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This essay provides a critical analysis of some of the public and museological debates that have swirled around the rediscovery of a Congolese holocaust. The authors of the essay highlight some of the evolutionary changes that have taken place in the exhibitions that are presented in the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren, Belgium, and they highlight some of the difficulties that attend the “mastering” of some complex colonial pasts. For more than a decade some harsh critics of the museum have complained about the exclusionary practices of the museum and elision of Léopoldian memories.

Keywords: Congo Free State; Holocaust; Léopold II; Rhetoric; Royal Museum for Central Africa

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ISSN 1057-0314 (print)/ISSN 1745-1027 (online) © 2010 Western States Communication Association DOI: 10.1080/10570311003614484
“The holocaust visited upon the Congo under Léopold was not an attempt at deliberate extermination, like the Nazis carried out on Europe’s Jews, but its overall toll was probably higher.”


“The RMCA…may have lagged behind in the “decolonizing” process as a museum, [but] it has been hailed as a forerunner internationally for its transparency and critical reflection.”

—Gryseels, Landry, and Claessens (2005, p. 646)

Neal (1998) argued that there are times when national collectives experience traumas that bring on feelings of anxiousness and despair (p. 4), and illustrative examples of these rhetorical situations can be found when national communities are asked to master complex genocidal pasts. As Zelizer (1998) observed, public or press interest in particular interpretations of atrocity pasts may come and go, and a great deal of responsible memory work is needed to preserve salient histories of individual or collective abuses.

This essay investigates some of the responsible memory work that can be linked to Belgian and Congolese tales that are told about a forgotten African “holocaust” (Hochschild, 1998). As we explore how various communities have coped with the welter of epistemic claims that are now being made about particular Belgian/Congolese pasts, we advance and defend one major thesis—that there are times when museums become the communicative purveyors of negotiated colonial histories and memories. Moreover, we argue that these museological sites of memory can become cultural barometers of postcolonial historiographic change. We offer a critique of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) so that we can illustrate how this (post)colonial museum has become a dynamic, evolving site in the rhetorical struggle over how to remember Belgian and Congolese histories. Our analyses of the altered spaces within this museum—and our interpretative critiques of the array of words that come from interviews and other relevant texts—allow us to review how various administrators and curators can work with visitors and other audiences as they grapple with the complexities of how to represent contentious pasts.

Throughout the past decade, many Belgians found themselves in the middle of their own traumatic memory debates, as various photographic and textual materials that were once deployed in early fin-de-siècle humanitarian campaigns (Sliwinski, 2006) are now recycled and used in Internet commentaries that vilify the work of King Léopold II’s Congo Free State (CFS) (1885–1908) or the “Belgian Congo” (1908–1960). For several generations a host of Belgian communities had viewed themselves as the inheritors of a relatively benign imperial legacy, one that was populated with fond memories of a Congolese–Belgian world filled with clean hospitals, efficient railroads, massive literacy programs, and mineral development projects. All of this new talk about the need for reflection or apologies threatened to radically alter the collective memories of the Belgians and Congolese who once revered their “model” colonies.

In 1998 an American journalist by the name of Hochschild published a best-selling book (King Léopold’s Ghost) that contained the provocative claim that many
Europeans had conveniently forgotten the costs that attended Léopoldian or Belgian colonization. This writer raised eyebrows, surmising that some 10 million Congolese may have lost their lives in the Congo between 1885 and 1925. By 2006, Hochschild’s publishers had sold more than 300,000 copies of his book, and hundreds of Web sites now invite viewers to think about the horrors that were experienced by those who collected rubber, ivory, and other resources that were exported to pay for Belgium’s magnificent buildings. Given the fact that so many key visual rhetorics are tied to the constitutive crafting of a whole host of public identities (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003), the recirculation of some of Hochschild’s Congolese photographs ushered in a new wave of questions about purportedly forgotten pasts.

Representations of these pasts could in turn be used as explanatory arguments that helped frame the way contemporary communities thought about modern Congolese conflicts, reinforcing Biesecker’s (1999) point that the dissemination of information about holocausts seems to always be imbricated in a “vast network of forces that may best be called political economy” (p. 218). The millions of lives that were lost during the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) civil wars of the 1990s only added to this gloomy calculus of administrative massacres. “The warring factions in Congo,” argued Hari (2003), “are now re-enacting an event we may soon have to call ‘the First Congolese Genocide’” (para. 5). This time around, it is modern Western corporate greed (fueled by the demand for coltan and other minerals) that can be configured as the new culprit that continues Léopold’s adventurism. Tales of kleptomaniac practices could be symbolically linked to Léopoldian pasts (Dunn, 2003; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002). As this evidence entered into the scholarly and public mainstreams, many Belgian and international observers began demanding that something be done to revise the antiquated historical recordings of benign Léopoldian practices.

Many communication scholars have noted how museums have become the sites of some contentious public memory debates (Dickinson, Ott, & Aoki, 2006; Gallagher, 1995; Hasian, 2004; Katriel; 1997; Taylor, 1998), and we take up the challenge of reviewing how museums cope with confrontation (Blair, 2001). In order to prepare for our analysis, we spent years collecting textual information about this controversy, and Wood made several trips to Belgium to interview many of the elite and public participants in these controversial museological debates. Many of the curators disagree amongst themselves about the nature and scope of the renovations that are taking place in some of these colonial museums, but there seemed to be a consensus that change was in the air. Yet, given the volatile nature of this memory-work it also became fairly evident that it was going to take time for some Belgian, European, and Congolese audiences to get used to the idea of seeing radical anti- or postcolonial exhibits.

