

CLAIRE DEBUCQUOIS

RED HANDS

Copper, Tin, Paint, Poems, Plants

THE KING APPEARED at dawn with red hands and tears that seemed to scorch his eyes, pouring down his cheeks into his beard. ‘Racism’ and ‘BLM’ were daubed in yellow on his horse’s flanks, and across his chest blazed a white-painted ‘Pardon’. In Brussels, Black Lives Matter protesters had gathered at the statue of Leopold II in the Place du Trône, demanding that at long last, it be taken down.

In *Handsworth Songs*, John Akomfrah’s 1986 film essay on similar protests in Birmingham, a line is uttered as if suspended in time: ‘There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories.’ Last June, again, protesters summoned the ghosts of untold stories, saying their names, returning visibility to their spectral presences. We may picture these ghosts as an Aeschylean chorus, intoning Adrienne Rich’s verses in ‘What Kind of Times Are These’:

this is not somewhere else but here,
our country moving closer to its own truth and dread,
its own ways of making people disappear.¹

Everywhere, we are called to recognize the ghosts of our history and to reckon with our distinctive ways of making them disappear. In Belgium, the debate has unfolded on the sixtieth anniversary of the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s independence from colonial rule, imbuing Leopold’s red-stained hands with particular significance.

The protests met with an array of responses. Some objected to the statues being removed without a public debate. Many argued that it would amount to erasing history.

How do we learn history, anyway? The commanding physical presence of a statue does not give it pedagogical power. Teaching demands curiosity, generosity and open-ended exploration. A monument dictates, blusters and imposes. In *Art and Revolution*, John Berger argued that sculpture has a social nature, which a culture biased towards the private and the atomized leads us to underestimate. 'A static, three-dimensional structure filling or enclosing space', a statue 'appears to be totally opposed to the space that surrounds it.' The immobile presence of the monumental figure translates into an implicit claim to continuity: 'It will stand against time as it stands against space'. A statue is a purely metaphorical structure, Berger continued, whose sole function is 'to use space in such a way that it confers meaning upon it.' A monument endures, then, for so long as the culture recognizes this meaning. Social change, rather than the mere passing of time, causes statues to fall. Their overthrow is an acknowledgment that past assumptions no longer hold and that a new pledge must be made, crystallizing the present values which the society addresses to its future.

Concerns about the erasure of history should not be brushed aside. Instead, the statue of Leopold II may—in its location and material features—serve as a starting point for a historical inquiry into the practices and institutions of the colonial past, while the very persistence of imperial monuments in Brussels suggests threads of continuity running forward to the present, and opening up future forms of contestation.

Leopold's Congo

Astride a horse that bows its head, Leopold II surveys the space before him. The monument projects the image of a far-sighted hero, a narrative that was crafted and cultivated after his reign. The second king of Belgium, as the story goes, provided vision and ambition to his small, young country.

¹ Adrienne Rich, 'What Kind of Times Are These', in *Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems 1991–1995*, New York 1995. The poem responds to the opening lines of Bertolt Brecht's 1938 'An die Nachgeborenen': 'Was sind das für Zeiten, wo / Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist / Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt!' (What kind of times are these, when / To talk about trees is almost a crime / Because it implies silence about so many atrocities!). Rich's stanzas appear throughout this essay, to support the exploration of the politics of place.

After the Napoleonic Wars, these largely Catholic provinces were assigned to the Protestant Dutch king, William I, prince of Orange-Nassau, but in 1830 they rebelled and won British backing for independence—at the price of accepting Lord Palmerston’s choice of a Saxe-Coburg scion, Leopold I, as their monarch. During Leopold I’s reign, Belgium’s early industrial revolution generated high returns for the *Société Générale*, the country’s national bank, of which the king was a major shareholder.² By the 1840s, Belgian companies had developed significant capacity in coal-mining, metallurgy, textiles and railways, and were seeking outlets abroad.

