

Mobilizing the past

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Mobilizing the past: *creuseurs*, precarity and the colonizing structure in the Congo Copperbelt

Timothy Makori

It was 2pm. The intense sun that afternoon made the fifteen-minute wait at the city centre of Likasi in Haut-Katanga province of Congo all the more tedious for Papa Kabongo, my research assistant, and me. We were waiting for some informants for an interview and they had not appeared. Half an hour passed and we spotted two brand-new Bajaj motorbikes whiz past us and turn around rather abruptly. The riders were both without helmets but they wore some fancy sunglasses. The blue bike came right up to me. The rider slowly lifted his glasses and with a cheeky grin said, ‘*Timoté, ni je?*’ (‘Timoté, how is it?’). It was Francis, my informant. I was perplexed, unsure of whether I should comment on his looks, that suspicious grin, or the flippant greeting. Francis knew and could see that I looked visibly surprised because, only the day before, Papa Kabongo and I had stumbled into him in an artisanal mine near the city of Likasi where I was conducting my fieldwork. Then, he wore shorts soiled with mud and a tired T-shirt browned by dust and spoke to us about the Sunday meeting while standing knee-deep in brown murky water while overseeing his copper ore being washed. At one moment, he would be speaking calmly to us and at the next he would be flailing his arms and hollering at some teenage boys at the nearby stream to hurry up with the rinsing of his malachite rocks. Francis was a *creuseur*.

That Sunday afternoon when I met him one might have mistaken him for a *sapeur*.¹ He had donned a Yankees baseball cap, aviator sunglasses, blue jeans, a Chelsea Football Club jersey, moccasins, and, just for effect, two replica Seiko watches – one on each wrist. Time obviously mattered to this guy, I mused. So, why was he late?

The momentary shock of seeing Francis *sapé* wore off. Jules, Francis’s friend and business partner, approached me. He laughed as he came off his bike in his black three-piece suit and greeted us in the respectful Katangese manner of bringing our heads to touch each other from side to side. I realized that their laughter and smiles were a response to what they must have perceived to be my exaggerated sense of surprise. I am sure they were wondering why it was so strange to me that they were *à la mode*, akin to the male dancers of the Congolese pop-music sensation Werrason.² Of course, they did not say that but they knew they had surprised me, and, from their smiles, I gathered that this pleased them. With their arrival

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¹*La sape* in Congolese French refers to an ostentatious display of clothing. When taken to the extreme by *sapeurs* – those who *sape* – it refers to what Gondola (1999) has described as a ‘dream-like hedonism’ expressed through particular forms of clothing that allow one to reconstruct both time and space and in doing so recreate one’s identity.

²Werrason is a famous contemporary Congolese musician from Kwilu province. He is also known to be one of the Congolese musicians most sympathetic to the plight of street children in Congo.

complete, Jules and Francis ferried Papa Kabongo and me to what they called a ‘quiet place’ where we could talk. Instinctively, I knew we were going to a bar and the beers were on me.

This article is about young men like Francis and his friend Jules who work as *creuseurs*³ or craft diggers. To me, the play and display of these young men reveals a few of the arresting paradoxes in the lives of *creuseurs*, such as the display of plenty when otherwise lack is the norm, the disdain for formality unless it meets practical ends, and the use of spectacle as a means of indicating and simultaneously masking social value (see Newell 2013). The delayed and unapologetic entrance of Francis and Jules, their *sapé* display (when otherwise they were tanned to their eyelashes in the reddish tinge of Katanga soil) along with the respectful manner of greeting, indicative of how relative equals acknowledge each other, were all attempts to disabuse me of what I thought I knew about *creuseurs*. Francis and Jules, whom I repeatedly met in the mine of Kilobe⁴ in Haut-Katanga province, wanted me to view them as coevals. They wanted me to recognize them as being representative, and maybe even constitutive, of the here and now as it is experienced and expressed in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is that emplacement, mutual recognition and historical experience I discuss in this article.

To what do we owe the emergence of this social figure of the African miner in the Copperbelt – a place once considered to be the bastion of modernity in Africa (see Epstein 1967; 1981; Ferguson 1999; Gluckman 1960: 57; Powdermaker 1962)? Francis was just one of the approximately 50,000 to 250,000 young men engaged in artisanal mining in Katanga province alone.⁵ Like his friend Jules, Francis became a *creuseur* in the wake of the decline of industrial mining, which took hold around 1990 when a collapse in global commodity prices coupled with the gross mismanagement of the country led to dwindling revenues from copper mining, resulting in the serious indebtedness of the state-run mining company Gécamines.⁶ The remedy for the ailing Congolese economy came in 2002 when, with the insistence of the World Bank, the state liberalized the mining sector and commenced a process of making redundant more than half of the 24,000 workers of the company along with other public sector staff (Rubbers 2010). The combined effects of the redundancy programme and the liberalization of the mining sector basically mortgaged the futures of the dependants

³My research is based on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in 2009, 2011 and 2013–14. Over this period, I was in the field for a total of ten months, first for preliminary thesis fieldwork and subsequently for extended fieldwork. I was mainly based in what is today Haut-Katanga province. Given that my fieldwork occurred prior to the 2015 subdivision of provinces in DR Congo, the rest of the article retains references to Katanga prior to subdivision.

⁴This is a pseudonym for the mine in southern Katanga where I conducted the majority of my fieldwork.

⁵A World Bank study (2008: 56–7) estimates that 90 per cent of all mineral production in Congo comes from artisanal miners, who are estimated to number between 500,000 and 2 million in the country. See also Global Witness (2006).

⁶Gécamines is the Général de Carrières et des Mines. In colonial times, Gécamines was known as the Union Minière du Haut Katanga (UMHK).

of thousands of workers, compelling them to swap the classroom for the *carrière* (artisanal mine). Somewhat predictably, liberalization also coincided with a rise in global commodity prices that made the metal and mineral ores of the Copperbelt an attractive investment in the global market (Trefon 2016: 119–46). The ensuing rush for mining concessions in Katanga has pitted artisanal miners (*creuseurs*) against the Congolese state and its partners: foreign mining companies.⁷

Beginning in 1995, conflicts between artisanal miners and large-scale mining companies have been documented and linked to reforms in the mining laws and regulations of at least thirty-six sub-Saharan African countries (Carstens and Hilson 2009: 306). In a majority of cases,⁸ changes to the regulations governing mining were taken with a view to increasing the participation of large-scale mining companies and with little regard to the livelihood strategies of rural residents, small-scale farmers and other land-dwellers. The Congo Copperbelt is no exception to the global trend of disregarding local livelihoods when enacting policy reforms in the resource extraction sector. In fact, as I show below, violent disregard for local societies is a recurring motif, particularly when one analyses the *longue durée* of resource extraction in Congo. That said, the presentist focus of resource policy literature still offers useful insights that dispel automatic links between the existence of natural resources and the incidences of violent conflict (for a review, see Cuvelier *et al.* 2014) while at the same time advocating for the recognition of artisanal mining in sub-Saharan Africa as a viable poverty alleviation strategy (for a review, see Hilson and McQuilken 2014) and the inclusion of women in mining (Bashwira *et al.* 2014; Werthmann 2009). However, this literature often underplays the role and endurance of technologies of governance and domination arising from the precolonial and colonial eras, particularly as these continue to inform the organization of resource extraction and labour relationships in artisanal mining in sub-Saharan Africa. As the precolonial history of mining in Africa shows, in many communities on the continent metallurgy was about more than material needs because the significance of the process of extracting and refining metals into valuable items influenced social relations in the sphere of politics, gender and religion (Cline 1937; Diop 1988; Herbert 1984; 1993). Therefore, an in-depth look at artisanal mining, which in Central Africa was a precolonial practice, also requires a reflexive analysis that grapples with the recursions and entanglements of the past as they manifest in and are informed by the shifting demands of the present.