It should come as no surprise that one of Léopold’s most famous architectural wonders became a key site of contested memories in the debates taking place in the wake of the Hochschild revelations. The RMCA is popularly known as one of the “last” of the world’s major colonial museums, and the dozens of galleries in this massive edifice house millions of artifacts that were brought by soldiers, missionaries,
civil servants, and scientists who traversed several continents. Visitors who take the
trolley to Tervuren and walk the grounds around the museum often remark that they
feel transported back in time, as temporal distance is erased when viewers take vicari-
ous (post)colonial journeys. The museum is filled with reminders that during the late
1870s and early 1880s Henry Morton Stanley and other adventurers supposedly dis-
covered undeveloped parts of Central Africa, and in 1884–1885 the European powers
met in Berlin and ratified the existence of what would later be called the “Congo Free
State.” Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002) noted how the creation of these borders impacted
the lives of many generations, as various companies were put in control of imposing
the rules that would govern ethnic relations and the administration of Congolese
justice.

From some rhetorical vantage points, the RMCA was supposed to provide iconic
proof of the majesty of Léopoldian imperialism, but not everyone was enamored with
this type of monumentalization. Morris (2003) for example, reacted in this way when
she studied the aesthetics of the RMCA:

To adherents of philosophies of Humanism and the cultural moral superiority of
Europe—in particular the Belgian colonizers of the Congo—the RMCA is a Temple
to the glorification of Empire and the colonial project. To those who experienced
the ruptures of this project—the colonized Congolese—and those whose material
culture and skeletons are on display here, the museum resembles a Tomb . . .
Scopophilic pleasure and the voyeuristic gaze are encouraged . . .[and] fantasies
of complete power and authority over the colonized Other are given free reign.
(pp. i–ii)

In a host of ways, the RMCA’s curatorial objects, exhibits, galleries, architecture, and
collections provided visual and textual messages that sometimes reinforced the meta-
narratives that were already circulated in the broader public spheres—that Belgian
intervention in the Congo was necessitous and successful.

In the decades before the publication of Hochschild book, a few critics of the
RMCA had asked for some major curatorial renovations, but there were a host of
complex factors that constrained this museological memory-work. Belgian school
children were once told that cadres of civil servants, missionaries, and engineers were
sent to the CFS and the Belgian Congo, and the “rhetoric used in (some) contem-
porary textbooks” has not changed “significantly since the early 20th century”
(Vanthemsche, 2006, p. 89). At the same time, tens of thousands of former “territor-
ials” still live on the European continent, and they worry that many outside observers
are confusing the historical memories of the Léopoldian years with the Belgian Congo
periods that followed.

Several years ago we began keeping track of many facets of these fascinating
memory wars, and we realized that the debates surrounding the RMCA were going
to have long-reaching impacts with unintended consequences. It became clear that
these debates about colonial pasts were also commentaries on Belgian–Congolese
presents and futures, and we noted how Hochschild’s work was now ideologically
drifting into debates about the return of African artifacts, the need for apologies,
improved diplomatic relations, and perhaps even some form of reparations. We
therefore shared Katriel’s (1997) assessment that it is essential to get “a better sense of the presentational strategies and ideological dimensions” that are a part of salient museological controversies (pp. 2–3).

We have several different goals in mind as we present our readers with conclusions. From a theoretical vantage point, we hope to defend the heuristic importance of critical museological studies, and we argue that these provide fruitful ways of looking at epistemic negotiations at key (post)colonial sites of memory. At the same time, we provide scholars with a methodological approach that traces the evolutionary nature of these types of museological renovations. An evolutionary study of gradual museological change puts on display the ways that publics and museums interact with each other, as various curators, directors, visitors, and other interested parties converse about the “truths” that need to be circulated in the RMCA. Excellent analyses of some of the static features of some of the temporary (Hochschild, 2005; Rahier, 2003) and permanent exhibits at the RMCA (Morris, 2003) already exist, but we are convinced that if critics are going to talk and write about the importance of dialogue and substantive social change, then they need to find ways of illustrating how various communities renegotiate the past as they craft new visualities and textual rhetorics. This is especially the case when museological “tangled memories” (Sturken, 1997) are involved in the creation of experiential (Dickinson et al., 2006) and potent representations of variegated colonial pasts.

We further provide readers with critical analyses of more recent changes in Belgian museum arrangements, and we argue that critics of the RMCA may have underestimated the radical potential of these changes. Some researchers may have implicitly made the mistake of simply assuming that the arrival of a 2005 temporary exhibit signaled the high-water mark of museological confrontation in Belgium. Yet, we found that during the last several years the RMCA employees have radicalized their critiques, in ways that open up spaces for the potential voicing of harsher postcolonial analyses.

With this in mind, we offer our own variant of a critical museology study that highlights various facets of the museological changes in the RMCA exhibits that were presented in 2002–2006. This period of time was a key juncture in these curatorial and public debates because this institution was at a “crossroads”—“it had to” decide whether it would be a leading “museum” of museums or “a retrograde” institution (Gryseels et al., 2005, p. 646). As Ewans (2003) noted, some local communities felt that the process of “mental colonization” needed to be brought to an end (p. 179). Yet for others, this epistemic decolonization spelled the arrival of historical revisionism.

To assist our rhetorical investigation of the communicative dynamics of these controversies, the rest of this essay is divided into five major sections. The first portion supplies a brief overview of the challenges that confront those who advocate the use of “critical museological” approaches, and the second segment begins our diachronic investigation through a tour of the museum prior to the arrival of the 2005 temporary exhibit. The third part then shifts our gaze so that we can evaluate the renovations that accompanied the inauguration of the “Memory of Congo” exhibit. The fourth
segment provides material on the crafting of more permanent exhibits. The fifth section affords some analysis of 2006 displays, and these recent changes provide us with some examples of how curators and other audiences can reorganize displays and reconstruct “histories” (Kavanagh, 2000, p. 148). The conclusion takes up the question of evaluating these evolutionary museological changes, positing whether these more radical post-2005 displays have finally exorcised Belgium’s ghostly pasts.

