

NEWS FROM THE FRONTS

"Never Forget." Drawing reconstitution of the Forest revolts in
Brussels on May 10-12, 1991. / Krasnyi Collective.

№44



BURNING CONSPIRACIES, FROM BRUSSELS WITH LOVE

JOACHIM BEN YAKOUB AND BAOBAB VAN DE TERANGA

Using the epistolary form, Joachim Ben Yakoub and Baobab van de Teranga write to us from the perspective of the Brussels racialized youth that revolted on May 10-12, 1991 in Forest. This uprising remains a fundamental event in the struggle against structural racism and police violence in Belgium and, as such, can influence analog ongoing fights in Europe and elsewhere.

Dear Funambulists,

We are writing to you, in the hope this letter finds you well. We are risking a leap in time, shooting our words thirty years into the future. We do this to briefly overcome a spark of our daily humiliation, to mark our frontlines, and our solidarity over time. It allows our dignity to recover, bit by bit, word by word, letter after letter, day after day.

From 1991 until the day you read this letter, the hogra we have to endure is likely to have become more pronounced and also more predictable, always following the same strategies and similar patterns. Contempt is the connecting thread, for our bodies, our places, our ways of being, our time and our presence in this world. It makes it impossible at times to breathe; so we move, and we revolt. We have to. There is, of course, contempt for our struggles too, as well as contempt for our version of the events that follow.

We write to weave yet another thread from Brussels to Tangier, from Palestine to L.A., from Benghazi to Baghdad—from yesterday to tomorrow. We write to you, as our revolts hopefully echo, not only in space, but in time too.

The verses of the story we want to share with you are not unique. Their rhymes—their regrettable rhymes—echo over the manifold lines that separate us. We must hold our balance, and hold each other close in our reverberations. The abyss is deep.

Our story begins on a Friday night in May, in Forest, one of the disregarded and damned municipalities of Brussels. It is a story of revolt, where our suffocated post-colonial bodies are united for an ephemeral moment in our refusal of state violence, embodied by its armed wing—the police.

Our story begins, like too many others, with yet another abusive police control. The straw that broke the camel's back. It ends, like so many others, with repression, misinformation, and more repression.

It all begins when two drunken cops beat up, once again without a clear motive, what they and the media see as a “young immigrant.”

It was a Friday afternoon when our friend Rachid Redouane parked his state-of-the-art Kawasaki motorbike on Place Saint Antoine, to have his cup of tea next door. A policeman saw his chance to issue a fine. Accustomed to this kind of situation, Rachid left the coffee house to ask for the reason for their intervention: his number plate was not visible enough.

The tension rises a notch when one of the policemen grabs Rachid by his shirt. “I am the law here”, one of the cowboys exclaims, as if his uniform didn't make that already obvious.

Rachid held his ground against this show of authoritarian control and insisted his motorbike was bought legally. He ran back home to get the bike's papers and warn his father and sister. “I'll show you the papers”, he shouted back at the policemen.

After he returned with the papers, they grabbed Rachid by his shoulder and hit him in the back with a baton. His 25 year old sister asked them to stop, but she too was beaten in the back and in the stomach. She might have been pregnant. So, we had to rush her to the hospital. Their father also ended up on the ground, and was dragged for several meters. The motorbike was seized and Rachid was taken to the police station.



Fig.1

We couldn't imagine a more violent provocation, especially of recklessly humiliating his father and sister in front of the neighborhood. This was it!

We surrounded the cops and later gathered with hundreds on Place Saint Antoine to express our indignation and anger, chanting: “This time, it's over! We own the place! We don't want the cops here anymore!”

After Rashid and his family faced abuse, everything went up in flames. The police were assaulted, cars damaged, and windows broken. We started with the discotheque Bains-Baden, a trendy place that denies us entry. The first patrol cars disappeared amid the shouting crowd. It was our victory! We were finally singing in unison: “We are at home!”

But a little later, the cowboys came back with water cannons to sweep us off the square. They directed

the high-pressure jets to our houses and broke some of the windows, where our little brothers and sisters were hiding behind. One of them got severely injured.

Located on Berthelot Street, the nightclub Bains-Baden is very noisy. When it was a public swimming pool, the neighborhood used to bathe there. Now, we have daddy's boys raising hell in the streets with their Porsches and Ferraris, yet the police don't move an inch. They allow them to speed around town without being bothered, while they insult, beat us, and lock us up for a badly parked Kawasaki...

InchAllah, this nightclub will close one day and become a respectable place, open to the neighborhood! We have no space to relax and hang out here. The public pool has been sold to private investors and turned into a racist and gentrifying nightclub we don't have access to. We have to take the bus to do sports? We have nowhere else to go. We prefer to play in the streets, against the garage doors on Belgrade Street. The city council promised us to build a mini soccer field along the church,



Fig.2

but we are still waiting. They have their mouths full with “integration,” but they don’t do anything concrete.

