# Audio file

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# Transcript

NJ

Welcome everybody to the next edition of our Researcher in Focus podcast from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences here at the university. My name is Nick Jones. I'm part of the Research and Impact team here at the faculty, and today I'm joined by Doctor Sarah Arens, Lecturer in French and the Department of Languages, Cultures and Film. Today we'll be hearing more about Sarah's wide research interests. including the histories, texts and the visual cultures produced during and in the aftermath of Belgian and French Colonialism. So first of all, Sarah, thank you so much for joining me today. And I wonder if by way of a quick introduction, you could just give us a rundown of your academic background and career so far and what brought you to the university?

SA

Yeah. Well, hi there and thank you so much for the invitation. So I joined Liverpool in August 2021 and I arrived here with and halfway through A British Academy Postdoc Fellowship that I had started at Saint Andrews in 2019 and, it's over now and it's off this month. I'm I'm a lecturer in French here, and before that I had held a string of short-term, precariously employed research and or teaching positions at Saint Andrews, Glasgow, Edinburgh. So like an almost complete tour of Scottish universities. I also did my PhD at Edinburgh and and I finished it there in 2017 and I also worked at Bristol and Yale before. And yeah, now I'm uh, I'm in. I'm at Liverpool.

NJ

How are you settling in, are you liking it?

SA

It here? Oh, yeah. No, it's great. It's I think I said that in my in my blog. It's certainly a bit of a peculiar experience to start a new job during a global pandemic. So I my interview was online and I started the job remotely. And so I'm I'm very keen to still I'm still like, even though I'm almost two years into this job, I'm still meeting lots of people I haven't met since I've started and and. But yeah, so far it's it's been really great. I'm I feel very grateful and lucky to be in, to be in the Department of Languages Cultures and film and. And within the bigger school, and also to be in a school structure with other subjects such as History and Politics. And I feel like it's it's a really dynamic environment and so far everyone I've met has been really nice to me. It's been great. Also also also students are brilliant. I haven't taught that much yet, but I have done some undergrad and postgrad teaching and that's been entirely positive so far as well.

NJ

Oh, brilliant. Well, I'm glad it's going well so far, and you're absolutely starting a new career during the pandemic must have been quite an unusual experience. I know quite a lot of people who didn't meet their colleagues for what felt like ages, when we all went from them so, well done for getting through that. And in terms of the interests of your research, how did you come to focus on those particular areas of colonial studies? Was there any particular academics or projects or papers or events that help shape your interests.

SA

And so, in all honesty, I didn't really know very much about Belgium before I started my PhD, and it's in my case it was more like the topic found me than the other way around. So i initially wanted to look at Paris and Frankfurt and postcolonial writing and and rarely thought about Brussels, which I ended up writing about. But so I wanted to write about Paris, and I was I was still, I was based in Germany at that time because I did my first degree there and I was, but I wanted to come back to the UK for my PhD where so before I'd spent time as an Erasmus student at York and I really enjoyed academia, even though it might sound a bit crazy to some people. But if you have been through the German academic system, that might might sound familiar to some, and anyway, so I I needed a scholarship. And at the time. AHC funding did not cover living expenses for EU students, so I needed I needed one that paid the full right and Edinburgh had one for francophone Belgian culture. So they said to me, oh, you should consider, you know, maybe writing something comparative. And then you could apply for this scholarship, which I did. And I was lucky enough to get the scholarship. And it turned out I found so much material that I just ended up focusing on Belgium and and this is really how this has come about. So there wasn't really any, any influential papers or projects or academics to start with. It was really. Uh. Having to find funding and kind of tweaking my research to fit it, but then luckily enough, it turned out to be really interesting and also turned out to be far less researched than France and the long term impact of the French, of the French colonial empire.

NJ

OK, so quite, although it might have stemmed from quite a pragmatic reasoning, it ended up being serendipitously, quite a rich topic you’d discovered?

