

# Representation of Afro-Belgian Voices in Belgium

## An Inquiry into Understanding the Dynamics of Representation of Afro-Belgian Voices in Belgium

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## Dedication

This piece of work is dedicated to my beloved mother, whose unwavering support and encouragement kept me going throughout my academic journey.

## Abbreviations

Afro-Belgians	Belgians with African Roots
BLM	Black Lives Matter
EU	European Union
IOM	International Organization for Migration
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
N-VA	New Flemish Alliance
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAD/BE	People of African Descent in Belgium
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

## Abstract

Migrant communities often lack representation in public discussions. This research focuses specifically on the Afro-Belgian community and critically examines how their voices are being represented in Belgium. This community is the largest African minority group in Belgium, representing approximately 2% of the population. The study categorizes their voices and representations into political and social factors and examines the challenges they face in making their voices heard. Furthermore, the mechanisms they use to amplify their voices, such as street protests (#BLM), and access to mainstream media, are also investigated. Moreover, the research looks at issues related to identity as the basis for collective struggle. Subsequently, the lack of mandate for Afro-Belgians to represent the broader community, and division within the community are also interrogated. To find answers to these enigmatic questions, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in addition to an extensive literature and theoretical review. The research interestingly features the voices of activists, politicians/policy makers, feminists, and decolonial educationist.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

It is important to note that migration has become a popular topic in public and policy discussions, as well as, in the academic domain. Lafleur & Marfouk (2017) have pointed out that the term “migration” has become associated with negativity in current times. This negativity has led to a need to understand and uncover the voices of migrant communities. In light of this, this research will focus on Belgium, the capital of Europe, to explore the perspectives of Afro-Belgians. Specifically, the research examines not only how their voices are being represented, but also, the individuals who are doing this representation. The Caritas (2019), a non-governmental organization (NGO) whose work focuses on working for deprived persons, including migrants, in its 2019 report highlighted the fundamental contributions of migrants in different epochs of Belgium’s history. For instance, most Afro-Belgians from countries like Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Rwanda, Cameroun, Senegal, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have opened up retail shops, barbering salons, and restaurants where they have employed personnel who work for a wage. Some Afro-Belgians are also self-employed, contributing to job creation and employment which service the economy. Many others have established cross-border connections where they import and export goods from their country of origin, thereby facilitating economic activities between Belgium and their country of origin (Martiniello & Bousetta 2008).

Bignandi (2018, as cited in Caritas International, 2019: 29) expounded that, “globally, a 10% increase of migrants from a specific country in a Belgian region led to an increase of 1.2% of the region’s exports from and 3.6% of its imports to the country in question”. The same report further emphasized how that has yielded not just divergent social and cultural outcomes but, more so, economic, and political development. Afro-Belgians like Stromae, Baloji, Zap Mama, Leki, and Sihame El Kaouakibi are just some of the names who have contributed through their diverse ways in shaping Belgian society (ibid, 2019). Moreover, Boon & Ahenkan (2012) do not only agree with this assertion but, take it further to state that the socio-economic contribution of Afro-Belgians in Belgium’s development is significant. For instance, their research found that “about 41% of the respondents cited payment of taxes as their contributions to the economy of Belgium, followed by sanitation through cleaning (34.7%), provision of labour (19.5%), ensuring food security (3.4%), and cultural enrichment (1.7%)” (Boon & Ahenkan, 2012: 355). Their research further indicates an

interesting observation of how Afro-Belgians think they can contribute positively to shaping the Belgian society in which they live. About “36.4% said by abiding by the laws of Belgium; learning the language (37.3%); investing in Belgium (16.9%); payment of taxes (6.8%); and keeping the country clean (2.5%)” (ibid: 356). Therefore, this research is not only timely but goes further to exploit the grey area as well as contributions of minority groups like Afro-Belgians in their host nations through how their voices are represented in Belgium.

Interestingly, there is a need to shift the debate from economic-driven migration discourse to, rather, the representation of the voices of migrants. Lönnqvist et al. (2020) agree with this observation that migration discourse has long been centred around labour migration but has less been on the voices and representation of the migrants in their host nations. This identified a fundamental gap in the literature is what this research seeks to address by examining the voices of Afro-Belgians. That is, not just their representation, but more so, those doing the representation and through which mechanism this is done.

To get to the heart of the discourse, both historical and contemporary lenses are employed. This is what this research calls the ‘double approach’. It is supported by Jansen (2011) as it provides a framework to appreciate the historicity and root causes of migration. As noted by Viaene (2008), Belgium in the 19th century was one of the most industrialized countries yet, the least imperial nation of the European continent. From a colonial context, the quest for industrialization underscores Belgium’s colonization that necessitated the exportation of bureaucrats to its colonial territories, notably in the Congo DR (Kisangani, 2022). This is to say migration resonates with an outward and vast movement of the population for industrial development. With this background in mind, Belgium in colonial times was an outward emigration country. This can be traced back to King Leopold’s “see big” ambition that necessitated its expansion abroad to restore dignity and respect for Belgium (Twain, 2020; Viaene, 2008). One can therefore argue that based on the colonial explanation that “historicity” explains why Belgium was not a migrant country but rather has an emigrated population. This assertion is also supported by Linnard (1998). He noted that, between 1831 and World War I, a chunk of the Belgian population had emigrated to countries like France, Canada, and the United States of America for better economic opportunities. Petillon (2006) similarly noted that the Belgian population in France was estimated to be around 45,000 in 1891 and thus, were a majority in some northern French cities like Roubaix.

What explains therefore the attractiveness of Belgium as a migration destination for African immigrants? Post-colonialism is a key reference point. As most African countries gradually became politically independent, this necessitated what could be termed a 'reversal policy'. This was with the idea of getting Belgians who were willing to come back to Belgium after the independence of Belgium's colonies like Congo DR (Briscoe, 2018). This further explains that the political independence of African states thus represented by and large the fall of bureaucratic colonialism (Zimmermann, 1995: 3). The end of Belgium's colonial rule in Eastern and Central African countries like Congo DR, Burundi and Rwanda resulted in Belgian soldiers and some civilian bureaucrats returning to their country, which was more stable and prosperous. However, some Belgian soldiers/ agents and bureaucrats had fathered children with the natives in these colonies and thus, the question of what to do with these children as the colonial enterprise fell apart was very much high on the table (Aljazeera, February 3, 2021). Therefore, as part of the postcolonial policy, was also the forced kidnapping of mixed-race children born to Belgian fathers and African mothers, otherwise known as 'Metis' (Heynssens, 2016). This led to the forced adoption policy which took away by force thousands of children from their parents in Africa, notably Burundi, Congo DR, and Rwanda.

What is equally imperative to understand is the fact that the kidnapping, abduction, and exportation of mixed-race children from the former colonies to Belgium were also happening before, during and after the independence of the former Belgian colonies in central Africa. In fact, between 1959 and 1961, there were "283 of these displaced children from the former trust territory Ruanda-Urundi were 'repatriated' to Belgium" (Heynssens, 2016: 2). After several decades of their lives in Belgium, the erstwhile kidnapped Metis children began to demand redress and an apology for reasons why this was done to them by the implicit knowledge of the colonial government. The continued pressure from the victims' families of the brutal actions who live in Belgium directed towards the Belgian state led former Prime Minister Charles Michel to issue an apology in 2019. The apologies were to Belgium's erstwhile colonies in Africa in which he described the policy as a "system of targeted segregation of métis and their families" (New York Times, April 2019). These children of African descent or background have become an integral part of the Afro-Belgian community today (Gregoire, 2019).

Furthermore, the newly independent African states undergoing sudden social and political unrest were also faced with challenges on how to govern their new and fragile states. An enormous population with a high rate of illiteracy amongst others was a problem to contend with. This precipitated an outward migration flow for many Africans in these newly free states (Schapendonk, 2011). For instance, the period from the 1950s to the 1980s were turbulent times for postcolonial African states. Notably, colonial wars fringes into postcolonial conflicts (Schoumaker, et al., 2013). Some of these internal struggles resulted in civil wars and ethnic conflicts. In Nigeria, one of the giant states of Africa, the civil war lasted for about 30 months (about two and a half years) and only ended when the secessionist group spearheaded by General Odumegwu Ojukwu were defeated by the military government of General Yakubu Gowon, (Fawole, 2004).

In Congo DR, civil wars have left an unbearable consequence not just on the people and the country, but more so, the region and the continent at large (Collier & Sambanis, 2005). The Katanga crisis between 1960 and 1963 not only saw the assassination of Patrice Emery Lumumba but was followed by riots and the ascension to power by Mobutu's dictatorial regime. This rendered the country at the edge thus, 'prompted' UN interventions (Meditz & Merrill, 1993; Meditz et al. 2012). Here, it is somehow imperative to give some context. The Katanga question or Katanga secessionist movement was not a post-colonial creation. It had existed during the Belgian colonial administration as well. During the Congo Free State under King Leopold II, it was administered privately by the 'Comite Special du Katanga' until it was finally transferred to the authority of the vice governor by 1910. Furthermore, by 1933, there were more reorganizations which brought Katanga under the custodianship of the central colonial administration (Gerard-Libois, 1966). With the advent of independence, the Katanga secessionist group saw this as an opportunity to push for their interest in a separate Katanga state. The civil war ensued, and the story of conflict and violence has become synonymous with the DRC regardless of the abundant natural resources (Demart, 2013). This led massive people to flee the erstwhile colonial metropolis. The umbilical cord of the intertwined Belgian-Congo history remains a question to be solved.

Belgium has long been a destination for migrants from Rwanda, even before the tragic events of 1994. However, it is argued that the colonial system's differentiation between the Tutsi and the Hutu laid bare the ethnic divide that ultimately culminated in the genocide (Mizuno & Okazawa, 2009). The conflict in Rwanda meant that people were forced to flee, exacerbating existing migration patterns (Fujii, 2008). As a result, there is a substantial Afro-Belgian population, estimated at around 110,000 individuals originating from Rwanda, Congo, and Burundi, making them the third largest group from outside the European Union (King Baudouin Foundation, 2017). Despite their significant numbers, they are often less visible in public discourse and political society (Dermart, 2013). In this research, we will focus on this group of Afro-Belgians, exploring not only how their voices are represented but also by whom and how this representation is carried out in subsequent chapters.

As cited by King Baudouin Foundation (2017), it is estimated that there are around 110,000 immigrants originating from Rwanda, Congo and Burundi who live in Belgium, hence making them the third biggest group from outside the European Union. Albeit this staggering number, they are not often visible in public discourses and thus, less discernible in the political society (Dermart, 2013). This group of Afro-Belgian is visible as well as a key target in this research. This research will explore in subsequent chapters not just how their voices are represented, but also, which people are doing this representation and how this representation is being done.

## 1.2. Contextualizing Belgium

Interestingly, there is a need to understand the setting of Belgium as a country. The strategic nature of Belgium as a developed and wealthy Western European country makes it today a viable migration destination (Blommaert, 2001). Strategically, it is located in the centre of Europe, and it is often referred to as the 'heart of Europe' (De Winter & Baudewyns, 2009). A famous quote by an Irish priest, Father Vincent McNabb sums up its unique characteristic as a small but unique country in the centre of Europe and therefore: "the little white ewe lamb of Europe". Aside from its cosmopolitan grandeur, Belgium is today the hub of European political hegemony. It is hosting European Union's institutions, Permanent Mission of the African Union, NATO Headquarters, and other Human Rights Organizations, (Schweiger, 2016).

As observed by Petrovic (2015), Belgium's immigration population can be traced as well as in contemporary times since WWII. Its uniqueness and economic prosperity make it viable for immigrants from Africa, Turkey, and other European countries post-WWII. The recent 2015 migration outburst has brought to light the discourse on migration in Europe and Belgium is at the heart of this debate. By its political, economic and migration significance it is well placed to study the political representation of minority communities such as the Afro-Belgian community. Significantly, these groups play a huge role in the everyday life of Belgium, such as in the labour market. As pointed out in the OECD Economic Survey (2015), despite their economic contributions, they still form a tiny percentage of those occupying white-collar jobs in the workplace.

### 1.3. Purpose of the Study

The underlying thrust of this research is to investigate the voices of Afro-Belgians in Belgium and to an extent, analyze how these voices are not only represented, but also, who is doing this representation in Belgium. With a focus on voices and their representation, the purpose of this research is to understand the organization of voices of Afro-Belgians. In so doing, one is keen to uncover the 'double consciousness' of Afro-Belgians as well as their heritage and in turn, to see whether it does influence how they represent their voices in Belgium.

Furthermore, one can argue that although Congolese Belgians, just like any other Sub-Saharan African migrants in Belgium remain conscious about their 'Africaness', they regard themselves and their identities as Congolese Belgians, Ghanaian Belgians, Rwanda Belgians, etc. Their national identities remain a conscious aspect of how they see themselves. They remain organized albeit some formally and others, informally as Congolese Belgians or Ghanaian Belgians, (Monaville, 2019; Geybels, n.d; Hassett, 2020). Nonetheless, some, as indicated by the chapter on analysis, remain within their national boundary in most of their organizations and meetings. This will lead us to what drives the agency and how the thereof/lack of agency influences the ability for their voices to be heard. The understanding of a minority community (Afro-Belgians) in a contemporary context in light of what is deemed in the West as 'the migration crisis'. This is why this study focuses on the Belgian context with a strong colonial link to one of the most exploited countries in Africa i.e., Congo DR. However, it is also prudent to state without ambiguity that this study is not limited to

the Congolese diaspora in Belgium. Rather, it aims to speak to the diverse Afro-Belgians from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Northern part of Africa as well.

