Chapter 2
Black Brussels

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The resurgence in the global focus on racism following the police killing of George Floyd in the USA in May 2020 was also reflected on the streets of the Belgian capital, Brussels. And while Floyd's death was the initiating event that brought together a diverse crowd of 15,000–20,000 people on June 7, 2020, under the banner of Black Lives Matter, the demonstration was also an opportunity to bring to the fore a decades-long antiracism struggle that had been ignored for too long by authorities and established media. A taboo appeared to have been lifted, although it is too early to say whether there will be a lasting effect. As a result, Black Belgians suddenly seemed to play a critical role in understanding how to shape a more inclusive and antiracist future. And while, until recently, immigration and cultural difference had been the only legitimate ways to speak about racism, the acknowledgment of the colonial past, which includes addressing the traces of that colonial past in public space, achieved a central position in the struggle against racism.

In different ways, the monuments, plaques, statues, etc. reminiscent of the colonial past have become tools for the struggle against systemic racism, the advocacy of the African diaspora's interests, and the legitimation of the African diaspora in the public sphere. Symbols of racial oppression, including statues of King Leopold II, who was responsible for the deaths of millions of Africans during his rule, have legitimately become instrumental. After more than a decade of acts that were considered vandalism, such as defacing and daubing King Leopold II statues and other colonial symbols throughout Belgium with red paint, in June 2020 the authorities decided to remove a bust of Leopold II in Brussels and one in Ghent, as well as a statue in the city of Antwerp. The latter was set on fire before it was taken down. Attitudes toward these problematic symbols seemed to be changing.

This could be viewed as a step forward for Africans, who have been present in the Low Countries (Belgium and the Netherlands) since the Renaissance (Earle and Lowe 2010; Hondius 2011; 2008), although their numbers have been substantial only since the 1990s. In the 1950s, facing a lack of labor following World War Two, Belgium employed immigrant workers for its industry and infrastructure (Van Mol and de Valk 2016). However, while many Western European governments chose to recruit workers from their colonies, Belgium did not; instead, it arranged with Mediterranean countries to bring in temporary workers (De Smet 2016; Lafleur, Martinello, and Rea 2015; Martinello and Rea 2003). This scheme was in line with its colonial policy. As Eva and Erik Swyngedouw explain:

> The colonial administration excelled in discouraging and controlling migration. During the colonial period, migration to Belgium was extremely limited. Officially, there was no migration. (Swyngedouw and Swyngedouw 2009: 71)

This was for two reasons: first, a shortage of workers for the industrial and agricultural exploitation of Congo itself in the 1950s, resulting in considerable internal forced migration within Congo; and second, a concern that Congolese immigration would undermine the imagined racial homogeneity of Belgium (Kagné 2001: 6). As a result, the Black presence in Belgium was limited mostly to students and diplomats from Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi until the 1980s (Arnaut and Ceuppens 2009; Demart et al. 2017; Demart 2013a; Grégoire 2010; Kagné 2001; Mayoyo Bitumba 1995). The instability in the region following the Rwandan genocide in 1994, the fall of Mobutu in 1997, and the ensuing devastating wars in Congo prompted a significant wave of Congolese, Rwandans, and Burundians to settle in Belgium in the 1990s. In addition, other African immigrants joined the growing population.

Today, the number of People of African Descent (PAD) in Belgium is estimated to be about 250,000 (Demart et al. 2017). However, they are not one community per se but rather several communities due to their different countries of origin, home languages, religious affiliations, immigration trajectories, family histories, educational backgrounds, etc. Yet, they appear to share a common experience of racialization, what Pap Ndiaye, called "a community of experience" (Ndiaye 2009). The French sociologist working on Blackness in France, who was appointed Minister of Education and Youth by French President Emmanuel Macron in 2022, said that they share a common interest in

addressing racism and the colonial legacy. However, racism and its link with coloniality has been partially obscured because, in Belgium, discourses of diversity, multiculturalism, racism, etc. have been dominated by a focus on Belgians of Moroccan and Turkish origin, often lumped together as Muslims (Demart et al. 2017; Arnaut and Ceuppens 2009). Thus, issues of inequality and racial discrimination are essentially understood in cultural, religious, and migratory terms, erasing the coloniality of power that informs the logics of racism (cf. Quijano 2000). As a consequence, Belgium suffers from a textbook example of "white amnesia" (cf. Hesse 2002) in which Black resistance against colonialism is forgotten. Moreover, Belgians like to think of themselves as part of a small, insignificant, and powerless nation that has had little historical impact (Mincke 2016). Consequently, they are usually unaware of the atrocities Belgian governments, businesses, and industries were involved in to create the wealth the nation knows today. Still, although Belgium lost its colonial possessions 60 years ago, the spirit of colonization is still to be found in the streets of its cities, undoubtedly so in Brussels (Njall Soiresse 2017).

