Traumatic Realism and Sublime Decolonization: Remembering the Mass-Mediated Representations of King Baudouin’s and Patrice Lumumba’s Speeches on Congolese Independence Day, June 30, 1960

Marouf Hasian Jr. and Rulon Wood

Throughout this essay, we will be defending one major claim—that “decolonization” is an argumentative process that involves more than just the passage of historical colonial time or the suppression of forgotten memories. Rather, as many interdisciplinary scholars have observed, the process of decolonization is an ideological struggle (Bhabha, 1983; Chen, 1997; Said, 1978) that invites historical reflectivity and an acknowledgment that the needs of the present often influence the ways that we selectively appropriate, argue, and use the shards of contested pasts (Hirsch, 1997). Triumphant narratives are often written by the victors in these ideological contests, but these rhetorical fragments gain their coherence by leaving behind other traumatic (Rotherberg, 2000) or sublime pasts.

Take, for example, the ways that contemporaries and other observers sometimes write about Independence Day in the Congo—June 30th, 1960. Patrice Lumumba, an aspiring Congolese revolutionary, spoke that day, but he shared the spotlight with King Baudouin of Belgium, and their various positions on the nature and scope of Congolese liberation would reflect and refract a whole host of emotions regarding colonial oppression or beneficence. Young (1965) explains that the “psychological climate of independence” was in the air that day as various communities dealt with the “emotional dimension” of “decolonization” (p. 308). It was supposed to be a glorious moment for the world, a time when the first televised recording of a liberated African state would visually put on display the beginning of the development of the African continent. While technically the conflicts in India, Algeria, Indochina, Iraq, Egypt, and other parts of the world antedated the arrival of the Congolese Independence Day, this would be the first time that world audiences would actually be able to see and hear about an exemplary transfer of power from the colonizer to the colonized. In
theory, global communities could observe how the “model” Belgian colonizers worked in tandem with cooperative Congolese, and this in turn might provide the world with some transcendent hope that colonial ventures could indeed end on a positive note.

This was a time when many revolutionaries and reformers had no shortage of utopian or pragmatic ideas about how to cope with the challenges of decolonization, but from a rhetorical vantage point there is little question that in these Belgian-Congolese contexts how one felt about the notion of “Belgitude”—a feeling of being at home with things that were Belgian, or the love that was felt by the colonizer for the colonized—provided a great deal of anecdotal information about one’s views regarding the desirability, pace, and consequences of Congolese decolonization. As we note below, there were many former colonizers who hoped that the unique nature of the Belgian colonial situation would help usher in a new age of hope and mutual respect, where incremental change would help maintain some beautiful and long-lasting relationships. But this was not to be. Within a matter of a few months, the Congolese armies revolted, parts of the former Belgian Congo tried to secede, Belgian paratroopers landed, internecine wars flared up, and the United Nations was forced to intercede (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002; Young, 1965).

The univocal tale that was supposed to be told about harmonious and respectful transfers of state power was replaced by a cacophony of ideological noise and material violence as various parties living in the Congo renegotiated their colonial pasts and decolonized futures.

Over the years some of the speeches that were presented during Congolese Independence Day were viewed as incendiary devices that lit the chaotic fires of unregulated revolution, but this is a reductionist way of thinking about African pasts or the ideological struggles that are involved with decolonization. Moreover, it reduces the argumentative complexities of decolonizing situations, and treats revolutionary social changes as events that stem from the individual decisions of empowered human figures who face a host of structural forces and material conditions.

In order to understand the argumentative density of some of these decolonization situations, we contend that it is imperative that communication scholars attend to the usages of historical materials as they complicate and unpack many of the rhetorical facets of Belgian decolonization and Congolese Independence Day. At the same time, we join the ranks of the communication scholars in our discipline who also believe in the impor-
tance of studying African diplomatic histories or colonial rhetorics. For example, Theodore Sheckels (2001) and Kenneth Zagacki (2003) have provided us with some much needed information on the performative success or failure of Nelson Mandela’s public addresses, and Frank Myers (2000) has reminded us of the importance of taking up the question of how diplomatic leaders cope with policy change and colonial “winds of change.”

We applaud the efforts of those who use traditional public address approaches as they decode the rhetorics of colonial or imperial pasts, but we are convinced that argumentation scholars need to also understand how some of these historical periods of time provide ideological horizons filled with heuristic resources for contemporary debates about the relative merits of decolonization. If we take serious the notion that the debates about “what happened” during and after Congolese Independence Day are not just about the retrieval of accurate histories, then we need longitudinal studies that take into account how various communities continue to remember (and perhaps forget) some of these contests over the meaning, pace, and direction of decolonization. This is not an easy task, because the debates about homelands, occupation, liberation, and collective consciousness involve “myths, memories, and traumas” that did “not develop in a vacuum” (Wistrich and Ohana, 1995, p. viii).

Given the multi-dimensional nature of the histories and memories that swirled around the names of Lumumba, Baudouin, and Congolese Independence Day, we felt that we needed to find a critical methodological approach that would help us explicate the experiential ways that immediate audiences reacted when they heard Lumumba’s rhetoric or watched the dissolution of what used to be called the “Belgian Congo.” Moreover, we needed to supplement some traditional textual analyses with argumentative criticism that took into account the contested, motivated, and divergent nature of decolonizations that impacted the lives of both elites and ordinary citizens.

Although there are a number of fruitful ways that argumentation scholars might get at some of the psychic or material dimensions of these decolonizing situations, we believe that Rothberg’s notion of “traumatic realism” (2000) helps us unpack some of the rhetorical dynamics of these (post) colonial situations. Rothberg, who was interested in decoding the ways that various generations witnessed and remembered the Holocaust, argued that the study of “traumatic” realism helps us get at both the “normal” and the “extraordinary” dimensions of salient historical moments, in that it allowed the researcher to see the lingering impact of key representations of contested
pasts (Rothberg, 2000, pp. 6-7). As Bhabha (1983) once explained, the “colonial stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious at it is assertive . . . “ (p. 22), and we contend that argumentation scholars can profit from a case study that attends to the ways that observers argue about descriptive and normative dimensions of Congolese and African independence.

In this particular essay, we focus attention on the traumatic realism that might be associated with the words and deeds of various “territorials”—former colonizers—who circulate their own representations of what happened during Congolese Independence Day. One of the major historical figures who will occupy our attention will be Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of his nation, and the memories of his untimely assassination are often tethered to contemporary debates about the political intrigue of the Belgian and U.S. governments (DeWitte, 2001). Another historical agent in this affair is King Albert Baudouin, the Belgian monarch who was supposed to take into account the “general climate of insecurity among the 10,000 European civil servants” who would be impacted by Congolese decolonization (Young, 1965, p. 311). Our research indicates that Lumumba’s reputation has grown over the years, and he is primarily remembered as one of the most militant critics of European colonialism.

Our particular style of argumentative analysis builds on the work of Conquergood (1991), Trujillo (1993), Taylor (1997) and other communication scholars who have argued for the heuristic importance of combining ethnographic with rhetorical analyses. We have contacted over forty colonial veterans and other former residents who lived in the Belgian Congo, and as we interviewed these territorials we tried to create an atmosphere where they could relate to us in ways that allowed for the gathering of pertinent information about Congolese Independence Day.

