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The Childhood of Human Rights: The Kodak on the Congo

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Abstract
This article examines the Congo reform movement’s use of atrocity photographs in their human rights campaign (c. 1904–13) against Belgian King Leopold, colonial ruler of the Congo Free State. This material analysis shows that human rights are conceived by spectators who, with the aid of the photographic apparatus, are compelled to judge that crimes against humanity are occurring to others. The article also tracks how this judgement has been haunted by the potent wish to undo the suffering witnessed.

Keywords
atrocity • Congo • crimes against humanity • human rights • phantasmagoria • photography

The history of the Victorian Age will never be written:
we know too much about it.

(Lytton Strachey, 1986[1918]: 9)

 Forgotten Origins
Hannah Arendt (1994[1965]) was mistaken to think that crimes against humanity were crimes that only appeared when the Nazi regime attempted to exterminate the Jewish people in the middle of the 20th century (p. 268). The mistake does not, however, undo her insight about the importance of the concept. As she rightly argued, such crimes are an ‘attack upon human diversity as such, that is, upon a characteristic of the “human status” without which the very words “mankind” or “humanity” would be devoid of meaning’ (pp. 268–9). This concept makes visible, in other words, the fact...
that people must be actively recognized as human to enjoy the benefits associated with such a title. Although human rights appear to establish and operate from the abstract moral category of the human, in practical terms, such a category simply does not exist.

As a matter of fact, George Washington Williams, a Black American, historian journalist, minister, and lawyer, first conceived of ‘crimes against humanity’ in 1890, some 50 years before Auschwitz (Williams, 1966[1890a]: 449). The charge was leveled against King Leopold II of Belgium and it referred to atrocities occurring in his personal colony, the Congo Free State. In 1906, E.D. Morel echoed the accusation in his book Red Rubber (1969[1906]) where he alludes to ‘a crime unparalleled in the annals of the world’ (p. xxviii). And in his unfinished and posthumously published, History of the Congo Reform Movement (1968), Morel expressly names ‘a great crime against humanity’ (p. 167). The crimes these authors describe would have been familiar to Arendt: the unlawful seizure of land and property, forced labour, horrific torture, and systemic murder. But some of the atrocities were unique to the Congo: the widespread use of a hippo-skin whip called a chicotte, the open buying and selling of ox-chained slaves, and the methodical severing of hands.

Due to a steady trickle of reports at the turn of the last century, Leopold’s treatment of the indigenous population in his colony had become a matter of great controversy in Europe and the United States. In 1904, E.D. Morel with Roger Casement, British Consul to the Congo Free State, mounted an organized campaign in Britain that became the largest humanitarian movement during the late Victorian era. Although perhaps bolstered by the legendary activism of abolitionists in the mid-19th century, scholars have identified the Congo Reform Association (CRA) as among the earliest critics of empire and advocates of a secular human rights ideology; see, for instance, Cline (1980), Ewans (2002), Hochschild (1999), Casement (2003[1903]), Taylor (1990). Both Casement’s 1903 Congo Report and Morel’s prodigious collection of writings on the subject offer a complex indictment that can be regarded as a forerunner to the work of present-day humanitarian groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

What is invariably underplayed in the histories of this movement is the impact of photography. The CRA was not only the largest humanitarian movement of the era, it was also the first humanitarian movement to use atrocity photographs as a central tool. Crimes occurring in far-away places were made publicly visible for the first time in history. The presence of photography in the 20th century’s first great human rights movement is not coincidental. Indeed, the very recognition of what we call human rights is inextricably bound to a particular kind of aesthetic encounter. Historical inquiry into the Congo reform movement shows that the conception of rights did not emerge from the articulation of an inalienable human dignity, but from a particular visual encounter with atrocity. This proximity of the ideal of human rights to representations of their abuse suggests that human rights discourse serves principally as a response to the witnessing of traumatic
violence. Human rights, we might say, are conceived through the recognition of their loss. Or put explicitly, human rights are conceived by spectators who, with the aid of the photographic apparatus, are compelled to judge that crimes against humanity are occurring to others.

The story of this recognition is complicated, however, by the fact that the presentation of atrocity within the Congo reform movement took two distinct forms. This dual treatment, in turn, produced two discrete articulations of human rights. On one hand, international investigators like Casement published photographs of dismembered Congolese (children in particular) as a kind of forensic evidence of colonial brutality. Here the images were meant to serve as incontrovertible proof that atrocity was occurring in the Congo and that international intervention was required in Leopold’s colony. On the other hand, missionary reformers were simultaneously delivering thousands of lantern lectures illustrated with similar images throughout Europe and North America. In contrast to the tone of a criminal investigation, these lectures took the form of phantasmagoric theatrical productions; the missionaries appealed to a mythic ideal of universal human dignity, and ultimately used the Congo crisis to promote their respective ambitions for central Africa.

This conflictual history brings together several tensions endemic to both visual culture and human rights discourse: How did this early use of photographic images affect the spectators’ response to the suffering? How did the image aid in the conception of ‘crimes against humanity’? What is the relationship between this early encounter with atrocity and contemporary encounters? There is also a second, more problematic, set of questions to consider: How should we account for the European anthropological view of Africans when thinking about the effect of the images and the movement as a whole? How should we take into consideration the phantasmagoric aspects of the Congo lectures? How does the Congo Reform Association’s conception of rights coincide with concerns about documentary photography as a kind of ‘victimology’ in which basic freedoms emerged only as gifts to be doled out by benevolent well wishers? How does this early, ambivalent history affect current conceptions of rights?

While we may be hesitant to recall this difficult moment from the childhood of human rights (preferring instead the story of their glorious birth in the French revolution), there is no doubt this conflict continues to exert an effect. Contemporary human rights discourse continues to mythologize the idea of an inalienable human dignity. Michael Ignatieff (2001), for instance, begins his much-celebrated Tanner Lecture by arguing that human rights represent moral progress, and specifically, progress from the disaster that was the Holocaust. Through a kind of sleight of hand, he subsumes the record of horrific social breakdown under a triumphal portrait of the present as morally developed. Of course Ignatieff is not alone in this view. This widely held version of human rights, however, actually serves as a defense against any significant recognition of the history of atrocity. I do not think we should give up human rights, but in contrast to their blind celebration, what this
article offers is the beginning of a working through, a return to the childhood
of human rights in an effort to elude the compulsion to repeat the
unresolved past.

Atrocities of the Congo Free State

It is not without trepidation that I delve into this particular history. The
colonial period of the Congo involves murder, slavery, the unbridled
plundering of natural resources, a fanatically cruel Belgian King, and the
complicated, ambivalent efforts of white reformers. The history of the
colonial rule in the Congo has been told before, many times in fact, by many
different people, beginning with a rich collection of memoirs, studies,
travelogues, and polemics written by those who were, in one way or another,
participants in the events. But despite the abundance of literature, this
history remains at the edges of contemporary consciousness. The Congo is
seldom listed among the 20th century’s genocides despite the fact that
millions of Congolese people were systematically exterminated during the
period of terror between 1890–1910.

The story perhaps begins in 1876 when King Leopold II, the constitutional
monarch of Belgium, invited an international scientific conference to
Brussels to consider the best means by which to open up the centre of the
‘dark continent’ to European civilization. This conference was launched
under the cloak of humanitarianism, although Leopold had long been
dreaming of colonial expansion for Belgium. One result of the conference
was that Leopold assumed presidency over the International Association
for the Exploration and Civilisation of Central Africa. As president, he quickly
enlisted the services of the celebrated explorer, Henry Morton Stanley, who
had just crossed the interior of Africa, discovering the course of the Congo
River. Leopold sent Stanley back into the Congo region in 1879 and again in
1882 under the guise of a second organization, Comité d’Etudes du Haut
Congo, to make treaties with chiefs and generally establish a plausible
economic basis in Africa ‘pending developments on the European chess-
board’ as Morel (1970[1904]: 9) put it. The Comité was quickly replaced by
another mysterious body, the Association Internationale du Congo, of which
Leopold was the secret and sole stockholder. The King’s agents crisscrossed
Europe and the United States begging for recognition of the Association’s
blue flag as an ‘independent state’. This was done largely by stressing the
philanthropic mission of the Association and by presenting the treaties made
with the native chiefs as the basis for a free trade confederation.