There are a lot of physical traces of the colonial past in Belgium's public space, with a high concentration in Brussels (cf. Stanard 2019). Depending on how one counts them, there are at least 74 explicit references in the city to people and places linked to Belgian colonization (Jacobs 2018), although Lucas Catherine, a Belgian historian, counts 101 places, just including street names that refer to men directly responsible for the colonial endeavor along with numerous buildings, squares, and avenues that do not refer directly to colonialism but were built as a direct consequence of colonialism (Catherine 2006). Meanwhile, since the early 2000s, several activist associations and community organizations in Brussels, whose members are majority, but not exclusively, of African descent, have been at the forefront of making the Black presence and the significance of the Black experience heard. Some recent publications explore the history and achievements of these organizations (Grégoire, Kanobana, and Demart 2023; Debeuckelaere and Abrassart 2020). But there is still a lot of work that needs to be done, and addressing in detail the social significance of these organizations and how they emerged would exceed the focus of this chapter. However, the celebration of the 50 years of independence of Congo in 2010 can be considered a key moment in bringing that legacy into the mainstream (cf. Demart and Abrassart 2016). In the process, the role of public space, and of a Brussels urban landscape that

is scattered with traces of colonialism, has served as a medium for making coloniality and racism visible and a subject to be addressed in earnest.

Efforts to decolonize public space in Brussels became undeniably visible in 2008, although the first public action seems to have taken place in 2005 following the decision to renovate the *Monument aux Pionniers Belges au Congo* (Monument to the Belgian Pioneers in Congo) in the Parc du Cinquantenaire. However, 2008 was a landmark year. Writer, philosopher, and activist Théophile de Giraud performed a critical act of protest against the huge equestrian statue of Leopold II on Place de la Nation (formerly known as Place du Trône), by climbing it and painting it red from its head to its waist; the first commemoration of the Unknown Congolese Soldier, organized by Black associations, took place at the Memorial for the African Campaign (see Figure 2.2) (Catherine 2018; Ben Yacoub and Abrassart 2016); and the first decolonial Brussels city tour was organized, explicitly denouncing the murderous aspects of Belgian colonization (Imbach 2008).

Out of the latter emerged CMCLD (Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations)[1], an influential unincorporated association of Pan-African activists from all parts of Belgium. Its members were initially exclusively PAD, and, as its name makes clear, the collective makes explicit the all too often ignored link between colonial legacy and the struggle against racism. The collective challenges a mainstream reading of colonial history, which is imbued with images that too often present colonialism as benevolent. Today, CMCLD continues to organize guided city tours that highlight the violent, racist, and exploitative aspects of the colonial past and are aimed at challenging a frequently glorified official history of Belgian colonialism (Imbach 2008). For example, CMCLD has pushed for the display of plaques with information that would contextualize certain street names and monuments, for the renaming of existing infrastructure, and for the establishment of new infrastructure with names of people – and, most importantly, of women – who fought against colonization and for the freedom of people.

However, there seems to be considerable resistance among politicians as well as in the media. Advocacy to address the colonial patrimony and the traces of Belgium's colonial past, in order to understand current forms of inequality and discrimination, has been going on for more than a decade, but with very little effect in political decision making and wider public dis-

1 CMCLD homepage: https://www.memoirecoloniale.be/a-propos/nos-realisations

courses (Lismond-Mertes 2018). It appears simpler to honor the South African President Nelson Mandela by naming the new Brussels rugby stadium the Nelson Mandela Stadium, or to condemn US and French imperialism, than to have an honest conversation about Belgium's colonial aberrations. It also seems easier in Brussels today to glorify those who oppressed and exploited rather than to honor those who fought for freedom and equality (Njall Soiresse 2017). As Achille Mbembe writes:

> The long humiliation of Blacks and their invisibility are still written in golden letters on the entire surface of the territory. (Mbembe 2006: 5)[2]

As the advocacy for a recontextualization of several colonial monuments has progressed, so too has investment in the creation and consolidation of new traces of the Black presence in Brussels.

