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Digging holes, excavating the present, mining the future: extractivism, time, and memory in Fiston Mwanza Mujila's and Sammy Baloji's works

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the links between creative imagination and extraction in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This question has an undeniable memorial dimension, for extraction, as a crucial point of entry into Congolese historical consciousness, allows for a multi-perspectivist examination of the way in which the memory of the past has been archived, experienced, and (mis) interpreted. As a key term to understand Congo's geopolitical position since colonial times, extraction offers a rich array of tropes and ideas to assess culture from the DRC and the Congolese diaspora. First, I reflect on the notions of extraction and extractivism; secondly, I analyse how they form the basis of Sammy Baloji's multimedia work in *Mémoire* (2006) and *Mémoire/Kolwezi* (2014); then, I turn to *La Danse du vilain* (2020) and *Tram 83* (2014) by Fiston Mwanza Mujila, first to assess how extraction is employed in these novels, then to conduct a reflection on 'necropolitics', and reveal little-known aspects of diamond digging during the Mobutu era. I will also show that Baloji's and Mujila's creative trajectories have been enriched by dialogues with Filip De Boeck, the Belgian social anthropologist and specialist of the DRC.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore les liens entre créativité et la notion d'extraction en République démocratique du Congo (RDC). Cette question revêt une indéniable dimension mémorielle car l'extraction, en tant qu'élément central de la conscience historique congolaise, permet d'examiner de manière multi-perspectiviste comment la mémoire du passé a été archivée, vécue, interprétée, voire déformée. Terme clé pour comprendre la position géopolitique du Congo depuis l'époque coloniale, cette notion offre un riche éventail d'images et d'idées pour examiner les productions culturelles en RDC et dans la diaspora congolaise. Dans un premier temps, je réfléchirai aux concepts d'extraction et d'extractivisme; ensuite, j'analyserai la place qu'ils occupent dans l'œuvre multimédia – *Mémoire* (2006) et *Mémoire/Kolwezi* (2014) – de Sammy Baloji ; dans une troisième

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phase, je me pencherai sur les romans de Fiston Mwanza Mujila – *La Danse du vilain* (2020) et *Tram 83* (2014) – pour y définir le rôle de l'extraction minière, mener une réflexion sur la notion de 'nécropolitique', et mettre en exergue certains aspects peu connus de l'industrie diamantaire pendant l'ère mobutiste. Je montrerai également que Baloji et de Mujila ont, au cours de leur carrière, été les interlocuteurs privilégiés de Filip De Boeck, l'anthropologue belge et spécialiste de la RDC.

This article belongs to a larger project, in progress, exploring the links between creative imagination—in the arts but also in fiction—and extraction in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).¹ Although a key term to understand Congo's geopolitical position and predicament since colonial times, extraction offers a rich, complex, multifaceted, and hitherto little-explored array of tropes and ideas to assess the connections between thought, literature, film, and artistic creativity in the DRC and the Congolese diaspora. This question has an undeniable memorial dimension, for extraction, as a crucial point of entry into Congolese historical consciousness, allows for a multi-perspectivist examination of the way in which the memory of the past—the colonial era but also Mobutu's dictatorship—has been archived, experienced, transformed, manipulated, and (mis)interpreted by several generations of actors. If there is a substantial body of works on the history of extraction and the local and global implications of mining and extractive practices (Declerq, Frøland, and Money 2022; Henriët 2021; Makori 2017; Rubbers 2021; Tshimanga Mulangala 2019; Vogel 2022; Walker 2014), the focus on how this context—and *reality*—has generated cultural responses remains relatively modest despite some recent publications (Bertho 2019; Bouwer 2023; Brezault 2019; Ceuppens 2022; De Boeck and Baloji 2016; Deckard 2020; De Groof 2022; Desquilbet 2021; Fraiture 2022; Garnier 2021; 2022; Kapanga 2019; Nugent 2021; Riva 2019; Tidmarsh 2019). This industrial heritage and its transmutation by artists, novelists and film directors constitutes an important repository of signs to initiate another cultural history of the DRC, excavate from the Congolese *present past* recent aesthetic trends and anticipate future developments. This article will, however, be more limited in scope and focus specifically on the way in which extraction, as one of Congo's major *lieux de mémoire*,² has featured in Fiston Mwanza Mujila's work. First, I will reflect on the notions of extraction and extractivism in a Congolese context; secondly, I will show how and why they formed the basis of Sammy Baloji's multi-media ground-breaking work *Mémoire* (2006) and *Mémoire/Kolwezi* (2014); then, I will turn to *La Danse du vilain* (2020) and *Tram 83* (2014) by Mujila to measure the enduring legacy of Baloji's artistic experiments and assess how extraction is employed in these novels to conduct a temporal reflection on 'necropolitics', as this concept was developed by Achille Mbembe. Drawing on Foucault's biopolitics, but also on other statements on the Holocaust and state terror by Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, and Giorgio Agamben, Mbembe argues that the (post)colonial 'sovereign', often in collusion with extractivist companies, has tended to disregard his subjects as disposable entities at the service of the crude and basic tenets of the global market economy (Mbembe 2003). Finally, I shall explore little-known aspects of diamond digging during the Mobutu era. In this discussion, I will also show that Baloji's and Mujila's creative trajectories have been

enriched by dialogues with Filip De Boeck, the Belgian social anthropologist, specialist of the DRC, Congolese urban practices, and diamond extraction in the Lunda territory.

Of extraction and extractivism

The extraction of natural and mineral resources has been closely associated with the history of modern Congo since the establishment of the Congo Free State (CFS) in 1885. Until 1960, extraction remained the most important strategic objective behind the economic success of the colony. In Congo and in other empires across the globe, extraction was invariably presented as one of the pillars of colonial development and as one of the most crucial instruments of the so-called ‘mise en valeur’ (Aldrich 2002).

Unlike extraction, extractivism (and extractivist) has been recently coined. In Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), the term is simply not used even though this book focuses on environmental justice and commitment and explores the post-colonial aftereffects of imperial extractive projects in the Global South. Extraction, however, comes up twenty times, either used on its own or in phrases such as ‘resource extraction’ and ‘extraction industry’. The same observation applies to Ann Laura Stoler’s highly cited *Imperial Debris* (2013), a volume of essays also dealing with the long-term ecocidal consequences of colonial violence. As highlighted in a recently published article, the notion of extractivism ‘has proliferated during the past decade’:

[It] has its origins as ‘extractivismo’ in the Spanish-speaking Latin American context, especially in the realm of natural resources, and in relation to Indigenous Peoples’ resistance and post-extractivist alternatives (Gudynas 2015, 2021). Extractivism as a concept forms a complex ensemble of self-reinforcing practices, mentalities, and power differentials underwriting and rationalizing socio-ecologically destructive modes of organizing life through subjugation, violence, depletion, and non-reciprocity. (Chagnon et al. 2022, 760)

In the early twentieth century, critical interventions by figures such as Roger Casement (1904, 1997) and Félicien Challaye (1909) aimed to denounce extraction in the context of imperial ‘subjugation’ and ‘violence’ during the red rubber scandal (Vangroenweghe 2010). While these pronouncements were formulated to defend local populations and expose human rights violations, they were rarely expressed in the name of environmental justice. In a context where the development of extraction companies remained first and foremost measured against criteria of economic profitability, this notion (environmental justice) had little or no currency until the 1960s. Interestingly, the ‘Preamble’ of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document which significantly contributed to (and anticipated) the gradual demise of the colonial project, made no reference to the environment and no attempt to link its depletion to ‘the inherent dignity of [...] all members of the human family [...]’ (OHCHR 1948). Apart from some isolated declarations by thinkers such as Alain Gheerbrant (1952), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955), and Georges Balandier ([1957] 1962), the environment (as this notion is understood now) largely remained a blind spot of imperial imagination.