For artisanal miners in Katanga, the present is defined by the ominous threat of dispossession. That which is sought by the state and private interests is the very source of their livelihood and cultural identity: their ancestral lands. Thus, resistance to dispossession attempts often takes violent and deadly forms. For the state and foreign investors, mining land is a lucrative commodity that can be prospected, traded or securitized in the present so as to generate future

⁷A similar trend has been noted in Eastern Congo with the arrival of large multinational corporations such as Banro Corporation (Geenen and Hönke 2014).

⁸Cases of conflict between artisanal miners and mining corporations are also discussed in Tanzania (Carstens and Hilson 2009), Ghana (Hilson and Yakovleva 2007) and Mozambique (Dreschler 2001). Similar dynamics have also been noted in Papua New Guinea (Kirsch 1996; 2014).

profits. To *creuseurs*, the hardening realities of the present reveal the future as conceivable only in so far as it is connected to the moral matrices of the past that link them as benefactors of the ancestors – the ‘true’ owners of the land. The conflict in this context hinges almost entirely on the perceived attempt by capital to define the future without any ‘space’ for the past: that is, without areas where local residents can communally organize their labour as independent miners to exploit productive resources. Therefore, I argue, *creuseurs* have come to understand attempts to annex artisanal mines as corresponding to the evisceration of their pasts. In anticipation of the existential nature of this dispossession, I discuss how both the organization and the character of artisanal mining have been adapted by miners to address the precarity they experience in the present. However, rather than transforming social relations among miners, these adaptations to the threat of dispossession unintentionally reproduce the very structures of violence of the colonial past they seek to overcome.

Below, I begin by first providing a brief historical backdrop to mining in Katanga with the purpose of highlighting how artisanal mining re-emerges after industrial decline. I then move on to provide an ethnographic analysis of *creusage* to show how it is structured in ways that mirror and seemingly reproduce colonial relations of violence. I close with a reflection of what the genealogy of artisanal mining reveals about the emplacement of African mineworkers in the neoliberal present.

Copperbelt history and the emergence of the *creuseur*

To explain the ‘history of the present’ informing the emergence of the *creuseur* as a social figure, it is necessary to situate the series of conjunctures that have shaped and continue to shape mining in the *longue durée* of economic exchanges in Central African history. This approach borrows from David Scott (1999: 15) the view that ‘histories of the present ought to be attentive not only to the shifting contours of the pasts they interrogate, but also to the shifting contours of the presents they inhabit and from which they are being written’. It is also in response to an emerging literature on Africa’s global labour history whose aim is to trace the histories of neglected occupational groups (Barchiesi and Bellucci 2014; Bellucci and Freund 2017; for the Congo, see Hendriks 2013). In my description of the practices, modalities and projects through which modernity inserted itself and altered the lives of the Congolese, the event and structure of violence across generations emerge as a defining aspect of colonial experience in the Congo. For Nancy Rose Hunt (2016), the insidious violence of the Belgian colonial era was particular, for, as she argues, it sustained a generalized mood of ‘nervousness’ in the colonial state. As I suggest below, the postcolonial present is a problem space still shaped by the history of colonial violence, and it is from that milieu that the figure of the *creuseur* emerges.

Oral historians explain that, from 1600 to around 1800, the crowding of strangers around centres of rare natural resources such as salt pans, copper outcrops and iron deposits in the Congo Basin formed the early basis of political centralization among the peoples of southern Congo (Vansina 1966). Increasing exchange and control of these items for prestige purposes facilitated the rise and spread of powerful centralized polities such as the Kongo, Kuba, Lunda

and Luba kingdoms (Reefe 1981: 84; Vansina 1978; Macola 2002). In spite of their systems of organization and political centralization, these kingdoms were ravaged from the early 1700s to the mid-1800 by the transatlantic slave trade. Joseph Miller (1988: 153) suggests that the outcome of slavery in the Central African region was that approximately 40 per cent of all slaves in the Americas came from West-Central Africa (Lovejoy 1989: 388). Thus, it comes as no surprise that Jacques Depelchin (2005) reminds us that the colonial encounter in the Congo Basin begins not with the ‘scramble for Africa’, but with the Atlantic slave trade. The combined effects of the collapse of the Kongo Kingdom, Portuguese slave raids in the interior of West-Central Africa, the Imbagala attacks in South-Central Africa and internecine group conflicts are responsible for dispatching 3.6 million central Africans into slavery between 1500 and 1800 (Lovejoy 2012: 73–4).

From around 1850 to 1890, the East African slave trade added to the waves of human migration that had produced tremendous change in the demography, political stability and economic production of the Congo Basin region.⁹ The assassination of the Sumba warlord Mushiri, who had established himself in the southern region of the Lualaba using links to Zanzibari slavers, ultimately ushered in Belgian rule in the Congo. Notwithstanding the resistance of Congolese communities to European rule, the annexation of Katanga and ultimately the Congo by King Leopold II continued a process that had begun with the arrival of the first Portuguese ships at the mouth of the Congo River. What differed between the seventeenth-century mercantilist Portuguese and the late nineteenth-century imperialist Belgians was not the ideology or even the methods of extraction, but rather their scope: Leopold wanted and violently took the lives of the Congolese and their natural resources – *both* of which he viewed as his personal property. From 1885 to 1908, when the Congo Free State was abolished and the colony transferred to the Belgian state, millions of Congolese lost their lives in the ‘Red Rubber’ campaign orchestrated by private concession companies (Hochschild 2005; Siocháin and O’Sullivan 2003).

In 1910, two years after the Belgian state took control of the Congo as a colony, the railway from Southern Africa arrived in Elizabethville,¹⁰ facilitating the movement of copper ore out of the Congo but also attracting more Europeans to work for either the Union Minière du Haut Katanga (UMHK), Katanga railways, or the *Force Publique*¹¹ (Fetter 1976: 34). In order to obtain cheap labour, Europeans imposed a head tax policy that was administered by local chiefs and village headmen, resulting in a forceful push of Africans away from the countryside and into urban centres. In fertile areas such as the northern Orientale province, peasant farmers were compelled by the colonial state to grow cash crops such as cotton at the expense of their food security (Likaka 1997). In the south,

⁹For the social cost of slavery in West-Central Africa, see Lovejoy (2012), MacGaffey (1977) and Miller (1988). For a general overview of the effect of slavery on other African communities, see Inikori and Engerman (1992), Miers and Klein (1999), Miers and Kopytoff (1977) and Willis (1985).

¹⁰This was the colonial name of the city of Lubumbashi.

¹¹The *Force Publique* was a paramilitary unit created by King Leopold II during the time of the Congo Free State (1898–1910). It was responsible for enforcing Belgian colonial policy and it played a significant part in meting out violence during the ‘Red Rubber’ campaigns in which millions of Congolese lost their lives (see Siocháin and O’Sullivan 2003).

those forcefully conscripted to work in mines in Elizabethville lived in camps that had, at best, ‘primitive’ conditions (Fetter 1976: 35).¹² A similar dynamic of urbanization across the border in Northern Rhodesia led anthropologists at the Rhodes Livingstone Institute to focus on the ‘adaptation’ of Africans to life in multi-ethnic mining towns (Epstein 1981; Mitchell 1957; 1961; Parpart 1983; Powdermaker 1962; Wilson 1945).