Matonge: Where Black Belgians Meet

One of the most important imprints has grown organically: the neighborhood of Matonge, which itself is now home to two important symbolic markers of the Black presence in Brussels – Lumumba Square and a prominent artwork, both discussed below. Matonge takes its name from a lively and fashionable neighborhood in Kinshasa, the place where Congolese Soukous and Ndombolo music took root and where artists such as Papa Wemba and Koffi Olomide emerged. Brussels' Matonge, which is situated in the Ixelles municipality at the Porte de Namur (Namur Gate), developed in the late 1960s in the area surrounding the African House (Demart 2013a). The African House was a residence for students from the Belgian Congo, established when the Belgian authorities started timidly to accept Congolese to study at Belgian institutions of higher learning.

Consequently, the building became the first meeting place of Congolese students who lived in Brussels. After the independence of Congo, the neighborhood became a place of reference, with boutiques, hairdressers, groceries specializing in African food products, restaurants, and bars; it became

2 Translated by the author. In the original: "La longue humiliation des Noirs et leur invisibilité sont encore écrites en lettres d'or sur toute la surface du territoire."

a space reminiscent of the Matonge neighborhood in Kinshasa. While the area emerged from the fact that African students were assigned to live there, it never became a space of predominantly Black residence (Demart 2013a). Indeed, residents of African descent are estimated to constitute only 8 percent of the people who live in Matonge (Swyngedouw and Swyngedouw 2009). From the 1960s onward, Matonge became first and foremost a meeting place for Africans living in or visiting Belgium, a social and economic center, not a place to necessarily settle. Matonge "functions, both symbolically and materially, as a key signifying place in the construction of Congolese diaspora identity, while shaping a new form of 'glocal' urbanity in Brussels" (ibid.: 72).

Therefore, it is not surprising that this neighborhood is a place of Black political mobilization (Demart 2013b) and also the location of the two most remarkable explicit imprints of Black presence in Brussels: not only Lumumba Square (see Figure 2.4) but also, about 120 meters from the square, the gigantic reproduction of a Chéri Samba fresco. The original is to be found in the infamous Africa Museum, in the Afropea exhibition room that focuses on the history of the African presence in Belgium. Entitled *Matonge–Ixelles. Porte de Namur! Porte de l'Amour?* (Matonge–Ixelles. Gate of Namur! Gate of Love?), it was installed on June 9, 2002 on the walls of a derelict building at an important crossing in the neighborhood. It was the result of a long struggle by different associations, among them several with strong links to the African diaspora, and it represents the very first example of African contemporary art in a Brussels public space (CEC 2002). Originally, the work was meant to be there temporarily. It disappeared from view in 2006 after the renovation of the building it concealed. However, efforts were made to establish the work of art permanently and it returned in 2010 on the façade of another building at the same crossing between Chaussée de Wavre and Chaussée d'Ixelles at the Porte de Namur (Bouhbou 2010).

The painting is based on the location itself. It represents a street scene of Matonge in Brussels, showing in the rear a mixed crowd of Black, Brown and white people filling its streets, and in the front people having a drink on a terrace while watching others. The fresco's production was part of an initiative to trigger an intercultural dialogue at the heart of the Matonge neighborhood, an urban space that is renowned for its African imprint and is a meeting place not only for Blacks but for many Asians and South Americans (CEC 2002; Demart 2013a). The project was also part of a neighborhood revitalization program, which was led by the Ixelles municipality in collaboration with associations,

local shopkeepers, and residents. CEC (Coopération Éducation Culture), an NGO established in 1970 that focuses on cooperation, education, and culture, invited the internationally famous Congolese artist Chéri Samba to create a painting inspired by the neighborhood. Chéri Samba is best known for paintings showing and commenting on everyday life in Congo, almost always including text in French and Lingala. Samba's work highlights social problems such as poverty, corruption, racism, sexism, health, and crime. He explained that he seeks to appeal to people's conscience and that artists must make people think. Moreover, Samba has been invested in nourishing and refashioning a common identity across the African diaspora and he usually paints himself at the center of his visual social commentaries (Samba and Magnin 2004).