Flashbulbs and typewriters captured for newspaper audiences some of the early pageantry of the day, and an immaculately dressed Belgian king, Albert Baudouin, helped choreograph the epic transfer of sovereignty. Several months earlier Congolese delegates had traveled to Brussels and drastically altered the timetable for independence—a punctuation of time that began with thirty years, then three or four, and now a hastily prepared affair helped usher in a new era. In Europe one could find journals that warned about how large “sections of the native [sic] populations identify independence with our expulsion” (quoted in Young, 1965, p. 311), but the organizers of the Independence Day activities wanted this to be a peaceful and celebratory affair.
When many contemporary viewers of internet blog sites or newspaper commentaries read about the work of Patrice Lumumba and his fiery speeches, Lumumba’s commentaries are treated as reactive words that responded to the brief speech acts of Baudouin, who spoke just minutes before the Congolese Prime Minister took the podium.

Given the fact that most of the Belgian scholars and former colonizers talked about these speeches in tandem, we follow Lindlof and Taylor’s (2002) suggestion that we treat these as “performances” that hold as much “interest as the content” (p. 180) of these presentations. The Congolese Independence Day speeches served as touchstones that “caught the world’s attention” (Hochschild, 1998, p. 301).

It will be our contention that a hybrid blend of textual and ethnographic analyses lets us decode some of the argumentative dynamics of this situation. As we review how some of territorials who lived during this period reminisce and argue about these affairs, we gain an appreciation of the contested nature of Belgian and Congolese histories, and we can see how the Baudouin and Lumumba speeches become ideological touchstones for much larger debates about the meaning of Congolese Independence Day and Belgian decolonization. We are convinced that some of the traumatic realism (Rothberg, 2000) associated with these territorial memories has to be placed
in the context of colonial nostalgia and symbolic loss, where transitional power displays threatened the recollections of those who sincerely believed in Belgitude. As we note below, what we shall call “sublime decolonization” involved the hope that Lumumba and the Congolese populations would remember a colonial world filled with schools, tropical hospitals, railways, active mines, and bright African futures.

Our blend of textual and ethnographic analyses provides a unique way of getting at some of the arguments about the Congolese Independence Day addresses, because it takes seriously the idea that some texts and situations have lingering—and perhaps jarring—rhetorical effects. Rather than simply making assertions about how audience members that day “might” have felt or the intentionality of the speakers, we want to provide multiple types of evidence that get at different facets of the traumas associated with decolonization efforts.

This focus on traumatic realism does more than simply provide descriptive information about the manifest meanings of propositions that might appear within key colonial texts. It provides an avenue for studying some of the complex reasons why those who debate about the beneficence or oppressive nature of Belgian colonization also disagree about how to remember the “history” of Congolese Independence Day.

As Caruth (1995) averred, “psychic trauma” involves both “intense personal suffering” and the “recognition of realities that most of us have not begun to face,” (p. vii). Leys (2000) similarly noted that those who experience hurtful experiences are “haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories,” that influence how one thinks about mourning, bereavement, or forgetting (p. 2).

With this in mind, our critical rhetorical and ethnographic analysis begins with a brief theoretical discussion of the salience of studies of traumatic realism and the witnessing of decolonization situations, and then we will move into analyses of the contexts, texts, and performances that swirled around the Baudouin and Lumumba speeches on Congolese Independence Day.

**Traumatic Witnessing, Colonial Remembrances, and the Strategic Uses of Bygone Pasts**

A growing number of scholars have invited us to think about the impact that traumatic events have on our histories and memories (Hirsch, 1997; Leys, 2000; Tal, 1996). As audiences witness the temporal or geographic disloca-
tions that threaten to alter their established identities, they seek out ways of explaining how they will deal with the clash of cultures, disruptive catastrophes, and the “persistence of ethnic identity” (Rothberg, 2000, p. 3).

In colonial and imperial contexts, both the former colonizers and the colonized may express ambivalent feelings about the end of various interventionist ventures, and one’s sense of loss or gain can be linked to feelings of relief, freedom, and even nostalgia. As various witnesses who lived through these transitional periods either recount their personal experiences or tell their stories to others, they become participants in a chain of “associative memories” (Caruth, 1995, p. vii) that impact the ways that they and others remember and forget key moments in colonial and imperial pasts.

The traumatic witnessing that can attend radical changes in fragile situations takes many different twists and turns, and not all communities respond to these colonial transfers of power in the same way. For example, in many of the mass-mediated postcolonial associative narratives that are now told about Lumumba’s speech and his tragic assassination, he is configured as a representative victim of European colonization, a brilliant and talented Congolese subaltern who never got to see a truly independent nation. O’Brien (1968), a member of the U.N. peacekeeping force that was stationed in the province of Katanga after Independence Day, argued that Lumumba was the personification of “freedom,” a human being who had to deal with some “veiled logic” that came from “murderous angels” (pp. xix-xx). O’Brien was convinced that talk about decolonization served as a convenient public relations device for those who wanted to continue to expropriate resources from the African continent. Decades later, De Witte (2001) alleged that the former Prime Minister was “a source for inspiration for generations of Congolese, present and future,” who had yet to see the day when “national-democratic revolution” came to the Congo (p. 182).

Yet in many ways, these (post)colonial memories are a rhetorical inversion of the dominant Western and Congolese tales that were circulated in the Congo between 1960 and 1961. During these earlier periods of time, Lumumba was configured as a “demagogue” who spewed “racial hatred and unbridled disorder,” an “impatient megalomaniac” who used his “immense personal magnetism as a rabble rousing instrument.” For some of Lumumba’s contemporaries, these types of activities inevitably led to his brutal murder by “tribal enemies” (“Review of Congo My Country,” 1962, p. 402).

Many of the colonizers have left us with some conflicting opinions about Lumumba, and yet there seems to be some consensus among the territorials
that postcolonial critics focus too much attention on the negative side of ledgers that are supposed to fairly balance colonial costs and benefits. For example, some vehemently argue that any extraction of materials was used for the mutual benefits of the colonizer and the colonized, and they contend that labor taxation helped maintain administrative regimes that significantly improved the lives of those who sought “development.” In other words, a slower and more incremental form of decolonization could have been a beautiful or sublime endeavor, a transitional process that could have been both inclusive and less violent.

Our analysis of a variety of texts and transcriptions provides evidence that many former colonizers and outside observers viewed militant, hasty decolonization as a time of personal and collective grieving, where forgetting about the mutual benefits of Belgian intervention could lead to a host of material and psychic pains. A common refrain that we heard from some of our interviewees was that countless Belgians and Congolese experienced dislocation, chaos, disorder, and uncertainty as Lumumba and other Congolese leaders pressed for immediate independence. These types of traumatic moments, argues Caruth (1995), are exactly the times that may be preserved in “space of unconsciousness,” as we make decisions about what to remember and forget (p. 8).