The infamous Berlin Conference, or ‘scramble for Africa’ as it has come to be
known, served as the next dramatic move on the chessboard. On 26 February
1885, the General Act of Berlin was signed, recognizing the Congo Free State,
and so making Leopold trustee for almost one million square miles of African
territory and guardian of the entire population of Africans who resided there.
Or, as Article Seven of the Berlin Act put it:
All the Powers exercising sovereign rights or influence in the aforesaid territories bind themselves to watch over the preservation of the native tribes, and to care for the improvement of the conditions of their moral well-being, and to help in suppressing slavery, and especially the slave trade. (Morel, 1970[1904]: 6)

By rhetorically positioning himself within Europe’s ongoing campaign against Arab slavery, Leopold’s interests in the Congo were widely believed to be humanitarian. His real aim, however, was to make the Congo Free State a financial success. This required heavy investment for infrastructure in the region and Leopold used his personal fortune and borrowed copious amounts from the Belgian government. When Europe discovered the usefulness of rubber – first for the pneumatic bicycle tire, then for hoses, tubes, washers, and eventually the automobile tire – Leopold began to see incredible returns on his investment. Between rubber and Leopold’s control of the ivory trade, the Congo Free State became the most profitable colony in Africa (see Pakenham, 1991: 524 for the precise figures).

The process of extracting rubber was, however, an arduous, labour-intensive undertaking. In the Congo rain forest, rubber came from a long vine that twined upwards around a tree, sometimes up to a hundred feet or more to where it could reach sunlight. To harvest this wild rubber one had to climb the tree, slash the vine and collect the sap in a vessel. Leopold created a series of concession companies to administer this activity. In 1888 a labour-contract system was installed in tandem with the establishment of the Force Publique. This armed force of native troops who were under the command of European officers was the main weapon in the campaign of terror that Leopold unleashed. In just two years the labour system became a systematic repression that seemed less a matter of rubber extraction than an international operation of incalculable brutality. To meet the outrageous quotas of rubber Leopold demanded, Belgian officers used the Force Publique to attack a village, then loot, maim, and take hostages until the requisite amount had been collected from the surviving villagers.

**Early Humanitarian Response**

Tales of the indiscriminate violence perpetuated by Leopold’s regime began to reach American and European ears through several sources. One of the first was George Washington Williams, who traveled to the Congo in 1890. Having already written a massive volume on the history of African Americans, Williams hoped the Congo would serve as a base for his next research project. Nearly one hundred years after slavery had been rendered illegal throughout the Western world, Williams expected to find a benevolently governed African society. What he actually witnessed was a hell described economically by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899). In his Marlow-like journey up the Congo River, Williams watched two Belgian officers wager £5 on whether their rifles could reach a trader in his canoe downriver: “Three
shots were fired . . . and the trade canoe was transformed into a funeral barge.’ He watched as a Belgian steamer approached the shores of a village where ‘a large crowd of men, women and children [were] laughing, talking and exposing their goods for sale.’ The soldiers on the steamer formed lines, ‘leveled their guns and fired, and the people fell dead, and wounded, and groaning and pleading for mercy.’ A ‘most revolting scene’ ensued when the Belgian officers quarreled over the selection of women that were left alive (Williams, 1985[1890b]: 251).

Williams’s shock quickly became outrage. He wrote an ‘Open Letter to King Leopold II of Belgium’ which was first published in the New York Herald in July of 1890 and widely reprinted throughout the United States and Europe. It remains a model for present day social-justice organizations: public accusation armed with measured and detailed testimonial account. The letter leveled 12 specific charges against Leopold’s government including: deceit, fraud, arson, the capturing of women ‘for immoral purposes’, the raiding and massacring of whole villages, excessive cruelty to prisoners including ‘condemning them, for the slightest offences, to the chain gang, the like of which cannot be seen in any other Government in the civilised or uncivilised world’, and ‘engaging in wholesale and retail slave-trade’. In short, Williams declared Leopold was ‘waging unjust and cruel war against the natives’ (pp. 243–54).6

Remarkably, Leopold successfully fended off Williams’s and others’ public accusations until 1903 when humanitarian pressure eventually led to a parliamentary debate on the Congo in the British House of Commons. One result of this debate was to send a British Consul to investigate the region. Roger Casement’s report, based on this investigation, was published (with heavy editing by the British Government) in 1903 (Casement, 2003[1903]). The main body of the report together with several photographic ‘inclosures’ paints an equally appalling picture of the unrelenting oppression of the Congo State system.

Among the report’s description of the decline of human and animal populations, crippling taxation of natives, and provision of slave labour, Casement’s most scandalous criticism was twofold: his confirmation of the Congo Free State’s use of the Force Publique for hostage taking, and the documentation of one particular mutilation that became the icon of Leopold’s entire colonial regime: the cutting off of hands. Casement’s report suggests that Belgian officers routinely demanded proof of native deaths from the Force Publique in the form of a human hand, or more specifically, a right hand. Each bullet issued to the Force Publique, Casement reports, was to be accounted for in this manner. The report’s first reference to this widespread practice comes from a Government informant (p. 72), but more strikingly there are several detailed accounts of particular cases: one of a boy named Epondo (pp. 110–15), and another of Mola Ekilite who had both hands taken (pp. 159–61). The fourth enclosure of Casement’s report includes a statement from Mola himself, taken some years after the attack and recorded through a translator. This statement provides one of the rare
instances in this history where a Congolese voice is recorded, although Mola (or perhaps the translator) refers to himself in third person throughout and the weight of the ‘I’ feels palpably absent:

State soldiers came from Bikoro, and attacked the Bwanga towns, which they burned killing people . . . From that they went on to Mokili . . . The soldiers took prisoner all the men left in the town, and tied them up. Their hands were tied very tight with native rope, and they were tied up outside in the open; and it was raining very hard, and they were in the rain all the time and all the night, their hands swelled, because the thongs contracted. His [Mola’s] hands had swelled terribly in the morning, and the thongs had cut into the bone . . . Mola’s hands were so swollen that they were quite useless. The soldiers seeing this, and that the thongs had cut into the bone, beat his hands against a tree with their rifles, and he was released. He does not know why they beat his hands. The white man ‘Ikatankoi’ was not far off, and could see what they were doing. Ikatankoi was drinking palm-wine while the soldiers beat his hands off with their rifle-butts against the tree. His hands subsequently fell off [or sloughed away]. (pp. 159–60)

Mola’s case is particularly haunting because Casement is unclear at first – due to the translation – whether Mola’s hands had been cut off or beaten off or simply fell off due to the tightness of the ropes. One can imagine his reluctance to quiz the boy about the details.7

One other artifact haunts this testimony: Mola’s photograph (Figure 1). Shortly after the attack, Mola was found and taken in by a nearby Mission. Casement follows up Mola’s statement by interviewing one of the missionaries, Mr Clark. Mr Clark reports that he had petitioned the local authorities for restitution on Mola’s behalf some years ago when he first found the boy. Uncannily, Casement remembers that he himself had transported Clark’s letter (‘in entire ignorance of its contents’) during an earlier visit to the Congo (p. 160). Clark, receiving no acknowledgement, addressed a second appeal to the Central Administration at Brussels, this time ‘inclosing a photograph of the maimed or mutilated boy’ (p. 160). The second appeal also met with silence. In fact, the only acknowledgement Mola’s story drew was from a Brussels newspaper, which within a week of Clark’s dispatch, published a paragraph to the effect that ‘an American missionary was going about with a faked-up photograph purporting to be that of a native of the Congo who had been mutilated by Government soldiers’ (p. 161).