Figure 2.1: Chéri Samba's Porte de Namur. Port de l'Amour? fresco.
Photograph: Sibo Rugwiza Kanobana

This work of art is no different: it features a self-portrait of the artist with text in French and Lingala commenting on what Matonge is and represents. Underneath the self-portrait are the words:

> Matonge–Ixelles. Gate of Namur! Gate of Love? I have traveled around the world, never have I seen a city like Brussels and a neighborhood like Matonge in Ixelles where everybody interacts with everybody (over 100 nationalities in this neighborhood alone). Difficult to describe in one word what Matonge is – Brussels or Brussels itself. Brussels is a mythical city. Brussels is paradise.[3]

3 Translated by the author. In the original: "Matonge–Ixelles. Porte de Namur! Porte de l'Amour? J'ai sillonné le monde entier, jamais je n'ai vu une ville comme Bruxelles et un

These words seem to straightforwardly praise Brussels and Matonge for their multiculturalism, but stating that Brussels is mythical and a paradise reveals a certain irony, or even sarcasm. The gate of entry to Matonge is the old city gate whose name refers to the town of Namur to the south of Brussels. This is also the name of the metro station and bus stops where one should alight if visiting Matonge. The name Namur forms an imperfect rhyme with *amour* (love), but Samba doesn't claim that the Porte de Namur is a gate of love. Rather, he questions it and wonders whether it can be such a place. This ambiguity is all the more apparent because, at first glance, the bright colors, the smile on Samba's face, and the crowd give an impression of happiness and post-racial conviviality. However, this combines with a text in which an older white man says "What I see here surprises me, since when do Africans read?,"[4] as well as comments such as "I don't like to stay too long in this neighborhood"[5] and "This neighborhood is invaded"[6] – but also "You have to be in a society where everybody's mixing."[7]

As a result, this impressive work of art that dominates the urban landscape of Matonge expresses the tensions and contradictions that are connected to a multicultural context that is imbricated with a colonial legacy. There is no naïve celebration of a supposedly post-racial society here, but a honest engagement with the past, the present, and the future, in which Black and white Belgians are not only onlookers but participants who interact with each other, acknowledge racism, but also envision a common tomorrow. Meanwhile, the 12 by 15 meter reproduction that hangs on the front of a large building has become iconic, not only of the Matonge neighborhood and the African diaspora in Brussels but also of Brussels as a whole. It appears to be there to stay, unmoved for a decade now, and cherished by the majority of

quartier comme Matonge d'Ixelles où tout le monde se mêle (plus de 100 nationalités dans ce seul quartier). Difficile de décrire en un mot ce qu'est Matonge – Bruxelles ou Bruxelles elle-même. Bruxelles eza ville mythique. Bruxelles eza lola (paradis)" (Samba 2002: 1).

4 Translated by the author. In the original: "ce que je vois ici m'étonne, depuis quand les Africains lisent-ils?"

5 Translated by the author. In the original: "je n'aime pas rester longtemps dans ce quartier."

6 Translated by the author. In the original: "ce quartier est envahi.."

7 Translated by the author. In the original: "Il faut être dans une société où tout le monde se mêle."

Brussels' citizens for the honesty, ambiguities, contradictions, and tensions it expresses.

Black Voices of Resistance

The push to create a voice for Africans in Belgium can be traced back to activist Paul Panda Farnana (cf. Tshitungu 2012). Born in 1888 near Banana, in Bas-Congo, he traveled to Belgium in 1900, accompanying a Belgian colonist who died shortly after his arrival. Farnana was placed in the custody of the man's sister and was educated at the School of Horticulture and Agriculture in Vilvoorde, a Brussels suburb, subsequently continuing his education in Paris at an institute for tropical agriculture. When World War One broke out, he enlisted in the Congolese Volunteer Corps and became a German prisoner of war in August 1914, remaining in Germany until the war ended (Brosens 2014). On his return to Belgium, he became involved in politics and founded the Union Congolaise in Brussels and "became known in Belgium and abroad for speaking out for African rights" (Stanard 2016: 236).