After independence, this issue continued to play a minor role. Congolese intellectuals, either those directly involved in Mobutu’s authenticity (see Kangafu Vingi Gudumbagana, 1973) or those critical of the regime, were more eager to delve into the factors behind Congo’s neo-colonial predicament. Figures such as Georges Ngal and VY Mudimbe, not

only in their fictions but also in their more theoretical publications, were above all interested in exploring the roots of epistemological dependency, the inauthentic (or 'alienated') nature of Congolese knowledge production and the subservient situation of the 'Bibliothèque zaïroise' as it was still reliant on a 'tradition qui remonte en ligne directe aux missionnaires et savants coloniaux' (Mudimbe 1980, 324).

In the past two decades or so, however, anti-extractivism has become one of the main instruments to explore Congolese memory from the perspectives of a wide range of (mis)remembering and (mis)remembered agents and stakeholders, from the DRC and beyond, determined to commemorate, often outside official channels, what they and their forebears have experienced and endured. Since the collapse of the Mobutu regime, the ensuing downfall of the Gécamines,³ the rise of new technologies and the race for tantalum (coltan), tin and tungsten in Eastern Congo (Vogel 2022, 68–69), extractivism has been given a new lease of life. The context in which the scramble for 'digital minerals' (Vogel 2022) or 'conflict minerals'⁴ has unfolded is strangely reminiscent of the conditions that had caused the red rubber scandal. Indeed, as argued by Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem:

[L]e passage du XXe au XXIe siècle présente de curieuses similitudes avec celui du XIXe au XXe. Comme écho de la période léopoldienne qui a été celle de l'introduction du Congo dans l'économie euro-américaine, l'époque présente serait celle de l'accès à l'économie mondiale. Comme 'passage' du premier âge de prédation au second, les acteurs occidentaux ont été rejoints par d'autres agents de la mondialisation qui seraient autant de nouvelles 'tribus des Blancs'. (Ndaywel è Nziem 2020, 425)

Mining time

Interestingly, these 'curieuses similitudes' have fed artistic and literary activity of the past twenty years and have, as is explored in this article, engendered fascinating overlaps and echoes across fiction and the visual arts from the DRC and the Congolese diaspora. Sammy Baloji's *Mémoire* (2006), a piece comprising a film and several *Untitled* photomontages, is symptomatic of this new creativity in which the distant past is evoked, and problematised, to generate a discussion on the pastness of the present. This short mimics oneiric thinking: its distorted form, which elicits an interpretative process that Freud (2008) famously called dream-work, forces its viewers to interrogate 'manifest' contents and infer 'latent' meanings. With this wildly suggestive take on modern Congo, Baloji (2015) is less interested in history per se than in the (seemingly) free accumulation of images and sounds whose narrative association serves the purpose of 'performer l'archive' (Le Lay 2015) and is used as a basis to better understand our present and its links to a traumatic past. His production, as a photographer, video artist, film director but also as exhibition curator,⁵ focuses on memory as this notion was developed by Pierre Nora and his collaborators (1984–1992) in a French context and subsequently problematised (and decolonised) by Michael Rothberg (2009, 2010) in his postcolonial revisitation of Nora's perspectives on national realms of memory. But it also resonates with memory activism, a concept used when memory is mobilised to generate reconciliation and peace resolution in conflict-torn countries (see Fridman 2018; Gutman 2017). Indeed, Baloji sets out here to investigate the memory of Katangese mineral extraction and extractive practices.

Shot on a dilapidated Gécamines site in Lubumbashi, this film skilfully combines traces of the past—speeches by Lumumba, Kasavubu, Mobutu, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, and Mulumba Lukoji—with visions of a ravaged industrial landscape. The soundtrack—a musical arrangement inspired by industrial noises—is used to accompany Faustin Linyekula’s energetic choreography performed on the premises of the former UMHK and Gécamines plant. This film envisions the possibility of a less coercive present. Faustin Linyekula’s movements reflect a certain degree of agency and indicate that the disused plant is there to be repossessed, repurposed, and used to stage and perform his own artistic subjectivity, in addition to proposing a new type of intellectual occupancy. It would be, however, wrong to read these dance moves as evidence of unbridled freedom for, at times, they remain constrained, jittery, and wrought by (neo) colonial dispossession, anxiety, and nervousness as Baloji’s short also explores the necropolitical dimension of the Congolese present past, and thus speaks to the ‘curieuses similitudes’ suggested by Ndaywel è Nziem (2020, 425).

This aspect is even more visible in the photomontage series, for all these pieces combine early twentieth-century black and white with twenty-first-century colour photos. Bogumil Jewsiewicki highlights the nostalgic and reparative dimension of Baloji’s photographic work in *Mémoire* (2006):

[...] les installations industrielles vidées du travail se dressent comme des cathédrales abandonnées érigées à la mémoire des grands-pères. Ces ancêtres sont devenus des fantômes qui se vengent sur les vivants, puisque l’absence du travail industriel dilapidé par les pères empêche les morts relégués à l’oubli d’exercer leur rôle. [...] S’acquitter de ce devoir de mémoire négligé par les pères, permet aussi de revendiquer non seulement le bénéfice de l’expérience des bâtisseurs du Katanga industriel, mais aussi d’en attendre le soutien pour partir à la conquête d’un meilleur avenir. (Jewsiewicki 2010b, 149)

Mémoire takes to task the post-colonial generation during the Mobutu era—the ‘pères’—and their failure to build on the grandfathers’ industrial knowhow.⁶ But it also reflects on the necropolitical nature of the mining sector and focuses on the role assumed by black bodies since the Leopoldian era. By superimposing Union minière photographic archives of black naked bodies over present-day derelict industrial sites, the photomontages denounce the objectifying principles that had presided over the recruitment of African miners (see this link and photo2 under ‘Mémoire’ (2006): SAMMY BALOJI—Axis Gallery). Naked, motionless, expressionless, and stripped of their identity, these men remind us of the violent conditions under which mineral extraction developed in the early days of the twentieth century. It would be therefore right to say that the former Gécamines site, while being a *lieu de mémoire*, is also a ‘lieu de traumatisme’ (Gröning 2016). The compositional features of this archival material—i.e., the rules adhered to by UMHK photographers to position their subjects in space—also demonstrate the extent to which the stereotypes of physical anthropology had seeped through every aspect of colonial labour management. Indeed, this row of men is reminiscent of the studies conducted from the nineteenth century onwards to tabularise, measure, rank, catalogue, and profile human ethnic diversity. These photographs, then, speak to a taxonomic order established at the intersection of policing, medicine and anthropology by nineteenth-century figures such as Alphonse Bertillon (1883), Francis Galton (1892) and Victor Jacques (1894–1895) who were all positioned at the crossroads of biometrics and racial theories.