Critical Museology and the (Post)Colonial Representations of Contentious Belgian–Congolese Pasts

As Shelton (1995) noted, what “has been called the new museology acknowledges the nonobjective status of knowledge and the political inflections to which it is subject” (p. 11). While earlier curatorial approaches were often based on the assumption that the representation of the real should be apolitical and neutral, those critical approaches, often influenced by postmodern, poststructural, or postcolonial rhetorics, ask museums to think about the ideological importance of everything from curatorial dialogue to the existence of multiple truths. This critical posture interrogates some of the objectification that is involved in representing real Congolese pasts, and questions some of the “primary motivation” behind the exhibits that produced “the effect of cultural difference in the eyes” of so many audiences (Mirzoeff, 2000, p. 186). As Gallagher (1995) explained, this type of rhetorical stance allows curators and critics to think of museological issues involving form, function, locale, motivation, symbolism, and cultural engagement.

These critical museological approaches are controversial for a number of reasons, including the fact that their purveyors are often inviting curators, politicians, and visitors to unravel the figurations that have contributed to a museum’s popularity. As Stanard (2005) explained, between 1910 and 1960, literally millions of local and international visitors came to fairs, exhibitions, and museums so that they could see the exhibiting of “colonial possessions” (p. 269), and the Tervuren structures provided some of the major architectural anchor points for the study of Belgium’s colonial past. The adoption of a critical stance meant not only the interrogation of taken-for-granted historical pasts, but brought into question the representative nature of Congolese artifacts. Critical museologists thus threaten to engage in acts of decolonization that call into question the “photographic realism” (Finnegan, 2001; Taylor, 1998, p. 331) of these displays.

Critical museologists are also interested in the study of resistances and silences, and Shelton (1995) provided a typical explanation for why these new museological perspectives were heuristic when he argued that colonial museums simply need a dose of “a new honesty.” By this, he meant that museums would be generous, reflexive, and open, in democratic ways that would help build bridges “within and between local, national and international communities” (p. 12). Wastiau (2000), one of the more radical of the RMCA employees, has similarly commented on the needed social study of collections, logics, classification systems, typologies of presentations, structures of inventories, and the other facets of inherited pasts.
Yet putting some of these “new” or “critical” curatorial theories into practice is no easy matter, especially in situations where those same communities bring with them a host of different identities, interests, and motivations. Critical scholars may applaud the fact that polysemic and polyvalent displays can be used for purposes of interrogating racism, sexism, triumphalism, colonialism, etc., but the performative nature of some of these displays may spark resistance and backlash.

These museological “open texts” (Katriel, 1997) can be “intertwined” in ways that both enhance and constrain our visions (p. 2). For example, they could be used for purposes of ideological retrenchment and visual recolonization. Even the best of plans can go awry when audiences don’t understand or accept these confrontational messages. When Cannizzo (1991) put on display the “Into the Heart of Africa” exhibit that opened at the Royal Ontario Museum in November of 1989, her ironic usage of traditional colonial imagery was meant to serve as a type of anticolonial or postcolonial critique of imperial pasts. Her display of an 1879 picture of a British soldier attacking a Zulu warrior was viewed by some as a primitive visualization that mirrored some of the problematic ethnic relations that existed outside of the museum. What the curator in this case may not have known was the fact that a recent shooting of a Black youth had strained relations between the local African Canadian communities and the police, and Cannizzo was attacked for her “callous” representations.

Hilden (2000) argued that not all forms of “critical museology” were really interrogating the disparate power relations, compulsive drives, or the appropriations of multicultural norms that marginalized others, and she defended a different type of deconstructive approach to museums that underscored the importance of restitution. Hilden’s approach may be too radical for some museum curators who serve multiple constituencies, but her theoretical arguments remind us that there are many forms of “critical” museological practices that could be tied to meaningful change.

If scholars are truly interested in studying the communicative dimensions of displays that would be dialogic, democratic, and pedagogical, then we need to find creative ways of thinking about museology that illustrates how public knowledge is co-constructed by visitors, curators, and others. We need to complement studies that highlight the interpretative power of the strong critic—for example, Haraway’s (1989) magisterial study of the teddy bear patriarchy in New York City exhibits—with analyses that trace how visitors and other audiences actually respond to and participate in the evolution of potentially decolonizing displays.

As Beiner (2007) recently observed, “a bridge between hostile communities cannot merely be invented and imposed from above through collaboration of professional historians and presented-minded politicians.” Pragmatic consciousness-raising needs to involve finding “ways to accommodate popular traditions of deep memory” (p. 389). This means that sometimes critics need to accept the possibility that reform sometimes takes time, as various constituencies turn museums into modern-day public forums for debates about colonial remembrances and amnesias. This is especially the case in situations where some museums question the accuracy of “representations of former colonies” (Amato, 2006, p. 62). One of the major questions in these types
of situations, of course, is whether moderate or radical social agents can ever successfully display these types of incremental and reflective exhibits.

The Permanent RMCA and the Communicative Coding of Léopoldian Pasts, 1897–2004

Before we track the evolutionary changes that have been made in the RMCA during the post-2004 years, it is necessary to offer some sense of the ideological boundaries that confront those who want radical alteration of what Kavanagh (2000) calls the “dream spaces” of museological remembrances. Gryseels et al. (2005) are proud of the RMCA innovations that turned this into “a modern and dynamic Museum, Research Institute, and Centre for Information Dissemination of the Africa of today,” and they admit that some of these changes may be “risky” because they are not following “the path of least resistance” (p. 646).

In theory, between 2002 and 2005, the RMCA moved away from representations that focused almost exclusively on the agency of the colonizers, toward presentations that included materials on whips, violence, and indigenous resistance. Gone are the days when backdoor deals are made for the sale of stolen artifacts, but there is no question that observers are dealing with histories and memories that don’t “disappear with the waving of a magic wand” (Wastiau, 2003). Visitors may spend several days walking through parts of 22 galleries that are put in a “colonial context” that is “also imbued with notions of power, culture, and identity” (Lagae, 2004, p. 173).