SA

Yeah, and I I was really surprised how little had been had been done on that topic. There's really just a handful of historians and literary scholars in the UK, but also beyond the UK in Belgium itself and on the continent. Who actually work on this and, which at times is a bit frustrating. Most of the time is actually quite interesting as I get to do a lot of a lot of the basic research in some ways, but then yeah, it's it's a very different experience from from what I've done before where I worked on stuff that was very well researched where I just had to find my little niche that I could fit myself in, whereas now it's. Very different.

NJ

Fabulous. I mean, I like the phrase Belgium found you as if it's it's colonialism is still not quite finished. It's still going out and you know, making claims to people. So what is, I know what you've said, that there's not really that much research existing about it. But what is different about Belgium? What's different about their Colonial aspirations or activities and trials so far.

SA

So I think in terms of how Belgian colonialism differs from other European imperial projects is and so Belgium has only been an independent country since 1830. So by the time that the British and the French colonial empires had existed for quite a while, had been kind of through their first iteration. And Leopold the First, that's the was the first king of an independent Belgium. He already had imperial aspirations and Belgium had some very short-lived colonial experiences in Latin America. Which didn't didn't work out very well. And but there was definitely this, this sense of urgency to create a nation, a cohesive nation, that's to this date doesn't really want to be a cohesive state. So we still have these political tensions between the Flemish speaking, North Flanders and the French speaking South of Belgium and. Leopolde the First, but then also, suddenly Leopold the Second. They. At least that's what what I'm arguing and what other people have argued is that if you want to be taken seriously as an imperial nation within Europe, amongst all these other far more established colonial powers, then if you want this empire, you have to identify as Belgian and not as Walloon or as Flemish. So this colonial project also became a nation building project. For this, this young state in the middle of it all. And however, there is quite a lot of or there there is a sense that there are a lot of stereotypes about Belgium in colonial historiographies so because they were a bit late to the imperial game that they were often seen as kind of trying to catch up with the other far, far longer established colonial powers. But when we actually look at what's happening, especially since the infamous Berlin conference, the the, you know, the very famous scramble for Africa where the European powers divided the quote, unquote, divided up Africa amongst them. When we look at that, so from the late 19th century up to the up to 1960s up to the point and 1962, so the the years in which what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rhonda and Burundi become independent. So Belgium's relatively short-lived presence in Africa. But when we actually look at what they've done, they didn't seem to be catching up that much. And that's, but maybe we can talk about this a little bit later when I'm talking a little bit about my current research project. But that's what I always that was what first drew me in was there seems to be a bit of a discrepancy between how we how colonial are historians of colonial Europe perceive Belgium and what actually happened on the ground and same with that like a lot of research focuses solely on Leopold the Second and the atrocities that were committed in the so-called Congo Free State. So the first while the Congo was his private property from up until 1908 and and that then another myth being that then when the Belgian state took over the administration of this colony and renamed it the Belgian Congo, that it would become some sort of model colony, which is definitely a very persistent myth in Belgian colonial historiography. But when we actually look at what happened, so yes, perhaps some of the really atrocious violence stops happening, but the systems all remain the same. The systems of governance, the systems of power, they all remain the same. So I that was always something that I found particularly interesting about Belgian colonialism and then also a lot of thankful post-colonial studies ignores the fact that Belgium was also branched from colonial empire and plays a not insignificant role as to why French is still so widely spoken throughout the world. However, the theoretical frameworks that are used in Franco postcolonial studies solely focus on the ideologies and the aftermath of the French colonial empire, but not of the Belgian, which was fundamentally different.

NJ

OK. I mean in there you touch on a little bit, this is obviously not my area of expertise, but you do touch touch a little bit on how it was Leopold, the Second’s own private property almost, was that unusual in those times, for a ruler to see it as rather than being an extension of an empire which is perhaps bigger than themselves, for which they are figurehead and instead see it as something which they personally own. Was that something that he was unique in doing?