Whenever former colonizers and the colonized deal with the “winds of change” that were mentioned by Harold Macmillan they can obviously expect some drastic social change (Myers, 2000), but these traumatic changes are experienced and interpreted in a host of different ways. As Kirk-Greene (2001) explains, decolonization brought on a series of shocks and traumas, and these dislocations were experienced by both the colonizers and the colonized. Participants who live through these periods of time can leave us traumatic histories that are filled with interesting characterizations and causal attributions, and these catalytic events can also be tethered to defenses of preferred colonial regimes. For example, Hugo Van Beeck, who served as a territorial administrator in the Kasai province, believed that some of the chaos and violence that attended Congolese decolonization came from the fact that neither the Belgian colonizers nor their wards had any clear or shared understanding of what “independence” actually meant. This former territorial administrator recalled how local Congolese politicians filled in this vacuum when they traveled to many of the “towns and the interior” of the Congo as they “agitated” and campaigned for independence. Those who heard this agitation were the “average,” the “common,” and the “low”
(Van Beeck, 2006, personal interview). Over time, all of the work that had been accomplished by the colonizers and willing Congolese workers was undone by those who kicked out the Belgians. Van Beeck elaborated by explaining: “If you see Congo now, you should have seen it fifty years ago . . . It’s [the Congo today] a mess…It’s a real pity” (Van Beeck, 2006, personal interview).

For many former colonizers, the decolonization traumas that were associated with independence in the 1960s were tied to exigencies that could have been avoided—if only well-intentioned politicians and administrators had had some foresight and had worked at educating publics about the true needs of the country. As some of our interviewees commented on the efforts of King Baudouin, Patrice Lumumba, or the United Nations, they couldn’t help but see parallels between their own traumatic experiences, conditions in the Congo today, and the contemporary turbulence of more contemporary civil wars.

As we transcribed and reviewed many of the materials that were collecting during our interviewing process, we began to appreciate the non-linear nature of some of these remembrances, and what Benjamin (1968) was talking about when he wrote about the “shock” of the “the past,” and the “constellations” (pp. 262-263) that bring together seized images that flit by (p. 255). The remembrances of these traumatic times often appeared to be suturing together the melancholy needs of the present with those of the past, and we listened as various social agents who lived through these times tried to conjure up for us visions of the causes and consequences that attended decolonization. For example, General Paelinck—whose father was a governor of the mineral-rich Katanga Province during this period—still travels to the Congo and is an active member of the Congolese cabinet of Commerce. As Paelinck talked about his recent travels to some of the small towns in the Congo, he averred that many Congolese who are now suffering from the ravages of civil war are now begging for a return of the colonizer so that the country can end the starvation (Paelinck, 2006, personal interview). In the ambivalent worlds of the traumatized colonizer and the colonized, mutual needs and mutual dependencies can be remembered as parts of imperial rights and duties, and the very meaning and directions of decolonization can take some unexpected twists and turns.

As we evidence below, many of the territorials who experienced decolonization lost friends, family, status, wealth, and respect. In their minds, Lumumba was simply an agitator, a communist, a political hack who knew
nothing about colonial realities or the administrative needs of his own people. These sentiments parallel many of the textual allegations that circulated on the European continent at the time of decolonization (Young, 1965). Lumumba’s aggressive and unrelenting anti-colonial ideology was said to have brought unbearable suffering, and the suasive power of oratory supposedly contributed to mutual misunderstandings. In many of these tales that were told by the former colonizers, larger social structures and political factors did play a role in the chaos of Congolese decolonization, but Lumumba and his public addresses played a pivotal role in paving the way for foreign intervention.

So given all of this complex memory-work, one wonders why so many of our interviewees and other commentators were talking and writing about two speeches that were given on Congolese Independence Day, June 30, 1960. What could King Baudouin have said that day that would have caused so much agitation among the Congolese, both on that day and in the annals of anti-imperialist histories? How could Patrice Lumumba say anything that would create panic? Can a single series of several short diplomatic speeches really be tied to the strategic selection of traumatic memories?

King Baudouin, Sublime Decolonization, and the Remembrances of Leopoldian Pasts

Over the last four decades, a host of scholarly and public debates have focused attention on the mindset of the Belgian officials who had to prepare for Congolese decolonization during the 1950s (De Witte, 2001), and there is little question that few of the Europeans who were living in Leopoldville, Stanleyville, or Elizabethtown during the first half of that decade could have anticipated a hasty transfer of power. By 1955 many of the colonizers could take pride in the fact that the vast majority of the 12 million Congolese living in the provinces had been afforded at least some rudimentary form of education, and the rich mining regions of the Katanga helped pay for the roads, the schools, the churches, and the hospitals that protected the local denizens from the ravages of tropical diseases. Since at least the early 1920s, the Belgian history books had treated the Belgian Congo as a “model” colony, a place where segregation had not interfered with the establishment of relatively harmonious race relationships (De Witte, 2001; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002). This is in spite of the fact that other critics, like Okojie (2003), contend that “the Congo has been in constant crisis since independence in
1960” and that the “duplicity of the Belgians and the U.N. at the time” had a “cataclysmic effect on the country ever since” (p. 32).

Interestingly enough, it had been King Baudouin who had been a major player in the decision-making process that led up to the selection of the date for independence. On several occasions during the early 1950s the young monarch had visited the Belgian Congo (Young, 1965, pp. 307-317), and it was on one of these trips that Baudouin first met Lumumba. During this earlier period of time Lumumba was considered to be a promising Congolese orator—“sensible, magnanimous, humane, and well-balanced” (“Review of Congo, My Country,” 1962, p. 402). Legend has it that the King and Lumumba shared similar views about development of a Congolese middle-class, and that both of them believed that only some of the Congolese deserved special privileges within the Belgian colonial hierarchy.

After King Baudouin announced in 1959 that the Congolese would be granted complete independence, the local political landscape would be filled with hundreds of diverse parties and leaders who had their own plans for decolonization. The territorials looked on as various Congolese factions deliberated about the fate of Kasai and Katanga provinces, disagreed about the need for unity or regional autonomy, debated about the power of various tribal leaders, and complained about schemes for dividing the mineral wealth of the country. Contemporary supporters of African liberation might view these as the mere growing pains of nation-states, but for some of the territorials, all of this uncertainty simply provided more proof that the Congolese leaders were acting like immature Africans who still needed their Belgian protectors (Young, 1965, pp. 243-367).

Some of the speeches that were presented on Congolese Independence Day reflected and refracted these ideological tensions, and a blending of textual and ethnographical study of the recordings of King Baudouin’s radio address provides us with some rhetorical evidence of how former colonizers might have thought about the majesty, the beauty, and the elegance of some forms of colonization.

As we decode some of meanings of key passages that appear in King Baudouin’s speech, and then reflect on what the territorials have told us about both the Belgian monarch and Lumumba, we are mindful of Willis’s (2000) admonition that this type of research needs to take into account the fact that we ourselves are grappling with “grounded” imaginations, where interpretations are tied to “local meanings” (p. viii).
Baudouin: The independence of the Congo is the crowning of the work conceived by the genius of King Leopold II, undertaken by him with courage and continued by Belgium with perseverance (qtd. in Meredith, 2005, p. 93).

