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### Ghosts, Copper, and Flies: Sammy Baloji's Reconciliation with the Past

In his art practice, Sammy Baloji interrogates the complex and unstable current social and political conditions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) through examining the history of colonialism in the country. Artworks like *Memoire* (2006), *Essay on Urban Planning* (2013), and *The Other Memorial* (2015), expose how the colonial history of the country's copper mining industry, the larger horrific and violent legacy of resource extraction in the area, and the cruel and deadly labor politics that fueled this extraction haunts the present day workings of society, politics, and the economy in the DRC. Baloji's works, which range from photographic montages to sculpture, put the exploitative economic and political past into relation with the present to reveal the scar that the colonial history has left, not only on the political structures in the country, but also in the minds and social body of the Congolese people. In his rich body of artwork, the past is key to understanding the present as the history of colonialism is shown still defining and delineating the lived conditions and experiences of the contemporary Congolese population in the postcolonial moment.

Sammy Baloji's photomontage series, "*Memoire*" ("Memory"), poignantly pictures the colonial past imprinted on the present. For this series, he photographed the abandoned colonial copper mines that litter the landscape of Lubumbashi. He then inserted colonial, archival photographs of Congolese miners back into these contemporary scenes. In

*Untitled 8*, for instance, a small copper slag pit fills the composition. A hazy view of a city, with its numerous buildings and looming cell phone towers, float behind the edge of the dirt landscape. The background of a city serves as stark evidence of what the foreground presents. In order to depict a more panoramic view, Baloji actually uses two images, which seem to have been taken moments apart, and places them side-by-side to compose the landscape. The putting together of two images creates an apparent seam that runs directly down the middle of the photograph, evidenced by the two-shaded violet sky and the non-congruent edges of the dirt in the foreground. The subtlety of the seam, a thin scar that marks the image, symbolically speaks to the fact that even in the contemporary moment, the Congolese landscape is still broken, left in pieces from the period of colonialism.

This landscape, poetically broken and reassembled, does not just evoke the violences of colonial history. It directly inserts the history into the damaged and scarred present. Cut-outs of four men, photographed in black and white, have been placed within this seamed and muted colored landscape. In research for this project, Baloji explored the photographic archives of the mining companies, and pulled images taken of Congolese miners by the colonial regime, which he then incorporated into his images of the contemporary landscapes. Three of the men in the photograph are dressed in black and white, prison-like uniforms, shackles connected to chains are secured around their necks that appear to be connecting them all together. They all are holding shovels and mining picks, the tools for this extraction. The men, presented in their shackles, speak to the process of dehumanization that many of these miners underwent under the colonial

regime, and the enforced slave labor that was introduced by Belgian ruler, Leopold II. The image of these chained men, when inserted into the present landscape of the DRC, reveal the distinct contours of the history that continues to taint the present.

The colonial history of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, beginning with the horrors unleashed by King Leopold II of Belgium on the region, which he laid claim to as his private colony, is a profoundly traumatic one. The country has been marked with colonial violence and exploitation that have scarred and continues to scar the nation. The Berlin Conference of 1885, instigated by King Leopold II, and better known as the “Scramble for Africa,” is where, as Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor expresses it, “Africa’s final fate at the hands of the imperial powers of Europe was sealed.”<sup>1</sup> What political theorist Achille Mbembe has called “necropolitics ... the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations,” was the driving force in this scramble over a continent populated by millions of people.<sup>2</sup> According to Mbembe, colonial authority manifested as “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not.”<sup>3</sup> Europe’s heinous colonial and imperial endeavors in Africa were built upon the fact that African’s were racially “Othered” through European white supremacy, which negated and is still negating the human existence and complex lived experiences in Africa. Racism in the DRC regulated, decided and justified Leopold II’s power to exercise extreme oppression

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1 Okwui Enwezor, “Introduction,” *The short Century: Independence and Liberation. Movements in Africa, 1945-1994*, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics” *Public Culture*, 15:1, 2003, 27.

and the ability to destroy lives and put the Congolese to death.<sup>4</sup> Baloji's image relates to these factors, exposing how the colonial regime has forced the Congolese into this violent relationship that is continuing to define how lives in the DRC are being interacted with, domestically and foreignly, today.