Succeeding his father in 1865, Leopold II set about building an empire that would put Belgium on a footing with its neighbours. As calculating as he was enterprising, Leopold advanced his designs under the guise of scientific and humanitarian endeavours, operating through a series of international bodies set up with the aid of General Albert Thys. In 1876, he invited a host of scientists and philanthropists from across Europe and the US to a geographical conference in Brussels, to further the ‘exploration and civilization’ of the African heartland. In the age of empire, the Congo Basin had retained its independence thanks in part to the dense jungle terrain and fierce local resistance. The consensus in London was that the region was not worth the expense of direct colonization, and British penetration was limited to trading posts, consular staff, missionaries and explorer-journalists like H. M. Stanley, who posted sensationalist tales of jungle atrocities in the illustrated press.

In 1879, Leopold established the *Association Internationale du Congo* (AIC) and hired Stanley and others to comb the region, persuading village chiefs to sign ‘cloth-and-trinket treaties’, sealed with cut-price gifts, which ceded their territories to the AIC. Meanwhile, Leopold won

² The *Société Générale*, founded as an investment bank by William I, played a pivotal role in the Belgian economy. After its 1928 merger with the *Banque d’Outremer*, *Société Générale* controlled about 70 per cent of the Belgian Congo’s economy. In 1934, after the law mandated the scission of mixed banks in the wake of the Crash of 1929, *Société Générale* transferred its banking activities to a new subsidiary, the *Banque de la Société générale de Belgique*, then *Générale de Banque*, which later became *Fortis*, now part of *BNP Paribas*. *Société Générale* remained a powerful industrial and financial holding, active in a wide range of sectors, including coal, steel, chemicals and transportation. In 1998, after a decade-long corporate saga, *Société Générale* was bought by the French *Suez-Lyonnaise des Eaux*, now *ENGIE*.

diplomatic support in Washington, London, Berlin and Paris for his project—combining these AIC territories into a new state, which he intended to rule by himself. At the 1884–85 Berlin Conference, Leopold won international recognition for the AIC, then renamed Congo Free State, promising in return free access to trade in his vast new domain—nearly a million square miles. The Conference, called by Bismarck to formalize the Scramble for Africa by ensuring the unbridled extraction and trade of its resources, vowed to bring ‘the blessings of civilization to the native tribes’ and to help suppress the slave trade.³

Leopold’s statue in the Place du Trône mirrors that of the eleventh-century armed Crusader Godfrey of Bouillon, erected in 1848 on the other side of the Royal Palace. The symmetry was intended: the nineteenth-century Zanzibari slave traders were Arab Muslims, and Christian Europeans would put a stop to their barbarism. Varnished with religion, the anti-slavery argument brandished to justify colonialism was suffused with racist undertones. Leopold was celebrated as a visionary philanthropist who would eradicate the slave trade and bring material advancement and spiritual redemption to the Congolese. In fact, he himself employed the Zanzibari to fill the ranks of the Force Publique, his notorious Belgian-officered military force.

Just west of the Place du Trône and south of the Royal Palace, the triangle of streets around the Rue Bréderode became the centre of a dense maze of banks and holding companies that amassed vast fortunes, from the Leopoldian era through colonial rule, overseen by a tight network of directors sitting on multiple boards. Leopold constructed an ingenious web of trust funds and endowments to expand his private fortune and strengthen his executive power, shielded from parliamentary oversight even as popular agitation mounted for democratic reform.⁴ Leopold held a monopoly on the exploitation of ivory and rubber in the Congo

³ Imperial Germany’s military occupation of the Swahili Coast in the late 1880s, crushing local resistance to the operations of the German East Africa Company, was ostensibly undertaken to abolish slavery in the region. In the present age of globalization, similar philanthropic pretexts are often deployed to conceal the reality of business as usual.

⁴ The Banque Lambert, which served as Leopold’s private bank, merged in 1975 with the Banque de Bruxelles to form BBL, which in 1998 became the Belgian subsidiary of the Dutch multinational ING Group. Its headquarters on the Avenue Marnix overlook the statue of the king in the Place du Trône.

Free State, granting concessions to private companies—including the Anversoise and the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company, ABIR—in which he also held shares. Exploitation intensified in the 1890s, as the growth of the automobile industry increased demand for rubber. High production quotas were policed by the Force Publique, which terrorized the population with mass rape, mutilations—notably the infamous severing of hands—and summary executions.

