The Childhood of Human Rights: The Kodak on the Congo

Sharon Sliwinski
Girl with amputated foot, utilised by sentries from a rubber concession. Equator District

A young man and woman with severed arms. Mok's hands, which had been destroyed by gangrene after being tied too tightly by soldiers, were discovered by the police. Yoka's hand, standing, was cut off by soldiers wanting to claim him as killed.
In the early 1900s, the missionaries Alice Seeley Harris and her husband, Reverend John Harris, produced what was probably the first photographic campaign in support of human rights. A significant moment in the history of photography. The Harris Lantern Slide Collection was, at the time of its presentation in Europe and America, a radical and significant shift in the representation and understanding of the impact of colonial violence in the Congo. Instead of the charade of civilisation that masked the Belgians’ presence in the Congo, these photographs exposed the deep-rooted hypocrisy of so called colonial benevolence.

The legacy of Belgian state-controlled violence in the Congo would tragically re-emerge after the Congo gained its independence in 1960, with the removal from power and assassination of the newly independent state’s first legally elected prime minister, Patrice Lumumba. In January 1961 he, along with two other government ministers, Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito, was shot, buried, exhumed, moved to a more remote location, cut into pieces and his body parts then thrown into a barrel of sulphuric acid. An act fully supported by the Belgian authorities. A most extreme form of cultural erasure.

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The history of the Victorian Age will never be written: we know too much about it.
Lytton Strachey, Eminent Victorians

One of Hannah Arendt’s few glaring mistakes was her assertion that crimes against humanity were crimes that only appeared when the Nazi regime attempted to exterminate the Jewish people in the middle of the twentieth century. The error does not, of course, 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 ‘human kind’ or ‘humanity’ would be devoid of meaning.” This concept makes visible, in other words, the fact that people must be actively judged human to enjoy the benefits associated with such a title. Although human rights appear to establish and operate from the abstract 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 fifty years before Auschwitz! The charge was levelled 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 where he alludes to “a crime unparalleled in the annals of the world.” In his unfinished and posthumously published, History of the Congo Reform Movement, Morel expressly names “a great crime against humanity”: The crimes in the Congo 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: the widespread use of a hippo-skin whip called a chicotte, hostage taking as strategy to enforce labour, and the methodical severing of human 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, together with Roger Casement, British Consul to the Congo Free State, mounted an organized campaign in Britain that became the largest humanitarian movement in the world during the late Victorian era. But heralded by the legendary activism of abolitionists, the Congo Reform Association (CRA) stands among the earliest critics of empire and advocates a secular human rights ideology. 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 foreunner for the work of present-day humanitarian groups like 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 campaign tool. Crimes occurring in far away places were made publicly visible for the first time in history. The presence of photography in the twentieth century’s first great human rights movement is not coincidental. Indeed, this historical campaign shows that the very recognition of what we call human rights is inextricably bound to an aesthetic experience. The conception of rights did not emerge from the abstract articulation of an inalienable human dignity, but rather from a particular visual encounter with atrocity. Moreover, the proximity between the ideal of human rights and representations of their abuse suggests that this rights discourse serves principally as a response to the witnessing of traumatic violence. Universal human rights were conceived by spectators who with the aid of the photographic apparatus were compelled to judge that crimes against humanity were 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 the one hand, international investigators like Roger Casement publicized photographs of maimed and dismembered Congolese (children in particular) as forensic evidence of colonial brutality. In this case, the images were meant to serve as incontrovertible proof that atrocity was occurring in Leopold’s colony. On the other hand, missionary reformers were simultaneously delivering thousands of lantern lectures—illustrated with the very same images—throughout Europe and North America. In contrast to the tone of a criminal investigation, these lectures took the form of phantasmagorical theatrical productions; the missionaries appealed to a mythic ideal of universal human dignity, and ultimately used the Congo crisis to promote their missionary ambitions for central Africa.

While one may be hesitant to recall this difficult moment from the history of human rights, there is no doubt these conflicts continue to exert an effect. Contemporary human rights discourse still mythologizes the idea of an inalienable human dignity. Michael Ignatieff, for one, begins his Tanner Lectures 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 triumphant portrait of the present as morally developed. Ignatieff is not alone in this view. This version of human rights discourse is, at its root, an elaborate fantasy of moral progress, a fantasy that vigorously defends against any significant recognition of the human capacity for barbarity. We should not give up on this discourse, of course, but as Walter Benjamin sagely advises: “The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible...is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.”

