

Decolonizing Flanders fields: Flemish Great War commemoration and the agency of literature

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Abstract

This article analyzes the commemoration of the centenary of the Great War in Flanders to show how the Flemish case complicates customary accounts of the relation between human rights, the duty to remember, and World War. While customary accounts see the commemoration's focus on victims, on minor perspectives, and on the futility of war as an extension of Holocaust memory, the article shows how in the Flemish context, the Great War functions as a "screen memory" for politically divisive memories of the Second World War, of colonialism, and of labor migration. The article analyses the contribution of Flemish literature, and especially the novel *Tell Someone* by Rachida Lamrabet, to the commemoration of the centenary to argue that literature is a viable tool for making visible Flanders' "colonial aphasia," even if the power of literature to effect mnemonic change is compromised precisely by this colonial aphasia.

Keywords

commemoration, contemporary literature, cosmopolitan memory, Great War memory, postcolonial memory

Flanders remembers the Great War

Flanders plays an overdetermined role in the international memory of the Great War as arguably its "most important memoryscape" (Jansen-Verbeke and George, 2018: 280). Conversely, the Great War takes up a central role in contemporary Flemish cultural memory, even exceeding the salience of the much more politically contentious Second World War. In the past decade, the massive mnemonic effort occasioned by the centenary of the Great War has made visible how the myopic focus on the Great War needs to be understood in relation to Flanders' incomplete confrontation with Belgium's colonial legacy and the reality of an increasingly multi-racial and multi-ethnic citizenry. This article situates the Flemish commemoration of the centenary in an international context, and it then shows how contemporary Flemish literature, which has not failed to rise to the occasion of

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the centenary, provides one site where the central constituents of Flemish Great War memory (its ethnic homogeneity, its focus on minor voices and on the futility of war) are given shape as well as being contested. The article analyzes Rachida “Lamrabet’s (2018)” novel *Tell Someone* as a rare text that directly confronts the mnemonic repertoire of the First World War and extends it to both the colonial past and the ethnically diverse present. While exemplifying the potential contribution of contemporary art and literature as a medium of memory, *Tell Someone* is most valuable as a diagnosis of the current state of Flemish cultural memory.

The commemorative activities in Flanders on the occasion of the centenary were deeply entangled with political and economic ambitions. More precisely, the Flemish remembrance of the war was tied to the political affirmation of Flanders as a semi-independent region in federal Belgium. As Karen Shelby (2019) has noted, “the identity of Flanders or even the ability to locate Flanders on a map is integrally tied to the repetition and the recollection of the events of the war” (p. 15). That political goal was coupled with an ambitious memory politics that connected to tourist, heritage, and scholarly policies in which, as one historian notes, “the ‘brand’ Flanders is connected to the ‘product’ First World War” (Wouters, 2012: 198). This wide-ranging “commemorative program with tourist, commercial, academic, cultural, educational, and international aspects” (Shelby, 2019: 26) overwhelmingly reproduced some of the key constituents of the cultural memory of the First World War across the globe. First, there was the focus on the *futility* of war, which underplays the fact that the Allied war effort was, if anything, a just war provoked by a very significant breach of international law when Germany invaded a neutral country (De Schaepdrijver, 2012: 190–191; Wouters, 2016). Second, the emphasis was on *common people* rather than nations, on civilians rather than soldiers (Shelby, 2019: 28)—what Jay Winter (2017) has described as contemporary war memory’s “downward thrust” (p. 241) to the level of the local and the individual. Third, the focus was on the *vicarious experiences* and the possibilities for identification afforded to tourists, museum visitors, and audiences of TV series such as *In Vlaamse Velden* (which translates as “In Flanders Fields”) or of the extremely successful “spectacle musical” *14–18*, which drew a record 350,000 spectators. The emphasis on isolated episodes of disorienting fighting, on minor voices and individual experiences, and on the contradictions between different voices and experiences (Shelby, 2018: 207) means that Flemish First World War commemoration was made up of “a multitude of competing narratives” rather than of one grand master narrative (Wouters, 2016: 83).

This lack of a grand narrative does not mean that the remembrance of the war in Flanders was not informed by an overarching memorial imperative with global, if not universal, aspirations. Indeed, as noted by Sophie De Schaepdrijver (2012), Flanders’ leading historian of the First World War, the different initiatives—official, vernacular, as well as commercial—centered around the “core value” of peace: “Peace as core value. ‘Never war again’ as the inescapable conclusion. Audiences are supposed to leave museums, manifestations, guided tours, and other events strengthened in their conviction that War is Bad (especially for the Common Man)” (p. 189).¹ Tourism, in the context of the Flemish commemoration of the centenary, was essentially “peace tourism,” with “the international idea of peace . . . serving as a source of legitimation” (Wouters, 2012, 198).² As historian Nico Wouters (2012) shows, the memorial initiatives in both Flanders and the Francophone part of Belgium (where issues of cultural policy, heritage, and education are regional responsibilities) are centered around human rights issues—“solidarity, intercultural dialogue, reciprocal understanding, individual liberties, the fight against racism and exclusion” (p. 204). This ambition to promote the First World War as a benchmark of human rights violations culminated in the Flemish government’s 2011 Flanders Field Declaration, which was sent to the 50 countries that had soldiers at the Flemish front. The Declaration (which has failed to have an impact either in Flanders or elsewhere) was coupled with a (similarly failed) proposal to found a “Permanent Forum for the