Each year, during the commemoration of the capture of Tabora in 1916, a turning point in World War One after Germany's defeat in Africa in which Congolese troops played a key role (Catherine 2014), Panda headed a delegation of the Union Congolaise to the Grand Place in Brussels asking for recognition of the African war effort. Eventually, in 1927, at his insistence a monument paying tribute to the Congolese soldiers who died during the war was inaugurated in Léopoldville (present-day Kinshasa), the then capital of the Belgian Congo, named after King Leopold II. However, when he returned to Congo, he died in mysterious circumstances, most probably by poisoning. Nobody knows who was responsible for his death, but what is known is that Farnana was disliked by the authorities and was considered to be a Congolese who upset the colonial order.[8]

Historians argue that it is because of Farnana, dubbed the first Congolese intellectual, and his activism for African rights that Belgian authorities enacted a policy of isolation, prohibiting Congolese from immigrating to Belgium in order to avoid ideas such as freedom and equality finding their way

8 See the 2014 documentary by Françoise Levie, *Panda Farnana, un Congolais qui dérange*, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNpqcC8MerI.

back to the colony (Stanard 2016; Kagné 2001; Etambala 2019). However, the Black subject – note, not citizen – of the Belgian kingdom continued to play not only an important economic role but, during World War Two, a military one. An estimated 22,000 soldiers and carriers of the Force Publique, as they were called, fought in Ethiopia alongside British troops and participated in expeditions to West Africa, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Burma. However, members were denied the right to march as victors alongside Allied troops in the cities of Europe. The Belgian government in exile explicitly objected, afraid that the honoring of Congolese troops might trigger political ideas that would jeopardize the colonial capitalist order (Braeckman 2020). After independence, the Belgian authorities abandoned the soldiers. None of the Congolese veterans ever received a pension to support their families. The only thing that they "received" was a monument in Brussels – the Memorial for the African Campaign, erected in 1970 in the municipality of Schaerbeek – which was ignored until it was reappropriated by the African diaspora in Belgium (ibid.).

The memorial presents two profiles of soldiers, stylized in stereotypical ways. They both sport the traditional headgear for colonial troops of the time: the white officer with a pith helmet and the Black soldier with a fez. However, the differences are not only to be found in their hats but also in their facial features. The Black soldier is presented with thick lips and a chubby nose, while the white one has thin lips and a pointy, straight nose. This memorial suggests that both are equal; they cross hands as a collaborative gesture. It is a remarkable monument for two reasons: first, because it was erected in tribute to all the operations carried out in Africa, from the so-called anti-slavery campaigns in the late 19th century

Figure 2.2: The Memorial for the African Campaign. Photograph: Merijn Van de Pol (creative commons)

until World War Two; and second, because it is the only known monument on which the white and Black protagonists face each other, at the same height, without the white man dominating the Black "other."

The uniqueness of the monument and the important story it tells have led Brussels PAD associations to organize an alternative and activist ceremony every November 11 since 2008, to commemorate the Unknown Congolese Soldier. This is equivalent to the official Armistice ceremony at the monument for the Unknown Soldier at the Congress Column in central Brussels (Catherine 2018). Thus, for more than a decade, Belgium's African communities have laid claim to this monument, using it as a place of remembrance of the African contribution to European history and also of Black suffering and exclusion.

However, the memorial is still problematic for several reasons. First and foremost, the aesthetics perpetuate racial stereotypes and obscure the racist oppression and violence that were part of everyday life in the Force Publique. Second, while it presents an image of racial equality, it is in fact an excuse to exclude and ignore the African war effort from the regular war commemorations, most notably the annual World War One Armistice commemoration in the center of the city. Third, not only does the memorial erase the fact that the Force Publique was made complicit in the terror that the colonial authorities inflicted on the Congolese people, it also underwrites an obsession with military achievements and the glorification of war – or, as Achille Mbembe eloquently states:

> That so many of these monuments are dedicated to the glory of soldiers and servicemen indicates how deep the habit of massacre now lies in our collective unconscious. (Mbembe 2006: 3)[9]

Yet, even if we take this pertinent critique into consideration, the yearly commemoration of the African war effort is of great importance in understanding the humanity of African traces in Belgian history and the common history we, of all races, share. It is an example of how monuments can be reappropriated to bring people together even if they have been erected to divide. Consequently, as Clette-Gakuba and Vander Elst (2018) explain, the political action

9 Translated by the author. In the original: "Qu'autant de ces monuments soient consacrés à la gloire des soldats et des militaires indique à quel niveau de profondeur gît désormais, dans notre inconscient collectif, l'accoutumance au massacre."

in which the reappropriation of colonial monuments is situated is not just about a restitution of the past, but just as much a way to communicate the emancipatory struggles and active transformation of a still racist present.