Therefore, it is based on this line of reasoning that this inquiry transcends beyond just the aforementioned erstwhile colonies of Belgium and thus, focuses both on the entire continent of Africa in a broader sense.

#### 1.4. Relevance of the Study

The discussion surrounding the position of Afro-Belgians has been predominantly portrayed in a negative light, which has resulted in insufficient recognition of their contributions to Belgian society. As cited by Demart (2022: 147), Belgians of African descent are consistently marginalized by institutions and society, preventing them from contributing to important discussions regarding their issues. They are often overlooked regarding topics like decolonization, the country's colonial history, restitution, and creating a more inclusive society. This social invisibility must be addressed to create a fair and equitable dialogue for all. Their voices are often unheard and, thus, not represented (Mazzocchetti 2012). To gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic, a thorough literature review and theoretical background were conducted. Additionally, in-depth semi-structured interviews were held with Afro-Belgians who have made notable contributions to the fight for the recognition of Afro-Belgian voices in Belgium. The purpose of these interviews was to gain insight from experts who possess a deep understanding of the subject and are willing to share their knowledge to address the existing gap.

This research holds immense significance. The election of Pierre Kompany as the first black Mayor in Ganshoren (Brussels) in 2018, followed by his resignation (reported by The Guardian on October 15, 2018), the recognition of Matonge in Brussels as the capital of Africa in Belgium, and the inauguration of the Africa Museum in Tervuren are all crucial factors in expanding the dialogue on the representation and voices of Afro-Belgians. As cited by Caritas Report (2019), African immigrants form about 25% of the migrant population in Belgium, only behind other European immigrants (54% of the migrant population). It is important to clarify that most Afro-Belgians within the 25% are located in North Africa, with Congo DR following closely behind.



In addition, the European Network Against Racism Report (2016) approximated that from 2012, people of Sub-Saharan (Black Europeans) origin, also known as the People of African Descent (PAD), constitute about 6.3% of all migrants in Belgium, with DR Congo leading the chart. Moreover, the report further ascertained that in contrast to other European countries, the people of African Descent in Belgium (PAD/BE) population in Belgium attain higher levels of political participation than has. The report, however, further states that this higher political height has not translated into better treatment of Afro-Belgians in their workspaces. Additionally, there is not just a substantial gap between the national average employment rate (66%) and that of People of African Descent (PAD) which is (39.7%), but also, the skilled Afro-Belgians are given more workload and/or need to put in more effort to keep their jobs, (Kwansah-Aidoo & Mapedzahama, 2018: 96-97). Consequently, this research has the potential of unearthing interesting results that may contribute to filling the gap that exists between the discourses on Afro-Belgians and their voices in Belgium.

### 1.5. Research Questions

This research will examine the following questions:

- Do Afro-Belgians have a voice in Belgium?
- What kind of voices do they have in Belgium?
- How are these voices represented and which people are doing this representation?
- What are the challenges Afro-Belgians face in the effort to make their voices heard and represented?

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2. 1. Introduction and Contextualization

There seems to be a contested meaning to the term ‘migration’ in the contemporary debate (Oliveira-Martins & Strange, 2019). In its simplest terms, migration can be defined as the movement of people from their country of origin to a new one. This can be a ‘permanent’ or ‘semipermanent’ change of residence (Manning, 2005). Similarly, the UN Migration Agency, International Organization for Migrants (IOM) defines a migrant as “any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is”. The two definitions are interlinked to mean the process and the person involved in this process.

The topic of migration has become a prominent issue in Europe and other parts of the world. However, it is important to also consider the perspectives of minority groups, and how they are portrayed and represented in their new communities. This is the focus of my thesis. Migration discourse in recent times has been mostly linked to “irregular” migration, as IOM defines it as migration that takes place “outside the irregular norm”. Throughout history, people have migrated for several reasons (Fisher, 2014). Among other reasons, it is observable that people have moved for socio-economic, political, and conflict/war reasons (Castelli, 2018).

It is also worth mentioning that colonialism is an important reference point. For instance, the first Europeans to arrive in Africa arrived by boat (Birmingham, 2016). These voyages led to several interactions and perpetuated slavery and colonialism that continue to define Europe-Africa relations (Kotsopoulos & Mattheis, 2018).

The partition of Africa by European imperialist powers fronts this historical relation. It gave European colonial powers domination and firm control over the African continent (Chamberlain, 2014). The 1884-85 Berlin Conference, otherwise known as the Scramble for Africa, formally, among other nation-states, established the Congo Free State for King Leopold II of Belgium (Craven 2015; Gregoire, 2019). King Leopold II of Belgium, albeit never to have set foot in Africa, callously ruled the Congo Free State from 1885 till 1908 (EISA, 2010). In a rare interview in 1906 with an American on the charges purported against him, King Leopold II stated, “I suppose there is nobody in Europe painted as such a monster of such blackness as I am. The words picturing my perfidy cannot be repeated in polite society. Nero, it is said, was a saint compared to me. I am an ogre who delights to torture helpless Africans”. He continued, “I do not deny that there have been cases of misjudgements on the part of Congo officials. Most likely, cruelties, even crimes, have been committed. There have been several convictions before Congo tribunals for the offenses. I do deny that every effort as far as possible has not been made to stop the ill treatment of natives not by white people, but by natives themselves” (Rahier, 2003: 58). However, it is least surprising that King Leopold II had sought and denied the charges against him during this interview which was published by the American journalist in the press.

Furthermore, De Mul (2011: 588) has bemoaned how pieces of literature have failed to ornate on the atrocities and the ‘holocaust’ that transpired in Congo, where about 10 million Africans were killed by the command of King Leopold II. Although this figure has also garnered different debates about the fact that King Leopold II and his soldiers might not have had the manpower to murder such a substantial number, the reality remains that it was more than the number of Jews executed by Hitler during WWII. This dynamic is interesting because some people do not necessarily see or hold King Leopold II responsible for what transpired in the Congo Free State during his reign of terror (Couttenier, 2018: 100; BBC News June 13, 2020).

In a TV program in 2020, Vrije Universiteit Brussel Professor (VUB), Herve Hasquin, stated in a TV debate that there were “positive aspects of colonialism” by itemizing the primary education, infrastructure, and health system (Afro News, June 13, 2020). Similarly, in 2010, an ex-foreign minister of Belgium, and father of a former Prime Minister Charles Michel, dubbed King Leopold II “a hero with ambitions for a small country like Belgium” (BBC News June 13, 2020). The counterarguments and debates seem to suggest that there is a contested legacy about the degree of atrocities caused by King Leopold II in Congo DR.

Furthermore, the analysis of European migration is crucially important. As outlined by Zimmermann (1995: 3), there are four phases of European migration. Notably, the periods of war adjustment and decolonization (1945–the 1960s) with an estimated number of 20 million displaced people because of the World War; labour migration (1955-1973) because of labour shortages, resulting in openness for labour migration which resulted in post War Europe economic growth; restrained migration (1974-1988) international labour migration was stopped as a result of increasing social tensions, and finally, dissolution of socialism and afterwards (1988 to date) resulted in East-West migration and on the other hand, asylum seekers and refugees. These distinct phases thus provide a clear overview of European migration history.

On the other hand, is the South-North migration. What is particularly striking is the contributions of African migrants to European societies and their countries of origin as expounded above in the introduction (Boon & Ahenkan, 2012). Therefore, throughout these distinct phases of European migration outlined above, the African continent has not only been a safe home for Europeans but, also, provided labour support. Fogarty, (2019) points out the fact that in WW I alone, it is estimated between 150,000 and 200,000 Africans travelled to Europe to labour in support of the war effort. The Second World War saw amongst other contributions, such as forced conscription. Schmitt (2020) argues that, notably, there were in French colonies, thousands of Europeans fled to Africa. East Africa (Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania) hosted over 3000 Polish (Piotrowski, 2004).

In lieu of the above, Europe's immigration policies can be grouped into: Firstly, the "immigration control policy or immigration regulation". This has to do with the rules and selection procedures that countries have that allow them to decide who they admit or allow entry into their countries. These can be temporary migrant workers and refugees. Secondly, "immigration policy" has to do with the circumstances and provisions that are carved out for the immigrants' group/residents in the host countries, i.e., work and housing conditions, welfare provisions, and educational opportunities (Meyers, 2000: 1246; Hammer, 1985: 7-9).

In the contemporary context, Africa is scapegoated in the migration discourse. There is no doubt that migration and displacement are very prevalent in Africa. However, what is missing in the discourse is that internal and South-to-South migration is more prevalent than what is projected in Europe. As reported by the (UNHCR), "around 30 million internally displaced persons, refugees and asylum-seekers live in Africa, representing almost one-third of the world's refugee population". The renewed conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Central African Republic, South Sudan, and Nigeria are widely cited (Africa Renewal, March 2020).

Furthermore, the contemporary migration debate in Europe has failed to include minority voices, rights, and representation (Demart, 2022). This therefore brings to question Afrophobia in the context of the voices of Afro-Belgians and how these voices are represented in Belgium. Described as the most "invincible minorities" in Europe, the Parliament Magazine (December 14, 2014) argues that "there are an estimated 7 to 12 million people of African descent and black Europeans in Europe, and they are particularly affected by racism and discrimination across the European Union". It is therefore crucial to examine the voices they poses and how their voices are portrayed, as well as their contributions to Europe. In this specific study, Belgium serves as the focal point.

## 2.2. The Push and Pull Factors of Sub-Saharan African Migrants to Europe and Belgium

Push and pull factors are imperative in decision-making when it comes to migration. In a simplistic term, Boon & Ahenkan (2010: 350) expounded that “push factors refer to events in the country of origin that motivate migrants to leave while pull factors are the deliberate and/or unintended actions from recipient countries that attract migrants to their countries”. Oftentimes, immigrants are defined as rational actors whose decisions are based on the pull factors in the receiving countries and thus, negating the push factors back at home. These factors, combined with the idea of better opportunities the pull factors promise, determine such a decision on the part of the immigrants. Europe received approximately one million asylum applications between 2010–2017 from Sub-Saharan Africa, excluding student visas, refugee resettlement, and family reunion or work visas (Pew Research Centre, 2018). But this recent influx alone cannot explain the growing number of African migrants’ population in Europe.

There are equally telling factors such as the umbilical cord of colonialism, violent conflicts in home countries, poverty, and ecological degradation, to mention a few (Kohnert, 2007: 5). Notwithstanding the staggering figures that one-third of the global population was African between 1993 and 2003, what is more, astonishing is the fact that 27 of the 54 countries in Africa are under some form of violent conflict or unease. Thus, they continue to push mainly the youth to migrate in search of a better future in Europe. According to the International Organization for Migrants (IOM, 2006: 26), the majority of migrants from Africa migrate to their erstwhile colonial metropolises like Belgium, Britain, Germany, and France due to the ever presence of the colonial umbilical cord between the colony and the metropole. Kohnert (2007: 9) underscores that about 33-55% of skilled Africans from mainly Kenya, Ghana, Angola, and Burundi have emigrated to the OECD countries. The United Nations 2006 report affirmed that, indeed, there is a growing migration from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe and, thus, would be beneficial to both sending and hosting countries if it is properly harnessed. But did hasten to register their concern on the hardline migration policies of the European Union. Consequently, the externalization of its border would only encourage and shoot up irregular migration, smuggling, marginalization, and exploitation of migrants, leaving them in a vulnerable position and an increase of inequalities (United Nations, 2006).

In Belgium, there are roughly 110,000 Afro-Belgian immigrants from Rwanda, Congo, and Burundi who live in Belgium hence, making them the third biggest group from outside the European Union (King Baudouin Foundation, 2017). Albeit this staggering number, they are relatively not often well represented since their voices are not heard. For instance, Demart (2013) stresses that the Congolese diaspora in Belgium, which is one of the largest minority groups in the country, has not been academically researched on in its complexities and, thus, continues to be prejudiced through public discourse, discriminated against in the labour market, housing and at the policy level. This is affirmed by the scholarly work of Mazzocchetti (2012), where she underscores that the migration statistics of Afro-Belgians in Belgium contribute to the ‘social invisibility’ of Black people not just in the Belgian Migration Studies, but also, the society as a whole.

## 2.3. Definition of Key Concepts

### 2.3.1. Introduction

To understand this subject is first to conceptualize key terms. How can we comprehend the concept of migration and identify who qualifies as a migrant? Additionally, how do we make sense of the political, social, and economic factors that influence the organization of migrants in their host country? In this context, certain key concepts help to situate this research to probe into the voices and the representational organization of Afro-Belgians in Belgium. Dingle & Drake (2007) noted that understanding of political organization of migrants is interlinked to individual behaviours that shape their community and organizations. This is to say, “individuals manifest their capacity for migration through behaviour. It is through behavioural traits in particular (although not exclusive) that natural selection will act to shape migration” (ibid.,: 116). This aspect of the research is centred around explaining certain key concepts about the voices of Afro-Belgians and how these voices are represented in Belgium.

### 2.3.2. Minority Group

Understanding minority groups requires us to first and foremost contextualize the concept. The term minority can be defined as “people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination” Wirth (1945: 347). This definition implies the study of a specific group of migration backgrounds who faced, among other things, discrimination and lack of recognition and equal opportunities in society (ibid: 348). With Belgium as the case study, Afro-Belgian voices are the focal point of this study this dynamic.

