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“Cheating History”: Blocking a Difficult Past at the Royal Museum for Central Africa

Remembering “Difficult” Colonial Pasts

The challenge of acknowledging difficult pasts is a crucial aspect of the sociology of memory because it informs how nations remember their “less than glorious” (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz 1991:376) histories. Whether these collective memories take shape in national memorials, commemorations, museums, or other modes of public display, the process of remembering itself has much to offer in terms of how we contend with the past. An extensive body of literature addresses how collective memories are constructed, contested, and even “managed” (Olick & Robbins 1998; Rivera 2008; Zolberg), but few scholars have examined the mechanisms by which nations systematically undermine the acknowledgement of a colonial past as “difficult.” While there is much scholarly attention to suppressing difficult pasts outside of sociology, the majority of this work converges around the Holocaust and post WWII memory in Germany. In recent years, sociologists have theorized the myriad of factors influencing the social memories of embarrassing, regretful, or traumatic pasts (Wagner-Pacifici Schwartz 1991; Olick 2007; Alexander 2004). However, as much as sociologists have contributed to our understanding of collective memory, this literature largely attends to “difficult pasts” that have already been identified and commemorated, even in a limited sense, in broader society. Furthermore, sociological literature has largely ignored the “difficult past” of colonialism celebrated in the public sphere (Steinmetz). Instead, this article addresses a case wherein a difficult colonial past has not been acknowledged as such. In some cases, focusing on memory management is preemptive because a nation may have experienced its so-called difficult history as pleasant, particularly when involving an overseas colony. Instead, this research identifies how nations subvert the acknowledgment of colonialism as a difficult past through failed commemorations.

Although sociologists have made great strides in advancing social memory studies the literature suffers from two prominent gaps. First, there is a dearth of case studies concerning historical events that have not been commemorated (see Wagner and Rivera
Thus far, sociologists have contended that collective memories of difficult or contested pasts are vulnerable to “negative commemorations” that downplay contentious histories in order to appeal to mass audiences (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). Moreover, difficult pasts may be fragmented in a way that leads to separate commemorations rather than displaying an entire history in one place or time (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002). Finally, difficult pasts may be “managed” by way of cultural covering or reframing to erase a “spoiled” national identity from public consciousness (Rivera 2008).

Armstrong et al contend sociologists have prioritized “struggles over how particular events are remembered than why some events are remembered and others are not” (Armstrong et al 725). Indeed, Vinitzky-Seroussi (2002) suggests focusing our scholarly attention on “failed” commemorations rather than those that exist in broader society. Despite this, cases of absent or failed commemorations have been overlooked and undertheorized by sociologists. Because many events can elicit difficult if not traumatic memories (Alexander 2004), it is analytically important to explore the determinants of failed, rather than “negative” or “managed,” commemorations. Furthermore, sociologists have paid relatively little attention to national museums (Autry 2012), which are ripe for analysis in terms of what is both remembered and forgotten. As sites of commemorative displays and objects, museums offer a unique opportunity for assessing how nations piece their national memories together with objects pilfered from their former colonies.

Second, most sociological research emphasizes national memories that overlook the distinct quality of national memory formed through colonialism and empire (Anderson 1991; Olick 2003). Colonial memory is further complicated by colonialism insistence on a “rule of difference” that separated and ranked colonist and colonized. Western European national histories are often self-aggrandizing and, although built upon colonial exploitation, fail to identify their colonies as a source of wealth and prosperity. In the neo-colonial era, forgetting colonialism proper allows European nations to forget the historical and contemporary sources of their wealth and prestige. However, these national memories steeped in colonial exploitation have ongoing consequences not only within the national memorialescape, but also in former colonies that are now under the constraints of foreign debt. Because of colonial legacies, events that are traumatic for
colonized peoples are often experienced quite differently from the Europeans who benefited from this systematic exploitation (Lonetree 2012).

Within social memory studies, colonial memories have remained undertheorized. However, literature outside of sociology pertaining to colonial memories has flourished in disciplines like history, anthropology, and comparative literature (Steinmetz 2013; Stoler). With so much interdisciplinary attention to colonial memories it is exigent that sociologists contribute to the scholarly discussion on the mechanisms used to downplay colonialism as a difficult past. We should consider that sociologists have a unique lens and set of methodological tools with which to study colonialism (McLennon 2013). As Steinmetz (2014) contends, “Sociologists often minimize the role of violence in social life by scaling it down to the interpersonal of micro level or turning it into a dependent variable (87). This research seeks an alternative approach to the violence of colonialism by considering what is at stake in bringing these memories to fruition in public settings.

In order to fill this gap in the collective memory literature, this research follows the case of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren, Belgium. The RMCA is unique in that it is the self-described “last colonial museum” in Europe to undergo a renovation. While other colonial museums have closed doors or absorbed their colonial collections in new museums, the RMCA has yet to adopt either of these strategies. The renovation process provides a lens into the how official memories of the colonial past determine display practices in the current and future museum. Because sociological literature on memory and colonialism is limited, I first turn to anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler’s concept of “colonial aphasia” to explain how the RMCA systematically blocks their morally repugnant histories to sustain the pleasure derived from remembering the past as glorious. Memory studies often span the gamut between amnesia and representation, but the concept of colonial aphasia allows analytical space for memories that are neither forgotten nor remembered. Colonial aphasia refers to a state of disconnect, speechlessness, and separation that inhibits admitting to wrong-doings in the colonial and neo-colonial eras. However, colonial aphasia is beyond a simple problem of remembering the past because it focuses our attention on the concerted effort to separate stories and events that are knowable but disconnected. According to Stoler, these disconnects are maintained by “blockages” that divide and separate the
consequences of colonialism for the colonized to protect a nation’s “glorious history.”” Blockages can be found in speech, activities, space, and, truly, any aspect of society that concerns sociologists. The way in which we encounter and construct a space, the activities in which we engage, and the stories we tell all have the possibility of either forging connections or proffering a silent burial. Colonial aphasia has implications for all societies in terms of how we “keep stories apart” (Ross 1995) in a way that would otherwise offer a space for remembering a “difficult past.” In addition, identifying how blockages operate offers the possibility of combating colonial aphasia by connecting the fractured stories and events that have kept a “difficult past” at bay for generations.

As a federal museum, the RMCA has much to offer in terms of informing how and whether we engage colonial histories and how these transformations take shape. This analysis shows how, even amidst a dramatic renovation, “blockages” in the institutional memory limit the possibilities of future representations of the past. “Blockages” are not only part of the outdated exhibition rooms at the RMCA, but have found their way into the renovation plans that emphasize a contemporary point of view. This problem of blocking the past to secure a select view of colonial history has interfered with the museum’s ability to openly admit that, for many Congolese, Belgian colonization was, indeed, a “difficult past.” Moreover, members of the museum’s African Diaspora (COMRAF) committee have described the RMCA’s renovation strategy as “cheating history.” As the RMCA prepares for its renovation, blockages remain the museum’s primary strategy for renovating its way out of colonial history. The RMCA provides pathways, both literal and figurative, to museum visitors as they experience “a little piece of Africa” within its walls. Through an analysis of interviews with museum staff, participant-observation of museum tours, and a spatial analysis of design practices, I find that the RMCA suffers from colonial aphasia and uses blockages to avoid the acknowledgement of colonialism in its former colonies of Rwanda, Burundi, and the Congo as difficult. I identify three types of blockages—temporal, design, and framing—used by the museum, not only to ward off the acknowledgement of a “difficult past,” but also to maintain the colonial spirit of the museum. I use the case of the RMCA in the context of Stoler’s work to develop a better understanding of how and why these omissions occur. I discuss examples of “blockages” in the current museum, offer an
analysis of how they operate, and consider their implications for future memories of the Congo. Finally, I identify the conditions under which colonial aphasia and its subsequent blockages are likely to determine the absence of commemorations.

