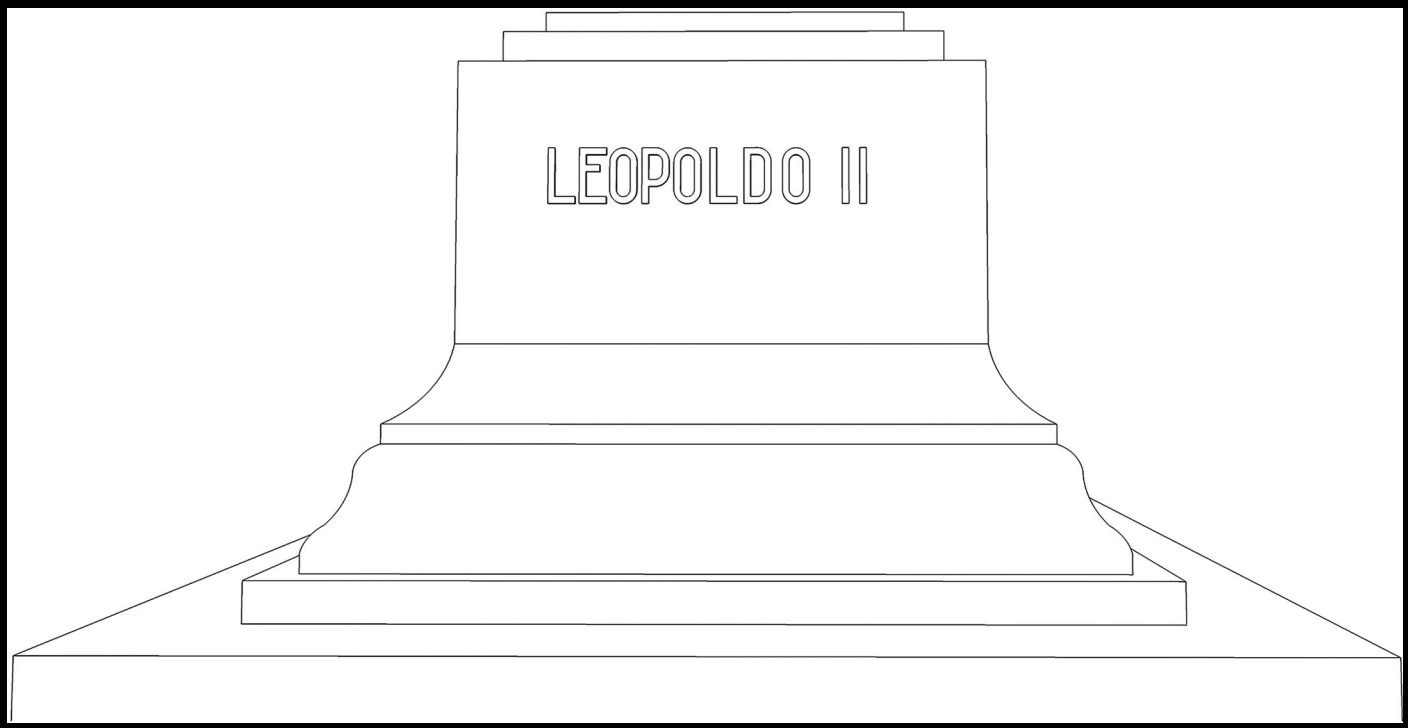
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PeoPL's Bursting Light

Melting Down the Afterlives of a Monstrous Colonial Monument

Joachim Ben Yakoub

Drop by drop, an ice replica of the late king Leopold II's equestrian statue is slowly melting away under its radiant reversed pedestal, hanging upside down from the ceiling in the hallway of a secondary school in the Marolles neighbourhood of Brussels, October 2018. The artist Laura Nsengiyumva turned the foundation of the colonial monument into the base of a heat lamp, inscribed with the letters of the king's name reshuffled, from *Leopold* to *PeoPL*.[1] For Nsengiyumva, melting an ice replica of this royal and colonial monument, central to the national history of Belgium, hints at the slow, almost invisible but instrumental, disappearance of the phantasmagorical and imposing presence of the late king, along with the colonial epistemologies the statue embodies in public space.

Her happening highlights the patience required to change prevailing dominant attitudes. Yet, in the same breath it also confirms the certainty that change is slowly happening. The materialisation of her dream to knock the sculpture of the late king off his pedestal by turning the base of the statue upside down is not intended to perpetuate the presence of the real statue in Throne Square, in the centre of Brussels. On the contrary, Nsengiyumva sees her happening as a gesture that – together with the burst of light emanating from the actions of groups of activists, artists and collectives – foresees the eventual ruination of the colonial statue, made of copper and tin extracted in Belgian Congo. Transforming the pedestal into an epitaph would serve as a totem of remembrance of all past and present victims of colonisation. Nevertheless, in her installation the light shining from the upside-down pedestal to melt the ice replica, is envisioned as a homage to the actions of activists and their ancestral

Laura Nsengiyumva, *PEOPL schema 0*, 2018, photo: courtesy Laura Nsengiyumva

1 The more than eight-hour melting of the statue was livestreamed and can now be viewed on YouTube; see Laura Nsengiyumva, *Laura Nsengiyumva Live Stream*, *YouTube*, 6 October 2018, https://youtu.be/kmFHM0RUAWY, accessed 17 November 2021.

lineage of anti-colonial dissent, determined to make history. It is a sensitive ode to their disobedience, necessary to keep open a space in which to discuss Belgium's colonial past, to ruin the still very present coloniality of power. Finally, in the resulting pool of water Nsengiyumva sees a source of life and a new beginning, a possible allegory for a common heritage, taking shape. Nsengiyumva's illuminating gesture makes almost palpable the afterlives of an ongoing royal and colonial monument-making process, as her gesture shows the subtle ways in which – after almost a century – it gained visibility once more, by paradoxically dissipating an ice reproduction into cold water, the source of life itself.[2]

Zeynep Çelik, in her study on colonial/postcolonial intersections in Algiers, shows how colonial monuments tend to reinforce the imposition of power structures and function as enduring symbolic sites by carrying forward their meaning from the colonial to the postcolonial era.[3] In this sense the present can never be completely sealed off, as it holds the potential to bring back unsolicited memories.[4] First inaugurated in 1926, this colonial monument in honour of the late king of Belgium, located in the heart of Brussels, has over time become almost invisible, thereby normalising the open wounds left behind by colonisation. The inability to *fully* remember has provided protection against the unsolicited and appalling records of history. Some colonial wounds have not been processed yet, and the deep pain felt as a result of the manifold forms of individual and collective injustices inflicted over generations still affect the social order today. As suggested by Deborah Cherry, questioning the afterlives of colonial monuments implies exploring the conditions under which these monuments tend to endure; it also, and more importantly, involves looking into the, at times unpredictable, desires, demands and claims made in relation to the monuments in question.[5] Bringing the afterlives of monuments as mnemonic forms into the centre of our preoccupations implies looking into the antagonistic and lively processes of monument-making. This gesture entails a thorough questioning of 'how, where, when, and why monuments have been remodelled, reused, remade, re-sited, cast aside, adapted, destroyed, defaced, forgotten, or abandoned'.[6] Through their re-appropriation, defacement, disbandment, destruction, reconstruction, and recycling, monuments 'leave traces, vestiges of a previous state', and tend to 'accumulate afterlives' as they 'enjoy, resist, and attract multiple… re-appraisals and remakings, generated by diverse groups or opposing communities' and their 'corporeal, mnemonic, and sensory engagements'.[7] By melting down an ice reproduction of the statue, Nsengiyumva is not only melting down the colonial afterlives of the reproduced monument and its broader assemblage, but she is also ruining 'the promise of survival, of living-on, through change' that this concept of afterlives holds.[8]

Aligning myself with a productive stream of readings of Nsengiyumva's illuminating proposition, I propose to deepen the reflection on the poetics of time by the slow meltdown of the enlightened replica, emphasising what Meltem Ahıska called the 'monstrosity of monuments'.[9] I will further add to these considerations a reflection on the poetics of space suggested by the vibrant matter that emanates from the highlighted replica, signifying a connection to a broader monumental assemblage still holding contemporary colonial lines of force together. The poetics of both time and space, each in their own particular way, cede to a funda-

2 Nsengiyumva's interpretation of her own work is derived from a detailed talk she gave at the artivist hub 'Le Space' in Brussels in May 2018, captured in the YouTube film 'PeoPL (Mobilisation)'; see: Nsengiyumva, *PeoPL (Mobilisation)*, *YouTube*, 12 September 2018, https://youtu.be/7dPfGhMYMGs, accessed 24 September 2018.