Furthermore, looking at minorities in statistical terms implies less than the native population. This reinforces the dichotomy of a minority being statistically inferior to a statistically superior majority. Interestingly, Wagley & Harris (1958, as cited in Schuerkens, 2010) argued that a minority group can be characterized by five distinctions: (1) unequal treatment and less power over their lives, (2) distinguishing physical or cultural traits like skin color or language, (3) involuntary membership in the group, (4) awareness of subordination, and (5) high rate of in-group marriage. Adding to the debate on understanding a minority group is the works of a famous sociologist Louis Wirth (1945). Wirth boldly stated that minority implies discrimination in sociological terms. This is based on the premise that there exist a minority in relation to the majority.

In any society, there exists a majority as the opposite of minority. The majority holds power and dominance, while the minority is subjected to subordination. It is important to acknowledge that while social status and race, among other factors, contribute to the defining characteristics of minority groups underpinning the discrimination they face, race is the primary factor that leads to differential treatment of these groups (Pew Research Center, 2016).



In the context of Belgium, Afro-Belgians are considered to be one of the minority groups in the society and, thus, constitute about 6.3% of the population (ENAR Report 2016). Furthermore, as cited by Caritas Report (2019), Afro-Belgians make up about 25% of the migrant population in Belgium, only behind other European immigrants (54% of the migrant population). This figure is interesting, particularly looking at the disparity that exists in other European Union member states. For example, the European Network Against Racism's 2012 study shows that in Denmark, people of African descent (PAD) constitute about 11% (49,743) of the immigrant population. In Germany, the figure is around 3% (477,000).

### 2.3.3. Voices and Representation

The question of voices in general and how they thus influence representation has been evergreened. Especially, as it relates to minority representation in a democratic society. Many scholars have tried to quiz themselves on what it entails in substance. To concretize this, Judge (1999: 1-2) argues that the concept of political representation should be exclusively understood as “a system of government in which the people are held present through their representatives in making political decisions”. This is to say that the voices of the citizens of a group of people in a democratized system are expressed or heard through the people who represent them in the decision-making body of the government apparatus. This is usually done through the elected people given the mandate to do so. Afro-Belgians who choose to speak up about the struggles faced by their community are not mandated to do so. However, many express themselves in their own unique ways using the platforms available to them. Furthermore, Bengtsson & Wass (2010: 838) add to the debate by asking “whom legislators represent, how do they represent and how representative or responsive are they regarding voter” opinions and policy expectations”. Although this leans more to the political side of the representation, in essence, the idea revolves around how the voices of Afro-Belgians are shaped and represented in divergent ways and who is doing this representation.

Nevertheless, these two strands do not offer us the needed explanation to understand and engage with the concept critically in its entirety. That is why the seminar work of Pitkin (1967) comes in handy. She argues that there are three types of representation based on the relationship that exist between the representatives and the represented. Firstly, a representative that “stands for” its represented group would only act in the way the group has asked rather than do something else. Secondly, the type of representation that takes “care of” its represented group can act and make decisions that it thinks are in the best interest of its represented group without necessarily consulting them. The most important aspect of this perspective is that, it would act in the very best interest of the group. Lastly, the third perspective of Pitkin’s three-way approach is the one that combines the other two styles. It is the type that does not only pay heed to its represented group through consultation but also has the capacity to act in accordance with his/her predilections as long as it serves the interest of the group (ibid.,: 61).

#### 2.3.4. Political Community

Political community implies minority groups with similar backgrounds/characteristics and are united by shared interests and goals (Allen, 1999). One puzzling question stems from the idea that, are Afro-Belgians a community? How do they even see themselves in this regard? Important to look at is, as individuals or groups of people move due to migration and other reasons, they settle down among groups, and with time, they organize themselves through certain identities and values that define them. As their community grows, there is the need to have a clearly defined voice that represents their interests (Lichterman, 1996). This may be directly or indirectly. As cited by Kukathas (2014: 39), a community “is a collectivity of people who share some common interest and who therefore are united by bonds of commitment to that interest”.

Looking at it from the voices of Afro-Belgians' collective point of view, stemming from the understanding of what is public and that which is private within that polity, though this bond can sometimes be weak. However, a greater interest supersedes the weakness and keeps it together. Some of these things for the Afro-Belgians are the fight against discrimination, and racism, and the strive for equal opportunity to societal recourse. Being more critical from the perspective of political communities in relation to Afro-Belgian voices, Mouffe (1992) argues extensively that the collectivity of the community is not necessarily dependent on a substantial idea of a common good but, rather, a common relationship embedded in public concern. This form of community existence comes with a defined identity as its' basic denominator.

### 2.3.5. Afro-Belgians

One of the biggest ethnic minority groups in Belgium is Afro-Belgians. This group of people includes those who are Belgians by naturalization, birth, adoption, etc., but also, have African descent (New African, December 5, 2016). For instance, as aforementioned, Afro-Belgians form about 6.3% of the Belgian total population (ENAR Report, 2016). This category of being considered Afro-Belgian has a long tradition of division where natives were referred to as the "autochthone" while non-natives/ foreigners were simply regarded as "allochtone", (New African, December 5, 2016).

This mode of categorization, although with the initial idea of statistical weight, has lived to connote negativity on the part of the 'other'. The direct translation of the word "allochtone" means "immigrant-origin" (Jacobs & Rea, 2012). Although this was initially used as a means of distinguishing between who is a native and who is a non-native, the term has however over a period of time, been profoundly racialized and, thus, has a negative connotation of mostly Afro-Belgians (Wills, Hubinette & Willing, 2014). Furthermore, one can argue that the word was imported into Belgium from the Netherlands as it is more frequent in Flanders than in the French-speaking part because the word is Flemish, and thus, Flanders has more cultural proximity to the Netherlands than the French-speaking part of Belgium (Jacobs & Rea, 2012).

Moreover, Demart (2022: 147) argues that Afro-Belgians are not only systematically and institutionally sidelined on very important issues regarding themselves but are also encountered with social invisibility to contribute to the national dialogue on important issues concerning them, such as decolonization, colonial past, restitution and living together. However, she subsequently acknowledges that activism and voices of the Afro-Belgians have been yielding results in the recent past. As part of a broader and comprehensive movement for restitution, the Belgian context succeeded in getting a political appreciation and, successively, a resolution that was pretty distinctive compared to other EU countries on such issues. Moreover, the manner in which this campaign for restitution ensued was equally interesting. A simultaneous approach was designed so that while there was the push for restitution, there was equally the need for Afro-Belgians to be not just considered an integral part of the national discourse on issues like decolonization, national heritage, and identity belonging but more so, their experiences and expertise be valued and appreciated in this regard (ibid.,: 148).

## Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

### 3.1. Introduction

Various theorists have emerged to explain migration discourse. Some of the famous theorists widely cited are but are not limited to the push and pull factors (see Chapter 2). The theory of pull and push argues that economic and political means are key factors that either push or pull people to migrate (Boon & Ahenkan, 2012). But this theory can also be supplemented with historical and contemporary factors. As cited in the introductory section above, there are numerous reasons why people in particular Africans migrated to Belgium and Europe in general. For instance, colonialism and colonial ties were and have been crucial (Demart, 2013). This is also evident in the number of targeted and research interview participants, mostly from the Congo, Rwanda, or French-speaking former European colonies. In categorical terms, conflicts and forced adoption are crucial. In the economic context, as noted by Boon & Ahenkan (2012), it is as a result of the poor socio-economic performances of nations that have triggered more migration.

### 3.2. Social Identity Theory

Consciousness plays a key role in the construction of one's identity. This in turn creates and influences social change. As noted by Kaplan (2000), consciousness is the process of the creation of one's identity. In other words, one's identity is shaped by social and political factors in order to have a representation in society. This takes us to the social identity theory coined by Tajfel (1979: 18-19) where he refers to this as "the process of locating oneself, or another person, within a system of social categorizations or, as a noun, to any social categorization used by a person to define him- or herself and others". This can be understood as a group of people coming together based on their shared identity. As noted by a renowned philosopher, Karl Max: "It is not the consciousness of [people] that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness" (Kertzer, 1979: 323). Similarly, another philosopher in the person of Rene Descartes noted quite famously: "Cogito, Ergo Sum"- which translates from Latin to English to mean: "I think, therefore, I am" (Stone, 1993: 460). Capozza & Brown, (2000: 1) have also engaged with social identification theory where they investigated the correlation between categorization and intergroup discrimination. These two quotes position human beings as conscious beings as they are

shaped by their societies. This explains the role of social and political consciousness in the fight for their voices to be heard and for representation to ensue.

Minority representation is fuelled by their social existence generated because of the construction of their own identity. This categorization which includes nationality, class, gender etc has a strong connotation and effect on how people make sense of themselves and, locate themselves within the social strata (Tajfel, 1982). In the case of this research, which is centred around Afro-Belgians and their voices in Belgium, it is even more interesting as the research aims to see how they organize themselves and to what extent do they identify or not around a shared identity to define their collective interests.

Furthermore, another theorization of consciousness takes us to the famous *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) essay of WEB Du Bois. The questioning of one's identity in what could be coined as "twoness". This experience is born out of one's experience of being oppressed while living in an oppressive society. As pointed out in his essay it is about "always looking at oneself through the eyes" (Du Bois, 1903: 8). In other words, how it feels like being black in a white society. In his definition of double consciousness, he underscores "the struggle African Americans face to remain true to black culture while at the same time conforming to the dominant white society" (ibid., 235). This consciousness pushed him to fight for racial and political equality for the African- Americans and in turn called in the form of a movement "the Pan-Africanism" for the total liberation of the black race and for an independent Africa. So, understanding how double consciousness and political representation in Belgium for Afro-Belgians is crucial in this research. As the saying goes "When America sneezes, the world catches cold" (Reuters, July 20, 2020).

If we apply the same line of reasoning to the contemporary context, we will see the power of the #BlackLivesMatterMovement. For instance, the killing of George Floyd by white police officers back in 2020 – "kneeled on his throat" that resulted in his death. His death amplified the call for justice, more so, racial justice for the entire black race. Protests were staged around the world including in Belgium. Consequently, race discourse started taking centre stage around the world (Euronews, June 9, 2020).

### 3.3. Counter Theories

The objective of having a counter theory is to argue contrary to what is/has been argued. The idea aims to offer a different view and argues differently in a rebuttal form that does not conform to what is being argued (Walton, 2009). This part of the research aims to look at different theories like replacement theory and colour/Identity politics. It argues that replacement theory and identity politics are two key facets that explains why some voices of Afro-Belgians are curtailed or hindered as they are used to push back and further marginalize further through discrimination and racism.

#### 3.3.1. Replacement Theory

Understanding anti-migrant sentiments is also crucial in this research. What is equally important is to look at the Replacement Theory. This theory connotes the fear of white or Western societies for being a minority in their own societies. Ekman (2022: 1130) argues that it is “a systemic conspiracy theory, where white Europeans are supposedly being replaced by immigrants from non-European countries through the actions of politicians and power elites”. The “conspiracy” theory as critics would classify it was first invented in America in the work of David Lane in 1995 known as White Genocide. In recent times, it has made headlines in Europe with the French author Renaud Camus in 2011 as a key reference to this conspiracy discourse.

As argued by Lentin (2020), this theory drives anti-black, anti-migrants, and anti-Muslimism sentiments and thus, sounds the false alarm bell that whites will become a minority, thus, the blacks will join other races to become the majority in Europe and in America. Even though Eurostat (2021) indicates that migrants in Europe only form about 5 percent of the population. Of course, fertility and the declining birth rate have always been a concern in Europe. For instance, during World War I, a country like France opted to recruit hundreds of Africans to fight for them to make up for its population deficiency.

Moreover, another critical dimension of this theory is the way it continues to surge and break through the body politic of North America and Europe, although, it is rising outside of these two continents as well. For instance, as cited in (The Guardian, June 8, 2022), the May 14 Buffalo shooting in the United States of America which killed 10 black people has been argued to have been a result of the endorsement of this ideology by the perpetrator of this massacre. The 18-year-old was

said to have believed white Americans were systematically being replaced with non-white immigrants, especially, black people hence his actions. Additionally, in a shocking televised speech by Viktor Orban, the prime minister of Hungary speaking about two days after the Buffalo grocery shooting stated that “the great European population exchange... a suicidal attempt to replace the lack of European, Christian children with adults from other civilizations – migrants” (The Guardian, May 18, 2022). This speech was in direct relation to the hardcore line of seeing the “other” as a potential threat that is bound to cause not just harm, but also, replace the Europeans. “Whiteness” provides a vivid description of the migration policies in Europe that have become much tighter. In Sweden, as argued by Kvist-Geverts, (2008) the term ‘folkutbyte’ which translates to ‘ethnic replacement’ in English has become a political discourse about migration. In Germany, a version of the conspiracy theory termed ‘Umvolkung’ or ‘Der Grosse Austausch’ is gaining ground too (Önnerfors, 2021). What this trend implies is that there is a growing consensus, albeit unequally in Europe, that migration is for many a bad omen and must be dealt with in a tough and stricter approach.

### 3.3.2. Color and Identity Politics

There is also another version of this discourse. As observed by CNN (May 6, 2021), colour politics is intended “to ensure power for White men and keep it at a distance for everyone else, most especially Black Americans”. As can be observed in the USA, the power of black votes during the 2020 US Presidential elections: “Black Americans represented over 50% of all Democratic voters”. What this shows is how minorities play a crucial role in the elections in the USA and elsewhere. With this understanding, colour politics will explain the role of Afro-Belgians and quiz if they have a voice that is representative of them.