Atrocities of the Congo Free State

Atrocities of the Congo Free State

It is not without trepidation that one delves into this history. The colonial period of the Congo involves murder, slavery, the unbridled plundering of natural resources, a fanatically cruel monarch, and the complicated, ambivalent efforts of white reformers. The history of the colonial rule in the Congo has been told many times before, 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 twentieth century’s genocides despite the fact millions of Congolese people were systematically exterminated during the period of terror between 1890-1910.

The story perhaps begins in 1876 when King Leopold I, the constitutional monarch of Belgium, invited an international scientific conference to Brussels to consider the best means by which to open up the center 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’Études du Haut Congro, to make treaties with chiefs and generally establish a plausible economic basis in Africa “pending developments on the European chessboard” as Morel put it. The Comité was quickly replaced by another mysterious body, called 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 sole 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.” 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 single most profitable colony in Africa.
The process of extracting rubber was, however, an arduous, labour-intensive undertaking. In the Congo rainforest, rubber came from a long vine that tended upwards around a tree, sometimes up to a hundred feet or more 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, massacre and take hostages.

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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 heartfelt: his confirmation of the Congo Free State’s use of the local police (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 officers routinely demanded proof of native slavery 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 informer, but more strikingly there are several detailed accounts of particular cases: one of a boy named Epondo, and another of Mola Ekili who had both hands taken.

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 testimony 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.

Stela soldiers came from Bilio, and attacked the Bwanga towns, which they burned and killed people. From that they went on to Moko. The soldiers took prisoner all the men left in the town, and tied them up. Their hands were tied very tight with native ropes, 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 swollen, because the thongs contracted. His (Mola’s) hands had swollen till it was a terrible morning, and the thongs had cut into the bone, but it was so swollen that it was quite useless. The soldiers saw 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 “kiaiakoi” was not far off, and could see what they were doing. Kialakoi 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). The case is particularly haunting because Casement is unclear—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.

One other artefact haunts this testimony: Mola’s photograph. 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, who reports that he had petitioned the local authorities for restitution on Mola’s behalf some years ago when he first found the boy. Uncertainly, Casement remembers that he himself had transported Clark’s letter (“in entire ignorance of its contents”) during an earlier visit to the Congo. Clark, receiving no acknowledgement, addressed a second appeal to the Central Administration at Brussels, at the time “inclosing a photograph of the maimed or mutilated boy.” 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.”

The photograph, a copy of which Casement included in his original report, shows Mola seated sideways on a modern-style chair. Both children are wearing white clothing against which they hold their mutilated limbs so that 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 Eondo, as well as images of several other victims and it seems plausible that Armstrong also took the photograph of Mula. The two subjects’ poses express 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.

Photography was used to document other incidents of such mutilation. Alice Harris of the Congo Free State, was also taking pictures of atrocities with an early Kodak dryplate camera. In May 1904, two young men suddenly arrived at her mission station, attempting to convey some pressing news. Harris surmised that a detail of African “sentries” of the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company had 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 child, 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.22

Harris’s image is remarkably calm given the story of its taking. Nsala is centrally figured, sitting in profile on what looks like a thatched veranda, gazing at two small objects lying in front of him. A potted cactus is positioned a 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. Harris appears to be creating a forensically valid image.23

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 forensic evidence for the alleged acts of brutality. As Kevin Grant 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.” By the time the report was published, a broad British lobby group had already assembled against the Congolese Free State. The group was made up of members of the Anti-Imperialist League, 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 spokesperson for the group. Instead, he convinced Edmund Dean Morel, an aspiring journalist who had begun to suspect the systematic 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 2,000 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 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.24 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. In this version, a crowned and sceptred 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 Israelis suffering in Egypt as a way to characterize the extent of the atrocities occurring in the Congo.25 The text of Red Rubber relies on top of evidence of the abuses transmitted by travelers from all over the Congo.26 This evidence is presented not merely as a catalogue of atrocities but as overwhelming proof that “What is known, what is supposed to be the case, is that in the Congo Free State as in the Roman Empire, the central tools in this strategy, 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 these rights have been swept away from him by the most colossal act of spoliation ever imagined by mortal man.”27 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 this appeal for the rights of the Congo inhabitants to live free from oppression sounds strikingly similar to the Universal Declaration written some forty years later, Morel petitioned on the basis of a legal precedent rather than on a 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 reflecting on the Nazi regime some sixty years later, that such monstrous 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 humanity of human beings. 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 Nadas after him, simultaneously overlapped and shattered any and all legal systems. Conceptualizing crimes against humanity, therefore, amounts to a legal response to such horror by inaugurating a new organization of human responsibility.