Educational, Academic and Cultural Evocation of the Great War” (PEACE; Jansen-Verbeke and George, 2018: 281; Wouters, 2012: 199–200).

The Flemish effort to promote the Great War as a global, even universal memorial reference point for the advancement of human rights differs markedly from a gesture that is much more familiar in the study of memory: the association between the *Second World War* (and the Holocaust), the duty to remember, and the promotion of human rights. Most famously, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider (2006: 4) have argued that the global spread of Holocaust discourse has generated a form of “cosmopolitan memory” that “harbors the possibility of transcending ethnic and national boundaries.” For Jeffrey Alexander (2003), the Holocaust has become “a generalized symbol of human suffering” that affords “historically unprecedented opportunities for ethnic, racial, and religious justice” (p. 3). And while the kind of memory politics that Levy and Sznaider and Alexander promote has been challenged for, among others, its unwarranted optimism, its unthinking Western bias, and its failure to factor in national differences (Craps, 2013: 76–80), the association between memory, the Holocaust, and human rights has been solidified through the mass media and such transnational institutions as the European Union, the United Nations, UNESCO, and non-governmental organizations. Indeed, commentators have analyzed the attempt to link the Great War (in Flanders and elsewhere) to human rights and to the memory imperative as an indication of the triumph of the Holocaust template. For Jay Winter (2017: 249–251), the fact that “the dead of the First World War are now [remembered as] victims, not martyrs” is explained by the rise of human rights since the 1970s (Moyn, 2010) and by “the language of Holocaust commemoration,” which “is the language of innocent victimhood in war, not the language of martyrdom.” For Nico Wouters (2016: 85), even if the two World Wars provide very different memorial material, “the various WW I commemorative programmes in Belgium in fact are a practical application of [the] new legal and political memorial context” in which the association between the Holocaust and human rights fosters “a state-imposed ‘duty to remember’ for populations.” It is on the strength of this articulation of policy, memory, and values that “even specific WWI narratives are easily translated into generic values that are ultimately specific translations of human rights values”—as when the “senseless” death in the trenches of common soldiers, for instance, is cast as a form of victimhood that is all too recognizable from postwar human rights discourses. On this understanding, the memory regime that brings together human rights and the memory of the Holocaust has conclusively “premediated” (Ertl and Rigney, 2009) the Flemish commemoration of the First World War.

Flemish Great War memory and colonial aphasia

If the interventions of Levy and Sznaider and of Alexander have been faulted for unduly generalizing particular national memory cultures, this article will avoid using the Flemish case as a template for a “global” Great War memory. Such a global Great War memory is (even) less robust than the global memory of the Holocaust; even if the British memory of the Great War has been exceptionally influential internationally (Shelby, 2018: 207), First World War memory is, for instance, not nearly as prominent in the United States as in Europe or Britain (Wellings, 2016: 106), while the discourse of the war dead as victims rather than martyrs fails to take ground in Eastern Europe and West Asia (Winter, 2017: 101). As Ben Wellings (2016) notes, “ultimately state-sponsored memory of the First World War remains dominated by contested national frameworks and individual memories rather than a global consciousness” (p. 101). Rather, if we want to understand how, as the Flemish case makes clear, First World War memory functions across national borders and makes normative claims on global moral significance, it is vital to understand the specific way in which Great War memory functions in contemporary Flemish cultural memory—especially as the region is a central signifier in international First World War memory. In this article, I want to

complement the customary understanding of Flemish First World War memory as an extension of the human rights memory imperative by foregrounding two other key dimensions of contemporary Flemish cultural memory.