On the other hand, too is the exploitation of black voters by far-right groups. In this context, this is to say that the use of Afro-Belgians by right-wing parties to sell their agenda is an interesting aspect to look at. The role of colour politics and how it affects or influences political voices, and its representation of Afro-Belgians forms another aspect of this theoretical framework. This is to say increasingly right-wing groups are using black people to justify their immigration and anti-migration claims. For example, Assita Kanko of the New Flemish Alliance party (N-VA) is also a member of the European Parliament MEP representing the (N-VA). However, her party, considered to be right-



right has faced several backlashes for being sympathizers of racism and anti-immigration although it has sought to portray itself as an inclusive and open party by the diversity of its members (Politico, October 17, 2020). In context, if a black person speaks in an anti-migration tone or diction, it is used by the right-wing to further propel their agenda. Furthermore, the mere fact that they have a black person in their group, they use it to debunk anti-racial claims. This example can be cited in Smith (2002) book *Managing the White Supremacy in America*. It underscores not only the fight for black votes but the use of race, particularly the Republicans to advance their agenda.

Afro-Belgians with right-wing leanings are seen as an opportunity by the far right to promote anti-immigration sentiments. This assertion helps to explain the growing number of elected right-wing parties taking centre in Europe who campaign on stopping migration and the boats (BBC, January 4, 2023). Recent cases to be cited are countries like Italy and Sweden where the right-wing has come to power on the back of strong anti-immigration rhetoric (Politico, September 26, 2022; Euronews, September 16, 2022). Moreover, Meyers (2000) underscores that Western immigration policies are aimed at drastically impacting the manner and flow of migration that the industrialized countries continue to face. Therefore, Geybels (n.d) noted the fact that this fight has become increasingly visible in the way Afro-Belgians are fighting for their voices to be heard and represented in Europe.

In conclusion, this theoretical aspect highlighted different dynamics of the Afro-Belgians' situation in Belgium. While consciousness forms the basis of identity just like Afro-Belgians, what is equally telling is how these identities are used based on politics to push back against the voices of Afro-Belgians (ENAR Shadow Report, 2014-015). While some right-wing parties in Europe and Belgium specifically have used other Afro-Belgian voices as their placard to show that they are not anti-immigrants and anti-Afro-Belgians in particular, other schools of thoughts have argued that it has been used to silence these voices instead of promoting it (Politico, October 17, 2020).

## Chapter 4: Methodology

### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the way in which the data for this research was collected, analysed, and interpreted. It was carried out between the month of March and April 2023. Methodological design is an imperative and comprehensive plan that stipulates how the researcher approaches his/her research with regards to data collection and analysis (Bhattacharjee, 2012). This does not only provide for a blueprint of how the empirical research chapters would be dealt with, but more so, the testing of the hypothesis and theories raised in the theoretical aspect. The questions of the interviews were linked to the theoretical concepts to test the assumptions raised. The research had a specific target group it wanted to reach. That is, Afro-Belgians who are residing in Belgium. The targeted audience of this research had a multilinguistic background and that is indicative of the fact that Belgium is a multilingual country. Based on that, the participants did not only speak one of the 3 official languages but more so, spoke more than one of the official languages.

Furthermore, it is imperative to state without ambiguity that all the Afro-Belgian interviewees interviewed in this research were not only of Sub-Saharan origin but also, North of African origin. Thus, the research would like to emphasize that it was predesigned. This was the idea from the onset of this research to ensure there was a clear representation of the entire continent and not only the Sub of the Sahara.

### 4.2. Qualitative Approach

The method of qualitative research has garnered mainstream importance by becoming one of the most utilized data collection approaches in the field of social sciences (Kvale, 2007). It is the type of research approach that intends to confront the world ‘out there’ and tries to make sense and oftentimes, expound social phenomena ‘from the inside’ in divergent ways (Streefkerk, 2019). Crucial to this approach is the fact that it seeks to unravel how people make sense of the world around them and thus, brings a great deal of insights into the answers that the research seeks to obtain (McLeod, 2019).

It is therefore in the knowledge of unearthing and bringing forth new perspectives that could be built upon knowledge in the social sciences that makes this approach a suitable one for this research as data is collated through interactions with experts with vast knowledge on this topic. Using this approach, I managed to get the firsthand experiences and understanding of the experts on this topic. They expressed themselves in a free-flowing manner and without any restrictions on what could be said or not, their experiences on this topic came in handy in this research. Through the qualitative approach, three interviews were conducted on the topic of the voices of Afro-Belgians and how these voices are represented in the Belgian context.

#### 4.3. Semi-Structured Expert Interviews

After opting to go with a qualitative approach to the data collection in this research, a semi-structured method was employed to carry out the interviews under the broader spectrum of qualitative methods. This approach is Social Science's most celebrated methodological approach to studying human nature and thus, strives to produce first-hand data. Saldana (2011: 3) referred to this as "the study of natural social life". It implies amongst many, as described by Golden-Biddle & Locke (2007: 4), observing "organizational events and members' interpretations of those events as they unfold". In other words, qualitative research emphasizes the participant's lived experiences (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). By using this method, a questionnaire guide was prepared before the interview with the respondents. This was done in a formal way where the participants answered the already structured questionnaires that the researcher had prepared. Chronologically, the questions were asked, and it was answered in that manner. But, also, important to what this approach did to this research was the fact that although it was a formal interview, there was room to probe for further answers when the answers of the respondents were unsatisfactory or led to something interesting that needed more clarification.

#### 4.4. Gaining Access

The plan on how to get access to the research participants was cumbersome. As such, getting access to research participants is as crucial as conducting empirical research. As such, it was very imperative that this was done in a professional way to be able to gather the data that needed to be gathered to make an informed scientific argument and conclusion (Thorne, 2000). During my bachelor thesis, I had the opportunity to interview some prominent Afro-Belgians who are activists

and scholars and are in different decision-making positions. Some of them are not into activism directly but have access to others who are in the field. Through them, I managed to reach out to the others who could participate in my research. This is the process known as snowballing or chain referral. Biernacki & Waldorf (1981) underscores this process as the method where participants refer to potential participants in research through their networks. This means that, some of the people I interviewed referred me to others they know and are equally knowledgeable in the field of research and thus, would add value to the research debate. They were reached out to through social media platforms like LinkedIn as well as through email. I reached out to the first participant via email and got a response after two days.

The second respondent gave me a response via email after a week. I responded instantaneously to their emails because I wanted to ensure they did not change their minds or have a full schedule. We agreed on a time and date, and I sent them the link to the online interview. The third respondent was reached out via Facebook through an intermediary. This third person was in communication with me as well as with the potential respondent until we managed to come to an agreement on the time and date for the interview. Subsequently, all of them agreed to be interviewed or participate willingly without any fear or coercion in the research.

#### 4.5. Interview Questions

To conduct this research, 10 questions (*see Appendix: 2*) were drawn up for the purpose of gathering data for this research. They were divided into subsections of introduction, transitional, and concluding questions. This had to do with the identity of the respondents about how connected they felt to the topic being researched and how that connection influenced their decision to make their voices heard as Afro-Belgians. The second aspect went deep into trying to understand from their point of view or expertise why certain decisions were being taken by the Belgian state about the growing voices of Afro-Belgians.

For example, Belgium has moved from denying its role in the assassination of the first Congolese Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba to acknowledging its role in it and naming a public square in Brussels after Lumumba (The Brussels Times, February 5, 2023). The questions in this section were to try to understand what was serving as the catalyst for these kinds of happenings in Belgium. The final of the questions tried to investigate whether the voices of Afro-Belgians were being heard.

Belgium had its fair share of the #BlackLivesMatter protest of protest post-killing of George Floyd in May 2020. Therefore, this part of the question was to see if this protest had a positive result in terms of ensuring the changes the Afro-Belgians have been trying to effect, or if it was a temporal phenomenon.

#### 4.6. The Interviews and Transcription

A research interview according to Kvale, (2007: 268) is “an interview where knowledge is constructed in the inter-reaction between the interviewer and the interviewee”. In the case of this research where an expert interview is employed, I organized the interview in a way that allows the expert to share their knowledge of the specific questions regarding the research. There were 10 questions which were developed by the researcher in relation to the theoretical concepts of this research. Some questions served to introduce the subject being discussed. I conducted several interviews with Afro-Belgians across the country. Most of the interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams medium. The reason was that the respondents had made it clear they had a very tight schedule and based on the timing of this interview; it was more convenient for them for this interview to be done online. The other interviews were done in Brussels, the capital of Europe. This was because the respondent preferred to have this in person. The interviews took between 45 to 60 minutes each.

Although the initial idea was to have this between 30 to 45 minutes, there were circumstances where some answers given by the respondents were unsatisfactory and/or required extra probing for further understanding and clarification hence, the overtime. The interviews were recorded for the purposes of being able to playback and transcribe it. This was agreed upon by both parties, and the consent form was signed to certify it.

After the interview was conducted, there was a need for the transcription of it to words to be able to analyse it. I used the online tool called ‘otter.ai’ to transcript the audio-recorded interviews. Since I was using the free version, there were limits on the number of interviews that could be transcribed without subscriptions. I managed to transcribe two interviews with the free version and then transcribe the remaining ones manually. Although the other two were used by the online software to transcribe it, it came with some challenges as well. Because my interviewees were non-native English speakers from the United Kingdom or USA or Australia and there was the need to choose

from one of these countries for the ascent. The transcription ended up not being able to transcribe some of the words because it did not sound like the 'original' accent the software is used to. So, I needed to go through its word for word and page per page to manually correct that. This was time-consuming and exhausting exercise.

#### 4.7. Research Participants

Tompkins (2007) in her work 'Data Management in Clinical Trials' argued that a research participant can be best understood as a person(s) who has agreed to take part in the research process. These persons could be volunteers or random people who, without coercion, agreed to be part of the research. Usually, a person can become a research participant by choice through a voluntary action or by a certain individual interest. Research participants are the primary producers of data used in testing of theories or hypotheses; hence, they are a critical part of the research that needs to be taken seriously (Sargeant, 2020). The research participants were chosen via different mediums.

Firstly, through my social network as a former student leader at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel as Deputy Chairperson of the Africa Student Community (ASCOM) during the academic year 2018/2019. I used my already established network to reach out to some people who used their networks to connect me with others. After the first interview with the first respondent, one of them recommended another potential respondent to me. This is where snowballing came in handy to help me get the next respondent. The other respondents, who are equally public figures, also reached out through my social network. All the respondents who participated in this research are in the public domain and are Afro-Belgians. However, the others are politicians who are in the current government coalition while the others are scholars, and social and political activists.

#### 4.8. Why Skilled Afro-Belgians?

There is a growing population of Afro-Belgians across the length and breadth of Belgian society (ENAR Report, 2016). As this community continues to grow, there is a need for them to organize themselves into a united front to be able to influence policy that affects their common good. Despite some being well-educated, vocal, and enjoying some publicity, there is a huge gap between the few who have been able to break through the political system and the vast remaining majority (Demart,

2022; Verbeeck, 2020). For example, Assita Kanko of N-VA is also a member of the European Parliament MEP representing the New Flemish Alliance party (N-VA).

However, her party, considered to be a conservative right-wing, faced several backlashes for being sympathizers of racism and anti-immigration although it has sought to portray itself as an inclusive and open party by the diversity of its members (Politico, October 17, 2020). This growing group of minorities is also chosen to be studied because they continue to be marginalized and are disproportionately disadvantaged institutionally, economically, and socially in all public spheres (Lentin, 2020). From some interviews with Afro-Belgians who are in divergent fields in Belgium, some have argued that lack of structural and political agency could be a factor in their invisibility. Others have argued that the lack of political and social voices is another factor that explains this lack of representation. This is supported by the works of Demart (2022) who argued that regardless of how big this group of Afro-Belgians are in Belgium, they are invisibly in the public sphere.

Other schools of thought have insisted that the use of Assita Kanko (Afro-Belgian) to do the ‘biddings’ of the white nationalist party, and as such, is the face of the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) is purely an identity politics where the Party uses that as a basis to debunk the idea of the party being anti-immigrants, racist and non-inclusion. The term is associated with the works of Barbara Smith and the Combahee River Collective of 1977. Their work precipitated a “document that emphasized the overlapping forms of economic and social oppression faced by black women” (The Guardian, 2020). It entails amongst other things that the people who feel oppressed tend to affiliate and associate themselves with people who share similar experiences like them (Ryan, 2001). However, critiquing this line of reasoning is because it leads to further “marginalization and that it prevents uniting with those who are working on similar issues but those who differ in physical and social features” (Gitlin, 1993).

This prompted my interest to research these specific people in this peculiar setting with the aim of finding some enigmatic explanations for the voices of Afro-Belgians and how these voices are represented in Belgium.

#### 4.9. Data Collection and Challenges

The plan for the collection of the data for this research was through interviews embedded in qualitative fieldwork. Through the in-depth semi-structured expert interviews that were employed to conduct my interviews, I was able to gather the data from the experts (some activists and civil servants) on this topic under investigation. Through the months of March and April 2023, I managed to conduct my interviews with my interviewees. Some of the interviews were in person while others were via Microsoft Teams online apparatus. Challenges and dilemmas are things researchers need to grapple with and eventually be able to find their way around in conducting research (Potter & Hepburn, 2012).

One challenge that arose was the language barrier. Although most of the Afro-Belgians I came across also spoke English, there were cases where some also spoke French because they were from Congo or other Francophone African origins and thus, had expressed interest to speak in French. They asked if I spoke French aside from English as some were to ensure whether their English proficiency was enough. I assured them that it was fine and that if the need be during the interviews, they could ask for further clarification to ensure everything was clear enough. Luckily, everything went fine with regards to the language during the interviews and I took my time steering the steer during the interviews to ensure no hitches emerged.

