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Performative Challenges to Belgium’s Colonial Amnesia
Mobilising Archives and Resonant Spaces

Yvette Hutchison

Colonial amnesia, the choice to forget or remember certain aspects of colonial history in specific ways, is often experienced simultaneously as déjà vu because the violence and traumas of a past keep returning to haunt the present. Ann Stoler’s edited book has usefully tracked some of the durable traces on the material environment and people’s bodies and minds that continue to revisit the present.¹ To address this haunting, many countries have set up truth commissions to ‘promote reconciliation, outline needed reforms, allow victims a cathartic airing of their pains, and represent an important, official acknowledgement of a long-silenced past.’² In July 2020 the Belgium parliament appointed ‘a “special commission” […] to look into Belgium’s colonial past in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi.’³ This commission tasked historians, political scientists, and lawyers to scope both ‘the known fundamentals and historical consensus on colonization, but they will also mention the grey areas, the aspects on which they disagree among themselves, the historical gaps.’⁴ That this was set up as a special commission, not a commission of inquiry or a truth commission that would formally investigate a period of history, suggests that Belgium acknowledges a need to engage with its colonial past, but is not prepared to fully interrogate it. In this chapter I argue that artists and performances, not included in this process officially, can play a particular role in challenging colonial amnesia and negotiating sensitive colonial histories and archives. I analyse how they can and have engaged visual memories of the past critically by connecting archives of the past with Belgium’s present particularly through the use of resonant spaces to challenge the ‘known fundamentals and historical consensus on colonization’ before this commission was constituted.

In my approach to resonance, I draw on two ideas: the idea of sympathetic resonance observed in musical instruments, which occurs when one string starts to vibrate and produce sound after a different one is struck; and the phenomenon of echolocation, a physiological process used by humans or animals to locate distant or invisible objects (such as prey or an obstacle) by sound
waves reflected back to the emitter (a blind person’s cane) from the objects. Thus, resonance can involve a sympathetic response evoked in recognition of a stimulus played back to one – in this case, histories of the past provoke an awareness of behaviours or attitudes that continue to impact the present. The sense that a sound can both orient a person and provoke further sounds frames my analysis of the ways in which artists have used archival material and spaces that have particular associations with the past to facilitate predominantly European audiences positioning themselves critically in relation to diverse colonial histories. This positioning can then produce further awareness regarding how these pasts are affecting the present and could define our futures.

But what is meant by ‘an archive’? There is much debate about the relationship between memory and archive. The director of the networking, advocacy, and research initiative Archival Platform, Jo-Anne Duggan, has suggested that:

> The act of exteriorising, or sharing, shifts memory from the private realm of the individual into the public domain. But this does not necessarily mean that it enters the archive. As with records, memory enters the archive when it is both exteriorised and deemed to be of archival value. Deemed memories enter the archive because they are considered to be potentially valuable to us when we think about the past. As valued resources, they demand preservation so that they can be accessible to others, in the present and in the future.⁵

Thus, archives are not so much about presenting facts as defining a shared understanding of the past in the present. Derrida refers to ‘the social and political power of the archive, which consists in selecting the traces in memory, in marginalising, censoring, destroying, such and such traces through precisely a selection, a filter’,⁶ in order to constitute a collective, formal version of the past in service of narrating the nation and its core values coherently.⁷ An archive is established, made visible, and disseminated through written historical narratives, literature, monuments, museums, and exhibitions. These processes can be compared to Austinian performative utterances,⁸ which not only describe a given reality, but at the moment of their utterance (‘I do’), they change the social reality that is being described (‘I am now married’). Thus, a material formulation of a narrative constitutes it into social being as an accepted reality.