Mémoire constitutes a landmark in contemporary Congolese culture not least, as argued by Gabriella Nugent (2021) in a book on the role of extractivism in works by Congolese figures such as Baloji and the artist collective Kongo Astronauts, because the 'series visually connects present-day Congo with the history of plunder that started with Leopold II' (41). An analogous momentum can be identified in contemporary Congolese literature and in recently published novels—by Jean Bofane (2014), Sinzo Aanza (2015), Blaise Ndala (2021), Marie-Louise Mumbu (2008) and in works by Fiston Mwanza Mujila—where tracking down the manifestations of necropolitics equates to a *devoir de mémoire*.

Terra morta, Terra nova

I will now turn my attention to Mujila's latest novel, *La Danse du vilain*. This book is stylistically close to *Tram 83*, his international bestseller. It is also replete with references to other media such as cinema, literature and above all music and the book can be regarded as a tribute of sorts to rumba and jazz musicians (see Deckard 2020; Fraiture 2022; Higginson 2017) from Africa who, as suggested by the author himself, accompanied the writing process: 'Ce roman est aussi celui de ces musiciens' (Mujila 2020, 263–264). This loose musical thread reflects the equally loose narrative structure of this novel, not only its syncopated rhythm but also its (seemingly) improvised progression (and digressions). The plot focuses on the plight of a group of homeless teenagers living on the streets of Lubumbashi during the Mobutu era and the narrative sets out to register their movements from the height of the cold war until the collapse of the Second Republic and the (re)emergence of the DRC in 1997 with Laurent-Désiré Kabila at the helm.⁷ The characters find solace in Le Mambo, a bar and nightclub where they get some respite from their harsh existence, indulge in alcohol- and drug-fuelled hedonism, and join in 'la danse du vilain'. As a bar, Le Mambo ambiguously reinforces but also eludes the strictures of Mobutu's neo-colonial order. It is a place that facilitates questionable deals between regime representatives and their (often unofficial) clients and henchmen be they businesspeople or 'mendiants, [...] voleurs amateurs, proxénètes déçus [...]' (Mujila 2020, 105). However, Le Mambo also appears as a laboratory in which a new culture/counter-culture—a new and less ideology-dependent aesthetic order—is in the process of being created. 'La danse du vilain' is employed here to show the extent to which *rumba rules*⁸ are being resented and flouted by the Congolese public. As is well documented, rumba was part and parcel of Mobutu's authenticity project and was central to his propaganda. The state-sponsored 'animation politique et culturelle' turned rumba into an instrument of political indoctrination by combining the 'aesthetic of folklore with the spectacle of popular dance music whose lyrics praised Mobutu and the one-party state' (Nugent 2021, 55). From the early 1970s onwards, rumba practitioners—Franco (Luambo Makiadi) comes to mind (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 94–95; White 2008, 75)—were invited to exploit the resources of this musical genre to pay tribute to Mobutu's regime and policies (White 2008, 65–96). In the novel, 'la danse du vilain' seems to be performed by the Mambo customers to criticise this state-imposed cultural orthodoxy. I would contend that this 'danse du vilain', precisely because it is devoid of 'intelligible' lyrics (Mujila 2020, 105), as stated by one of the main characters, cannot be called upon to support Mobutu's ideology and authenticity project. This lack of intelligibility, then, is a means to counter the official verbiage and the political instrumentalisation of the rumba. The song's *raison*

d'être is above all countercultural as it is performed to assert the rumba's complex genealogy:

[...] juste des cymbales, un saxophone baryton [...] des riffs psychédélices de guitares hawaïennes, un accordéon majestueux [...], une basse-clarinette, deux contrebasses [...], une conga, un triangle, un piano à queue, des castagnettes, des banjos, des trombones [...], deux saxophones alto, deux saxophones ténor, des cornets, la kora, [...], des percussions, [...], un tuba [...]. (Mujila 2020, 105–106)

This list of musical instruments speaks volumes and is a reminder of the rumba's transnational (transatlantic)—and therefore *non-authentic*—origin.

Transnationalism is an important aspect of this novel for it is also set in Lunda Norte, the diamond-rich area of northern Angola, a Congolese *lieu de mémoire* outside the official—national—DRC boundaries. Thus, the text moves back and forth from the Katangese Copperbelt to this other significant mining area of Central Africa where some of the protagonists migrate to escape poverty and the Mobutu regime. Like *Tram 83*, in which, incidentally, St John's Gospel is parodied to refer to the genesis of modern Congo ('Au commencement était la pierre [...]') (Mujila 2014, 9), ore digging also lies at the heart of this novel. By crossing the Congolese-Angolan border, the disengaged youths from Katanga become 'garimpeiros' (Mujila 2020, 26) or, better, 'Bana Lunda', a generic appellation employed to designate the many Zairians who, at the time of the Angolan civil war, left their country, and specifically the Kwango province (Omasombo Tshonda), to improve their economic prospects. This endeavour, however, was fraught with difficulty:

urnommés les Bana Lunda ou les enfants de Lunda, ils descendaient par milliers en Angola notamment dans la province de Lunda Norte en pleine guerre. Certains ne revenaient plus jamais au pays. Tués par balle. Ensevelis par la terre. Morts par noyade pour les scaphandriers et autres plongeurs traquant la pierre dans les eaux troubles de la rivière Kwango. Explosés par des mines antipersonnel. D'autres regagnaient Kinshasa et Bandundu, riches, endettés jusqu'au cou ou paumés comme à leur départ. On savait quand on entrait en Angola mais on ne savait ni le jour, ni l'heure à laquelle on en sortirait. L'armée gouvernementale tout comme la rébellion de l'Unita utilisaient des fortes manières pour décourager les amoureux de la pierre. Côté zaïrois, l'armée attendait de pieds fermes les revenants dans l'espoir de manger sur leur dos. (Mujila 2020, 204)