3 Zeynep Çelik, 'Colonial/Postcolonial Intersections: Lieux de Mémoire in Algiers', *Third Text* 49, vol 13, issue 49, 1999, pp 63–72, p 63

4 Meltem Ahıska, 'Monsters that Remember: Tracing the Story of the Workers' Monument in Tophane, İstanbul', *New Perspectives on Turkey* 45, 2011, pp 9–47, doi:10.1017/S0896634600001291, Part 1 available at https://red-thread.org/en/monsters-that-remember-tracing-the-story-of-the-workers-monument-in-tophane-istanbul-part-i/

5 Deborah Cherry, 'The Afterlives of Monuments', *South Asian Studies*, vol 29, no 1, 2013, pp 1–14, p 3

6 Ibid

7 Ibid

8 Ibid

9 Ahıska, 'Monsters that Remember', op cit

mental and primary reflection on the preconditions, possibilities and properties of prevailing aesthetics, or to a certain shared colonial distribution of the sensible. These poetics enable a reconfiguring of these aesthetics once the still suffocating and enclosed racialised bodies decide to breathe, move and revolt. Thinking through the possibilities of time and the vibrant possibilities of space that together determine the aesthetics of the work, will set the proper conditions to render visible not only the burst of light shining from the upside-down pedestal, symbolising the actions of the growing protests against the bronze colonial effigy, but also the humbling and, as we will see, premonitory brilliance of the artwork itself.

Figuring Out the Sensible

Before figuring out the aesthetics at play in the work of Nsengiyumva, a more detailed account is needed of the original sculpture of which her installation is a full-scale replica. Five years after Leopold II passed away in 1909, the Belgian authorities took the initiative to commission a memorial in which his incommensurable legacy would be chiselled in stone. It was created by the sculptor Thomas Vinçotte, but was only finalised after World War I by architect François Malfait, and inaugurated in 1926 in the presence of the highest royal, political and financial authorities of the time. The statue was erected in Throne Square, south-east of the Royal Palace. The location of the monument in the 'heart of the city' was quintessential to the project, as it had to remind passers-by of the immense debt they owed their belated king.[10] As Lucas Catherine has remarked,[11] the royal statue looks towards what used to be the Banque Lambert (now merged to form the ING-bank), the local branch of the Rothschild family, which not only financed the new state of Belgium under Leopold I, but also the first colonial expeditions led by the king in Congo.[12] The royal stables, renowned for serving as a hiding place, preventing a lawsuit over royal ivory transfers, are located to the left-hand side of the 'founding father' of the Belgian Congo. Funded through public tender, with the raw materials being offered by the Union Minière du Haut-Katanga (UMHK), the erection of the statue proved to be a profitable decision. With this accumulated capital, a faithful reproduction was established in 1928 in Léopoldville, the capital city of the Belgian Congo, today Kinshasa. The statue was erected on the square opposite the parcel of land where the Governor General's new residence was to be built. After the struggle for liberation, when independence was gained in 1960, and in the context of Mobutu Sese Seko's authenticity policy,[13] the colonial statue was removed and kept in a warehouse on the outskirts of the city. It was briefly reinstalled in 2005 in front of the main railway station in the centre of Kinshasa, on the pedestal where the statue of King Albert I was once erected, in order to rehabilitate pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history in public space. However, as it was met with general protest it was removed in less than twenty-four hours to the courtyard of the Institut des Musées Nationaux du Congo, where it still stands, in the corner of a park on Mount

10 Véronica Curto, *'Recontextualiser' les monuments coloniaux Belges. Une étude des cas portant sur trois monuments à Bruxelles*, Bamko-Cran asbl, Brussels, 2018

11 Lucas Catherine, *Wandelen naar Kongo: Langs koloniaal erfgoed in Brussel en België, Epo*, Antwerpen, 2006

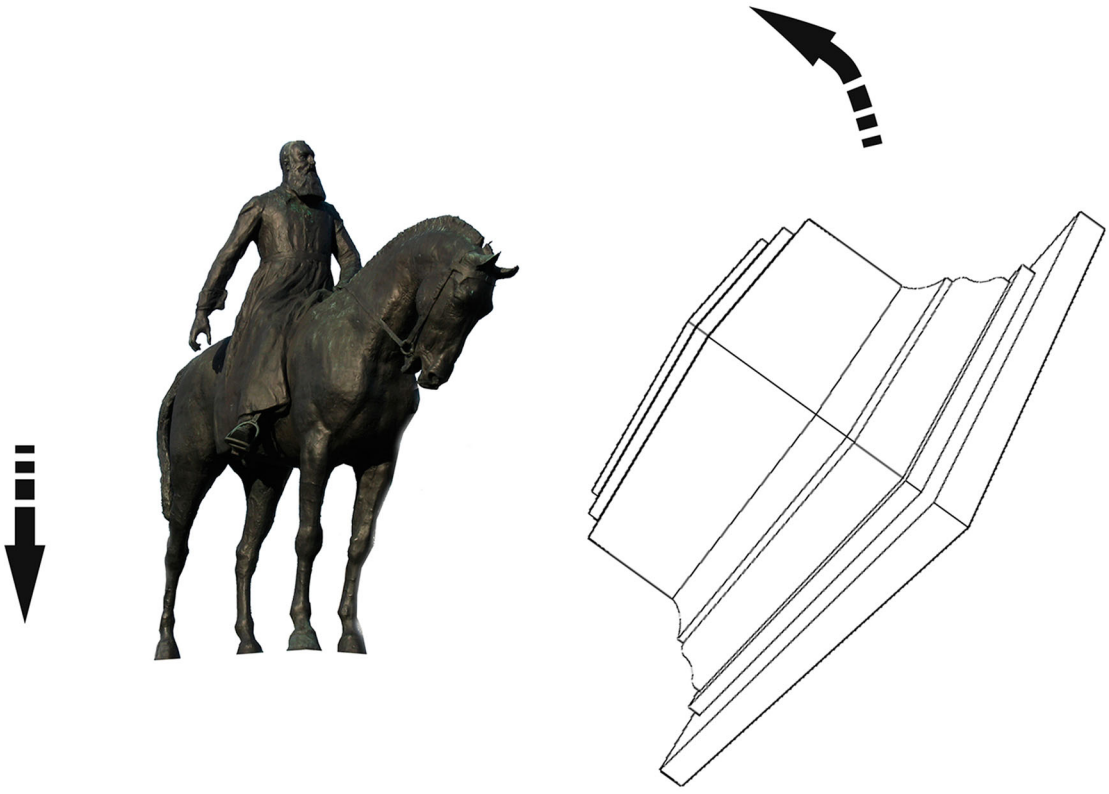
12 As detailed by Lucas Catherine, Baron Lambert, one of the sons-in-law of the Rothschilds, financed the 'Comité D'études du Haut-Congo' and was himself a member of the 'Association Internationale du Congo'. He was also the manager of the 'Compagnie du Katanga' and founder of the 'Banque du Congo' (that would later be transformed into the 'Belgolaise', which merged with 'Fortis' in 2000, now rebaptised as 'BNP Paribas Fortis'. He was a co-organiser of the Brussels International Exposition in 1910 and travelled to Congo in 1924, where he shot a remarkable propaganda film, inviting investors to risk their capital in the Belgian colony. Ibid.

