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Towards a Black Cultural Memory

Black Consciousness and Connectivity in the Online-Offline Continuum

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Abstract

The article explores how Black people in Belgium have sought meaningful engagement with their history, culture, and identity to create a shared cultural memory, and vice versa: how Black people's engagement with a shared cultural memory has formed a collective, Afro-diasporic identity and culture. To illustrate how Black identities take shape beyond personal histories, cultures, and memories, I conceptualize a memory framework called Black Cultural Memory (BCM), giving insight into Black people's interconnected identity constructing/maintaining embodied culture, and shed light on how social media, memory and Black people's lives interact by discussing how cultural memory is shaped, sharpened and inquired through Black people's contemporary digital engagement. Examining the memory practices and discoursers of Belgian Renaissance, New Awoken African Generation, and #BLMbelgium, I illustrate how digital platforms helped these initiatives to shape and distribute notions of collective blackness, which ultimately connects them to a global Afro-diaspora culture.

Keywords

African diaspora – cultural memory – Black consciousness – Black activism – social media – collective identities

Résumé

L'article explore les voies par lesquelles les Noirs en Belgique se sont investis dans la découverte de leur histoire, de leur culture et de leur identité et comment, ces formes d'engagement ont généré une mémoire culturelle commune, puis une identité et une culture collectives afro-diasporiques. Afin d'illustrer la façon dont les identités noires prennent forme au-delà des histoires, des cultures et des souvenirs personnels, l'auteure conceptualise un cadre théorique appelé "Mémoire Culturelle Noire" (BCM). Il permet à la fois, d'exposer comment se construit une identité interconnectée parmi les Noirs, comment perdure une culture incarnée, et d'éclairer la façon dont les réseaux sociaux, la mémoire et la vie des Noirs s'influencent mutuellement. L'auteure discute également de la façon dont la mémoire culturelle est façonnée, consolidée et interrogée par les Noirs de Belgique sur les réseaux sociaux. Enfin, en examinant les pratiques mémorielles et les discours de la Renaissance belge, de la New Awoken African Generation et de #BLMbelgium, l'auteure montre que les plateformes numériques ont permis à ces formes d'engagement de formuler et de diffuser des notions telles que la négritude collective, la communauté ou d'appartenance afro-diasporique, ce faisant, elles les relient finalement à une culture afro-diasporique globale.

Mots-clés

diaspora africaine – mémoire culturelle – conscience noire – activisme noir – réseaux sociaux – identités collectives

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> The truth is that one's personal black story is *a* black story, but not all black stories are *the* black story.
>
> LEWIS R. GORDON, *Fear of Black Consciousness*

• • •

> The shared past is precious, not for itself, but because it is the basis of consciousness, of knowing, of being.
>
> CEDRIC J. ROBINSON, *Black Marxism*

• •
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1 Introduction

In this article I explore how Black people have sought meaningful engagement with their history, culture, and identity to create a shared cultural memory, and vice versa: how Black people's engagement with a shared cultural memory has formed a collective, Afro-diasporic identity and culture. Situated in the context of Belgium, Europe, this work contributes to post-colonial discussions related to Belgium's cultural memory, which have increasingly focused on national issues with memory and colonial imaginary but failed to include the lived experiences and counter memories of its Black population. While Black people continue to be treated as outsiders in Belgian society (Ceuppens 2006), I seek to center them in my work as active partakers and agents of memory.

In the white population's gaze, Black people in Belgium embody memories of there-and-then, while not quite seeming to belong here-and-now – as is typical of post-imperial nations whose colonial system was external in nature. To perpetuate such a worldview, Belgium's hegemonic memory surrounding its colonial past has symptomatically involved silence, repression (Van den Braembussche 2002), suppression, collective amnesia (Van Nieuwenhuyse 2014), active forgetting (Ceuppens and De Mul 2009), and colonial memory loss (Goddeeris 2015). All of these point at significant memory-gaps, or a "non-memory" (Hirszowicz and Neyman 2007), which I use here to refer to Belgium's purposeful aversion of certain memories for the sake of maintaining a rather patriotic and white-supremacist national or federal pride, including an idealized image of the past as constructed by a present-day subjectivity rooted in white innocence (Wekker 2016), white saviorism (Cole 2012), white fragility (DiAngelo 2018), and white narcissism (Gordon 2022). At the margins of such non-memory is where counter memories take shape, which involves the refusal and resistance of official historical narratives (Foucault 1980). In this article I explore what these counter memories can entail for Black people in Belgium. I thereby build on the notion of *cultural memory*, which is defined as being an identity constructing/maintaining embodied culture stored in and recalled by texts, practices, and places (Assman 1995).

As I seek to contribute to filling the gap in both memory research and research on blackness in Belgium and Europe, I focus on Black people's identity constructing/maintaining embodied culture, which I call Black Cultural Memory (BCM). To illustrate how Black identities take shape beyond personal histories, cultures, and memories, I provide an explorative account of the way cultural memory is implicated in the lives of Afro-diasporic peoples. Building on the work of Stuart Hall (1989) and Christel N. Temple (2020), among oth-

ers, I conceptualize Black Cultural Memory and point out how it relates to and interweaves with other cultural signifying mechanisms and practices (cultural archive, Black consciousness, and diaspora literacy). This is followed by a discussion on how cultural memory can be shaped, sharpened, and inquired through Black people's contemporary digital engagement and Black cyberculture, which sheds light on how media, memory and Black people's lives interact.

Based on semi-structured in-depth interviews and discourse analyses, I discuss some of the memory practices and discoursers of three initiatives in Belgium that have involved navigating and negotiating a Black existence in and beyond Belgium's hegemonic cultural memory through digital media practices. They are Belgian Renaissance (2014), New Awoken African Generation (2016), and #BLMbelgium (2020). I look at their use of digital platforms in shaping notions and discourses of collective blackness and Afro-diasporic identity, which include reflection on "generational" relations to cyberculture and digital technologies. I discuss how these initiatives engage with blackness and memory and illustrate how such engagement connects them to a potentially empowering and increasingly visible global Afro-diaspora culture, despite its internal contradictions and divisions.