This cross-border diamond rush, in addition to focusing on the *creuseurs'* raw and precarious corporeality (see Garnier 2022, 211–231), is used as a backdrop to explore the way in which the Cold War was experienced in Zaire and Angola and to examine, via a subplot featuring an unfinished novel by Franz Baumgarten (one of *La Danse du vilain's* secondary characters), the failure to create an independent Katanga (Mujila 2020, 229). This thread focuses on how Angola, and Lunda Norte in particular, became a haven of sorts where the so-called 'gendarmes katangais' took refuge after the failed Katangese secession in the 1960s and the 1977/1978 Shaba wars (De Boeck 2001, 561, n.6). Several concomitant issues contributed to the development of this trans-African *lieu de mémoire*—and the translocation of Katangese memory *away* from Katanga—in which the characters of *La Danse du vilain* are involved: first, the collapse of the copper industry in Katanga and the gradual decline of the Gécamines from the late 1970s onwards (Jewsiewicki, 2010b, 145, Rubbers, 2006); second, the independence of Angola from Portugal in 1975 and the protracted civil war generated by this event; and, thirdly, the involvement of the Angola-based gendarmes katangais in Mobutu's overthrow (De Boeck 2001, 561, n.6).⁹ The novel characters, then, are caught in

this historical turmoil referred to in the Bana Lunda quotation above. In their exploration of late twentieth-century Central African history, Mujila's narrators adopt a more explicatory tone than in *Tram 83* as the narrative is peppered with contextual annotations on diamond digging and the geopolitical factors behind the transnational movements described in the book.

In the 'Note de l'auteur', Mujila admits being indebted to Filip De Boeck 'dont les nombreuses discussions ont nourri le personnage de la Madone' (Mujila 2020, 263). I shall briefly focus on this character—la Madone (Tshiamuena)—later in this piece but what is certainly apparent is that Mujila must have carefully read De Boeck's research article, 'Domesticating Diamonds and Dollars' (1998), on the daily life of Zairian Bana Lunda during the period in which *La Danse du vilain* is set. In this essay, based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the Lunda territory of Southwestern Zaire and Angola, De Boeck provides a fascinating account of the way in which impoverished Zairians made their way to the Angolan province of Lunda Norte to become garimpeiros ('illegal diggers', 784) in the mining town of Cafunfo. The following quotation, and its focus on the mortal perils facing Zairian migrants and returnees, clearly demonstrates where Mujila gathered facts, anecdotes, and intelligence on this quasi '*lieu d'oubli*' (Miller 2008, xi) of Congolese historiography and little-known chapter of the late Mobutu era:

Crossing the Zairean-Angolan border [...] was [...] a dangerous venture. Frequently, people were killed by land-mines or shot by Angolan government troops, [...] who controlled Cafunfo [...] throughout the 1980s. Returning to Zaire was just as hazardous an undertaking, not only because taking diamonds out of Angola was declared illegal by the MPLA, but also because, on the other side, Zairean soldiers patrolled the border, officially to defend Zairean territory from MPLA attacks and to arrest trespassing 'Angolans' [...] but basically to loot and extort money [...] from returning diamond traders. (De Boeck 1998, 783)

Many other passages from this article reflect Mujila's efforts to draw on the anthropologist's findings to bolster the verisimilitude of his narrative. At various points, the Congolese novelist expertly—one would be tempted to say *naturalistically* because Mujila's approach here points to a more conventional conception of the novelistic genre—comments on the operations underlying the extraction—*creusage*—of diamonds. It is difficult here not to establish an analogy with Zola's *modus operandi* and the preparatory work—some of it of ethnographic nature—that went into the writing of *Germinal* (Mitterand 1987, 75–91; Quièvre 2020, 323). In his painstaking descriptions of the personnel involved in this process—the 'plongeurs, kasabuleurs ou scaphandriers' (Mujila 2020, 29)—Mujila also seems to rely on observations by De Boeck (1998, 782), who, in turn, brings his readers' attention to the 'beautiful description of the diamond exploitation [...] between a Luund¹⁰ and the Portuguese *comptoirs* in Northern Angola in the early twentieth century' (De Boeck 1998, 782, footnote 6) by referring to Castro Soromenho's novel *Camaxilo* (1956), a book first published in 1948 in Portuguese under the more evocative (and ominous) title of *Terra morta* (Soromenho, 1979 [1948]).

This reference to fiction is a vehicle to interrogate the regime of truth informing contemporary representations of diamond extraction in Central Africa. De Boeck (1998) argues that these accounts tend to privilege Afro-pessimistic visions—diamonds are often 'seen as the source of ecological destruction, or as the tools of social disjunction, introducing prostitution, alcoholism, violence and exploitation into the rural space' (De Boeck 1998, 802)—at the

expense of less unidimensional narratives. He does not deny the violent effects of this process but insists that the Africans involved in this diamond rush have also been able to operate outside the assumed coloniality of contemporary Central Africa, a region famously described as having been invented by, and trapped into, a modern (Western) discursive regime. De Boeck suggests that for all the hardship usually associated with diamond digging and trafficking, this activity has also enabled Africans to ontologically redefine themselves. He particularly focuses here on the notion of masculinity among the Bana Lunda and argues that the transformations generated by the dollarisation of their activity cannot merely be ascribed to an inexorable process of Westernisation and be captured by the tropes of Afro-pessimistic narratives in which Africans are shown to be the reluctant recipients of an imported modernity. De Boeck (1998) suggests that the Bana Lunda find themselves engaged in ‘a “reinvention” of capitalism [...] in their own terms’ (‘the invention of an Africanized Occident’) and that this reterritorialisation of ‘the West and its pathways of accumulation’ (802) also provides the backdrop against which their own masculinity undergoes transformation. But he contends that this transformative process remains reliant on ‘longstanding moral matrixes’ (801) and thus does not in itself constitute a total rupture with the type of masculinity that had prevailed before their arrival in Lunda Norte when game hunting, with all its rites of passage, rituals and sedimented ancestral practices, was the cornerstone on which depended clannish identity, survival, and cohesion. As an overlooked transnational site of memory—the above-mentioned *lieu d’oubli*—Lunda Norte helps us to understand how postcolonial history has reconnected with the territorial fluidity that had prevailed when the Lunda were free to roam across the national frontiers established at the Berlin Conference (1884–85).