Belgium’s official remembering of King Leopold II’s colonisation of the Congo from 1885 to 1908, and the Belgian state’s engagement with the colony thereafter, exemplifies this clearly. As Julien Bobineau⁹ and Matthew Stanard¹⁰ convincingly demonstrate, official Belgium colonial records have tended to emphasise Leopold II’s mission and the Belgian state’s involvement in the colonial Congo areas as being ‘civilisational’ and ‘philanthropic’.¹¹ Bobineau notes
that from ‘the 1910s Belgian historians gradually began to glorify the deceased king in order to justify the purchase of the colony’, by convincing the public that the ‘wild Africans’ needing ‘to be dressed, missionised and civilised’. Castryck suggests that even 1970s school textbooks continued to present this image of ‘Belgian heroism, until Congo disappeared from history courses altogether’. Given this silence or disavowal of Belgium’s colonial history, visual memorials are particularly significant as mnemonic embodiments of how the state has remembered this past for the nation. There are many monuments of Leopold II, ubiquitously sitting astride a horse, looking powerful. However, I want to consider an unusual rendering of him in the Royal Galleries, built to protect the bourgeois from the rain and wind when they went to the Royal Palace racetrack by the beach in Ostend. The monument was sculpted by Alfred Courtens and unveiled in 1931. (Fig. 1) At the centre and top of the bridge is a quintessential representation of Leopold II, in military dress on a horse, represented as a dignified European leader. In such commemorations, colonised subjects are usually absent, but below and on one side of the plinth, Courtens has sculpted the ‘grateful Congolese people’. The plaque states that Leopold II had ‘liberated them from the slavery by the Arabs’, and the scene on the other side is entitled
'the homage by the Ostend fishermen to its brilliant protector'. Juxtaposing these images in effect suggests an equivalent comparison of the subjugated Congolese peoples to local fishermen, patronised by a kind and benevolent king. Visually, this monument exemplifies one of the four strategies Antoon Van den Braembussche suggests are used to cope with historical taboo – namely, ‘ideological historical falsification’ – whereby Belgium continues to present itself as having been ‘reluctant imperialists’, intent on saving and civilising its colonial subjects, rather than plundering and murdering millions of people.

However, the protests against these amnesiac versions of Belgium's past in the early 2000s illustrate what happens when an ‘archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e. texts, documents, buildings, bones [monuments])’, interacts with ‘the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e. spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)’. In 2004, when the members of the Flemish group De Stoeten Ostendenoare [The Bold Ostenders] sawed off the left hand of a Congolese slave figure that featured in the Congolese group that accompanied the Ostend statue of Leopold II, the group performatively undermined the officially constituted history and made visible the disavowed memory of the cutting off of hands as part of the regime's rule of brutality and terror. The group's subsequent offer ‘to return the hand, but only if the royal family and the Belgian state apologised for their colonial history’ insists on both those currently in power acknowledging this disavowed past and the importance of symbolic reparation in addressing a violent past. The royal family have refused to perform this act to date, even though King Philippe I, in a letter addressed to Félix Tshisekedi (the Congolese premier) to mark the sixtieth anniversary of Congo's independence expressed “my deepest regrets for the injuries of the past”.

Performative resistance to Belgium's accepted history continued in 2010, when the group Collectif Memoires Coloniales et Luttes contre les Discriminations marched to this monument at Ostend on the anniversary of the assassination of Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, and symbolically replaced the cut off hand with a hand made of chocolate. They then cut the chocolate hand into pieces, which they distributed to the Congolese participants present as symbolic reparation. This performance resonated in many ways: first, it extended De Stoeten Ostendenoare's making visible Belgium's disavowed history to metaphorically reference the colonial exploitation of raw materials in the Congo, and the ongoing need for restitution. Second, the hand cast in chocolate suggested that Belgium's exploitative history is not past history but involves ongoing exploitation. Belgian chocolate is a key national symbol and a significant contributor to the economy; by ‘2013, the last year of data, Belgium was exporting more than 500,000 tons of chocolate worth more than 500 million euro. This may seem unrelated to colonialism, but there is evidence
of ongoing trafficking and slavery of African children as part of the European chocolate industry,\textsuperscript{25} despite the Harkin Engel Protocol of 2001 that was set up to eliminate child labour in the growing and processing of cocoa beans and their derivative products. This performance insisted that people see the past in the present and acknowledge European complicity in ongoing colonial resonances.