King Baudouin, who was enthroned in 1951, clearly seemed to be the type of leader who understood the material and symbolic importance of his great, great uncle’s legacy, in spite of the fact that many humanitarians had accused Leopold II of having overseen the perpetration of what some have called the Congolese “holocaust” (Hochschild, 1998). Yet by the time he gave his speech, very few Congolese or Belgians publicly talked about “red rubber” (Morel, 1969), or the horrors that were suffered by earlier generations of Africans who worked for the Force Publique—the military arm of the Leopoldian regime. King Baudouin’s Congo was an entirely different realm in the territorial imaginations, a place that had been built up to rectify all of those horrors. The Congo of the 1950s was a place where the Congolese could dance the Cha Cha Cha (Schorochoff, 2006, personal interview), could aspire to be “évolues” and become registered, and even plan on attending universities. Yet the dominant argumentative strategy here was one that privileged the spending of Leopold II during the time of the founding of what used to be called the Congo Free State (1885-1908), an entity that existed before the formation of the Belgian Congo. Baudouin’s opening comments invite listeners to think about the social agency of the colonizers while obfuscating the role that coercive labor played during that period (Hochschild, 1998).

Baudouin: It [independence] signifies a decisive moment in the existence, not only of the Congo itself, but also—and I don’t hesitate to say it—of the whole of Africa. When Leopold II undertook the greatest project that is being crowned today, he did not announce to you[sic] as a conqueror, but as a civilizer. The great independence movement that drives the whole of Africa has received the broadest understanding from the Belgian government. In consideration of the unanimous longing of your people we have not hesitated to grant you this independence from the very start. (qtd. in Meredith, 2005, p. 93)

Notice here the absence of any discussion of rioting or the social agency that came from violence or threats of violence, something we view as a strategic
omission. The focus of attention in this part of the King’s presentation is on
Belgian acts and European decision-making, with no reference to any of the
specific acts of any named Congolese.

Our research indicates that many Belgian citizens who traveled to Africa
were proud of having been a part of a colonial heritage that was filled
with tales of the ending of the nineteenth-century Arab slave trade, and
few seemed to have questioned the necessity or beneficence of those who
built the Belgian Congo (1908-1960). As King Baudouin spoke on Con-
golese Independence Day about the contributions of his ancestors, he gave
what one of our interviewees, Martine Gatti, remembered as an “expected
speech—full of idealism and expectation for the future” (Gatti, 2006, per-
sonal interview). Gatti’s (2006) comments are indicative of the ways in
which Baudouin’s opening comments reflected prevalent colonial attitudes.
It seems clear that many of our interviewees viewed themselves as the inheri-
tors of precious imperial legacies, filled with forefathers who fought against
the villainy of the slave trade and built up a harmonious, modernized soci-
ety. These were the liberators who followed Leopold II’s lead and freed
their wards from superstition, poverty, and moral degeneration. Other com-
mentators echoed these sentiments, often acknowledging that the King was
presenting a somewhat optimistic picture of decolonization that fit within
traditional ideological frameworks.

Some of our ethnographic research provided us with anecdotal informa-
tion on how Baudouin’s immediate audiences tied his speech to larger ideo-
logical and material forces.

For example, Louis De Clerck (Louie), who worked as a judge in Burundi
after Independence, explained that according to colonial “protocol” these
types of presentations were circulated beforehand among select officials.
When some head of state paid a visit to another head of state, they were
supposed to “exchange speeches” before they were given, so that the other
party would know exactly what was going to be said (De Clerck, 2006,
personal interview). The Belgian Foreign Minister and the King had been
given copies of the scheduled presentations, and this apparently aided them
as they prepared their own speeches (see also Akerman, 2000). Given the
fact that many Europeans viewed President Kasavubu as the leader of the
Congolese populations, and the fact that they hadn’t received any vocalized
objects to the King’s address, we can understand why many territorials con-
sidered Baudouin’s address to be fairly typical colonial speech that reflected
pro-colonial sentiments.
Baudouin: For 80 years, Belgium has sent to your land the best of its sons - first to deliver the Congo basin from the odious slave trade which was decimating the population, later to bring together the different tribes which, though former enemies, are now preparing to form the greatest of the independent states of Africa. . . Belgian pioneers have built railways, cities, industries, schools, medical services and modernized agriculture. . .

Baudouin’s contextualizations of Leopold II’s colonizing efforts, and those of his followers, have often been attacked by contemporary critics. For example, Winternitz (1987) complained that Baudouin “delivered a clumsily conceived speech,” that praised the “great scourge of the Congolese people” (p. 121). More than a dozen years later, Osabu-kle (2000) would write that he was convinced that Baudouin’s speech was “provocative” and “ill advised” at the time. All of this talk of public service was all well and good, but was the King conveniently forgetting that between 1950 and 1959, the “Union Minière alone made a net profit of 39 billion francs?” (p. 256). Osabu-kle’s disapproval of colonial intervention was argumentatively linked to the notion that commodities were flowing to Belgian shores, and that “all” of this was “repatriated” (p. 256).

This obviously was not the way that many of our interviewees thought about colonial loss and governmental transfer. We found that the changing of the political guard was not merely a diplomatic affair or a sign of radical economic change, but rather a deeply personal experience that was often tethered to the spirit behind Baudouin’s words. Claire Alenus, the wife of a territorial administrator, recalled that when she was going to have to leave the Congo, her “servant” came up to her and asked this interesting question: “When will independence end?” When Claire told her servant “never,” he refused to help her pack because he believed that this meant that his own children would never go to school. Claire concluded that he “didn’t like it” (Alenus, 2006, personal interview). With all of its segregation and other faults, the Belgian Congo could be remembered as a thoroughly modernist venture, a place of progress and regenerations of several ethnic communities.

From a methodological standpoint, this type of traumatic realism is not something a critic can find through textual analysis—one needs to hear and see the responses of the territorials to get a sense of how Baudouin’s messages resonated with audiences who truly cared about indigenous communi-
ties and believed in the ontological existence of Belgitude. It was only by talking with our participants about the address, and then juxtaposing those transcriptions with the textual remains of his speech, that we gain an understanding of sublime beauty of these images of a progressive Belgian Congo.

Baudouin: The dangers before you are the inexperience of people to govern themselves, tribal fights which have done so much harm, and must at all costs be stopped, and the attraction which some of your regions can have for foreign powers which are ready to profit from the least sign of weakness. . . .

This portion of the Belgian King’s address configures the Belgians as potential allies of knowledgeable évolués, who are inferentially marked as the representatives of a Congo that would continue to be built through Belgian-Congolese connections. Together these groups would hold off the outside predators, the communists (see Young, 1965) and others who preyed on those who sought quick fixes.