2 Conceptualizing Black Cultural Memory

I begin my conceptualization of Black Cultural Memory with the words of Stuart Hall, who argued that the profound cultural discovery of being Black "was and could not be, made directly, without 'mediation'. It could only be made *through* the impact on popular life of the post-colonial revolution, the civil rights struggles, the culture of Rastafarianism and the music of reggae – the metaphors, the figures or signifiers of a new construction of 'Jamaican-ness'." (Hall 1989, 75). Black cultural identity, in the context of Jamaica, is mediated through movements and philosophies that serve as gateways to 'hidden histories', ultimately awakening among people a consciousness of sociopolitical and cultural belonging. It is clear that much of what constitutes the Afro-diaspora depends on consciousness, and the mediation thereof. The metaphors, figures, and signifiers Hall refers to (i.e., post-colonial revolution, civil rights struggles and the culture of Rastafarianism) constitute what I call a Black Cultural Memory (BCM). Such memory can be understood as a discursive, informational, and cultural site, consisting of historical connotations, codes, and cues that are, to paraphrase André Brock Jr. (2020), an intentional and agentive interpellation of blackness. This blackness is not *essentially* affixed to "the bottom of a social and cultural order" by a white racial ideology (Brock 2020, 23), but

rather, to return to Hall, a *new construction* of blackness. It is marked by "a positive desire to identify oneself a member of a group and a feeling of pleasure when one does so" (Isajiw 1977, 8) despite (though, not always) recognizing that such grouping was initially based on a racist allocation. In other words: Black people's engagement with memory involves much more than trauma, suffering, and oppression. The work of Christel N. Temple illustrates this thoroughly. In *Black Cultural Mythology* (2020), Temple uncovers an expansive and notably Afrocentric set of memory practices, inclusive of liberationist and survivalist notions of resistance, nostalgia (also see Ahad-Legardy 2021), and futurity (see also Nelson 2002). What makes Black cultural mythology afrocentric is its departure from African (-descendant) narratives, experiences, and cultural frameworks (Asante 2003). Its mythological structure does not necessarily imply some sort of fantasy or fabrication of history – as is often asserted by anti-Afrocentrist classicists (e.g. Lefkowitz 1992) – but more so refers to a recurring *genre* that typifies the way Black people have recalled their collective past. Namely, through *heroic survival*, *memory*, and *narrative/art*. Concretely, Black cultural mythology can involve oral, textual, or audiovisual storytelling, aesthetics, and other forms of art, as well as philosophy and critical theory – all related to Black people's survival and resistance throughout the post-colonial experience.

Unlike conventional (white Eurocentric) cultural memory research, Temple's work captures the *lived* memories of Black people by means of "itemizing the critical dimensions of how African people heroically responded to and behaved within histories of not only enslavement but also during the entire diaspora experience" (Temple 2020, 6). Although necessarily entwined with my notion of Black Cultural Memory, Black cultural mythology is a conceptual framework that helps us identify *how* people remember and what technologies of remembrance are enacted in Black people's memory work. As a methodological guide, it provides helpful tools for researching Black people's cultural memory practices. I consider Black Cultural Memory, however, as an umbrella concept that tells us more about *what* people remember. BCM encompasses a wide range of historical events, sociopolitical figures, and cultural signifiers that are archetypically assembled to constitute Black collectivity or an Afrodiaspora culture over ethnic, linguistic, and national borders. I draw parallels to the concept of the cultural archive by Edward Said, who initially applied the term to the racist ideological framework of imperial Europe which had thoroughly fabricated its sense of self through "a particular knowledge and structure of attitude and reference" (Said 1993, 52). The concept of cultural archive may encapsulate the cultural and historical configurations of the collective blackened existence in Afro-diaspora. In contrast to Euro-American white cul-

tural archives – whose goal is to maintain the imperial racial economy for the conservation of its contemporary subjectivity – Black Cultural Memory is not as static. It must be understood as an open-ended cloud that treasures memories of shared and interconnected histories that may not be perfectly uniform – at times even contradictory or messy. Also, access is not automatically granted, or even a given for all people racialized as black. After all, people *choose* to embrace a Black politics, and with that a Black collective identity. Access to BCM thus takes a sensibility of some sort, a consciousness – a Black conscious – which may be triggered by an event, an encounter, passed down by upbringing or environment, or distributed by digital media technologies that have in recent years added a new dimension to the way cultural conceptualizations and modes of Black being are mediated (Wade 2017).

3 BCM, Black Consciousness, and Diaspora Literacy: Some Sorta Trinity

My notion of Black consciousness builds upon earlier explorations of Afrodiaspora and memory politics in and beyond digital media, such as that of Anna Everett (2009) who has captured the multifaceted persistence of an *African diaspora consciousness* on the Internet. Such a consciousness refers to the common spirit behind the various Black sociopolitical-cultural movements emerging from the 19th century onwards across the Western hemisphere and on the African continent (e.g. Pan-Africanism and its sub-movements such as the Rastafari movement, the Négritude movement, Black Power movement, etc.), having in common a critical comprehension of how the current sociopolitical and cultural system was built on an anti-Black white power structure that continuously inflicts upon Black people an (in)direct sense of sociopolitical-cultural inferiority. Anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko referred to that critical awareness with the term Black Consciousness, which he defined as an "attitude of mind and a way of life" (Biko 1981, 14). Rooted in a Pan-African ideology, Black consciousness enables Black people to use "that very concept (of blackness) to unite ourselves and to respond (to white supremacy) as a cohesive group" (Biko 1981, 19), whether or not such unification is largely built upon an imagined or symbolic sense of community (Anderson 2006). Lewis Gordon (2022) defines Black consciousness as the unsettling and "dangerous" power of Black people *looking back*, not only at history, but also at the gazing white order. This critical social-political-historical comprehension and contestation of what he calls "the choking contradictions of antiblack societies" (18–19) has logically become a source of uproar among (mostly) white cultural critics and politicians who as-

sociate Black youth's digital engagement and their Black consciousness with a polarizing "woke culture" (Pilkington 2021).