In Brussels, the grand urban projects of the ‘Builder King’ included an extension of the Royal Palace and the erection of the Cinquantaire Arcade to mark the country’s fiftieth anniversary. The city’s broad, tree-lined avenues give glimpses of the immense fortunes built on wealth extracted from the Congo. Behind these refined façades lay the spectres of colonial exploitation—families torn apart among the rubber vines, elephants killed for their tusks. Perhaps the most original of Victor Horta’s Art Nouveau townhouses was designed for Edmond van Eetvelde, Leopold’s plenipotentiary in the Congo.

Carved on the plinth of the statue in the Place du Trône are the words:

LEOPOLDO II
REGI BELGARUM
1865–1909
PATRIA MEMOR

The same foreshortened Latin phrase—‘The Fatherland Remembers’—was engraved on memorials and medals honouring the combatants of the 1914–18 war. The statue was unveiled in 1926 by Leopold’s successor Albert I, along with several monuments thrown up in the interwar period to rehabilitate the sovereign. Growing opposition to Leopold’s policies in the Congo—Belgian companies angry at being sidelined by the Crown’s monopoly, British impatience with trade restrictions, humanitarian outcry at reports of the atrocities publicized by E. D. Morel and Roger Casement—forced him to relinquish his private estate. In 1908, the Congo became a Belgian colony.⁵ The myth was that Belgian rule turned a clean page; with the press largely acting as the government’s mouthpiece, it was depicted as ‘good colonization’. The self-congratulatory

⁵ Pursuant to the fateful Treaty of Versailles, Belgium expanded its African empire in 1922 with a League of Nations mandate to govern part of the former German territories (GEA) of the Great Lakes region, present-day Rwanda and Burundi.

notion was epitomized in the memorial to General Thys, at the entrance of the Parc du Cinquantenaire. The statue, 'The Belgian Genius guiding the Congo', portrays a classical goddess indicating the way forward to a bare-breasted African woman, who carries an overflowing horn of plenty and gazes at her Belgian guide with almost religious devotion.

A small plaque on Leopold's pedestal notes: 'The copper and tin of this statue come from the Belgian Congo. They were provided courtesy of the Union Minière du Haut-Katanga'. The УМНК was a joint venture of Société Générale, the parastatal company Comité Spécial du Katanga and the British Tanganyika Concessions Limited, set up to exploit the discovery of copper ore in the Congo's southeastern territory of Katanga. Mining—copper, zinc, radium, manganese—was the core of the colonial economy, and took on particular prominence during the Second World War. 'Little Boy', the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, was filled with uranium mined in Shinkolobwe, Katanga; over a thousand tons of the exceptionally rich ore were stored on Staten Island for the Manhattan Project. Today, minerals continue to drive conflicts in Kivu, around the cobalt and coltan mines where adults and children alike work in squalid conditions to provide raw materials for mobile phones and electric cars.

Companies operating alongside the УМНК included Forminière, with a substantial bloc of US shareholders, which exploited timber and mined diamonds, gold and silver, and the Lower Congo and Katanga Railway, BCK, which connected the mining areas to Leopoldville.⁶ In a classic colonial land grab, railway companies received swathes of 'empty' land—*terres vacantes*—along with rights to exploit the minerals underground. Over 2,000 miles of railroad track were built between 1909 and 1931, and where railways went, extractive industries followed, replacing the forest with mines and plantations: copper, tin, cotton, palm oil and cocoa. In 1911, the Belgian government granted a concession of nearly

⁶ These three companies were created by Leopold in 1906, through Société Générale. Their capital outlasted them in various forms, through mergers, acquisitions and sales of assets. Forminière was dissolved in 1966, but incorporated its subsidiary Interfor, later Indufor, for activities outside the Congo. In 1968, part of the УМНК's assets were absorbed by the SG, becoming Union Minière, now Umicore. In May 2019, Umicore signed a long-term agreement for Anglo-Swiss Glencore to supply cobalt hydroxide from its Katanga-based mines, to serve as battery materials for the car industry.