SA

In some ways, yes, and I think has has more to do and this is another crucial difference between the French and the French Empire and the French colonial empire and the Belgian colonial empire and its aftermath to this day. So Leopold the Second was the absolute ruler of the so-called Congo Free State. He never set foot there, but he ruled it as his private property, and only in 1908 it would become, it would be state-run and would become the Belgian Congo under the under the governance of the of the Belgian Government, yet still with quite significant influence of of the king. To this day, Belgium is a is a constitutional monarchy. It's not a Republic like. France is and. So in that sense, yes, but it also had a lot to do and I'm I'm trying not to go off on a tangent here. It also had a lot to do with than what it actually was, you know, it was, it was about business, it was about economic exploitation and the companies, international companies from all over the place that were involved in the exploitation of the Congo Free State and then later also of the Belgian Congo. It was the largest privately owned called, to my knowledge, the largest privately owned colony in in history. But so in that sense I I suppose it's it's unique, but I think has has more to do with Belgium’s, Belgium's monarchy at the time and throughout the time that Belgium did have, did have colonial territories overseas. That significantly differed from other state forms in in Europe.

NJ

OK. Yes, I mean like you say that there are so many tangents that we could go off down there. So don't worry if you feel like going off on one that's absolutely no problem at all. And I believe you're currently working on a book which you mentioned in your blog ‘Experimental Empire: science, technology and Belgian colonialism’ where you talk about the weaponization of science and technology that was perhaps driving some of this colonial project. As a way to be perceived as as as a modern nation, do you think they were successful in driving and changing worlwide perception?

SA

Well, I I guess that depends on how you define successful. So from from a colonial perspective, yes for a limited amount of time. And especially after the Second World War and up to 1960/1962. Whereas so the Congo became independent in 1960, which is kind of there, which was by far their their largest colony after the First World War. What was then Ruanda-Urundi which is today, Rwanda and Burundi were German colonies that then became League of Nations mandates. So de facto colonies of Belgium, they remained under Belgian control until 1962. Yeah. So what I'm interested in is how how the Belgian colonial state utilised and weaponized science, and especially what we call life sciences or natural called and called natural sciences and technology as part of their control of their colonial territories. This was my British Academy project and I'm still working on it and hopefully it's going to become this book, it’s, uh, is looking at what role they played and what initially got me onto that was there is quite some quite a lot of research on, on the role of other sciences for colonialism, perhaps most prominently, anthropology or other form or other fields and subjects that have perhaps more obvious colonial roots and have had to reckon with that in more obvious ways than perhaps, presumably, natural sciences have had to do. And so I'm looking at that. And I'm also looking at their exhibition through museums and world fairs to better understand, also, the role they played in communicating communicating Belgium's newly acquired role as now being a coloniser in the late 19th century. And to gather support amongst Belgian population for this colonial project. And and so for example, what we see, one thing I've I've I've worked on is in in one chapter, I'm looking at agriculture and especially since World War Two, the Belgian colonial state poured huge amounts of money into agricultural research in the Congo, opens up all these research stations, establishes and opens up all these research stations, stuffs them with like really high calibre university graduates. And we finds articles from that time from both kind of both in the press but also in kind of more specialist journals in Britain and France that really expressed kind of jealousy towards this. Although there are these, there's there's always this bit of. Yeah, like patronising. You know, they they're way smaller than us. They don't have this huge empire. However, they get all this funding for this research and they are so far ahead with that. And these are kind of research conditions we can only dream of. And I thought, hold on. That's quite interesting because that kind, that doesn't really fit with this stereotype of them catching up, so they have kind of managed to manoeuvre themselves into a position here through science and through research that actually puts them into a different position compared to other European colonial powers at that time. And it's especially, I mean this rather short lived period in the end of the Second World War, while like and during the Second World War, Belgium was obviously occupied by Nazi Germany, up to 1960, and I thought that was that was really interesting and I'm currently looking at and at similar developments in. Other fields, however, this seems to be an I mean the the people are talking to each other. Here are all just experts, but I'm also interested in how this was then communicated to a broader public which was predominantly through through museums and and the World Fairs, so the two kind of the start and the end point of my of my study because it's 1897 to 1958, which seems seems a bit random, but it's the date of the two big world fairs in Brussels. And 1958 as an endpoint, then what was this world that was actually what got me onto this project. So if we look at a map of this world fair and if we look at what happened there. 1958 was the year of the inauguration of the ATOMIUM. I don't know if people know it, but but Google it's this huge landmark and it's the model of an atom. So it was it symbolised the start of the peaceful use of nuclear power. So only 14 years after the bombs were dropped onto Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Now. This was the advent of the peaceful use of nuclear power. And but if we look at a map of the world fair right next to it, we have what they called a village region. So a very late example of the so-called human zoo, where people from the Congo were, quote, unquote, exhibited in pretty much made-up clothes and in the village setting for the, you know, white visitors of the world fair to be to be looked at. And I'm arguing in my research that this is really a crucial moment because it's celebrating science and progress and modernity through, like the inauguration of the Atomium. You know, and it's all like all the posters as well. It's like this very typical late 1950s, early 1960s celebration of post war modernity and everything is going to get better. And then we have this, yeah, almost a remnant of the 19th century, of these 19th century human zoos, which seems really like from another era. But if we look at a map of the World Fair, it literally happened right next to each other. And I'm arguing that this is expressing the world view in in which the the colonised eople from Belgium's colonies, they are considered to be not part of this. They are considered as like they're cut off from all this progress and modernity. They are kind of stuck in this timeless zone and can only ever be these, yeah, these objects to be, to be gazed upon like some sort of subcategory of humanity. And I thought that 1958 is extremely late for this and but I thought that this is so interesting in terms of what this says about how the Belgian colonial state understands itself, understands its relationship to science and progress, but also how it understands itself as a governor of these vast territories in Africa. Together with that, it's important distinction between Belgian colonialism and other forms of European colonialism, is that Belgium never admitted any significant numbers of Congolese to immigrate to Belgium throughout its through the colonial period, be it as students or as workers. So after the Second World War, Belgium, like most other western Central European countries, reach labour migration agreements. But for for workers to to come to Belgium, however, they never drew on their colonies. They signed labour migration agreements with, I think initially Spain and Italy and later with Morocco, but not with the Congo, Ruanda-Urundi. So any significant numbers of migration from there only really happened after 1960. And then especially from the 1970s onwards, with the establishment of the dictatorship of cycle, so only from this time onwards, we have any significant numbers of of Congolese who arrive in. And so there was always, there was always a different sense, I think, of what it meant for Belgium to perceive itself as as an imperial nation as this metropolis in. Which was definitely different than say, you know, London's relationship, or England's Little Britain's relationship to to its empire, or France's relationship to its empire.