And such protests have escalated with the Black Lives Matter movement, which has included various performative interventions on social media platforms. Hezbon Mureithi’s Twitter post entitled “THIS BELGIAN BRUTE,”\textsuperscript{26} for example, juxtaposed the ubiquitous image of civilised Leopold II to archival images of colonial brutalities, thereby publicly challenging official memory and history. These posts link the past to the present directly, as they were narrated by the children of colonised peoples who continue to experience the resonances of colonialism in present global policies and everyday racism.

It is thus no surprise that growing public criticism of and dissatisfaction with Belgian colonial amnesia has motivated museums like the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, renamed the AfricaMuseum, to rethink their exhibits (see Dónal Hassett’s chapter in this volume). Thompson quotes director general of the museum, Guido Gryseels, on this project: “decolonisation is a process. We’re certainly moving toward the direction of a decolonised museum, and I think a lot of things could be a lot better,” he says, citing the involvement of the African diaspora,\textsuperscript{27} which is key to challenging amnesias in this increasingly mobile, transnational world.

**Performance engagements with the past: Exhibit B and De Waarheidscommissie**

This leads to the question of how we situate diverse bodies in performances when renegotiating memories. It is clear that individual performative acts have made national amnesia visible to the public to a limited extent. However, I suggest that artists can mobilise archives to engage publics more closely with these contested pasts. I have chosen to analyse two performance installations that interrogated disavowed Belgian history in resonant spaces in 2012–13:\textsuperscript{28} *Exhibit B* (2012–13) by South African artist Brett Bailey, and *De Waarheidscommissie* (*The Truth Commission*, 2013) by Flemish-Tunisian theatre-maker Chokri Ben Chikha with the Flemish intercultural group Action Zoo Humain.\textsuperscript{29} Both these productions mobilise specific archives in resonant spaces to facilitate what sociologist and anthropologist Johannes Fabian called a coeval approach to time and space to create a sense of ‘intersubjective time,’\textsuperscript{30} which he argues anthropological accounts specifically deny. By inhabiting the same physical space in
the present that resonates a specific past, as framed by the constituted archive, the observer is implicated in the installation. Thus, the aesthetic chosen can facilitate an active intersubjectivity that brings ‘them’ and ‘us’, ‘there’ and ‘now’ together, making the viewer aware that they are complicit in the accepted renderings of other peoples, times, and places, while resisting anthropological allochronism.

**Brett Bailey’s Exhibit B**

Brett Bailey creates provocative work that combines community projects with ‘an eclectic mix of spiritual forms: trance dance, African sangomas (diviners/shamans), consciously structuring the plays in the form of intlombe, a play within a ritual’.

He constructs his plays in this way to facilitate a critical engagement with an audience’s perceived realities. In particular, he seeks to highlight the source of fear that manifests itself in rape, murder, and other acts of violence in South African society. He never attempts to facilitate an authentic African ritual, but rather Bailey layers his performances, juxtaposing authentic rituals with highly performative melodrama to provoke thought about where our beliefs and values come from, and the implications of cultural frames for these. These provocations are evident in the titles of his plays that engage overtly with particular historic moments: *Zombie* (1995) that was reworked as *Ipi Zombie?* (1998), *iMumbo Jumbo* (1997), and *The Prophet* (1999).