Further, the men, standing in the barren and destroyed landscape of a defunct copper mine, reveal why people had to be violently instrumentalized and made disposable. Leopold II seized the DRC, naming it the Congo Free State, as his own personal economic and natural resource machine. The Berlin Conference, that made legitimate Leopold's assumption of power in the Congo, also allowed him to extract the maximum amount of profits and resources out of the land, no matter the human cost. Since, as Mbembe explains, "the colony represents the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of power outside the law," Leopold II was able to extract resources in the Congo as he wished, with no one—and no law—to regulate and make his actions accountable.<sup>5</sup> The forced and insidious relationship that he implemented in the country completely ignored the fact that millions of human lives were being destroyed by his regime's violence and exploitation. Because of the erasure and negation of humanity through the processes of racial "Othering," which denies the existence of the "Other" as not being humanly relatable and understandable, since it is not familiar (i.e. European and white), "Othering," as a result denied the lives and lived experiences of the Congolese.<sup>6</sup> Through those means, Leopold II was able to suspend the Congolese's subjecthood, and instead instrumentalized the population by

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<sup>4</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture*, 15:1, 2003, 36.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 40.

<sup>6</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Time on the Move," *On the Postcolony*, University of California Press, 2001, 2.

condemning them to objecthood.<sup>7</sup> By forcing the population into objecthood, Leopold II was able to use the Congolese population as “free” labor for the extraction of natural resources, which he obtained through creating a slave-labor economy. These labor-politics further allowed for the justification of violence and extreme oppression, and defines what Mbembe would call the continued necropolitics of exploitation and destruction that the Democratic Republic of the Congo has forcefully been bound by.

Baloji’s practice serves as evidence to how the necropower, that casual destruction of human lives for resource extraction instituted by Leopold II’s regime, has continued to fuel the destruction of the post-independent nation. Thus, in the juxtaposition of the colored landscape that Baloji captured and the black and white archival photograph of the men that he has inserted, the people exploited by Leopold’s regime have been transformed into spectral beings haunting the contemporary landscape of the abandoned mines. With their shovels posed above the grey lands, the men enact how this violent and exploitative history continues to dig into the present. They reveal how the regime of Leopold II in the DRC has left a legacy and, to evoke Baloji’s poetic use of the seamed images, a deep scar in the country that, according to historian Whitaker Birt, “gives rise to persistent problems in the Congo.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, in the photomontage, Baloji also shows what African Studies theorist, Bogumil Jewsiewicki, calls the difficulties that surround making “visible the tragic consequences of rupture between presents and their pasts through the misappropriation of industrial modernity.”<sup>9</sup> These men have been made into ghosts, because the colonial past that Baloji has found in mining archives is not always so easily seen.

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<sup>7</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics”..., 34.

<sup>8</sup> Whitaker R. Birt, “The Congo: From Leopold to Lumumba,” *Stanford University Press*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Bogumil Jewsiewicki, “Leaving Ruins,”... 3.

Sammy Baloji was born after independence in Lubumbashi of the Katanga province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1978. He was raised in a time when the violent colonial history of the Congo was not taught in schools or actively discussed by populations. Thus, Baloji, like many other young Congolese individuals today only have, as Jewsiewicki explains, an “indirect understanding of the colonial past.” In fact, according to Jewsiewicki, the past seems only to have the most tentative relationship to those born post-independence. As that scholar writes, “they carry in their heritage its incorporated experience and question the history that does not belong to them because it was written from the gaze of elsewhere and refers to the generations of their fathers and grandfathers.”<sup>10</sup> In his art practice, Baloji is attempting to uncover the past that has produced the present environment in the DRC. For example, in an interview, Sammy Baloji stated that, “I think reality has a kind of complex, a relationship with, past, present, now, yesterday or today.”<sup>11</sup> Baloji is intent on uncovering the present conditions of Congolese people, who are still struggling with the economics of ongoing resource extraction.