#### 4.10. Ethical Considerations and Positionality

Ethics are crucially important in scientific research. It does not only distinguish between what is right or wrong and what should be done or not in research, but it is also about keeping a professional and scientific standard (Bhattacharjee, 2021). In this research, it was clearly stated in the consent form in plain and unambiguous language that the respondents would have the absolute right to stop the interview partially or fully withdraw from participating in the research at any time if they feel the need to.

Secondly, as a young skilled Afro-Belgian undertaking this research, it comes with merits but also, some drawbacks. Therefore, I had pre-empted situations where some respondents might be inclined to assume that the researcher (Afro-Belgian like them) has lived some of their experiences and hence, can relate to what they are saying. This can lead them to make use of innuendos and



presumptions with the view that I can relate to the topic of discussion while that is not supposed to be the idea of conducting this research.

Therefore, by ensuring them a comfortable avenue to ensure they can tell their stories in their most relaxed manner while remaining professional. There is no doubt that my positionality was imperative in this research. As such, I was aware of the psychological and power relations between myself as the researcher, and the interviewees as research participants (Muhammad et al., 2015). Oftentimes, research from the Western perspective has been done in a colonizing fashion where the researcher comes as the knowledge producer/reproducer while the participants are merely tools serving as means to an end (Held, 2019).

However, this research takes a different route. It is not about commodifying their stories for the purposes of academic gains by the researcher. As cited by Suffla, et al., (2015: 16,) positionality in research entails “the researcher’s social location, personal experience, and theoretical viewpoint, the relational and institutional contexts of the research, and the bearing of these elements on the research process itself”. Therefore, my position on the research topic has no influence on what the participants can say or not. While there were certain things that were said to trigger further discussion, this was only done with the sole purpose of ensuring a rich data was produced for the research.

#### 4.11. Data Storage, Consent Form, and Privacy

In research, it is imperative to communicate and assure the research participants of the safety of their data under all circumstances and most importantly, its discretion. That is why I communicated to participants that the collated data (recorded interviews) would be kept in an encrypted server of Ghent University (Conflict & Development Department). Subsequent usage of their data (recorded and transcribed) would be subjected to the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) of the European Union and Ghent University’s standard data use policies, which protect the anonymity of the participants and with their explicit approval. If all or part of the content of the data they have contributed to this research needs be used in the future by the University, it will be with complete anonymity ensured and their approval.

Furthermore, the issue of confidentiality on the part of the respondents was raised before the interviews. As argued by Wallace (1999), respect for anonymity and privacy of research participants is a crucial ethic that researchers must respect. Data of participants are supposed not to be shared with those who are not privy to the information without the approval of the participants. In fact, the EU's stance on regulations on data and privacy is very formidable. For the EU, people's personal data should be treated with privacy, and anonymity and in a manner that does not put their personal information in danger (European Patients Forum, n.d).

Finally, the use of the consent form, which has the authority of the faculty and to a larger extent, the University (UGent) stated categorically and without any ambiguity that the anonymity, safety, and privacy of the respondents are guaranteed as I do not anticipate any risks associated with their participation in the research.

#### 4.12. Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Data analysis is an integral and critical part of this research. Sirivastava & Thomson (2009: 75) define this process as "a framework analysis which is flexible during the analysis process in that it allows the user to either collect all the data and then analyse it or do data analysis during the collection process". The approach in this research is pivoted on the transcription of my data from the interviews both manually and using an online transcribing tool called 'Otter.ai'. After the transcription, thematic analysis was used to help organize the result into themes and codes thus, making my analysis more meaningful. As argued by Braun & Clarke (2012), thematic analysis helps to organize the data into specific themes which makes it logically comprehensible for analysis. Through the themes and codes that have been generated through recurring themes, I am able to see which themes were a collective outcome by the interviewees from the interviews.

#### 4.13. Synthesis of The Interviewer

As an Afro-Belgian myself, there is no doubt that this research came with some benefits as well as some hurdles. The benefit of my 'positionality' of being an Afro-Belgian myself, in fact, made the interviewees more comfortable and interested in the topic of research. It gave them the calmness and the trust that this research was not being conducted in a perpetuating way of trying to tell the stories of Afro-Belgians by an outsider.

However, this did not mean that it made the research all easy-going. By virtue of my identity, the Afro-Belgians interviewed often made statements like ‘as you know and have experienced’, ‘you know what I am talking about’, to connote that I have lived their experiences and, thus, being aware of their realities. This was not an easy hurdle to navigate around as it was a recurring theme. However, that did not affect the flow of information and data acquired from the interviewees. Rather, it served as a springing board to make them feel comfortable to share their stories and expertise with me in a professional manner.

#### 4.14. Conclusion: Methodology

This research employed a qualitative research method approach. The rationale behind this was that this kind of approach emphasized the research participant's lived experiences Roller & Lavrakas (2015). Through an in-depth semi-structured interview with carefully selected Afro-Belgians, interesting data was collated, which served as an integral part of the findings of this research. Furthermore, it is imperative to state without any ambiguity that this approach was challenging and required diligence from the researcher to ensure that the confidentiality of the researcher was ensured (Potter & Hepburn, 2012).

Moreover, after this data was gathered, both online tool and manual transcription was done to ensure the audio files were transferred into words for the purpose of analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen to analyse the information that has been garnered. The reason was that this method offered this research the possibility to organize the findings comprehensively and logically into themes that made it clearer for analysis and conclusion (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

## Chapter 5: Analysis

### 5.1. Thematic Analysis

In research, data analysis is one of the most important exercises that is carried out to ensure that the data gathered are systematically and diligently explained. Braun & Clarke (2006: 57) define it as “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set”. As an imperative aspect of qualitative research, thematic analysis offers a multifaceted approach to understanding divergent perspectives on the subject being researched. Furthermore, it forces the researcher to diligently categorize and summarize big data into components and themes that make it less cumbersome to analyse for the purpose of producing an insightful outcome (King, 2004).

Distinctively, this type of data analysis comes with the freedom to be able to categorize data based on a shared pattern of statements or topics that gives shared meaning. These themes further make it less cumbersome to be able to analyse the data and produce reasonable meanings. Moreover, it strives to critically identify relevant patterns that can be analysed and answered by the data that has been collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with Afro-Belgians with backgrounds ranging from activists to politicians. Through this process, the focal point was centred around aggregating themes that could help to answer the research question (s) after the interviews had been transcribed and subsequently coded.

### 5.2. Political Issues that Re-enforces the Voices of Afro-Belgians to be Represented

How is it possible that the biggest African community has so many problems and challenges to organize itself? The Afro-Belgian community is the biggest migrant population in Belgium (Demart, 2013). Despite their enormous size, they remain understudy, especially in the context of examining their voices and representations. Despite their high population and strong historical connection, which can be traced to back colonization, they are a staggering number, they are not often visible in public discourses and thus, less discernible in the political society (ibid, 2013). Among other Afro-Belgian migrant communities is the Congolese society. As viewed by an interviewee (*RI: see Appendix 1*), “Congo is not, was not created by the will of Congolese people. It is a creation of

European powers of Leopold II. But today it is a political fact and Congolese love their country”. This speaks to the impact of European colonization as Congo is a good reference to King Leopold’s colonial project.

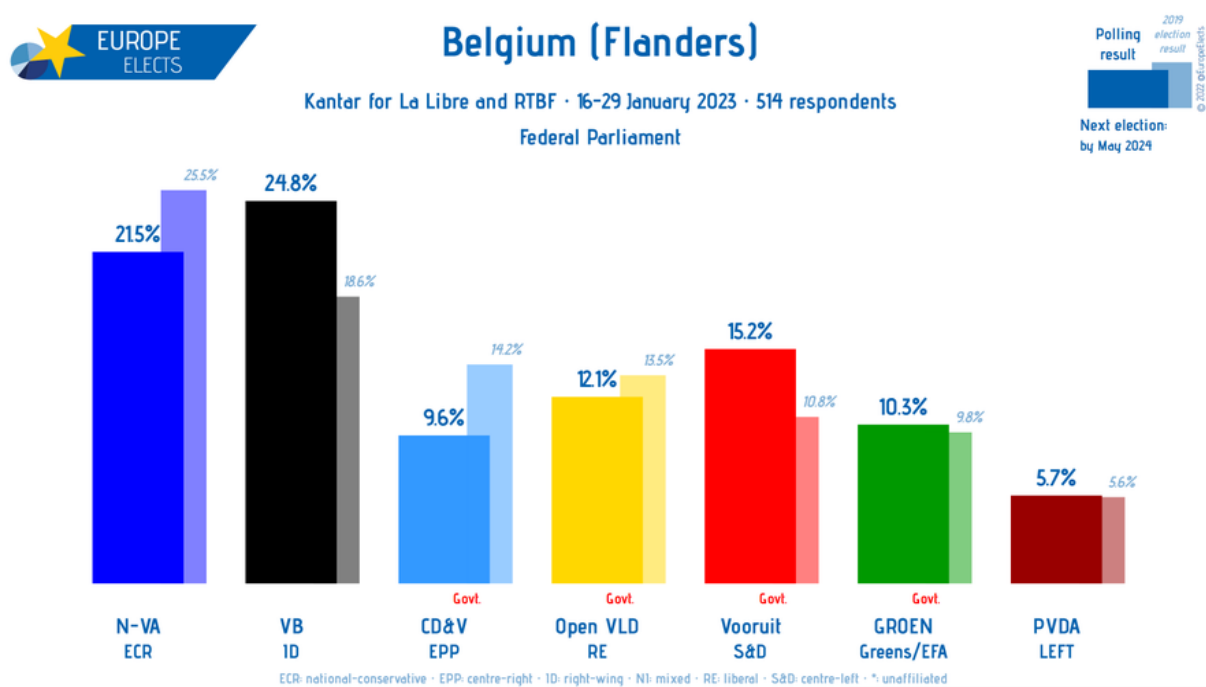
Moreover, there is a need to look at the social and political organization of Afro-Belgian communities in Belgium. What informs their voices and the representation of these voices? One characteristic is that there is a sense of *Africanness* stemming from similar backgrounds coming from Africa or with an African heritage. As exemplified in the Congolese community, the love for their country is a key future of their representation here in Belgium. This common background serves as a base to form an organization at the local level within the host communities (Van Praag, 2023: 10-11).

Concretely, as shared by a social activist, “So, we have political representation in political parties, we are present in the civil society, there are Congolese organizations, et cetera”, (*RI: see Appendix I*). On a local level, they have representation across Belgium but are less represented in Flanders (this division is addressed in subsequent chapters). This observation was also made by a political activist who stated that “we have representatives, not in Flanders but in Brussels and Brussels Parliament, Parliament in Wallonia et cetera”. Afro-Belgian representation takes place individually through sparse political involvement. At the regional level, Afro-Belgians are more involved in Wallonia than in Flanders (De Graeve & Kanobana, 2020; CNN, November 30, 2019).

Flanders, on the other hand, poses a huge challenge for Afro-Belgians because of the strong presence and growing influence of far-right parties and politicians. This can be argued that, based on the surge in the far and extreme right parties in Flanders, there is a genuine threat that it poses to Afro-Belgians as one of the minority groups (The Brussels Times, July 4, 2022). We can cite an interview with a policymaker who has attempted to explain this challenge. For the policymaker: “I see this and the problem today in Flanders is that we live in a region with the big political problem of Far-right extremism. So, we have to deal with this, and of course, I am also afraid of this. I do not know what I will imagine if Vlaams Belang becomes the biggest party in 2024”. What will it mean for the fight for Afro-Belgians, for those activists or for people with African descendants” (*RI: see Appendix I*).

This was a genuine concern of Afro-Belgians as they were compelled to use their social and civil space coupled with individual clout and exposure to speak up and represent the voices of Afro-Belgians in public spaces.

This fear of the growing far-right extremism in Flanders comes from a genuine reality that is shaping the politics in Belgium. According to recent polls, the extreme right party, Vlaams Belang has topped the last two successive polls this year and is well on course to win a majority in the upcoming elections in 2024. It had 25% and 22% in the February and June polls, respectively (The Brussels Time, June 10, 2023), while the next big conservative nationalist N-VA, (New Flemish Alliance) party garnered 21% and 22%, respectively, as *Figure 1* shows below (The European Conservative, February 25, 2023). It is this kind of growing influence of the far-right in the political spectrum that poses a potential threat to the Afro-Belgian community, as there is a genuine fear of invisibility of the already marginalized group.



**Figure: 1. Source:** <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/nearly-half-of-flanders-supports-national-right-parties-poll-reveals/>

Furthermore, one of the big avenues Afro-Belgians used to catapult their voices and make their plights heard was the #BlackLivesMatter protest in 2020. Although George Floyd died on the streets

of Minneapolis in Minnesota on May 25, 2020, the protest, however, was felt in the streets of the European Capital of Brussels and Antwerp in Belgium (Politico, June 7, 2020). These protests and the unrest that resulted from it sparked conversations and indeed mounted pressures on the government of Belgium's colonial past and how it has systematically discriminated against Afro-Belgians. In other words, Afro-Belgian voices became prominently featured across the country through national protests (Euronews, June 9, 2020).

Given this protest back in 2020, and because for the first time in the history of this country, people, Belgian citizens saw that there is an important black community here in Belgium and thus, brought an awareness to the Afro-Belgian population in the country. This was best quantified by an interviewee: "I think it is a very good thing that happened in 2020 because for the first time in the history of this country, people, Belgian citizens, saw that there is an important black community here in Belgium. It is a good thing to see, even for politicians and political parties, that some people were like, oh my God, I did not know that there are a lot of black people here" (R3: *see Appendix 1*). The interviewee continued: "The second thing it did was that it created a momentum of expression. I saw a lot of initiative taking on the political level, in organization, and people started to think about old problems, that is racism" (R3: *see Appendix 1*).