This type of framing of Congolese independence implies that many of the Belgians were not going to be leaving any time soon, and that it would be “foreign powers” that would be boarding planes. These types of assumptions were echoed in some of the commentators of our interviews, who saw themselves as social, political, and economic allies in the rebuilding of the Congo. For example, Louie recalled that during the time when the two countries were negotiating their treaties, the Belgian government had decided that they would put all ten thousand Belgian civil servants at the disposal of the Congolese authorities. This created an atmosphere where “people were confident that things were going to go smoothly after Independence. Most white people applauded the King’s exuberance because they believed that the white officers and the Congolese soldiers of the Force Publique would continue to behave well, even in the most difficult of situations” (De Clerck, 2006, personal interview).

Baudouin: Don’t compromise the future with hasty reforms, and don’t replace the structures that Belgium hands over to you until you are sure you can do better. (qtd. in Meredith, 2005, p. 93)

These types of messages invited audiences to believe Belgian social agents had played a major role in building the model colony, but what is interesting to note here is that those who lived in the Congo were not always sure how indigenous communities felt about the continued presence of the territori-
als. Willie Alenus (whose father had served in the Congo during the 1920s) explained to us that the Belgians knew little about the actual mindset of the Congolese. Alenus elaborated by noting that “we didn’t know, I presume, that the Congolese expected us (more or less) to leave” (Alenus, 2006, personal interview).

Before, during, and after King Baudouin’s address one finds shards of evidence indicating that many territorials hoped that Belgitude would protect them from the backlash of disparate power relations, but there were those who did not share the Belgian monarch’s optimism. General Paelinck, another of our interviewees, served as second lieutenant during these transitional years, and he recalled that weeks before the presentation of these addresses Congolese subalterns were warning their military superiors about potential civil unrest. One Congolese sergeant major bluntly told the General that if he truly cared about his family then he needed to take his pregnant wife “back to Belgium” (Paelinck, 2006, personal interview). When Paelinck tried to warn his own commanding officer, General Janzeens, about the dangers of coming decolonization storms, he was told that that kind of talk was dangerous (Paelinck, 2006, personal interview). General Janzeens was the same leader who famously wrote on a blackboard “Before Independence=After Independence” and many of the Congolese troops rioted when they realized that they were supposed to remain in subservient positions.³

_Baudouin: Gentlemen [sic], yours is now the task to prove that we were right to trust you. The world is watching. My country and I recognize with joy and emotion that on this day, June 30th, 1960, the Congo requires independence and national sovereignty in full accordance with friendship with Belgium. God protect the Congo._ (qtd. in Meredith, 2005, p. 93)

We do have evidentiary confirmation that many of former colonizers who were in attendance that Independence Day clapped loudly at the end of King Baudouin’s speech (Meredith, 2005, p. 94), perhaps hoping that this paternalistic presentation could persuade both the évoluës and the masses that they could experience the benefits of a beautiful form of decolonization. Could colonial transitions take place that involved partnerships rather than violence?

Analyses of several first-hand witness accounts offer us some interesting insights into this balancing of hope and fear as listeners heard these Independence Day addresses. Martine Gatti, the mother of a newborn baby,
Fabrezio, remembered how her husband was working at a hospital where loudspeakers were set up so that workers could listen to the words that were spoken at the palace. Flags were flying and music was piped in as the hospital staff took care of patients. Martine was at home listening on her wireless, and recalled that it began as a “splendid, sunny day in Kasango” (Gatti, 2006, personal interview).

Obviously, not all of the King’s listeners were going to be enamored with his pro-colonial messages, and some of the Congolese who respected the territorials’ contributions were nevertheless bothered by the Belgian monarch’s presentation. The moderate Congolese President, Kasavubu, followed King Baudouin and he gave a short speech that tried to focus attention on the celebratory nature of this event. Yet even he left out some of his final prepared remarks that had included some personal tributes that were addressed to Belgium’s monarch (Meredith, 2005, p. 93). Kasavubu purportedly “read a diplomatic speech prepared by his Belgian advisers” (Osabu-Kle, 2000, p. 256), but it must be admitted that his remarks may not have been that memorable. Kasavubu, like Lumumba, had been jailed for incitement in the late 1950s, but now he had much to gain from any possible public reconstruction of his image as a person who could restore order at a time of chaos. Yet it would be Prime Minister Lumumba who would electrify audiences on Congolese Independence Day, and it would be his daring remarks that would become the stuff of legend.5

Of “Tears, Fire, and Blood”: Radical Decolonization and a Vision of Total Congolese Independence

Lumumba: Men and women of the Congo, victorious fighters for independence, today victorious, I greet you in the name of the Congolese Government. All of you, my friends, who have fought tirelessly at our sides, I ask you to make this June 30, 1960, an illustrious date that you will keep indelibly engraved in your hearts, a date of significance of which you will teach to your children, so that they will make known to their sons and to their grandchildren the glorious history of our fight for liberty. (Merriam, 1961, p. 352)

Note that from the very beginning of his address, Lumumba is refusing to prioritize the social agency of the colonizers, and he invites his audiences to think about how they have won independence through contestation and struggle.
Lumumba: For this independence of the Congo, even as it is celebrated today with Belgium, a friendly country with whom we deal as equal to equal, no Congolese worthy of the name will ever be able to forget that it was by fighting that it has been won [applause], a day-to-day fight, an ardent and idealistic fight, a fight in which we were spared neither privation nor suffering, and for which we gave our strength and our blood. We are proud of this struggle, of tears, of fire, and of blood, to the depths of our being, for it was a noble and just struggle, and indispensable to put an end to the humiliating slavery which was imposed upon us by force. (Merriam, 1961, p. 352)

Several interviewees told us that when they heard these words coming from Lumumba’s lips, they began to mentally and physically begin the process of packing their bags. The euphoria that swirled around the Belgian King’s address now had to be juxtaposed with more menacing messages, filled with allusions of potential violence and unrest. Those who decided to remain behind realized that they were taking risks. Martine Gatti remembered feeling that this was a “discourse full of hatred,” a “cold shower” that “might produce a real revolution in some way.” What bothered her was the fact that for days, one of the Congo radio stations kept “delivering those words of hate,” and since she and her family lived some 600 kilometers from the border she worried about the safety of her newborn baby (Gatti, 2006, personal interview).

Louie recalled how many Belgians who listened to this address were “astonished,” and he remembered that for a time it looked like the King was going to leave the Congolese parliament building and fly back home. This interviewee recalled that during the uprisings in Leopoldville (January of 1959) dozens of Congolese had been killed by the police forces, and this meant that international pressure had been brought to bear on the policies of the colonizers. Yet many Belgians were still willing to make a “bet” that a quick transition would prevent some of the bloodshed that had been experienced by the French or the Portuguese (De Clerck, 2006, personal interview).