13 Authenticity was an official state ideology implemented by the postcolonial Mobutu regime after independence in 1971, when the Democratic Republic of Congo was renamed Zaire. This nationalist policy wanted to mark a clear symbolic break with colonialism and its superstructure, creating a centralised imagined community.

Laura Nsengiyumva, *PEOPL schema 1*, 2018, photo: courtesy Laura Nsengiyumva

Ngaliema.[14] The question presents itself as to why the Belgian political sphere reacts defensively to the abiding interventions and actions of a growing movement of grassroots activists, artists and collectives, while in Congo the monuments dating from the colonial era have long

14 On the history of colonial monumentality in Congo, see Johan Lagae, 'Léopoldville: Bruxelles, villes miroirs?



Laura Nsengiyumva, *PEOPL schema 2*, 2018, photo: courtesy Laura Nsengiyumva

L'architecture et l'urbanisme d'une capitale colonial', *Afrika Studies (Bruxelles)* 73, 2007, pp 67–99; Lagae, 'From "Patrimoine Partagé" to "Whose Heritage"? Critical Reflections on Colonial Built Heritage in the City of Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo', *Afrika Focus*, vol 21, no 1, 2008, pp 11–30; and also, Bambi Ceuppens, 'Les monuments coloniaux: Lieux de mémoire contestés', Presentation for the CADTM (Comité pour l'Abolition des Dettes illégiTiMes), Brussels, SETCA, 27 September 2008.

15 Joachim Ben Yakoub and Gia Abrassart, 'La chasse aux spectres monumentaux dans la Belgique Congolaise', in Sarah Demart and Abrassart, eds, *Créer en postcolonie:*

lost any right to exist in public space and are already sheltered in museums.[15]

Melting down an ice replica of this historically contested memorial, *PeopL* radically challenges general sensibilities traversing (settler) colonial and postcolonial societies by poetically pointing at the radical possibility of altering particular aesthetics. Following the critical aesthetic theory of Jacques Rancière,[16] primary aesthetics can be considered principally political, insofar as politics always implies a shared distribution of the sensible, ie a common fragmentation of the properties of space and the possibilities of time, and through this fragmentation a shared delimitation of who and what can be seen, heard and said but also felt, embodied and visualised, of what appears to the senses, makes sense or is intelligible and possible at a certain moment in a given polis. It is a regime that encompasses a worldview that legitimates a given police order, or an organisational system structured by a set of implicit rules and conventions which determines the distribution of roles and modes of participation and its accompanying dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. However, following Edward Said's line of thinking, aesthetics implies an understanding of politics and aesthetics as an ensemble that reveals its wholeness.[17] Even though aesthetics can be grasped as an all-encompassing realm deeply entrenched in and connected to the political, there is no pre-existing essence to aesthetics. As stated by Sylvia Wynter, aesthetics is 'the very

condition of existence of all human "forms of life"', and determines the ways in each order 'effects its autopoeisis as a living, self-organizing… system'.[18] As such, the main characteristic of aesthetics is its capacity to reproduce and maintain itself. Aesthetics therefore cannot simply be reduced, as Rancière suggests,[19] to '*a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience'. When grasped as a contrapuntal ensemble, aesthetics is the result of unfinished historical contingencies that form certain lively power structures and subjectivities. It is traversed not only by a colonial or imperial divide but also by a post- or neo-colonial one. What the happening *PeoPL* then facilitates is a contrapuntal understanding of prevailing primary aesthetics. Consequently, it gives us a refreshing insight into the common fragmentation, not only of the possibilities of time but also of the vibrant properties of space, reminding us of the lingering possibility to, from the bottom-up, re-determine the distribution of the roles and modes of participation, its dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and thus to restructure the shared division of the sensible of our colonial present. In what follows, I will elaborate on the way Nsengiyumva questions, through her illuminating gesture, the main presuppositions that structure the ongoing discussions on the possible relations between art and politics, relating to the common fragmentation of the possibilities of time and of the vibrant properties of space.

Possibilities of Time

The rhythm of the drops of water sliding off Nsengiyumva's melting sculpture challenge the spectator's experience of time and their perception of monuments as an immobile, fixed and stable substance. It makes visible how, through time, matter can move, fluctuate and, in this case, dissipate into water. The equestrian statue of the monarch reproduced by Nsengiyumva is in itself inextricably related to a sense of time, as the original monument already hints at the mythologising of the past through the process of materialisation. The political and historical power relations, of which the statue is a manifestation, are symbolically expressed and determine a certain hegemonic reading of history. The perpetual and unquestioned presence of colonial monuments in public is a daily reminder of what should be remembered. Colonial effigies in public spaces enhance the illusion of permanence and intergenerational continuity and, by doing so, elevate in a tangible way the sovereign above all temporal contingencies.[20] They fix and delineate an image of a past, giving it a semblance of a real past inscribed in stone,[21] to avoid a situation where 'the past would catch up too fast with the present'.[22] Sculpted in copper and tin mined from the colony, the contours of which time period is still located in the colony, they craft postcolonial subjects with an imposed conception of history, excluding the possibility of experiencing time outside these sculpted lines. In the words of Frantz Fanon, they 'encase', 'enslave' and provoke oneself to 'be sealed away in the materialized Tower of the Past'.[23] As a result, following Ahıska, colonial monuments and their afterlives tend to 'celebrate and consume the present, as if it were a wrapped-up commodity with a capacity to deliver us smoothly to the future'.[24]

2010–2015 voix et dissidences belgo-congolaises, BOZAR & Africalia, Brussels, 2016, pp 131–140

16 See Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Gregory Elliott, trans, Verso Books, London and New York, 2014; and also, Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Gabriel Rockhill, trans, Continuum, London, 2004

17 Edward W Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Knopf, New York, 1993

18 Sylvia Wynter, 'Rethinking "Aesthetics": Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice', in Mbye Cham, ed, *Ex-iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, Africa World Press, Trenton, New Jersey, 1992, pp 237–279, p 259

19 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, op cit, p 24

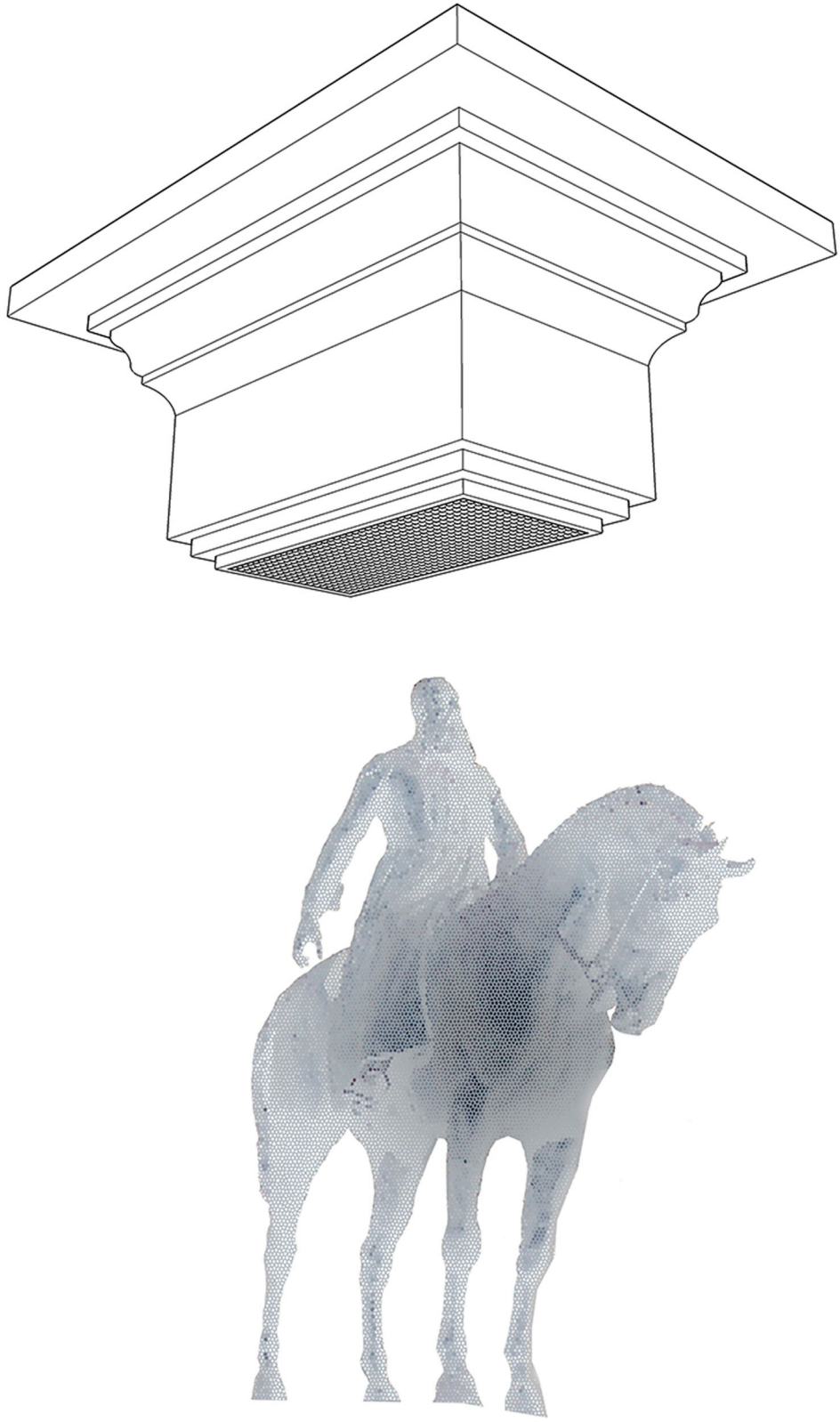
20 Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso, New York and London, 1995

