing for more and other ethnographies of confrontations with ex-colonials. For instance the kind of thick ethnographies that describe “full subjects” : ex-colonials in the richness of their biographies, in their private worlds and associational life, in their public appearances at memorial services and at regular moambe-dinner meetings. It is indeed in these contexts also that former colonial employees and their contemporary co-workers “push back” by building coherent self-descriptions and lifeworlds.
- 9 In this instance, the author restricts her material to linguistic interaction and chooses direct exposure to a chunk of “illicit discourse”. Given the enduring non-dialogue between self-proclaimed colonialists and anti-colonials in Belgium, and taking into account this nation’s present quest to come to terms both with its colonial past and its postcolonial xenophobia, this book can be taken as a methodological experiment in the “reconciliation of truths” and offers us a glimpse into the kind of resistances that it will generate.