First, in Flanders, the moralized remembrance of the Great War is, if anything, *more* prevalent than that of the Second World War.³ Even if the scholarly attention to the history, the memory, and the literature of the Second World War exceeds that of the First World War, Flanders' complicated history of collaboration with the Nazi occupier has never been properly worked through, making the Second World War unavailable for the kind of moralized remembrance that the First World War does allow; in the case of the First World War, "Poor Little Belgium" was clearly a victim of international aggression, and the image of innocent Flemish soldiers abandoned to mass slaughter by Francophone officers resonated with a carefully cultivated resentment against the (now obsolete) political and economic dominance of Francophones in Belgium. Recent political tensions over the country's most important Holocaust memorial site, the Kazerne Dossin, a former concentration camp that now serves as a memorial and a museum, point to unresolved struggles between the site's focus on Jewish memory and its official commitment to universal human rights, making clear that in Flanders, the shift in Holocaust memory from the experience of "a delimited particular group" to "a traumatic event for all mankind" is less straightforward than Alexander (2003: 3) claims. Indeed, it is more accurate to note that the Great War functions in Flemish memory as a "screen memory" that covers over Flanders' morally much more ambivalent relation to the memory of the Second World War. Whereas the Holocaust has in other national contexts been used as a "screen memory" that displaces compromised episodes from one's own past such as slavery and colonialism (Hansen, 1996; Huyssen, 2003), the Flemish case shows a different dynamic at work in which Second World War memory is itself displaced by a morally more straightforward cultural memory of the Great War.

Second, while the remembrance of the First World War was marked by an "impressive multiplicity" of initiatives and actors, and while many of these initiatives did not fail to link the memory of the Great War to contemporary wars such as the civil war in Syria (Van Alstein, 2014), it is equally marked by the near-absence of the 4 million soldiers from French, English, German, but also Belgian colonies who fought in the war. While the number of Congolese soldiers fighting in the trenches was as small as 32 (Brosens, 2013), tens of thousands died in the fight against Germany in Africa (Van Ypersele and Ngongo, 2018). That these porters and soldiers from the colonies have failed to find a place in Flemish cultural memory (Nsayi, 2018; Van Ypersele and Ngongo, 2018) is all the more conspicuous given developments in other countries. In France, the contribution of colonial troops has increasingly been highlighted (Ginio, 2010), while in Britain, it is especially the memory of Indian soldiers that has gained prominence over the last decade (Das, 2018; Wellings, 2016: 103–105). As Ann Rigney (2021: 11) notes, "the interest in colonial troops . . . is slowly, if hesitantly, growing in Europe," even if it has not totally remedied "a long-standing failure across the continent to link the memory of World War One to the memory of European colonialism." Flanders' marked deviation from the situation in France or the United Kingdom (Wellings and Sumartojo, 2018), then, points to a larger failure to confront either the postcolonial reality of contemporary Flemish society or Belgium's colonial legacy. Idesbald Goddeeris (2015) has underlined, for instance, that the memory of the Congo is still dominated by a "nostalgic and triumphalist" (p. 436) narrative.

Recent years have seen positive developments in the direction of a more critical memorial attitude to the Second World War and the legacy of the Congo: through a series of much discussed television documentaries (named, in translation, *Children of the Collaboration*, *Children of the Holocaust*, and *Children of the Colony*); the Belgian King's official expression of regret on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of Congo's independence; the creation of a (contested) parliamentary commission on Belgian's colonial past; and finally, through the renovation and reopening

of the infamous Africa Museum in Tervuren, close to Brussels (Goddeeris et al., 2020). Still, these developments have not affected the memory of the First World War, and the unreflective ethnic homogeneity of First World War memory points to certain blockages in contemporary Flemish cultural memory. Less a matter of forgetting, denial, or repression (Bobineau, 2017), the failure to articulate the memories of war, of colonialism, and of postwar labor migration points to “a mnemonic pathology” that Ann Rigney (2021), following Ann Laura Stoler, calls “colonial aphasia” (p. 12): an inability to see connections between or find meanings in memories that fall outside of available memory frames. As Sarah De Mul (2012: 173) observes, the problem is less “a general absence of a collective postimperial memory discourse”—indeed, there is a plethora of isolated performances, protests, and interventions—than the “incoherent and inherently diversified nature of Belgian postcolonial cultures” that allows “specific, repetitive memory patterns of empire” to persist and preclude a more robust articulation of different experiences and traditions.

Rigney (2021: 18–19) emphasizes that artistic and literary interventions have a slight but undeniable agency in creating new sites of memorability: “small qualitative changes do matter,” and minor shifts in the “micropolitics of reading, viewing and reacting” have the potential to be incrementally scaled up. Art and literature, then, have “a distinctive role to play in what is a multi-sited and multi-medial process.” While Rigney’s examples from the British, German, and French contexts illustrate the incremental agentive power of literature, this power only accrues over time (one of her examples, Mulk Raj Anand’s 1939 novel *Across the Black Water*, took over 60 years to enter a productive dynamic of remediation), and tells us little about how *contemporary* literature can intervene in a situation of memorial aphasia when its interventions do not immediately resonate with dominant memory frames. This lack of resonance complicates the mnemonic role that literature can play. This article points to an even more provisional role for literature: not as a “catalyst” of memory (Rigney, 2010), but as a diagnostic tool that makes visible instances of colonial aphasia. It is unclear whether contemporary literature will eventually come to have the considerable effect that Rigney’s examples have had, but for now, I argue, literature can play a diagnostic role that can point scholars, activists, fellow authors, and reading audiences to the mnemonic pathologies of the present.