*Ipi Zombie?* dramatises events that took place in Kokstad, a town in the Eastern Cape, in 1995 when three women were accused of being witches that caused a road accident resulting in the death of twelve boys travelling in a minibus, and then turning them into zombie slaves. *iMumbo Jumbo* stages the quest by Chief Nicholas Gcaleka to retrieve the head of his ancestor, King Hintsa kaPhalo, paramount chief of the AmaXhosa, from Scotland. The title suggests how confusing such negotiations can be, but also the terms used to dismiss the returning colonised subject who comes to claim colonial reparations. *The Prophet* (1999) tells of Nonqawuse, a fifteen-year-old girl who persuaded the Xhosa people to sacrifice all their livestock to overcome the British in the midnineteenth century, suggesting the horrifying consequences of believing impossible prophecies. These plays all use highly theatricalised aesthetics, which Bailey calls Afro-Kitsch, to address specific horrors. Here Bailey engages Hannah Arendt’s argument regarding the banality of evil and thoughtlessness in connection with the Eichmann trial in Germany in 1961, where she questions whether the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite
independent of results, could […] be of such a nature that it ‘conditions’ men against evildoing?\textsuperscript{34}

Both Arendt and Bailey insist that revising violence requires more than an intellectual excavation of facts. Bailey suggests that it requires people to perceive and acknowledge that the source of social imbalance and violence is not external but begins with something within themselves, often fear of the unknown or the inexplicable. Bailey uses theatrical frames to move audiences between subjective and interrogative modes of experience and thought to acknowledge their complicitities\textsuperscript{35} and so begin a secular exorcism of past and present violences.

In 2009 Bailey shifted from creating theatrical plays dealing with violent events to interactive installations, beginning with the one-off performance *Blood Diamonds: Terminal*, a work that ‘rests contextually on the history of the city, and the massive divide and bloody fault-lines which separate the obscenely wealthy from the obscenely poor, in this country in general, but Grahamstown in particular’.\textsuperscript{36} In this performance, audience members were ushered into the ticket office and then waited on the platform of the old Grahamstown station, before a young ‘street child’ led them individually by the hand down the platform, over the railway bridge, into the graveyard, and beyond into the Xhosa areas of the town. The silent journey was punctuated by a series of performance installations that illustrated the fault lines that continue to divide the colony and Africa. This marked the beginning of Bailey’s engagement with disavowed histories through installations. Bailey’s *Exhibit Series*, which deals with disavowed European colonial histories, began in 2010. Bailey says, ‘what I’m looking at in this work is how Europeans have represented the African body and how those distortions have led to a particular sequence of actions and legitimized some of the most terrible atrocities’.\textsuperscript{37}

*Exhibit A* (2010–11)\textsuperscript{38} explored German colonial South West Africa, now Namibia. *Exhibit B* (2012–13)\textsuperscript{39} considered atrocities under the Belgian and French colonial regimes in the two Congos. *Exhibit C* was planned to expose British colonialism in Africa, but this was replaced by a reworked *Exhibit B* (2014),\textsuperscript{40} which addressed general European colonial histories, and was specifically aimed at European audiences, so they were not performed in Africa beyond Namibia and South Africa. The installations, *Exhibits A & B*, exhibits were set up as a series of individual rooms, which audience members entered one by one and were confronted by twelve to fourteen fixed tableaux vivants that depicted images of colonial atrocities taken from archives or contemporary images of racism by European nations towards African asylum seekers. These included images of the genocide of the Herero and Namaqua by the German colonisers in 1904 in German South West Africa, now Namibia, with images
of individuals, such as a Black woman who sits on the edge of a bed in chains, waiting to be raped by her master, alongside examples of contemporary incidents of racism by European nations towards African asylum seekers, like the deportation from Schiphol airport of an illegal immigrant who suffocated on the aeroplane. The performers silently stared back at the spectators as they paused to sit and look at them in the chairs provided, read the accompanying plaques, or passed on. These installations were clearly designed to parody the human zoos of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where Europeans could look at individuals or groups of people brought from various colonies as exhibits. Bailey used local performers and immigrants in each city the installations were staged to embody the disavowed images and ask what we know, how we know it, and how far we are postcolonial.