This became a focus in 2018, during ceremonies for the centenary of the Armistice. Belgian, British, and Canadian flags flew next to those of former British colonies at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Congress Column, yet there was no Congolese flag, although hundreds of thousands of Congolese played a leading role in the outcome of the conflict. And this was not due to a lack of interest on the part of Black organizations to include this part of history in the official ceremony. Their efforts and requests were systematically rejected (Demart and Dibua Athapol 2018). This is an example of how Belgium has a difficult time dealing with its colonial past; that the Black presence is erased and ignored at the center – in this case, at the official ceremony, where only white Belgians were commemorated next to other nationalities, but not the formerly colonized Congolese subjects of Belgian Congo.

Since 2007, several Black activist associations have demanded that the authorities and the royal family include the African contribution to the war effort in official Armistice commemorations. As a result, in 2016, the Belgian government laid a wreath in front of the Memorial for the African Campaign. That year was also the centenary of the capture of Tabora, which marked the beginning of the end of the German Empire (Roulette 2018), but the ceremony was not a moment of inclusion; rather, it was one of racial segregation. And it did not happen every year. After 2016, the official ceremony went back to its white normalcy and no formal presence of state officials was to be found again at the African memorial during Armistice celebrations. Even if the history of the Battle of Tabora is widely acknowledged as divisive, it is only seen as a white individual achievement. Indeed, a memorial in the city's Forest municipality honors one person for this battle, who is presented as a white man who "singlehandedly" won the Battle of Tabora: General Charles Tombeur, knighted as Baron of Tabora.

Patrice Lumumba Square: Claiming Black Spaces

An important symbol of Black presence in Brussels and recent addition to the city's public space is Patrice Lumumba Square. It was officially inaugurated on June 30, 2018, on the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC's) day of

independence. Standing at the entrance to a central location for African peoples – the Matonge neighborhood (described above) – the square is the result of more than a decade of advocacy for public space that pays respect to the murdered first prime minister of the DRC. Community organizations with strong Afro-Belgian affiliations, such as Belgian Afrodescendants Committee (BAMKO), Change, CMCLD, and Groupement des Femmes Africaines Inspirantes et Actives (GFAIA), played a central role to achieve this (CMCLD 2018), along with other collectives and efforts by individual intellectuals and local citizens (Duval and Delobel 2018; Lismond-Mertes 2018). Most advocates had initially proposed another location, a square in the municipality of Ixelles behind Saint Boniface church, in the heart of Matonge. An informal street plaque with the name had already been put there by activists, and, thanks to a Belgian NGO's cyber intervention, if you search for it in Google Maps, you will find Futur Place Lumumba. Yet, the Ixelles municipality refused to use that location (Ben Yacoub and Abrassart 2016) and rejected the idea of a square named after Lumumba, arguing that he was not a unifying figure (Duval and Delobel 2018). Eventually, an interpellation by Zoubida Jellab, a councilor for the Ville de Bruxelles municipality, got the ball rolling for the establishment of a Lumumba Square at Ville de Bruxelles's border with Ixelles – i.e., at the Porte de Namur, the gate of entry to the Matonge neighborhood in Ixelles (Lismond-Mertes 2018).

Figure 2.3: The informal Square Lumumba behind Saint Boniface church. Photograph: Sibo Rugwiza Kanobana

The question remains whether the establishment of the square can be considered a change in the way in which public authorities in Belgium are address-

ing colonial history and its recollection. While it is a step in the right direction, one cannot deny that negationist forces in relation to colonial crimes are still at play within state structures (cf. Clette-Gakuba and Vander Elst 2018). Moreover, the square cannot be called a "proper" square, which is what the initial Place Lumumba activists strived for. The "real" square is officially a triangular crossing of three streets, with a low volume traffic, surrounded by houses and trees, and featuring the terrace of a local bar. The official Place Lumumba, however, is just a little piece of the sidewalk[10] (Braeckman 2018), limited to a narrow strip 15 meters by 50 meters, between the taxi stand at the metro station's exit and Avenue Marnix, a large avenue with heavy traffic that is part of the Brussels ring road, nicknamed *la petite ceinture*, that circumvents the city center. Consequently, no buildings will ever have Lumumba Square as an address (Lismond-Mertes 2018).