Beyond Morel’s direct political demand for intervention on Congo affairs, Red Rubber also made a more deliberate effort to amuse the emotions of its readers. Nezinge District

Nsala of Wala with the severed hand and foot of his five-year-old daughter murdered to appease the “backdrop” for the mutilated limb after the murder of the daughter and then devoured them, leaving behind only the daughter’s hand and foot. 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.22
The site where Patrice Lumumba, Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito were executed and first buried.

Photograph by Sammy Baloji (Untitled), Katanga Province, Democratic Republic of Congo, January 2010.

Commissioned by Autograph ABP. Sammy Baloji was born in 1978 in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He lives and works in Lubumbashi. His first one person show in the UK was presented at Dilston Grove, London in June 2010 by Autograph ABP.
Equator District

A young boy forced to collect rubber for the ABR. The rubber quotas imposed on the indigenous population were so great that, as in this picture, the rubber vines were cut down rather than waiting for them to be tapped. As a result, the image in *Red Rubber* all depicts suffering: “I’m going away of illness, mutilated.”

The early text used images of Congo life largely for illustrative purposes, the reproductions illustrating the text, accompanied by short titled captions. But while atrocities photographs: “For six years I have appealed to the head,” he remarked. The photographs serve as devastating confirmation of Morel’s conclusion, which is soon after completing the book, “and now I am appealing to the heart, the head

Burdened by Raiders.” The photographs serve as devastating confirmation of Morel’s “Barnegro Chief Showing Their Emaciated Condition,” and “Section of Village Burned by Raiders.” The photographs serve as devastating confirmation of Morel’s 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 grandfatherly 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 “Congolese Free State” has long ceased to exist. It has given place to a political monster and international outlaws. Of that political monster and international outlaws, but one thing can be said or written, Delenda est Carthago. The seek of its abominations mounts to Heaven in famines of shame. It pollutes the earth. Its speedy disappearance is imperative for Africa, and for the world.”

The image that punctuates these final paragraphs is Alice Hart’s photograph of Nkala 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 image in the mind of the spectator. This use of the photograph as evidence of atrocity is here less a matter of juridical proof than psychically arresting, marking these atrocities as socially and psychologically meaningful.

Other reform literature made similar use of this and other atrocities photographs. King Leopold’s *Sociology*, 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 Nkala. As the title suggests, Twain’s polemical text is a long monologue written from the point of view of Leopold himself as he fuses and fumes about the state of his colony. Near the end of the *Sociology*, Leopold actually remarks on the reform movement, and in particular on Morel: “This Moral is a reformer; a Congo reformer. That stirs him up!”

Leopold also addresses Morel’s newspaper, *The West African Mail*: “supported by the voluntary contributions of the NSArrayed and the soft-hearted; and every week it storms and roars and fascists with up-to-date Congo atrocities.”… I will suppress it… it should not be difficult for me to suppress a newspaper.” 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 book 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 tacks of mutilations as slanders, lies, inventions of buoy-body American missionaries and exasperated foreigners.…. Yes, all things went harmoniously and pleasantly in these good days…. Then all of a sudden came the crash! That is to say, the incompressible kodak—and all harmony went out 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 ferment them out and suppress them.”

Twain emphasizes that it is the camera’s particular exposure of atrocity that turned the tide in Congo reform. The “incompressible kodak” facilitated feelings of moral 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 rigorous articulations of modern human rights—what perhaps could be called the childhood of human rights—however 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 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 Twentieth Century, no issue so thoroughly occupied British public imagination as Congo reform.

The phantasmagoric other

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” panoptic views of foreign lands as well as ethnographic specimens of “primitive races” and “exotic beasts.” Although this era of colonial expansion saw the emergence of the modern concept of the “other,” an emergent that was deeply dependent on photographic technology, this other was constructed for Western audiences for both public and private 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. 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 hermetic 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 Casement relied heavily on information and support from missionaries in his report, including the use of their photographs, these were to Congo reform deeply troubling E.D. Morel. He expressed concern, and, at times, outright aversion to religious ideology serving as fuel for reform sentiments. Nevertheless, the
Alice Seely Harris with a large group of Congolese children.
missionaries and their photographs became a central arm of the Congo Reform Association, and in part responsible for its popular success. Specifically, Kevin Grant suggests 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 atrocities.” On the other hand, the lantern lecture was not new to European or American audiences. In Paris in 1798, Etienne-Gaspard Roberton took this technology to it’s fullest potential in his childhood as a cure for melancholia. Unfortunately, the device produced nothing but further sorrow by transforming young Marcel’s relationship to it’s subject that betrayed the incomparability of the others’ particularity of the other’s suffering. The lectures’ discursive framing transformed 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 that were meant to stand in for the millions of people that the CRA claimed had been executed or maimed. Isolated from their relationship to its subject, such an appeal “fails to call spectators into question” in any rational way. The phantasmagoric form, in short, can be charged with promoting meicrominorization, a denial of the other’s radical difference. They made a universal judgment about the rights of others. Universal judgments, 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. This transcendent appeal mythologised 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 abjected category that confuses the thou to an “It.” Subsequently, it could be argued that the missionaries did not stray far from a kind of spectatorial lust evident in imperialist interest in Africa.