The photograph, a copy of which Casement included in his original report, shows Mola seated sideways on a modern-style chair. Another child with a similar injury, Yoka, stands next to him. Both children are wearing white clothing against which they hold their mutilated limb so the injury stands out in sharp relief. A wooden structure is visible in the background through the foliage. The author of the photograph is unnamed; however, Casement’s report refers to Reverend W.D. Armstrong as having produced the
photograph of Epondo, as well as images of several other victims (p. 167), and it seems plausible that Armstrong also took the photograph of Mola. The two subjects’ poses express a striking similarity, and Armstrong was known to instruct each of his subjects to wrap a white cloth around himself to create a ‘backdrop’ for the mutilated limb.

The camera was used to document several other incidents of such mutilation. In his study of the original correspondence of the Congo reform campaign, Kevin Grant (2001) tells the story of Alice Harris, a British Missionary at Baringa, some 1200 miles inland from the West coast of Africa in the territory of the Congo Free State, who was also taking pictures of atrocities with an early Kodak dry plate camera. In May 1904, two young men suddenly arrived

Figure 1 Mola Ekilite (seated) and Yoka. © Anti-Slavery International/ Panos Pictures.
at Harris’s mission station and attempted to convey some pressing news. She surmised that a detail of African ‘sentries’ of the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company had attacked a village in the vicinity for failing to provide the company with rubber in accordance with its assigned tax. The two men were on their way to the local agent to protest against the attack, bearing proof of their claims in a small bundle of leaves. At Harris’s request, one of the men, who identified himself as Nsala, opened the bundle and displayed the freshly cut hand and foot of a small child. Harris gathered from Nsala’s explanation that the sentries had killed his wife and daughter and then devoured them, leaving behind only the daughter’s hand and foot. Appalled by this revelation, Harris persuaded the man to pose with the child’s remains for a photograph (p. 27).

Harris’s image is remarkably calm given the story of its taking (see Figure 2). Nsala is centrally figured, sitting profile on what looks like a thatched veranda, gazing at two small objects lying in front of him. A potted cactus is positioned at his back. Two other men look on from a careful distance, one stands with his arms crossed protectively against his chest. It is a formally posed, almost peaceful image. Painful scrutiny is required to make out the items in front of Nsala. The object closest to him appears to be his daughter’s foot, lying on its side, severed end tipped towards the camera; the object furthest is Boali’s little hand, resting palm side down. These tiny body parts explode the peaceful composition of the image and illustrate an uncanny inversion of the typical representation of the injury: rather than picture a child with missing limbs, here Nsala poses with the remains of his missing
child. Missing is not really the right word – Boali is more than simply absent from the scene – but perhaps there are no words which could appropriately describe the devastating affect of her nonexistent presence.

When John Harris returned and viewed the photograph that Alice had since developed, he immediately wrote to the Director of the Congo Balolo Mission:

The photograph is most telling, and as a slide will rouse any audience to an outburst of rage, the expression on the father’s face, the horror of the by-standers, the mute appeal of the hand and foot will speak to the most skeptical. (Grant, 2001: 27)

This response to the image bears significance. Upon seeing the picture, John Harris immediately imagined the photograph’s effect on an audience. That is to say, the image seemed to pull away from the place of its registration to be imaginatively transported before the public. The camera’s intervention in these atrocities pushed the question of ethical response out of the arena of immediate interaction (in this case between Alice Harris and Nsala, or perhaps between the missionary station and the local authorities) to become a relationship between photograph and spectator. Similar to how the emergence of the concept of crimes against humanity presupposes the prior emergence of humanity as such, the photograph presupposed the prior existence of a mass public that could witness the event. Moreover, the image demands a specific affective approach: the spectator is ‘challenged’, to use Walter Benjamin’s term (1988[1936]: 226). John Harris imagined this photograph could command a resolute sense of moral outrage, even in the most skeptical viewer. He imagined, in other words, that the image was a powerful tool which could arouse public judgement.

The ‘Incorruptible Kodak’

Indeed, these photographs did set off an explosion in the public realm, first through Casement’s report, which served as a precedent in its treatment of the photograph as evidence for the alleged acts of atrocity. As Grant (2001) suggests, the images Casement included were ‘simultaneously to embody the humanity of the Congo people and the inhumanity of a regime that literally consumed them in its accounting’ (p. 33). By the time the report was published, a broad British lobby group had already assembled against the Congo Free State. The group was made up of members of the Aborigine’s Protection Society, members of the Liverpool, Manchester, and London Chambers of Commerce and concerned citizens. Because of his position in Government, Casement could not assume the role of primary spokesman for the group. Instead, he convinced Edmund Dean Morel, an aspiring journalist who had begun to suspect the systemic oppression based on his own experience as an employee of a shipping company that did business in the Congo. The Congo Reform Association (CRA) was officially born in an
inaugural meeting on 23 March 1904 when some 2000 people crowded into Liverpool’s Philharmonic Hall. At this first meeting, the CRA determined that its central task was to disseminate information about the Congo State through publications and public meetings. Photographs were considered central tools in this strategy. Morel’s monthly journal, *The West African Mail*, regularly ran reprints of the images Casement brought back as well as several dozen photographs by Alice Harris. Morel also published two books containing photographic reproductions, *King Leopold’s Rule in Africa* and *Red Rubber*, and the group enlisted several famous writers to lend their pens to Congo reform.

*Red Rubber*, the more widely read of Morel’s books, first appeared in 1906 and was enthusiastically reviewed by all sections of the press. The original cover had an illustration by F. Carruthers Gould depicting a scene from the Egyptian Book of the Dead in which the soul was weighed (Figure 3). In this version, a crowned and sceptered King Leopold sits on one end of Anubis’s scale and a single black hand rests on the other. Two small figures hold up their mutilated limbs for the Egyptian god to consider. Not having the language of ‘genocide’, the reformers often appealed to the cultural memory of the Israelites’ suffering in Egypt as a way of characterizing the extent of the atrocities occurring in the Congo. The text of *Red Rubber* piles evidence on top of evidence of the abuses: testimony from travelers of the 1890s, summaries of Casement’s report and the various parliamentary debates, eyewitness testimony from missionaries, and even a study of the profits of the system by a professor of the Free University of Brussels. This evidence is presented not merely as a catalogue of atrocities but as overwhelming proof that ‘a crime unparalleled in the annals of the world’ was occurring in the Congo Free State (Morel, 1969[1906]: xxviii). The basis of Morel’s articulation of Leopold’s regime as ‘criminal’ rested primarily on his radical conception of the Congolese as possessing certain inalienable rights, in particular the right to property and control over their labour: ‘The Congo native, like the native of every part of the African tropics, must be protected in his rights in land, property, and labour. All those rights have been swept away from him by the most colossal act of spoliation ever imagined by mortal man’ (p. xxi). Morel conceived of the right to trade as an elementary function of humanity, the basis of the recognition of possession of property and freedom itself. Throughout all of his writings, however, Morel grounded his charge against Leopold on the language of the Berlin Act, often recalling Article Seven where the material and moral well-being of the native tribes was legally guaranteed.

Although his appeal for the rights of the Congo inhabitants to live free from oppression sounds strikingly similar to the Universal Declaration written some 40 years later, Morel petitioned on the basis of a legal precedent rather than on the transcendental ideal of human dignity. It is perhaps this grounding that allowed him to conceive of Leopold’s actions as a ‘crime against humanity’. Morel understood, like Arendt (1994[1965]) reflecting on the Nazi regime some 60 years later, that such atrocious crimes were unique in that the violence represented not only the killing of other human
individuals for human reasons, but an organized attempt to eradicate the very concept of the human being. Although Leopold’s actions undoubtedly had devastating physical and psychological affect on the Congolese peoples directly, they were not limited to them. In some more precise sense, these crimes were an attack on the very notion of humanity. Without mythologizing the events, what the concept ‘crimes against humanity’ makes evident is this disparity between mere criminality and the facts of an organized system of terror. Leopold’s actions, like the Nazis after him, simultaneously overstepped and shattered any and all legal systems. Conceptualizing ‘crimes against humanity’ therefore represents a radically creative response to such horror by inaugurating a new organization of human responsibility.