After a successful run of *Exhibit A*, Bailey researched and mounted *Exhibit B* at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts (KFDA) in partnership with the Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg KVS (Brussels) [Royal Flemish Theatre] in 2012. Initially the work was received positively. Part of the success of the early exhibitions was Bailey’s careful choice of resonant found spaces in which the work was performed: in Brussels it was staged in the monumental but destitute Gesù church; later in 2012 it was staged at the Berliner Festspiele in the daunting old water towers on Prenzlauer Berg, once the site of an early Nazi concentration camp. In an interview on the Brussels exhibition Bailey said,

I was looking for a location in Brussels I first considered the magnificent Palais de Justice, because it was built under Leopold II and represents justice in a disputable way. I also thought of the public Galeries Saint-Hubert, but I soon realised that unless you frame a performance like this very carefully, informed looking and reflection becomes very difficult. The Gesù church is interesting because it was squatted for many years by undocumented people who today are still living in the adjacent monastery. Indeed, another thing I look at is the present policy of the European Union towards African immigrants: the deportation centres, the racial classification based on DNA profiling, people without documents, etc. Bailey’s choice of venues facilitated audience members perceiving the connections between different pasts and present struggles: linking by association colonial violence, the Holocaust, and contemporary policies and behaviours towards migrants in Europe. Bailey intensified these associations in his casting strategy by recruiting local performers and immigrants without acting experience to perform alongside the Herero performers who travelled with the show and sang in the final tableaux. These Namibian performers were juxta-
posed against German professor of medicine, anthropology, and eugenics Dr Eugen Fischer’s ethnographic photographs. This overtly suggests comparisons between his field research in German South West Africa in 1906, which included medical experiments on the Herero and Namaqua people that resulted in interracial marriage being prohibited throughout the German colonies from 1912 and later legislation on race including the Nuremberg laws, with the medical experiments conducted on Jews in Nazi Germany and recent deportations of immigrants that have led to their deaths. The uncomfortable question arises: how postcolonial is contemporary Europe?

Re-engaging the past is never easy or simple, nor do intentions always translate into the desired effect, as seen by responses to later performance installations: some historians and individuals of former colonies applauded the exhibits, and others roundly condemned them, all in quite emotional terms. Protests against Exhibit B began in Berlin in 2012. Members of Buehnenwatch were outraged about the aesthetic form Bailey had chosen to use, and Black activists joined demonstrations at the Kleiner Wasserspeicher, where the work was programmed as part of the Foreign Affairs Festival. Sandrine Micosse-Aikins stated, ‘This is the wrong way to discuss a violent colonial history’. In a post-performance public debate in Berlin, South African-born spoken-word artist Philipp Khabo Koepsell challenged Bailey directly, saying:

If you have a white South African director giving orders to black performers to tell their story voicelessly, you’re not breaking the legacy […] You are enforcing and reproducing it. You can call it whatever you like, but the fact is that you as a white, privileged person are sitting there and ordering black people around.

Race features centrally in these protests: Bailey was challenged not only for his choice of aesthetics but also for being a White stage director, which gave him specific ‘privilege’ and access to spaces and archives, not available to Black immigrants or subjects. However, performers like Collivan Nsorockebe Nso, who played Aamir Ageeb, a twenty-year-old Sudanese asylum seeker who was suffocated on a passenger flight in 1999, alongside the names of fourteen immigrants who died while resisting deportation from Europe between 1991 and 2010, said:

This is my story […] I’m a Cameroonian, and I’ve been in Germany since 2002. I should have been deported in 2006. I hate talking about it. It’s so painful. I don’t want sympathy; this is how we live every day. There is this silence, but we need to talk about these things.
These diverse responses opened a space with great potential to engage publics not only with what was being remembered but by whom, for what purpose, and on what terms. They particularly suggested that certain aesthetics may or may not be appropriate to engage violences of the past and questioned how power dynamics can be made visible without replicating them. These exhibits literally staged silence and the power of the gaze, using these strategies to implicate each audience member, who had to choose whether to look or look away, and think about what they did or did not know about the histories or contemporary incidents cited.