By 1901, the 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 inequality by throwing chips to British Missionary Societies.” Morel’s appeals only deepened the growing rift.

Due to these increasingly personal exchanges, John and Alice Harris left the Congo Reform Association in 1919 and became Joint-Organizing Secretaries of an amalgamated Anti-Slavery and Aborigines’ Protection Society. British interest in the Congo faded and in 1913 the CRA declared victory by default, despite the fact 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 World War I arrived, he had produced a full-blown account of Leopold’s exploits and humanitarian protests up to the time of
A group of Bongwanga rubber workers.
An ivorystore ever-deeper sleep. Violence and aggression that has ruined the world. As in all dreams, a potent wish witnessed through the camera’s lens. As laudable a dream as it may be, without relying on transcendental notions of dignity and duty. That is, current human rights movements simply ended, perhaps as T.S. Eliot famously alleged, “This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper.”

The arts of this early human rights movement—the photographs and the discourse that mobilized them—perhaps now seem like residues of a distant dream-world. Indeed, the CRAs captured its generation with a kind of dreampower, providing the spectator with a heady illusion of her ability to intervene in distant suffering. This illusion was the phantasmagoric use of atrophy photography, in particular through the missionaries’ lantern slide lectures. Mola’s wounds and Nkadi’s mule grieves was presented in tandem with powerful verbal appeals to do or die. As in the 1940s film The Human Condition, the world was presented with a primary reason for profound emotion: Reality being operated on the photographs’ ability to provoke spectators’ affects, the missionaries were a powerful myth that propounded this painful encounter with atrocity could be transformed into meaningful action. Indeed, the CRAs perhaps helped invent the belief—so ubiquitous today—that the liberation of stranger’s suffering is in the hands of disinterested contemporaries. "This incident is detailed in Kevin Grant’s article “Christian Critics of Empire,” 27.

Casement, Congo Report, 159-161.

Grant, “Christian Critics of Empire,” 41.

Hochschild, King Leopold’s Soliloquy, 242.


112.


14 E.D. Morel, King Leopold’s Rule in Africa (1914). New York: New York University Press, 1970; Red Rubber History of the Republic Reform Movement and Mark Town, King Leopold’s Silhouette: A Defense of His Congo Rule (1909). (New York: International Book Title Press, 1917). The second edition contains the studies and a matter of pure speculation—a political act—upon his political work. Red Rubber History of the Republic Reform Movement and Mark Town, King Leopold’s Silhouette: A Defense of His Congo Rule (1909). (New York: International Book Title Press, 1917). The second edition contains the studies and a matter of pure speculation—a political act—upon his political work. Morel’s stirring call to recognize the “great crime against humanity” was largely ignored, and from the perspective of the historian, the success of the CRA remains a perpetual question. Once a blinding bonfire, a subject that moved the world like no other for more than a decade, this international human rights movement simply ended. Perhaps, as T.S. Eliot famously alleged, “This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper.”

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A store assistant who never seems to finish his book. An ivorystore ever-deeper sleep. Violence and aggression that has ruined the world. As in all dreams, a potent wish witnessed through the camera’s lens. As laudable a dream as it may be, without relying on transcendental notions of dignity and duty. That is, current human rights movements simply ended, perhaps as T.S. Eliot famously alleged, “This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper.”

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A store assistant who never seems to finish his book. An ivorystore ever-deeper sleep. Violence and aggression that has ruined the world. As in all dreams, a potent wish 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, Walter Benjamin might say, forgets its own history and sinks into an empty gesture.

Sharon Skvirski is Assistant Professor of Visual Culture in the Faculty of Culture and Media Studies at the University of Western Ontario. A longer version of this essay originally appeared in the Journal of Visual Culture, Vol. 5, Number 1, 2006. All rights reserved. Sharon Skvirski