In his own exploration of this historical phenomenon, Mujila also registers how this Angolan exile is responsible for the transformation of his male characters who, while falling prey to the many perils associated with this new life, also reap the benefits from *creusage*. The Congolese writer seems to contend that this dangerous but ontologically transformative activity cannot be subsumed by the figures of Afro-pessimistic literature. By the same token, *La Danse du vilain* reflects on the narrative possibilities of the novel as a genre and on the difficulty to produce ‘des textes peu reluisants sur l’Afrique sans être accusé de perpétuer l’image d’un continent moribond’ (Mujila 2020, 210). Even though this novel remains opaque, elliptical, and allusive, it possesses a historicising dimension largely absent from *Tram 83*. Despite their resemblances, *La Danse du vilain* and *Tram 83* significantly diverge in their treatment of time. In *Tram 83*, temporality is ahistorical and marked by the relentless return of the past in the present. *La Danse du vilain*, on the other hand, adopts a progressive, dialectical, and transformative conception of history:

[...] le Zaïre, le Congo ou le Congo-Zaïre—c’est selon—l’Angola et bien d’autres pays, pendant une guerre ou juste après, deviennent les pays de la chance, du lupemba,¹¹ de l’argent... On peut le soir grimper dans son lit vilain, dernier des vilains de la terre, et se réveiller le lendemain ministre ou inspecteur de la police nationale, ou plus encore pour les plus chanceux, ambassadeur plénipotentiaire de la République du Zaïre [...] auprès du Royaume de Belgique. (Mujila 2020, 247)

But the two novels also diverge in their treatment of space: *Tram 83* does not take place in a precisely named country even though the ‘Ville-Pays’ and the ‘Arrière-Pays’ are obvious references to Lubumbashi and Congo, Zaire or DRC. This lack of clear geographical anchorage feeds the dystopian dimension of this novel¹² and is constitutive of its

allegorical thrust, for like other African texts—*La Vie et demie* comes to mind—*Tram 83* can be read as a sort of political fable. This absence of chronological and spatial markers is deliberate and underpins the novel's more abstract exploration of capitalism as a system maintaining time and place out of history and precipitating the advent of the *terra morta*. There is a sense here that some of the building blocks of capitalism, such as the notion of primitive accumulation, are still operating and that time itself, as argued by Eli Jelly-Schapiro (2022, 1193) in an article partly dedicated to *Tram 83*, has collapsed onto itself through 'the reenactment, in the present, of putatively primordial modes of depredation'.¹³ This novel memorialises the past, present and future ravages of mining in Katanga. In this context, Katangese mining is narrativised as a traumatic *lieu de mémoire*, that is, as a space submitted to the 'slow violence' of mining and extractivist capitalism (Nixon 2011) and traversed by the return of colonial figures such as Stanley (see Fraiture 2022).

Tram 83 examines Congolese necropolitics as this concept has been developed by Achille Mbembe in several publications (2003, 2016, 2019). In a short piece, 'Le monde-zéro: matière et machine' (2014), specifically written to comment on Sammy Baloji's pictures of copper mines in his *Mémoire/Kolwezi* photo album, Mbembe argues that capitalist economy is still residually primitive: 'a gardé un fonds de primitivité', as it has continued to be contingent on the 'paradigme de la chasse et de la cueillette' (2014, 74). He describes this economy as a zero world in which:

la fin [est] chaque fois différée et la question même de la finitude suspendue. [...] Le monde zéro est un monde dont il est difficile de figurer le devenir justement parce que le temps dont il est tissé ne se laisse guère capter à travers les catégories traditionnelles du présent, du passé et du futur. (Mbembe 2014, 76)

In addition to being characterised by this temporal indeterminacy, this zero-world analysed by Mbembe, fictionalised by Mujila in *Tram 83*, and photographed by Sammy Baloji (2014), is also an entity whose landscapes and occupants have been downgraded by capitalist extraction. In the following quotation, 'hommes' and matter are part of one single chromatic continuum:

C'est également un monde qui porte dans sa chair et dans ses veines les entailles de la machine. Des crevasses, des gouffres et des tunnels. Des lacs de cratère. La couleur tantôt ocre, tantôt rouge latéritique et tantôt cuivrée de la terre. [...]. Des hommes-fourmis, des hommes-termites, des hommes rouges de latérite qui creusent à la pioche à même la pente ; qui s'engouffrent dans ces tunnels de la mort ; qui, dans un geste d'auto-ensevelissement, font corps et couleur avec ces sépulcres d'où ils extraient le minerai. (Mbembe 2014, 76)

Of course, this reflection on capitalism also informs *La Danse du vilain* but here the approach is, without being straightforwardly realistic, certainly more relatable because the reader can locate the characters and the events in time, space, and history. This situatedness is a tool to propose a discussion on the meaning of nationhood during and after Mobutu's reign, in DRC but also beyond its national frontiers, and to articulate the interconnectedness of memorial processes across the Congo/Angola official demarcation lines. The novel's dual location upsets the fixity of colonial and indeed neo-colonial cartographies. This cross-border setting and the prioritisation of characters on the move run counter to the inherent exoticism informing the construction of Afro-pessimistic narratives. Here, Mujila's Africa is not

the proverbial *terra morta* but a reinvented continent or a ‘*terra nova*’, to refer to the metaphorical shortcut used by De Boeck in his article (1998, 803–804). In his ‘Note de l’auteur’, Mujila is eager to point out that the Zairian diamond diggers in Angola had deliberately boycotted ‘les frontières héritées de la colonisation’ (Mujila 2020, 263). The focus on Lunda Norte, then, provides an opportunity to engage with the fluid nature of ethnic circulation in Central Africa and to approach Congolese and Angolan histories away from the intrinsic coloniality of a more traditional national framework.

This imbrication—the Lunda have for centuries lived across a huge territory stretching from Angola, Congo (Katanga) and Zambia (see Bustin 1975)—is captured by Mujila’s ability to render the lives of Katangese *creuseurs*—the above-mentioned Bana Lunda—in the Angolan mines of Cafunfu. This community revolves around Tshiamuena, a matriarchal figure revered by the miners, not only by the Angolan staff but also the Katangese protagonists of this novel. As already mentioned above this character was inspired by conversations between Mujila and De Boeck. Therefore, the novel constitutes yet another example of fruitful (and in this case informal) collaboration between fiction and social anthropology (see Clifford 1988; Debaene 2010). Indeed, Mujila’s Tshiamuena is loosely based on a real Congolese woman, Mado, interviewed by De Boeck as part of his volume on Kinshasa (De Boeck and Plissart 2004). In a fascinating chapter, ‘Mado, the Story of a Female Diamond Smuggler’ (211–223), the Belgian anthropologist presents, through her own words (translated from Lingala into English), her extraordinary life story: her determination to become rich, her ability to dodge, bribe and even marry customs officers or Angolan diggers to cross the Angolan border from Congo and gain the right to remain in Lunda Norte, and her callous capacity to get rid of rivals—and sometimes lovers—to keep and fructify her hard-won capital. One of the many interesting features of this piece of ethnography is that it has literary qualities, reads like a short story, and offers hitherto little-known (but also unavowable) details on the survival strategies adopted by this female smuggler:

After a month, our ‘bundle’ of diamonds had grown considerably. Ya Willy wanted to return to Congo once and for all and he started to make plans to marry me upon our return. Since I was already married in Congo, I knew that I could not possibly go along with his plans. I decided that it was time to play a trick on Willy. I myself produced a letter which was addressed to me and seemingly came from the Congo. In the letter, my family announced the imminent death of my mother. They begged me to come home as soon as I received their message so that I could take my mother to hospital and pay for her bills. That day, I cooked dinner. Then I went inside the house and stayed there for the rest of the day, adopting a sad air. When Willy came home, I made sure that big tears were rolling down my cheeks. [...] He was surprised to see that I was crying and asked me what was going on. I gave him the letter [...]. He was moved and tried to calm me down. [...] Willy promised to let me return to Congo so that I could look after my mother [...]. Willy and I made love, all night long till the morning. In the morning, I told him that the money to hospitalize my mother constituted a major problem. Willy said that he was willing to split the diamonds we had. I told him: ‘Before doing that, I want to make love to you again’. And so we did. Afterwards, he took the bundle containing the diamonds and we divided them in two equal parts. [...] I arrived in Kikwit a couple of days ago. Now I have escaped from Willy. (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 221)

In its rawness and uncomplicated (if chilling) but reasoned and rational mendacity, this account resonates with other stories—Serge Amisi’s *Souvenez-vous de moi, l’enfant de*

demain (2011, also translated and adapted from Lingala) springs to mind—based on real-life experiences of war and genocide survivors. In *La Danse du vilain*, then, Mujila appropriates this real smuggler and turns her into an even more fantastical character, Tshiamuena. Allegedly born in the fifteenth century (Mujila 2020, 68), but also, ‘en 1885, 1882, 1876, voire [...] en 1492’ (73–74), she is a larger-than-life character—sorcerer, cannibal—reminiscent of other great semi-historical, semi-mythical central African female figures such as Kimpa Vita (Thornton 1998) or Lueji Ya Konde (Pepetela 1989). Called ‘la Madone des mines’, Tshiamuena is used as yet another literary device to memorialise *creusage* and explore the history of the Congo inside but also beyond its national borders and, in turn, contribute to the edification of the above-mentioned transnational (and trans-African) *lieu de mémoire*. Mujila suggests that Congolese history has also been taking place away from the Congo and been shaped by external factors and global actors. This focus on transnational intertwinements is an aspect informing other recent artistic experiments such as the exhibition ‘K(C)ongo, Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues’ curated by Sammy Baloji in which a collection of drawings inspired by Kongo motifs were used to trace and research ‘the political, religious and commercial exchanges that took place between the Kongo kingdom, Portugal and the Vatican as early as the 16th century’ (Baloji 2022).¹⁴ In an interview on this event, Baloji argues that Central Africa, with its ‘frontières arbitraires’ is an ‘espace inventé’: ‘C’est cela que je questionne: comment la colonisation a partagé l’Afrique et comment, à partir de l’intérieur, je peux raconter des histoires qui échappent à ces frontières qui ont été imposées vers le dix-neuvième siècle’ (Baloji 2022).

Mujila adopts an analogous approach in *La Danse du vilain*, a book offering an alternative story of Zaire—reinvented by Zairian *creuseurs* in Lunda Norte, an overlooked *lieu de mémoire*—and questioning at the same time the status of Congolese literature within a trans-African and trans-continental network of exchange. Books and writers are submitted to the vagaries of the market, and, in this respect, they are, in the same way as diamonds and their traffickers, susceptible to the peaks and troughs of supply and demand: ‘La pierre n’a aucune valeur en Afrique. Il faudra qu’elle atterrisse à Anvers ou ailleurs pour qu’elle recouvre sa valeur réelle’ (Mujila 2020, 59).¹⁵ Like *Tram 83* before (see Fraiture 2022; Higginson 2017), *La Danse du vilain* examines the challenges associated with the circulation of literary goods and the constraints under which writers from Africa and the Global North—writers from the peripheral or central areas of world literature (Moretti 2000)—are operating and competing. Mujila focuses here on Franz Baumgarten, a fictional Austrian writer who has a Zairian passport but can no longer claim this citizenship when Zaire becomes the DRC in 1997. This *doppelgänger* of sorts—Mujila is a Congolese novelist residing in Austria—is employed to stage literature itself and the possibility of transforming—‘reworlding’—its (neo)colonial cartographies and canonical practices (Cheah 2016, 246–277).

Mujila challenges unidimensional representations of Congo and employs the narrative resources of the novel to move away from simplified accounts of his native country and identify what has been referred to as *nœuds de mémoire* in the ‘hope to stimulate further conceptualization of collective or cultural memory beyond the framework of the imagined community of the nation-state’ (Rothberg 2010, 7). Indeed, Mujila demonstrates that the DRC is made up of overlapping *lieux de mémoire* and that, if the Katangese

experience goes a long way to render the centrality of mining from the point of view of a Congolese collective memory, other memories should urgently be taken into account.

La Danse du vilain, whilst mainly focusing on Mobutu's Zaire as seen and experienced by characters in Lunda Norte and Lubumbashi, makes use of a complex web of narrative voices and perspectives to render this period which culminated with Mobutu's demise and Laurent-Désiré Kabila's power grab in the wake of the First Congo war (1996–1997), an event itself caused by the Rwandan Genocide (Prunier 2009). The fifty-four chapters of this book do not progress sequentially as their arrangement remains contingent on a loose plot whose many threads are abruptly interrupted, abandoned but also unexpectedly taken up by different African or European first- and third-person narrators. Mujila, like Mohamed Mbougar Sarr in *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes*, tests the patience of his readers—and critics—by exposing the unreliability of his narrators and the infinite intertextual porosity of his novel. This literary trick(ery), however, is, like in Sarr's novel, triggered to ponder the possibilities of the novel as a genre and the mirroring effects produced by the cohabitation, in the same narrative, of other novels, a strategy employed by Sarr to situate Yambo Ouologuem within a tradition—'le génie du collage' (Sarr 2021, 232)—initiated by Jorge Borges and continued by Roberto Bolaño.¹⁶ Indeed, the *labyrinthine* structure of *La Danse du vilain* is complicated by the presence of two main competing but also overlapping narratives. In the words of one of the Katangese characters conversing with his friends in the Mambo, the Austrian (but Zairian) writer is an intriguing case:

Tantôt, il raconte qu'il écrit un roman sur Tshiamuena, une femme bicentenaire qu'il aurait rencontrée en Angola, tantôt il me fait comprendre qu'il bosse sur des gendarmes katangais et ça fait des années qu'il bosse sur ce fameux roman! (Mujila 2020, 209)

The tone of this statement—the derogatory 'raconte', the use of the conditional and the sarcastic 'fameux'—signals that Baumgarten's literary undertakings are not taken seriously and even held in suspicion as he is also carefully watched by the Zairian intelligence service. And this critic of sorts adds:

Si vous voulez mon avis, c'est très ardu pour lui d'être un écrivain blanc et de devoir écrire sur l'Afrique, ou plus précisément d'entretenir dans son roman non pas un personnage noir mais des personnages noirs. C'est, je pense, écrire dans une mare de clichés. Le comble, c'est qu'il n'est pas écrivains comme Handke ou Musil—qui sont venus à l'écriture progressivement, d'abord par la poésie. Franz est devenu écrivain par hasard et, pour son premier roman, il doit déjà composer avec des personnages qui lui échappent . . . (Mujila 2020, 209–210)