Contemporary Flemish literature has actively participated in the elevation of the First World War as a foundational and normative event. This article focuses on one novel by the activist, novelist, and human rights lawyer Rachida Lamrabet that challenges the memory frames through which colonialism, labor migration, and the two World Wars are customarily remembered in Flanders. At the same time, the novel offers an indirect diagnosis of the “colonial aphasia” that marks the broader public sphere by linking Lamrabet’s story of the Great War to an episode in her own life that saw her being fired from her job as a lawyer for UNIA, Belgium’s official independent public institution for the fight against discrimination and for the protection of fundamental rights, on account of a commissioned script she wrote for a short film on Belgium’s controversial burqa ban. The novel strongly suggests analogies between the colonial violence that ends up killing her protagonist and the ongoing stratification of the Flemish public sphere. These analogies, I will argue, challenge dominant memory frames and have the potential to reorient Flemish cultural memory away from its current blockages.

Contemporary literature of the Great War: documents, small people, (dis)continuities

It is unsurprising that Flemish literary policy participated in the effort to commemorate the First World War as both a Flemish and a global site of memory. In Flanders, literary policy is the responsibility of the Flemish Literature Fund (Fonds voor de Letteren, now Literatuur Vlaanderen), and its ambitions can be glimpsed from a number of promotional brochures; *In Flanders Literary*

Fields: Thirteen Titles on WW I aimed to spotlight recent or upcoming publications for the 2013 Frankfurt Book Fair, the most important event in the international marketing of Flemish literature (McMartin, 2019), and *Stories from No Man's Land: WW I in 25 Lectures* (original in Dutch) aimed to provide domestic stakeholders (schools, local cultural centers, heritage organizations) with a portfolio of World War-themed author lectures. Koen Van Bockstal (2013), the Fund's (now former) managing director, explicitly links literary policy to memory politics when he opens the international brochure by stating that "literature makes present and future generations aware of the importance of tolerance and international relations," which are "essential building blocks for an open, tolerant society with the peace motto of 'No More War' at its foundation." Given that literature is "an ideal tool for generating empathy and identification" (Van Bockstal, 2013), the introductions to both brochures underline the geographic and generic diversity of the contributions. It is all the more remarkable, then, that over 30 authors and works featured in the brochures, only one (youth author Aline Sax's *The Girl and the Soldier*, featured in both brochures, which deals with the friendship between a young girl and an African soldier) even hints at the role of colonialism in the experience and memory of the Great War. None of the works is by a person of color.⁴

Flemish literary authors have not failed to respond to the centenary: *In Flanders Literary Fields* showcases First World War novels by three of Flanders' most acclaimed novelists (Stefan Brijjs, Erwin Mortier, and Stefan Hertmans). It is especially Hertmans' novel *War and Turpentine*, which made it to the *New York Times* 10 best books of 2016 list and tells the story of the author's grandfather on the basis of the latter's notebooks, that epitomizes three key elements that recur throughout the works and authors presented in the brochures.⁵ First, a remarkable number of stories is inspired by *documents* that serve as media and catalysts of memory—photographs, notebooks, soldier diaries, newspaper archives. One century after the facts, in other words, contemporary Flemish literature of the Great War thematizes the fact that Great War memory is situated beyond the threshold from communicative to cultural memory, at the moment when embodied and vernacular memory has made way for mediated memory (Assmann, 2011). Second, the focus is invariably on *minor voices* of civilians, bystanders, and small soldiers, who are presented as witnesses rather than actors in the war (in the case of Hertmans' novel, the grandfather, after an impoverished childhood, becomes a reluctant front fighter in the trenches), in keeping with a general emphasis in Great War memory on "the common man (or woman or child) caught up in the destruction of an incomprehensible and ultimately absurd total war" (Wouters, 2016: 83). And third, it is striking how often literature is presented as a medium for imaginatively bridging the gap across a *historical divide*; we read how authors are "pierced" and "touched" by the encounter with recovered documents and stories, and how that inspires a restorative act of writing. In the case of Hertmans, this "sublime historical experience" (Ankersmit, 2005) in which a perceived discontinuity inspires a literary effort to reconnect to the past takes shape as a Sebaldian novel of memory that interweaves documentary material, direct evocations of the past, and the author's own memories of his grandfather.