**From National Memory to Colonial Aphasia**

In recent decades, sociologists have dedicated much time and energy to advancing “social memory studies” (Olick and Robbins 1998). Although social memory was once reserved for the sociology of knowledge, it has since become its own field with a section at the American Sociological Association. Social memory studies have come to dominate the questions of cultural sociologists who are interested in commemoration, identity, and even trauma (Alexander et al 2004; Eyerman 2008; Olick & Robbins 1998). Olick and Levy (1997) aptly describe collective memory as “an ongoing process of negotiation through time” (pg. 921). This allows scholars to distinguish between the processes of constructing collective memories versus the collective memory of nationalism (Olick 2003).

This “memory turn” from the sociology of knowledge to memory studies was largely influenced by Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz’s (1991) work on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which provided a framework for understanding the contextual factors influencing commemoration. Subsequent research has followed the commemoration trend of analyzing “less than glorious” (p. 376) historical events to account for challenges in representing the past (e.g., Alexander 2004; Fine 1996; Olick 2007; Schudson 1992). Contested histories (Olick, Zolberg) Sociologists are increasingly occupied with collective or social memory studies related to identity, trauma, and national cohesion as well as the “stigma” or “taboo” attached to “difficult histories” (Rivera 2008; Olick & Robbins 1998; Olick & Levy 1997; Cohen). Sociologists have made use of micro-level analyses, such as impression management, stigma, and taboo and proscription/prescription to understand the macro-level phenomena of social memory (citation).

*Colonialism and Commemoration*
Blocking a “difficult past” may serve many purposes such as evading complicity, reparations, and perhaps most importantly, to sustain ignorance of the influence of the past on the present. This occurs when colonial history is divided into chronological segments that herald independence as the end of colonization. However, despite how much time has passed colonialism has found its way through new technologies, policies, and strategies. This is accompanied by what Fletcher (2012) has described as “Imperial amnesia” or “the tendency on the part of ‘agents of postcolonialism to either ignore the history of colonial domination in their accounts or to present a sanitized version of colonialism from which evidence of exploitation, persecution, subjugation and genocide has been effectively effaced” (Fletcher 2012:423). Thus, bad acts of colonialism become “public secrets” (Taussig 1999) that are neither forgotten nor embraced, but rather strategically blocked from national memory. It is not simply the impact of forgetting the past, but of refusing to acknowledge the imprint of the past on the present. Belgium’s museums have been sites of “imperial nostalgia (Planche 2009) and incrimination.” The museum has been described a suffering from both amnesia (Hasian; Hochschild) and ambivalence (Planche 2009) regarding its colonial history.

While Vinitzky-Seroussi (2002) has identified the conditions leading to either multivocal or fragmented commemoration in relation to difficult pasts, as of yet the literature does not account for absent commemorations. Vinitsky-Seroussi (2002) found that commemorations around difficult pasts were more likely to be fragmented, or commemorated in disparate spaces with different audiences in mind. In this way, the collective memory remains fractured, spread out across different and sometimes wholly conflicting monuments and memorials. Alternatively, Kristin Ross explains this phenomenon as the “keeping of two stories apart” or a strategy used “for forgetting one of the stories or for relegating it to a different time frame” (Ross 1995:8). As Stoler proposes, “We need a better understanding of how occlusions of knowledge are achieved and more insight about the political, scholarly, and cognitive domains in which knowing is disabled, attention is redirected, things are renamed, and disregard is revived and sustained. At issue is both the occlusion of knowledge as a political form and “knowing” as a cognitive act” (Stoler 2011;153).

**Operationalizing “Blockages”**
Colonial aphasia is not only about missteps in speech; it is about the associations, pathways, and activities that allow us to foreclose the consequences of colonial acts in the present. A “blockage” is any redirection—spoken, enacted, or built—that creates a diversion from a contested history. Furthermore, a blockage allows for the reenactment of the past by negating the consequences of colonization in the present. Thus, a blockages serves two purposes: first, to disconnect a nation from a violent history and, second, to allow for the continued enjoyment of colonialism in the present. The RMCA is the perfect environment for assessing blockages as it offers narratives, activities, and pathways, all of which are vulnerable to diversion strategies. Because the past does not stay put (Griffin & Bollen 2009) and is reconstructed and redefined in the present (Olick, current sociological research must take account of the blockages used to enjoy the past without being held accountable.

**Colonial Memory and National Identity**

A critical aspect of cultural memory and commemoration is its emphasis on identity and group cohesion. For many scholars, mnemonic practices are considered essential to forging national identities (Olick; Griffin; Autry 2012). More importantly, sociologists have noted the interdependence between memory and nation building. Identity, in turn, constructs one group in opposition to other groups while invoking judgment, feelings of superiority, and even justifications for violence against others. Thus, the memorialized histories of a group are essential to establishing the parameters of group membership (Schwartz 1982). Memories construct who we were, support who we are, and pave the way for who we may become (Dickenson et al 2010). Memories, too, establish who we are not (Eyerman 2002) and, as such, “history, memory, and identity are implicated in one another” (Heisler 200). This memory work is integral to identity formation and is necessarily bound up with what is not remembered (Griffin and Bollen 2009). As Smouts elaborates, “Long forgotten aspects of the colonial past may accordingly appear as a ‘risk for national cohesion’ of the former metropole, as they both questions ‘who we were’ and ‘who we are’” (Smouts 2007:27).

Since the “memory boom” in the 1990s, memory has been increasingly linked to historical context and identity (see, e.g., Megill 1998; Kratochwil 2006). However,
Belgium is a special case in the long history of Western Europe. Only gaining sovereignty from the Netherlands in 1830 after a series of violent occupations, “poor little Belgium” has a much shorter national history compared to other European nations. Leopold II’s acquisition of the Congo Free State escalated the country’s importance in political affairs throughout Europe. Procuring a colony 80 times the size of Belgium allowed the country to engage its neighbors through colonial posturing by securing a “slice of the African cake.”

Further still, the country has suffered a fracture between Francophones and Flemmings since its inception. The ongoing Belgo-Belgian disputes between Francophones and Flemings contest national history as much as colonial history. The very fact that Belgians cannot achieve any sort of reasonable national cohesion alters its memory of colonial history considerably. Not only because the country is in a constant state of victimization, but also because the strict divide between two ardently opposed groups serves to distract from the very question of who is to blame. Concurrently, the Flemish have a history of identifying as victims of elitist Francophone policies that align them with Central Africans.¹ Belgian scholar Stéphanie Planche poses the important question, “what happens when a nation is no longer sure that it wants to remain a nation?” (Planche 9). The consequence is neither the French or Flemish takes responsibility for colonization. As such, the “imagined history” (Anderson 1983; Zerubavel 2003) Belgium lays claim to is a fractured one fueled by the eternal victimization of the Flemish by the French. If Flanders is a victim of internal colonization there is little room to confront the nations’ collective role as perpetrator of abuses in the Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi.