a million hectares to William Lever, an English industrialist. Lever's 'Huilleries du Congo Belge' deprived the villagers of their traditional lands and relied on their forced labour, under the iron rule of the Force Publique, to extract palm oil for its Sunlight soap—accumulating the profits that would fuel the giant multinational, Unilever.⁷

In a contemporary, wayward revival of Leopold's tax haven, timber and minerals are shipped cross-border from the Ituri rainforest. Climate imperialism compounds the unfolding ecological disaster. Where the rubber vines once grew, the forest continues to vanish, primarily affecting the local population—and then, through a sinister butterfly effect, the countless indigenous communities most imperiled by global warming.

I won't tell you where the place is, the dark mesh of the woods
meeting the unmarked strip of light—
ghost-ridden crossroads, leafmold paradise:
I know already who wants to buy it, sell it, make it disappear.

In 1956, Leopold's statue in the Place du Trône was visited by Patrice Lumumba, on a study tour of Belgium. Returning to Brussels two years later for Expo 58, he was disturbed to encounter the demeaning recreation of an indigenous village in the Congolese pavilion. In December 1958, he was a delegate at the All-African Peoples' Conference in newly independent Ghana, and was electrified by Frantz Fanon's call for resistance to colonial oppression. In January 1959, protests against Belgian rule erupted in the Congo, forcing the authorities to speed up plans for transition to a 'moderate' Congolese government, whose strings they planned to pull. Unexpectedly, Lumumba's Mouvement National Congolais emerged as the largest party in the rigged elections of May 1960.

⁷ Descendants of the villagers who were displaced by Lever one hundred years earlier are still fighting for their right to work their land. Agribusiness company Feronia reportedly bought 100,000 hectares in 2009 after raising \$100 million in ESG loans from Western development banks, with pledges to revitalize the region. Instead, villagers who protested the company's toxic dumping on their land and its failure to deliver on the modest projects promised were arrested without charge and jailed in Kisangani, 200 miles away. After five months in prison, they were allowed to be released only if they dropped all complaints against the company. World Rainforest Movement, 'Action Alert! Immediate release of villagers in the DR Congo imprisoned on false charges related to a land conflict with Feronia Inc', 11 February 2020.

Lumumba's speech on Independence Day, 30 June 1960, hailed the Congolese people's struggle 'of tears, fire and blood' that 'put an end to the humiliating bondage forced upon us'—the forced labour, the hunger, the inadequate clothing and lodging, the daily injustice and humiliation. Commemorating those persecuted by the colonizers for their political convictions, exiled from their native land, killed or thrown into jail, he announced his government's commitment to a new social and economic order, so that 'the lands of our native country truly benefit its children.' Brussels moved to secure its former colony.⁸ Under pressure from the UMHK, the foreign service fomented the secession of Katanga and Kasai, and Belgian troops took over the country's airports. While Lumumba pleaded for support, the UN sat on its hands.⁹ The CIA chief, Allen Dulles, cabled that Lumumba's removal was 'a high priority'. The Belgian Minister for African Affairs called for his 'definitive elimination'. On 1 December 1960, Lumumba was taken prisoner. On 17 January 1961, he was transferred to Katanga and, in an operation jointly overseen by Belgian officials and Congolese Army forces under Colonel Mobutu, tortured and shot to death.¹⁰ Mobutu seized power after a violent interregnum; he would govern for over thirty years, building up the nation through the plunder of its people.

Lumumba's name joined the lengthening roll call of the dead that would echo across the continent: Félix-Roland Moumié, Louis Rwagasore, Mehdi Ben Barka, Eduardo Mondlane, Amílcar Cabral, Steve Biko, Thomas Sankara, Ken Saro-Wiwa. Others, like political activist Andrée Blouin, a prominent member of Lumumba's cabinet, and Léonie Abo, a writer, Simba rebel and wife of Pierre Mulele (who had been tortured to death by Mobutu), were forced to flee the country. Western powers

⁸ The Belgian authorities had secured economic control through several measures taken weeks before independence. On 17 June 1960, companies active in the Congo were allowed to register under Belgian law, which the UMHK did seven days later by transferring its headquarters to Brussels. On 27 June, the parliament dissolved the parastatal Comité spécial du Katanga, which had a majority stake in the UMHK. As in a shell game, the debts incurred under colonial rule were transferred to the newly independent state—later ballooning under Mobutu into the DRC's current, unserviceable public debt.