Another interviewee who is an educationist gave a vivid reflection on the impact of the protests on young black in Belgium:

For years and years, people pretended that there were not any racial problems in Belgium. Because they were like, oh, my God, I mean, black people do not get gunned down by the police and stuff like that. If you place yourself in the position of young black citizens here in Belgium, some of them may never dream about seeing so many people in the streets, you know. That in itself says something that, yes, there is a way of getting people up there. Yes, they are not willing to just look the other way. Yes, they are expecting certain things to be done. And yes, they would not be kept quiet anymore (R2: *see Appendix 1*).

Despite the relative success of the protest organized by the African community or giving an exposure of the problems affecting the Afro-Belgians, what was lacking is that the follow-up has been weak (Debating Europe, February 1, 2021). This claim was affirmed by an interviewed activist (R1: *see Appendix 1*)

There was a momentum. We created our own momentum. But we did not succeed to do a good follow up on the political level. I saw a lot of initiative taking on the political level, in organization, and people started to think about old problems, that is racism. It was a good thing but again. The African community organized this big protest. That is a successful thing. But the follow up was weak. And that is because the community is not organized. There was a momentum. We created our own momentum. But we did not succeed to do a good follow up on political level. It was the moment to sit at a table, around the table with politicians and to ask, Ok, these are all reservations, we want this, we want that. But we don't have this kind of organization because you're not organized, and that's the weakness of the movement (*RI: see Appendix I*).

Another interviewee stated, “What we can draw from this observation is the fact it was supposed to have been that moment to influence concrete change, sit on table, around the table with politicians and to ask, Ok, these are all reservations, we want this, we want that. But we don't have this kind of organization because we are not organized, and that's the weakness of the movement” (*RI: see Appendix I*).

Therefore, Afro-Belgians continue to fight for their voices to be heard and represented. This is because it is shoulder-heavy for Afro-Belgians to fight for their existence. An interviewee summarized it in a succinct way by stating that, “to do so, there is the need for political representation at the political level. In this regard, “these are the big issues, and it is those educated Afro-Belgians who can push for that change. As a political scientist, I see that we need politicians, we need political parties to succeed in what we are doing” (*RI: see Appendix I*).

### 5.3. Social Issues Influencing the Voices of Afro-Belgians and its Representation

Important is the discourse around societal factors affecting Afro-Belgians. Critical among them is a lack of inclusivity which is a by-product of discrimination in the context of fighting against racism to make their voices heard (VRT News, March 22, 2022). Afro-Belgians are discriminated against in various sectors including housing, work, education, etc (Verhaeghe & De Coninck, (2022); Kalter & Kogan, (2006); de Hert, et al., (2020). This section thus delves into these issues in the context of Afro-Belgian voices and fights. Racism as we know it is deeply endemic in Western societies. It is thus not specific to only Belgian society, however, the focus of this research is on Belgium.



Historically speaking, racism has long been perpetuated by Belgium's colonial past, (Mielants, 2006). This difficult past still has a significant impact on Belgian society today. A historian with Afro-Belgian roots, born in the Congo, however, grew up here in Belgium, in Flanders. The person's engagements are influenced both by Belgium's colonial past and the everyday racism facing Afro-Belgians in Belgium. It is fair to say that Afro-Belgian voices are pushed and impacted by their desire to fight against racism and for a more inclusive society.

As stated by the interviewee, "we live in this country. What do we want to do? We want to have a contribution to a more equal society. Or are we just waiting to see what is going to happen? And I think that we need to fight, and we need to do something to create a more inclusive society and making this choice means also that it will not be easy. It will not be easy. But what is the alternative" (R1: *see Appendix 1*).

The fight against racism is a cardinal fight that continues to amplify the voices of Afro-Belgians in Belgium. Afro-Belgians from all social classes continue to manifest themselves by highlighting this phenomenon that has long been influenced by Belgium's colonial past. The urge to be part of an inclusive society here in Belgium is what is pushing for this fight (Politico, December 11, 2017). This is because there is an urgent need to do something about it to create a more inclusive society. A feminist interviewee stated that "it influences my voice because they feel like, I mean, it is not a matter of opinion. It is the fact you are dealing with racism, and also dealing with sexism, you know, and that being the case, I am not only advocating for humanity, but I am also advocating for dignity. I am advocating for equality and equity. And I feel like equity is not something that people are often on the forefront of " (R2: *see Appendix 1*).

Furthermore, the fight for decolonization is another agenda point within the Afro-Belgian community. For many years, the Afro-Belgian community pushed for the recognition of Belgium's role in the killing of the first prime minister of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba (The Brussels Times, February 5, 2023). Recently a square has been named after him after many years of protests in the streets (Africanews, July 1, 2018). The former Square du Bastion which was renamed to Patrice Lumumba Square lies near Matonge which is considered the capital of Africa in Belgium – although the majority is filled with Congolese diaspora (The New York Times, June 30, 2018). This proved

that the growing voices of Afro-Belgians to ensure social justice are yielding results, albeit this more symbolic rather than political or social progress.

Albeit this symbolic landmark, others have argued that the fact that it took such a long time before this was done shows the unwillingness of the Belgian political society to deal with its past. Thus, without protest and taking to the streets in an organized manner, change would not have happened (Africanews, July 1, 2018). This observation is also cemented by a policy maker: “The fact that we have the Lumumba square, it is only due to the fact that people were in the streets, were demanding for that for more than 10 years” (*R3, see Appendix 1*).

Basically, it is the persistent nature of the fight to stay in the streets that made it possible for at least some sort of recognition. And the 2020 #BLM protests (discussed above) also amplified the voices of Afro-Belgians to be paid attention to. The impact is the fact that without this, as the interviewee re-echoed, “we will not have the national commission”. The parliamentary commission was set up in June 2020, with the aim clearly mapped to confront the Belgian colonial past, to repair and compensate (VRT News, December 19, 2022). This committee having carried out more than 300 interviews and testimonies from experts on history, law, and diaspora groups and even visited Congo DR, Rwanda, and Burundi (erstwhile Belgian colonies) failed to reach an agreement on the content of the findings of more than 2 years of intensive work (Justiceinfo.net, January 19, 2023).

This failure which was due to the lack of political will even from the so-called Liberal governments did not only prove that Belgium as a country was not ready to recognize its brutal colonial past and its present structural and institutional implications on its Afro-Belgian populations, but more so, the lack of the any urgency to confront it (VRT News, December 19, 2022).

Furthermore, as cited by The Brussels Times, (June 8, 2020), this #BLM protests attracted 10,000 people to the streets in a process of seeking more justice for decolonization. It gave momentum to seek for discourse by amplifying Afro-Belgian voices. The establishment of the parliamentary commission can be seen because of the growing voice of Afro-Belgians although the commission failed to deliver for purely political reasons as already aforementioned. As cited by an interviewee, “If Black lives truly did matter in our country, the National Commission on the colonial past would have succeeded to have a report, which they didn't because they could not even agree on the simple fact to say yes, we will present our excuses and ask for forgiveness. So that lets you know,

everything you need to know, no, do not care about racism. Because racism is one thing and one thing only, it's about money” (R2: *see Appendix 1*).

Moving forward, however, there is the need to shift from symbolism to action. What do Afro-Belgians want in return? In lieu of this assessment, there is also a need to rethink strategically and how the organizing of Afro-Belgians contributes to change to bring about social justice. This is also made observable by another interviewee emphasizing the need to organize themselves as a community. The fight should go beyond the individual to the collective level if they are to achieve any meaningful development. This is supported by a claim made by an interviewee that

But I think that the five last years it was easier for Congolese Belgian activists in Flanders to have some impact than for activism in Brussels and in the French part of Belgium. Today I see in Flanders that black activists have access to mainstream media, to political parties, etc. People like Don Ponzou, Lieven Kandolo, Dalila Hermans, et cetera. 10 years ago, they were not really engaged in this fight. They are real. These are our young people, and they already have a place in this public debate, but the difference is that we are all Just persons or individuals. And we are not organized in some formal initiatives and that's a weakness (R1: *see Appendix 1*).

Advocating for the collective is however imperative to strengthen the fight for dignity. And if the fight remains at the individual level, it will not serve the interest of Afro-Belgians. In the process advocating for equality and equity; fighting for a society, a better society against racism. At the personal level as cited by an interviewee, “everyone will find a good job. So, we will have a good salary at the end of the month. It will maybe change the life of some people or will change my life and maybe the life of my family, but it will not really change the situation of the community” (R1: *see Appendix 1*).

In addition, one of the challenges faced by Afro-Belgians is the lack of collective organization (Deutsche Welle News, June 28, 2020). What is responsible for this lack of collective organization? It starts with the biggest Afro-Belgian community – the Congolese Belgian community-which is not united as a single unit (Koning Baudouin Foundation, 2017). This division is primarily along tribal and religious lines. These divisions are noticeable in other Afro-Belgian communities as well and

are not limited to the Congolese community. People tend to socialize more within their country of origin, ethnic, religious, and other determinants (Godin, Herman, & Thys, 2015).

Concretely, there is no such thing as a ‘united Afro-Belgian community’ – each speaks to their needs/agenda. Since the Congolese community is the largest Afro-Belgian community, all the other communities may take some inspiration if they organize themselves collectively (Demart, 2013). This is also supported by another Afro-Belgian voice interviewed by stating, “I am really convinced that if the community is committed, because it is the biggest African community in Belgium. It will result in a good or if it tries to organize itself in a good way” (*R1: see Appendix 1*).

#### 5.4. Stigmatization Against Afro-Belgians

Stigmatization and discrimination against Afro-Belgians is a major issue in Belgium (Manirankunda, et al. 2021). This implies that Afro-Belgians are being generalized each time an Afro-Belgian commits something bad. In other words, issues like shoplifting, coming to function late etc are associated with black people (ENAR Shadow Report, 2014-2015). A feminist activist recounted a childhood memory of being stigmatized by narrating that,

I feel like I am still sometimes struggling a little bit with that, but I am paying attention not to. Because that is a burden that only we have to face and not others. For instance, when white people do something, it is one human being, one single person doing something. And we are the only ones who have been taught to believe that we have all been put into one group, like, yeah, certain things I never did when I was younger, not even think about doing it because I am a black woman. For instance, I know that when you're a teenager, a lot of people who don't do stuff like shoplifting, whatever stuff like that, which I, first of all, that's not my thing. But even so I would never have done it because I knew that the consequences would not be only on me, but on the rest of my people. And till today, there are certain things that I pay attention to, and I am trying to work on that. Like, I never arrived late somewhere, because I already know the stigma around that. But I'm trying to work on the fact that I do not have to carry all that weight on me (*R3: see Appendix 1*).

This goes a long way to show how stigmatizing against Afro-Belgians has pushed some to speak up and act whenever they are in a position or place in order not to be seen or interpreted along this line of negative preconceived notions against black people.

Furthermore, this generalization of Afro-Belgians weighs on them as black people (The New York Times, May 9, 2014). Interestingly, as narrated by an Afro-Belgian interviewee, who gives an instance whereby virtue of her colour and identity as an Afro-Belgian, it was expected of her to behave and act in a certain way. She stated, “I am trying to work on the fact that I do not have to carry all that weight on me. And yeah, no, I am just doing my best for me. And then yeah, advocating for my people” (R2: *see Appendix 1*).

The interviewee further illustrated by giving a concrete example that,

For instance, like one situation between one girl and another woman who did something wrong, and one guy was expecting me somehow, even though he didn't say it. But, I was really, really sure about what was happening. He was expecting me to say something that would prove something based on the fact that I am like myself (black woman). And I did not want to put myself in that position in the sense that I know that you would not be expecting that from someone else but me. And that is really something that I noticed in a lot of situations where people create a mess, and they always expect black women to come and resolve it (*ibid*).

### 5.5. Lack of Economic Stability Affecting the Voices of Afro-Belgians and its Representation

Lack of economic stability and job opportunities continue to affect the struggle of Afro-Belgians (Verbeeck, 2020). As shared by an activist, it is “because people are, I think, on the community level, they are living in a very unstable environment. You see, when you must think about what I am going to eat, or my kids have problems or school problems or problems with housing” (R1: *see Appendix 1*). These kinds of social problems make it difficult to have a meaningful engagement in creating an inclusive society where Afro-Belgians matter and are represented as well. As the saying goes “a hungry man is an angry man”. In this context, it implies that people from desperate and economically handicapped are volatile (Christie, et al. 2008). Thus, they prefer to focus on themselves and their families. This claim is also backed by an activist interviewed where she stated

without ambiguity that, “because you are not really stable financially, and you have to think on the short term” (*ibid.*). If Afro-Belgians are to make any meaningful progress the economic situation must be addressed.

Historically speaking, due to Belgium’s history, this lack of economic stability has a different impact on the Afro-Belgian communities compared to other minority immigrant groups in Belgium (Kalter & Kogan, 2006); (Etambala, 2011). As pointed out by an interviewee with a strong historical background of Belgium migrant history.