Lumumba: This was our fate for eighty years of a colonial regime; our wounds are too fresh and too painful still for us to drive them from our memory. We have known harassing work, exacted in exchange for salaries which did not permit us to eat enough to drive away hunger, or to clothe ourselves, or to house ourselves decently, or to raise our children
as creatures dear to us. We have known ironies, insults, blows that we endured morning, noon, and evening, because we are Negroes. Who will forget that to a black one said “tu”, certainly not as to a friend, but because the more honorable “vous” was reserved for whites alone? (Merriam, 1961, p. 352)

Lumumba’s accusations provide us with illustrative examples of anti-colonial argumentative critiques of imperial lexicons, where the disempowered felt the emotive sting of linguistic devices—and fought back publicly. Some Congolese apparently viewed these vocalized markers as signifiers that reflected cultural imperialism, but this was not the way that some of our territorials interpreted this language. For example, Andrew Croonesborghs, a territorial administrator who helped build roads and supervise literacy campaigns, readily admitted that during the 1950s the Belgian-Congolese relationship was indeed “paternalistic,” and that the “natives” usually called the colonizers “father, mother, or uncle.” Yet he vehemently disagreed with Lumumba about the motives and ideologies that were being linked to these linguistic usages. Croonesborghs told us that Lumumba’s interpretations of the uses of “Vu” or “Tu” could be explained as a “misunderstanding,” and he elaborated by noting that “even to this day” the Belgians remember Lumumba’s accusations (Croonenborghs, 2006, personal interview).

Lumumba: We have seen our lands seized in the name of allegedly legal laws which in fact recognized only that might is right. We have seen that the law was not the same for a white and for a black, accommodating for the first, cruel and inhuman for the other. We have witnessed atrocious sufferings of those condemned for their political opinions or religious beliefs; exiled in their own country, their fate truly worse than death itself. We have seen that in the towns there were magnificent houses for the whites and crumbling shanties for the blacks, that a black was not admitted in the motion-picture houses, in the restaurants, in the stores of the Europeans; that a black traveled in the holds, at the feet of the whites in their luxury cabins. Who will ever forget the massacres where so many of our brothers perished, the cells into which those who refused to submit to a regime of oppression and exploitation were thrown. (Merriam, 1961, pp. 352-353)

For many of the territorials who heard these words, it became increasingly clear that Lumumba’s rhetoric and persuasive skills might threaten their
colonial work, their diplomatic relations, and their social lives in the Congo. Traumatic realism, evidenced by articulated feelings of loss and potential destruction, where replacing the hopes of those who longed for a more sublime and uplifting form of colonization. Martine Gatti recalled that Lumumba’s speech was initially met with “complete silence” as “fear” spread among some doctors, staff, and patients at her husband’s hospital. Later on the American embassy apparently sent out loudspeaker messages that informed whites that they should not “waste time,” but she thought that this simply exacerbated the problems because so many Europeans weren’t ready to leave (Gatti, 2006, personal interview). As Dunn (2003) would later explained, this type of discursive focus, that concentrated attention on colonial errors and horrors, helped to transmogrify Lumumba into a “diable (devil),” in the “press coverage of his Independence Day speech” (p. 84).

Our analysis supports this conclusion, and we found no shortage of critics who worried that his political power constituted a palpable and imminent threat. Wong (2002), writing with the benefit of hindsight, remarked that within a matter of months, Lumumba “had managed to outrage the Belgians by insulting their king, appal [sic] the West with his flirtation with Moscow and alienate the United Nations” (p. 79). The discursive barbs sent out during the Independence Day address became a harbinger of things to come.

Martine Gatti recalled that many anxious Europeans finally got hold of some planes and managed to leave the country. She vividly remembered being on a small plane on a short runway, and she kept worrying that it was “never going to take off” (Gatti, 2006, personal interview). As far as Louie was concerned, Lumumba’s words that day, when they were linked to the later request for Soviet help, cost Lumumba the “support of the Belgians” (De Clerck, 2006, personal interview). For General Paelinck, the premature bestowal of independence created false hopes on the part of many Congolese, who believed that African populations would no longer have to obey the decisions that were made in Brussels (Paelinck, 2006, personal interview). Hugo Van Beeck similarly remarked that one of the biggest mistakes that the territorials made involved their underestimation of the powers of the critics of empire. He reminisced about how the Belgians had let “local politicians” frame the meaning of independence and decolonization. He averred that this was an abdication of responsibility on the part of the Belgians who “should have prepared them” for self-rule (Van Beeck, 2006 personal interview).
Lumumba: All that, my brothers, we have endured. But we, whom the vote of your elected representatives have given the right to direct our dear country, we who have suffered in our body and in our heart from colonial oppression, we tell you very loud, all that is henceforth ended.... Together, we are going to establish social justice and make sure everyone has just remuneration for his labor [applause]. We are going to show the world what the black man can do when he works in freedom, and we are going to make of the Congo the center of the sun’s radiance for all of Africa. We are going to keep watch over the lands of our country so that they truly profit her children. We are going to restore ancient laws and make new ones which will be just and noble. We are going to put an end to suppression of free thought and see to it that all our citizens enjoy to the full the fundamental liberties foreseen in the Declaration of the Rights of Man [applause]. . . . We are going to rule not by the peace of guns and bayonets but by a peace of the heart and the will [applause]. (Merriam, 1961, p. 353)

These types of remarks were obviously meant to answer the claims of King Baudouin and other the Europeans who believed that colonial relations were held together by the glue of Belgitude, and it signaled that Lumumba was implying that African nationals were the true inheritors of Enlightenment principles. This type of rhetorical reframing put the Belgians in the role of repressive agents of coercive change, who ruled through the power of the Force Publique.

Lumumba: And for all that, dear fellow countrymen, be sure that we will count not only on our enormous strength and immense riches but on the assistance of numerous foreign countries whose collaboration we will accept if it is offered freely and with no attempt to impose on us an alien culture of no matter what nature [applause]. In this domain, Belgium, at last accepting the flow of history, has not tried to oppose our independence and is ready to give us their aid and their friendship, and a treaty has just been signed between our two countries, equal and independent. On our side, while we stay vigilant, we shall respect our obligations, given freely. . . . I ask all of you to forget your tribal quarrels. . . . The Congo’s independence marks a decisive step towards the liberation of the entire African continent. Glory to the fighters for national liberation! Long live independence and African unity! Long live the independent and sovereign Congo!” [applause, long and loud] (Merriam, 1961, p. 354)
The more that Congolese applauded these types of remarks, the greater the dangers that would be attributed to Lumumba’s acts. Within days the Congolese soldiers of the valorized Force Publique revolted against their white officers, and several Belgian women were said to have been assaulted or raped during the resulting chaos (Young, 1965, p. 317-323; Young, Akerman, 2000, para. 35). These disputes were complex affairs, but Lumumba’s lukewarm support of the soldiers did nothing to help his radical reputation.

Yet what is interesting to note here is the way that many territorials remained convinced that Lumumba’s views did not truly represent either the material interests or the political aspirations of the Congolese communities. Martine Gatti argued that many of the Congolese had organized meetings in Kasango so that they could gather the Europeans together and let them know that they trusted them, and as far as she was concerned, this was “our independence day” (Gatti, 2006, personal interview). Not everyone forgot about the social and economic benefits of colonization.

