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Robby Fivez graduated as an engineer-architect in 2015. From the fall of 2015 onwards, he has been employed as a PhD researcher at Ghent University in the framework of the FWO-funded project 'Tout le Congo est un Chantier'. He is currently writing his PhD dissertation under the working title 'A Concrete State: Building Ambitions in the (Belgian) Congo, 1908-1964'. So far, his PhD research resulted in a number of participations in international conferences and workshops and in published research papers and articles, among others in ABE journal and the Journal of Landscape Architecture.

The railway, the territory and the cement plant: investigating continued forms of violence along the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line

The railway line between Matadi and Kinshasa —once the showpiece of Belgian colonialism— is now understood as a site of cruelty. While in 1953, the story of its construction was still the subject of an 'adventurous' account dedicated to Belgian king Léopold II, the more recent work of historians like Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem and Jules Marchal revealed its construction as a 'machinery of death'; its recruitment policy as a 'deportation system'. Ndaywel è Nziem estimates the death toll of its construction to be in the five thousands, the necrology in Marchal's work (focusing on the reconstruction of the railway in the 1920's) lists the names of 3.684 deceased labourers. Despite the value of this historical research, it does tend to obfuscate other – less sensational – forms of violence, less binary histories, and – most importantly – narratives of (everyday) resistance.

This paper aims to 'revisit' this railway line, focussing on the numerous foreign companies that occupied the railway's adjacent land. The first part of the paper will map these terrains; although no exhaustive work —probably numerous other companies, investors or private individuals obtained land here – it aims to divert the attention away from the linear structure, giving an idea of the enormous areas these underexposed forms of violence operated on. The second part will concentrate on one such place: the cement factory of Lukala. Since the reconstruction of the railway line not only required labour but also a low-cost building material, the company that operated the railway immediately invested in a cement plant in the region. While the appropriation and transformation of land (inhabited and used by local people), the recruitment of immigrant labourers, or the dreadful working conditions in the cement plant, would sure add several names to Marchal's necrology, the paper mainly emphasizes how these Africans tried to collectively (or personally) resist the forms of violence inherent to these environments.



Albert Cosse (12 October 1923) "Interrogatoire des indigènes", Brussels, Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Fonds Terres", File no T6.