At the peak of industrialization in the 1960s, mining companies were the dominant social force in the African Copperbelt. In the city of Lubumbashi in the Katanga province of Congo, residents lived according to the rhythm of the state-run mining company, UMHK. It provided food, housing, medical care, running water, and even paid the bridewealth for its workers, whom it considered its ‘children’. The corporate welfare of the company was initially aimed at ‘stabilizing’ its workforce by enticing men to sign longer employment contracts (Dibwe 2001). By 1965, this programme was a success, and the average length of an employee contract with the UMHK was nine years (Fabian 1973: 301). All the children of mineworkers went to primary school; 30 per cent of the boys went to professional school and the rest to the worksite.¹³ Homemaking schools prepared wives and mothers for their new role as a ‘support system for salaried male workers’ (Jewsiewicki 2010: 9; Hunt 1997). To historians, ‘stabilization’ misrepresented the fact that the management of the UMHK was basically trying to ‘breed its own labor force’ (de Meulder 1996; Dibwe 2001; Fetter 1976: 466).

Evidence of the paternalism of the company in post-independence Congo was reflected in the often-heard remarks that ‘*Union Minière [kazi] njo baba, njo mama*’: that is, ‘Union Minière [salaried work] is father and mother’ (Dibwe 2004; Petit and Mutambwa 2005: 470).¹⁴ Through its system of ‘welfare capitalism’ in which work, leisure, lodging, healthcare, education, marriage, and even spiritual life were controlled by the company and guaranteed on the basis of employment, the company tried to create the male mineworker as domestic patriarch of a monogamous nuclear family. The fact that it offered bridewealth to new recruits and restricted the movement and leisure of its workers led historians to argue that the company was gradually trying to substitute itself for the clan and extended family (Dibwe 2001: 55). Things took a turn for the worse in the 1980s as declining revenues from mining started to threaten the paternalist image of the company, which by then had been renamed Gécamines. Cuts in welfare took many of the residents of Katanga by surprise, for, unlike the rest of the Congolese, revenues from mining had for decades offered relative stability to the Katangese from much of the economic turmoil in post-independence

¹²Stories of Africans being eaten alive by *batumbula*, terrifying creatures that ate the flesh and drank the blood of Africans in Katanga, circulated widely in Elizabethville and in Northern Rhodesia during the early 1920s, and these speak of some of the violence of the colonial experience (see White 2000: 270).

¹³The ‘benevolence’ of the company nurtured a ‘myth of philanthropic paternalism’ (Higginson 1989: 185) based on the fact that, at independence in 1960, the UMHK was directly responsible for the destinies of 20,000 workers and total of 100,000 people (Jewsiewicki 2010: 9).

¹⁴The economic importance of the UMHK, not only to Katanga residents but also to the Congolese postcolonial state, is made even more explicit if it is noted that, just prior to the collapse of the company in 1990 with the closure of Kamoto mine, the UMHK contributed almost 40 per cent of all foreign exchange revenue earned by the country (De Herdt 2002: 448). On the consequences of UMHK paternalism, see Rubbers (2013).

Congo. A sure sign of industrial decline came in the form of the closure of Kamoto mine in 1990 (Rubbers 2009: 29). Despite the fact that the collapse of mining was symptomatic of post-Cold War political realignments, wider state failure, and the volatility of international markets, it was not experienced or explained as such. Children apportioned blame to their fathers for taking all the benefits of industrialism and leaving them with nothing. ‘Fathers’ became a social group widely held responsible for mishandling independence and permitting the ensuing corruption of President Mobutu¹⁵ and his elites (Jewsiewicki 2010: 10; see also Dibwe 2001). Decades of a colonially produced institutional paternalism had eventually produced its own critique.

Dwindling American support for the kleptocratic regime of President Mobutu set the stage for his violent removal from power in 1997, leading to a period of protracted violence in the country.¹⁶ This occurred at a time when the World Bank and International Monetary Fund were implementing structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) across Africa. For the people of Katanga, structural adjustment came in the form of the liberalization of the mining sector in 2002 and led to the wholesale loss of tens of thousands of industrial jobs and the evaporation of many of the welfare supports of the past (Rubbers 2010). It is in a post-industrial present informed by generations of colonial violence and, more recently, the hardening reality of economic liberalization that I analyse the figure of the *creuseur* in Katanga.

Precarity and the colonizing structure

One of the aspects of the past made clear in the aforementioned history is that the colonial encounter sought to utterly reorganize and destroy precolonial modes of existence so as to define the form collective social life would henceforth take in Congo. Fortunately, this process was not entirely successful. The memory and practice of precolonial activities such as artisanal mining persisted at the turn of the twentieth century despite colonial attempts to reorganize rural life (Jewsiewicki 1983; Likaka 1997). Monseigneur de Hemptinne (1926), apostolic vicar of the parish of Elizabethville (the present-day city of Lubumbashi), describes how a Yeke ‘chief’ named N’kuba organized copper mining campaigns after being trained and initiated into a guild of ‘copper eaters’. The campaign ran in the dry season, around mid-May, after the harvest of sorghum, and it commenced with the ‘chief’ pronouncing ‘*Tuye Tukadie Mukuba*’, ‘Let us go eat copper’ (de Hemptinne 1926: 381). On launching the mining campaign, the ‘chief’ summoned the *ngang’a* (ritual specialist) to invoke the assistance of the *Bakishi*, or spirits of the ancestors. For four to five months, ‘Chief’ N’kuba mined for copper ore, after which time smelting began. During the entire period of ore extraction, N’kuba’s people relocated to the closest river or stream to the

¹⁵President Mobutu Sese Seko became the President of Congo in 1965 after the assassination of the Prime Minister-elect Patrice Lumumba. He ruled Congo for thirty-two years.

¹⁶Laurent-Désiré Kabila deposed Mobutu from power in a coup that led to warfare all across the country. This was followed by the second Congo war in the east from 1998 to 2003 (see Reyntjens 2009).

mine. After the extraction campaign, members of the village offered a portion of their copper ore to the ‘chief’ in recognition of his role in ritually maintaining the fertility of the land, but even after paying those dues, the men digging and women cleaning the ore still obtained a substantial portion of the copper resource. It is estimated that, from 1850 to 1910, the Basanga, who were famed as the ‘eaters of copper’, produced approximately 700 tonnes of copper (de Hemptinne 1926: 402).

Many decades after the disappearance of the ‘eaters of copper’, artisanal mining has returned to Congo. This return in the destructive wake of a declining colonial industrialism reveals the uncanny nature of the past, for, while the practice largely retains its familiar precolonial form (consisting of the use of rudimentary tools to dig for minerals in mines whose access is guaranteed communally), it is nevertheless ‘strange’. Its strangeness is in large part a product of the timeliness of its return to a present in which mining is singularly structured and based on the imperatives of the global market rather than the stipulations of the precolonial peasant economy. Thinking of artisanal mining today, one has to consider and even juxtapose its *doppelgänger*: private concession mining. Both artisanal and concession mining are enshrined in the revised *Code Minier* of 2002, and, given the surge and declines of commodity prices over the past decade, these two groups are often in competition for the same mining concessions. As I discuss, the effect of this collision course between foreign investors and *creuseurs* routinely results in the state-sanctioned privatization of artisanal mines.