Even critical museologists need to acknowledge that in many ways, the RMCA is still an architectonic wonder, a building filled with contentious social texts that can still be domesticated or decolonized, depending on the contextualizations of the hallways and displays. Many of the galleries have marbled walls and inlaid floors, and visitors who walk through these hallways cannot help but be impressed by the aura that is created by the ivory, the art, the statuary, the plants, and the other objects that act as aesthetic purveyors of ethnographic information. As Saunders (2001) insightfully observed, the “photologics” of this building contribute to an atmosphere of awe, desire, and wonder.

A host of projective devices carry messages of monumentalism and memorialization as visitors can be temporarily blinded by the sensory assault that comes from gazing at all of this gold, whiteness, and contrasting darkness. The entrance-cupola has been described as a structure that reminds one of a “baroque church” (Saunders, 2001), spatially arranged in ways that make it appear that the “light of God” shines down on the human figurations who are allegorically enacting beneficent colonialism (Morris, 2003, p. ii).

Throughout the RMCA visitors can see some 30 sculptures that were made by more than a dozen European artists, and it is the massive figures and entrance scenarios that set the mood and tone for the beginning of the tour. There are parts of this permanent exhibit that will probably not be changed, in spite of the renovation rhetoric. Take, for example, some of the statuary that adorns the main entrance. From a historical vantage point, it could be argued that the post-World War I years
were the heyday of Belgian colonial power, and four key statues provide iconic instantiation of these “glory” years. In the late 1910s and the early 1920s, an artist by the name of Arsène Matton was given the task of capturing the mood of the times, and it is his lifelike statues that help develop the metanarrative of colonial beneficence. One of these statues depicts an Arab slave trader trying to force an African woman into slavery after having killed her Congolese companion (Rahier, 2003, p. 59). Another put on display the acts of a Catholic priest standing over two female Congolese wards, symbolizing the nation of Belgium’s paternal protection.

These visual markers convey messages that may have nothing to do with Hochschild’s allegations. In this revered spot, visitors can read plaques that tell them about “La Belgique apportant la civilisation au Congo” [Belgium bringing civilization to the Congo], “L’esclavage” [Slavery], “La Belgique apportant le bien-être au Congo” [Belgium bringing well-being to the Congo], and “La Belgique apportant la sécurité au Congo” [Belgium bringing security to the Congo]. By the time that you see all of these images, the mood is one of imperial admiration and colonial sacrifice, feelings that underscore the heroism of the colonizers. Here the colonial villains are the slave traders who raped and pillaged Congolese villages, and it is the Léopoldian and Belgian territorials who become the heroes in these iconic morality plays. These types of images might underscore the voluntary nature of some forms of imperial rule, and these visual purveyors of meaning provide examples of visceral forms of argument that present Belgian variants of Europe’s fin-de-siècle “new” imperialism.

The missionaries had protectors, and one of the galleries puts on display the names of 1,500 fallen officers and traders who fought Arab slavers. This room will be modernized, but we need to bear in mind that 40,000 former territorials will not willingly accept the totalizing deconstruction of what they view as a part of their heritage. Pierre Vercauteren, who was born and raised in the Congo, told a reporter that Congolese histories are indeed filled with some “abuses and excesses,” but that all of the colonies engaged in this type of behavior. One former lawyer, André Schorochoff, argued that Léopold II was primarily a developer who was interested in trade (Castonguay, 2005). Many of our interviewees mentioned that they had relatives who shared these sentiments.

These are obviously only a few of the colonial images that are circulating in the massive RMCA, but they give readers an idea of why these representations are deemed so controversial. Morris (2003) viewed them as a form of “sanctioned eroticism” that came from voyeuristic gazing, and Rahier (2003) was convinced that Léopold’s propaganda messages were still on display (p. 62).

Those who held these conflicting ideological positions were pulling the RMCA in opposite directions. On the one hand, a coalition of patriots, conservatives, and defenders of Belgian imperialism argued that curators and outside international audiences were unfairly focusing on the negative sides of Belgian and European colonial ventures. Moreover, curators and researchers who were trained to believe in the importance of positivistic, dispassionate, and objective scientific inquiry were bothered by the inroads that were being made by critical museologists who were blurring a host of epistemic and social boundaries. On the other hand, there were
coalitions of liberal and radical observers who wanted a complete overhauling of the RMCA, so that visitors could see a more multicultural display of Belgian–Congolese histories.

Between 2002 and 2004, an appointed committee collected a wealth of historical, cultural, social, political, and economic data on the two different colonization periods, and after years of negotiation the RMCA unveiled the temporary “Memory of Congo: The Colonial Era” exhibit in February of 2005. Riding (2005) provided an example of how some members of the press felt about the changes when he described them as “remarkable,” renovations that put on display visual and textual materials that would bring to the surface “unexpected” and “alternative versions of history.”

Yet, a communicative look at some of the rhetorical features of the evolution of these displays will find that although the RMCA employees were willing to question some features of the dominant metanarrative of colonial beneficence in 2005, there were other aspects of the familiar story lines that were left alone. We would go so far as to argue that many parts of this temporary display configure Léopold II as a committed abolitionist. Consciously or unconsciously, these curators may have been trying to answer some of Hochschild’s allegations by creating displays that showed that the Belgian monarch tried to control the very abuses that were a part of contested ghostly pasts.


With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the curators of the RMCA negotiated their way through the thorny thicket of historical memory work. They were trying to accomplish three different and yet related tasks in putting together the temporary exhibit—they wanted to have displays that were more inclusive, they wanted to provide visitors with a fairer display of the rewards and costs of colonization, and they wanted to answer Hochschild’s allegations about the existence of a Congolese “holocaust.” We believe that these efforts produced mixed results.