For an empirical inquiry we need a materialized expression of the enigmatic quality that is Black consciousness. Collette Chapman-Hillard (2013) developed a Scale of Black Consciousness (SBC) which examines Black people's cultural knowledge as a determining factor of Black consciousness. This method provides valuable information about which type of knowledge may sustain self-esteem, cultural knowledge, and collective identity among Black people. However, instead of demarcating what type of knowledge constitutes critical Black identities, I seek to broaden and complicate our understanding of Black cultural knowledge by looking at what different Black people find worth knowing and remembering rather than looking at *if* they know and remember what they supposedly should. So instead of capturing some type of authentic Black identity, I focus on Black people's "intersecting and intercrossing relationships and cultural intertextuality," also labeled Black Transnational Consciousness (Joseph 2017, 54), using VèVè A. Clark's concept of diaspora literacy (Clark 2009). Often but certainly not automatically accompanied with racial literacy (also see Adhikari-Sacré & Rutten2021), diaspora literacy was observed to recover among Black people self-knowledge and cultural memory (King 1992). Clark argues that a shared knowledge of historical, social, cultural, and political markers has created a body of Afro-diasporic (literary) signifiers that represent "mnemonic devices whose recall releases a learned tradition" (Clark 2009, 11). The skill was observed to be developed through a shared lived experience which allows Black people to "read" and *overstand* – to stick to the genre – across a variety of African and Afro-diasporic cultural texts (Busia 1989). For instance, *The Autobiography of Malcolm x*, *Black Skin White Masks*, or simply the names of Cheick Anta Diop, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Aimé Césaire and many others, become codes and portals to a deep reservoir of cultural knowledge, memory, and history. The way these "texts" are understood in my work, is broad. In practice, diaspora literacy can involve remembering the atrocities in the so-called Congo Free State through the history of lynching in the USA and vice versa. Diaspora literacy activates memories of transatlantic (and Arab) slavery through the trafficking of Sub-Saharan Africans in Libya and vice versa. Diaspora literacy entails remembering the minstrel shows through the *Zwarte Piet* tradition in Belgium and The Netherlands and vice versa. Diaspora literacy could also involve remembering the words of Bob Marley, Fela Kuti, or Lucky Dube through cases of state violence against Black people. For the same reason, the murder of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor evoked among many a strong sense of *déjà vu*, *déjà vécu*. In short, I understand Black consciousness as the sentiment of an

all-encompassing Black Cultural Memory, while diaspora literacy is, then, the materialization of such consciousness and the manifestation of Black Cultural Memory.

4 Black Cultural Memory in the Online-Offline Continuum

The Internet has granted Black people relatively easy access to historical and political information and continues to do so. The Internet also provides a vital space for connectivity, community building, and collective remembrance (Sobande, Fearfull, and Brownlie 2019). Despite the prevailing critique of e-activism, digital technologies have become such an integral part of our daily routines (not just that of Black people) that it is worth rethinking the boundary between the online world and the so-called "real" world which is the "offline" world. In fact, referring to the "offline" world as "real-life" minimizes if not ridicules the cultures, knowledges, political efforts, and affairs that take shape online and have very real implications on people's lives and sense of self. In a way, we have become "virtual-physical assemblages" (Wade 2017) that operate in an online-offline continuum. This is notably reflected in the way our digital actions and messages have proven to carry the potential to build community, seep into public debate and lead to effective social-political pressure or even change: #BlackLivesMatter (Clark 2015; Jackson 2016). To understand how BCM operates in the online-offline continuum, I draw on the work of André Brock Jr (2020) and his notion of Black cyberculture, which refers to the cultural productions of Black people online. It comprises "various digital artifacts, services, and practices both individually and in concert" (Brock 2020, 5) that reflect a broad Black collective culture that is as much shaped by people as by technology. Concretely, it is represented through online semiotic expressions related to being Black (food, music, aesthetics, politics, art, history, etc.) including performances of blackness and Black cultural phenomena with signifyin' language[1] and call-and-response communication (Brock 2012, 2020; Florini 2014).

Black cyberculture is on constant display on Social Networking Sites (SNS), where African Americans' substantial presence account for most of the trending content (Brock 2012, 2020; Florini 2014), exercising significant impact on popular culture and politics world-wide. The distribution of these situated cultural productions garnered critical attention in research about Black Europe

1 Generally known as an African American (vernacular) linguistic practice involving the indirect expression of ideas through culturally specific types of wordplay. See Brock, 2012, 2020 and Florini, 2014.

and the overall Afro-diaspora (Hine, Keaton, and Small 2009; Emejulu and Sobande, 2019). However, the widespread suspicion among white cultural critics regarding Black people's capability of critically navigating the here and there (in this case the "online" and "offline") is at odds with the essence of the diaspora experience, which has necessarily involved a proficiency in decoding and encoding cultural texts as a matter of plain survival (Tal, n. d.). When understanding digital blackness as "a discursive, informational identity, flitting back and forth in the virtual space between a Black communal context and a white supremacist categorial context" (Brock 2020, 23), we see that the flux identities inherent to the Afro-diaspora now involves negotiating a digital blackness (the discourses and information related to blackness retrieved online) with AFK-blackness –the blackness that people live and embody "Away-From-Keyboard" (Russell 2020) in the context of Europe and Belgium. Looking at such a process should at least to a certain degree consider the generation-shaping force that is digital technology. Although generations overlap, the rapid developments in digital technology and communication tools in recent decades has led to a generation (Generation Z or Gen-Z) growing up in a context where social media, constant connectivity, and on-demand entertainment are generally a given, rather than innovations to adapt to – as is the case for Millennials and older generations (Andersen et al., 2021). With these reflections in mind, I carefully consider how Black people's digital practices have given rise to a Black Cultural Memory framework in Belgium.

5 Methodology

Popular memory research related to blackness remain too often embedded in a Eurocentric (French-Halbwachsian) nationalistic framework of memory (Kansteiner 2002), which contradicts the notion of (Afro)diaspora as it reproduces simplistic ideologies of race and place (Gilroy 1993). Instead of inscribing Afro-diasporic memory practices and discourse into dominant memory frameworks, in this article, I follow Temple's approach by centering Black people's practices of re-membering the past, present, and future. Concretely, I analyze the practices and discourses of three initiatives that strongly engage with the notion of blackness, Afro-diaspora, and cultural legacy. They are Belgian Renaissance (BR), New Awoken African Generation (NAAG), and #BLMbelgium (BLM5), each representing a different wave of Black consciousness in Belgium throughout the past decade. The first is a manifestation of the earliest wave of Black (antiracist) youth voices in Dutch-speaking Belgium in the early 2010s. The second represents the emergence of a Black conscious "woke culture" in

Belgium in times of intense digital connectivity in the mid-2010s. The third reflects the uprising of a new conscious generation (Gen-Z) in the wake of #BlackLivesMatter in 2020.