Beyond Morel’s directly political demand for intervention on Congo affairs, *Red Rubber* also made a more deliberate effort to arouse the emotions of its readers. This was achieved through a highly polemical writing style as well as the use of atrocity photographs. ‘For six years I have appealed to the head’, he remarked soon after completing the book, ‘and now I am appealing to the heart, the head having been captured’ (cited in Cline, 1980: 60). As with *King Leopold’s Rule in Africa*, several full-page reproductions illustrate the text, accompanied by short titled captions. But while the earlier text used images of Congo life largely for illustrative purposes, the images in *Red Rubber* all depict suffering: ‘IMPONGI, A BOY OF ILLNEGA, Mutilated by State Soldiers’, ‘ISEKANSU Mutilated by Sentries for Shortage in Rubber’, ‘BARNEGRO CHIEFS
Showing Their Emaciated Condition’, and ‘SECTION OF VILLAGE Burned by Raiders’. The photographs serve as devastating confirmation of Morel’s (1969[1906]) evocative descriptions, piercing the reader visually. Morel’s conclusion, which is accompanied by the final photograph in the book, provides the most expressive appeal:

Nothing impractical, nothing unrealisable is being demanded on behalf of the Congo natives. No grandmotherly legislation, no sentimental claims are being urged in their interest. Only justice. They have been robbed of their property. We demand that their property shall be restored to them. They have been robbed of their liberty. We demand that their liberty shall be restored to them. They are bound in chains. We demand that those chains shall be rent asunder. For fifteen years they have been degraded, enslaved, exterminated. We demand that this shall stop, not fifteen years, or five years, or one year hence: but now.

The ‘Congo Free State’ has long ceased to exist. It has given place to a political monster and international outlaw. Of that political monster and international outlaw, but one thing can be said or written, Delenda est Carthago.

The reek of its abominations mounts to Heaven in fumes of shame. It pollutes the earth. Its speedy disappearance is imperative for Africa, and for the world. (pp. 212–13)

The image that punctuates these final paragraphs is Alice Harris’s photograph of Nsala sitting on the veranda looking at his daughter’s severed hand and foot. More than any other, this image seems to encapsulate the sentiments of the Congo Reform Association. The profound silence of the image seems to retain a surcharge of meaning that cannot be reduced to semantic content. In the public reception of the image, its effect became collective and social, but also a psychic image in the mind of the spectator. This use of the photograph as evidence of atrocity is less a matter of juridical proof as it is psychically arresting, marking these atrocities as socially and psychologically meaningful.

Other reform literature made similar use of this and other atrocity photographs. King Leopold’s Soliloquy (1970[1906]), which Samuel Clemens published under his pen name Mark Twain in 1906, also featured several woodcuts of the images taken by the missionaries from the Congo Balolo Mission, including the image of Nasala. As the title suggests, Twain’s polemical text is a long monologue written from the point of view of Leopold himself as he fusses and fumes about the state of his colony. Near the end of the soliloquy, Leopold actually remarks on the reform movement, and in particular on Morel. ‘This Morel is a reformer; a Congo reformer. That sizes him up’ (p. 67). Leopold also addresses Morel’s newspaper The West African Mail: ‘supported by the voluntary contributions of the sap-headed and the soft-hearted; and every week it steams and reeks and festers with up-to-date
“Congo atrocities” . . . I will suppress it . . . it should not be difficult for me to suppress a newspaper’ (p. 67). At this point, Leopold’s manic train of thought is broken as he studies ‘some photographs of mutilated Negroes’. Twain writes that the king throws the pictures down and sighs:

The kodak has been a sole calamity to us. The most powerful enemy indeed. In the early years we had no trouble in getting the press to ‘expose’ the tales of mutilations as slanders, lies, inventions of busy-body American missionaries and exasperated foreigners . . . Yes, all things went harmoniously and pleasantly in those good days . . . Then all of a sudden came the crash! That is to say, the incorruptible kodak – and all harmony went to hell! The only witness I couldn’t bribe. Every Yankee missionary and every interrupted trader sent home and got one; and now – oh, well, the pictures get sneaked around everywhere, in spite of all we can do to ferret them out and suppress them. (p. 68)

Twain emphasizes that it is the camera’s particular exposure of atrocity that turned the tide in Congo reform. The ‘incorruptible kodak’ facilitated feelings of outrage because the photograph bears an inextricable relationship to the faculty of moral judgement, appealing as it does to the spectator’s conscience. The collection of writings from the Congo Reform Association represents one of the first vigorous articulations of modern human rights – the childhood of human rights. And yet, this articulation emerged from a particular visual encounter with the abuse of rights. These early atrocity photographs helped illuminate the fact that the Congolese people had been grossly violated, and in turn organized the possibility for recognition of these abuses as criminal. The reformers conceived of rights in direct response to the suffering registered by the camera’s lens, a form of compassionate responsiveness to that moment in which human dignity was perceived to be lost. As a direct result of the reformer’s public use of the photographs, the smoldering Congo crisis was transformed into a fierce bonfire. During the first decade of the 20th century, no issue so thoroughly occupied British public imagination as Congo reform.

Relating to the Other Phantasmagorically

As remarkable as the effects of these photographs were, their psychical force also resists an unequivocal reading. Far from transparent historical evidence, many theorists have painstakingly described the role of photography as a tool of empire, ‘capturing’ panoramic views of foreign lands as well as ethnographic specimens of ‘primitive races’ and ‘exotic beasts’ (see, for instance, Coombes, 1994; Edwards, 1992; Killingray and Roberts, 1989; Landau and Kaspin, 2002; Mirzoeff, 1998, 1999; Ryan, 1997). Although this era of colonial expansion saw the emergence of the concept of the ‘other’, an emergence that was deeply dependent on photographic technology, this other was constructed for Western audiences for both private and public consumption. Nearly all photographs of Africa from this period are products
of colonial agents in one way or another, and the missionaries who sought to arouse interest and maintain support at home through the use of such images share this ambivalence.

As early as 1890, missionaries were delivering lantern slide lectures in Europe and North America to promote the interests of their respective projects. One enthusiastic minister, Dr Guinness, regularly gave a lecture entitled ‘A Reign of Terror in the Congo’ that drew thousands of spectators (Grant, 2001: 37). A strong evangelical tone was set at the outset of these lectures with organ music, prayers and hymns. The narrative opened with an overview of the land and peoples of the Congo, followed by a heroic account of European exploration and Leopold’s philanthropic efforts. In a regular lecture, this would be followed by a focus on the savagery of the Congolese (highlighting practices of cannibalism, slavery, and polygamy) that would serve as fuel for the importance of Christian conversion. As the controversy surrounding Leopold’s administration rose, the savagery of ‘the native’ was followed by a discussion of the savagery of the Congo Free State administration, the missionaries’ atrocity photographs illuminating the atrocities committed by agents of the government.