Figure 2.4: The official Lumumba Square sign at the Porte de Namur. Photograph: Sibo Rugwiza Kanobana

In essence, Lumumba Square is limited to a plaque, which is nearly invisible compared with the large advertisements surrounding the square. As historian Elikia M'Bokolo said during his speech at the inauguration, this plaque may be a revolution, but it is not enough. A square without a statue, monument, or other symbol may become a subtle way to perpetuate a failure to acknowledge the value of the person who embodies the Congolese will for independence and sovereignty. The mayor of Ville de Bruxelles municipality appeared to be aware of this in 2018, as he explained in an interview with *Le Soir*, a Francophone Belgian daily newspaper. He claimed that the municipality wanted something strong to be added to the square. Therefore, next to the plaque, a monument would be displayed in the months following the inauguration. The authorities reportedly freed up money to finance a call for artist pro-

10 Translated by the author. In the original: "un bout de trotoir."

posals for such a monument (Biermé 2018). But two years later nothing had happened and the mayor's spokesperson refuted the statement from 2018 by announcing that "There will be no statue" and claiming that "There was no agreement about that, it was only a lead [to explore]" (cited in Galindo 2020).

Maybe a statue of another individual is not what is needed (cf. Mbembe 2006), but, while there may now be a street sign referring to a Lumumba Square and a plaque with some contextualization, the municipality still honors Belgian colonists who committed crimes against humanity in its public space in a much more prestigious way. Elikia M'Bokolo addressed this at the inauguration, when he pointed out that the establishment of a Lumumba Square should logically lead to a questioning and revisiting of other public spaces that are directly linked to colonialism. He asked the crowd whether it could accept that the square was only named after Lumumba, without any further spatial planning, while not too far away a bust in a park glorifies Émile Storms, a colonist, assassin, and criminal (Bouffioux 2018), and just 300 meters away a huge monument glorifies King Leopold II, the man who symbolizes the horror that was inflicted on Congo when it was colonized by the Belgians.[11] These monuments, next to so many others, legitimize the colonial conquest by obscuring its destructive character (Clette-Gakuba and Vander Elst 2018). Furthermore, the problem is that the authorities viewed the inauguration of the square as an event for African communities, not as a Belgian event. However, it is essential that it is not seen as a memorial for associations of PAD , but as a tool of inclusive citizenship that aims to decolonize Belgian society as a whole (Njall Soiresse 2018). The question is indeed whether a country that self-identifies as democratic chooses disunity and dissension by holding on to its colonial symbols, or whether it wants to move forward and create an inclusive society in which the African diaspora does not need to legitimize itself, and in which the public space is respectful of all its citizens, Black and white, past and present (Vincent 2020).

Moreover, Ludo De Witte points to the danger that we could end up in what Herbert Marcuse called "repressive tolerance" (Wolff, Moore, and Marcuse 1970: 81–123), where one thing is tolerated in order to rebuke another. The danger is that the establishment of Lumumba Square may be taken as a tool not for decolonizing society as a whole, but rather to mute any further

11 Meanwhile the Emile Storms bust was removed by authorities on June 30 2022.

efforts at decolonization. Yet, a street sign or a plaque is not enough; it is not even a beginning. In a best case scenario, it is a letter of intent. Indeed, more and deeper work is needed, mentalities have to change, and the whole of the public space should be decolonized, including teaching history differently and stimulating the artistic, historical, and political work necessary to revisit colonial history (Duval and De Witte 2018).

All these critiques highlight that the decolonial nature of a Lumumba Square has not achieved much if it is not matched with other important tasks that are meant for all Belgians, whatever their racial or ethnic background. However, this is long-term work, and, in the meantime, the revisiting and reappropriation of colonial monuments and the wider public space by PAD is taking place, organically, step by step, without necessarily the official involvement of the authorities. Conclusively, and as also shown in the examples of Lumumba Square and the Armistice celebrations, public space seems to unceasingly play a critical role in the decolonial processes with which Brussels needs to engage, in order to create a common destiny that is not blind to humanity's past perversions, contemporary flaws, or future obstacles.

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