Today, the RMCA is precariously located in a globalizing world where nation-states are losing much of their sovereignty to the dominance of international bodies such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the European Union (Butler and Spivak 2011). As state borders are subverted by cross-national organizations, museums are caught trying to represent national identity in a world where such a thing is no longer

¹ See “De Vlamingen aan de Negers van den Congo” (The Flemings to the Congo Negroes) at the Museum Belvue in Brussels. This propaganda poster compares “discrimination of the Flemings in Belgium with the treatment of native peoples in the Congo.”
feasible. More importantly, relatively new states, like Belgium, who never truly achieved the status of full-fledged nation-states are now in the process of retroactively asserting state sovereignty through memories of the colonial past (Andermann 2012).

As Jules Destrée, leader of the Walloonian national movement famously stated in 1912, “Il n’y a pas de Belges [There are no Belgians]” (Billiet 2006). Not only are there “no Belgians” per se, but there is no cohesive state to accept responsibility for abuses in the Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. Brussels has successfully transformed itself into the capital of Europe. In an increasingly transnational environment we find new configurations of colonial memory that pull at the strings of regionalism and European, rather than strictly Belgian, identity. Brussels is not only the capital of Europe, but now one of the major metropoles responsible for disseminating neo-colonial policies. In such a neo-colonial context, the RMCA is up against a variety of obstacles prohibiting new representations of the colonial past. In the words of Sharon Macdonald, the question then becomes, “Are they [museums] too inextricably entangled in ‘old’ forms of identity to be able to express ‘new’ ones?” (Macdonald 2003:1).

Colonial Museums

The battle “between pride and embarrassment” (McLeod 2) can result in flat exhibitions that fail to disrupt the old attachments to former colonies. Public memories are solidified in structurally contained spaces, such as museums, to invoke nationalism, nostalgia for times passed, and sometimes outrage at atrocities. Because “Empire-building and museum-building went hand in hand” (Aldrich 138), museums provided colonists with state-sanctioned places to display their stolen booty and promote pejorative narratives about the “primitive” men and women from their colonies. Additionally, colonial conquest was supported by scientific expeditions bent on proving the inferiority of native populations through observation, measurement, and classification. Due to the link between display and science, many colonial museums began to identify as scientific institutions as they funded research on overseas colonies. In addition to garnering support for the human and capital expense of maintaining a colony, museums “symbolically brought the empire to national capitals, and made imperial capitals out of national capitals” (Aldrich 139). Thus, not only did empire and museum building go
hand in hand, but nation building through the lens of empire and colonial display were central to constructing imperial capitals.

Almost immediately after independence, colonial museums began to detach from their colonies through renovations, name changing, by absorbing colonial collections or museums, and in some cases by closing permanently. Prominent examples include the once thriving London’s Imperial Institute (1897) of London, the Dutch Colonial Institute (1926) in Amsterdam, and the Musée Permanent des Colonies (1931) and the Musée de l’Homme (1937) in Paris. Others, like the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford and the RMCA, “have gracefully maintained their old galleries” and continue to attract thousands of visitors to the “last colonial museum” (Aldrich 139).

The 1990s brought a renewed interest in colonial display, pushing any remaining museums to reluctantly contend with the past. The cultural turn has proved equally challenging as museums navigate the new expectations for display practices. Displaying an embarrassing or “difficult” past is one of the primary challenges facing museums today. As referenced in New Museum Theory and Practice contemporary museums are moving away from western dominated display practices and including colonized and/or indigenous communities in their preparations. As Klein explains, “Where collections are made up of remnants of living cultures expressed by actual people, they who are ‘collected’ are now demanding a voice in their own representation” (Klein 2000; 42). This transition has not been easy or foolproof; many museums engaging in new practices have inadvertently fallen back into old habits or invented new diversions (Lonetree 2012; Atalay 2012). In particular, the post-structural emphasis on abstraction, used to tell the story of difficult pasts, leaves visitors confused and none-the-wiser about the exploitation of indigenous populations. Even when colonial histories are displayed they are commonly relegated to a distinct moment in time that fails to present the colonial past as ongoing (Lonetree; Hackney). This is especially disconcerting when local populations, who continue to benefit from the spoils of colonialism, are unaware of how they are implicated in neo-colonialism.

Because contemporary renovations still result in “missed opportunities” (Lonetree 2012) it is crucial to identify the blockages that hinder confrontations with a difficult past. Historian Amy Lonetree contends that museums must undergo a full-blown
decolonization by accepting the “hard-truths” of colonialism to change the public’s relationship with a difficult past. Unfortunately, colonial history is still told from the perspective of the victors making “decolonization” an incredibly arduous task. Furthermore, the possibility of engaging these “hard-truths” is subverted by the blockages endemic to museum display, narratives, and activities.

The Royal Museum for Central Africa

In 1897, Belgium hosted the World Fair at the behest of King Leopold II. As part of the International Exhibition, a Congolese village was displayed wherein two hundred and sixty five Africans lived in plain view for the duration of the fair. The village was intended to increase visibility of Belgium’s only colony, the Congo Free State. This exposure to Africans proved too enticing for fair visitors and interest in the Congo soared. Due to the success of the temporary exhibition Leopold sought to create a permanent showcase of his newfound colony. To encourage European, and especially Belgian, participation in the Congo Free State Leopold established the “Congo Museum” in Tervuren Park, just outside of Brussels, in 1898. In 1960, the Congo Museum was renamed the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) to commemorate the Democratic Republic of Congo’s independence from Belgium. Today, the RMCA continues to function as a scientific institution funding scientific scholarship in Central Africa and offering a number of temporary and permanent exhibitions ranging from natural history, art history, ethnography, and colonial history to museum visitors.

Entering the rotunda of the RMCA is an enthralling experience that immediately conveys the essence of the colonial spirit. Visitors are greeted by a variety of bronze statues encircling the grand rotunda depicting Belgians in heightened positions relative to their inferior colonial subjects. In one statue a Belgian missionary stands above a Congolese boy who kneels beside him while tugging at his ornate robe. The statue placard reads “Belgium brings civilization to Congo.” The marble floors and vaulted ceilings exude an embodied nostalgia for the excesses of colonialism. In every direction the museum showcases its colonial origins with ethnographic objects, a vast collection of taxidermy, and numerous statues and busts of King Leopold II. A series of double “L’s” signifying Leopold’s reign are etched into the dome ceiling. In the very center of the
rotunda the crown star of the Congo Free State is showcased in the marble floor. The museum makes such an impression that visitors often inquire if the building was once Leopold’s personal palace.

As a federal museum, the RMCA was required to seek approval and funding for its renovation plans from the Belgian government. Although talks of a possible renovation began as early as 2000, the Federal Council of Ministers did not approve the $90 US million project until July 20, 2006. Since then, the RMCA in collaboration with the Belgian Building agency drafted several plans before finally settling on a design and contractor, Stéphane Beel Architects, in 2012. Because the museum is located in Flanders it had to seek approval from the Flemish Regional government to restore and refurbish the building. To date, plans for the renovation have focused primarily on the restoration of the main building and the construction of a new modern welcoming pavilion in the park situated between the original Palace of the Colonies and the Director’s Pavilion. Finally, an underground gallery with space for exhibitions will link the modern welcoming pavilion with the restored museum building. While thematic changes have been promised as well, these are far less developed and generally refer to the desire for representing “contemporary Africa with themes such as biodiversity, natural resources, humanity and society” (RMCA website). The RMCA website offers a detailed description about the funding and physical modification of the museum and will be updated throughout the process of the renovation.