⁹ Dag Hammarskjöld eventually sought to intervene and was killed in a mysterious plane crash while en route to broker cease-fire negotiations in September 1961.

¹⁰ See Ludo De Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, trans. Ann Wright and Renée Fenby, London and New York 2001; reviewed by Linda Melvern in 'Dispatching Lumumba', NLR 11, Sept–Oct 2001.

and their puppet governments showed remarkably consistent ways of eliminating resistance fighters.

There's a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows uphill
and the old revolutionary road breaks off into shadows
near a meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted
who disappeared into those shadows.

The ghost of Lumumba hovers over *The Wretched of the Earth*, which Fanon wrote in the wake of his comrade's murder. For Fanon, the world that imperialism had produced—'a world compartmentalized, Manichaeian and petrified'—was 'a world of statues': 'the statue of the general who led the conquest, the statue of the engineer who built the bridge. A world cocksure of itself, crushing with its stoniness the backbones of those scarred by the whip.'

'The colonist makes history', Fanon noted. 'He refers constantly to the history of his metropolis, of which . . . he is the extension'.¹¹ Yet as the colonizer writes the history of his nation, he effaces that of the country he plunders. Chinua Achebe captured this pattern in the caustic ending to *Things Fall Apart*, where the District Commissioner projects his own narrative onto the Igbos' thoughts, words and rituals: 'He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*'. Belgians catalogued the stones, birds and butterflies of the Congo, and classified the population by ethnic categories, like a shopkeeper taking a stock inventory, impervious to other forms of knowledge.¹² A group of French Surrealists denounced the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931 for fostering among 'the citizens of the metropolis the consciousness of property owners so that they will hear without flinching the echo of distant shootings'.¹³ Objectification is wrongly conflated with objectivity; the 'colonial fact' becomes *un fait acquis*, accepted truth, informing international opinion.

The statue affirms this discourse of domination, staking a claim like a flag over the square. The monuments that reside in our streets are

¹¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, New York 2004, p. 15.

¹² Colette Braeckman, 'Jean Omasombo: "Je l'affirme, en 1960, le Congo a été assassiné. Il n'y avait plus rien"', *Le Soir*, 21 June 2020.

¹³ Louis Aragon, et al., *Ne visitez pas l'Exposition Coloniale*, Paris 1931.

a singularly western, patriarchal mode of memorializing: historical triumph is set in stone, events are congealed into a hierarchy of forms. Historical narratives exalting monarchy or empire as an expression of national identity bury language divides and social fractures under nostalgic memories of illusory grandeur. ‘Providing context’ with a small plaque, as some propose, reinforces the illusion that colonization is a bygone phenomenon, safely confined to a footnote.

This rigid concept of history and national heritage has long shaped the prevalent content and forms of knowledge in Belgian research and education. For decades, scholars have unearthed the legacy of Leopold II and the darkest aspects of colonial rule, but the backlash has been fierce. When Daniël Vangroenweghe published his damning *Red Rubber* in 1985, prominent members of the economic establishment prompted the Minister of Education to conduct an inquiry into his ‘behaviour’. Former colonial administrator Jules Marchal felt compelled to publish his findings under a pseudonym. The archives of the Congo Free State were famously burnt by Leopold, and access to those of the colonial period was long riddled with restrictions.

Today, Belgian children still learn of Leopold II as ‘the Builder King’. Teenagers study the Carolingian dynasty and pore over the ‘Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry’, yet often leave school without a passing knowledge of the egregious crimes committed in the Congo. This is no indictment of teachers, contrary to the prevalent tendency to deflect from collective responsibility by assigning individual blame. The teaching of colonial history should be a political priority, spurring the revision of programmes and the dissemination of pedagogical tools.