We can’t stand this injustice any longer. Why is it that the wealthy elite can park on the sidewalk without a fine, yet we are put on the spot for the slightest thing? They come and steal the strawberries from the Moroccan grocery on the corner, pee on our walls, and leave broken whisky bottles and champagne glasses everywhere. In the morning, we wake up with a Ferrari blocking our doors and piss in the mailboxes—it is a bit like the rich come here to spit in our faces.

The next day, we reasserted our presence on the square, this time with Molotov cocktails. The cowboys came back to parade ostentatiously. They shouted at us from their police cars while making obscene gestures, repeating over and over again “Sales Bougnoules” and “Macaques.” Some undercover cops in plain clothes even came to provoke us.

We called our brothers and cousins over from Brussels, who are also too familiar with these forms of daily insults and violence. They arrived soon from other districts: Schaerbeek, Molenbeek, Uccle, Ixelles, Porte de Hal, Porte de Namur—you name it.

For a brief moment, we were one in our refusal to be treated like criminals, and to be searched and abused in front of our neighbors, friends, and family members. It is downright humiliating and we’re sick of the dirty tricks, controlling and undressing us day after day. Plus, they’re never there when you need them. We cannot stand the contempt any longer, and we can’t longer allow them to just put their guns to our heads for nothing.

We hear their Volvo 140 from afar. It’s a cat and mouse game, really. We know them personally, and we even give them nicknames like “Lucky Luke” or “the German.” They are the troublemakers, and they will harass and provoke us to see how we react. Once they even tore one of our ID cards in front of our eyes. Since the end of the war in Iraq, police ID checks have multiplied, and the cowboys act more and more aggressively. They want to intimidate and chase us away. They act like their uniform is their modern sheriff’s star!

On Sunday, the police were well prepared and surrounded the Place Saint-Antoine. With about 20 people, we were able to escape to a video store that was about to close. We hid under the roof and could see the police taking 200 young people into the stables of the manège in Etterbeek completely arbitrarily. We saw scenes of unimaginable brutality—they beat up anyone who moved. In the stable, the cowboys lined us up along the walls and decided to make us turn in circles, in single file. They then deployed police barricades to separate us into three different enclosures. Imagine the arrogance with which they addressed us: “We fooled you with the Gulf War, didn’t we?”

We asked for food but didn’t get anything until 6am. Like how peelings are thrown at the pigs, we were finally given some sandwiches, but with sausage and ham. These were of course thrown back into the cowboys’ faces, which they later retaliated by spraying us with their pumps. The white kids were released at 7am, while the rest of us were released 12 hours later.

After the first night on Friday, police said they were surprised no one had died yet. They shot in the air whenever they felt threatened. One of us was hit in the back of the head by a rubber bullet. But the discovery of Ahmed Dahdouh’s body on a railway platform in Genval, ten kilometers from Brussels, left us all puzzled. He was a young university student who lived on Rue de Mérode, just next to Place Saint Antoine. He was probably killed Sunday evening in Forest by right-wing elements, or by the police themselves, and thrown on the rails to hide the crime. But the police continue to deny everything and claim it as an accident... May God guard his soul!

Whatever the case, can you explain to us why the policemen who brutally assaulted Rodney King in L.A. have not yet been punished? Is “democracy” only for white people? You ask us for our responsibilities, when we don’t even have the right

to have rights, when we are not even allowed to live and die in dignity.

When they endlessly repeat, “Sales bougnoules!” or “Sales Macaques!” as their mantra, it is clear they see the Maghrebi, especially the young Maghrebi, as an animal. All we ask is that they stop with their paternalism and treat us as human beings.

The politicians in all this? They are not even willing to receive us. They have nothing else to do but to reproduce the fundamentalist conspiracies spread by the police. Yes, they spread rumors that Islamic fundamentalists would organize our riots to keep the police out of our neighborhood, so they would have a greater hold on us. This is bullshit! Even the mayor thinks that our revolt, which she even frames as “terror,” is programed by professional troublemakers. They claim that far-left or far-right agitators and Islamic fundamentalists are stirring us up, and that these groups would be against our “integration.” Can you believe this? As if we didn’t have our own political consciousness.

There are no leaders here. We are supposed to be “professional troublemakers,” just because we were spotted at an anti-U.S. or pro-Palestinian demonstration. The politicians only talk about provocation and manipulation, but this is a spontaneous movement. It is easy to attribute responsibility on external provocateurs, so politicians don’t have to look in their own pockets.