The thematic changes however have not been so simple. A committee of museum curators is charged with updating the display content. Thus far, team members have agreed upon one direction: a vision of contemporary Central Africa. Broken tiles, fading walls, deteriorating taxidermy and the lingering smell of toxic preservatives popular in the 1950s all demonstrate the need for renovation. How the thematic and structural changes are managed remains to be seen as the museum attempts to balance the preservation of the old with an updated building. During the museum’s estimated three year closing and rehaul of the physical structure will hopefully provide museum staff with the time and space needed to envision a alternative telling of colonialism in the Congo.
Although the new museum will not reopen until 2017, the contemporary vision has already taken form in several of the newer exhibitions. This offers an idea of how the museum actually contends with the very past that gave birth to its existence and what this contemporary point of view means in practice. Rather than cut up into several distinct eras, the RMCA is a collection of impressions about Central Africa throughout time. In the museum, time does not function in a linear form despite the effort to present history in the form of a timeline. Rather, collections, stereotypes, and the affect of the space combine to create an experience of a hyper-colonialism with pieces and impressions from every moment in time representing every brand of colonialism from 1885-2013. From the civilizing mission to the advent of neo-colonialism and development the museum contains elements of every bizarre perspective of Central Africa that has plagued the region for the last century.

Similar to many colonial museums, the RMCA has always placed a strong importance on “scientific” research about its former colonies, especially Congo. Today, the museum contains many scientific exhibitions such as a large collection of insects and animals from the Congo River Basin and information about biodiversity. The museum is comprised of 300 employees spanning four departments: Cultural Anthropology, African Zoology, Geology and Mineralogy, and History and General Scientific Services. Each department is responsible for producing research, updating exhibits, and contributing to the overall scholarly vision of the museum. Despite the prevalence of masks, idols, and cultural artifacts on display, the RMCA knows very little about these objects. According to RMCA Anthropologist and curator, Dr. Bambi Ceuppens, “the way the museum ignored the history of Congolese people – merely treating them like the animals and plants as exhibits to be stared at – led to the plundering of culture too” (BBC World Service 2013). Thus, as museum visitors travel from exhibit to exhibit they are presented with fantastic objects with unknown histories. As Dr. Ceuppens explains, “we have lost their stories. They were brought here just because they looked nice” (BBC World Service 2013).

Data and Methods
The timeliness of this research is crucial, as the RMCA closed its doors to the public in December of 2013. The months leading up to the renovation were the last opportunity to conduct research at the museum prior to its dramatic transformation. The museum will not complete its renovations until 2017, leaving a 4-year gap wherein scholars have no access to the museum. This research was conducted from February through August, 2013, at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium. I conducted participant observation of 30 museum tours, interviews with 30 members of the COMRAF committee and museum staff, analyses of museum displays, and RMCA documents pertaining to the renovation. I selected the RMCA because it is the “last colonial museum” in Europe and is an extreme example of displaying a glorious, albeit difficult, past. As such, studying the renovation offers insight into the process of transitioning from old colonial museum to fully renovated museum by 2017. The RMCA has much to offer in terms of informing how and whether we engage colonial histories and how these transformations take shape. The RMCA provides pathways, both literal and figurative, to museum visitors as they experience “a little piece of Africa” within its walls. Finally, the RMCA serves as a critical example of how nations struggle with colonial history through a myriad of renovations, transformations, and resurrections in the neo-colonial era.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION. A vital part of the museum scene involves the engagement of visitors with the museum guides. Most of the interaction between museum staff and visitors occurs in the context of guided “walking tours.” Each tour begins in the museum rotunda where the guides typically ask each group what topics or salles they are most interested in visiting. Although tours are often adapted to meet the desires of visitors, the museum also offers special-themed tours focusing on art history, colonial history, the museum renovation, and even architectural tours of the attic and cellars. I followed each of these special-themed tours as well as those dictated by visitors. I also participated in tours and activities designed for children including workshops in the “Congo Village” in the attic of the museum. The walking tours were a great opportunity to learn how each guide interacts with the museum and whether the
organization of space and display either limit or enhance the discourse surrounding colonial history.

A second aspect of participant observation was noting what events were held at the museum and for whom. Because the museum is a popular site for corporate team building, reunions, weddings, birthday parties, and diplomatic engagements, much of my observations centered on how these guests used the space. The RMCA is an important representation of Belgium and, as such, is a popular destination for foreign diplomats, presidents, and Belgium’s royal family. Throughout my tenure at the museum, I kept a journal with field notes to supplement my interviews and content analysis. The participant observation clarified how museum decisions regarding displays and events actually impacted the presentation of colonial history on a daily basis.

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF MUSEUM DISPLAYS. The spatial and visual organization of the museum was central to how visible the Belgian colonial past was to visitors. I conducted a spatial analysis of the entire museum by mapping out the location of different displays and noting their placement based on “difficult” or “friendly” themes. This allowed me to determine which parts of the story were separated from one another and whether some themes were present in more than one location. I also conducted a content analysis of objects and images present in each salle or room. This allowed me to determine which images were most visible and what story they conveyed compared to those that were relatively hidden from visitors.

INTERVIEWS. To understand the power dynamics behind the scenes in determining museum display practices, I conducted semi-structured interviews with museum staff and members of the COMRAF committee. This ranged from tour guides and personnel directly involved in planning the renovation to guardians stationed at various points throughout the museum. I also interviewed members of the COMRAF committee who are representatives of local African organizations. This committee is comprised of members of the African Diaspora who are elected to weigh in on the museum’s policies and exhibitions. My interview questions were primarily related to what participants liked
or disliked about the museum in addition to what strategic changes would or should be undertaken to transform the museum.

Colonial aphasia is not a matter or intellectual knowing or not knowing; it is about separating pieces of history and maintaining these disconnects through blockages. A museum that also acts as a scientific institution makes this point clear. The RMCA is the museum for learning about Central Africa with Africanists in residence. In addition, all of the museum guides had advanced degrees in Art History, African History, Archaeology, or a related field, were very well read and incredibly knowledgeable. If highly educated individuals who study Central Africa for a living struggle to contend with a difficult past then we have to look farther to understand the power of colonial aphasia. Despite seeming like the ideal environment to thoroughly engage a difficult past and yet this has not been achieved. A museum that also functions as a scientific institute helps isolate blockages because they are centers of knowledge. If this research were conducted from the perspective of visitors who had little to no knowledge of the region, their inability to make connections could be written off as ignorance. I focus on the experts to reveal the blockages that befall even the most knowledgeable of institutions. A museum plagued by blockages provides the perfect space for visitors to experience colonial nostalgia.
The Colonial Era: A Brief Period in a Long History

Temporal Blockage

Time is an important medium for organizing and memorializing historical events. “Historical chronologies solder a multiplicity of personal, local, and regional historicities and transform them into unitary, national time” (Alonso 1988). They way in which the RMCA presents colonialism through time offers museum visitors a particular temporal structure to compartmentalize the beginning and end of events. Temporal blockages emerge when linear time is used for cutting off and cutting up difficult pasts in a way that both disconnects events and minimizes their effect in the present. If a potentially traumatic event is presented as a neatly contained piece of the past that is separate from the rest of history it downplays the complexity and severity of colonialism.

Since the publication of *King Leopold’s Ghost* by Adam Hochschild in 1998, scholars have expressed a renewed interest in the atrocities committed in the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo between 1885-1960 (Hochschild 2006; Hasian 2012). After an initial period of quietude the RMCA made an official effort to respond to the publicity aroused by *King Leopold’s Ghost*. Director of the RMCA, Guido Gryseels, stated, ”We will look at these claims, we will investigate them and by 2004 we will attempt to provide an answer to Hochschild’s book” (The Guardian 2002). The answer to Adam Hochschild’s allegations was an investigatory committee headed by Professor Jean-Luc Vellut. The committee prepared a response in the form of a temporary exhibit entitled “Memory of the Congo: The Colonial Era”, unveiled to the public in 2004.