NJ

Very sounds like it was a very one directional kind of idea about it.

SA

Yeah, and it was not like it was not like Algeria or India. It was not a especially the Congo was not a settler colony like we have much more significant numbers of Belgians and other Europeans who move to the Congo as administrators. As you know, employees of companies that are active there, but it's never at any point the kind of numbers that we see in satellite qualities such as, such as, yeah, Australia, Algeria, India, like, they're never these numbers. Also like with this, there are never after 1960 there there are significant numbers of Belgians moving leaving the Congo and moving back to Belgium. But it's not the kind of exodus we see leaving Algeria and moving to France, so this is this is not really what's happening, but there's always this, perhaps a certain kind of disconnect, but I think it's important to understand that while there is this, there's not the same quote unquote sense of empire in Belgium. It's in, I think it's important to understand how at the same time. Colonialism and imperialism really affected all parts of Belgian society and culture at the same time, and I think especially looking at the exhibition of of colonial sciences, we get a little bit more insight into the.

NJ

OK. Fascinating. Well, I'm aware that we're probably only very much looking at the tip of the iceberg when it comes to all of these kinds of, you know, you know, the studies that you're doing here. But I would like to also touch on some of the other topics that you have research interests in like you mentioned in the blog that we have, one of them being Politics of meat and its cultural intersections with race and races and gender and sexuality. That sounds absolutely fascinating, but I'm not sure I completely know what might lie behind it? Could you tell us?