21 Immanuel Wallerstein and Étienne Balibar, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, Verso, London, 1991, p 78

22 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1995, p 11

23 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952], Pluto Press, London, 1986, pp 176–226

24 Ahıska, 'Monsters that remember', op cit, p 3



Laura Nsengiyumva, *PEOPL schema 3*, 2018, photo: courtesy Laura Nsengiyumva

However, in this celebration some recollections are annihilated or left behind and become deviant.[25] In other words, forgetting is an essential part of the dynamic selective process of memorialisation or monument-making.[26] A colonial statue might be both an artefact that pretends to be 'the latest substitute of the substance of time itself', while at the same time it is a trap of 'a rebellious time' that refuses to be caught between the hands of any potentate.[27] It might as well function as a trick of colonial reason through which time refuses to exhaust itself.[28] If we agree that colonial monuments are always built on a certain poetic of time, then we must accept, as stated by Sarah Nuttall, that the process of monument-making or 'memorialization… is never immemorial; it changes as society changes' and that consequently colonial monuments need to 'face the possibility of their demise' and have the 'graciousness to move on, or be removed'.[29] These pulsating and animating statues are thus part of the afterlives of a colonial assemblage and can therefore not be minimised as decorative monuments that enlivened urban life. The living power relations, of which these vibrant statues are the materialisation, are symbolically expressed and determine multiple collective readings of an unfinished and still living history.

It is here, in this liminal space filled with the apparent contradiction between the exclusion of the possibility of experiencing time outside the sculpted lines of the past and the living matter of colonial statues and their perpetual animated presence as actants, in that interstice between life and death, that lies what Ahıska calls the monstrosity of monuments.[30] Thus, pointing at the essentialising yet vibrant and ambiguous ways monuments tend to function, for Ahıska colonial monuments and their afterlives 'claim to embody the will to remember'. But at the same time they 'have mostly served to reify the present as a fulfilled moment of arrival, canceling the need to re-find and remember the past in the present'. They 'contribute to the closure of the past as a dead body' yet at the same time they 'do not just kill memory, they also forge a regime of memory and desire that serves power'.[31] In short, monuments are 'dead but alive, or "undead"… seducing people to play a lethal game with power'.[32]

For Kopano Maroga, the drops of water sliding off Nsengiyumva's sculpture feel like tears purging an 'inherited trauma' of an 'unspeakable loss'.[33] The slow meltdown of the effigy evokes a sense of intergenerational mourning, grieving every single death colonisation provoked:

> handing over the coffin and everything that lies in it to the next generation, and the next generation, and the next generation, in the hope that at some point it will be laid down into the dirt to decompose and we will be free to dream new futures outside of the framework of a trauma laden past.[34]

The radiant ice replica indeed reminds us of the very vivid image of the spectres still haunting public consciousness and unconsciousness through the historical memorialisation and monument-making processes at work. For Veronique Clette-Gakuba and Martin Vander Elst the visible spectral radiation of the ice sculpture is indeed reminiscent of the aura that was constructed around the afterlives of the late monarch through its mimetic replication, transforming it into an all-seeing omni-

25 Ibid, p 1

26 Partha Mitter, 'Monuments and Memory for Our Times', *South Asian Studies*, vol 29, issue 1, 2013, pp 159–167

27 Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, Laurent Dubois, trans, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2017, p 104

28 Veronique Clette-Gakuba and Martin Vander Elst, 'Une tentative de décolonisation de la statue de Léopold II', *Bruxelles en mouvements* 297, November 2018

29 Sarah Nuttall, in Lucia Allais et al, 'A Questionnaire on Monuments', *October* 165, September 2018, p 111

30 Ahıska, 'Monsters that Remember', op cit

31 Ibid, p 1

32 Ibid

33 Kopano Maroga, 'PeoPL: Colonial Haunting and Decolonial Dreams', *Rekto:Verso*, 2 December 2018, https://www.rektoverso.be/artikel/peopl-colonial-haunting-and-decolonial-dreams, accessed 6 December 2018

34 Ibid

present and potent modern symbol of prevailing dreams, making invisible and intangible the desire for its colonial reverse. Rendering palpable the melting and ruining afterlives of the contested king indeed 'breaks down the congealed and sedimented temporality of phantasmagoria' and 'opens a revolutionary temporality'.[35] As noticed by Maroga, the image of a group of children playing with the melted ice debris and water the night of the happening could be seen as a vision of the lightness of a possible future in which people would be 'so far removed from the violence of these images… that they are free to imagine it as a playground'.[36]

Vibrant Properties of Space

As suggested by the poetic gesture of Nsengiyumva, the abiding interventions of activists and artists are not merely symbolic – together they point not so much to the political morphology,[37] but to the deep and vital political materiality of these monuments. Not only do the alignments between the morphology of monuments and their political, economic or cultural foundations influence the shared experience of built form of a certain constituency, but alignments with the sheer matter of these monuments can also have deep political impact. A monument not only refers to the human figure it ought to represent, but also points to the substance of which it is made and thus implies a 'gesture toward the mineral and geological'.[38] This geological and mineral substance of colonial sculptures is not passive, inert or dull, but a forceful agent, as it exists as animate, lively and vibrant matter.[39] On their guided walks through Brussels, the collective Mémoire Coloniale points to a small tablet behind the main statue on Throne Square that still states that the statue is made of copper and tin mined from 'the Belgian Congo, kindly provided by the Union Minière du Haut Katanga', today still active as Umicore NV.[40] To honour Leopold II, Albert I had these exploited raw materials poured into the current equestrian form in *La Compagnie des Bronzes de Bruxelles* – now better known as *La Fonderie museum* in Molenbeek. It is indeed crucial to take seriously the vital materiality of these monuments as part of a larger colonial assemblage bound up with the afterlives of the colonial – narratives that this assemblage (re)produces. These statues are no imperial debris,[41] at least not yet, as they are carefully maintained by the urban maintenance service, which plants flowers every year in the well-kept lawns surrounding the statue. On the occasion of the 175th anniversary of the kingdom of Belgium in 2005, the equestrian statue was renovated at a cost of more than EUR 17,000. As Félix Baras portrays in his short film *Memoire*, after protesters smear the statue, the urban maintenance services immediately clean and restore the statue to its original state. As remarked by Clette-Gakuba, the continuous activity of the urban maintenance service show that these statues are not half-eroded relics, covered with moss, but cherished and carefully maintained parts of urban heritage.[42] It is therefore key to see these totemised actants as vibrant matter and to analyse the revolt against these actants, as imaginary openings to actions that turn the outcry of decolonisation into practice, into effective super- and substructural transformations that can meet the now loudly resonating demands