While the seizure of artisanal mines by the state and private mining companies may be akin to what David Harvey (2005) has called ‘accumulation by dispossession’, it is by no means unique to the Congo. Such forms of seizure are a common feature of contemporary imperialism, whose manifestation, particularly in the West, is the physical, occupational and existential precarity of modern life (Butler 2006; Standing 2011). To be precise, while in the West precarity emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century and has come to refer to a politically induced condition that is the outcome of the systematic dismembering of social and economic networks of support by the rapacious imperatives of neoliberal governance, in Africa this same pattern of social engineering by neoliberal forces goes back to the mid-1980s. The idioms used to refer to precarity then (as now) in Africa are ‘uncertainty’ (Callaghy and Ravenhill 1993; Cooper and Pratten 2015; Smith 2015; Werbner 2002) and ‘crisis’ (Hoogvelt 1997; Mbembe and Roitman 1995: 324; Petit and Mutambwa 2005). As attractive as it may be to draw comparisons between precarity in the West and in Africa, such comparisons quickly run into problems when we move beyond the idiomatic expression of ‘precarity’ and begin to tease out the historicity of such an experience.

Particularly in the resource economies of Central and Southern Africa, it is apposite to reflect on Frederick Cooper’s (2017: 148) claim that ‘if “precarity” has any meaning it is as the reverse of “stabilization”’. This is because the social welfare agenda of stabilization in the Copperbelt was *not* aimed at building a society based on democratic values, equal opportunity and solidarity, as was the case in twentieth-century Europe (and less so in the United States) (*ibid.*: 148). ‘Stabilization’ in Congo was a colonial project whose social welfare agenda was aimed at increasing the survival rates of men living in mining camps so as to ‘breed a workforce’ that would be solely reliant on waged labour for its social reproduction (de Meulder 1996; Dibwe 2001; Fetter 1976: 466). The fact that this process was never fully successful is maybe the reason why the industrial decline was not

completely disastrous for Copperbelt mineworkers (see Mususa 2010). This not only highlights the resilience, thrift and resourcefulness of the Congolese in the face of dramatic social change but also points to the structural violence inherent in ‘stabilization’ as a colonial project. To say that the violence of stabilization did not produce precarity in the lives of the Congolese would be disingenuous, and it therefore also ought to be expected that mine labour in the aftermath of colonial industrialism would be as precarious – if not more so – as it was in the past. Considering the specific trajectory of mine labour in Central African history from the peasant past to ‘stabilization’ and the liberalized present, I am impelled to analyse the ‘precarity’ of *creuseurs* in the present not only as a politically induced condition resulting from neoliberal forces but, more fundamentally, as a social condition linked to the foundational and enduring violence of the ‘colonizing structure’.

As Valentin Mudimbe (1988: 15) reminds us, the structure of colonialism in Africa entailed the domination of space, the reformation of the natives’ minds and the restructuring of local economies. Nowhere was this more visible than in the Copperbelt, where, as early as 1971, Bernard Magubane¹⁷ argued that scholars ought to view the modernization of the region as an acute pathology of colonial experience. I want to suggest that Magubane’s (1971) admonition still rings true in the context of post-industrial decline in Congo. For instance, if we consider how rural life in colonial times was radically restructured to meet the demands of industrialization in southern Katanga (Jewsiewicki 1983), then the corporate social welfare regimes of Gécamines, which catered for a minority in urban centres, start to appear more an exception than the norm. Similarly, the dispossession, impoverishment, generational disenfranchisement and inability to connect means and ends experienced by *creuseurs* when viewed from a *longue durée* perspective suggest that precarity has quite likely been the norm for a majority in rural and urban Congo for decades. Furthermore, the fact that many young men working as *creuseurs* were the descendants of mineworkers who were once conscripted and then later seduced by employment-linked guarantees of industrial welfare, only to be discarded and rendered abject by the whims of global finance, speaks to the exceptionalism of the industrial moment as much as to the tenacity of colonially induced inequality. The recursive and insidious nature of generational inequality emanating from a colonial ordering of social experience in the Congo is what concerns me in this article. As Anibal Quijano (2000) reminds us, the structures of power produced by colonialism and persisting in its wake to codify and hierarchically order global and domestic social relations are an index of the *coloniality of experience*. It is these same structures that I have in mind when I explore below the extent to which the precarity experienced by *creuseurs* in the present is informed by the colonial encounter.

The *creuseurs* of south Katanga

Liberalization of the Congolese mining industry in 2002 produced a mixed bag of results. While on the one hand it coincided with a rise in world metal prices – at a

¹⁷See the critique of the indices used by Rhodes Livingstone Institute scholars to study social change in Magubane (1971: 431).

time when the economic opportunities for many families in Katanga were in steep decline – it offered employment to only a small fraction of the more than 10,000 redundant workers of Gécamines. Furthermore, although changes in the mining code attracted foreign investment, hardly any of the benefits of such investments landed in the hands of the vast number of children whose parents were made redundant by Gécamines. Life for these young men and women was collectively far worse than anything their parents had ever experienced. Unable to continue with school and with no means of support, these children and youth descended – in the thousands – to the copper, gold and cobalt mines of Katanga to earn a living. A flourishing artisanal mining industry also attracted young people from the western provinces of Kasai, hundreds of kilometres away. Those from Kasai had grown up in the shadow of a different state-run company, MIBA, or Société Minière de Bakwanga, but, from the early 1980s, they too experienced an industrial decline that could match, if not rival, that of Gécamines. Upon their arrival in Katanga, a considerable number of these new migrants went to work in artisanal mines as *creuseurs*, mineral ore cleaners, transport providers, petty traders and mineral traders, or *négociants*. The result of the migration of people from different parts of Congo such as Kasai and Kivu provinces has been the sprouting of artisanal mines and mine villages in different parts of southern Katanga.

Typically, *creuseurs* are almost exclusively young men between the ages of fifteen and forty. They earn a living by digging for copper, cobalt and gold and work independently or in small groups of around four or five individuals in what are often remote locations that the Congolese state has demarcated for small-scale artisanal mining. The majority of *creuseurs* are not contractually bound to person or place and tend to work when and more or less how they wish. In theory, a young man going into the artisanal mine needs a permit from one of the two unions involved in artisanal mining in Katanga: EMAK,¹⁸ the Association for Artisanal Miners of Katanga, or CMKK, Cooperative Madini kwa Kilimo. In practice, very few get one.¹⁹ Young men insert themselves as their circumstances demand. For usufruct rights, they are charged a tax by local authorities, which is often 10 per cent of the ore they produce from deep-shaft copper, gold or cobalt mines. Mining is carried out only by men, a fact that can be traced back to the colonial division of labour in the early industrial era, when, generally, urban life forced men to serve as wage labourers (miners) and women as reproductive subjects (mothers). Over the years, this gendered division of labour has come to attain various cultural justifications among artisanal miners. One view I often heard was that the presence of women in a mine angers the spirits of the mine and makes the ore disappear. These spirits are most often female in gender and miners say that they harbour jealousy towards local women, thereby justifying the taboo against them in the mine (see also Cuvelier 2011b). Enforcement of this taboo has turned artisanal mines into hyper-masculine spaces with anywhere from 200 to more than 10,000 people. To obtain a sense of how an individual ends up as a miner, let me return to Francis, one of my

¹⁸EMAK is the Exploitants Miniers Artisanaux du Katanga.