The study is embedded in a larger research project related to Black identity, media, and memory practices in Belgium for which I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews (N=29). This article is informed by that data, although largely focuses on the data derived from the interviews (N=4) with founding-members of the initiatives centered in this article, which specifically focused on the inception of the initiatives, their motivations and goals, and their reflections on the debates taking place in their community. I conducted group-interviews with two administrators of NAAG, among which a co-founder. I also discuss some of some of the group's content and the discussions that have taken place. In addition, I interviewed three out of five members of BLM5. These interviews centered around what it means to be Black in Belgium and how such identity relates to Black activism, media engagement, BLM, and global Black history. As for BR, I conducted individual interviews with two of its founding members and further rely on a discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) of their mission statement. I looked for codes, cues, and signifiers related to blackness and Afro-diaspora culture, and guided myself throughout my analysis with the following questions:

1. Which meanings and characteristics are attached to contemporary Black life in Belgium?
2. How is Black life in Belgium understood as part of a wider Black collective or Afro-diaspora culture?
3. Which memory practices (derived from Black cultural mythology) are thereby used/relied on?
4. Where do such practices take place (online or AFK)?
5. How do these realms (online – AFK) relate to each other in their practice?

In the next sections I will discuss some of the findings as I present and outline the media and memory practices of the three initiatives.

6 Findings and Discussion

Black people in Belgium have long identified and organized primarily along the lines of national heritage. With the apparent absence of strong multi-ethnic, post-national Afro-diasporic subcultures, such as a Rastafari community, there seemed to be little mobilization that aimed to connect Black people in Belgium to a global Afro-diaspora. In the 1990s, there appeared to be a "progressive emergence of a certain elite trying to constitute a 'community

consciousness' oriented toward collective action" among different (nationality-based) African associations (Grégoire 2010, 180). Some of the most prominent examples are The Council of African Communities in Belgium and in Europe (Conseil des Communautés Africaines en Belgique et en Europe / Raad van de Afrikaanse gemeenschappen in Belgie en Europa – CCABE/RAGBE), Platform of African communities (Platform van Afrikaanse Gemeenschappen – PAG), and the Federation of Anglophone Africans in Belgium (FAAB). Their goal was to foster "legitimate" representatives of Black Africans for public policy makers in Belgium. However, in so doing, they evaded the term "Black" in favor of "sub-Saharan African" as a marker of commonality in their public discourse, hence adopting the appropriate institutional language of identity and origin without speaking of race, and ultimately without explicitly tapping into a global Afro-diasporic and Black consciousness movement. This has shifted, at least in Dutch-speaking Belgium, with the launch of Belgian Renaissance, which appears to be the first movement to explicitly inscribe into a global Afro-diaspora community for the sake of an explicit Black cultural empowerment, and continued to be a common premise in the years following with the establishment of the New Awoken African Generation, and the rise of #BLMbelgium.

7 Belgian Renaissance and the Making of an Afro-diaspora in Belgium

Belgian Renaissance (2014–2017) was founded by students Adinda Vanderzande (21),[2] Mathieu Charles (27), and Melat G. Nigussie (22). In their mission statement they make use of different signifiers to describe their target audience and concerns.[3] It starts as follows:

> We no longer live in a homogeneous society, but have evolved into a complex, multi-ethnic society. Young people of Congolese, Rwandan, and Ghanaian descent are part of the Belgian population. As a collective we

2 Indian adoptee Adinda Vanderzande, initiator of Belgian Renaissance, has been an important figure in conversations in Dutch-speaking Belgium surrounding Afro-diaspora culture and the Black Atlantic. Her pioneering thought may have been influenced by her studies in Amsterdam and her involvement in the Surinamese-led student movement *New Urban Collective* (currently known for their establishment of The Black Archives). Her engagement in Black activism was, however, met with criticism in recent years due to her south Asian (and thus not "Black"/African) heritage.

3 This observation was initially made by Sibo Kanobana in the context of our collaborative paper presentation on "the languages of blackness in Belgium" (10 December 2022, VUB, Brussels).

> want to give a voice to the African diaspora youth in Belgium. When we say African diaspora, we are not just limiting ourselves to the sub-Saharan region, but we are taking it very broadly: young people of the first, second and third generation migrants, adopted children, people with black Atlantic roots and/or a black identity and children born of mixed couples are all included.
>
> CHARLES, NIGUSSIE, and VANDERZANDE 2014

Throughout the text of about 600 words the term *Zwart* (Black) is used eleven times, each time referring to a specific kind of identity (e.g. Rwandan, Ghanaian, Black-Mixed people, Black adoptee, and people with Sub-Saharan African descent) that received little acknowledgement in a context where the notion of blackness is tailormade on the continuous colonial structure that had made every Black person in Belgium Congolese and Francophone in the white gaze. Though, BR mentions *Zwart* only once without any other signifier, namely when referring to where the name Belgian Renaissance comes from – reflecting the various Black voices and initiatives that popped up in Belgium at the time – and how the Harlem Renaissance contributed to a Black consciousness in the USA. The hyphenated use of the term Black outside US-contexts may signify how blackness is indeed a much more natural or clearly demarcated notion in the US-American cultural context, confirming the widespread critique in Europe that blackness is essentially an American thing. Yet, BR clearly attempts to counter that idea. *Zwart* is in all other instances accompanied by "African", possibly in an attempt to stress the particular racialization of Africans from below the Sahara as Black, unlike most people from the Maghreb regions of Africa. Moreover, *Zwart* is accompanied twice by "Atlantic", which clearly refers to the seminal book *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1995) in which Paul Gilroy describes a culture that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but all of these at once: a Black Atlantic culture whose themes and techniques transcend ethnicity and nationality to produce something new and, until then, unremarked. BR follows this tradition by inscribing into a larger cultural network of Afro-diaspora using Black Cultural Memory.