35 Clette-Gakuba and Vander Elst, 'Une tentative de décolonisation de la statue de Léopold II', translation by the author, op cit

36 Maroga, 'PeoPL', op cit

37 Michał Murawski, 'Radical Centres: The Political Morphology of Monumentality in Warsaw and Johannesburg', *Third Text* 156, vol 33, no 1, January 2019, pp 26–42

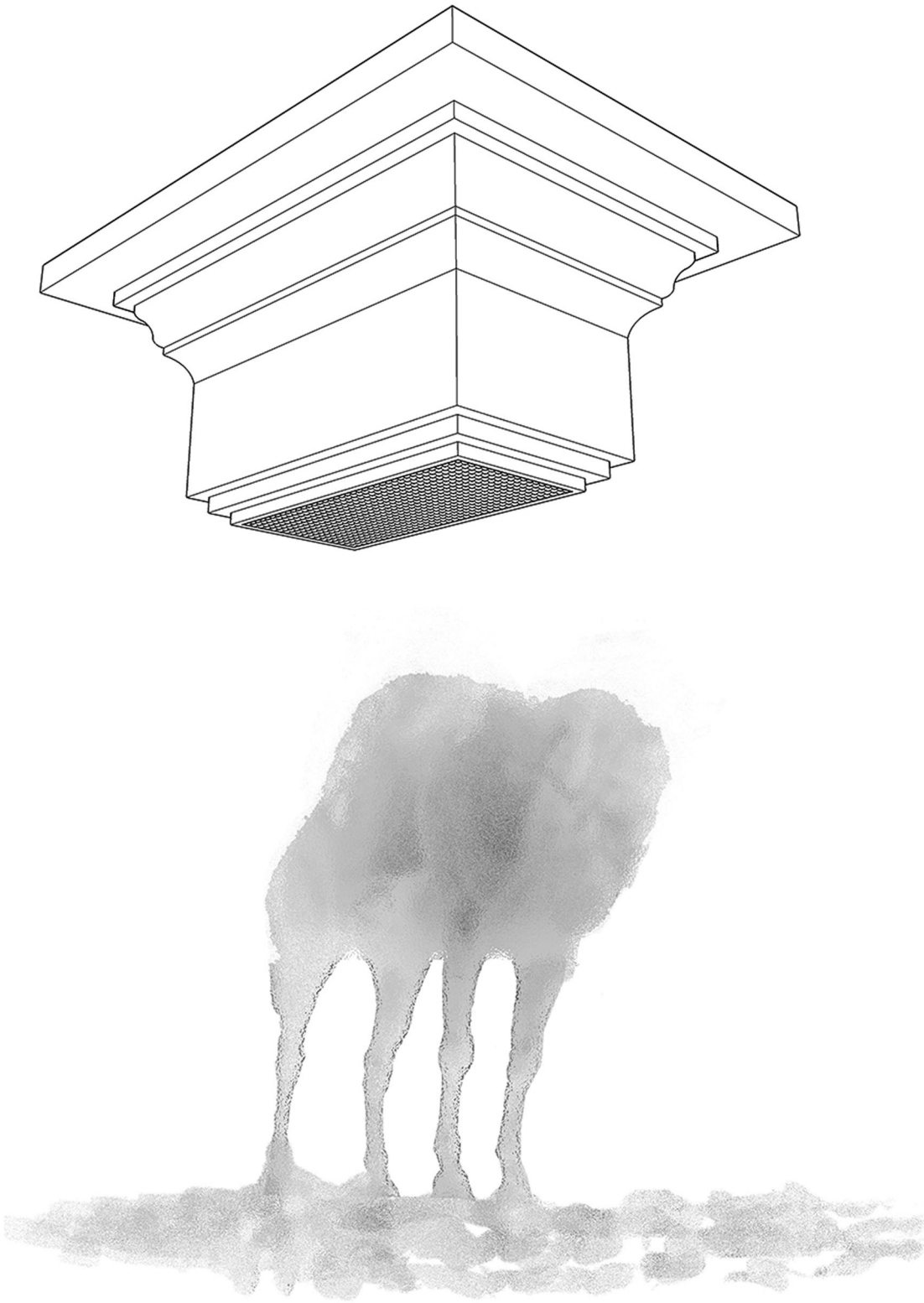
38 Mbembe, in Allais et al, 'A Questionnaire on Monuments', op cit, p 112

39 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2010

40 Umicore is also one of the financial partners of the recently renovated, but still contested AfricaMuseum. See Gillian Mathys, 'Colonial Continuities: Tensions and Opportunities', in 'Renovating the AfricaMuseum: A Conversation with Gillian Mathys, Margot Luyckfasseel, Sarah Van Beurden, Tracy Tansia', *AfricaIsACountry*, 29 April 2019, https://africasacountry.com/2019/04/renovating-the-africamuseum, accessed 7 May 2019.

41 Ann Laura Stoler, 'Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol 23, issue 2, May 2008, pp 191–219

42 Clette-Gakuba, in Joachim Ben Yakoub, 'Monumentaal koloniaal: tijd voor een gesprek op gelijke voet', *Rekto:Verso* 79, 2018, pp 90–102



Laura Nsengiyumva, *PEOPL schema 4*, 2018, photo: courtesy Laura Nsengiyumva

for decolonisation and reparations, both on the material and immaterial level, beyond any metaphor.[43]

These vibrant colonial monuments function in the same way as police stations or prestigious state buildings.[44] They are different symbolic markers of a monumental assemblage that, as vibrant spatial nodes of power, hold colonial lines of force together. Monuments are strategically positioned to facilitate critical points of confluence in urban development and thus tend to be deployed as 'instruments of territorial management, penetration, and control'.[45] Inadvertent, but also deliberately political, monuments have the tendency to divide 'common territories and histories in the name of imaginary ethnic imperatives'.[46] The postcolonial state stabilises and perpetuates its domination and capital accumulation by setting up mundane royal sculptures to emphasise the lively moral power of its deceased historical leader. These sculptures are imbued with an institutionalised intermediary function that renders visible by their direct presence the oppressive and mutually exclusive separation and compartmentalisation of urban space. They thus function as a vibrant spatial node of territorialised sovereign power. The colonial world is a motionless essentialising world, divided into compartments.[47] It reduces space through a Manicheist division into two mutually exclusive zones: the spacious zone of the coloniser, which is forcefully and violently separated and opposed to the claustrophobic zone of the native. Colonisation is a spatial process of immobilising separation and static confinement (if not a form of imprisonment) that permanently keeps the colonised in place, by not only generating visible coercive relations but also by embedding the resulting spatial relations in daily practices, bodily and affective experiences and representations.[48] Cities and their symbolic markers are restructured not only as a representational endeavour to mark the country's full adherence to modernity but also to render invisible its coloniality and turn the city into a more governable space. So, also in the metropole, the racialised body of the colonised is hemmed in, immobilised in its own zone, until – as Fanon reminds us – 'deciding to embody history in his [sic] own person, he [sic] surges into the forbidden quarters'.[49]

Colonial monuments can be considered the 'sculptural extensions of a form of racial terror'.[50] The presence in public space of these monuments is far from trivial. These vestiges are the signs of a domination and of a physical and symbolic struggle for power. To be effective, domination must not only be inscribed in the body, it must be anchored in the living space and imagination of the oppressed, leaving indelible marks. This subjugation must permeate the daily routine and the very structure of the unconscious. From this perspective, monuments in public spaces are not merely appealing artefacts, intended to beautify life in the city; they cast a shadow over the bodily consciousness of people. These disciplinary tendencies of monuments neglect the lives of already damned populations and haunt their memories. These public artefacts are a morbid glorification of the imperialist spirit, a form of necromancy, keeping alive colonial and postcolonial racism, and an inherently tight inferiority complex. As succinctly stated by Ahıska, colonial monuments and their afterlives always 'ask for more blood for keeping alive the spirit of the imagined community, which they claim to represent'.[51]