¹⁹A study by Pact (2010) noted that, of 267 interviewed miners, only 16 per cent identified themselves as being members of either one of the two unions of artisanal miners (see Tsurukawa *et al.* 2011: 30).

key informants in the mine of Kilobe where I carried out most of my fieldwork. When I first met him in 2011, he detailed the circumstances leading to his life in the mine as follows:

I was born in Likasi in August of 1986. My father worked for an industrial metal company called SOCRAL here in Likasi until he got sick in 1997. As the first born in my family I dropped out of school and started to hustle. Four years later, I ended up in the mines. I started off as a *salizer*,²⁰ then I began carrying the ore from the mine to the river for cleaning. Afterwards I joined the ‘*chain*’²¹ and I was getting paid for removing the ore from the mining shaft. At last, they allowed me to start working on the ‘*tableau*’.²² I became a *creuseur*.

The narrative pattern that Francis outlines above of his father’s illness and, quite possibly, subsequent loss of employment, leading to the discontinuation of his studies, was a recurring theme in the interviews and focus group discussions I conducted with *creuseurs*. If there was sickness involved then the explanation often given to me of how they ended up in the mines was reduced to one word: ‘*crise*’. The ‘*crise*’ was an implicit reference to the relationship between the macro-structural trajectory of industrial decline and its attendant effects in the domestic life of individuals. It was the impetus behind ‘*debrouillardise*’ or the ‘fend-for-yourself’ culture that scholars have identified as being a pervasive feature of contemporary Congolese social life (Petit and Mutambwa 2005; Trefon 2004). The particular manifestation of the need for improvisation in order to survive led Francis and others to the mines due, in large part, to a lack of means and a recent ‘renaissance’ in mining in Katanga (Trefon 2016: 119–46). Most of the mines upon which young men descended in the early 2000s were ancient artisanal mines that had been taken over by the UMHK and later abandoned by the company as industrialism collapsed in the 1990s. These mines were often in peri-urban and rural areas, off the beaten track and far from urban centres. Venturing into what are often remote and abandoned mines to dig out minerals is more than a part-time vocation; it has become a career for individuals such as Francis. As he explains, perpetual movement defines the improvisation in his life.

I’ve worked all over. I started in Shinko²³ in 2001 mining cobalt. Then I went to Milele, Miringi, Kabunji, Kilobe, Mbola, Kansunga, Luisha, Kolwezi and now I am back at Kilobe. I have been a *creuseur* for more than ten years and it is only this that I have done.

²⁰*Salir* in French is ‘to make dirty’. The usage here is slang and refers to the teenage boys who get dirty by sifting out the soil from the malachite in water so as to obtain a cleaner product.

²¹The ‘*chain*’ is literally a chain of individuals who are situated on the walls of the mining shaft and work to haul out both the ore and the removed soil as it is made available from deep in the mineshaft.

²²*Tableau* in French, as it is used here, refers to the subterranean surface from which ores are extracted.

²³Shinkolobwe mine. This is one of the oldest Gécamines mines and is infamous for being the site from which uranium was sourced for the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs. The company abandoned it in the early 1990s but it was very poorly fenced off. By 2001 it had become a hive of activity for *creuseurs* and it was shut down, but reports of artisanal mining in the area still persist (Marnham 2013).

Although Francis does not mention it, the movement of *creuseurs* in the Congo Copperbelt was an involuntary outcome of a complex array of forces. Artisanal miners often left designated mines in which they worked purely based on rumours about booming mines elsewhere. Sometimes such rumours were true; most of the time they were not. If a miner fell for such a rumour and arrived at a site only to find out that a particular vein of minerals was exhausted or the mine was facing closure because it had been annexed by the state, he would end up moving to a neighbouring mine or would most likely remain stranded at that remote location. Unable to pay his way back home, the only option for a stranded miner was to lease his services as a hired hand or *mercenaire* for a daily wage. This sort of arrangement plunged many into a cycle of poverty whereby they were forced to live on a very meagre wage of around US\$3 to US\$5 per day until and unless they obtained enough to leave the mines. It is not impossible to survive on such a wage in a city such as Likasi, and many do get by. However, given this amount in a remote mine where a person's social networks are limited (if any) and, more importantly, basic social services are lacking and the provision of them is the source of steep profiteering, those working as hired hands find themselves in extremely precarious positions. Almost all the money such a miner will earn in a day will be spent on paying for lodging and food, making an individual extremely beholden to the whims of others or unending indebtedness. Francis's movement in the various artisanal mines can be understood, on the one hand, as indexing the momentary notoriety of particular mining sites (some of which are currently shut down by the state), and, on the other hand, as reflecting his spatial history of indebtedness. Consider how he explains this in a conversation we had in 2011:

I married when I was seventeen and we had four children in the *carrières* but we separated with my first wife. Her behaviours were hard [to stomach]. She stole from me and was ill mannered so I left her in 2009. I opened a mine in Kilobe and my luck changed. A few days after we started working we found the 'mother vein'.²⁴ I made over US\$2,000 in one day. I was lucky. I made wonderful sums of money.

[I] am lucky because I respect my parents and I care for them. When I have money I give them some, you see. Timoté, [I] am a businessman. I have bought three [small] houses and six motorbikes from this work and whenever I have money I use some of it to buy merchandise. My current wife is a *négociant*.

In this line of work, courage comes from your decisions and money is what motivates me. We suffer to find the ore. Once, my entire *équipe* ran away. They saw danger in the mine-shaft but I fixed it and it became operational. I have seen mining holes collapse many times. I have seen people die but I have never stopped *creusage*.

By 2011, Francis had worked in more than half of the artisanal mines in Katanga, moving as new mines opened up and also as the various mining operations he was working in as a hired hand ran out of money. When he eventually landed in Kilobe in 2010, his luck changed and it is there that I first met him. At twenty-six years

²⁴Deposits of copper are often found in veins within particular sections of the earth strata. The linearity of copper columns accounts for why the area in Central Africa where copper is found is named the Copperbelt.

old, he was remarried, the father of five, a *creuseur* turned successful businessman. My early conversations with Francis included numerous remarks in which he exuded a deep desire to fashion his life and the choices informing it as a success story. Take, for instance, the manner in which he glosses over abandoning his ex-wife and their four children as if it were simply her fault: ‘she stole and was ill mannered’. He also frames his decision to rid himself of her as being the main strategy that changed his ‘luck’. To be sure, he says, he was vindicated when ‘a few days later’ he struck it big. Purporting that his ex-wife was the cause of the blockages he had been experiencing until then was possibly another way of implying that she may have been a witch. Claims such as these were rife in the mines, in no small part because they helped people make sense of the misfortune they experienced as marginalized individuals in a world in which their social position denied them alternative perspectives on the complexities they faced. To counter such positioning, someone such as Francis crafted a persona that reinforced his exceptionality, an image also in keeping with his social status as the elected ‘president’ of the *creuseurs* of Kilobe. Of course, the fact that he had had a windfall contributed significantly to his election as leader of a large group of young men with practically identical aspirations: to get rich quick. However, unlike many of his friends and peers, such as Jules, who aspired to own a truck and start a large-scale transport business, Francis was singularly focused in furthering his career in and through artisanal mining, for this was what he knew how to do best.