However one evaluates Exhibit B, not working with local communities whose histories were involved and not including images of everyday racism significantly affected this work’s reception. Later protests in the United Kingdom and Paris exposed how disconnected major cultural institutions like the Barbican were from communities beyond their regular audience members. Paul Richards from the UpRise anti-racism campaign and BrazenBunch arts collective said regarding protests in the United Kingdom:

The people who created, commissioned and staged Exhibit B did not grasp the gravity of the issues it tackled and the impact it would have. The Barbican did not consult the black British or African communities […]. There was no cognitive or cultural diversity in the conversation. Something like this has to be in consultation, or have informed decisions, with the community.

This argument about consulting local communities regarding Exhibit B, which was cancelled due to protests, is fascinating because these same groups did not insist on being part of the decisions about how archives are being negotiated in the British Museum or programming in the Barbican’s mainstream venues, where Bailey’s adaptation of Verdi’s Macbeth, which includes similarly provocative images of Africa’s colonial and postcolonial history, had been staged the preceding week. This anomaly suggests that there is something about the way in which specific spaces, here The Vaults, a maze of disused railway arches under Waterloo station in London, and physical repertoires of remembering expressed through embodied performances of oppression, can trigger deeply emotional responses. This juxtaposition illustrates Diana Taylor’s argument for dialogic interaction between archives and repertoires when negotiating memories and histories, highlighting the importance of key players situating themselves carefully in relation to the narratives, experiences, memories, and histories that are invoked in these restagings of contested pasts. Form is key – despite Bailey’s insistence that, ‘This is not a human zoo […] It’s performance theater,’ this was not what audiences and local Black communities perceived. The sense of outrage
at a White South African highlighting issues of Black African suffering in Europe using an aesthetic they felt replicated the violence was outrageous to many.

**Action Zoo Humain: De Waarheidscommissie/The Truth Commission,** Ghent 2013

Action Zoo Humain is an intercultural artistic collective formed around brothers Chokri and Zouzou Ben Chikha. Since 2017, the company has been funded by the Flemish government; and from the 2018–19 season, it has had artist-in-residence status at NTGent, the city theatre of Ghent and one of the biggest theatres in Belgium. However, I am going to look back at the play that launched this company in Ghent in 2013. I begin with the geopolitical context from which this play by Moroccan-Flemish Belgians working with other immigrants emerged. The context creates two layers for the work: first, it explores how Flanders positions itself in relation to Belgium in terms of different cultural hegemonies, particularly vis-à-vis language, and second, in relation to wider immigration issues. Bobineau notes that

> [a]ccording to a joint survey of the [French-language] newspaper *La Libre Belgique* and the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard* in 2010, almost half of Flemings (46%) generally rejected the Belgian monarchy while only 26% of the Walloons demanded a republic without a royal house.

Based on the perceived shared linguistic and sociopolitical struggles against the dominant French Belgian administration, Flemings tend to associate themselves with the subjugated colonised rather than with those involved in the colonial endeavour, despite many missionaries having been recruited to the Congo from Flanders. In part, this play critiques this positioning of Flemish Belgians as solely victims, and suggests they are implicated in both Belgium’s past and the legacies of its colonialism that continue to resonate in the present, particularly in its immigration policies.

*De Waarheidscommissie* took as its specific topic the one hundredth anniversary of the Ghent World Fair, while noting wider engagements with similar events:

Flanders and Belgium were champions of human zoo for millions of visitors until a century ago. Think of the 144 Congolese in Antwerp (1894), the 270 Congolese in Brussels (1897) or the 128 Senegalese and 60 Filipinos at the Ghent World Exhibition (1913), who were literally or imaginatively placed in a cage.
The play set out to interrogate how Ghent officially positioned itself in relation to this aspect of Belgium’s colonial past. The website Ghent, 1913–2013 the Century of Progress described the original exhibitions of Filipino and Senegalese peoples as ‘the 28th in a long row of exhibitions which had been organized in Europe and America since 1851’, where visitors came to ‘gaze at “these savages” with their bizarre way of life’.