43 Eve Tuck and Wang K Yang, 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol 1, no 1, 2012, pp 1–40

44 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, 1961, (1963)

45 Allais et al, 'A Questionnaire on Monuments', op cit, pp 3–177, p 4

46 Ilana Salama Ortar and Stephen Wright, 'Inadvertent Monuments', *Third Text* 80/81, vol 20, no 3/4, May/July 2006, pp 373–376, p 374

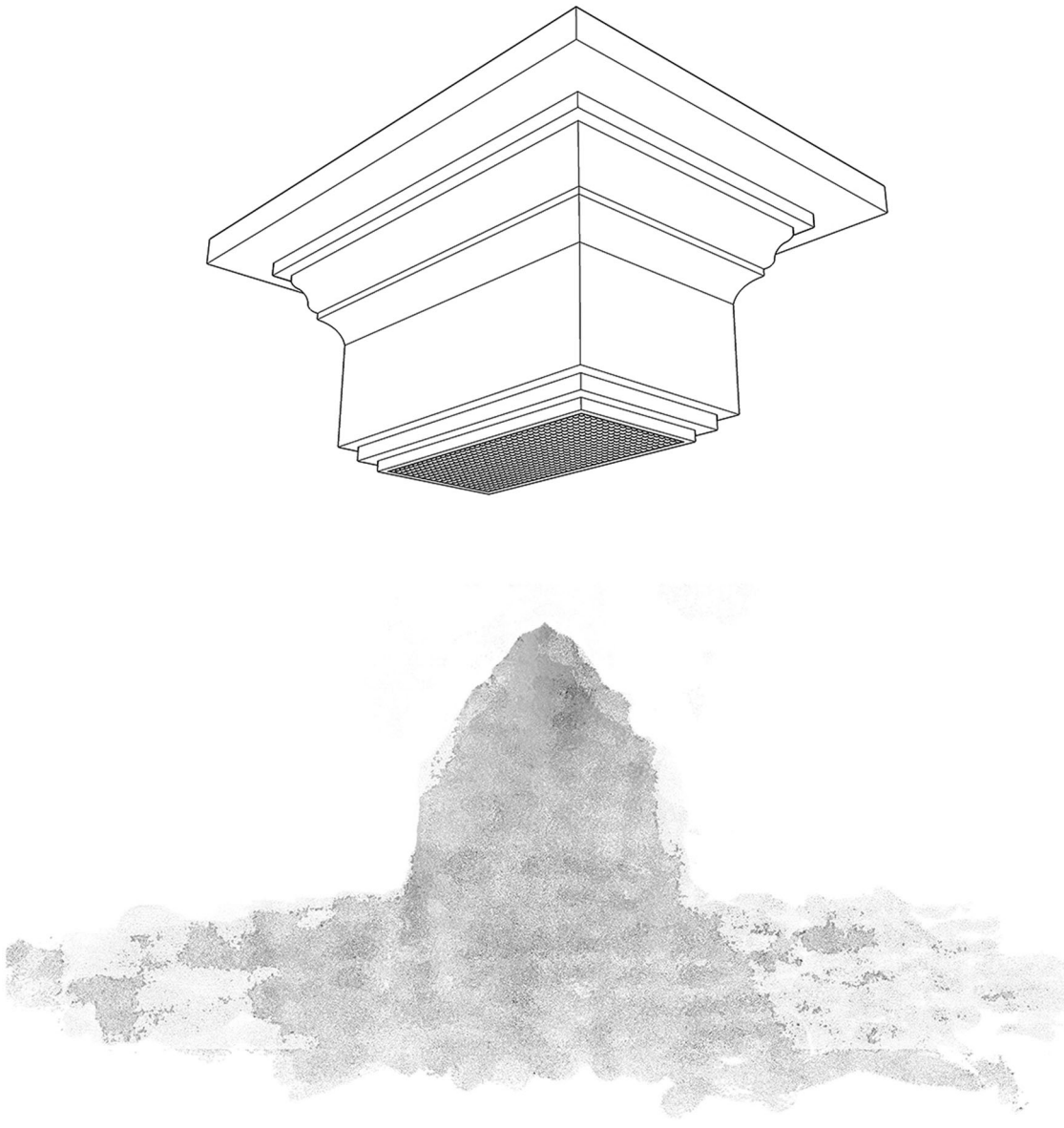
47 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, op cit

48 Stefan Kipfer, 'Fanon and Space: Colonization, Urbanization, and Liberation from the Colonial to the Global City', *Society and Space*, vol 25, no 4, August 2007, pp 701–726

49 Fanon, *The Wretched of The Earth*, op cit, p 40

50 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, op cit, p 128

51 Ahıska, 'Monsters that Remember', op cit, p 1



Laura Nsengiyumva, *PEOPL schema 5*, 2018, photo: courtesy Laura Nsengiyumva

Viscerally emerging from a zone of non-being, however, the racialised body contests the 'bodily experience' and the 'vivid sensation of intersubjectivity' when encountering a colonial statue.[52] This body is not a stranger to Belgian history. It is 'not any-body… but some-body' that can historically be perceived as 'a body out of place'.[53] A body for which its social conditions prevent proper moving and breathing.[54] A claustrophobic body that feels confined, convinced there is no way out. A figuratively amputated, dismembered and castrated body.[55] A body that, when asleep, continuously dreams of jumping, swimming, running, climbing and laughing, but is constantly on its guard and in a continuous state

52 Cynthia Kros, 'Rhodes Must Fall: Archives and Counter-Archives', *Critical Arts*, vol 29, no 1, 2015, p 153

53 Sara Ahmed, 'Embodying Strangers', in Avril Horner and Angela Keane, eds, *Body Matters: Feminism, Textuality, Corporeality*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000, pp 85–97, p 55

of muscular contraction when awake.[56] An asphyxiated body whose breathing is not only observed but occupied so that the breathing of the racialised body is what Fanon famously named 'combat breathing'.[57] Thus, it is not a well-delineated and defined historical and ideological programme but simply the impossibility of breathing that becomes the *primum movens* of revolt and of a possible redistribution of the sensible in the Belgian postcolony.

PeoPL's Illumination

For Nsengiyumva, the warm burst of light radiating from the upside-down pedestal hanging from the ceiling melting the ice sculpture, represents the concentrated ancestral anti-colonial energy produced by the collective groups of past and present local activists which, through their dissent, are slowly dissolving colonial thinking, attitudes, affects, discourses and practices in Belgium and beyond. The battle for the monumental dethronement of the late Leopold II is indeed not unique, but part of a translocal movement of revolt.