Overall, contemporary Flemish literature's engagement with the memory of the Great War adheres to the tenets of the larger wave of commemoration: a focus on minor perspectives, an investment in objects and documents as carriers of memory, an emphasis on discontinuities that imaginative and mnemonic work can remedy, and a near total elision of the experience of colonial subjects. Rachida Lamrabet's *Tell Someone* is not the only Flemish work of literature that has begun to address this last oversight: two other prominent authors, Annelies Verbeke (2015) in *Thirty Days* and Koen Peeters (2017) in *The People Healer* explicitly connect the experiences of African soldiers during the war to colonial legacies that persist into the present. More than these novels, in which the experience of the World War is not central but merely a subtheme, *Tell Someone* directly challenges the mnemonic repertoire that shape Flemish cultural memories of the

Great War. The novel tells the story of a decidedly minor player: a Moroccan boy who is sent to fight at the front for the French army in order to escape a lifelong prison sentence, but who is then court-martialed to death on account of supposedly subversive messages found in his diary. The diary, then, participates in a space of writing and communication where, even if the colonial soldiers feel the psychological need to forget the horrors of warfare, notation is the only way to escape oblivion: “After all we had suffered, it would be the worst punishment to be erased from the memories of those still living” (Lamrabet, 2018: 195–198). In marked contrast to more customary literary evocations of the trope of the soldier diary, the acts of writing, recording, and remembering are here also captured by power relations; even if the Moroccan boy erases his subversive words in the diary, he is still held accountable for them; neither the privacy of the diary nor the erasure save him from the imposition of brutal power hierarchies.

Lamrabet’s revision of the tropes of the common man—a category that is here extended to colonial subjects—and of the historical document as a gateway to the past—a process that is here complicated through power relations policing the borders of what can be said—goes together with her revision of the third key feature of the template of contemporary Flemish Great War fiction: the fantasy of transmission across historical discontinuities. The story of the nameless narrator is framed as a monologue he addresses on the night before his execution to his estranged father, a French colonizer and artist who is entrusted with passing on the boy’s manuscript to the boy’s sister “and every one who knew [him],” so they “will know how things went for [him] here in the house of war” (p. 251). The father betrays this trust; on his way back home, he throws the manuscript on a fire in the train station: “the boy had finished the last chapter with his name. I watched as the fire consumed his name . . . everything was now irrevocably gone” (p. 255). *Tell Someone* is a story of a radical and deliberate failure of transmission; it is framed by the refusal of the colonizer to transmit the story of the colonial subject, to whom he has earlier already failed to serve as a father.

While it is not hard to see how this framing of the story criticizes the obliteration of colonial perspectives from Flemish First World War memory, the novel makes clear that the situation is not one of total erasure. The first 30 pages are narrated from the perspective of the father, and confront the reader with the racist—or at the very least orientalist—preconceptions that characterize this perspective (“the grand and noble project” of civilizing “an uncivilized world” (p. 12); the boy’s mother as an “inscrutable . . . eastern beauty” bringing him to “the heart of this dark country” (pp. 17–19)). This compromised perspective does not preclude the father’s persistent fascination with colonial realities. In the last sentence of the novel, it transpires that the father has not managed to eradicate the memory he aimed to destroy: “still I would carry his name and his story with me forever until I in my turn would perish” (p. 255). Lamrabet’s intervention, in other words, challenges Great War memory in a context of colonial aphasia; less a matter of “forgetting and amnesia” than a complex combination of “loss of access and active dissociation”; less total erasure than “a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things” (Stoler, 2011: 125). As we will see, Lamrabet’s work revises conceptual and lexical vocabularies in order to enable an articulation of as yet unintegrated aspects of contemporary Flemish memory culture.

Rachida Lamrabet’s *Tell Someone*: (re)framing war

Tell Someone’s choice for a Moroccan protagonist serving in the French army not only extends the remit of Flemish Great War memory, it also directly challenges a key constituent of the particular kind of colonial aphasia that afflicts contemporary Flemish memory culture. As Elleke Boehmer and Sarah De Mul (2012) explain, one thing that sets the Flemish postcolonial present apart from that in countries like France and the United Kingdom is that there is “a historical disconnect

between colonialism and a post-world war history of migration from Italy, Morocco and Turkey, which is very different from the British [and French] context where migrants have tended to come from the former empire” (p. 6). Lamrabet’s choice to tell the story of a colonial subject who comes to Europe to “work” (if only as a soldier; the boy fights in France in order to “earn” his freedom and escape prison) is then an imaginative strategy to bring these two disarticulated historical legacies together. This choice is all the more effective given that the novel’s protagonist hails from Morocco, the country of origin of a large number of labor migrants since the 1960s; unlike the labor migrants from Italy, the Belgian–Moroccan community, a group to which Lamrabet herself belongs and which counts around 450,000 people, continues to suffer from overt racism. That these two memorial episodes are articulated in the context of the Great War underlines the novel’s ambition to intervene in the pathologies of contemporary Flemish memory culture.