Today, the “Memory of the Congo” exhibit has been scaled down to fit into one of the permanent exhibition halls of the RMCA. Here, visitors can take a brief tour through colonial history from 1885-1960. The museum presents the colonial era as neatly contained within the broader history of the Congo. Unfortunately, the careful scaling of the colonial history timeline suggests Belgian colonialism was but a moment of contact between Africans and Europeans. This underestimates the ongoing impact of colonization and negates African history.
It is important to note that although the RMCA favors this approach to history there is no indication that anything other than colonialism occurred throughout Central African history. While this kind of a framing could be used to demonstrate that the Congo has an extensive history beyond colonialism, the timeline does not present visitors with additional events. This is a larger problem that is reflected in the absence of Congolese history in the museum. As one COMRAF member explains,

“We like talking about the colonial era, but we do not talk about before the colonial era. Because there is also a story before the colonial era. And that we do not speak of. We always want to talk about this glorious history of colonization, because the West has this sense of superiority. It’s what they love, all of it. But before, there is also a history of Africa. Africa had a history. It was not the people in the bush as they say, no. There was a history with empires, with kings, and things no one ever spoke of and, more and more, do not speak of.”

The museum’s temporal blockages restrict the colonial period to a moment in history that suggests this period ended with Independence. It also fails to consider Congolese history by fitting the Congo squarely into European history and marking its presence in time only as a Belgian colony. During my first tour of the colonial history section, I immediately noticed information regarding Patrice Lumumba’s assassination was nowhere to be found. This is a direct function of the museums use of time to represent colonial history as events that occurred between 1885-1960. Because Lumumba was murdered in 1961, the RMCA does not have to include his death in their timeline. I asked interviewees to comment on this to gauge their thoughts about his place in the museum. His presence in the Belgian political landscape looms large as the nation struggles to admit culpability in his murder (. Many respondents were hesitant to include information about the assassination of Patrice Lumumba out of fear of appearing too political. As is true of many museums and institutions, there is a vested interest in remaining “neutral” and emphasizing historical facts when dealing with a public audience (Gable et al 1992). Presenting Lumumba’s assassination is considered “taking a stand”
on an issue that does not belong in the museum. On the other side, however, some individuals are eager to see Lumumba’s life and death represented in the new museum. In fact, for members of COMRAF discussion of Lumumba’s murder led to mention of other African leaders who were assassinated by Belgians, namely Prince Louis Rwagasore of Burundi. Despite the differences among interviewees it is clear that there is a faction of museum staff who wish to see a change, however minor, in the representation of Belgian colonial history at the museum.

For tour guides, Lumumba’s death is difficult to address because the museum structure does not facilitate the telling of this history. As one tour guide explains, “the history hall is not inviting and there’s nowhere else to tell it, so about Leopold II there’s plenty of places where you can talk about Leopold II because he’s got traces everywhere in the museum and Lumumba hasn’t.” Patrice Lumumba’s murder is difficult to address because it was carried out by Belgians post-independence and cannot be blamed on the greedy King Leopold II. Therefore, “It’s easy to talk about the lion, it’s far less easy to talk about the killing of Lumumba.”

Patrice Lumumba’s assassination has hindered the Congo’s political progress in incalculable ways. As the Congo’s first prime minister, Lumumba actively resisted Western dominance and was thus categorized a “communist.” Had he lived, the Congo might have avoided the thirty plus years of dictator Mobutu who sacrificed the nation’s well-being for personal profit. Understandably, members of the COMRAF committee express a profound sense of loss when speaking of Lumumba’s death:

“I think with Patrice Lumumba, had he continued to live, we had a direction that was perhaps a little better for the country than what we know now. So this is a very important figure for the Congo. For the Congolese who know the history of the country it is necessary, it must be a tribute to him, it must be nearly a museum just for him to further develop his thought, to show his vision and awareness especially for all Congolese so that we can adopt it, for it must make reference because this is another drama too. We know little about our history. Many Congolese do not know their stories. And when you're know you’ve been wronged, you cannot get into the future with certainty, with assurance.”
When time is blocked off in these ways it is hard for visitors to develop a critical approach to the colonialism represented in the museum and beyond. It also dismisses the ongoing culpability of Belgium in the Democratic Republic of Congo’s current political crisis because colonialism is “over.” This view was reiterated by one historian at the RMCA when she explained, “colonialism has nothing to do with the events in Congo today.” This attitude is reified through display and runs the risk of leaving visitors with a similar conclusion.

**Spatial Blockage**

The organization of space is central to how open or closed museums are with regards to their content. If exhibition materials are inaccessible or hard to find visitors are unlikely to engage with the hidden content. Spatial organization of the RMCA follows a predominately open floor plan with straightforward pathways and readily available displays throughout the museum. The one exception to this trend is the colonial history section, tucked away between art history and memorial hall. While conducting participant-observation of the walking tours, I found that most tour guides avoided the colonial history section. In fact, only one of the eighteen adult tours I followed entered the colonial history section and it was a group of Germans hoping to learn about Rwanda and Burundi. As one tour guide confirmed, “I usually avoid it unless a group asks for colonial history.” However, structurally speaking, the colonial history exhibition is easy to overlook altogether. Unlike the rest of the permanent exhibitions presented in an open and spacious manner, the RMCA presents most of its colonial history behind a set of temporary walls that are uninviting to visitors. Another guide explains, “It’s like a labyrinth sort of thing. I think most people skip it because they don’t even know it’s there.” This redirection away from colonial history is a structural blockage that encourages visitors to explore the friendlier pathways in the museum. Thus, the exhibition not only cuts off time in a peculiar manner but it literally cuts off this history from visitors by directing them away from the exhibition.
It is easy to miss the colonial period section due to the temporary walls that hide the negative aspects of colonization (Planche). As is typically the case, visitors walk from the salle d’art to the memorial hall, bypassing colonial history. In between is an area dedicated to the life and exploits of Henry Morton Stanley, a subject that is strongly associated with the Congo Free State. As the primary actor hired by Leopold to secure posts along the Congo River, Stanley established posts that allowed Leopold to claim the vast territory for himself. The story of Stanley continues to excite visitors as one of the world’s most famous colonists, despite Stanley’s abuse of native populations along his route and unabashed penchant for embellishing his personal history. Upon exiting, visitors make their way to the Memorial Hall, a long, open hallway with a looming memorial inscribed with the names of Belgians who died in Congo. And yet, there is no memorial for the millions of Congolese who befall a violent death at the hands of Belgian colonists. The Salle du mémoire contains uniforms from la Force Publique, the colonial army, war memorabilia, maps, drawings, and weapons in addition to a looming statue of King Leopold.