SA

Us more. Yeah. So I'm teaching on a second year module that looks at French food cultures and I'm also providing teaching for the Masters in health and medical humanities and critical animal studies has kind of always been one of my secondary research interest, but now that I'm teaching on these courses, I can actually use it, which is great. So it's a little bit of I've had a few moments where I kind of, this is my teaching-led research where I had I had prepared materials for teaching and actually they seem so interesting that I'm. Trying to work them into something more substantial and which has worked out quite well so far. So for example, the politics of meat and its cultural intersections with race races and gender and sexuality is it's basically, so in my in the second year sessions for this module that I'm providing, we're looking at the politics of meat in France. Where the school canteen has become kind of a battleground for to understand French politics and Frances's relationship to a whole range of whole range of topics. So the background to this is that in certain far right municipal but certain municipalities in France who have far right mayors have decided or are trying to stop provisions for pupils who don't eat pork, so be they, it be it because they follow halal or kosher diet or because they're vegetarian or vegan and in these efforts are kind of cloaked in the pretence of secularism, which is one of these, you know, big French Republican ideals, the separation between state and religion. And that's so the argument is, oh, if we are secular, that means everyone has to eat the same. Everyone has to eat pork and this was kind of an an interesting starting point. To look into what's happening in contemporary French politics at the moment, so to understand, first of all, the role of meat in kind of traditional French food cultures in general, but then also what we if we look at that and focus on that, what do we learn about French colonialism? French, France majority societies, relationship to diasporic communities that, you know, follow kosher or halal diet. What does this? Mean about the growing threat of the French power of the French right? What does this mean in terms of what does secularism mean? What does secularism mean in everyday French life? And how does how can this? Presumably you know egalitarian ideal of French Republicanism actually be used as a weapon against minoritized communities in the. And so we're looking at, we're looking at the school canteen and French elections we're looking at in another session. So and and and by doing that, we realised that actually focus on meat and the politics surrounding meat is a really great method to understand how different forms of oppression intersect, and so in another week, we're looking at. What happened in France after me, Hashtag me two, which in France uh was called hashtag #BalanceTonPorc which kind of means, I mean, if you wanted to translate it kind of means expose your pig, you know. And we're looking at the ways in which images of meat are used in sexist advertising, but also how it was how images of meat and animal non-human animals that, Uh, you know. I used for meat production. How are they depicted and in ways that they are sexualised or in ways that they are presented as specifically gendered, and we're also looking at why there are such few vegetarians and vegans in France, whereas that seems to be a trend that, especially in the Anglophone world is a growing one. But why is that not really happening in France? And so this has this has become a big interest of myself as well too, because I think it's such a great starting point to understand. Like I said before, to understand how different forms of different forms of oppression be it racism, be it sexism, how they are connected, how it's not really possible to. Look at them separately, but this is one of the great focal points, especially because it's such an everyday product that we can understand how it actually affects, you know, society at large.

NJ

Again, amazingly, how inventive we can be when. It comes to being horrible to our fellow human beings, isn't it? You know, we're always going to find another way to just basically pick on them because we don't like them and also connected to that you talk about critical animal studies and the ideas around animal labour. This might be kind of like connected subject to that and what do you mean by animal labour? Is that all forms of labour like dairy, animals, beasts of burden, lab animals? What's the context for that?