For many territorials, Lumumba’s speech was a performance that signaled the violent dismantling of many idyllic dreams. Could anyone really think that black soldiers would continue to obey their officers when they stood by and watched how “civilians came from nothing” and became prime ministers? (Paelinck, 2006, personal interview). When some of the Congolese soldiers decided to mutiny, this set off a chain of events that led to the temporary secession of the Katanga province in the Congo (O’Brien, 1968), and within a matter of a few months Lumumba had no planes, no control of the radio stations, no local army, no help from the U.S., and no support from the United Nations. On January 17th, he and two companions were put against a large tree and shot. A Belgian scholar (De Witte, 2001) spent seven years uncovering some of the facts surrounding this assassination, and he claimed that various national and international communities stood by as Lumumba was beaten, tortured, humiliated, and finally hacked to death. Several years ago a Belgian Commission came forward and admitted that some of the participants in Lumumba’s assassination were “morally responsible” for these acts.

Yet our analysis of various diplomatic memos, press comments, interviews, and studies of texts indicates that Belgian officials were not the only social agents who believed in the ideologies that were a part of these sad tales of violence. For example, Harry Gilroy, the New York Times reporter who traveled to Leopoldville to hear those speeches, would later remark that the Prime Minister’s “attack on colonialism” transformed what was an “atmo-
sphere of friendship” into a world filled with commentaries about “the sufferings of the African people at the hands of the whites” (pp. 1-2). During the early 1960s, there were many Cold-War audiences who shared the views of the territorials that we interviewed, and Lumumba became a condensation symbol for those who worried about premature decolonization. As Martine Gatti explained, Lumumba’s speech was filled with warnings of revolution, and appeared to have mapped out what “exactly happened” (Gatti, 2006, personal interview). On the day after the presentation of Lumumba’s address, La Libre Belgique claimed that this was “un affront au Roi et à la Belgique,” and lambasted the “l’insolence” of this speaker (Dunn, 2003, p. 84). Five years later, Lefever (1965) of the Brookings Institute averred that many Belgians considered it to be a “contemptuous and ill-tempered” presentation (p. 4) that did not advance the true cause of the Congolese. For those who were fighting for the hearts and minds of former colonial subjects, Lumumba’s address was providing manifest proof that this was one individual who might “sabotage Belgian interests” (Hoskyns, 1965, p. 86).

We may never know just how many Congolese respected Lumumba’s courage when he spoke these words—“nous ne sommes plus vos singes” (we are no longer your monkeys), but as De Witte (2001) pointed out, his stance reinforced the “Africans’ sense of dignity” (p.36). Some of today’s scholars would perhaps agree with Atmore’s (1994) assessment, that many Westerners thought that Congolese Independence Day had been turned into a “disaster” (p. 233).

In the wake of the Independence Day presentations, some Belgians immediately left the Congo or headed for Boma, the French Congo, or other destinations, but those who remained tried to downplay the representativeness of Lumumba’s words and deeds. He was branded as a loner, a former embezzler, and several members of the press caricatured him as a power hungry malcontent who interfered with the establishment of harmonious Belgian-Congolese relationships (Young, 1965). The violence in the streets was viewed as an imminent danger that threatened the property and lives of many Europeans, and the territorials welcomed the arrival of Belgian paratroopers. From a political vantage point, Lumumba had to compete with Congolese politicians like Kasavubu and Moise Tschombe, and poorly paid soldiers flocked to the banner of a former Lumumba aide by the name of Mobutu (O’Brien, 1968). Those who have chronicled these traumatic moments contend that Lumumba compounded his problems by making another key mistake—when he lost control of the military, he begged for U.N. intervention.
“From the day” that Lumumba gave that speech argues Osabu-kle (2000), the Belgians were “bent on seeing the overthrow of Lumumba” (p. 256). Given the rhetorical power of so many traumatic memories, we can readily understand why this “communist” puppet appeared to be such an imminent danger.

Remembrances of Traumatic Pasts: Postcolonial Memories of the Congolese Independence Day Addresses

Throughout this essay, we have tried to adopt a critical stance that takes advantage of both textual and ethnographic perspectives in ways that helped us reflect on histories and memories that shadowed some of the mediated representations of the speeches that were presented by King Baudouin and Prime Minister Lumumba as they spoke at the Palais de le Nation in Léopoldville. Make no mistake these decolonizing years were turbulent times, and many of our interviewees fought back tears as they reminisced about torn bodies, destroyed lives, and divided nations. As we noted from the outset, our notion of embodied research (Conquergood, 1991) is meant to provide an example of how critical interviews can supplement traditional analyses of key public addresses. Like Luttrell (2003) before us, we ourselves can empathize with some of this emotionality.

From a critical vantage point, this meant that during our study of the voices of the colonizers, we tried to be attentive to the ways that various memories can be juxtaposed, realigned, and recontextualized as they are read “against the grain” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 257). As we read various decolonization documents or heard select interpretations of these affairs, we stayed cognizant of the fact that the study of the traumatic memory work required acceptance of the fact that these types of experiences are “perpetually re-experienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present” (p. 2).

Given the volatile nature of traumatic realism, how one feels about societal “normality” and “extremity” (Rothberg, 2000, p. 4) can provide us with some indicators of how one reacts when they reflect on the words of King Baudouin and Prime Minister Lumumba. O’Brien (1968), a former representative of the U.N. Secretary-General in Katanga, had this to say about the influential power of some of these words:

*To say that millions of Africans are affected by some event, or impressed by some personality is usually an exaggeration. . . . But the name and fate of Patrice Lumumba have really reached the minds and hearts of mil-*
For generations of anti-colonials and anti-imperialists, Lumumba would be remembered as an African hero, who must have known that his words might lead to his eventual death. Years later, De Witte (2001) noted that the events that transpired on Congolese Independence Day can be thought of as triggering factors that soon involved the diplomatic machinations of the U.S., Belgium, France, the UK-controlled Rhodesian Federation, Portugal, etc., and he viewed them as an “expression of the anti-colonial revolution which pitted the colonialist North against the colonized South” (pp. xvi-xvii). This is a scholar who treated Lumumba’s memory with reverential care, surmising that real social change could only come to the Congo when others listen to his words and sought to end the “balkanization” and “neo-colonial stronghold” that still stood in the way of Congolese regeneration (p. 183).

Yet in many circles, the Cold War contextualizations of Lumumba’s words and deeds still resonate with some postcolonial audiences. Even those who regret this loss of life and complain about the legality of sanctioned assassination still imply that his radical creeds did little to heal the wounds of traumatized communities of colonized and colonizing others. Defenders of Belgian colonization or critics of Lumumba’s brand of nationalism have continued to treat his remarks as incendiary devices that needed to be controlled and contained, and his volatile personality is often treated as a metonymic marker that perhaps illustrated the dangers of pre-mature decolonizations. Gibbs (1991) would later recall that for many critics of Congolese liberation, a “consensus” soon crystallized after Lumumba’s address, and there were those who assumed that his performance provided definitive proof that he was “unreliable, anti-Belgian, anti-white, communist, and perhaps crazy” (p. 81).