Tell Someone’s presentation of the Great War explicitly deploys familiar “frames of memory” (Bond, 2015) that shape the dominant Flemish memory of the Great War. This generates a multidirectional dynamics (Rothberg, 2009), in which affinities and resonances between different memorial traditions—here, the experience of the migrant or soldier on the one hand and that of the cultural mainstream on the other hand—generate the possibility of unanticipated solidarities. The book’s representation of the boy’s experience in the French army mobilizes elements from Flemish cultural war memory; there is the innocence and naivete of the soldiers, who initially expect to confront mounted infantry and have no idea where they are being sent; there is the lack of a shared language between soldiers and generals (Lamrabet, 2018: 209); there is the merciless indifference of the generals and the unflinching executions of soldiers who refuse to enter no man’s land; there is the empathy with a dying German soldiers that cuts across the boundaries separating friend and foe so as to underscore the arbitrariness of that distinction (Lamrabet, 2018: 32, 194). By applying these key elements through which Flemish cultural memory remembers the Flemish victims of the Great war to the experience of the Moroccan boy, *Tell Someone* reimagines the Great War as a potential site of a less ethnically stratified cultural memory.⁶

As the first half of the novel is situated in colonial Morocco, it also showcases the continuities between the experience of war and colonial violence—a continuity that has been extensively studied in the context of the Holocaust and the colonial past (Arendt, 1951; Césaire, 2000; Rothberg, 2009) but that this novel extends to the World Wars more generally. Flemish audiences are familiar with the Second World War trope of disproportionate collective punishment at the slightest provocation against the Occupier. *Tell Someone* presents such atrocities in a colonial context: the French colonizer kills thousands of innocent men, women, and children in retaliation for the unsolved killing of nine French railroad workers (Lamrabet, 2018: 147); the killing of a French doctor leads to the evacuation of all people from the neighborhood, after which all men over 14 are executed in front of their families (Lamrabet, 2018: 24). The boy realizes that “[t]he violence, the fire, and death were always and everywhere the same” and that these are “the always recurring images of war” (Lamrabet, 2018: 46). The Moroccans who are initially deemed unfit for modernity (by the father/colonizer) are later transported by train, the symbol of modernity, to suffer and die in the trenches (Lamrabet, 2018: 170). The boy’s first sighting of Europeans, when he is still in Morocco, further destabilizes the separations between different memory traditions; what strikes him is that “you rarely saw their women in the street and when you saw them . . . [t]heir faces were mostly invisible behind the thin veil they wore on their heads” (Lamrabet, 2018: 122)—an image that anticipates even if it reverses contemporary Flemish responses to Muslim hijabs. It is significant that the novel, as I noted, begins its story from within a colonial mind-set, as in that way, it aligns itself with its intended Flemish audience who then gradually see their familiar memory frames being extended to colonial experience, and even reversed in a process that sees European life itself framed from a perspective that the reader discovers not to be so alien after all. Remarkably, the

novel eschews didactic glosses or explanations of terms and experiences that might be unfamiliar to Flemish readers (such as the term “Amazigh,” for instance, which is much less familiar than the problematic term “Berber”); this underscores that the novel is less interested in keeping its readers in their comfort zones than in inviting—or indeed forcing—them to adopt different perspectives and extend their customary memorial and imaginative frames.

A second way in which *Tell Someone*'s account decolonizes Great War memory, apart from its reorganization of extant memory frames, is by emphasizing the extent to which both colonialism and World War incite an altered geographical awareness and a changed sense of belonging. For the colonizer or father, migration is “a catastrophic loss” (p. 12); for the colonial subjects, things are more complicated. The boy initially feels he belongs to his village, and it is only because of the French administrative unification of Morocco that he even realizes he is somehow connected to other Moroccans. Subsequently, the war is the first occasion where he meets people who are not either colonial subjects or colonizers, in a context where communitarian sentiments emerge in response to intercultural encounters. Initially, the fact that the French invite “us (the Moroccans), the Senegalese, the Algerians, the Indians and who knows what other people” to “kill men who are as white as they are” is incomprehensible (p. 163). But soon hierarchies set in, as the Algerians claim superiority over other groups and the boy discovers affinities across ethnic, linguistic, and religious boundaries, only for different boundaries to establish themselves along national lines: “Here, we became Moroccans, Algerians, or Senegalese” (p. 172). National difference and nationalist sentiments, the novel shows, emerge in response to the displacements of war as much as they inspire them. As the boy notes, “Before I set out on this adventure, my people coincided with people from my region and my motherland was not larger than my village. But I would soon learn that a nation is something other than a village,” as it needs a people that “worships” it and even goes to war for it (p. 172). The distinctions that the experience of war migration generates have a destructive effect; talking about the relations between the Algerians and the Moroccans in the army, the boy notes that “[t]he real catastrophe was that we had learned to make distinctions based on something that we used to find meaningless” (p. 231). Underlining the extent to which war destabilizes geographical relations, also for colonial subjects (who, the novel tells us, “had never heard of Belgium or the Netherlands” (p. 158)), the novel invites a less ethnically homogeneous Flemish Great War memory.