Because I think that the origin of the immigration of the community, migration is different compared with Moroccan or the Turkish. Moroccan and Turkish people came to Belgium to work here. So, when they arrived, they had the good working card, so it was easier for them to start working to make money to buy houses, et cetera. With the Congolese community, it's different because the first generation in the 60s and in the 70s. They came to Belgium to study. So, you know the situation, when you come to Belgium to study, you have a visa to study and after four or five years you have to leave the country and to go back to your country to Africa. So, a lot of people from Congo, they came to Belgium to study, and the first generation tried to go back to Congo to work in Congo because there were a lot of economic opportunities but since the 80s and the 90s, We see another kind of group who's coming in, not really to study. Yes, they try to stay in Belgium by using the study card but it's different. So, I see even today a lot of Congolese who don't have the Belgian card, a Belgian nationality and we have really problems with papers and with documents. So, it means that it's not really easy to have a stable life when you don't have the good papers. So, you need to have good papers to participate in society and it's difficult (*R1: see Appendix 1*).

This to some extent shows why some Afro-Belgians are unable to make their voices heard due to the situation they find themselves in.

Moreover, the Afro-Belgian communities/neighbourhoods are seen to be poor and economically handicapped communities (Ddungu, et al. 2023). This is not to say that although there are individuals who are financially worthy in the Afro-Belgian community, however, they have not played a significant role in helping create and push the voices of Afro-Belgians to be heard and represented enough. This is clarified by an interviewee who stated that “We have people with money

but yeah, financially, it is not a strong community. We have also to think about the financial stability model. How can one contribute financially to activism or the community? Maybe I will not have time to organize, mobilize, et cetera, or protest, et cetera. But maybe I can pay every month, 50, or €100 to contribute to the activism. That's why I think that we have maybe to have some or to take some inspiration from civil rights movements in the United States to see how they organize themselves financially” (*RI: see Appendix I*).

This is to say that, for the voices of Afro-Belgians to be heard and represented, there is the need to finance those who do this through divergent ways like through advertisements and media outlets.

## 5.6. What are the Channels being used to make these Voices Represented

### 5.6.1. Media

Media is an important part of today’s fight for equality and justice. One’s access to media plays a huge role in ‘conscientizing’ its people and the society as a whole. The concept of “mediatisation” is a good reference point. It deals with the daily realities that media is everyday reality of the people and society (Couldry, 2014: 35-36). Take for instance social media platforms that are used to amplify voices within seconds. However, it is access to mainstream media that pushes discourse further.

In the context of the Afro-Belgian discourse, the lack of access to media affects their fight. As acknowledged by Boehmer & De Mul (2012) there has been progress compared to some years back, albeit it being sluggish. However, this so-called progress needs some context. It is imperative to state without ambiguity that the French speaking part of Belgium on its radio station called RTBF had the first ever Black women-led journalistic platform such as Tarmac in Belgium (Amponsah, 2021). Albeit this hallmark as it was viewed back then, the Dutch speaking north has however been considered to be more inclusive and welcoming than the French speaking south (Ceuppens 2006; Amponsah, 2021). This contrast, however, cannot be boastful in the Dutch speaking as there has been lack of structural and institutional changes to really accommodate Afro-Belgians into the core part of journalistic and media works. Instead, they have been reduced to a mostly and relatively modest quota of Afro-Belgians in a rather low and not necessarily core production aspect of the media (De Swert et al. 2019).

Representation in the media matters and more so, for Afro-Belgians due to the invisibility of this community in the media landscape. As pointed out by a renowned Afro-feminist Belgian, Djia Mambu (2020), “what we don't see, does not exist” cited in (Amponsah, 2021). This understanding can be linked to the longitudinal absence of Afro-Belgians from major media representation and thus, fuels the ambivalent status of the non-existence of Afro-Belgians in Belgium, (Mowatt et al. 2013). Interestingly, an interviewee, who is a political activist argued during the interview that there has been some interesting progress on this front although there is no room to contend with the progress and thus, must forge ahead with more determination. She stated that,

Today for me the challenge today is not to have access to the mainstream because we are in the mainstream. We can share our opinions in papers such as De Standard, De Morgen, on TV, VRT, radio, etcetera. But we have a responsibility when we have the space to speak in papers or on TV on how to use this power. The challenge today is to organize ourselves as an African community and to try to have structural contributions to change. That's the big challenge today for me (*R1: see Appendix 1*)

Indicatively, what this portrays is that access to media gives one the power to share something that is useful for the fight and for the Afro-Belgian community in general.

### 5.7. Museum: Cultural and Museum Space as a Place to Echo Afro-Belgian Voices

One of the critical fights by Afro-Belgians is the Central Africa Museum. This museum continues to portray a colonial imaging of the continent of Africa and particularly the Congo and other erstwhile colonies of Belgium (Bragard & Planche, (2013); Couttenier, (2019). To contribute to its reimagining, Afro-Belgians offered their services but the resistance against their participation continues to hamper their fight. As shared by an activist interviewed, she stated that, “That is why for me, when I ended my studies, when I graduated, I tried to work for an institution so I could also do something for the community by working in the museum. I can also work on cultural programs or activities for the Community and with the Community” (*R1: see Appendix 1*). Furthermore, she stated how this has helped to be able to work closely together with the Afro-Belgian community. She stated that, “over 10 years as a policy officer, it was also possible to work with the Congolese community by giving them a voice” (*ibid.*).



Furthermore, there are other Afro-Belgians who are also collaborating with the Africa Museum to give a voice and represent Afro-Belgians in the fight for an inclusive society. For instance, the ‘Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations’ is one of the civil organizations that work closely with the Africa Museum to give voices to Afro-Belgians and other ethnic minorities in Belgium. Their main demand is centred around the decolonization of public space, the end of the falsification of the History of Africa and its teaching in schools and universities (Justiceinfo.net, March 24, 2023).

They also organize visits and tours to the Africa Museum where they have Afro-Belgians leading these tours to tell their own stories in an undiluted fashion. An activist and a staff of this organization interview stated that,

People like me are trying to have a voice in the museum. But it's not the case now because there are no black people of African descent who are in the top of the museum and thus, can decide about what is happening in the museum. So, we just have agreements with the museum, to just do what we can to get into the museum, we can critique the Museum during our visits/ tour, but just that, there's no other impact in the museum aside from this (*R2: see Appendix 1*).

However, this agreement between the Africa Museum and ‘Collective Memoir’ in providing tour guide has given albeit sluggishly, a voice for the Afro-Belgians the opportunity to have staffs from the Museum to listen to the guides during the tour and in the process and would occasionally make some changes as ‘corrections’. Nonetheless, as little corrections are not what the aim is and rather, they intend to have an impact. He therefore stated that the overarching goal of their work is to have “an African community, entering the museum and making decisions” (*R2: see Appendix 1*).

#### 5.8. Representation – What is Influencing this Representation?

One of the key identifiers of Afro-Belgians is their ‘mixed’ sense of Afro-European identity (ENAR Shadow Report, 2014-2015). More broadly, their sense of ‘Africanness’ of being Africans with African-European background speaks to their course to fight. With this background in mind, we can relate to the story of a policy maker. In the activist interview explanation, she emphasized that the origins of both her African and Congolese origins are very important in this engagement. On what

is influencing her to be the voice and represent Afro-Belgians in Belgians, she stated that, “I think that my motivation is also really linked on my origins and the history of my Congolese, my parents, and ancestors. And I see this love and this attachment also here in the Congolese diaspora, the Congolese community here in Belgium, but also in other countries" (*R1: see Appendix 1*).

Bearing in the activist’s African identity, further indicated strong identity and origin as a key role in this fight. R1 emphasized that, “I think that I identify myself as an Afro-Belgian and maybe more as a Congolese Belgian” (*R1: see Appendix 1*). This is because the person’s motivation is also really linked to the person’s origins and the history of the person’s Congolese background; parents, and ancestors is a common denominator that serves as a base for fighting for other people like her.

In this context Afro-Belgians identify themselves as Afro-European, and to be more precise, as well as persons of Afro-descendants even if they were not born in Belgium (ENAR Shadow Report, 2014-2015). Characteristically speaking, these groups can be first, or subsequent generations of migrants. Simply put, they are Africans in Europe with African roots (ENAR Fact Sheet Report, 2012). This category reflected during my interview, and these are the people that are interviewed for this research. One of the interviewees emphasizing on his Afro-European roots argued that “I was not born in Belgium, but I came in Belgium when I was around three- or four-years old” (*R2: see Appendix 1*). One may affirm that he is part and parcel of Belgian society thus the person’s fight for Afro-Belgians speaks to that background (Politico, June 18, 2019). As the person noted, “but now, I feel like our generation and people even younger than me, are not asking for stuff. They're demanding in knowing that they have all the rights in the world to access it” (*R3: see Appendix 1*). Concretely, Afro-Belgians are standing up for themselves as a collective despite their diverse African backgrounds and the divisions that exist amongst them.

### 5.9. Lack of Mandate from Afro-Belgians to Represent Afro-Belgians

What is remarkable is the fact that Afro-Belgian influencers operate loosely. This means that people are not mandated to speak for the wider community. However, they use their voices and platforms to speak against injustices that they and the wider Afro-Belgian community faces (The Brussels Times, March 21, 2023). In doing so, they are able to speak directly to the people around them. This is how they end up building a network in consensus to the issues they are faced with as a people. As pointed out by an activist interviewed, “So, no, I do not see myself as a representative to the African

or Congolese community. I know that people are writing to me to say thank you so much. You represent us, but it is very difficult and a big charge to do this. And I do not have this mandate from someone or from our group” (R1: *see Appendix 1*). Thus, as the activist went further to strengthen the point, she stated that, “but it is important to say that I am trying to understand the community, to share some opinions or situations of some issues of problems of the community and the public debate, that is a different thing to say” (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, Their voices speak to the wider African community although they are not mandated to do this representation (ENAR Shadow Report 2014-2015). R1: (*see Appendix 1*) continues to elaborate this stance by indicating that, “so, yes, I am trying maybe to be a voice, one of the voices of the Congolese community, but I do not see myself as the person working for this community because I do not have a mandate. So, I have to be able to be in this fight. I am trying to do my best to be able to be here” (*ibid.*).

Another interviewee stated that, albeit not having the mandate to lead and represent Afro-Belgians. R1 by virtue of the position held uses it to create space for the community. As narrated that,

I do stuff for my people. But the first person I'm doing that for is for me. Actually, no one ever called me up and said, do that for us. That is not what is happening. And I think it's quite dangerous to put yourself in that position and be or see yourself as a hero, as the one who's doing it for the culture of our community. I think it's extremely dangerous to think of yourself as something that you're not. And it's also dangerous in a community way in the sense that I do not believe that one person can save a situation, it's always a collective monster. Furthermore, there are a lot of people who see us in interviews, TV, and media, and they are moved and that is very good to see (R3: *see Appendix 1*).

#### 5.10. Division within Afro-Belgians as a Setback to Amplifying the Afro-Belgian Voices and its Representation

What is also remarkable to note is the fact that there is diversity in opinions within the Afro-Belgian community. Even though they identify themselves as Afro-Belgians, ENAR Shadow Report, (2014-2015) and maybe more strongly connected as a Congolese Belgians as indicated by an interviewee that, “I think that I identify myself with as an Afro-Belgian and maybe more as a Congolese Belgian.

Because I see the presence of our African over black community here in Belgium. In that sense it is easier to speak about the Congolese community because that is a community where I personally grew up and the community that I personally know the best” (R1: *see Appendix I*). Importantly, the Afro-Belgian community as stated above is super diverse and cannot be put into one basket (Afropean, October 1, 2014).

There are different things that divide this community, as others are very conservative and not necessarily progressive on social issues (Afropean, October 1, 2014). This is best summed up by an interviewee as observing that “it is not really a surprise because I think that there are a lot of Africans who are conservatives on ethical issues. They are conservative on abortion, LGBTQ rights, women issues, et cetera. That is the reality” (R1: *see Appendix I*). Because of their conservative backgrounds, this has far reaching influence on how they associate themselves with other Afro-Belgian community members. This is why it is not surprising as indicated by the people interviewed that there is no need “to be surprised when we see a black person in the conservative political party in Belgium” (*ibid.*).

Concretely, there has been no evidence based on the interviews conducted to state that there is a strong Afro-Belgian community or the voice of Afro-Belgians. However, there is a sense of community, a collective consciousness of community amongst those who feel connected to this identity as expounded by the interviewee (The Guardian, November 3, 2013). This is illustrated by an interviewee that said, “so, I think that my origins, my African communities origins are very important in this engagement for me, because I am not a white person” (R1: *see Appendix I*).

#### 5.11. Lack of Equivalent Certification/ Working below their Qualifications

One critical challenge facing Afro-Belgians is the issue of equivalent educational qualification. This particular issue is stressed by all interviewees as a serious problem that the majority of Afro-Belgians who come to Belgium with other certificates do grapple with (The Brussels Times, March 21, 2022). Despite studying in countries of origin, he was made to redo his entire studies because his studies were not recognised or considered equivalent to the level and system here. R2 reiterated that, “my diploma here was not recognized. So, I went back two years at school to get my high school degree in Belgium. But, I already had a high school degree in Congo, but it was not recognized in Belgium, which was the first experience I had as an adult”. The fact that the person

studied in Congo, R2 high school studies was not recognized as good enough, sets a huge setback to Afro-Belgians to be able to compete on a level playing field.

In other words, the person was not considered on the same level as Belgian students as R2 recounted this sad experience which led R2 to believe the assumption that, “I was considered inferior to others” (R2: *see Appendix 1*). This issue of lack of recognition of school certification here in Belgium makes it difficult for Afro-Belgians to continue their studies in order to gain meaningful jobs befitting their level and qualification (The Brussels Times, March 21, 2022). This often requires that they take underpaid jobs that are below their qualifications (UNIA, March 21, 2022). When one analyses this from the workplace perspective, as observed by another interviewee, “people are working not on the level of their studies or qualifications” (R2: *see Appendix 1*).