Atwater and Herndon (2003) argued that societies need museological displays that “reveal the intersection of race and culture in the recovery of a society’s historical and cultural memory” (p. 16), and many of the seven major sections of the temporary exhibit highlighted the multicultural aspects of the Léopoldian and Belgian colonial periods. The “Memory of Congo” exhibit was topically organized, and some of the major rooms were labeled “Back in Time,” “Hierarchies,” “Transactions,” “Encounters,” “Representation,” “Independence,” and the “Documentation Centre.” The first room told audiences about the role that the Bantu languages played in veiling a “much longer pre-colonial past,” and here the committee made sure that visitors could see that the colonial history that was on display was only one small part of much more complicated Belgian–Congolese pasts. In the “Hierarchies” room, there is no detailed discussion of how individual “Africans” felt about the establishment of the CFS, but visitors were told that they “both helped and hampered” these early efforts (Vellut, 2005, p. 4).
A great deal of strategic planning went into the selection of the photographs that are used in these rooms, because the vast majority of these pictures helped paint a picture of harmonious relations. This contextualization built on audiences’ prefigurative understanding of the “model” colony, creating a type of “naturalistic enthymeme” (Finnegan, 2001, p. 135) that presumptively posited arguments about the ontological realities of beneficent colonization. In some of the “Memory of Congo” rooms, visitors got to see pictures of churches, hospitals for the treatment of tropical diseases, and bicycle assembly plants. Congolese and Belgians were shown working together as they built the Matadi-Léopoldville railway line, and the accompanying texts let visitors know that at the time of independence (1960) some “40% of the Congolese population was literate.” In contrast, we were told that only about “10%” of the rest of “black Africa” were able to read and write (p. 3). While the temporary exhibit did acknowledge the de facto existence of a “colour bar” in the Belgian Congo, it domesticated this acknowledgment with a claim that many of these laws and regulations were “petty” (Vellut, 2005, p. 36). The pictures of African children singing in front of nuns at the Lubunda mission, and the photographs of President Kasa-Vubu standing next to King Baudouin in 1960, gave the impression that the vast majority of the population not only accepted but embraced many facets of this system. Any mention of mutinies appearing in the display—for example, the mutinies of the Force Publique—were configured as activities that temporarily plunged “the country into chaos and violence” (p. 41). The “bodies at risk” (Harold & DeLuca, 2005, p. 267) in these scenarios were treated as abject subjects experiencing atypical setbacks.

Out of fairness we need to point out that when we compare these newer displays with some features of the older permanent exhibit it does appear that these attempts at inclusiveness did render visible some of the activities of the Congolese whose agency was missing in the previous dominant metanarratives of the RMCA. From a critical museological perspective, these renovated displays provided visitors with an alternative way of thinking about the social agency of the Congolese, but these same displays were organized in ways that still highlighted the overall progress that was ushered in by Belgian intervention. For example, in one of the first rooms a Bandia “sultan” was described as an African who “proudly” wore the uniform of a soldier for the Congo. This type of imagery, when sutured together with the entrance statuary, reiterated the idea that the Congolese desired colonialism. Belgitude—or the love and acceptance of all things Belgian—was in the air.

Most of these “Memory of Congo” rooms were filled with textual and visual materials that lavished attention on the improvements that were made after the 1908 annexation. Some of the supplemental exhibition brochure materials told readers about the work of the Parliamentary committees in Belgium, and at one point the authors of this text claimed that “the ideal of material modernization reinforced the belief that the Congo was a model colony.” For example, without the slightest “guilty conscience,” some of the sectors that were devoted to the World Fair of 1958 sent out “a message brimming with material optimism” (Vellut, 2005, p. 11). In many ways, one could argue that this renovated exhibit provided many Belgians with a display of the underappreciated features of misunderstood pasts.
The RMCA curators also needed to respond to the allegations that had been made about the Congolese “holocaust,” and the “Memory of Congo” temporary exhibit contained displays that provided visitors with an example of reconstructed historical memory. Portions of this exhibit displayed four of the pictures of mutilated victims of the “red rubber” harvests (Morel, 1906), and these same exact photographs had been used by British missionaries and their allies in early 20th-century campaigns to oust Léopold II. Yet, these images were placed on the periphery of the exhibit. Some RMCA researchers concluded that “contrary and in spite of official directives, abuse had become widespread in the absence of control” [our emphasis] (Vellut, 2005, pp. 6, 11). This was an intriguing rhetorical gesture, because it invited visitors to think about the need for more European control of local populations, and it treated Léopold II as an enlightened leader who would have intervened if his investigative committee had found any concrete reason for more radical action. Modern-day visitors reading this type of material could still conclude that the Belgian King was a philanthropic genius who was ahead of his time, a humanitarian activist whose civilizing mission was undermined by a few subalterns who followed market forces and strayed from the path of imperial rectitude.

Given the fact that rooms 1 and 2 of this temporary exhibit were supposed to focus on Congolese–Belgian colonial histories, the curators needed to find a way of answering the challenges that were posed by Léopold II’s biggest contemporary critic—Morel, a journalist who was revered by Hochschild (1998). In most academic treatises that comment on the “red rubber” atrocities, it is suggested that Morel led an alliance of missionaries and merchants as they formed efficacious transatlantic anti-Léopoldian campaigns. Morel may have been one of Hochschild’s heroes, but in the 2005 “Memory of Congo” exhibit he is treated as a misguided and uninformed interloper who made extravagant claims about African depopulation. When most critics of Belgian colonization talk of a population of 20 million Congolese, they go on to argue that about half of these Congolese lost their lives laboring for the CFS. This particular “Memory of Congo” display responded to these allegations by noting that these high population figures were recirculated at a time when Belgian officials were worried about Congolese birth rates and degeneration. All of this talk of depopulation theoretically originated during the 1920s, when reformist groups sought to justify the need for large-scale health care programs. Over time, the “media” and “public” came to believe these inflated numbers, and visitors who may have read Hochschild’s book are led to believe that he in turn was taken in by the circulation of this (mis)information. A huge placard in the temporary exhibit noted that a study of the “history of demographic decline between 1875 and 1925” would provide evidence of only a “20%” decline in the population during the Léopoldian years, and visitors were asked to keep in mind the myriad number of factors that are involved with human migrations. In sum, there was “no scientific basis” for Morel’s “interpretation” (Vellut, 2005, p. 9).