Green ruins

Public conversations are important, and the initiatives announced last summer by the Brussels regional parliament and the Belgian Chamber may have meaningful outcomes. But the debate started years ago—before people in power were inclined to listen, let alone prepared to respond. Associations such as BAMKO-CRAN, Bruxelles Panthères and Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations have contested the presence of colonial iconography in public spaces, along with systemic discrimination in areas such as policing, housing and employment. Some of these demands were partially heeded; most were ignored.

Activists have also fostered debate through artistic creation, recognizing the rhetorical aspect of statues but envisioning them as sites for performance and interaction. Art as resistance often adopts the ruling language to disrupt its grammar. For instance, jazz coopts and twists musical conventions by syncopation and improvisation. In *Petit pays*, Gaël Faye recounts his exile from his country and childhood, his ‘sensations without repatriation’, in a slam fusing rhythms and languages. His visceral awareness of violence, born in the intimate experience of the Burundian and Rwandan genocides, reverberates through the rhymes and the beats. And Baloji turns on its head the ludicrous expression ‘All this won’t give us back the Congo’ to chant: ‘Ça ne vous rendra pas le Congo’.

Likewise, dominant narratives have been disturbed by visual interventions. The blood-red paint that regularly appears on the statues of Leopold and his generals long predates last June’s protests. In 2004, Ostend protesters sawed off the hand of a Congolese man on a monument which bears the words: ‘Thanks from the Congolese to Leopold II for having freed them from the slavery of the Arabs.’ The City Council decided not to replace it. In January 2018, a bust of the king vanished from Duden Park. The Citizens Association for a Decolonial Public Space (ACED) claimed responsibility for the ‘abduction’. Two days later, a new Leopold appeared on the pedestal, yet this time the imposing stone figure had been replaced by a birdseed replica. The gesture had an eerie quality: all that adamantine power transmuted into an ephemeral return to nature.

The previous year, a group of Brussels students designed alternatives to the Place du Trône monument. In one proposal, the statue is surrounded by a mix of poisonous and healing plants, whose growth would cause the king to disappear. The project reverses Derek Walcott’s meditations on the colonial legacy of racial cruelty in the Caribbean, marked by ‘an absence of ruins’. In ‘The Royal Palms’, instead of ‘heroic palaces / Nettled in sea-green vines’ are the interred corpses of the indigenous peoples and the enslaved, dislocated from their ancestors’ shores—a forced exile in place and time. Walcott writes:

If art is where the greatest ruins are,
Our art is in those ruins we became,
You will not find in these green, desert places
One stone that found us worthy of its name.¹⁴

¹⁴ Derek Walcott, ‘The Royal Palms’, *London Magazine*, February 1962.

To let the statue of Leopold be subsumed by greenery has an archeological as well as a botanical aspect; it resonates with the ‘Pardon’ painted on the king’s chest last June. Such artistic practices remediate our relationship to history—interwoven with collective memory—by interrogating the meaning once conferred upon space, and proposing values to cultivate in the future. Cultural creation is political action, forging places where people assemble to reimagine the city we might inhabit together.

Handsworth Songs ends with a mysterious incantation:

These are for those to whom history has not been friendly
 For those who have known the cruelties of political becoming
 Let them bear witness to the ideals which in time will be born in hope
 In time, let them bear witness to the process by which the living
 transform the dead into partners in struggle.

The Brussels protests honoured these personal and collective stories of violence and resistance. Many dismissed these acts of solidarity as mere expressions of transatlantic outrage. In European discourse, the propensity to vilify racist violence abroad, while failing to see or address it at home, has taken the shape of a bizarre, distorted mirror image of American exceptionalism. But in Europe, too, ethnic and religious groups are marginalized and excluded. Far-right xenophobic narratives infiltrate our political rhetoric. The Mediterranean swallows refugees fleeing war and the widening desert, as Frontex looks on—or pushes back. Resonating from the Place du Trône to the hulking buildings of the EU, Rich’s lines remind us: this is not somewhere else but here, with its own ways of making people disappear. The statue may soon be gone, but protest must go on.