It noted the scale and backing of the exhibit in positive terms, ‘by pacesetters from the private sector, by eminent industrials and representatives of the social elite in Ghent’. The section entitled ‘Ark of Mamon’ defended its place in the nineteenth-century scramble for Africa, suggesting that ‘Belgium showed the world that it was absolutely right to seize the enormous territory in Central Africa from the hands of the severely contested “owner” King Leopold II’. Action Zoo Humain felt that the terms of this remembering of Belgium’s colonial past was inappropriate and thus they created a performative critique, pitting the archive against various embodied repertoires of remembering this past.

Like Bailey, Chokri and Zouzou Ben Chikha chose resonant spaces for their critical performances: in Belgium it premiered in April 2013 in the former courthouse on Koophandelsplein in Ghent (Fig. 2); in South Africa it was performed in February 2014 in the Senate building at the University of the Western
Cape, which was the former ‘coloured’ Chamber of the Tricameral Parliament of South Africa between 1984–1994. These spaces reminded audiences of the venues’ legal, judicial, and sociopolitical roles both in the past and present. The spatial arrangements for the performances denied audiences the comfort of passively watching the proceedings; in both contexts, audiences faced one another: on the traverse in Ghent, and on three sides in Cape Town. This forced audiences to watch both the staged performance and one another’s reactions to the proceedings.

The play’s titular reference to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 1996–98) signals the company’s intention to use this play to engage critically with Belgium’s colonial history and its contemporary resonances. The South African TRC extended its mandate beyond investigating the acts and patterns of violence and gross human rights violations that took place during a specified period of time, as are the usual parameters of such commissions, to ‘restore victims their human and civil dignity by letting them tell their stories and recommending how they can be assisted.’ This placed the personal narratives of both survivors and perpetrators at the heart of the commission, thereby challenging previous versions of South African history and its legal processes.

By invoking the TRC, the artists signalled their intention to move away from traditional fiction towards verbatim or documentary theatre, which blurs the boundary between what is ‘real’ and what is fictional. This form provokes questions about how we access truth and ascertain veracity, again echoing some of Bailey’s concerns. Traditionally, verbatim theatre cites actual people and their words to interrogate an event, in this case the 1913 World Fair in Ghent, to challenge the findings and archives formally adopted by the state. Simultaneously, this form facilitates a collective exploration of the trauma for survivors, in this case descendants of the Senegalese people exhibited, and by association, other formerly colonised peoples. In this piece, the commission is chaired by a significant public figure, Herman Balthazar, an academic and former governor of Flanders. In South Africa his co-commissioners were Mrs Josiane Rimbaut, a news reporter; Mrs Marijke Pinoy, an actress, dancer, and mother of five; Christopher Kudyahakudadirwe, an African historian and activist; and Ilse Marien, who was responsible for the social inclusion of immigrants in Belgium. Those testifying include a descendant of a Senegalese man who died in the Ghent exhibition, Madi Diali, played by Michael Olabode Hyslop in Cape Town and Ousmane N’Diaye in Ghent. He comes to the commission to petition the Belgian government to repatriate his ancestor’s remains, represented materially in South Africa by a skeleton, and in Belgium by moulded heads. Dr Verdoolaege (University of Ghent) is a researcher who presents ‘facts’ regarding
the conditions and experiences of the Senegalese people in the 1913 exhibition. Tom Lanoye, Flanders's best known and highly acclaimed playwright, plays the role of Cyriel Buysse, a Flemish naturalist and playwright who fought for the rights of the Flemish language, but whose writing includes racist passages. This mixture of identifiable people and actors representing historical characters and contemporary figures indicates various positions in this debate regarding Belgium's colonial past and how colonial attitudes continue to resonate in the present, as exemplified by references to Belgium's programmes for integration and language policies for immigrants.63