**Figure 6:** Map of the Royal Museum for Central Africa. The arrows indicate the path normally taken by visitors away from the labyrinth inspired colonial history section. Royal Museum for Central Africa (2013).
If one ventures behind the temporary wall encasing the colonial history section, an alternative history begins to emerge. The display of the “severed hands” and the red rubber boom comprise this section, although not in great detail. The tour guides often discredit the colonial history section for its overabundance of text with statements like, “I don’t think many people will even see what it’s about because it doesn’t attract you to read things and if you don’t read things it’s not telling you anything.” There is, “too much and its not too clear and everything that is then so written about everywhere in the world like the cut off hands and the abuses during Leopold II is there but you have to go somewhere looking for it.” If one makes it beyond yet another temporary barrier that looks as though it is intended for museum staff, one finds tight corridors depicting key aspects of the civilizing mission: religion, education, and medicine. There is no mention of the gross failure of the colonial education regime or the fact that, at the time of independence, only four Congolese held university degrees (citation). For medicine, we see nothing of the medical experiments conducted in Congo (Insert citation for polio-vaccine trials). Finally, the exhibit ends abruptly in 1960, the year of independence, with two charts depicting the amount of foreign aid donated by Belgium to Congo. By emphasizing development aid, the RMCA again overlooks the continuity of colonialism in the neo-colonial era.

COMRAF members offer a different perspective on the supposed virtues of development. As one man counters, “Development yes, what is called development, but it has hidden many things. There are African values that are not the same as European values. Europeans have their own values that go with their own culture, with their point of view. That's it. So today, excuse me, but you are not emancipated.” Another continues, “We do not have the same way of seeing things. Development is not always good together. There is development that kills.” Much like colonialism, development is viewed as having a hidden agenda that threatens the livelihoods of Africans. For those who have been colonized, development aid is a reminder of ongoing exploitation.

As one staff member explains:

“Yeah, this colonial history section is something special because it took us five years, we organized this big exhibition about the colonial past of Belgium. Until that moment the history gallery at the museum was still telling the story about Leopold II who went to Congo to fight against
slavery. So after this exhibition it was impossible to put the gallery back in its original state, of course, but we were thinking it will close down in one year. So yeah really, we were all the naïve again and again. So, we said, ‘Oh well, we will close down in a couple of months, so we just make a temporary resume of this exhibition. And that is why it is a strange thing.”

The colonial history section is literally blocked off from the rest of the museum. The use of space to maintain a distance from colonialism is an effective strategy for deterring visitors. If visitors never engage colonial history there will not be a difficult past to deny. The space also represents the challenges of approaching colonialism, structurally and discursively. It is a sensitive subject that is off limits even in the midst of a colonial museum. The RMCA runs the risk of avoiding colonial history during the renovation and opening with a section that has the same blockages. There has been little movement, if any, with this section since 2005. It is as though the RMCA appeased the public with the exhibition in 2005 and prefers that it does not return. For the museum guide who has only one and a half to two hours to introduce visitors to Central Africa the absence of Patrice Lumumba in the exhibitions space means they would have to go out of their way to speak about is assassination. This places the burden of disclosure squarely on the shoulders of individual tour guides when the museum should provide them with an adequate timeline that invites a discussion of colonialism.
**Rwanda and Burundi**

*Framing Blockages*

While time and space work together to inform museum display, narrative frames are another mode of determining what is included in the museum. Narrative frames both limit and inform the uses of exhibition space. The aspects of colonial history that are excluded from museum space and time are often supported by narrative frames that justify their absences. One of the glaring omissions in the RMCA is the absence of Rwanda and Burundi from the colonial history section. Despite Belgium’s colonization of Rwanda and Burundi, they are both excluded from the colonial history section. I asked respondents whether Rwanda and Burundi should be included in the colonial history section of the museum. Although responses were mixed, participants rarely considered Rwanda and Burundi to be official colonies of Belgium, unless they were of African descent. This argument is used as a reason to exclude Rwanda and Burundi from current and future exhibitions on colonialism at the museum. Although the museum was originally established in 1898 by King Leopold II to garner acclaim for his private colony, the Congo Free State, Belgium went on to colonize Rwanda and Burundi as well. In 1919, after WWI left a defeated Germany stripped of its colonies, a League of Nations mandate gave Rwanda and Burundi to Belgium as “protectorates.” The forty plus years of Belgian colonization fractured both countries leading to numerous ethnic purges and, eventually, the Rwandan Genocide in 1994. Oddly, white respondents did not consider Rwanda and Burundi true Belgian colonies:

“to me it was protectorate. We are given a need to protect it [Ruanda-Urundi] from the Germans. I know that the Germans they were the leaders whereas we were in charge changed the leaders and it was the Tutsi who became the leaders because Belgians like Tutsi more than the Hutu and then all of a sudden they can be in charge and the Hutu was suppressed and that’s the reason why in ’94 we had this great Congo war.”

This attitude is supported by the fact that the museum does not have an official area to present the history of Rwanda or Burundi. With the exception of a few objects scattered throughout the museum, there is no opportunity for museum guides to convey this history to visitors. As one tour guide explains, “in my formation, you know what I learned about in museum, no one ever told me about Rwanda and Burundi, never.” The
categorization of Rwanda and Burundi as protectorates coupled with insufficient training of museum guides results in an incomplete colonial history.

A second framing blockage is the emphasis on what constitutes Central Africa. Some participants also counter that Rwanda and Burundi are not part of Central Africa and therefore have no place at the Royal Museum for Central Africa. Museum staff described the long discussions about Central Africa leading up to the renovation. As one person explained, “One of the main questions of renovations is what is Central Africa? How do, and then it’s very strange, maybe they told you about it, it’s strange discussions between natural sciences and human sciences. A completely other view on what is Central Africa. Do we see it as a geological part? Or, do we see it more cultural? Because it’s different. So we are discussing about it for the last ten years. What is central Africa?” The diversion of ruminating over defining Central Africa distracts from the historical and political reality underpinning both states. As former colonies, Rwanda and Burundi have grappled with their colonial legacies for sixty years. Removing these nations from Belgian colonial history allows Belgium to avoid discussing its role in perpetuating genocide.

However, some participants did feel, regardless of geographical location, Rwanda and Burundi should be included in the renovated museum. As one COMRAF member explains,

“Yes, I also think they should also be represented. Necessarily, yes, to teach. Not only to tell the story, because they were colonized but for all the harm that has been done there too. The division we have now ... It comes as Tutsi segregation and Belgians reported over there [Rwanda and Burundi] we were different. So all of that has to be taught today, to new generations. Belgians even now teach that there sometimes there problems that you see now is still saying ‘oh these people are fighting, why do they kill each other? They are not normal.’ But it is because you have shown them that this one [Hutu], he is not your brother. Here, it just it may, it must just be in the museum any colonization that took place in Rwanda, Burundi, all the misdeeds that were committed there, and allow to teach. It should be the ultimate goal to be able to educate people, teach children, educate them. Then, Rwanda and Burundi should also have a place.”

In the future, the museum should attend to all of its former colonies whether or not they would be considered a part of “Central” Africa. The prospect of including
Rwanda and Burundi is particularly daunting because it would require discussing the Rwandan Genocide of 1994. And yet, Belgium is attached to genocide. It’s colonial empire led to numerous massacres, the 1994 Rwandan genocide, and is now the site of Africa’s First World War. If the RMCA is sensitive about the use of the word genocide it is likely because it hits too close to home. Still reeling from WWII and “what the Germans did to us,” let alone the victim-perpetrator dynamic intrinsic in the Belgo-Belgian divide, Belgium is not ready to admit perpetrating widespread and ongoing violence of its own accord. Concurrently, supporting these blockages will leave Belgian colonial history incomplete and out of touch with contemporary events.