Sure enough, three years later I met him in the city of Likasi on my last research visit. He was still working as a *creuseur* but I could see that his enthusiasm was waning. The ‘renaissance’ of industrial mining that had begun in 2003 and survived the 2008 financial crisis was finally tapering off in early 2014, along with China’s booming industrial growth. Francis viewed the local slump as temporary but its impacts signalled quite the opposite. In the three years since I had last seen him, Francis had sold all his motorcycles and two of his houses, and was now very dependent on the income of his wife to launch any new artisanal mining explorations. In addition, his *équipe* had once again deserted him, but he was still planning to go to work in the next hotspot: the mine of Lupoto. To make some money to finance a mineshaft in Lupoto, Francis had come up with a plan of selling DVDs to the owners of television theatre halls in Kilobe. The plan was obviously one among many and it became clear to me that it was not working when, a week later, I met him in Kilobe wearing the same clothes I had last seen him in. Suspecting that he was not going home to his wife, I asked his friends and I was informed that he was having problems with his wife and had been spending the night in the Kilobe mine. Francis the braggart was slowly giving way to Francis the *choquer*, a hustler keen to make a hit (*un choc*). All the signs were pointing to the end of the days of plenty, and, although this reversal of fortune was stark, it was also predictable because it coincided with the global decline of copper prices from 2013 onwards.²⁵ Francis’s fortunes, like those of many other *creuseurs*, were totally in sync with global commodity markets.

²⁵See Nasdaq’s ‘Copper: latest price and chart for high grade copper’ <<http://www.nasdaq.com/markets/copper.aspx?timeframe=6y>>, accessed 1 June 2017.

Practically all of the young men who rush to the mines come from families with limited means to begin with, and, of those in this group, a considerable number began mining at a young age, meaning that they had quite limited education. Those individuals who were forced to become *creuseurs* but have managed to move out of the job to become motorcycle chauffeurs or *négociants* are often young men with a relatively advanced educational background – a number may have even started or completed university but found few opportunities to provide for their families. Young men such as Francis who persist with *creusage* despite their experiences and best intentions do so because many of the income-generating projects they initiated fail. These failures are not only the result of their actions but also the outcome of an inability to sufficiently insulate their nascent businesses from the risks they face on a daily basis. An accident or the illness of a friend or family member is enough to bankrupt a *creuseur* turned motorcycle chauffeur or leave them heavily indebted. For someone such as Francis, whose daily life was a series of risks and gambles that intermittently paid off, the loss of his motorcycles and houses over a period of three years was as much a reflection of the vicissitudes of the mining economy in Katanga as they were an effect of precariousness. For *creuseurs* who have little formal education and are thus forced to spend more than a decade in rural and peri-urban artisanal mines despite their best intentions, self-employment is viewed as the only antidote to being unemployed and unemployable. Few, if any, of these young men can access the limited employment opportunities offered by the many multinational mining companies in the Congo Copperbelt. In my view, *creuseurs* are not entirely a ‘reserve army of labour’, as Marx (1992 [1887]) would have it, since many lack the formal competencies for highly mechanized industrial work, but nor are they a ‘lumpen’ group, for individually and collectively they make a significant contribution to resource production and the local economies of mining areas. Simply thinking of *creuseurs* as ‘informal workers’ similarly misconstrues the legal standing and regulated nature of artisanal mining in Congo.

Small-scale artisanal mines in Katanga not only attract *creuseurs* but also a wide range of other types of labourers. Artisanal mining has spawned a whole cottage industry of services in remote areas because productive mines are often awash with real (and speculative) money. The vibrancy of such spaces is reflected by the multitude of ‘informal’ workers, ranging from money transfer agents to sex workers, *restauranteurs* and ‘hoteliers’ to ‘doctors’, turning placid rural areas into bustling centres of commerce with tens of thousands of people.²⁶ In these bush enclaves, housing, public amenities, businesses and state ‘offices’ are made of sticks and sackcloth, materials that are cheap, portable and recyclable. Small fuel generators power fridges and televisions, and practically all transport is by motorcycle. Young men on Bajaj motorcycles, or *moto*, transport everything from mattresses to crates of beer. *Creuseurs* will tell you that, if something cannot be carried by *moto*, then it is probably not needed. Jules would often remind me that ‘*Bintu apa il faut kuwa portable*’, ‘Everything here must be portable’.

²⁶Examples of such areas are Kimanyuki, Miringi, Luisha, Mbola, Kamatanda and Kansunga in Katanga.

Part of the logic of portability and transience reflected in the architecture of mine villages is a consequence of the imperatives of mine work. As I came to learn, the restlessness of *creuseurs* is informed by an awareness of fluctuating mineral prices for the three main ores mined by artisanal miners in south Katanga: gold, copper and cobalt. If gold prices are up, one shifts from mining copper or cobalt and goes to the gold mines; the process is reversed when gold prices fall relative to other minerals. Generally, the trend in the mines is that the traffic of people varies in relation to mineral prices. Buyers of minerals, *négociants*, sponsor *creuseurs* to open mining shafts, thereby attracting an increasing number of youth and petty traders to the mines. The downside to a boom in mineral prices is that it also attracts the attention of investors or private speculators who have more money and the necessary political influence to lease the very concessions in which the *creuseurs* work. Visibility invites the threat of expropriation of mining sites and local livelihoods – a threat that some *creuseurs* counter by admitting that they are ‘ready to die’ in defence of their mines.

Militarism and seizure in the mines

Talk of ‘dying for the mine’ initially struck me as hyperbole, a locally accepted way of distinguishing a persona through exaggerated praise. In Kingwana, a Katanga dialect of Swahili, they called it *kutapa*, and *creuseurs* are masters of exaggeration. I did not think much of the claim that young men would sacrifice their lives until I started to unpack the organizational structure of relationships within an artisanal mine. The more I observed, the more they seemed to mimic those of formal militaries. Occupational names of certain key jobs in the mine, such as *mercenaires* (hired hands/mercenaries), *négociants* (price brokers/peacemakers) and *dirigeants* (managers/commanders), speak of a division of labour that seeks to mirror military battalions. A subset of *creuseurs* in Kilobe mine were adherents of Rastafarianism and they imposed strict discipline among their members partly because they had to contend with local suspicions that they were societal rebels and drug addicts. Discipline among Rasta *creuseurs* was enforced through an organizational hierarchy that included generals, brigadiers, colonels and officers (see also Cuvelier 2011b). The hyper-masculine character of the *carrière*, its remoteness, the demand for portability, productivity and hard labour in remote environments inspire some *creuseurs* to imagine themselves as soldiers.²⁷ Donatien, a long-time miner in Kilobe, explained to me:

A *creuseur* is like a soldier. He gets his ‘gun’, his metallic mining bar, hammer and shovel and he gets to work. He can get people to help and they will not care if he is from Kisangani or wherever. They will all just get to work.²⁸

²⁷In 2011, I conducted a focus group discussion in the office of EMAK with a group of over forty *creuseurs* just prior to their ‘deployment’ to a private mine in Kifumpa in south-western Katanga. I was invited to talk to them as they awaited instructions, counselling and money before departing to the *carrière*.

²⁸Translated by the author.