7.1 *Social Media for Community Building and Archiving Retold Stories*

BR's core work entailed organizing cultural events for and by Black people in Belgium, surrounding themes of art, literature, and critical race theory. Essential to their work are media, and particularly content-sharing sites such as Facebook and Tumblr. They launched their first call on Facebook which gathered a small hub of people who were grappling with similar questions surrounding

their Black cultural heritage and ultimately helped carrying out the Belgian Renaissance movement and mission over the next couple of years. On their Facebook page they shared and gathered information related to blackness in and beyond Belgium, posted calls, and launched AFK events. These events generally included an intellectual exercise, honoring and acknowledging cultural figures, most notably Audre Lorde. The topic of their most successful event "A woman speaks: Audre Lorde | Uses of archive and transnational feminism" (17 November 2017) clearly reflects a diaspora literacy: Audre Lorde's travels and work in Europe, and particularly Germany, shows that Black women's struggle is not confined to one place and benefits from transnational solidarities. At the core of such solidarity lies the exercise of *overstanding* our own sociopolitical conditioning and struggle by re-searching another's. Retelling our collective herstories then form alternative archives, both material and symbolic, surrounding our collective past and present. In line with that, BR's continuous and successful inclusion of not only a diverse range of younger and older speakers, but oftentimes a Dutch-speaking, French-speaking, and international guest, reflects a clear investment in actively constituting an Afro-diaspora over Belgium's (sub)national borders, inscribing into a global Black community and with that, setting the foundation of a BCM framework in Belgium, which encompasses the lived experiences, memories, ad cultural references of different Black populations.

Their vision and achievements are archived on their Tumblr page where they posted pictures of their social gatherings, organization meetings, and creative explorations in the form of drawings, photoshoots, and snippets of press interactions (see figure 6). Here, too, we see how different cultural contexts are tied together, drawing explicit links between injustices and actions of contestation surrounding anti-Black depictions and caricatures in Belgium (Zwarte Piet/Black Pete – top left) and injustices and revolutions elsewhere (in the U.S.[4] – bottom left). What is happening "here", is thus understood through memories of what has happened elsewhere, filtered through a present-day sociopolitical and cultural consciousness.

Overall, BR's popularity and success reflect an omnipresence of Black consciousness among Black youth in Belgium. The organization has showed that there was indeed a strong interest and investment in Afro-diaspora culture, but simply no common infrastructure for connection and mobilization, which long

4 The image of soul singer and activist Aretha Franklin touched up by Tom de Moor with a markup balloon saying "The Belgian Renaissance is coming" draws immediate links between the civil rights movement in the U.S.A. and the rise of a Black movements in Belgium under Belgian Renaissance.

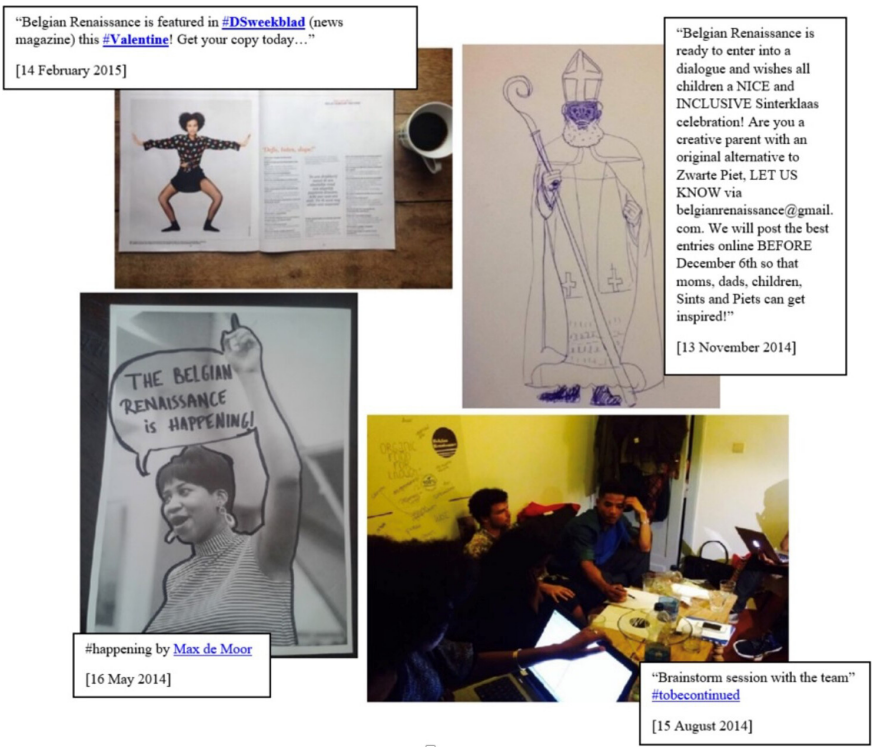

FIGURE 1 A collection of BR's Tumblr content
IMAGES AND TEXT RETRIEVED FROM HTTPS://BELGIANRENAISSANCE.TUMBLR.COM ON 3 MARCH 2022

withheld the formation of an actual Afro-diasporic community in Belgium. By creating visibility online, Belgian Renaissance materialized a much-needed connection both online and AFK, showing how the two are necessary and intertwined.

8 The New Awoken African Generation of Belgium

In May 2020, the Flemish public broadcaster VRT launched a two-part documentary about the Cushitic Empire, where "powerful black Pharaos swept the plaque", titled *Lost kingdom of the black pharaos*. Despite ongoing academic debate over Egypt's "Black" African character (see Boter and Flinterman 2016; Hira and Ankh-Kheru 2016) representations of a Black Ancient Egypt and surrounding regions were now mainstreamed on national television, and ultimately shared in a Facebook group dedicated to "bringing sub-Saharan

Africans and Africans outside Africa closer together". Deliberately so: the group in question, *New Awoken African Generation* (NAAG), has been an important site for Black people's reimagining and uncovering of histories of pre-colonial Africa, including that of ancient Egypt and Nubia, using them as a source for Black pride.

NAAG was launched in December 2016 by two Antwerp-based women of Congolese descent. Bitshilualua Kabeya (20) and Nuria Familia (23) withdrew from an all-Congolese Facebook group to create a more open "African" group, focusing on exchange and empowerment among "the children of" a generation that appears to lag in that endeavor. Kabeya and Familia had a clear intention of moving beyond national and ethnic identities in order to create a "new" sense of community based on a Pan-Africa notion of belonging that is post-ethnic and arguably Black. As a result, the group grew into the first and largest Black Facebook group of Dutch-speaking Belgium.

I approach NAAG, not as a secluded generation (as its name indicates), but a *wave* of Black consciousness in Belgium that is characterized by self-discovery (sociocultural and political awakening) in times of intense digital and cultural engagement. In this article, I identify two of its BCM registers: one relates to Black connectivity (i.e., post-ethnic, Pan-African discourse) and the other to the so-called Hotep discourse (see further).