“We Are Fighting the Building”

Framing Blockage

The RMCA suffers a blockage between the love for and fight against the building. As one tour guide describes, “The museum is a very thrilling place, it’s a bit in the woods, it has exceptional surroundings, it’s a particular building, lots of people know the museum…there’s a very strong reputation which is between something a bit mysterious, lots of possibilities, intriguing and so on.” These adjectives of “thrilling” and “mysterious” echo the experience colonists were seeking one hundred years ago when they first ventured overseas. The museum is also described as “magical” and “charming.” It’s a pleasant experience for visitors and staff alike, one that a connection with a “difficult” colonial history threatens to disrupt. The building activates colonial nostalgia for staff and visitors alike who are drawn to the promise of adventure and discovery inside.

Although the RMCA is wrought with outdated displays and stereotypes, participants complained about the influence of the building itself, rather than the internalized beliefs about Central Africa. One tour guide posited, “I think the guiding tours in this museum are one big battle against the building and the exhibition itself.” The renovation team insists they are “fighting the building” and feel a brand new museum building in the park would be the best response to the colonial atmosphere of the RMCA. The current renovation plan includes a new welcoming pavilion constructed next to the original building in the park. The two buildings will be connected by an underground
passageway, linking the old with the new, while maintaining a visible distance. This desire to gain distance from the “old” museum and, specifically, Belgium’s colonial history was a common theme. Museum staff is caught between the allure of the building and the desire to separate from the “ugly” colonial past. As expressed by Director Guido Gryseels, “Giving a contemporary vision to an Africa of the past and present and allowing it to take shape in a building that dates from the colonial period is a major challenge” (africamuseum.be/renovation/masterplan/newexhibition).

However, for participants of color it is not the building that needs to change. For them, being at a colonial museum is a heart wrenching experience bringing up a painful past that remains hidden in the museum. As one COMRAF member explains, “You can use the same building, you can use the same premises. But it is the spirit of the museum needs to change.” Another COMRAF member adds, “What could be changed is mentality, but mentality is difficult to change…I think the museum should do more work in terms of attitudes, to change a bit. This is an important mission for the museum to know that when it welcomes all these people, it’s responsible for breaking up this prejudice.” Another COMRAF member directly challenged the prejudice of the museum by asking that meetings be held elsewhere. She explains, “So I asked the director of the museum…if we could change the name of the party room, it's called Colonial Palace, because now we are in a party room, if called Colonial Palace is as if one is happy to be under the control of whites.” Like many other aspects of the building, the “Colonial Palace” party room is yet another reminder that whites are free to have a good time on at the expense of Africans. As one COMRAF member confirmed, “people want to feel good.”

The RMCA is a museum that predominately attracts white visitors for a number of reasons. First, the museum is a place of nostalgia for many Belgians, including the former colonists who wander its halls on a biweekly basis. Second, the museum has a light-hearted atmosphere the draws thousands of visitors, especially children, each year. Third, the museum is open to hosting a wide-variety of events such as reunions, birthday parties, weddings, and caters to the needs of funders who wish to host business meetings on site. Contrary to other museums dealing with sensitive topics, the RMCA is a place of overt celebration. Some COMRAF members complained about the lack of seriousness at
the museum and compared it to celebrating Hitler and the Holocaust. However, this view is not shared by all and there is a disparate perspective between white and black employees. While many white visitors are clearly enjoying themselves at the museum, for others, especially those who are persons of color, the museum is a somber place full of stolen objects.

“Cheating History”

Like any institution, the RMCA is home to a variety of personnel who do not always agree about the future of the museum. In 2003, the RMCA created an African Associations Committee (COMRAF) to consult members of the African Diaspora. This committee is based on elections of Africans who are connected to African associations throughout Belgium. Members are required to attend monthly meetings on site and offer feedback regarding museum events, exhibitions, and renovation plans. This group often presented novel ideas about the future of the museum but in practice was excluded from renovation plans and the RMCA did not consider their presence vital in the future.

The COMRAF was inspired by the lack of African visitors in the museum, something the RMCA hopes to change by consulting Africans. Due to the museum’s colonial environment, it has been a challenge to recruit African visitors. A museum staff member who specializes in consulting Africans explains, “I started in ‘92, so it’s a long, long work, but slowly African people feel they can trust the museum, that if they say something we listen and we try to do it.” Museum personnel who are white see this as a significant step in repairing the tarnished relationship with Africans living in Belgium. The perspective is that, “And now, little by little, they feel much more involved by this museum which is quite important, I think.” The RMCA events coordinator explained, “When I came here you didn’t see any African visitors in the museum. None at all. They were very angry at us and they didn’t come because they didn’t feel like this was their museum.”

As much as the establishment of COMRAF has sought to counter the negative experiences of Africans, the museum continues to be a place of grief. In describing the reluctance of Africans to visit the museum, one COMRAF member explains, “But hey, it is not easy because it is still a story quite heavy because it may be a glorious time for the
settlers, but it is not a glorious time for the colonized. There is this feeling also, that the museum abounds much wealth from looting. It is taken by force. It was taken by force; was not given so there is a little frustration on that side. The first time you go into the museum, as an African, it was more, it was an evil being, malaise, it seems there is something that is taken, we have been taken.” For COMRAF, the RMCA is a museum “managed by Europeans who speak African stories.” The general sentiment is that the RMCA should “not ask an African and Congolese to go see the museum as if going to the fair.”

In addition to the uncomfortable environment, most persons of color feel they are being used by the museum to make it appear more diverse and forward thinking. For example, some individuals complain of being asked to attend special events with funders so guests can mingle with “Africans.” The COMRAF “was also a demand [made] already Africans who came, who criticized the fact the museum and then it was a way to respond to these criticisms involve Africans. It is a part for me what I think about the purpose of the COMRAF, but in reality, in practice rather, what I see is a small aesthetic thing is to look good and this is taken into account of Africans, they are there as they participate in COMRAF. But in reality, in practice, they [COMRAF] are there only to do well, to be nice when researchers come and see that here, ‘we work with Africans, they are there too, they also participate.’”

This is one of the primary challenges of the museum; white visitors are still drawn to Africans as though they are objects to be displayed. Another effect of this treatment is that some individuals were initially very excited to work with the museum in the hopes that things could change. This experience was largely described as a “disappointment” once individuals discovered that the way they are treated is all too familiar. COMRAF members describe their place at the RMCA as “we do nothing in the museum” and “you're nothing but the bottom of the museum.” Another member concludes, “It is as if it [COMRAF] was simply an aesthetic operation to look pretty.”

One COMRAF member explained how she approached her position within the museum, “I keep a cool head. I’m not in style [agreement] with the museum. It’s just, I mean you need a bit of a position, how to say, I tried to be a bit Cartesian, to be rational and look at things with a cool head. With hindsight, weigh the pros and cons. But there
is no denying the negative side because one cannot deny the pain of a person, to try to hide it or mask it. We will never move forward. It [the museum] will never move forward. There will always be frustration. And frustration is not good because it will eventually explode, create hostility, violence.”

The renovation plan includes transitions from old colonial museum to fully renovated contemporary museum. This vision has been inspired by a number of the challenges faced by the museum. In addition to the absence of African visitors, the museum suffers a number of problems that museum staff wishes to change. The tour guides have daily exposure to the stereotypes of visitors that are not easily corrected. In particular, visitors associate the museum with prehistory and ask questions like, “where are the dinosaurs?” and “will we see a real African?” in the museum. These mindsets are further complicated by the effect of Disney’s *The Lion King*, a cartoon that has affirmed for viewers some of the worst stereotypes about Africa. Even in passing I heard visitors express, “look, there’s Pumba!” referring to a warthog on display or singing “Hakuna Matata” when introduced to a few phrases in Swahili.