Although Roger Casement relied heavily on information and support from missionaries in his report, including the use of their photographs, these allies to Congo reform deeply troubled E.D. Morel. He expressed concern, if not outright aversion, to religious ideology serving as fuel for reform sentiments. Nevertheless, the missionaries and their photographs became a central arm of the Congo Reform Association, and in part, responsible for its popular success. Specifically, Kevin Grant (2001) argues that ‘John and Alice Harris changed the course of the Congo reform campaign’ by appealing to Britain’s ‘Christian conscience’, and the ‘right tool’ for hitting that spot ‘was the lantern slide image of atrocity’ (p. 41). Once back from the Congo, John and Alice Harris took over from Dr Guinness, giving over 300 lectures (and arranging many others) in the Association’s first year of operation alone. In America they addressed more than 200 public meetings in 49 cities. By all accounts, the lantern lectures had an incredibly dramatic impact on people. Hochschild (1999) reports that in one meeting in Chicago, an elderly woman who had been born a slave tried to donate her life savings to the cause of Congo reform, although the Harrises would only accept one dollar (p. 242). Standard lectures, accompanied by slides, were prepared for ministers to use in their sermons throughout Europe and North America. John and Alice Harris further organized Town Hall meetings as forums for the establishment of CRA auxiliaries. These auxiliaries managed fund-raising, distributed literature, and produced lantern lectures for local churches.

Magic lantern shows, however, were not new to European or American audiences. A prototype of the modern slide projector, the magic lantern was invented in the 17th century by Athanasius Kircher. Using a concentrated beam of light, it projected small images that were painted on a glass plate onto a large screen or sheet. In Paris in 1798 Etienne-Gaspard Robertson took this technology to another level when he unveiled his ‘Phantasmagoria
Show’ at the Pavillon de l’Echiquier in Paris (Castle, 1988: 31). Essentially a multimedia stage production, Robertson’s show served as a form of popular culture in Europe for several decades. Using a technically advanced magic lantern mounted on wheels, the showman created projections of ghosts, skeletons, and the heroes of history (Rousseau, Voltaire, Robespierre, and Marat), in an effort to thrill paying audiences in a darkened theatre for an hour and a half. He also added special effects – lightning, thunder, smoke and music – to enhance the eerie atmosphere. The phantasmagoria made its way to England in 1802 when a Parisian, Paul de Philipstal, offered similar shows at the Lyceum Theatre, making it a staple of popular entertainment in London (he later took the show on tour to Edinburgh and Dublin with his partner Madame Tussaud). The phantasmagoria reached more audiences in the Victorian era with the popularization of miniature versions, available to every middle-class household. Terry Castle (1988) recalls the opening pages from Remembrance of Things Past, in which Proust describes being given a magic lantern in his childhood as a cure for melancholia. Unfortunately, the device produced nothing but further sorrow by transforming young Marcel’s room into an uncanny and terrifying world (p. 42).

Phantasmagoria is of special interest to visual historians because it represents a symbolic link between visual technology and the 19th-century evaluation of the imagination as a haunting, alienating force. ‘The magic lantern was the obvious mechanical analogue for the human brain, in that it “made” illusory forms and projected them outward’ (Castle, 1988: 58, see also Benjamin, 1999[1936]; Buck-Morss, 1991, 1992; Cohen, 1993; Simon et al., 2002). Beyond the connection to magic lantern technology, phantasmagoria also recalls a kind of feverish state of mind evocative of the romantic period. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1990, 8th edn, ed. R.E. Allen), one definition of phantasmagoria is ‘a shifting series of real or imaginary figures as seen in a dream’ (p. 892). From ‘normal hallucinations’ to ‘delirious conceptions’, phantasmagoria also referenced an agitated psychological state in which the distinction between reality and fantasy had broken down. As a liminal space linked to the uncanny, it referred to the haunting nature of the imagination, how thoughts could be conjured onto the internal screen of the mind.

An uncanny legacy permeates the Congo reform movement via the Association’s lantern lectures. Aside from Morel and Twain’s books, knowledge of the suffering occurring in the Congo arrived largely through the movement’s massive public meetings, a central part of which was the lantern lecture. These highly structured ‘shows’ could be considered a derivative of phantasmagoria: scripted horror narratives illustrated with 60 photographic slides, of which perhaps a half dozen represented various atrocities (Figures 4 to 7), interspersed with hymns, prayers, and melo-dramatic evangelical appeals, all of which meant to elicit a strong emotional response. Criticism of such phantasmagoric forms often focus on its effect of inducing reverie, or a generally detached relationship to reality. For Walter Benjamin (1988[1939]), this ‘reifying representation of civilization’ epitomized the 19th-century mode of experience: a veil of illusion through
which one perceived the world (p. 14). This reverie, in turn, limits the spectator’s ability to respond, limiting the capacity for responsibility. In this respect, phantasmagoric forms do not sit well with ethical concerns. As Simon et al. (2002) suggest, in phantasmagoria an item of information arrives and passes away with a fleeting momentary fascination, ‘its urgent and frightful address instantly replaced by another item’, leaving the basic assumptions of the spectator ‘intact’. Despite being deeply moved, such an appeal ‘fails to call spectators into question’ in any radical way (p. 8). The phantasmagoric form, in short, promotes misrecognition, a denial of the other’s radical difference.

The king must have rubber; the native must be forced to produce it. To persuade him to do so, the ‘Chicotte’ was introduced, ‘a murderous-looking instrument of hippopotamus hide, five feet long, thickened at one end for convenience of grip, flexible as a riding-whip, deadly as the knout’. How many men and women have died under its blows none will ever know. Mr. Ruskin, of the Balolo Mission, says that he saw one woman flogged with 200 strokes, so severely that blood and water flowed from her, and that she died shortly after. A woman, mind you! (WR., 1909)
These natives . . . found their murdered relatives in the forest, and themselves cut off the hands and brought them to the missionaries in proof of their statements. The Rev. William Morrison, of the American Presbyterian Mission, sent a private personal appeal to King Leopold in 1899. His colleague, M. Sheppard, had himself seen and counted eighty-one human hands slowly drying over a fire. Mr. Ackermann, a Swiss gentleman, wrote in 1903: 'If the chief does not bring the stipulated number of baskets, soldiers are sent out and the people are killed without mercy. As proof, parts of the body are brought to the factory.' The decrease in the population is appalling, and it is estimated at the minimum rate of 100,000 per annum. (W.R., 1909)

Figure 5 Natives of the Nsongo district with the hands of their countrymen, Lingomo and Bolengo, murdered by 'sentries' in May 1904. The white men are the Rev. J.H. Harris (right) and the Rev. Edgar Stannard (left), 1904 (photo by Alice Harris). © Anti-Slavery International/Panos Pictures.
Moreover the slave trade was in full swing . . . Stanley too tells of the execution of slaves on the occasion of the death of a chief, and Mrs. Harris’s photograph strikingly depicts the scene. The doomed men were made to sit or kneel, their arms and legs being securely bound. A young tree was then bent like a bow and a rope was lashed to the top. The rope was then passed round the man’s head, drawing up his form and straining the neck, and almost lifting the body from the ground. Then the executioner advanced with his short broad-bladed falchion and after measuring his distance, severed the head clean from the body. The spring of the released tree sent it bounding several yards away. But whilst all this is revolting enough, we must not forget that it is no worse than what took place in Europe in the Middle Ages; and the condition of these people is, naturally, one of primitive barbarism. (W.R., 1909)
Here again, a poor little lad has his hand hacked off by a ‘sentry’ at Wambala. Mr. and Mrs. Harris had stopped at the village down the river to get food for their canoe paddlers. Amongst those who ran down to see them was this boy. It was the same story of a village raided, and a hand cut off to account for a cartridge. Here, again, the boy recovered, but think how many thousands are left in the forests to bleed to death, far from human aid. May God have mercy on them, for man has none. (W.R., 1909)

Certainly it can be said the Congo Reform Association’s lectures structured a relationship to its subjects that betrayed the incommensurability of the others’ particular experiences. The maimed children’s stories were obsessively repeated at hundreds of thousands of meetings (although usually without proper names). The individuals became characters who were meant to stand in for the millions of people that the CRA claimed had been executed or maimed. Isolated from their own verbal testimony in the context of the lantern lecture, these figures perhaps only serve as ‘standardized