We were born here, and we are not afraid to speak out. We are at home here, and we will not leave, so get over it! We are not migrants, as we have never lived elsewhere. But many of us still don’t have the right to vote, despite having been in this country for thirty years. We want to say something, we want to be listened to and heard. They didn’t listen to our parents, but they will listen to us now.

They are afraid that one day they can no longer lock us up in factories like they did with our parents.

We are systematically pushed into vocational training, to do carpentry or metal work, or electricity. We don’t feel “integrated” at all, even though we were born here. Why should we feel like we have to further integrate into a society where we already belong?

Our three days of revolt were extraordinary. By saying, “Now we’re not going to let ourselves be crushed, we’re going to make it clear that we’re fed up,” we managed to stay together. We almost forgot all our little everyday problems. It was the first time our parents were not there to punish us, but rather to support us. We have never seen something like this before. There were fathers breaking paving stones for us and mothers throwing their pots and pans. Older women and also Belgian families protected us by giving us shelter. They opened their doors for those who were being chased by the police. The taxi drivers would also inform us of the police’s arrival, as they could tap into the police line on their radios.

We made sure that our neighbors were not injured by the violence. As for the cameramen from the mainstream media, they were identified as being part of the state apparatus. The journalists would leave with the cowboys, and they would be telling the same stories. We managed to capture a camera from the national broadcast BRT—so from now on, we’ll control our own images and make our own films, our own cinema! We will show you that there was never really a climate of insecurity here. On the contrary, the only thing you will find is a friendliness with hot mint tea that you will not find in any other, more upmarket neighborhoods.

Even our Belgian neighbors opened their doors, and yelled from their windows at the police: “What you’re doing is disgusting!” There were also people applauding from their windows, signaling a broader kind of awareness in the neighborhood, beyond the Maghrebi community. As soon as a young person was arrested, everyone moved and was ready to put themselves in danger, risking state punishment. We got closer to each other.

Now, our neighborhoods are more stigmatized than ever. In the media, Brussels is called the “Bronx on the Zenne River.” Can you imagine? What happens in other parts of the world also has consequences for us, especially what is happening in Palestine and Iraq. We see double standards at the global level.

The L.A. riots, the ongoing people’s uprising in Palestine, the worldwide repercussions of the first Gulf War are echoing here, making reactionary Belgian politicians fear the beginnings of a “Brussels intifada.”

While the Moroccan Minister Delegate condemned the police violence, he nevertheless stressed his desire for a quick return to law and order. Yet even Muammar Gaddafi himself denounces the police violence in Brussels. Apparently he follows the news about us here in Europe closely. He sees the violent treatment by Belgian police as an act of persecution and a consequence of racial segregation.

The noise of our discontent escalated steadily. On Friday, we knocked on the door once, but nobody listened to us. On Saturday, we knocked with more assertion, and still we weren’t heard. On Sunday, we really knocked hard. Then they heard us, they knew we were there, and they had to engage in a conversation that was unavoidable. Next time, it will be worse.

Dear funambulists—all you acrobats of social justice—our story is one that ties into our collective struggle. For Rodney King, Ahmed Dahdouh, all those in the Third World and the enclaves of the First World who do not survive their contempt, our bodies will continue to breathe, resist, revolt, and build something else, something different in the face of this systemic hogra, in all latitudes and in all decades.

With quantum love,

For all the revolting bodies

Anywhere, over time. ■

This letter was written as an exercise in critical fabulation and quantum love. It is part of FEU2FORET, a collective endeavor bringing together a number of artists to reimagine thirty years of revolt in Brussels through different burning aesthetics. It is based on archival work by Naima M. And with boundless gratitude to Najib Chairi and the Artistory Collective for the inspiring collaboration.



Fig.3

Joachim Ben Yakoub is a writer, researcher and lecturer operating on the border of different art schools and institutions. He is affiliated to the MENARG and S:PAM research group of Ghent University, where he is conducting research on the aesthetics of revolt somewhere in between Tunisia and Belgium. He is guest professor at LUCA school of Arts Brussels and lecturer at Sint-Lucas School of Arts Antwerp, where he is also promoter of the collective action research The Archives of the Tout-Monde.

Baobab van de Teranga interacts within a high density spectrum of practices valorizing non-eurocentric and non-anthropocentric forms of knowledge. Weaving ties throughout Africa, the Caribbean and Europe, She understands her tangible self as a form of cultural hyphen. She provides analyses using cartography as a visual and a-colonial tool allowing subversive shapes to emerge, misconsidered territories to be seen and unheard voices to be heard.

Fig.1, 2 & 3 “Never Forget.” Drawing reconstitution of the Forest revolts in Brussels on May 10-12, 1991. / All drawings by Krasnyi Collective.