However, the RMCA has pushed the contemporary agenda so hard that some fear the museum will exclude colonial history in the future museum. Others suggest the contemporary turn may be an intentional distraction from the museum’s heavy colonial history. As one COMRAF member challenges, “but just maybe presenting the museum in this form [contemporary] is just a bit in order to remove this side, this colonial past, you see everything…It is a good idea, but as I said before doing so we must first recognize it [colonial history]. Otherwise, it’s a bit hidden. If we mean to do something new while still hiding it [colonial history], it is as if I bury a corpse in a closet behind a cemetery I make pretty.” Another member described this blockage as “cheating history” by avoiding the “ugliness” of colonial history. It is worth noting that during the 3-5 years of renovation, the museum will not have to deal with the public or its colonial history.

For Africans, the museum’s inability to contend with colonialism as a difficult history is akin to celebrating Adolf Hitler and the Holocaust. One COMRAF member asks, “Imagine the Nazis make a museum in honor of Nazism here. And then you ask the elders, they say this is going to change the museum, what do you want us to change? We must make a new museum, what do you want us to change? Well, so this is how I see it
[the museum]. So it would be very difficult. So it therefore requires, the very nature of these museums can show, first criticize colonization.” Another member continues, “The new museum, if we say new in quotes, has first to criticize these approaches to history and draw lessons that provides information that teaches people.” There is understandable doubt that the renovated museum will express a different sentiment regarding colonial history, especially if that history is ignored. One COMRAF member contends that the RMCA, “wants to ignore the past. It will not be neutral, because the facts that the museum displays, these are not facts that are neutral, it is the facts that speak, that show the realities that are sometimes hard. They are unbearable but also their history. It is also the history of Belgians; they see that their parents were sadists. They will see that their government protected sadists.” Blocking colonial history protects white Belgian visitors from confronting the “sadistic” behavior their parents and grandparents carried out in the Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi.

Separation vs. Commemoration – Conditions Influencing Colonial Aphasia
While there is no nation that is wholly welcome of all colonial memories and narratives, there are distinct characteristics of Belgium that makes colonial aphasia a likely outcome. These include the establishment of Belgium as a nation with a contested national history and the widespread colonial memorial groups constituting the past as a living memory,

CONTESTED NATIONAL HISTORY. The RMCA is located in Flanders, but as a federal museum is required to display placards in both French and Flemish. This caused some disturbance among visitors who expected the museum to be entirely in Flemish due to its physical location. In one interaction, a Flemish man was asked by a museum guardian from Iraq to please abstain from taking pictures with flash, a typically request in the museum. As an immigrant from Iraq, the guardian’s Flemish was imperfect, which caused the man to stage a fit, threatening to report the guardian to the museum director. The man stormed out of the museum without seeing any of the collections. These scenes were not uncommon and confirmed both by participant-observation and interviews with museum staff. The national cleavages surrounding the museum often trump discussions
of shared responsibility. A nation that resists its very formation is vulnerable to cleavages in national memories of colonialism. If the nation does not exist, neither does the perpetrators. In 2013, the RMCA hosted 132,000 visitors including 26,000 children who participated in its educational activities and guided tours. There was an insignificant gap between French and Flemish speakers, estimated at 46% and 48% respectively (RMCA Annual Report 2013). Ironically, in a country divided into French and Flemish regions, the RMCA serves as unique space where visitors cross paths to learn about Central Africa.

COLONIALISM AS A LIVING MEMORY. Belgium is home to some two-dozen colonial memorial groups comprised of former Belgian colonists from Rwanda, Burundi, and the Congo. The museum is a popular destination for those with personal experiences with each of the former colonies. One such group, Mémoires du Congo (MdC) holds bimonthly meetings at the museum where former colonists recount their experiences followed by a traditional Congolese meal in the museum café. Indeed, Halbwachs contends that, “autobiographical memories” are much harder to commemorate compared to those affecting the deceased. After the close of the museum in November 2013 Director Guido Gryseels released a statement clarifying the RMCA’s plans for the future. Despite the renovation plans discussed by curators and tour guides, the Director confirmed the museum’s attention to former colonists. He stated of the renovation “it’s walking a tightrope and you’ve got to go step by step. Don’t offend them [colonists] too quickly with too much criticism that everything was bad” (Reuters 2/24/14). Although Director Gryseels expresses concern for the last generation of colonists who frequent the museum, the emphasis on contemporary Africa actually acts as a shield for all Belgians, across generations, who wish to experience the thrill and mystery of encountering the colonies. The RMCA has a long relationship with Belgians who once served in the Congo and supports these visitors by hosting events like reunions, retirement parties, birthdays, etc., for those with a colonial past. The event organizer explains the process:
“First of all, we have the smaller events like external people who retire since Belgium or Congo, part of the colony of Belgium, still very, let’s say the previous generation they had a lot to do with Congo one way or another either with their parents because their parents work there. Very often uncles or aunts have been there. So when people here now work in Belgium, retire at age of 60, they have something with Africa very often. And then either they or their HR department, they are looking for a space where they can offer a drink for that specific person related to his hobbies. For example, if somebody asks into the Congo, okay, we want to celebrate him and he’s leaving our company and we would like to do that in an environment which has to do with Congo.”

The museum is also a popular destination for companies wishing to arrange team-building exercises in a colonial environment. “We also have very often department of companies who come here for meetings or team buildings and they either do half-day, they’re renting in a room they rent. In the afternoon, we offer then something which we call rhythm session team building that’s a musician which does with them something to relax in and to have a funny part to end their day.” Adult visitors may also visit the Congo Village upstairs to dress up in African attire and take photographs thereby making the museum a place of escape and entertainment rather than one of reflection.

Implications for Future Research

This article examines a case study of colonial memory in a fractured nation. While most memory studies follow the trend of single-case analyses, sociology would benefit from cross-case comparisons and generalizations. The Belgian case would be ripe for comparison with Germany, a nation that has been forced to undergo commemorating the Holocaust. However, a comparison with memories of Belgian colonialism in Rwanda, Burundi, or the Congo would be especially intriguing considering the violent colonial histories embodied by each.

This article contributes to social memory studies by highlighting the factors that limit the likelihood that a difficult past will be identified as such and revealing how systematic repression takes place. The case of Belgium demonstrates that European metropoles with ambivalence regarding their own national cohesion are especially vulnerable to colonial aphasia. One of the key factors in attending to difficult pasts is the
presence of an identifiable set of perpetrators who contributed to the violence of colonialism. Without

My research demonstrates that the lack of an identifiable perpetrator inhibits the commemoration of difficult colonial pasts. Furthermore, the strategies used to undermine successful commemorations are comprised of blockages—temporal, design, and framing—that redirect attention away from a potentially embarrassing or painful history. Colonial aphasia is likely to result in failed commemorations in nations where colonialism is a living memory and where national identity is fractured.

Identifying blockages not only informs how we subvert difficult pasts, but also provides a means of redressing wrongs. With the impending renovations, the RMCA has the opportunity to revisit its official “memory of the Congo” prior to reopening doors in 2017. In order to express a new memory pathway in relation to Central Africa the RMCA must reconsider its nostalgia for *les temps colonials*. This will require addressing the blockages that continue to paint Belgium’s colonization of Central Africa in a humanitarian light. Forging new connections and pathways will only occur if the RMCA undergoes a full-blown decolonization by acknowledging the “hard truths” of colonialism in all of its former colonies.
REFERENCES


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