SA

Yeah, absolutely. And I think to adequately understand the agroindustrial and the pharmaceutical industrial complex and it's vital to understand the forms of labour that's supported and including and I think one of the of the important contributions of research into animal labour by other people has been that also non-human labour should be considered as labour to understand kind of animals, not only as or to understand their bodies. Not only as the product or by product of of these industrial complexes, but also as labourers within this, that make the whole thing possible, and this is a little bit more connected to my teaching I'm doing for the health and medical humanities. Masters where we teach texts in critical animal studies with the students. And we kind of we start off with. Tiger King. This is another lockdown project, lockdown research. First, I couldn't go to any archives during lockdown, so this is. I didn't that. I watched Tiger King and thought about how I could use that for my own research. And there's this moment in, in, in Tiger King. So this documentary about a very colourful zoo owner in rural America and there's a moment in in Tiger King in the first season where we see this big meat truck from Walmart arrive at this zoo with like meat that has gone off, that will be fed to the to the Tigers and and the others that's in the zoo, but before we see the labourers of the soo kind of going through this meat, that is, you know, will not be in this huge, very cheap supermarket chain in America. And so they they go through this really low quality and probably like this meat that has not been consistently been cold. That's probably at this point also health hazard. So they they go through this and they pick out the nicest bits for themselves. And I felt like this is a really powerful image to understand how for example, the agro-industrial complex and with it the meat industrial complex really affects all labourers within this system. So it's not only the animals have to eat who you know are locked up in cages and have to eat this meat, but it's also the labourers at the zoo who are incredibly badly paid. We have and we see all this in the documentary as well. You know, I have these horrendous living conditions and this is also they eat the same food, so they eat the same meat that you know comes with this with this Walmart truck. And and that then led me to look a bit to look a bit further into this, because we also saw at the beginning of the pandemic, we saw that at meat plants. And I think most of the reporting focused on North America and on Germany in, in this context, how they became these hubs for for COVID and why did they become this hubs? Why did so many people get infected with COVID there? Well, it's because the working conditions, the labour conditions are really bad. A lot of labourers who work in these plants are oftentimes, you know, migrant labourers with who don't really have a choice in what kind of labour they get to do and. We see the same across different uh, Western nations happening at that time. So I thought that was an interesting moment together with, you know, me watching Tiger King to think about how. This meat industrial complex is such a good moment to understand again how this this this very foundational tenant of critical animal studies. How, how these, how meat really becomes this focal point of how these different struggles and oppressions intersect with each other? And yeah, so that's what I'm I'm what I'm looking at what I'm. Looking at.

NJ

Fabulous. I mean, so many interesting things going on there. Thank you so much. I'm gonna ask my final question now as part of the research and impact team, I'm duty bound to ask this question really in terms of your work. What would you like to see is the most single significant change you'd like to see out there in the real world as a result of your work? This you know, what impact do you hope to see from your research?

SA

Yeah. Thanks. Well. I was very lucky that I mean eventually it failed, but Belgium did have a Commission, did put a Commission into motion to look into the crimes that were committed during the colonial period. And I know that some of my research has been used for that. So that's really great. Long term, I hope I can contribute to so something that I really care about in my research is is decolonization in its various forms and. I'm looking at because I focus mostly on on sciences and looking at kind of the less obvious objects in museums and how they can be incorporated into decolonization efforts such as, you know, not human remains or not cultural artefacts or artistic artefacts. But for example, what to do with all that? And there's great research being done in this area already, so. But what to do with all the stuffed animals? What to do with all the butterflies and all the bones and all the other things that were, quote, unquote, collected during the colonial era? And what do we do with that and because I think that any decolonization efforts worthy of worthy of of this name, they really need to engage with or that their aim must be restitution and reparation, and and so I'm I I hope that kind of my work on the less obvious archives and institutions will contribute to that and more practically and not and slightly removed from that is, I'm currently working on a funding application to for a film that I'm going to produce with the Manchester based production company on what we call the scenes we keep. So we want to look at personal, I want to look at things people have kept from previous relationships, so not necessarily love relationships, but also friendships or familial relationships that that don't exist anymore and what kind of what objects have people decided to keep and what role do they still play in their in their life? So to approach to to kind of use a kind of bottom-up approach to to health and to heritage and and well-being and how what our relationship to these things is of relationships that aren't there anymore and how we incorporate them in our everyday life or not and. Yeah. So that kind of connects with my research and kind of memory and heritage studies and how do we engage with these objects within and outside of traditional commemorative spaces. So outside of museums, outside of institutionalised public archives, but with this stuff, we keep at home.

NJ

Like yes so. That whole idea of our, you know, our personal memorialising that we do in in all the objects keep our, our little, you know, caches of things in boxes and drawers. Wonderful. Thank you so much. And so, Doctor Sarah Arens, thank you so much for joining me today. It's been really, really fascinating. I'm aware that we could go on and on talking about that the work you've done but we must end it there. Thank you for giving us such a fascinating overview of what you do.

SA

Thank you so much. Been a pleasure.

NJ

Yes, wonderful to have you here. And thank you all for listening and. I hope you'll be able to join us next month when our featured research, who will be Doctor Stella Morgana, who is British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the Politics department. Once again, Sarah, thank you so much and I'll see you all next time.