The right to literary agency: confronting colonial aphasia

Tell Someone constitutes a significant intervention in contemporary Flemish memory culture in at least three ways. First, it reflects on how memory and forgetting function in the context of war, and underlines how acts of recording reality and of refusing others the power to record it constitute forms of power continuous with warfare.⁷ Second, it intervenes in the colonial aphasia that marks Flemish cultural memory by reorganizing available memory frames in a way that connects war memory to the memory of colonialism and labor migration. A third and final intervention pertains to the ways in which it shows how the power relations that afflict and constrain migrant voices persist in the Flemish public sphere. In this way, the novel reflects on its own relative lack of agency; it signals an awareness that it can only minimally and provisionally impact the ethnically homogeneous national imaginary that dominates public debate in Flanders. Genuine mnemonic change depends on the continuation of the novel's work by other agents of memory—academics, curators, fellow writers, activists, and artists.

In the novel, the failure of the boy to transmit his story has at least two reasons: there is the unreliability of the mediators—the father who ends up burning the notebook, but also the interpreter during the trial who, because of the rising animosity between different national groups,

cannot be relied on to provide an accurate account (Lamrabet, 2018: 246)—and there is the fact that the boy's writings are read ungenerously. Not only are the reflections in his private notebook considered as evidence that he planned the killing of one of his French superiors, but his decision to replace an earlier statement—"We have taken revenge" (p. 210)—with a longer reflection on fate and mortality (pp. 211–215) is simply discarded. The initial declaration of revenge, the boy reflects, expressed a fantasy of agency and heroism, but because that fantasy "was rooted in [his] imagination and not in reality" (p. 210), he decides to erase it. The authorities, however, "have recovered it from underneath the erasure" (p. 211). The implication is that colonial subjects are not allowed provisionality, hesitation, and self-correction; every trace of insufficiently loving "a country that isn't [theirs]" (p. 244) or insufficiently mourning the death of a cruel officer is punishable (p. 36).⁸ These constraints are contrasted with the father's ability to fictionalize, to embellish reality in his drawings, to "adapt reality" in his art (p. 149). Imagination, fiction, and change are the privilege of the colonizer, while the colonial subjects are exposed to suspicion and ungenerous interpretation.⁹

It is impossible not to link this to Lamrabet's own life story, which in 2017 took a dramatic twist when she was fired as a human rights lawyer by UNIA, Belgium's government-funded equal opportunities center. Lamrabet had written the script for a work of video art (commissioned by the Brussels-based KVS theater and the Washington Goethe-Institut) in which a fictional veiled woman reflects on privacy issues related to the wearing of a niqab in the context of Belgium's contested ban on face covering. While Lamrabet expressed her own dissatisfaction with the ban (as well as with the burqa) in interviews, the artwork offers a critical reflection on rather than an outright condemnation of the ban—let alone that it recommends the wearing of a niqab, as a number of ungenerous commentators insinuated. As Lamrabet (2017) explains in her book-length essay, *Shut Up, Immigrant!* ("Zwijg, Allochtoon!" in Dutch), the non-trivial distinctions between writer and lawyer, between artistic reflection and political or religious activism did not seem to apply in her case; as a recalcitrant and critical migrant voice, she was simply slotted as an enemy of the state and fired from a position to which her artistic work or private opinions should be irrelevant. The campaign against Lamrabet maintained that she "used the technique of fiction to execute a hidden agenda" (Lamrabet, 2017: 56, 69); it capitalized on the notion that Muslims were incapable of metaphorical thought and could only read literally. It is clear that Lamrabet's own experience of being denied the right to reflection, hesitation, and nuance informed her representation of the colonial subject that narrates most of *Tell Someone*. This links her diagnosis of the violence of war to the contemporary Flemish public sphere, which continues to constrain the power of migrant voices to generate now sites of memorability.

Conclusion

What allows works of art and literature to contribute to mnemonic change is, as Ann Rigney (2021: 14) explains, not only "[i]ntegrating memories into existing narrative schemata," but also mobilizing "defamiliarisation—or, more precisely the defamiliarisation constitutive of aesthetic experience" that can disrupt customary habits of identification. Lamrabet's analysis makes clear that, in the Flemish context, it is precisely the particularity of aesthetic experience that is being denied to migrant voices. Her work, both in the case of her novel and her film script, is denied the power to complicate, surprise, and provoke, and is instead simplified and reduced to a statement of disloyalty. Interestingly, the novel anticipates this inability to be received as truly literary. Most of the novel consists in the boy's monologue, not in the text of his notebooks. The two long quotations from the notebooks that are included are much more lyrical and almost naively open to the exciting experience of a new continent. It is significant that Lamrabet has this more literary mode of writing

(fictionally) destroyed and instead offers the reader a more sober and disenchanting narrative. This foreclosure of the *aesthetic* contribution of migrant art and literature is a crucial aspect of the colonial aphasia Lamrabet diagnoses the Flemish public sphere with. This was apparent in the reception of Lamrabet's novel: lukewarm reviews in the major Flemish newspapers criticized the work's alleged lack of nuance and its excessive explicitness—which can be decoded as condemnation of the work being considered insufficiently literary and overly didactic (Leyman, 2018; Vlaar, 2018).¹⁰ This underlines the self-perpetuating nature of colonial aphasia, and the difficulty of remedying it: part of the condition is that it forecloses the discursive conditions that could begin to generate a less ethnically homogeneous cultural memory.