As various communities around the world read about the recent civil wars in the Congo or think back to the practices of Mobutu or other Congolese leaders (Wrong, 2002), they often search through the colonial archives so that they can read the words of Prime Minister Lumumba or hear the tone of King Baudouin’s radio message. The retrieval of information on historical remembrances of the Congo Free State or the rapacious practices of other colonizers are used in contemporary debates about reparations, renovated
museum displays, and the existence of some Leopoldian “holocaust” (Hochschild, 1998). Lumumba is treated as a prophetic figure in many of these humanitarian tales, the example of the subaltern who refused to bow down to the will of the colonizer.

Just before he died Lumumba wrote a moving letter to his wife that was filled with comments about African history, the fight against “foreign domination,” and the liberation of the Congolese, and these stirring words are now re-circulated on websites as African and European audiences come to grips with complex and entangled traumatic pasts.

At the same time, various defenders of African nationalism or the progressive advancement of human rights have portrayed Lumumba’s address as a canonical fragment that can be re-appropriated for newer causes. His legacy as a murdered martyr has been deployed by those who continue to battle for the promotion of African nationalism or the advancement of progressive socialism. Dunn (2003), for example, is convinced that over time many Europeans turned Lumumba into a scapegoat for all types of “fears and disappointments,” and he implies that he was unfairly caricatured as a wayward child who had forgotten the beneficence of a “wise father” (p. 84). From these types of vantage points, the territorials are engaging in acts of nostalgia, perhaps longing for a past that has been forgotten, or never existed.

Interestingly enough, the passage of time has not always clarified the question of just who did speak for most of the Congolese on Independence Day. In 1960, Lumumba’s political party, the National Congolese Movement (MNC), did receive a substantial number of the political votes that were recorded in the weeks preceding the independence celebrations, but this offers us only one index of the ideological power that can be conferred by lay persons or elites. The question of just how closely Lumumba’s words and deeds represented the feelings of his Congolese constituents or other Africans continues to be a major point of historical contention. Gibbs (1991), whose own analysis has focused on the geopolitical nature of the U.S. interests, is sure that this decolonization period can be configured as a “crisis.” After all, the Belgians had to cope with anger that was directed against “European tutelage,” and they had to contend “with diffuse, popular hostility” that was “widespread in the Congo” (p. 81). Almost a dozen years later, Ewans (2002) looked at the address from a slightly differently angle, and surmised that Lumumba’s speech provided us with indications that he was a “consummate orator” who was tapping into some deeply felt colonial
traumas. Here was a lowly civil servant, born into poverty, who was expressing “the sense of outrage felt by many Africans as they came to realize that their colonial lives were filled with ‘inequities’” (p. 251).

Our own investigations has led us to conclude that many of the former colonizers sincerely believed in the moral and political importance of their civilizing missions, and they remained convinced that Lumumba and his followers destroyed a potentially sublime form of beneficent colonization. With the passage of years, many of the territorials have clearly felt victimized and unfairly maligned, as their historical dreams have been re-characterized as reactionary visions of nostalgic longings. By the end of the twentieth century, postcolonial and pan-African ideologies have gained in ascendency. These contested ideologies are now tethered to debates about the individual and collective memories of the Lumumba and Baudouin addresses, and are themselves linked to new forms of imperial power. Osabu-kle (2000), for example, believed that after Lumumba’s “speech,” many Westerns rallied behind Baudouin because the “former colonial masters were not prepared to accept any condemnation or statement of the facts about colonialism and imperialism from former” colonized subjects. Reading those Independence Day events through the mists of time, he now surmised that perhaps these were omens that signaled the arrival of a “new,” “latent,” and “disguised” form of neocolonialism (p. 257).

These are interesting conjectures, but if argumentation critics really want to understand some of the historical and discursive origins of these rhetorical controversies, then they need to be able to listen to the voices of many different communities and understand the traumas that impacted the ways that various audiences debated about Belgian decolonization. The “narrative interviews” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 179) that we collected reminded us of the complexities of these colonial adventures, and we refuse to believe that these tales are simply nostalgic commentaries that are merely filled with representations of hate, racism, and economic expropriations. As Bhabha (1983) noted decades ago, both the colonized and the colonized experienced ambivalences and desires in a host of contentious ways.

Granted, colonial administrations were based on disparate power relations, but many of these colonial shards of memory are filled to the brim with visions of sacrifice, love, hope, anxieties, and incredible misunderstandings. As Chen (1997) once averred, the violence that attended decolonization impacted those who lived both within and outside former colonies (pp. 82-84), and this has left us a host of conflicting historical memory screens.
Yet various colonizers responded to a host of queries about their past in very different ways—some are unapologetic, some wistful, and others are remorseful. Regardless of their political positions on these colonial ventures, we are eternally grateful that they have provided us with much needed information about the perceived realities of some complex periods.

References


Endnotes

1. In other essays we will take up the question of how many of the Congolese felt about the 1960 decolonization and Lumumba, but in this particular essay on traumatic realism we want to begin our investigations by taking up the question of how many of the Belgian colonizers talk and write about these controversial figures and events. In order to put together materials for this essay, we collected books, articles, newspaper commentaries, diplomatic memos on these topics, and one of us traveled abroad on several occasions so that he/she could interview dozens of former doctors, diplomats, soldiers, lawyers, and other former Belgian “territorials” who lived through these turbulent decolonization periods.

2. Throughout this essay, we follow a three-tiered methodological approach that reflects the theoretical importance of both rhetorical and ethnographic insights. First, we began by collecting a wealth of archival primary and secondary sources of Baudouin and Lumumba. Second, we supplemented these with collections of transcripts that were collected during two trips to Belgium in 2006. Most of our interviews were “territorials” who worked in the Belgian Congo between 1950 and 1960, and we would like to thank official representatives of the Belgian government, several members of key territiorialist organizations, scholars working at the Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA), and many private Belgian citizens who spent literally hundreds of hours in front of cameras as taped some of this transcribed material. As Dwight Conquergood (1991) reminded us, there is much to be gained by moving from the cerebral work of the armchair and into the “open air” research that is so frequently utilized by the ethnographer (Conquergood, p. 180). Finally, we analyzed the extant audio-visual materials of the televised speeches. These include recordings of the speeches and the reactions of the crowd gathered on June 30th, 1960.

3. The “evolues” were the elite Congolese who were supposed to help with the moral, political and economic regeneration of their less fortunate African brothers and sisters.


5. If you see some of the televised materials that were circulated on June 30th, 1960, you will notice that several cameras captured on tape Lumumba’s frenetic note taking as he heard the remarks that were presented by King Baudouin and President Kasavubu. The obviously agitated writer is scribbling away (Meredith, 2005), creating a visualized distraction that deflected attention away from the solemn words of the other leaders. The words that Lumumba spoke that day still echo around twenty-first century websites as global citizens look for uncompromising heroes who demand immediate and substantive postcolonial change. We now know that one of his friends—Jean Lierde—told Lumumba about some of King Baudouin’s prepared remarks, and Akerman (2000) is convinced that when the Prime Minister decided to take his friend’s advice and speak that day, it “was probably the worst advice Lumumba ever took” (para. 34). A few months later, the Prime Minister would be assassinated in the province of Katanga, and it would take some 40 years before many European and African communities would learn the specifics of his death (De Witte, 2000).