The sense that working in the mines is like soldiering for a cause is reinforced by the fact that miners have to work in *équipes*, or teams of four or five people. Miners often live with their teams in small shacks around the mineshaft itself or in a mine village nearby. Every day, as one descends down the mining shafts to work, one does so as a member of a unit. Given the perilous nature of artisanal mining, it would not be a stretch of the imagination to compare the camaraderie and support among members of *équipes* of *creuseurs* to the *esprit de corps* in organized state militaries. I want to suggest that the modelling of life in artisanal mines along militaristic lines is not a haphazard transplantation of war fantasies from elsewhere; in fact, it is a manifestation of what Frantz Fanon (1963: 30–2) called the *atmosphere of violence*: that is, a general state of anxiety, nervousness and insecurity that defines a colonial environment. Part of the unconscious logic underpinning the *creuseurs*' militaristic organization of work is the need to resist a state whose approach to resource extraction, from its very inception, has been extremely violent and currently remains so. By and large, this rapacious mode of resource extraction has remained unchanged from the colonial era – even today, its imperatives are driven by foreign interests who profit at the expense of the Congolese. Thus, I read the turn to militarism by *creuseurs* as a didactic response to an autocratic, masculine, hierarchical and often arbitrary postcolonial state whose modality of power does not necessarily appeal to reason in public life but to the whims, drives, sensations, pleasures and pains of its elites, who are its main beneficiaries (Mbembe 2001: 102–33).²⁹ One may even go as far as to say that it is a contemporary manifestation of the internalization of the violent histories that created the Congolese state and continue to perpetuate its existence.

If the structure of the collective organization of *creusage* hints at an attempt to discipline and organize young men, then that same desire is also reflected in how mining space is regulated. The entire artisanal mine is a tightly controlled space littered with state agents from military intelligence, the mining police, the provincial administration and EMAK. The overriding claim by these state actors in artisanal mines is that their presence ensures order and security in mining operations. This claim is rendered specious at best because, as mentioned earlier, there is a very clear division of labour in an artisanal mine, from the extraction of the ores to their purchase. State agents do not make work in the mine more orderly; rather, they add to the atmosphere of violence in a mine. Mining police and intelligence agents are armed with rifles and pistols, and, like other state officials, they pay for their presence in the mine by extorting *creuseurs* and mineral buyers, *négociants*, based on the volume of extracted ore. Like other artisanal mines in Eastern Congo (Geenen and Classens 2013; Smith 2015), Kilobe is highly securitized: mining police control entry and exit points to the mine; the customary 'chief' organizes and regulates the partition and use of land for mining, commercial and residential purposes; and various other officials tax miners and mineral traders. Local villagers, along with the wives and girlfriends of *creuseurs* and *négociants*, run the majority of businesses in the villages surrounding the mine,

²⁹In July 2017, the Congo Research Network revealed that President Joseph Kabila and his family had amassed tremendous wealth through a vast business network created during his fifteen-year tenure as leader (see Maclean 2017).

providing food, lodging and various other services. For as long as there is money to be made, the state remains ever present and commands a fee through its officials or indirectly through customary authorities. To many in the mine, this confirms the view that the existence of these authorities in the mines is focused on using seizure to satisfy material needs.

The onerous presence of the state is as much a source of anger as it is of satire. During my fieldwork it was a running joke when someone asked you the following:

Question: *Unayua maana ya l'état?* [Do you know the meaning of the state?]

Response: [After a guess] *Apana.* [No.]

Punchline: [Snatching whatever the other person holds in his hands] *Leta!* [Bring it!]

'To bring' in Swahili literally translates as '*kuleta*'. However, when used in its command form, the prefix *ku-* is dropped, leaving *leta*, which is pronounced 'leh-tah' and is phonetically similar to *l'État* (the state) in French.

The presence of state functionaries does not provide security or support to people in the mines in any meaningful way; in fact, many a time it offered the opposite. It took only a moment's notice to bring the forces of the state bearing down on an area, seizing it and expelling all within it. For *creuseurs*, the army and the police in Katanga exist especially for this purpose, since they are regularly co-opted by private interests or *bazungu* (foreigners), as they say, making them the face of the violence of privatization to *creuseurs*. As a consequence, the sight of a *muzungu* in the mine was explained to me as the *death* of the mine, for it is perceived that this racial 'Other' has dominating intentions. A *muzungu* is enough to get everyone to stop working in preparation for a fight. The disruptive nature of the encounters with *muzungu* carries echoes of other violent encounters between Africans and Europeans in the region. One of the most deadly of these was that between Émile Storms of the International African Association of the Belgian King, Leopold II, and Lusinga Iwa Ng'ombe, a Tabwa chief who was beheaded for resisting colonial rule (Roberts 2012). Similarly, Kienda Biela was skinned alive in Elizabethville by the Belgians for opposing the construction of the railway through his village (Fabian 1990: 79–81). Recalling the harrowing violence of colonial encounters in Katanga's past, one may begin to appreciate the anxiety of *creuseurs* when they encounter foreigners in communal artisanal mining lands.

Possessing pasts and dispossessing presents

Fears that the mine could be shut down or expropriated loom large over *creuseurs* and others whose livelihoods are shaped and supported by artisanal mining. This fear is born out of experiences of lost livelihoods and deaths that have occurred in places such as Mbola, a mine village about 50 kilometres from the city of Likasi. In 2006, Mbola was a booming cobalt-mining site for tens of thousands of *creuseurs* when state authorities decided to lease out the mining concession to a private investor at very short notice (Cuvelier 2011a). Demonstrations and protests against the actions of the state lasted weeks, and not even the brutality of the army could convince *creuseurs* to abandon what they claimed was 'their mountain'. Chants of '*Bulongo ni wa bankambo*', 'The earth is our ancestors', rallied all

those disenfranchised by the privatization of the mine into a frenzy of violence. In Likasi, one informant mentioned that *creuseurs* from Mbola went on the rampage after the army arrived, and, upon reaching Likasi, raided the office of the mayor, destroying everything. They tried to capture the mayor of Likasi in order to strip him naked and shame him for colluding to expropriate ‘their ancestors’ land’.³⁰

In a focus group discussion I conducted in 2011 with a group of around thirty *creuseurs* who eventually had to leave Mbola, the predicament of miners was described as follows:

The *creuseur* discovers ore in the mountain; it is *we* who discover the ore. By this I mean we are like geologists, we expend a lot [of money, energy, time, knowledge] on the mountain. We pay for ritual ceremonies; we expend money every day on developing the hole but the whites come and buy the mountain at the price they like. The ‘white man’ and the government don’t see the expenditure [we have incurred]. The situation is something like this: you have just married your wife and then, sometime later, you come to discover that your wife was already married to another man. How would you explain that?

Land is viewed by *creuseurs* as an inalienable resource since it is tied to local histories and thus demands unique skills to make it productive. All of this local knowledge is rendered obsolete and unwanted in the future-oriented optics of the state and private investors. As the young man explained, ‘the white man and the state’ do not *see* their expenditure. This blindness, according to them, is a negation of history, labour and collective identity, which implies that *creuseurs* are out of step with the contemporary neoliberal order. The affective dimensions of this spatial displacement led *creuseurs* to compare the relationship between them and the mountain as being analogous to a marriage between a man and his wife. Relationships between *creuseurs* and the ancestral spirits residing in mountains undergo perpetual shifts, but because of the risky nature of underground mining, many recognize that these relations are deeply personalized. In all the artisanal mines I visited, it was rumoured that there were individuals who used charms of sorcery, *lawa*, to obtain the minerals, but often these were unproven claims. However, at the collective level of the mine, miners knew that there was a constant need to appease the spirits ‘*mizimu*’ of the mountain, either through rituals or offerings given to the customary chief. In mines such as Kilobe, placating the spirits is thought to help prevent the absence of mineral ore and instances of injury or death due to collapsing mining shafts. Annexing the land by fiat is thus not only violent but is also viewed as an existential attack aimed at dispossessing miners of their links to the material resources that animate their spiritual connection to the land.