Figure 7 Maimed boy (photo by Alice Harris). © Anti-Slavery International/Panos Pictures.
objects’ or ‘thematic events’ (Simon et al., 2002: 10). That is, the individual’s particular injuries were abstracted into one undifferentiated, exchangeable injury: the cutting off of black hands. This strategy enabled the CRA to transform particular cases into a recognizable standard from which the spectator could make a universal judgement about the rights of others. Universal judgements, however, subsume the particular case under a general rule and in this case this general rule was a markedly Christian notion of duty and responsibility.\(^\text{11}\) This transcendent appeal mythologized human rights, divorcing them from the particularity of the other’s suffering. The lectures’ discursive framing transformed the fundamental moral relationship between ‘I and Thou’ into a relationship of ‘I and Them’, that is, into a relationship between an ‘I’ and an abstracted category that confines the thou to an ‘it’. Subsequently, it could be argued that the missionaries did not stray far from what John Atkinson Hobson called ‘the spectatorial lust’ evident in imperialist interest in Africa (cited in Coombes, 1994: 63).\(^\text{12}\)

By 1907, a rift had developed between E.D. Morel and the missionary reformers. Morel was convinced that the missionaries had allied themselves with the Congo Reform Association only in order to expand their evangelical work, and had no interest in securing the inhabitants’ human or property rights. As this dissension split the ranks of the reformers, Leopold eventually bowed to mounting international pressure and in 1908 sold the Congo Free State to the Belgium Government. In turn, the Belgian Parliament granted new stations to the Congo Balolo Mission. In gratitude, the Mission’s Home Council instructed its missionaries to stop publicizing evidence of atrocities. An incensed Morel appealed to the Mission: ‘The Belgian Government is doing its utmost to undermine the British movement for a radical alteration of this fundamental inequity by throwing sops to British Missionary Societies’ (cited in Grant, 2001: 51). Morel’s appeals only deepened the growing rift.

Due to these increasingly personal exchanges, John and Alice Harris left the Congo Reform Association in 1910 and became Joint-Organizing Secretaries of an amalgamated Anti-Slavery and Aborigines’ Protection Society. British interest in the Congo fizzled and in 1913 the CRA declared victory by default, despite the fact that it continued to receive reports of misgovernment in the Congo. The CRA disbanded and surplus funds were given over to Morel to write a history of the Congo reform movement. By the time the First World War arrived, he had produced a full-blown account of Leopold’s exploits and humanitarian protests up to the time of the Reform Association’s founding in 1904. Morel quickly became absorbed into controversies about the aims and question of responsibility for the Great War, openly declaring his view that the war was madness. During this time, Morel’s close friend Roger Casement was tried and executed for high treason when he attempted to enlist Irish prisoners of war to fight against British colonial rule.\(^\text{13}\) The editors of Morel’s (1968) posthumous history of the CRA, Louis and Stengers, suggest this painful event explains why he never finished the book (p. xii).

As the First World War took centre stage, details of Leopold’s cruel regime in the Congo dropped from Europe’s memory. Signs that this forgetting was
actually a repression are evident in the newspaper stories, cartoons, and political speeches during the war which luridly suggested the evil Germans were ‘torturing’ the brave little Belgians. And in a truly uncanny return of the Congo atrocities, Hochschild (1999) reports that the Allied press even (falsely) reported that Germans were cutting off the hands and feet of Belgian children (p. 296). Although reports of abuses from the Congo did drop markedly by 1913, this was probably less due to the reformers’ efforts than the shift from wild rubber collection to state cultivation of rubber trees. An imposition of a heavy head tax by the Belgian government forced the Congolese to work these rubber plantations, which on the surface at least, provided an alternative system that drew less protest from humanitarians (Hochschild, 1999: 278). Morel’s stirring call to recognize the ‘great crime against humanity’ was largely ignored, and from the perspective of the historians the success of the CRA remains a perpetual question. This international human rights movement, once a blazing bonfire, a subject that moved the world like no other for more than a decade, ended, not with a bang but a whimper.

**Dreaming of Human Rights**

Given all these complicated, ambivalent features, how should one evaluate the significance of the Congo reform movement? How did this demand for the recognition of the rights of others affect, if at all, the drive for universal human rights after the Second World War? How is uncovering the facts of this repressed history useful for thinking about the present in which human rights are proudly championed as moral progress? I do not think that human rights need to be discarded. Indeed, this discourse may become an important location for working through the conflicts of the traumatic past. Perhaps surprisingly, the study and interpretation of visual images – artifacts that provoke a construction of history – may be key to this working through.

Walter Benjamin (1999[1936]) provides a compelling methodology for such a critical inquiry, and in particular in his massive, unfinished study of the 19th century, *The Arcades Project (Das Passagen-Werk)*. One of Benjamin’s most faithful readers, Susan Buck-Morss, suggests his methodology attempts to develop a philosophy *out* of history, committed as it is to a ‘graphic, concrete representation of truth, in which historical images made visible the philosophical ideas’ (Buck-Morss, 1991: 55, emphases added). Benjamin cut through the traditional, linear structures of temporality and historical understanding and this fragmented, discontinuous approach can perhaps illuminate the significance that the Congo reform movement offers to thinking about human rights in the present.

In an early draft of his ‘exposé’ of the project, Benjamin (1999[1935]) speaks of ‘residues of a dream world’ (p. 13). These residues were the Paris arcades themselves – iron and glass architectural precursors to the modern shopping mall – that were already in ruins in Benjamin’s time. Benjamin sought to uncover the origins of his era’s cult of consumerism in these arcades.
Passagen-Werk was to offer a historical study akin to dream analysis, that is, a methodology that could reveal unconscious wishes contained within the material form. In his era of industrial culture, Benjamin perceived consciousness to exist only in a ‘mythic, dream state, against which historical knowledge was the only antidote’ (Buck-Morss, 1991: x). Such a dream state spelled political danger for Benjamin because ‘dream-work’, as Freud (1991[1900]) famously pointed out near the end of The Interpretation of Dreams, ‘does not think’ but rather ‘restricts itself to giving things a new form’ (p. 650). In a dream state, one has deliberately turned against reality; one can only wish.

Freud’s conception of dream interpretation offered Benjamin inspiration for a new form of political analysis, one that centered fantasy at the heart of political language. Specifically, Freud argued that past unconscious forms exert a psychological force on the present. Moreover, the analogy of dream interpretation as political analysis provided a way for Benjamin to conceptualize ‘demystification’: a means to awaken from the dream. For Benjamin, this was achieved by building constellations of historical insight. He did this by working patiently, minutely documenting the way phantasmagoric forms construct their irrational myths of progress in the present, which, like dreams, are simply re-presentations of past wishes wrapped in a new form. The Paris arcades, for instance, unveiled at the beginning of the 19th century as innovative structures that would facilitate mass desire, were in fact utterly incapable of furnishing society with any real liberating solution to what Benjamin perceived as stifling instances of capitalist consumption. Nevertheless, the powerful forces that drove the creation of these arcades allowed them to be viewed as if these structures were ‘new’ and ‘progressive’. In response, Benjamin (1988[1940]) hoped the practice of history writing that borrowed from dream analysis could destroy this view of the present as progressive. By unveiling the way phantasmagoria formed unconscious attachments to an earlier era, by recognizing the present as being shot through with elements of the unresolved past, Benjamin hoped to explode ‘the continuum of history’ (p. 261).

This was a political project to be sure. As Buck-Morss (1995) puts it, ‘social transformation . . . was to have been the goal of Benjamin’s fairy tale’ (p. 7). But holding Benjamin’s vision of social transformation in abeyance for the moment, I want to borrow his historical method in order to think about current conceptions of human rights in constellation to the Congo Reform Association. The artifacts of this movement – the photographs and the discourse that mobilized them – can also be regarded as residues of a dream world, although unlike Benjamin’s arcades, this dream world contains the material for definitions of responsibility, international intervention, and the very conception of human rights. The CRA captured its generation with a kind of dream power, providing the spectator with a heady illusion of his or her ability to intervene on distant suffering. This illusion was provided by the phantasmagoric use of atrocity photographs, in particular through the missionaries’ lantern slide lectures. Mola’s wounds and Nsala’s mute grief was presented in tandem with powerful verbal appeals intended to stir the
audiences’ sense of duty and responsibility. Relying on the photographs’ ability to provoke spectators’ affect, the missionaries wove a powerful myth that proposed this painful encounter with atrocity could be transformed into meaningful action. Indeed, the Congo Reform Association perhaps invented the belief that the liberation of strangers’ suffering was in the hands of distant spectators.