8.1 *Black Connectivity*

In the early stage of its existence, NAAG was a space for discussion where Black people from all walks of life could share their experiences of being Black in Dutch-speaking Belgium and – as the group increasingly attracted a Dutch audience – The Netherlands. The unexpected growth of the group was, according to one of its current administrators, Ismael (30), the result of a prevalent "hunger for information" among Black people in the Low Countries. Conversations centered around finding commonalities and historical continuities between Black populations in the past and present. This happened, for instance, by ways of sharing images and information about African heroes (e.g., Queen Nzinga Mbande of Angola), political figures (e.g., Patrice Lumumba, Steve Biko, Kwame Nkrumah), historical villains (e.g., Leopold II), and inspirational quotes (ranging from Akan or Somali proverbs to quotes by Malcolm X). These type of conversations and posts carried a strong *mythological structure*, as Temple (2020) would put it, meaning that they are in fact memory practices that seek to build a sense of pride, confidence, and self-esteem around being Black. However, these efforts also led to discursive clashes among members, as there was no uniform experience, vision, or even memory of what it means and has meant to be Black. For instance, questions related to who belongs to

the Awoken African generation (e.g., non-Black Africans, Black-mixed people, Afro-Caribbeans) led to heated debates and occasional conflict. Also, members from Belgium seemed to primarily seek consolidation over their everyday experiences with racism, while members from the Netherlands appeared to be more occupied with building Black businesses and generating economic stability among Black communities. Thus, NAAG facilitated daily debates covering a wide range of topics and interests, ever expanding the set of cultural signifiers and sociohistorical and political frameworks of reference related to the Black experience in and beyond Belgium.

8.2 *What in the Hotep Hell Is This?*[5]

NAAG's impact on Black people's sense of blackness should not be underestimated: many Black millennials in Belgium who lived through the era where Facebook dominated the social media landscape have at least some memory of the group, albeit not always for the right reasons. When inquiring about (previous) go-to virtual hangouts in the context of my doctoral research about Black people's media practices, one of my research participants recalls:

> The new woke, African … something. Oh my god, that group was so fucking annoying. Everyday a Hotep was preaching some weird shit. It's just a double-edged sword (being in Facebook groups), because on the one hand I thought: oh great, sisterhood and all that. And on the other hand, I'm like: oh no, what discussions are we gonna have today? Make it stop! [laughs]. So, I always had a love-hate relationship with those groups.

Hotep – a term originally used as a greeting in ancient Egypt (Amen 1990) – has over the past decade become the ultimate trope in Black popular culture for faux woke-culture, often set aside as "a clueless parody of Afrocentricity" (Young 2016). The term is generally used to mock a philosophy and aesthetics (popularized by but not limited to the Nuwaubian movement[6]) that builds upon legacies of precolonial African empires – most notably Ancient Egypt, or Kemet – as a source of Black pride. Kabeya states:

5 "What in the Hotep hell is this?" comes from a tweet by American social worker and Black feminist Michelle Taylor, known professionally as Feminista Jones, in which she responded to a mention about her "Nubian glo" (6 September 2015).

6 The United Nuwaubian Nation (one of its many names) is an African American religious movement founded in and led by Dwight "Malachi Z" York in the 1980's and 90's. Starting out as a Black pseudo-Islamic group, the movement developed into an Afrocentric ancient Egyptian themed fraternal order, mixing and incorporating ideas derived from Black nationalism, Pan-Africanism, Egyptian neopaganism (Kemetism), Gnosticism, UFO religions, New Age, and more (Palmer 2021; 2016).

> They were very interested in everything that has to do with Egypt and pyramids … so according to them Africa begins in Egypt. And they were all guys, too. There weren't many girls who came up with that topic. I also noticed that those guys provided really weak sources for their statements. (…) They arrived (in the group) when people with stronger sources and more social topics stopped discussing. I call them – what do you call those again? The Hoteps!

Images of Ancient Egyptian gods and symbols regularly circulated in the group, leading to discussions about the significance of this ancient knowledge system for present-day Black subjectivities. At the same time, the caricature of the Hotep appears to reflect a much older identified pattern among pro-Black men, involving a patriarchal bias vis-à-vis vis Black women, the darker hued in particular (Wallace 1999). It appears as though Black women remain passive objects (although "Queens") in a liberated Black past and future for Black cis-hetero men. Indeed, as debates became more sensational and provocative in nature, NAAG's reputation rapidly shifted from being a relatively safe space where people could discuss what being Black *could* entail to an infrastructure for people who sought to demarcate what being Black *should* (or should not) entail. An image of a young Black boy around the age of five wearing a full face of make-up was posted in the group accompanied by a text saying: "If you think this is acceptable for a boy … This Ain't the page for You". The post provoked a trail of 114 comments, ranging from statements about child abuse, and homosexuality being taught and "un-African", to questions interrogating the causality of wearing make-up and being gay, and the heteronormative limits of woke culture and Black liberation. While some members understood the image as an attack on masculinity, others started to draw parallels between the rise of so-called "Hoteps" and the increasing (hetero)sexist and misogynoirist sentiment in the group.

Although the trope of the Hotep requires a lot more inquiry, in this article I identify the worldview and discourses of so-called Hoteps as one of the many registers that exist within and have shaped BCM. Despite negative connotations (e.g., dogmatisms, heteropatriarchy, essentialism), it has introduced new codes, cues, and signifiers to a Black collective consciousness, which continue to be used and recognized cross-culturally as powerful symbols of a Black conscious overstanding of the past, present, and future. The most notable one is the symbol of the Ankh, which is now widely used as a symbol of Black African cultural identity, proudly worn by many – whether or not they live by a "Hotep" worldview.

8.3 *Policing BCM in the Online-Offline Continuum*

Nia Roberts has pointed out how critical debate surrounding so-called Hoteps "have began (sic) to appear in mainstream media, where discussions of the origins and implications of the word are now being negotiated offline" (N. Roberts 2021, 8). In Belgium, similar discussions arose when Belgo-Congolese Anthropologist Bambi Ceuppens expressed her concern about the messages she sees on social media from "young people of African origin" in an interview for a Flemish newspaper, clearly fearing racist rhetoric, including discourses of purity, to be reproduced among Black youth (De Ceulaer 2018).