These various strands of renovated texts helped the RMCA dissociate itself from the “primitive” interpretations that were a pervasive part of the aura of the rest of the permanent galleries. Although some critical museologists might object that this
appropriation of multiculturalism simply provided a simulacrum of real historical agency, this was at least an attempt at making the museum more inclusive. At the same time, it is clear why these employees were not going to automatically abandon the idea that the Belgian Congo needed to be represented as a “model colony,” because it was still viewed by the majority of visitors as a taken-for-granted fact that had little to do with Léopoldian predations. If anything, the 2005 renovations might have given visitors the impression that all of this racial harmony had been lost with decolonization, purveying the idea that this journey into a postcolonial “heart of darkness” was doing more than simply answering a few allegations that were made by an American journalist. Observers may want a mastering of the past, but that mastering can take many polysemic forms.

Although some journalists and scholars questioned the comprehensiveness of the temporary exhibit (L. De Witte, personal interview, March 12, 2006; Hochschild, 2005; Riding, 2005, p. 3), many regarded the open display of the four “atrocity” photographs as a courageous effort on the part of the museum director and his staff. This is not to say that the exhibit was without its flaws. Even the director of the museum, G. Gryseels, in an interview we conducted in 2006, noted that the museum staff had learned a great deal from the exchanges. He told us that in retrospect, he would have modified several features of the 2005 exhibit. For example, he averred that the temporary exhibit did not focus enough attention on Congolese uprisings, and he thought that the RMCA needed to let visitors know that the Congolese were not unanimously pleased with colonization (personal interview, March 17, 2006). This type of commentary provides us with illustrative proof of some of the heuristic power of criticism, both within and outside the RMCA, as various memories and histories were being renegotiated.

We viewed these changes as moderate and important, and our early assessments seemed to fall in line with some of the critiques of the museum. French (2005) was convinced that the “‘Memory of Congo’ exhibition was formless, and partial.” He complained that by the time any of us reached the end of the tour, all that we really learned was that this was a “controversial period” and a “turbulent chapter in history” (p. 17). He was bothered by the fact that the temporary displays contained commentaries on colonial lotteries, the activities of priests in seminaries, and the influence of the Congolese rumba, and all of this hindered any sophisticated understanding of forced labor or large-scale abuses. French realized that some of the video screens may have been trying to provide viewers with realistic images from the Congo era, but he worried about the politically incorrect characterizations of “boys” [sic] who liked “white people.” Moreover, was it really factually true that so few had any “negative feelings” toward “whites” (p. 17)?

Some of the most trenchant observations came from those viewers who realized that this was an exhibit filled with layers of complex (post)colonial representations, sedimented ideologies, and exclusionary performances. For example, during one of our interviews, K. Arnaut noted how:

The museum is aware that this whole renovation is a process that needs to be discussed with a number of stakeholders in this Africa/Belgium context, and
they’ve made an effort to ask for the participation of, say, the Africans living in Belgium. I think it’s important, but what I’ve been worried about is that, again, this is not so much… It’s done on, how you say, a volunteeristic basis. It’s like the museum feels that it’s going to invite, say, the African associations for tea and light refreshments and we’ll discuss the plans as they are now for a little feedback. . . . I’ve seen that this is done in a way that the associations, these stakeholders, and perhaps others do not have a kind of structural place in the whole consultancy set up around this renovation. (personal interview, December 9, 2006)

In the minds of many critics, Congolese researchers needed to be a part of the entire renovating process. Otherwise all that would remain would be “politically” harmless displays (L. De Witte, personal interview, March 12, 2006).

Critical Museology and Radical Innovation at the RMCA (2005–Present)

The director of the RMCA has indicated that by 2011 this should be a thoroughly modernized structure, and we wondered if the criticisms of the temporary exhibit had altered any of the planned renovations. While one of us kept track of the burgeoning Anglo-American textual and visual commentaries on the Congolese “holocaust,” the other author made a return trip to gauge the perceptions of these museological changes. The RMCA is a bustling center of learning, filled with monthly conferences on a host of scientific and humanistic topics, and many of the employees of the museum have been the very social agents who have actively sought more radical reformation.

Parts of the temporary “Memory of Congo” exhibit have now become permanent fixtures, and in many ways these versions of this exhibit can be viewed as repositories of newly minted negotiated histories and memories. Curatorial objects have been rearranged in ways that reflect the impact of both public and academic debate. The newest RMCA changes seemed to reflect the salience of four key themes that required attention—1) the importance of acknowledging state involvement in the systematic use of coercive labor, 2) the growing recognition that many Congolese were involved in violent rebellions during the colonial years, 3) the need for greater self-reflection on the part of those who were involved in constructing displays, and 4) the importance of having a more inclusive museum.

As we noted early in the essay, the promoters of the “Memory of Congo Exhibit” (2005) had promised that after 3 years of study they would present a more objective view of Belgian–Congolese pasts, but Hochschild (2005) felt that these employees still refused to acknowledge the agency of CFS officials in perpetrating abuses. Using citations from the work of Marchal (1996) and other researchers, he complained that the four missionary photographs that were put on display were tiny reproductions dwarfed by the dozens of enlarged photographs offered in other displays. Hochschild (2005) argued that many visitors who read the exhibition labels or the coffee table book that accompanied these displays would still get the idea that most Congolese spent their times in schools, traveling by steamboats, working in laboratories, being cared for in clinics, or hanging out in cafés. In the battle for control of pictorial dominance, the “occasional” abuses that appeared in the photographs did little to help
explain the magnitude of the “holocaust.” Even in cases where RMCA curators were willing to comment on the problem of depopulation, external material forces were considered to be the primary causes of destructive change.