Contemporary calls for human rights often unconsciously borrow from this form. Such calls similarly utilize atrocity photographs, demand intervention, and rely on transcendental notions of dignity and duty. That is, current human rights discourse presents a familiar dream of liberation and redemption from the violence and aggression that has ruined the world. As in all dreams, a potent wish drives this discursive formulation: the wish to put an end to the suffering witnessed through the camera’s lens. As laudable a dream as it may be, without historical insight, without the recognition of this dream as a dream, human rights discourse, Benjamin might say, forgets its own history and sinks into an ever deeper sleep.

What does it mean to recognize dream elements in contemporary human rights discourse? For one, this means recognizing that the fantastic wish to put an end to suffering is a residue from an unresolved past, from the painful childhood of human rights. This article has traced the pungent wish back to spectators regarding the atrocities of the Congo Free State through photographic representations. And although this wish can be thought of as heralding the birth of human rights, paradoxically, such a wish is actually formed in the registration of the breach of these rights: photographs of atrocity generally present evidence of absolute social breakdown, and moreover, this presentation comes too late, only after the atrocity has occurred. As with all fantasies, the wish for human rights is formed as a defense against the perception of loss. Constructed as an attempt to frantically repair (or perhaps even undo) the atrocity encountered in the visual representation, this version of human rights discourse offers little but a dream, a dreamworld in which every human individual possesses an inalienable dignity.

I am sympathetic to the wish at the heart of this articulation of human rights. Photographic representations of atrocity offer only an anguished portrait of reality and it is perhaps the very definition of misery to be helpless in the face of such suffering. Having encountered the atrocities occurring in the Congo passively – as spectators – the Congo reformers idealized the photograph’s power to repair the wrong, and so constructed a discourse of rights to mitigate the traumatic timing of this perception. Concealed by the magic of the dream-work, this traumatic response continues to be enacted in the present through the phantasmal belief in universal a priori human rights. The spectator’s wish has become an official discourse that seeks to prevent or alleviate atrocious suffering around the world. The dream-work operates by displacing the helplessness initially felt in the face of the photograph to an expectation of future helplessness. In defense of this discovery of the utter frailty of human life, spectators erected and then clung to guideposts of
reliability: the Articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But such a dream of predictability only serves as a means to turn away from the reality of horrific suffering. In this way, contemporary calls for human rights should properly be perceived as a veil, a symptom that substitutes for a more compassionate response to the loss presented in the image. Indeed, this veil clouds any real recognition of the ongoing violence that piles up at our feet.17

For Freud, the task of dream analysis is to tear patients away from the illusion, to show them again and again that what they take to be new, real life is actually a reflection of the past. Correspondingly, if current spectators can acknowledge that the demand for human rights is driven by the impossible wish to put an end to past suffering, a defense against their helplessness in the face of a photograph, then perhaps the image may also become a location for a working through, the means by which humanity may be released from the compulsion to repeat its painful, unresolved childhood. Such a working through also helps pave a route for the reconstitution of human rights. Rather than place faith in an inalienable dignity, human rights discourse must reckon with the extreme vulnerability of the human condition, and correspondingly, with the emergence of a new, supreme kind of injury: crimes against humanity. In her original conclusion to Origins of Totalitarianism Arendt (2004[1951]) boldly names the recognition of this crime as the beginning point in the history of humanity (p. 627). In so doing, Arendt unknowingly echoed those Congo reformers who conceived of this concept as the foundational principle of universal human rights. Recalling this very different model of rights – one that begins with recognition of their loss – is a crucial exercise of imagination, a provocation for thinking new thoughts on these intractable matters of political life.

Notes
1. Credit should go to Adam Hochschild (1999) who identified this first use of the phrase ‘crimes against humanity’ in his book King Leopold’s Ghost (p. 112). He kindly directed me to the precise location of Williams’s reference in personal correspondence.
2. The bibliography of scholarship on the colonial period of the Congo’s history is enormous and the list that follows features the key texts relied on in this article. Books and articles on Leopold’s rule and the Congo reform movement are often divided into two main classes: original and secondary. The original material consists of the documents from those who were somehow participants to the events: Casement (2003[1903]); Conrad (1988[1899]); Morel (1970[1904]), (1969[1906]), (1968); Twain (1970[1906]). The secondary list comprises the studies and narratives published subsequently: Benedetto (1996); Cline (1980); Ewans (2002); Franklin (1985); Grant (2001); Harlow and Carter (2004); Hochschild (1999); Lindqvist (1996); Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002). O’Siocháin and O’Sullivan’s general introduction to the recently published version of Casement’s report (2003[1903]) was also invaluable. Glaringly absent from the list of original texts are African voices. This absence exists in part because, aside from Roger Casement’s attempt to record the testimony of those maimed individuals he encountered directly, there are simply no accounts (oral or written) from any
Congolese person during the Free State’s regime. In literature from later periods, a steadily growing condemnation of both the Free State’s regime and Belgium’s subsequent rule is evident. Early on in the Congo’s independence movement, the first Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, was optimistic about relations with the Belgians and even argued against ‘raking up past mistakes’ (Lumumba, 1962: 13), but just a year later in his Independence Day speech, Lumumba had adopted an anti-colonial position, calling upon memories of (among other injustices) ‘the humiliating slavery which was imposed on us by force’.

3. Lemkin’s (1944) term is generally applied to the mass killing of Armenians by Ottoman Turks between 1915 and 1920, the Nazi Holocaust, the Khmer-Rouge’s massacre of Cambodians between 1975 and 1979, the organized ethnic cleansing of Muslims by Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians in Bosnia-Herzegovina throughout the early 1990s, and Rwanda, where almost one million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were systematically murdered in 1994. It may be debatable whether King Leopold was bent on annihilating the Congolese peoples – genocide refers specifically to those actions aimed at the destruction of essential foundations of life of groups of people – but this is precisely what Sven Lindqvist (1996) argues in his book *Exterminate All the Brutes* (the title is taken from the famous line uttered by Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, 1899). Lindqvist provocatively suggests that Europe’s various attempts to exterminate the ‘inferior races’ of Africa ‘prepared the ground for Hitler’s destruction of six million Jews in Europe’ (p. x).

4. I tend to side with Theodor Adorno (2003[1967]) on the point that ‘to quote or haggle over numbers is already inhumane’ (p. 20). I should note, however, the number of Congolese who died under Leopold’s regime is a figure of much dispute. Mark Twain (1970[1906]) cites five to seven million in his pamphlet *King Leopold’s Soliloquy* and this number is cited in Hochschild (1999: 3). In his unfinished *History of the Congo Reform Movement*, E.D. Morel (1968) suggests eight million were killed; however, the editors, Louis and Stengers, argue in a long critical comment that this number is virtually impossible to approximate and moreover that Morel’s original population estimates from which he ascertained the figure of eight million were most certainly wrong. Louis and Stengers, however, are among the most conservative of Congo historians, and only refer to these murders as ‘depopulation’ (p. 252).

5. Although Conrad’s celebrated novella was first published in 1899, it was undoubtedly based on his service on English ships in the Congo in 1890 (see Conrad, 1988[1899] for details).

6. George Washington Williams, already in ill health and weakened from his Congo trip, died on 2 August 1891 at 41 years of age (Franklin, 1985: 225). In many ways, public accusation about Leopold’s rule in the Congo died with him until the CRA was formed nearly a decade later.