Various measures were taken by the NAAG administration to detach itself from its Hotep reputation. This included the recruitment of administrators as well as monitoring posts, member-flow, comments, and topics by setting protocols, reviewing posts and member profiles, disabling comments, limiting topics to a certain day of the week, and more. As a result, the group became far less active. Also, these measures were met with criticism from members who exclaimed that they were being silenced and that administrators only gave space to "highly educated people and people who appear in the media" (Kabeya). To avoid reproducing gatekeeping mechanisms of mainstream media and public debate in a group that was supposed to be for all Black people, the NAAG team attempted to sustain healthy relationships among members by organizing AFK get-togethers and activities. The goal was to facilitate "real-life" community-building and bring conversations about blackness back to the supposed here-and-now. Today, the group has significantly decreased in members and traffic. This is in line with the growing popularity of other social media platforms, leaving Facebook behind as it competes with upcoming SNS that have transformed according to user behavior changes in the mobile age (Hou and Shiau 2019). NAAG currently serves as a marketplace where Black people share calls, vacancies, and promote their personal work and AFK endeavors. The group's life cycle illustrates how the way people relate to a collective Black experience is in itself not uniform, and that a common experience with anti-Black racism is accompanied by a variety of paradigms and frameworks of cultural remembrance that at times overlap, but can also contradict and strongly oppose one another – potentially leading to new and fractionated notions of cultural belonging and collectivity.

9 #BLMbelgium and the New Black Conscious Generation

Finally, BLM5 (launched as #BLMbelgium) refers to the remaining young women behind the first public call for a BLM-solidarity protest in Belgium.[7] They are Aledis (19, Ghanaian-Nigerian), Ana-Maria (19, Colombian), Deborah (19, Senegalese-Rwandan), and Feliciana (19, Angolan). Amina (22, Burundi) joined the group at a later stage and brought the women in touch with established Black activist organizations Black Speaks Back and Black History Month Belgium, ultimately leading to the second largest national anti-racism protest action in Belgian history.[8] BLM5's different and mixed ethnic backgrounds appear to necessarily lead to a creolized (not creole[9]) collective identity with an Afro-diasporic premise within which identities that are alien to or inexistent in Belgium's colonial racial imaginary unite. Here, too, we see that Afro-diasporic identities reinforce the unification and mobilization under the unifying marker that is blackness. It is, however, not until the murder of Floyd that BLM5 and many of their peers started to overtly engage in Black activism. The tragedy of Floyd's death clearly awakened a new wave of Black consciousness among Black people and subsequently became in itself a major signifier in BCM: Floyd's murder evoked a sense of urgency among these women to rise

7 It started with a call for a protest action in Belgium on Twitter by a young Black man called Rinda and accumulated into a WhatsApp group with over 200 young people of different racial backgrounds out of which four young Black women pulled through by initiating a national BLM protest in Belgium.

8 This connection led to the formation of a short-lived umbrella organization, the multilingual Black queer women-led Belgian Network for Black Lives (BN4BL), that would play a core role in the organization of the national BLM protest action in Brussels on the 7th of June next to the Francophone Change asbl.

9 Some scholars argue that creole identities or creolization are in fact a rejection of Africa and blackness (Andrews, 2018). It is true that so-called creole communities from across the Americas have structurally detached themselves from other Black peoples (e.g., African American "negroes", maroons, and Africans with direct ancestry on the African continent) by ways of internalized anti-Black sentiments. For example: due to prevailing negative associations attached to blackness and Africaness, Surinamese and Antillean "creoles" in the Netherlands were long hesitant to identify with these qualities to the extent that references to Ghanaians, Nigerians, and other Black Africans as "Bokoes" (a Surinamese curse word carryings connotations of backwardness, wildness, dirtiness, and ugliness) were omnipresent. This has shifted in the past two decades, when African cultural productions, especially in the music and fashion industry, became increasingly popular in mainstream culture (See Scarabello and De Witte 2019). So, in order to use the term creolization critically, I distinguish 'being creole' from 'creolization.' Whereas creole may refer to a specific people, food, and languages, I understand creolization as a process of sociocultural reinvention in a context of (post-)colonial struggle.

up and contest the sometimes intangible spirit of anti-Black racism in their own context, despite the fact that Black activism in Belgium, especially in the wake of Black Lives Matter, is at once criticized and exoticized for its alleged otherness. Flemish journalist Lieven Verstraete, for instance, reported on the BLM demonstrations in Belgium expressing his concern about a "radicalization among young Afro-Flemings" (VRT 2020). While at the same time, young people (increasingly referred to as a generation largely overlapping the characteristics of Generation Z) hold a superhero-like status in Belgian mainstream media and beyond for their courage and will-power to change the world (Torbeyns and Woussen 2020; Luttrell and McGrath 2021; Raby and Sheppard 2021). Such praises (although generally reserved for white youth) tends to leave the work and legacy of the older "generation" activists invisibilized and bypassed, especially given the fact that the #BLMbelgium group was initially ignorant about the various types of anti-racist work that already existed in Belgium. This "generational" schism illustrates how BCM is scattered in Belgium and cannot yet rely on durable forms of transmission.

9.1 *The Wake of Slavery*

As many Black people in Belgium still grow up relatively secluded from each other, experiences of "being the only one" (Aledis) and growing up in "a very white environment" (Deborah) are recurring among BLM5 and the vast majority of my research participants. For many, and for BLM5 in particular, the Internet has unintentionally served as a site of refuge, a safe(r) space where AFK experiences with racism and racialized sexism are balanced out with an empowering Black cyberculture and an increasingly politicized fandom culture, particularly on Twitter, Instagram, and Tiktok (Lee and Moon 2021; Peterson-Salahuddin 2022).