Observe, for example, how the leading author of the official brochure provided his summary of the latest scientific findings on Léopoldian population losses:

The enthusiasm that accompanied the early days of the Congo State, opening up great opportunities for “works of civilization” and the fight against slavery, was soon replaced by disappointment. In the 1890s global speculation on rubber saved Léopold’s enterprise from imminent bankruptcy, but at a heavy price. The embryonic State was diverted from its “duties” and put to work towards making it profitable... (Vellut 2005, p. 6)

In the name of dispassionate inquiry, we have claims being made about the omnipresent power of profit motivation.

A year later the more permanent exhibit reflected changes indicating that curators were now willing to tackle the question of governmental involvement or corporate complicity in at least some of these abusive affairs. Compare the 2005 text with this newer material that appears in a placard that is now a part of the renovated permanent exhibit:

The king makes the most of rubber speculation: in certain parts of the Congo, he demands that the population be forced to gather this raw material as a tax. The embryonic state is distracted from its duties by profitability. All means are deployed to gather as much rubber as possible, which leads to multiple abuses...

(RMCA, 2006)

Note how this revision alters the discussion in ways that don’t necessarily contradict the earlier text. Instead, the more nuanced explanation adds information that allows a reader to think that perhaps Hochschild, and other critics were right on point when they alleged that the Belgian King had at least some hand in these affairs.

What was even more surprising was the way that new display contextualized the use of the feared “chicotte,” the whip that was used on recalcitrant subalterns. This new exhibit has not only altered some of the textual materials that appear in these displays—we are now presented with pictorial evidence that shows the collective social agency of members of the Force Publique. Note the striking image (Figure 1) that has accompanied the renovated exhibit.

The accompanying text reads:

Composed of African soldiers, many from West Africa, the Force Publique (acting as both police and army) is one of the pillars of the CFS. To maintain order, the soldiers are instructed to use also flogging by whip (chicotte) and to keep prisoners in chains. (RMCA, 2006)

The chicotte, perhaps more than any other curatorial item in colonial iconography, has come to symbolize the extreme violence that was carried out against the Congolese. In many of the earlier public and academic commentaries that touched on this subject, it was often implied that those who plundered, raped, and pillaged were primitive deviants who knew nothing of civilizing missions, CFS regulations, or
European imperial codes of honor. This was formerly framed as a matter of individuated justice, something that had been argued in the Belgian press since at least the early 1890s. To our knowledge, this is the largest aggregate of colonial subjects that have appeared in this type of photograph, an image that undercuts the arguments of those who might have claimed that the single shots from missionary cameras were manipulated or staged.

Given the polysemic and polyvalent nature of photographic representations curators can’t always control the reframing of these shards or vectors of historical memory, but they do illustrate that many RMCA employees want to provide more critical voices as a way of balancing the commemorative displays that have honored the Force Publique. Granted, here we still find no apologies or talk of reparations, but this is a long way from totalizing denial. One might call this a novel “rhetoric of colonial acknowledgment,” a marker that allows for the potential recognition that states can be involved in the administration of some horrific activities. Visitors are now being presented with competing tales of slavery and antislavery, and Léopold’s agency is tied to the acts of his employees in the Congo.

For those readers who still have a modicum of hermeneutic suspicion about the potential radicalness of these changes, note how the RMCA is now willing to tackle some of the taboo subjects that once raised the ire of colonial veterans and many royalists. In bold strokes, the museum now paints this picture of Léopoldian abuse:

In order to harvest wild rubber—a difficult and dangerous task—villagers cut vines in forests, into which they must penetrate more and more deeply because of intensive exploitation. Women and children are held hostage by agents of the CFS and private companies in order to force the men to extract rubber. Villages refusing to provide their quota are burned and the rebellious villagers executed. (RMCA, 2006)

These same lines could have been written by Morel, Marchal, or Hochschild, and they evidence a drastic interrogation of the orthodox colonial tales.

In short, since 2005, the RMCA has gone to great lengths to acknowledge Léopoldian, European, and/or Belgian complicity in the colonial enterprise. Rather than burying the darker side of colonization in a corner of the exhibit (as some
accused the museum of doing in the 2005 temporary exhibit), the curators who put together the permanent exhibit have prominently displayed textual and visual materials in new pedagogical ways.

Criticism of portions of the older displays often focused on the exclusive presentation of Belgian–Congolese harmony, and the RMCA in 2006 took up the challenge of trying to find ways of explaining why Belgian–Congolese histories are littered with examples of violent noncooperation. The question of whether the RMCA directly responded to the lamentations of Hochschild and others may always be a source of contention, but what we do know is that RMCA curators in 2006 put together an entirely new section that focused attention on the violence that was a part of preindependence histories of the Belgian Congo. For example, one prominent wall text was labeled “Execution of rebels in Shinkakassa.” It explained that although “allied with the State, the Force Publique can also oppose it. The mutinies within the Force Publique during the time of the CFS (1895, 1897, 1899), the Belgian Congo (1944) and the Republic of Congo (1960) were to be major traumas” (RMCA, 2006).

We can readily imagine how some of the territorials may react when they see this type of permanent display, and yet there were some observers who congratulated the museum for interrogating the idea that Force Publique constituted some state organization that was simply used in the wars against the “Arab” slavers. These types of displays allow for the possibility that viewers might now treat violence as an inherent part of imperial projects, or as a manifestation of Belgian colonial conditions. These new imaginaries go against the grain, and make things potentially difficult for those who continue to disassociate Léopoldian violence from postannexation tranquility. Note how the above textual fragment describes the ongoing rebellions, up to and through the 1960 Independence, and the following photograph (Figure 2) deconstructs some notions of uncomplicated desires on the part of the colonized.