For many *creuseurs*, discovering the ore is an act of benevolence by spirits. This relationship to the land mirrors that of their forefathers, *les mangeurs de cuivre*, who viewed mining as an animated process of ‘eating copper’ that was offered to them by their ancestors. Consequently, seizure of the mountain of Mbola by a *muzungu* – a foreigner – was not only perceived as an affront to miners’

³⁰In a discussion about Mbola with a *négociant*, Mr Kasongo, he mentioned to me that he lost his son in the violence of Mbola in 2006. Subsequent to that, his wife left him and told him to stop working in the mines. He blamed his woes on foreigners, *bazungu*, who come to Congo to ‘buy the country’, leaving the locals with nothing. He was furious when it came to issues regarding *bazungu* involvement in artisanal mining.

livelihoods but also to their sense of self-worth³¹ and collective identity as the descendants of ‘living ancestors’. In rhetorically asking me ‘How do you explain that?’, the group of *creuseurs* were appealing to me – as a man – not for a reason but for an action. To them it was inexplicable why someone would seize the mine, with complete disregard for those for whom it was a source of livelihood. What one had to do was *fight*. The tendency to force and violence as a tactic of resistance against foreign capital among *creuseurs* has led polite society in Katanga to label *creusage* as a job for hooligans, thereby depoliticizing it and minimizing its socio-historical complexity. Certainly, the work of *creuseurs* is a source of anxiety not only for the parents of miners but even for the traders who work with them on a daily basis. Take, for instance, an individual like Papa Felicien, a father of four who had grown up working in the diamond-mining industry of Kasai province. He had gone to university, studied theology and become a pastor, only for his church to collapse, forcing him, thirty years later, to reluctantly return to the mines as a *négociant*, or mineral trader. He bought copper ore from *creuseurs* and sold it to Chinese and Lebanese mineral buyers. For Papa Felicien, *creusage* was ‘*un jeu de fous*’, ‘a game for the mad’:

Creusage has no benefits. It sends people to enter into witchcraft and witchcraft kills. If you send a child to work as a *creuseur*, you are killing them. All *creuseur* activity is bad, it makes a child uncivil; dull of the mind. It’s a crazy game. It is death. Among these children, there are licensed university graduates; what is it they lack? ... When we grew up life was good, but our children are growing up like vagabonds.

The parental fear of moral corruption in the mine is very real, as Papa Felicien observes, and so too is colonial nostalgia, especially as a ‘structure of feeling’ among an older generation of Congolese citizens (Makori 2013). But both of these concerns have far less weight than the imperatives of making a daily wage. If we recall that many *creuseurs* are the ‘children’ of former industrial workers, then we must also acknowledge that *creusage* as a social practice is a contemporary sign of compounded generational disenfranchisement in the neoliberal present. Although *creuseurs* engage with the market in meaningful ways as petty traders, consumers, tax-paying citizens, parents, husbands and working youth, polite society in Katanga still views them as ‘bad, crazy, uncivil, and dull-minded’. While these views reflect generational anxieties over the trajectories of youth, they also unfortunately play into the interests of global capital, for they support the misguided view that *creusage* is a dispensable practice in the inevitable march of capitalism in Congo. The more than 200,000 artisanal miners in Katanga alone suggest that this is far from true.

Conclusions

Aversion to risk, whether physical or material, is not a feature that marks life as a *creuseur*. Being a *creuseur* in Katanga means living constantly on the edge: at risk

³¹For a lengthier discussion on the masculinity of Katanga miners, see Cuvelier (2011b). For an analysis of the association between diamond mining and hunting among the Aluund, see De Boeck (1998).

of dying, being completely disfigured by the collapsing earth, being financially ruined by the market, or having your mine abruptly expropriated by private interests. Although the dangers of life in the mines are known, people – both young and old – keep returning to the mines in spite of their better judgement and planning. Precarity is a constant feature of social life in contemporary Congo, and neither education nor social status sufficiently insulate people from it. This marks a difference with industrial life in Katanga, a life enjoyed by a minority and predicated on ‘stability’ and a salaried sedentary social order based on welfare guarantees. The collapse of this industrial model of welfare capitalism produced a distrust of employment and salaried life, just as it engendered desperation and a ‘fend-for-yourself’ attitude on an unprecedented scale, especially among young men in Katanga. Youth working as *creuseurs* live in the present and for themselves; they are keen to ‘take the waiting out of the wanting’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006: 267–80). Their claims to subsist off the land are couched in a language of inalienable rights: ‘the earth is our ancestors’, ‘*bulongo ni ya bankambo*’. This mobilization of the past is a strategic response to the dispossession faced in the present and it dislocates the market-driven future horizon of capital authored by the state and foreign investors by laying claim to an anterior ‘sovereign’ – the ancestors – whose existence predates colonialism. While the response to the threat of dispossession draws on the precolonial era to secure a future for *creuseurs*, both the structure and character of the labour of *creuseurs* are defined by technologies of domination whose ambit is grounded in the violence of the colonial encounter. Herein lies the uncanny of the *creuseur*: a *contemporary* but tragic figure of the African miner whose formation and claim to the land draw social force from the moral matrices of the precolonial era yet whose organizational structure is informed by the same relations of hierarchy and domination he seeks to overcome.

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Abstract

The Copperbelt of Congo was once the bastion of industrial development and no individual embodied its modernity as fully as the salaried industrial miner. Today, with the near collapse of the state-run mining company, Gécamines, and the liberalization of the mining industry starting in 2002, the majority of miners are no longer trained and salaried industrial workers but rather children and youth eking out a precarious living as artisanal miners or *creuseurs*. In Congo, artisanal mining is paradoxical, for, although it indexes a future of unskilled, untrained, flexible work in rural and peri-urban enclaves, its organization of labour and rudimentary techniques of copper extraction allude to and borrow from the colonial and pre-colonial past. *Creuseurs* mobilize the past as a strategic response to the threat of dispossession of 'their' land by the state and foreign investors, and they do so by laying claim to an anterior 'sovereign' – the ancestors – whose existence predates colonialism. This paradoxical emplacement of artisanal mining, its entanglement in time, invites interrogation of some of the ways in which scholars have understood precarity not only as a politically induced condition resulting from neo-liberalism but also as an outcome of the enduring nature of the colonizing structure in Africa.

Résumé

La Copperbelt du Congo fut autrefois le bastion du développement industriel et nul n'incarnait autant sa modernité que le mineur industriel salarié. Aujourd'hui, avec le quasi-effondrement de la société minière d'État Gécamines et la libéralisation de l'industrie minière entamée en 2002, la majorité des mineurs ne sont plus des travailleurs industriels formés et salariés, mais des enfants et des jeunes gagnant tout juste de quoi vivre en travaillant comme *creuseurs*. Au Congo, l'exploitation minière artisanale est paradoxale en ce qu'elle

augure un futur de travail sans qualification, sans formation et flexible dans des enclaves rurales et périurbaines, tandis que l'organisation du travail et les techniques rudimentaires d'extraction du cuivre évoquent et empruntent au passé colonial et précolonial. *Les creuseurs* mobilisent le passé comme réponse stratégique à la menace de dépossession de « leur » terres par l'État et les investisseurs étrangers, et ils le font en revendiquant un « souverain » antérieur (les ancêtres) dont l'existence précède le colonialisme. L'emplacement paradoxal de l'exploitation minière artisanale et son intrication dans le temps nous invitent à nous interroger sur certaines manières dont les chercheurs ont interprété la précarité non seulement comme une condition politiquement induite résultant du néolibéralisme, mais également comme une conséquence de la nature persistante de la structure colonisante en Afrique.