### 5.12. Push Backs by Politicians and Society to Afro-Belgians Voices

One of the socio-political issues that has occupied both public and political discourse in Belgium in the recent months that signifies the resistance against or push back against the growing voices of Afro-Belgians is the debate on woke Politico (June 5, 2021); TU Delta, (October 4, 2021). In the simplest form, woke simply connotes being aware of social inequalities and injustices that not only exist in our societies, but has and continues to shape the way society functions. This presupposes that others are oppressed, subjugated, and trampled upon for others to benefit in a rather in an unequal manner (The New York Times, March 26, 2023).

However, the good intentions of the idea of woke trying to bring awareness to the social, economic, and political injustices to the forefront of society although not exclusively Afro-Belgian driven, are vehemently met with other school of thoughts that see this as a dangerous and deadly weapon that only aims to destabilize society and the status co, especially, in the Western world. Belgium, the case study of this research, has not been insusceptible to the debate about woke and to what extent, politicians are racing amongst themselves to see who is dealing the hardest blow to crack down ‘wokeism’ in Belgium (The Brussels Times, April 13, 2023).

In Flanders, the two major political parties, New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) and Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) have taken this fight to rather a different length in the race of trying to prove to the voters on who is dedicated to crashing the so called ‘woke cultural wars’ (The Brussels Times,

April 12, 2023). The leader of the New Flemish Alliance, Bart De Wever wrote an entire book called "over woke" (about woke) where he stipulates the alleged dangers of woke in the Belgian society and how it threatens social cohesion and to an extent, the Western living standards (The Brussels Times, April 13, 2023). An interviewee (R4), who is a politician, explains how a chairman of a right-wing party in Flanders goes to the extent of pumping massive amounts of money to big tech companies like Google in order to do everything possible for a misinformation campaign to cash the so-called wokeism. Expanded that,

So, what Bart de Wever, being smart, did was just having a narrative of the white male privileged male class men who voted for me. Maybe now he wants their votes. So, I'm going to tell them I'm with you. I'm like you. I also don't like those people (woke). I also don't like this and that he calls these people the cause of polarization. I mean, he gives money to Google to do polarization like 1,000,000 euro for a year. And all these journalists are like, huh? Yeah, because these journalists are also white males. I mean, you cannot win this fight. And even when he did this, I did not see something (*R4: see Appendix 1*).

Now, this begs the question. How and why does this threaten or push back against the Afro-Belgian voices and its representation in Belgium and why are Afro-Belgians worried about this trend (Politico, October 17, 2020). Interestingly, the example of the appointment of Dalila Hermans as the cultural intermediary in the iconic city of Bruges to promote the city's program as the cultural capital of Europe in 2030 is a paramount case to look at (The Brussels Times, April 12, 2023). Regrettably, the attention this garnered speaks volume to the question raised above. The subsequent online abuse, hate speeches and personal attacks that were directed to Dalila Hermans was only aimed at one thing - she was a black woman and made her voice heard (Brussels Times, April 13, 2023). This brouhaha prompted the Vlaams Belang, an extreme right party in Flanders to launch their offensive attacks by saying that this Afro-Belgian did not deserve to lead this cultural project although her credentials fully back her like any other citizens. An MP of New Flemish Alliance, Maaïke De Vreese openly stated that "she is extremely polarizing and focused on skin color" (Belga News, April 12, 2023). This does not only show to the extent some of the politicians are willing to restrict Afro-Belgian voices, but, also, to discredit it even publicly and blatantly.

According to Vlaams Belang, this was an extreme wokeness and purely anti-white racism. They view Dalila Hermans as someone who is anti-white and therefore, to be heading such a position, although, exclusively the decision of the city council and the mayor of Bruges, as a threat to a ‘white Belgian society’ (The Brussels Times, April 12, 2023). This supposedly notion of fear about Vlaams Belang and the potential dangers that they pose to Afro-Belgians were echoed loud and clear by an interviewee where she stated that,

I see this and the problem today in Flanders is that we live in a region with the big political problem of Far-right extremism. So, we have to deal with this, and of course, I'm also afraid of this. I don't know what I will imagine if Vlaams Belang becomes the biggest party in 2024. What will it mean for the fight, for activists or for people with African descendants? It will not be a good thing for us, but we have to make a choice. Well, what do we want? We live in this country. What do we want to do? We want to have a contribution to a more equal society. Or are we just waiting to see what is going to happen? And I think that we need to fight, and we need to do something to create a more inclusive society and making this choice means also that it will not be easy, it will not be easy. But what is the alternative? (R1: see Appendix 1)

What this implies is that the voices of Afro-Belgians are pushed back by politicians who feel that the status quo is being shaken, although the intention of Afro-Belgians is directed at creating an all-inclusive society. As affirmed by an activist interviewee, “I think it's important for me to engage myself against racism and for a more inclusive society” (R3: see Appendix 1).

Another interviewee, who belongs to the liberal party stated how surprised R4 claimed a major role in making #BLM an agenda point in the parliament.

And then you had Black Lives Matter where I was actually the only one who had sent in a question about the protest. No one else, not the left. Not the right did that. And that's how I started the debate about racism and discrimination and the impact of colonization in Belgium. And that's where I started the fight for two months and it was for me a very, very hard fight because, you know, I had this whole Parliament against me because the left people were like [...]. She now has our team and she's overpowering us from the center and the right are like, hey, we don't want you to talk about race and discrimination here. So, I was isolated,

but I did fight over it and I did put it on the agenda I had. I did ask if the government had to do something with it and after this because there was so much commotion around the discrimination tests and my voting against my own government with the opposition, you know, that has never happened. That's where, like the party I was part of, the open VLD of Alexander de Croo said, like in the federal government we will do it. We will do what we couldn't do in Flanders because N-VA didn't want (*R4: see Appendix 1*)



## Chapter 6: General Conclusion

The primary objective of this research was precipitated by looking at the representation of Afro-Belgian voices. By identifying what kind of voices Afro-Belgians have, this research took it upon itself to analyze how these voices are not only represented in the public sphere, but also, which people are doing these representations. Factors such as social issues, political issues and to an extent, identity were some of the grounded themes that emerged as strong indicators for Afro-Belgians who took it upon themselves without any mandate to represent the Afro-Belgian voices in their divergent ways.

As argued by Demart (2020), contemporary migration debate in Europe (Belgium) has failed to include minority voices, rights, and representation in the manner in which this discourse about them takes place, without necessarily involving their lived experiences. When this is further interrogated, it becomes even more alarming that African immigrants form about 25% of the migrant population in Belgium, only behind other European immigrants (54% of the migrant population). However, it is also imperative to state without ambiguity that, within this 25%, majority of the Afro-Belgians are from North Africa and followed by Congo DR (Caritas Report, 2019). Furthermore, the European Network Against Racism in their influential 2012 report indicated without haziness that the European Network Against Racism people of Sub-Saharan (Black Europeans) origin also known as the People of African Descent (PAD) constitute about 6.3% of all migrants in Belgium with DR Congo leading the chart (ENAR Report, 2016). Nevertheless, of this staggering number, this community has not been studied enough in order to better understand them and make informed policies that open up the opportunity for them to contribute constructively to Belgian society. Albeit this staggering number, they are not often visible in public discourses and thus, less discernible in the political society (Demart, 2013).

Consequently, this study expounded that, there are certain political dynamics that are steering the need for Afro-Belgians to begin to make their voices heard and represented. The growing far right extremism in Belgium, (more specifically Flanders with Vlaams Belang) is genuinely sending the alarm bells to the Afro-Belgians as a minority group (The Brussels Times, July 4, 2022). This fear that the outright anti-immigrants and fear of what might happen to this minority group was clearly emphasized by the interviewees in this study. They expressed their uncertainties on what could

possibly happen if the extreme right party becomes the leading political party in the upcoming elections in 2024 in Belgium.

Socially, there was interesting information that was unearthed by this study. One of the biggest social dynamics that drives Afro-Belgians to have their voices heard and represented is to have an inclusive society where they are afforded equal opportunities in order to contribute their quota to the society, (Politico, December 11, 2017). The invisible hand that makes this cumbersome to attain is discrimination and racism which negatively affect almost all aspects of Afro-Belgian lives in Belgium, and thus, pushes them to fight for their voices to be heard and represented (VRT News, March 22, 2022). Afro-Belgians face discrimination in the housing market, labour, and education. These are often covertly done due to its institutionalized dynamic that is usually felt and experienced by those who it affects (Verhaeghe & De Coninck, 2022); Kalter & Kogan, (2006); de Hert, et. al. (2020).

Furthermore, another interesting dynamic that was expounded by this research was the impact of the #BlackLivesMatter protest which happened in 2020. As reported by The Brussels Times (June 8, 2020), the #BLM protest attracted about 10,000 protestors who came out to vehemently march against the injustices embedded in the institutionalized racism and discrimination against Afro-Belgians in Belgium. Although George Floyd died on the streets of Minneapolis in Minnesota on May 25, 2020, the protest, however, was felt in the streets of the European Capital of Brussels and Antwerp in Belgium (Politico, June 7, 2020). These protests and the unrest that resulted from it sparked conversations and indeed, mounted pressure on not just the government of Belgium to redress the question of the colonial past and how it has systematically discriminated against Afro-Belgians. In other words, Afro-Belgian voices became significantly featured across the country through national protests (Euronews, June 9, 2020).

As a result of this, the inter-parliamentary committee on Belgium's colonial past was set up with the main objective of examining the brutal erstwhile colonial history of Belgium. Subsequently, the commission was to have set out recommendations on how to confront the country's colonial past, in order to repair and apologize (VRT News, December 19, 2022). Unfortunately, this commission, having worked tirelessly with different experts and families from divergent backgrounds for two years, failed miserably and dishonourably due to the lack of political will (Nzally, 2023). Sadly, not

even the liberal parties could come to an understanding on the recommendations and findings of the commission, Radio France Internationale (December 24, 2022); (The Brussels Times, December 2, 2022).

However, the fight for the representation of Afro-Belgian voices is not a smooth sail. There continues to be some push backs by politicians, especially, in Flanders against Afro-Belgians (The Brussels Times, April 13, 2023). Under the so-called fight against ‘wokeism’ disguised under cultural wars, the two major political parties in Flanders, New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) and Vlaams Belang (Flemish Importance) have taken this fight to rather a different level in the race of trying to prove to the voters on who is dedicated to crashing wokeism to the ground (The Brussels Times, April 12, 2023). This, in practical terms was very evident in the way both parties tried to not only block the appointment of Dalila Hermans, who is an Afro-Belgian, but also, push back in a way that is meant to deny her the opportunity based on her identity and stance on social, political, and cultural issues (Belga News, April 12, 2023).

Notwithstanding the fact that this research exposed the voices of Afro-Belgians and how they are represented, it also showed in detail what drives the need for these voices to be heard and represented. Nonetheless, this research still remains relatively limited due to the fact that the Afro-Belgian communities have not been critically studied and understood to full extent. This, as alluded by Demart (2013) has rendered them invisible in public discourses and thus, less discernible in the political society in Belgium. Therefore, there is the need for further scholarly works to be done on this particular topic and the Afro-Belgian voices in general in order to better understand the representation of this minority group and their struggle to make their voices heard.

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## 8. Appendix

### 8.1. Appendix 1 - Interviewee Coding Names

<b>Names</b>	<b>Coding Names</b>	<b>Interview Date</b>	<b>Interview Format</b>	<b>Portfolio</b>
Nsayi	R1	April 17, 2023	Online	Political scientist/ activist
Sanchou	R2	April 7, 2023	Physical	Educationist/ Activist
Stephanie	R3	April 7, 2023	Physical	Politician/ Feminist
El Kaouakibi	R4	March 10, 2023	Online	Politician/ Policy maker (MP)

## 8.2. Appendix 2 - Interview Questionnaires - Masters' Dissertation

- ❖ Do you identify yourself as an Afro-Belgian and if so, what is your experience as an Afro-Belgian in Belgium?
  
- ❖ How does your Afro-Belgian heritage influence your political voice and consciousness in Belgium?
  
- ❖ What do you think informs the voices of Afro-Belgians to be politically active taking into consideration the danger this exposure might put you in? For example, the racist violence attacks be it online or in person and the potential activist burnout that can come with the exposure.
  
- ❖ Is there any agency through which Afro-Belgians articulate their voices in Belgium and how does this agency/ lack thereof impact the manner in which Afro-Belgian voices are represented politically in Belgium?
  
- ❖ How does the 'Woke' hysteria compromise the voices of Afro-Belgians in their quest for their voices to be heard and represented?
  
- ❖ Do you think the Black Lives Matter protests in Belgium (BLM) amplified the voices of Afro-Belgians on social and political issues or it was something temporal? And what impact have you seen in the way Afro-Belgian voices matter in Belgium post BLM protest?



- ❖ From denial to the recognition of Belgium's role in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba by naming a public square after him in Brussels (the Lumumba Square), In your opinion, what do you think is necessitating such steps to be taken? And why are these steps significant in the political voices of Afro-Belgians and it's representation in Belgium?
  
- ❖ What does the voluntary return of the tooth of Patrice Lumumba to Congo last June mean to the Afro-Belgians struggle and what does it say about the voices of Afro-Belgians in Belgium's dealing with it colonial past?
  
- ❖ What does the election and subsequent resignation of the first black major (Pierre Kompany) in Ganshoren, Belgium mean to the growing voices of Afro-Belgians for political representation?
  
- ❖ In conclusion, what are any transformative progresses from Afro-Belgians in the last few years in Belgium that has been attained through the growing and demand for the voices of Afro-Belgians to be represented?