Figure 2 Members of the Force Publique stand guard over the leader of a local rebellion.
We have discovered that this is an image of Shakindugu of Kwango, who led a rebellion in 1931. Hochschild (2005) argued that “nowhere in the book [exhibit supplement] or the exhibit [temporary] do we hear any details about the great Pende rebellion of 1931, which was set off when white officers set out to conscript palm oil workers by seizing Pende women as hostages” (p. 40). The use of this type of photograph provides a competing vision that can be used to interrogate the monumentalism that appears in other parts of the RMCA.

**Presentist Pasts and Futures: The Polysemic Nature of Postcolonial Memories**

The rhetorical trajectory of these evolutionary museological changes offers a sense of how this museum is participating in the constitutive creation of a host of new Belgian–Congolese histories and memories. While the RMCA will still display those epic statues that came from the mind of Matton, they have supplied other iconic materials that help interrogate the Léopoldian and Belgian Congo periods. As Hochschild (2005) noted, it may take a while before the Belgians and other Europeans apologize for the actions of bygone generations, but there is little question that many iconoclasts will celebrate the literal and figurative removal of Stanley and Léopold II from their historical pedestals. K. Arnaut has averred that

> What we’ve seen now is that... a new history room at the museum... is ten times better than the one that was there before, which was really there to honor Léopold II and his great ideas about colonizing Africa and getting rid of the Arab slave trade, and stuff like that. It’s really quite ludicrous. So you see, it is one stage in a long process. (personal interview, December 9, 2006)

This museological form of mental decolonization provides a substantive interrogation of the mythos that surrounds the metanarratives that are told about the “model” Belgian colony.

In many ways, Gryseels and the other employees of the RMCA need to be congratulated for their efforts, and academics should thank these employees for putting together displays that have stimulated renewed interest in Belgian–Congolese affairs. Since Gryseel’s appointment there have been many conferences held at the RMCA dealing with topics that would be familiar to many of those who believe in the importance of critical museology, and now a host of competing photologics (Saunders, 2001) swirl around the RMCA. While many visitors will continue to believe that only hundreds of thousands of Congolese lost their lives during the Léopoldian years, and that the Belgians have been unfairly singled out as perpetrators of a “holocaust,” these types of disputes have helped open up spaces for future debates. As one teacher explained, the advent of the new display brought a “critical history,” that could be used as a “laboratory” for students (S. Cornelis, personal interview, December 8, 2006).

Yet, complicating these critical histories and memories involves more than the interrogation of a single metanarrative. When we began our investigations we assumed that the more that the RMCA offered graphic exhibitions—the “dark tourism” (Lennon & Foley, 2000) that would show some of the magnitude of these abuses—the greater the chance that national and international audiences would join those
who vilified Léopold II and deprecated the actions of the CFS. We initially assumed that if the RMCA curators simply focused on the negative features of Léopoldian or Belgian colonialism then this would help lift some of the veils of ignorance that contributed to the amnesias that Hochschild so vividly portrays. The moral and political calculus would change, so that audiences who were mesmerized by the aura of the statues would no longer accept the iconic truths of beneficent colonization.

For the most part, many commentators, members of the press, and interviewees took this position, a stance that underscored the importance of reflecting the “reality” of Léopoldian or Congolese pasts. Yet, if we truly believe in some of the tenets of critical museology that focus on the rhetorical dynamics inherent in creating these reality “effects,” then we need to dig deeper and realize that that the RMCA display of all of this Belgian–Congolese violence may not (need not?) always be construed in ways that support the idea that decolonization was an unalloyed good. As Sontag (2003) observed, all “photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions” (p. 10), and this contextualization is especially important in genocidal debates.

This means that the promoters of critical museological perspectives need to appreciate the fact that the use of “dark tourism” (Lennon & Foley, 2000) imagery does not always mean that visitors will walk away from these exhibitionary complexes (Bennett, 1995) with a totalizing picture of the obvious merits of decolonization or anticolonization projects. As Blair (2001) has astutely observed, there are times when museums may deal in “rhetorical excess” (p. 187).

This study has led us to conclude that in many situations, diverse groups think about these displays in enthymatic ways (see Finnegan, 2001), where presentist needs influence the shaping of (post)colonial interpretative frameworks. For example, territorials who have visited the museum have told us that they still believe that some of the CFS abuses could have been avoided through more disciplined regulation of coercive labor, and that all of this talk of depopulation simply showed that decolonization was prematurely bestowed by those who did not understand the realities of life in the territories.

Even more interesting were the reactions of many Congolese, who did not always accept frameworks that highlighted the negative side of European colonization. Our research confirms the findings of other scholars who have noted the polyvalent nature of these displays. “In the eyes of many Congolese” who have survived civil wars, noted Nziem, “the colonial era now looks like a golden age.” This Congolese historian explained that these views were openly expressed at a time when “Belgian opinion is going in the opposite direction and recognizing the crimes of the past” (quoted in Riding, 2005, para. 14).

Given our own preconceptions and motivations, we cannot help applauding some of the consciousness-raising that we believe took place when the RMCA put on the more radical 2006 display, but there are limits and unintended consequences, and future researchers will need to study the long-term effects of some of these museological changes. In many ways curators around the world have made tremendous strides as they have moved away from the display of material cultures as some
ahistorical “trophy” or “curiosity” (Coombes, 1994, p. 2), and the tackling of sensitive subjects like a “holocaust” illustrates the growing importance of museums as sites of national and international ideological struggle. Zelizer (1998) once noted how some of the imaging of the Holocaust was being redeployed in the framing of press commentary on more recent atrocities in Rwanda, Burundi, and other African locales (p. 235), and we are convinced that the debates over the RMCA displays may open the floodgates for the migration of many other colonial critiques as many other (post)colonial communities talk and write about apologies, denials, restitutions, and reparations.

References