BLM5's engagement with Black cyberculture has led to a broad understanding of cultural signifiers and texts (diaspora literacy) which is well reflected in their ability to make links between various injustices across time and space. Most notably, their experiences in blackness were said to be understood as a historical continuity of Black subordination in "the Wake" of slavery (see Sharpe 2016). They are not strictly confined to notions of race and blackness as constituted by Belgium's colonial past. For instance, Aledis explains how slavery is still apparent in the subordinated status of Sub-Saharan African housekeepers in Dubai who are structurally deprived of basic human rights. Amina remarks that, although her direct ancestors did not suffer slavery, "slavery effects the whole world. Our entire system comes from slavery … capitalism, industrialization, fat phobia … (…) Gen-Z understands that, and so we are more into activism as opposed to our parents. We get shit done". Clearly,

experiences in blackness take shape beyond personal histories, cultures, and memories. Meanwhile, the role and methods of Gen-Z in Black activism is imagined as unique and almost secluded from the legacy of former generations and movements ("we get shit done"), both by the youth in question as by society at large according to popular discourse on youth movements. So, although there is a clear spirit of resistance and survival, there is an apparent absence of what Temple classifies as *sacrificial inheritance* and *ancestor acknowledgement*. This means that the work of former generations and movements may be minimized or deemed inessential to the lives and achievements of younger generations. Additionally, the neoliberal character of SNS and its rapid information flow continues to further transform digital platforms into an infrastructure where important historical markers and figures are beginning to circulate as brands or assets. As a result, in-depth discussion, critical inquiry, and intellectual assembly are far less apparent in the collective and personal activities of BLM5, which contrasts the premise of earlier movements like Belgian Renaissance and NAAG.

9.2 *Black Consciousness through Language and Activism*

Gen-Z has called for new approaches to learning, remembering, and belonging, informed by the integration of the Internet and digital technology in our everyday routines over the past decades (Seemiller and Grace 2017). During my conversation with BLM5, this became apparent in two ways: 1) their use of language and 2) their approach to activism.

Despite all being Dutch-speakers, we switched back and forth between Dutch to English throughout our discussion. When I pointed this out, Aledis situated such code-switching at the core of her Black identity. Not only as a Ghanaian-Nigerian whose cultural heritage is influenced by an Anglophone colonial pedagogy, but as a Black person in a predominantly white society where English offers a cultural register that Black people, as opposed to white people, "just get". She experiences such moments of mutual recognition to spark joy and nostalgia. For Black people in Dutch-speaking Belgium with ancestry in Francophone Africa, the French language similarly fulfills the cultural purpose of performing blackness or Africanity. However, the inexistence of "race" in the francophone constitution has omitted such language to fulfill besides a cultural purpose, a political one. In line with that, Amina points to the richness of the English vocabulary to speak about blackness and race in relatively nuanced ways. Deborah sees English as the language of the Internet and digital community. When she says that she was "literally raised with and by the Internet," she was not wrong: Just like Gen-Z, the Internet was born in 1995, which makes BLM5 part of a generation that is largely shaped by rapid techno-

logical developments, cyberspace, and an increasing visual culture (Seemiller and Grace 2017).

Then, when observing BLM5 and other young people's approach to Black activism, I noticed how that primarily involves punchy visual content that aims to sensitize, inform, and spread awareness, and does not necessarily lead to mobilizing AFK, beyond the BLM uprising in the spring of 2020. Visual culture has provided tools to visibilize Black people's joy, achievements, and cultural legacies, hence operate as a site for *aesthetic memorialization*, which centers around the use of visual art and narratives as tools to promote and recycle key heritage markers (Temple 2020).

Although activism encompasses a much wider range of activities than mass manifestations, the use of the Internet as a core element of one's activism is still often associated with slacktivism and performativity (Roberts 2021). Yet, Black cyberculture, including digital activisms, can be critical sites where counterculture and subversive memory work operate, and shape Black people's (individual or collective) AFK lives.

10 Concluding Thoughts

The memory and media practices and discourses of three Black consciousness movements in Belgium illustrate that Black Cultural Memory involves an intertextual overstanding of Black being and Black cultural legacy. Contrary to common white critique, this involves a continuous negotiation of Black identity and Afro-diaspora culture, leading to a diverse range of BCM registers and references. This is well reflected in the divergent memory practices of the inquired initiatives. Belgian renaissance's memory practices have involved seeking commonality and redefining Black identities in Belgium which involved incorporating a Black Atlantic cultural framework including a broad range of Afro-diaspora signifiers and histories that have transgressed a blackness constructed by Belgian colonial history and ideology. New Awoken African Generation has sought to create a space where such cultural signifiers and histories can be exchanged and celebrated in real time, thereby witnessing a fractionation in the previously assumed commonality which has laid bare the diversity of BCM. As digital natives, the members of BLM5 embody an almost naturally creolized Afro-diaspora identity, drawing from a global (although occasionally USA-centered) Black cybercultures to navigate everyday Black life in Belgium.

The inception of Internet culture and an increasingly prominent Black cyberculture has broadened and complicated notions of blackness (Brock 2020; Everett 2009). In effect, BCM and Afro-diaspora culture has been (re)-

formed and expanded. Moreover, rapid digital developments over the past decades have strongly reconfigured our relation to the Internet, evoking new understandings of Black connectivity, commonality, and collectivity, especially among generations who were raised with and "by" the Internet. Although some young people's notion of Black activism is primarily a digital affair, it is only fair that we start looking at how people's online and AFK life relate to each other in nuanced ways, especially amid a global pandemic (amidst which the global BLM uprisings emerged) that had left most of the world's population in lockdown and strongly dependent on digital communication. In so doing, we avoid adopting the overall sentiment regarding (amongst other movements) BLM as covered attempts to discredit efforts aimed at fighting structural anti-Black racism, as if "younger generations experience and recognize anti-Black bigotry uniquely due to their concentrated use of social media" (Horde 2017, 19). After all, not every Black person becomes "woke" by entering the Web, which shows that critical Black identities and BCM are not an automatic outcome of digital engagement. The agentive and intentional character of Black consciousness remains an essential ingredient for BCM and Black cultural memory practices. Also, the platforms in use – and how the use of platforms diverges among movements and generations – appear to reveal somewhat of a variety in discourses and BCM paradigms. Further research may want to focus more specifically on how different platforms shape people's experience in blackness and of BCM, and how Black people's (digital) memory work (such as Black activism) influences hegemonic cultural memory in concrete ways.

In this article I have illustrated that BCM carries immense potential for (transnational) solidarities that enact powerful Black identities, but it also serves collective and individual healing and joy in a context where these are structurally denied by hegemonic cultural memory and mainstream historical narratives. It is important, however, to keep in mind that, apart from the three initiatives mentioned in this article, many have individually, or collectively archived ideas and memories related to Black being. From Paul Panda Farnana to Black History Month Belgium, Black people have since their presence built on and worked towards a Black Cultural Memory framework in Belgium.

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