This normative statement complies with the *authentic* logic underpinning Mobutu's cultural policy. It was applied to music and dance, as argued earlier when I analysed the role of rumba in this novel, but also to literary productions. Baumgarten's critic contends that he should stick to the traditional path followed by his illustrious Austrian predecessors. He also says that his whiteness precludes him from being able to imagine and successfully develop black characters. This sort of anti-racist racism, first introduced by Sartre (1948), rejected by Fanon (1952) in his own refutation of negritude, then embraced by Mobutu's authenticity advocates and, lately, by the opponents of cultural reappropriation (Siems 2019), is taken to task by Mujila. As a novelist dialoguing with African peers—e.g. Jean Bofane—but also *white* interlocutors such as Didier de Lannoy, the Belgian social scientist and novelist, Marc de Gouvenain, a literary editor at Actes Sud and, of course, Filip De Boeck (Mujila 2020, 263),

Mujila challenges this narrow understanding of cultural identity. This said, the connection between writing and reappropriation—and hence extraction—is broached in the novel. In the above-mentioned bar discussion, it is also argued that Baumgarten, by dint of being European, ‘peut écrire sur qui il veut’ (Mujila 2020, 210). By the same token, *creusage* is used as a metaphor for writing: ‘Même en abandonnant son projet sur les gendarmes katangais pour celui de Tshiamuena [...], il avait toujours l’impression de s’enliser. Comme un éboulement qui prend de court des orpailleurs à l’intérieur du trou’ (Mujila 2020, 120).

By and large, however, this issue of cultural reappropriation has an autobiographical dimension and reflects Mujila’s own position as a francophone Congolese writer living in Austria, writing increasingly in German and who, as suggested in an interview, does ‘not exclude completely abandoning French’ (Noubel). As argued by Susanne Gehrmann (2022), his 2018 theatre play, *Zu der Zeit der Königinmutter*, has been described by the author himself as ‘a hybrid creature of African and Austrian elements’ (171). Interestingly, Mujila regards German as a ‘neutral language’ and does not associate it with ‘violence and brutality’ whereas French, ‘even if appropriated as a creative tool, remains a colonial language of power’ (Gehrmann 2022, 171). In an interview with Filip Noubel, Mujila describes himself as an ‘Afroaustrian’ writer and argues that people from Lubumbashi, speaking Swahili and being geographically closer to centres such as Lusaka and Johannesburg, have developed a looser connection to Kinshasa, the French language and the cultural Paris-centred Francosphere (Noubel; see also Ranaivoson). For Mujila, who alongside French, German, and Swahili also masters Ciluba, Lingala and English, language is but a tool to produce literature (Noubel). This reflection on language also provides an opportunity to assess literature’s creative possibilities in an Africa where monolingualism does not rhyme with nationalism and with what Benedict Anderson (2006), referring to France and England, called the ‘relatively high coincidence of language-of-state and language of the population’ (60). There is no doubt that the memorial processes and multi-perspectivity that I have explored in *La Danse du vilain* is further complicated by the multilingual contexts—Swahili, French, Lunda and Portuguese—experienced by the characters; and that this situation, in turn, reveals the emergence of an Africa liberated from the shackles of colonial monolingualism (see Van den Avenne 2017, 202). As suggested by Mujila in the same interview, he is above all interested in ‘inter-African dynamics’, the ‘porosity of borders’ and to instances of ‘secessionist discourse’ disseminated to develop ‘resistance against nationalism and authoritarianism’ (Noubel). *La Danse du vilain* seems to be doing all these things at the same time. It focuses on Zairian migrants in Angola and asserts the necessity to narrate Congolese history from other viewpoints. By staging characters on the move—diamond smugglers from Lubumbashi, *creuseurs* from Lunda Norte, and *gendarmes katangais* half conjured up by a pseudo-Zairian novelist from Austria—Fiston Mwanza Mujila argues that Mobutuism and its memory—memories—lie in Congo and its subsoil but also, and perhaps more crucially, in an African geography that has—or *should* have—little concern for national borders.

Conclusion

Extraction and its depletive effects have often been associated with the Congo since its creation as a *modern* repository of resources. It has also been evoked to bolster the rhetoric behind ‘mise en valeur’ and, relatedly, deplore the human—rather than the

environmental—consequences of (neo)imperial extractive ventures. In this context, the mine—its landscapes and personnel whether in Lubumbashi, Kolwezi or Lunda Norte—has been mobilised to elicit a reflection on Congolese memory. Anti-extractivist activism, on the other hand, has been particularly attentive to the ecocidal ravages of twenty-first-century mining in the Global South. Whilst being mindful of the human and exploitative effects of such activities, anti-extractivist activists have also shifted the debate away from traditional humanism and insisted on the development of a planetary consciousness in which all organic species and inorganic matters would be granted a right to cohabit equitably and respectfully. It is my contention in this article that twenty-first-century DRC culture (across a wide spectrum of productions involving artists, curators, fiction writers and social anthropologists) has largely been informed by this new brand of memory activism. DRC culture is characterised by its disciplinary porosity and ability to tap into the resources of literature, colonial archives, photography, film, and anthropology. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the works analysed here is their power to feed from other media and genres and approach creativity as an act of co-creation or cross-creation. Baloji's archiving of Katanga's industrial landscape is a dual gesture. It offers a critical memorialisation of a necropolitical present past but also acts as a tribute to a time—roughly speaking 1960–80—when the UMHK/Gécamines was able to infuse a sense of collective identity among its workers. Baloji's work also showcases the proximity of art and research.¹⁷ In his novels, *Mujila*, from Lubumbashi and one of Baloji's quasi-contemporaries, addresses the same extractive context. In *Tram 83*, the mine—treated here as an atemporal black hole and a traumatic *lieu de mémoire*—is a symbol of a globalised, unbridled and hyper-exploitative capitalism. In *La Danse du vilain*, however, it is an altogether less sinister site where Katangese-cum-Bana Lunda are given the choice to escape the strictures of an *authentic* identity and become what they were not meant to be. Digging holes, and to return to the title of this article, is part and parcel of a process whereby the mine is employed to remember traumatic pasts, call for reparation and reconciliation, and identify overlooked sites of (multidirectional) memory. Digging holes, then, is a strategy to excavate the present, understand the life-terminating but also the life-giving powers of the soil and the environment. This possible ontological transformation, in turn, is facilitated by a reconfigured African geography, the emergence of transnational *lieux de mémoire*, and a decentering of the nation-based cartography inherited from imperial times, a process relating back to the above-mentioned planetary consciousness. This ambition to disrupt conventional maps and chronologies is also supplemented by a determination to treat the novel as an intermediary—or intermedial—genre allowing unexpected conversations with non-literary modes of expression, be it music, the visual arts (Ranaivoson 2009, 51–52) and anthropology. This more hybrid form of co-creation has been successfully trialled by Filip De Boeck and Sammy Baloji in their exploration of the Congolese cityscape (2016) and in their soon-to-be published study on gendarmes katangais residing in Lunda Norte.¹⁸ In this now rich body of work, the 'hole'—an interpretative trope to explore necropolitics, past and present traumas and envisage the shape of the future—is presented as a two-faced Janus. It is a glaring sign of poverty, but it is also, as argued by De Boeck in a reference to Kinshasa potholes, a site from where change could be enacted:

[The] Kin-based artist, Pathy Tshindele, created a street performance on one of Kinshasa's dilapidated central avenues in 2017. Sitting in the middle of the avenue on a plastic bucket in front of a giant, water-filled pothole, with cars passing by on all sides, Tshindele picks up a fishing rod and starts to fish in the pothole, much to the surprise and bewilderment of the car drivers and pedestrians, who soon flock around Tshindele's pothole, shouting comments and questions to the artist. Tshindele's performance, as a politics of presence in the urban public space reveals the potential for political and environmental criticism that the active absence of the hole carries within itself, while pointing to ways in which absences can yield new opportunities and can be sutured into the 'something else' of potentially more inhabitable urban worlds. (De Boeck 2022, 159)

Notes

1. This article is an extended version of a paper delivered at the University of Milan in September 2022. Shorter versions in French—'Tout ce qui brille n'est pas diamant: violence et extraction dans *La Danse du vilain* (2020) de Fiston Mwanza Mujila'—were presented at the Institut Supérieur Pédagogique of Kinshasa (ISP-Gombe) and at the ISP of Mbuji-mayi in November 2022 with the support of the European Research Council research project 'Philosophy and Genre: Creating a Textual Basis for African Philosophy'. I would like to express my gratitude to my Congolese hosts Prof. Crispin Maalu-Bungi and Prof. Emmanuel Kambaja Musampa for their boundless generosity and the stimulating exchanges generated by this visit.
2. It is impossible to be comprehensive here but other (im)material *lieux de mémoire* would include the Congo river, rumba music, the Matadi-Leopoldville railway line, the Tata Raphaël stadium and the Palais de la Nation in Kinshasa; historical figures such as Kimpa Vita, Simon Kimbangu, Leopold II, Stanley, Patrice Lumumba, Mobutu; and other sites such as the Virunga Park and the uranium and radium mine of Shinkolobwe, alongside some raw materials (rubber, diamonds, copper, cobalt and coltan); *kindoki* (witchcraft); la Sape; Pentecostal churches; Lingala.
3. La Générale des Carrières et des Mines, the mineral conglomerate that replaced the colonial Union Minière du Haut Katanga (UMHK) after Mobutu's *coup* in 1965 (Vanthemsche 2012, 247–251).
4. In his book, Vogel (2–4) insists that these so-called 'conflict minerals' (or '3 Ts') are not the cause of wars in DRC but that the revenues generated from the sales of minerals are employed by belligerents to finance military operations.
5. For an overview of his activities in this domain and his collaborations with intellectuals such as Lotte Arndt, Dominique Malaquais, Fiston Mwanza Mujila and many others, see Baloji et al. (2019). He also co-curated, with Bambi Ceuppens, 'Congo Art Works: Popular Painting', an exhibition held at the BOZAR (Brussels) in 2016–2017 and co-edited the eponymous exhibition catalogue.
6. Bogumil Jewsiewicki was also the curator of Baloji's first solo exhibition in the United States, 'The Beautiful Time. Photography by Sammy Baloji', at the Museum for African Art, New York (2010). This exhibition was based on the *Mémoire* material discussed here. Jewsiewicki authored the eponymous exhibition catalogue. The phrase 'the beautiful time' (or 'la belle époque' in French) is used to nostalgically look back at the time when the UMHK/Gécamines was still successful. Jewsiewicki has extensively written on Congolese art, not only on Baloji but also other contemporary artists approached from the perspective of memory, see Jewsiewicki (2016).
7. The DRC was referred to as Zaire between 1971 and 1997.
8. Here I am referring to Bob White's book (2008) on rumba. Baloji also co-directed (with David. N. Bernatchez) the film *Rumba Rules: Nouvelles Généalogies* (2020), a project to which Kiripi Katembo and Nelson Makengo contributed.

9. The gendarmerie katangaise is often presented as a neo-colonial paramilitary group created after 1960 to facilitate the Katangese secession, maintain the economic status quo in Katanga and allow Western powers—and Belgium in particular—to control the province’s mineral resources (De Witte 2022, 63–66). This explanation, albeit exact in the main, leaves out the fact that this group, when in exile in Angola, was able to reinvent itself away from this neo-colonial agenda (Kennes and Larmer 2016).
10. The ‘aLuund,’ ‘Aluund’ or ‘atuLuund’ are the terms used by the the Lunda of southern-western Congo (Kwango region) to refer to themselves in uLuund, their language. Now, however, the preferred denomination is simply ‘Lunda’. I would like to thank Filip De Boeck for clarifying this point.
11. Success in Lingala.
12. And the ‘tendency of Mujila’s novel towards resource conflict dystopia’ (Deckard 2020, 254).
13. Theorised by Marx in *Capital*, the concept of primitive accumulation is predicated on the idea that capitalism, in the West and in the colonies, was originally made possible by land dispossession, resource extraction, displacements of populations, exploitation of the labour force and environmental devastation. By drawing on thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Rosa Luxemburg, David Harvey but also Rob Nixon, Eli Jelly-Schapiro (1996) demonstrates that primitive accumulation ‘is not merely originary but ongoing’.
14. Kongo refers to the precolonial state whose territory extended over present-day DRC, Republic of Congo and Angola. It is also used as an adjective.
15. On the role of Antwerp in the diamond trade, see Misser and Vallée (1997, 41–56).
16. The epigraph of *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* is taken from Bolaño’s *Los detectives salvajes*.
17. As he was telling me in an interview in Brussels (12 July 2023), he is in the process of completing a PhD thesis under Bambi Ceuppens’s supervision at the LUCA School of Arts (Brussels). This thesis focuses on the Kasaïan Kasala, an oral genre used to praise and/or commemorate the genealogy of Luba people. He is particularly interested in how this genre can be transposed in other languages (in French in particular) and other settings (outside Kasai). In *Congo as Fictions* (2020), he provided, in collaboration with Fiston Mwanza Mujila, examples of transposed Kasala.
18. To be published by Harvard University Press with the support of the Peabody Museum where Sammy Baloji was the Robert Gardner Photography Fellow in 2017: [Sammy Baloji | Peabody Museum \(harvard.edu\)](https://www.harvard.edu) [accessed on 26 July 2023].

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