In fact, *Untitled 8* links the aftermath of the Berlin Conference of 1855 to the current circumstances around mining in the DRC. What colonialism created and envisioned for the country, that is, its resources would serve to enrich those elsewhere, continues to influence the present in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The political economy of the DRC is still in the strangle and grasp of foreign power relations. The natural resources, specifically copper, that the DRC has been *cursed* with, continue to play a crucial role in the world's modern technologies, such as smart phones and anything else that involves electricity. Much like in the times of

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<sup>10</sup> Bogumil Jewsiewicki., “Leaving Ruins,” *African Arts*, Spring 2016, 49:1, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Matthias Ussing Seeberg, *Sammy Baloji: The Past in Front of Us*, Video, Louisiana Chanel, The Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2015, Minute 6:50.

colonialism, the world is still reliant on what the Congo can offer them. The economic relationship that the DRC has with the rest of the world today perpetuates the same relationship of inequality, where everyone but those who are giving their lives to extracting these resources, are benefitting. Needing to understand why this continuation of struggle still persists, Baloji turns his attention to the history of colonialism, a time he was not directly apart of, but a time that he and the Congolese people are still marked by and dealing with. Baloji's work speaks to the need, as Jewsiewicki poetically avers, "to take control of one's becoming, [through] recogniz[ing] ruins as evidence of a past from which memory opens to a future."<sup>12</sup>

*Essay on Urban Planning* speaks further to how colonial endeavors have shaped the present-day environment of Lubumbashi and the lives that inhabit it. This photo essay is composed of twelve images, stitched together in a quilt-like fashion. Six images are aerial photographs of the city of Lubumbashi that have been laced together with six images of cases of mosquitos and flies, pinned for display. Baloji calls this work a visual essay; it depicts the colonial-constructed city and tells the tale, as the Nigerian curator Yesomi Umulo states, of "health, hygiene and segregation in the colonial imagination."<sup>13</sup> The images of the pinned insect specimens compliment and parallel the geometrical sprawling of the urban landscape. Their presence in this photo essay can also serve to represent the ways in which, under the colonial regime, the Congolese were stripped of humanity and became labor specimens to bring in economic growth for the Belgian colonial powers. The pinning of the insects can be paralleled to how the Congolese were pinned under the violent oppression of colonialism.

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<sup>12</sup> Bogumil Jewsiewicki. "Leaving Ruins."... 2.

<sup>13</sup> Yesomi Umulo, Exhibition Curator, *So-called Utopias*, Logan Center Exhibitions, [https://arts.uchicago.edu/sites/arts.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/documents/Low\\_2015-11-16\\_LCE\\_So-called%20Utopias%20\(Foldout\\_23.25w%20x%2016.5h\).pdf](https://arts.uchicago.edu/sites/arts.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/documents/Low_2015-11-16_LCE_So-called%20Utopias%20(Foldout_23.25w%20x%2016.5h).pdf).

In five of the images, a green belt of land is seen separating the two sides of urban space. This belt of land, called the *cordon sanitaire*, was established by the Belgian colonists in 1910, and served to segregate the Belgian population from the Congolese population. This speaks to how Mbembe outlines the beginnings of necropolitical relationships, that “colonial occupation entails first and foremost a division of space into compartments,” that can be regulated and controlled.<sup>14</sup> The width of the green belt was determined to be the maximum distance that potentially malaria carrying mosquitos could fly, ensuring that the Belgian population living in the Congo would remain safe of disease.<sup>15</sup> Not only did the *cordon sanitaire* segregate these populations, creating an apartheid-like social system, but its also enacted a form of environmental racism that forced the Congolese to live amongst the copper mines they were required to work in. So, not only were the Belgian population kept safe from malaria, they also did not have to deal with the negative health effects and contaminated drinking water that are a result of living in proximity to mines. This piece communicates the necropower held by the Belgian colonial regime, who had utter disregard for Congolese lives, and could render others “disposable,” to again use Mbembe’s poignant turn of phrase.<sup>16</sup>

*Essay on Urban Planning* shows the result of the colonial regime’s planning of the urban spaces of Lubumbashi in 1910, segregating the Belgians from the Congolese, which resulted in impoverished neighborhoods that are still being effected by what this segregation of space has done. This piece visually communicates that the past is still deciding the present and the future,

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<sup>14</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics”... 42.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

and that the present-day Congolese population are still forced to deal with what the colonial regimes have created.

In one of his more recent works, *The Other Memorial*, Sammy Baloji continues to grapple with the memory of the past and the real violent effects of colonialism that are still operating in the present. This piece, unlike his earlier work, is a sculptural installation. Again, like the *Memoire* series, Baloji looked to the archival history of the colonial period to gather information in order to have it interact with the present. *The Other Memorial*, is a small replica of a copper dome built in Belgium during the 1930's to commemorate the Belgian lives lost during World War I.<sup>17</sup> The copper used to build the war memorial in Belgium was extracted from the copper mines in Lubumbashi, and taken back to Europe to be used for the construction of the dome, a resource relationship that is not new, as we have seen. Baloji's globe-like dome is made up of numerous copper panels that have been melded together. The surface of each of the panels are covered in beautifully intricate indigenous Congolese scarification patterns. The panels are polished so that they shine, causing the areas where the scarification patterns are imprinted to remain subtle. This subtly draws the viewer in to examine the surface of the dome further.

