Saturday, 18 May 2019

Portrait of two servants, Diego Bemba and Pedro Sunda, who accompanied D. Miguel de Castro, Congo ambassador, to Brazil | 1643 | Albert Eckhout (1610-1665)

"CONGOÍSMOS",
TO THE NORTH (AND SOUTH)

Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo

The production of layers upon layers of stereotypes has always been useful for the (geo)political imagination. The making of stereotypes has functioned in different ways across different historical contexts, with any number of protagonists and interests at stake. Stereotypes have served, and continue to serve, many ideologies, and have been justified in many ways. Producing stereotypes has been, and continues to be, profitable for many fields, including academics and artists, who frequently, and without hesitation, play parts in political and ideological operations which run directly counter to their self image of autonomy, criticism and dignity. Indeed, whether deliberately or not, denunciations of essentialism and stereotypes often serve precisely to reinforce them. Generalization responds to generalization, superficiality, even if in an opposing vein, is mobilized against superficiality. Persistent

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geographical determinism and cultural essentialism, unequivocally moulded by politics and ideology, is one fertile strand of such stereotyping. Stereotypes continue to be useful tools in many fields (1).

Congoism, a recent book by Johnny Van Hove, shows precisely how the accumulation of "normalizing" discourses and images of "Congo" has operated. Van Hove analyses North-American society over a long period (2). Indeed, the genealogy of readings of "Congo" in the United States is extensive and diverse, with its origins in the eighteen hundreds. There are long-standing economic connections between Central Africa and the USA, above all in terms of the slave trade, but more recently though uranium, which was central to the Manhattan Project. For example, the mine of Shinkolobwe, in Katanga, played a crucial role in the development of nuclear technology and all its apocalyptic potential (3). Connections can be seen, too, in the active support given by the United States to Leopold II"s colonial project, in which Henry Shelton Sanford played a leading role (4). US involvement in the election of Mobutu Sese Soko is another example not only of how close, but of how promiscuous US relations have been with the region (5). The impact of these connections is clear in the USA itself, in cities such as New Orleans and in the history of African-American poetry (6). Various communities and fields – from activism to journalism, from politics to science and art – have contributed to establishing what Van Hove calls "Congoism": the production of a consistent narrative and "discourse" about "Congo" which encompasses culture, geography and many stereotypes. Van Hove analyses "Congoism" by combining, contrasting and comparing contributing voices, arguments and positions. These include Henry Highland Garnet"s *An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (1843), in which he talks of the "untutored African who roams in the wilds of Congo". They span Booker T. Washington and his *Cruelty in the Congo country* (1904), Martin Luther King – for whom "the American Negro is not in a Congo" – and the explorer Henry Morton Stanley who bequeathed to Joseph Conrad his famous title: "the heart of darkness". This last expression took on a life of its own, becoming a cliché used in contexts from Africa to South America. It is still common today thanks in part to its cinematographic adaptation into the context of the American war in Vietnam.

Just some of the *topoi* established by the author are "Congo as slave", "Congo as savage", "Congo as darkness" and "Congo as resource". These follow and accumulate upon one another, historically, becoming a "language of repetition" (and another of "silence"). They emerge from various relations of power and (lack of) knowledge. Such diverse imagined "Congos" were based on many things, from volatile "material markers" of territory, nationality and sovereignty, to violent colonial dependency

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and post-colonial repression. They were also based on literary, religious, commercial and political imaginaries (7). Yet, from the "Kingdom of the Congo" to the "Democratic Republic of the Congo" (1964-1971; 1998-present), through the "Independent State of the Congo" of King Leopold II, through "Belgian Congo" (1908-1960), the "Republic of the Congo" (1960-64) and "Zaire" (1971-1998), the region has been a space of variable territorial and political geometry, and heterogenous socio-cultural construction (8).

But complex reality is compromised by stereotypes, essentialism, myopia and convenience. An originary "Congo" has been crystallized as (most often) revolt and misrule and (at times) submission and docility. This reductive, polarizing process has been based on repeated manifestations of a "Congoism" which shares features with North American "Egyptomania" (9). "Congo" (or, better, various imaginaries of "Congo") has often been a central element in affirmations of identity among African-American intellectuals. "Congo" was frequently used to denote the entire African continent and its negative properties, to enable a favourable comparison with the USA. Through such invocation and iteration, African-American intellectuals "knew themselves to be free, not enslaved; civilized and progressing, not savage and backwards; beautiful and desirable, not ugly and repulsive; and historical, not without history". "Congoism" changed according to its contexts, but it maintained this primordial function (10).

"Congos" were multiple and "Congoism" was malleable in form and content, but it was always expedient to particular circumstances and actors. Telling its history and narrating its memory can only be done cautiously. It is important to consider, too, its non-European history, its transnational, transregional and transatlantic qualities and its history on the African continent itself. This is not to blur the diversity of actors, institutions, "discourses", images, motivations and interests, but to recognize the history and contingency of "Congoism". To ignore that is to do little more than reproduce "Congoisms" in another form, and to substitute one reification for another, as so often happens, even where you least expect it.

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(1) Martin W. Lewis e Karen E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California, 1997); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 2003 [1978]).

(2) Johnny Van Hove, *Congoism. Congo Discourses in the United States from 1800 to the Present* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2017).

(3) John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Susan Williams, *Spies in the Congo: America´s Atomic Mission in World War II* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016)

(4) François Bontinck, *Aux origines de l''État Indépendant du Congo. Documents tirés d''archives Américaines* (Louvain/Paris: Nauwelaerts, 1966).

(5) Peter J. Schraeder, *United States Foreign Policy Toward Africa: Incrementalism, Crisis and Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press pp. 51-113.

(6) Ira Dworkin, *Congo Love Song: African American Culture and the Crisis of the Colonial State* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2017).

(7) Van Hove, *Congoism*, p. 47.

(8) Koen Bostoen e Inge Brinkman, eds., *The Kongo Kingdom. The Origins, Dynamics and Cosmopolitan Culture of an African Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold''s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (London: Houghton Mifflin, 1998); Kevin Dunn, *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); David Van Reybrouck, *Congo, une histoire* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2012).

(9) Scott Trafton, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2004).

(10) Van Hove, *Congoism*, pp. 29, 303.

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Translated by Archie Davies

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