This article has demonstrated the minimal yet vital mnemonic agency of literature in a context beset by colonial aphasia. If literature's contribution to a less ethnically stratified memory of the Great War is uncertain, its diagnostic ability to make visible the dysfunctions of contemporary Flemish memory culture is undeniable. It is uncertain whether Lamrabet's interventions can serve as a corrective of the memorial dysfunctions that this article observed in official, vernacular, as well as literary Great War remembrance; but her work can undeniably help assess a situation in which a monomaniacal memorial focus on the Great War occludes legacies that it is at least as urgent to address. This article has emphasized the particularity of the Flemish case, where the commemoration of the Great War intensifies a situation where the moralized memory of that war precludes a forthright engagement with more ambivalent and even dubious legacies—colonialism, labor migration, and even the Second World War. Even if work on cosmopolitan (Levy and Sznajder, 2006), transnational (De Cesari and Rigney, 2014), or transcultural (Bond and Rapson, 2014) memory has shown how memories of suffering and violence can make normative claims beyond regional or national boundaries, the case of Flanders (as diagnosed by Lamrabet) affirms the importance of studying the particular memorial contexts in which these normative claims emerge and in which they function. In their groundbreaking book on postcolonialism in the Low Countries, Elleke Boehmer and Sarah De Mul (2012: 6) have noted that conventional postcolonial ideas such as hybridity and creolization find little purchase in the Flemish context. Similarly, most historical scholarship in Belgium's colonial legacy originates abroad, and is at times inattentive to the specificity of the Belgian situation (Goddeeris, 2015). What goes for postcolonial scholarship also goes for memory studies: particular inflections of colonial aphasia, human rights discourses, and cosmopolitan memory need to be understood "from within" before they can productively enter into dialogue with other contexts and conceptual paradigms. Here, at least, literature can play an indispensable role.

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Notes

1. Throughout the article, translations from the Dutch are my own.
2. See Vanneste and Foote (2018) for the deliberate shift from battlefield to peace tourism.
3. It is a significant detail that the spectacle musical *14–18* was *followed* in 2018 by the no less successful *40–45*.
4. In this respect also, literary policy followed a broader tendency in the commemoration of the Great War. As Laurence Van Ypersele and Enika Ngongo (2018) note, in relation to the Belgian colonial past, "[a]

- mongst the thousands of events, exhibitions and seminars that took place throughout Belgium in 2014, less than a dozen were uniquely devoted to the Belgian Congo” (p. 60).
5. See McMartin (2019) for a book-length account of the novel’s international career as “a future classic.”
 6. In the context of the United States, for instance, the shared suffering in the First World War provided African American soldiers with the determination to fight segregation back at home. *Tell Someone* imagines a similar cross-ethnic solidarity on the basis of a revised *memory* of the Great War.
 7. In the novel, not only do the French refuse to teach their colonial soldiers French, it almost seems “that they fight a war in order to fill their notebooks” (Lamrabet, 2018: 191); the novel notes that “there is nothing innocent about a Frenchman who notes down everything” (p. 183).
 8. The novel also pursues this theme in the story of the boy’s mother, who has invented a whole life story in which the boy’s father is not a colonial artist but a proud Amazigh father, but who (together with her daughter, the boy’s twin sister) ends up being confronted with the consequences of their actions (ostracism and shame). Gender has been a crucial dimension of Lamrabet’s fictional work from her first novel *Woman Country* (Lamrabet, 2008), but the topic falls outside of the scope of this article.
 9. This analysis resonates with classic analyses of the twisted mode of subjectivity that colonialism imposes on colonial subjects and the compromised modes of agency and freedom of expression it entails. See, for instance, Memmi (2003: 146) for the impossible choice between assimilation and petrification and Fanon (1963: 13) for the inability of the colonized intellectual to “engage in dialogue” rather than turn into “a kind of mimic man.” In these accounts, as in theories of subalternity, the emphasis is on the *structural* impossibility of intersubjective communication.
 10. Since this lukewarm initial reception of the novel, Lamrabet has gone on to win prominent prizes: the Flemish Community’s official Ultima award for literature, the University of Leuven’s Culture Prize, and the University of Leuven’s Humanities Honorary Medal (all in 2019). The recent accolades may suggest that the impact of *Tell Someone* may grow in the coming years, and that the work will take up the agentive trajectory that Rigney (2021) describes.

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