In the present day Democratic Republic of the Congo, scarification is not practiced, nor have many people seen these patterns since the colonial period. Baloji came across these patterns, which were not familiar to him, in doing research of the Congo during its colonial occupation. He found that during Leopold II's regime in the Congo, he sought to destroy and outlaw many of the indigenous practices that were used to preserve the cultural memory of the

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Moss, "Its Art, Not a History Lesson," Mentor and Protege, <https://medium.com/mentor-protégé/it-s-art-not-a-history-lesson-ab263a8e50da#.hr3nzrlnz>.

Congolese, such as scarification.<sup>18</sup> The scarification patterns that are imprinted on *The Other Memorial*, serve to speak to the erasure of culture, and even further to the erasure of memory of that culture at the hands of colonial regimes. The scarring on the sculpture also serves to symbolically address the scarring left from colonialism memory, which has, as Enwezor evocatively writes, “left an indelible mark, whose crude, schematic features remain difficult both to erase and to reconcile with.”<sup>19</sup> The scars left by colonialism demonstrate how easy and carelessly it was for the Belgium colonial regime to inflict wounds upon the Congolese, both mentally and physically. Much like the process of a scar healing, with its raised and shiny markings, colonialism and its living aftermath serve as a reminder of the wound that continues to have a presence on the body, the land, and the mind.

Further, in order for the Belgium memorial to commemorate the Belgian lives that were lost during WWI, Congolese lives and labor had to be used to extract the materials, a brutal, back-breaking process that during the 1930’s was usually under the terms of forced labor. Through the title of this sculpture, Baloji points to the fact that Congolese lives also deserve and need to be memorialized, since it was the colonized, laboring body that was disposed of during the history of industrialized economic violence that was instituted by the colonial regime. This sculpture also speaks to the fact that the extraction of copper still has a relationship to contemporary bodies in the DRC. Its presence in the room play two roles. First, it serves to stand in for the real bodies that are still continually being effected by the resource extraction taking

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<sup>18</sup> Debora L. Silverman, “Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part 1,” *West 86*, 18:2, 181.

<sup>19</sup> Okwui Enwezor, “Introduction.” . . . , 1.

place in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and in many other African countries.<sup>20</sup> And, on the other hand, it reminds viewers, who have enjoyed the luxury of copper's capabilities, that while we are surrounded by copper made objects, we are also surrounded by the bodies who have been forced into situations of violence and exploitation that were birthed out of the economic relations of resource extraction of colonialism. *The Other Memorial* is a memorial for the ones who were colonized and the ones who are still being affected by the aftermath of colonialism, who have been made to endure and are still enduring the violence enacted upon them during this period, and who are not thought about as needing commemorating or memorializing. This sculptural installation serves as an ongoing monument for the contemporary bodies who are still made to endure the history of the past.

Sammy Baloji's artistic practice is poetic and hard-hitting. His works have an emotional register that forces viewers to consider how the same forces of greed that fueled colonialism continue to operate today in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, through systemic practices of economic and political oppression. Baloji achieves this through re-articulating the history of colonialism in the DRC, which has created an erasure of lives, resources, memory, and identity, and re-situates that history into the contemporary moment. By doing this, he is able to offer a rethinking of what post-colonialism in the DRC is to the real life contemporary lived conditions and experiences of the Congolese, showing that the present isn't much different than the past. He traces how the DRC has been inflicted with necropolitical relationships that are still determining the regulation of life through means of economic, political and social control. Sammy Baloji's work offers insight to the fact that the Congolese are still attached to mineral production and

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<sup>20</sup> Rachel Nelson, *Lecture*, January 2017.

resource extraction, and that while systems may have changed, there is still something gravely wrong with them, causing the trauma of the past to continue to define reality in the present.



Sammy Baloji, *Untitled 8, Memoire*, 2006



Sammy Baloji, *Essay on Urban Planning*, 2013



Sammy Baloji, *The Other Memorial*, 2015