7. The severed hand seems to provoke an unusually heightened sense of the uncanny. Freud (1991[1919]) relies on two such stories in his essay: Hanuff’s fairy tale and Herodotus’s story of the treasure of Rhampsinitus in which a master-thief, whom a princess tries to hold fast by the hand, leaves his brother’s severed hand behind with her instead (pp. 368–9, 375). In another uncanny return, such mutilations became the systematic signature of terror in the recent ‘civil war’ in Sierra Leone (1991–2002). No doubt much more could be said about the symbolic force of this particular injury.

8. The September 1905 issue of *The West African Mail* included what could be called a photo-essay entitled ‘The Kodak on the Congo’. The images are headed up by several quotations from reformers and from Leopold himself about his
efforts at ‘moral and material regeneration’ of the ‘lazy and indifferent’ natives. Eight pages of photographs by Alice Harris follow, depicting the sufferings of the Congolese people with extended captions.

9. In a November 1905 article of *The West African Mail*, the reformers wrote:

> All the abuses we have denounced – the appropriation of the land, of the produce of the soil, of the labour of the people, the subjection of the people to a slavery more absolute, more binding, more continuous, than that endured by the Israelites in Egypt; a slavery accompanied by and upheld by atrocities which have never been exceeded in nature or extent – are the necessary *sequelae* to the primary fact, the fundamental purpose, which it is our plain duty to expose and to overthrow. (Morell, 1905: 28)

Because they did not have the language of genocide, the Congo reformers needed a historical precedent and so leaned upon the memory of the Israelites’ suffering. Indeed, this strategy could be considered a version of Benjamin’s dialectical image: an analytic strategy for demystifying the present by use of past example.

10. An exception to this over-arching critical evaluation is Enid Schildkrout (1991), who argues that Herbert Lang’s photographs of the northeastern region of the Congo during the period directly after the Free State was handed over to the Belgian government (1909–1915) manage to transcend the anthropological gaze and should be read as works of art. Nicholas Mirzoeff (1998) takes issue with Schildkrout and in turn offers a reading of Lang’s photographs as visual documents that conform to a particular grammar of colonial vision. Although he does not address the atrocity photographs used by the Congo reform movement, Mirzoeff’s study illuminates the fact that photographic representations of the Congo were subject to intense political debate throughout the beginning of the century. While there is not space to address the critiques of the Congo reformers at length here, it is important to note that the photographic evidence of the Congo reform campaign did not go unchallenged at the time. Officials for the Congo Free State refuted the reformers’ claims in a monthly periodical titled *The Truth About the Congo*. In the case of Epondo, for instance, the State asserted that his hand had not been cut off by a state sentry, but bitten off by a wild boar. They even published a doctored photograph that featured E.D. Morel standing over a boar carcass, gun in hand, with a caption: ‘A photographic proof – Mr. Morel has just killed Eponento’s wild boar’ (the image is discussed and reprinted in Grant, 2001).

11. The missionary reformers espoused a version of Protestantism that called for social reform based on awakening audiences to their own culpability in human misery due to ‘indifference’. The missionaries’ combined presentation of atrocity photographs and ‘horror narratives’ were meant to arouse audiences’ conscience as well as provide recognizable Christian themes (atonement, redemption, awakening, and hell’s harrowing) with which to form a prescribed response. In a significant parallel, between 1888 and 1915, pioneering photojournalist and social reformer Jacob Riis offered scores of magic lantern shows to crowds of hundreds (and sometimes thousands) who gathered in churches, guild-halls, and theaters. Projecting his documentary photographs with a magic lantern, Riis recreated a virtual tour of New York tenement neighborhoods – complete with the direct personal account of some of its inhabitants – in order to arouse his audiences’ empathy and moral outrage at the living conditions of the working class. Gregory S. Jackson (2003) has shown how Riis’s presentations used modern technology to make traditional modes of religious pedagogy newly relevant to largely secular campaigns for social
reform. Evidently there is much research to be done to uncover the connections between Riis’s visual strategy and the Congo reformers’ lantern lectures.

12. Although she does not mention the Congo Reform Association, Annie Coombes (1994) shows that missionaries’ representations ultimately served imperial interests. The ‘travelogue’ structure of CRA’s Congo lantern lectures does bear striking similarity to other imperialist narratives Coombes describes such as the national and international public exhibitions about Africa that were popular at the end of the 19th century. These massive exhibitions fuelled popular conceptions of Africa, simultaneously constituting scientific investigation, philanthropy, and mass entertainment. One exhibition, The Stanley and African Exhibition mounted in 1890, bears particular interest in regards to the Congo. Stanley’s infamous trek to ‘rescue’ Emin Pasha, Governor of Equatoria, had captured British popular imagination and the exhibition was no less engrossing. Coombes notes that the viewer was expected to consume the exhibition from the position of explorer and thereby ‘gain the “experience” of the seasoned traveler’ (p. 69). At the entrance, the visitor would find himself ‘in the heart of Africa’, and having passed through a palisade of trees ornamented with skulls, would arrive at a simulated explorer’s camp. The exhibition was then divided into five main sections dealing with zoology and exploration, missionaries, the slave trade, and a ‘Native Section’, which displayed raw materials and goods as well as weapons, implements, dress. In another uncanny echo of the CRA’s photographs of mutilated boys, two orphaned boys, Gootoo and Inyokwana, also appeared in the 1890 exhibition, serving as living examples of the depravity of slavery.

13. Casement, an Irish nationalist, went to Germany during the war to enlist Irish prisoners in the cause against British colonial rule. He was charged with high treason almost the moment he landed back on Irish soil, the first knight of the realm to be so accused in several hundred years. Money and messages of support arrived from around the world. Several writers including Conan Doyle and George Bernard Shaw petitioned for clemency. Scotland Yard authorities found Casement’s personal diaries, which included several entries about his homosexual experiences. They released copies of these to the king, influential citizens, and journalists. The inflammatory content of these diaries effectively sealed Casement’s fate (Hochschild, 1999: 284–6).

14. The term did resurface in the Allied denunciation of the Turkish government for the massacre of Armenians in 1915, which they held responsible for ‘crimes against humanity and civilization’. The term was, of course, institutionalized during the Nuremberg trial in 1945.

15. I am alluding, of course, to the last line of T.S. Eliot’s (1925) poem ‘The Hollow Men’. The epigraph that heads the poem, ‘Mistah Kurtz – he dead’, is itself an allusion to Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1899). One wonders if Eliot had the Congo crisis in mind when composing this poem.

16. I am drawing here from Freud’s (1955[1926]) discussion of ‘Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety’. In the addendum of this paper, Freud links anxiety to trauma, suggesting anxiety is both the expectation of future trauma and the repetition of past trauma in a mild form.

17. This is a conscious allusion to Benjamin’s (1988[1940]) ‘angel of history’. Based on a Klee painting that Benjamin owned, this angel faces the past but is being blown backwards by the catastrophe that continues to pile wreckage in front of its feet. Incidentally, Benjamin’s friend and colleague, Hannah Arendt, developed a similar notion of political discourse as an anxious response to a
traumatic history. Arendt (1998[1958]) centered her critique on the ‘faculty of promise’, which she considered one of the central control mechanisms of public life and political thought (p. 244). Political contracts, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, serve to both dispel the basic unreliability of humans and arise from the impossibility of foretelling the consequences of one’s actions. ‘The function of the faculty of promising is to master this twofold darkness of human affairs and is, as such, the only alternative to a mastery which relies on domination of one’s self and rule over others’ (p. 244). The danger with such ‘promises’, Arendt suggests, is when they are used to ‘cover the whole ground of the future and to map out a path secured in all directions’ (p. 244). Arendt suggests such control mechanisms function like dream-work: a wish-fulfilling illusion that regresses withdraws from reality, ‘disposing of the future as though it were the present’ (p. 245).

References


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