The successful movement 'Rhodes Must Fall' in the land of the Khoisan people, Cape Town, South Africa set the world in motion in 2016.[58] Mounted on a tall pedestal, the larger-than-life bust in honour of Christopher Columbus got a sledgehammer in the forehead on the day that his 'discovery' was to be commemorated in the land of the Anishinaabe, known today as Detroit.[59] The protest against the statue of Columbus on the Ramblas in Barcelona has also been re-activated: various collectives are working to have it replaced by a monument commemorating the 500 years of resistance to colonisation and imperialism.[60] In Caracas in Venezuela, a statue of Columbus was replaced by that of Guaicaipuro, a leader in the fight against the genocidal Spanish occupation.[61] The bust of Francisco Pascasio Moreno, better known as Perito Moreno, one of the most influential figures that facilitated the colonisation of large parts of Patagonia, was found submerged under skulls and bones placed by the artist Chugo (Fernando Chandía) in honour of the Indigenous Mapuche people.[62] The statues of 'explorer' Captain James Cook on Māori land, in what is now known as Gisborne, New Zealand,[63] and of colonial strategist John A Macdonald in the land of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg people, better known as Ottawa in Canada, fell from their former glory after enduring protests and creative interventions by local activists.[64] In the land of the Rumsen Ohlone people, in what is now known as Monterey, California, the statue of the Catholic missionary Junípero Serra was simply beheaded.[65] After deadly protests sparked by the removal of a Confederate war monument in Charlottesville,[66] many more actions followed in the United States and around the world.[67] During the latest urban uprisings in Chile in 2019, different statues representing Spanish Conquistadors were subjected to various symbolic attacks by Mapuche collectives in Tumeco.[68] With the second breath of Black Lives Matter worldwide in the wake of the tragic murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the movement has gained speed as monuments in memory of slavery and colonialism are annihilated on a global scale. After protest toppled two different statues of French politician Victor Schœlcher on the island of Martinique

54 Judith Butler, 'Violence, Non-Violence: Sartre on Fanon', *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol 27, no 1, 2006, pp 3–24

55 Hourya Bentouhami-Molino, 'L'emprise du corps: Fanon à l'aune de la phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty', *Cahiers Philosophiques*, vol 138, no 3, 2014, pp 34–46

56 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, op cit, p 16

57 Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* [1959], Grove Press, New York, 1965, p 65

58 See, for instance, Kros, 'Rhodes Must Fall', op cit, pp 150–165; or Lwandile Fikeni, 'Protest, Art and the Aesthetics of Rage: Social Solidarity and the Shaping a Post-rainbow South Africa', Ruth First Lecture, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2016

59 Daniel Bethencourt, 'Christopher Columbus Gets Ax to the Head in Detroit', *Detroit Free Press*, 12 October 2015

60 Mahdis Azarmandi, 'Commemorating No-Bodies – Christopher Columbus and the Violence of Social-Forgetting', *Somatechnics*, vol 6, no 1, 2016, pp 56–71

61 Rachel Boothroyd Rojas, 'Venezuela: Indigenous Resistance Hero Honoured', *Green Left Weekly* 1073, October 2015, p 13

62 'Cipriano Catriel: de "joya envidiada" del perito a su restitución', *Miradas Del Centro: Para una communicacion colectiva*, 16 May 2018, http://miradasdelcentro.com.ar/home/cipriano-catriel-de-joya-envidiada-del-perito-a-su-restitucion/, accessed 17 May 2018

63 Richard Wolfe, 'James Cook: The Voyages, Exhibition', *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, vol

and the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol, UK was pulled down and thrown into the harbour, more and more people in Belgium were convinced 'Leopold II has to fall', and various online petitions circulated demanding that all the statues be unbolted. The first toppling took place in Ekeren, a northern district of the municipality of Antwerp. As the statue was severely burned and damaged, it had to be moved for renovation to the Middleheim Open Air Sculpture Museum, from where it will probably never return. After a nightly intervention in Auderghem Brussels, the local Leopold bust was toppled from its pedestal. Although the Ghent city council was better prepared, the bust in South Park was also vandalised, and was removed from its pedestal by the council on the 60th anniversary of Congo independence, to be stored mostly likely in The Museum of Industry, Work and Textiles. The city council of Leuven followed suit and took down a statue very few knew existed from a tower of the town hall. Hasselt, Sint-Truiden, Oostende, Tervuren, Halle, Monse – very few cities in Belgium were spared by the anti-colonial light of young and energised people determined to illuminate and eventually melt down the coloniality of power these statues represent.

The contestation of the symbolic presence of Leopold II did not, however, start with the Black Lives Matter movement. Already in the 2000s, in the wake of the Lumumba Commission – the parliamentary commission of inquiry that pointed to the 'moral responsibility' of members of the then Belgian government in the murder of Patrice Lumumba,[69] activists started to direct their attention to the present but, for most, almost invisible relics of Belgium's colonial past in the country's public spaces.[70] In 2008, anthropologist Bambi Ceuppens observed that most of the actions around colonial monuments were carried out by white activists, and that very few Belgian Congolese were involved.[71] The latter, by contrast, would be more engaged in paying an annual tribute to the graves of their compatriots who passed away in the Human Zoo set up during the 1897 Brussels International Exposition. Here, however, Ceuppens dismisses what James C Scott would call the hidden transcripts circulating in Congolese diasporic spheres, probably since the time when Patrice Lumumba had the 'honour' as an accomplished 'évolué' of laying a wreath at the foot of the royal statue in the centre of Brussels in 1955 as a sign of gratitude for the king's 'civilising work' that helped his nation to 'progress' and 'prosper'.[72] Nevertheless, this divergence highlighted for Ceuppens the absence of a real debate on Belgium's unfinished colonial history, and could best be explained by the general invisibility and absence of Congolese in debates on a shared colonial past. This has, however fundamentally changed in the last five years with the abiding power of artists, activists and collectives, such as Decolonise Belgium, Mémoire Colonial, Change, La Nouvelle Voie Anticoloniale, Collectief No Name, A.C.E.D, Bamko-Cran and many others. The turning point occurred in December 2015, when a group of activists interrupted, and succeeded in cancelling, the planned royal celebration of the 150th anniversary of the enthronement of the late monarch by mobilising around his central equestrian statue in Brussels. As stated by Clette Gakuba, that day is now inscribed in the collective memory of anti-colonial struggle as 'the day the myth of the "king builder" wavered'.[73]

127, no 2, July 2018, pp 252–257

64 Sean P Hier, 'Monumental Panic: Reconciliation, Moral Regulation, and the Polarizing Politics of the Past', *Critical Sociology*, vol 46, no 4/5, July 2020

65 Lee M Panich, 'After Saint Serra: Unearthing Indigenous Histories at the California Missions', *Journal of Social Archaeology*, vol 16, no 2, June 2016, pp 238–258

66 Mabel O Wilson, 'Memory/Race/Nation – The Politics of Modern Memorials', lecture at *Penndesign*, Weitzman School of Design, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 26 September 2018

67 For an overview of this worldwide spiral until 2018, see for instance Allais et al, 'A Questionnaire on Monuments', op cit.

68 Laurence Blair, 'Conquistadors Tumble as Indigenous Chileans Tear Down Statues', *The Guardian*, 5 November 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/05/chile-statues-indigenous-mapuche-conquistadors, accessed 21 November 2019

69 In February 2000, the Belgian parliament agreed to establish a 'commission of enquiry, ordered to determine the exact circumstances of the murder of Patrice Lumumba and the possible implications of Belgian political responsibility therein'. See, 'Enquête parlementaire: visant à déterminer les circonstances exactes de l'assassinat de Patrice Lumumba et l'implication éventuelle des responsables politiques belges dans celui-ci. Rapport fait au nom de la commission d'enquête', Chambre des representants de Belgique, DOC 50 0312/006, 16 November 2001; The commission of enquiry saw the light of day after the journalist and author

The light that radiated from that anti-colonial struggle brought into being a radical, autonomous, discursive space from which a new generation of politicised diasporic and displaced people, mostly but not exclusively of the African diaspora, emerged, cooling down what Maddee Clark and Neika Lehman justly dubbed 'The Unbearable Hotness of Decolonisation'.[74] From 'failed' multiculturalism, diversity, super-diversity and the present turn in securitisation through the misnomer of radicalisation, processes of inclusion/exclusion are for the first time in history being discussed on the conditions and in the terms of diaspora communities, reopening and challenging the archives of international solidarity and facilitating what Clette-Gakuba and Vander Elst call 'the convergence of urban minority struggles' around the evermore vibrant colonial statues and the demand for decolonisation.[75]

The sensible forms mobilised by Nsengiyumva following her most intimate dream to end the afterlives of the venerated king, strongly resonate with how Audre Lorde relates to poetry as a form of illumination, shedding light on that ancient, deep and 'dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises'.[76] Tapping into a collective 'reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling', the ruination or melting gesture facilitates 'true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action' that 'predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change'. [77]

Melting Down Colonial Afterlives

PeoPL's illuminating gesture sheds a burst of light on the often overlooked circumstances through which a renewed upsurge of revolt is altering the alleged pastness of a still very present colonial order. Rather than – as suggested by Ogutu Muraya – evoking a kind of 'peeling away of layers' or that still very present colonial legacies 'decompose',[78] following Sylvia Wynter, the happening calls to mind a deciphering practice. Laying bare the geological and mineral substance of colonial sculptures as animate, lively and vibrant matter, this deciphering practice then renders the way the hegemonic cultural imaginary reproduces itself intelligibly.[79] By deciphering its autopoiesis, it also uncovers the bright emergence and luminous inflation of counter monumental interventions as part of a renewed translocal imaginary. After all, this still ongoing wave of revolt directed against the monstrosity of a monumental assemblage, still holding contemporary colonial lines of force together, opened a discursive space that altered the condition through which difference is historically being thematised in public debates. The specificity of this autonomous thematisation, cooling down the hotness of decolonisation, lies in the gesture of questioning the common fragmentation of the properties of space and the possibilities of time, by linking politicised difference to translocal geopolitical and unfinished historical contingencies shaping prevailing power structures and subjectivities. By facilitating a contrapuntal understanding of prevalent primary aesthetics, it reminds us that these sovereign and disciplinary power structures and subjectivities are deeply traversed, not only by a still very lively (settler) colonial or imperial, but also by a post- or neo-colonial, divide. While engaging with the revolting senses directly against the vibrant colonial monuments

Ludo De Witte held the Belgian government responsible for the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in September 1960. For an in depth analysis of the Lumumba Commission, see Ludo De Witte, *De moord op Lumumba*, Uitgeverij Van Halewyck, Leuven, 1999; and also Jean Omasombo Tshonda, 'Commission Lumumba: Difficile regard sur un passe', *Association Belge des Africanistes*, March 2002, pp 10–13.

70 For a summary of the different recent interventions on colonial monuments in Belgium until 2015, see Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Colonial Streets and Statues: Postcolonial Belgium in the Public Space', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol 18, no 4, 2015, pp 397–409; or Matthew G Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock: Colonial Memories and Monuments in Belgium*, Leuven University Press, Leuven, 2019.

71 Ceuppens, 'Les monuments coloniaux: Lieux de mémoire contestés', op cit

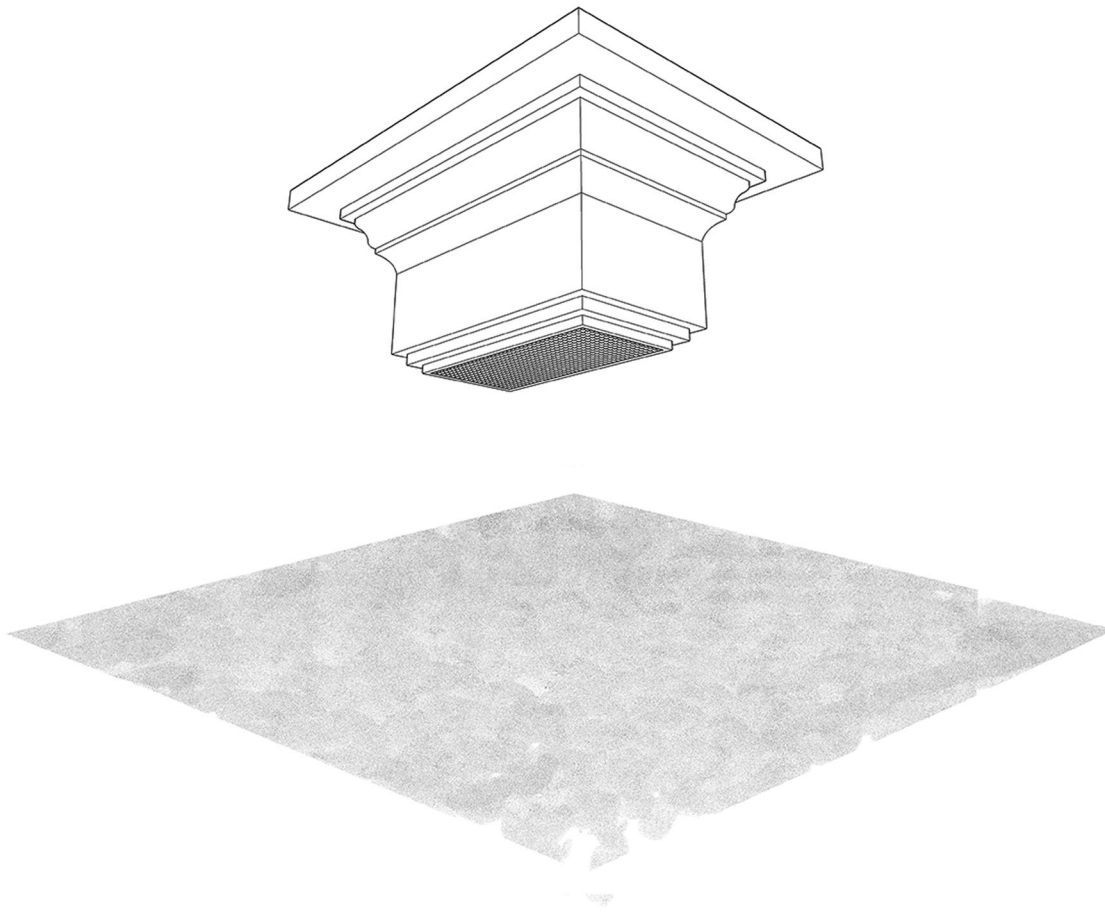
72 James C Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990

73 Clette-Gakuba, in Joachim Ben Yakoub, 'Monumentaal koloniaal: tijd voor een gesprek op gelijke voet', *Rekto:Verso* 79, 2018, pp 90–102

74 See the special issue with the striking title, Maddee Clark and Neika Lehman, *The Unbearable Hotness of Decolonisation*, *un Magazine*, vol 12, no 1, 2018

75 Clette-Gakuba and Vander Elst, 'Une tentative de décolonisation de la statue de Léopold II', translation by the author, op cit

76 Audre Lorde, 'Poetry Is not a Luxury', in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* [1984], Crossing Press, Berkeley, 2007, pp 36–40, p 36



Laura Nsengiyumva, *PEOPL schema 6*, 2018, photo: courtesy Laura Nsengiyumva

77 Ibid, p 37

78 Ogutu Muraya, 'PeoPL by Laura Nsengiyumva', interview with Gia Abrassart, Café Congo, Brussels, 6 October 2018

79 Wynter, 'Rethinking "Aesthetics"', op cit

as mnemonic forms, radiating the afterlives of an unfinished colonial history, *PeoPL* reassures and energises the very engagement of the collective of racialised bodies that decided to breathe, to move and to embody history in their own person, that decided to revolt. It shows that what can be shared and distributed, can also be redistributed. In a luminous way, the happening renders visible how the distribution of the roles and modes of participation, its dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, are being re-determined. It makes almost tangible the ongoing restructuring of the shared division of the sensible of the colonial present in Belgium. Touching upon the insuperable political dimension of aesthetics by deciphering historically structured conditions of intelligibility, and possibility, Nsengiyumva's proposition challenges the general distribution of sensibilities traversing not only Belgian but (settler) colonial and postcolonial societies in general. It challenges who and what can be seen, heard and said, but also felt, embodied and visualised. It defies what appears to the senses, makes sense or is intelligible and possible in the postcolony and by doing so questions the distribution of roles and modes of participation, its historically rooted dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Going

beyond decolonisation as a metaphor, *PeoPL* envisions an active process of monument-making, moved by rupture that is disrupting a well-seated police order, and by doing so enables a reconfiguration of the shared distribution of the sensible, at least if the still suffocating and enclosed racialised bodies continue to breathe, move and revolt.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Aditi Jaganathan, Gia Abrassart, Veronique Clette-Gakuba and Pitcho Womba Konga, for their wholeheartedness and revolutionary love, but also to Laura Nsengiyumva, for just being the loving awareness she is, relentlessly challenging us through her subversive praxis.