Both the spatial arrangements and testimonial form invited audiences to 'bear witness', a term that conjures a law court, where witnesses' testimonies become the basis for a verdict; a community support group where individuals publicly acknowledge faith or a taboo secret, like substance abuse or alcohol dependence; or where one is called upon to report on a significant event at which one has been an agent or bystander. All these instances require individuals to actively speak out and to take a position regarding an issue or event. Action Zoo Humain overtly invited audience members 'to take part in the Truth Commission [to] watch and listen to the witnesses to [sic] the dubious event of 1913, testifying in word, image and movement'.64 This invitation also overtly signals their intention to shift away from privileging spoken testimony, as is the case in most commissions,65 to include embodied repertoires of remembering. Once again, the archive of formal documentation is juxtaposed against repertoires of memory held in peoples' bodies, including those of the audience, who are asked to interpret what they see and hear in relation to what they already do or do not know or believe.

For example, Diali's ritual drumming, performed by Ousmane N'Diaye in Ghent (Fig. 3), or Chantal Loial's dance (Fig. 4), which visually references Sarah Baartman, can only be interpreted against knowledge that audience members already have of these specific histories and cultures. Thus, the performances themselves invite audiences to question what they know about Africa and Belgian colonialism, how, and why this is so. The manner in which these performances blurred specific temporal-spatial referents of here and now, there and then, invoked Fabian's intersubjective temporality to destabilise how audiences believe they make meaning of the past in relation to the present. For example, after Loial's dance, the actress-commissioner raised concerns about this performance, which left her feeling 'disturbed, confused, like a voyeur'. She suggested that 'this dance was maybe not in the right place as it was not a theatre or museum, but a commission'. She objected to the dancer being re-objectified by a male choreographer for the sake of his reputation and the audience's pleasure. This response suggested that the embodied mode of performance
both evoked the colonial period and demonstrated the ethical issues involved in re-representing subjugated people from the past in the present, as the past and its representations segue into the present, and issues of representation and reproduction converge, as they might do in dramatic reconstructions in court proceedings. The embodied performance created much greater disturbance than images of Sarah Baartman in a history textbook. The physical repertoire and the performer’s insistence on her own agency challenged colonial notions of the fixed, passive colonial subject.

The play further conflates the past and present by means of Mourade Zeguendi’s participation as a contemporary Moroccan immigrant to Belgium. Throughout the piece he constantly interrupted proceedings with requests for a translation of what was being said, or by objecting to Belgium’s current immigrant integration programme, which irritated the Belgian commissioners. These interventions highlighted how language is at the heart of much of Belgium’s politics, as the status of French and Dutch has long been debated. It also serves to draw parallels between African colonial issues of the past with contemporary cultural hegemonies experienced by European minority groups and immigrants, further complicating narratives of the ‘past’, ‘progress’, and ‘post-coloniality’.
Zeguendi also highlights broader assumptions about what is African and the complexities involved in interpreting unfamiliar embodied performances when he, as a Moroccan, objected to the Senegalese man’s impassioned ritual dance between the first and second hearings. Zeguendi accused him of dancing ‘like a monkey’ for White people, as his ancestors did in the zoo. The irate Diali responded by insisting that neither the audience nor Zeguendi had understood the ritual he had performed for his ancestor, and that he neither wants to perform for Whites nor does he need anyone to defend or moderate him, as he can choose how and for whom he performs. This heated interchange forced the audience to reconsider the idea of a homogenous Africa, and how even Africans’ own specific knowledge of various African performances and cultures can influence their various understanding of resistances and histories being engaged.

These challenges regarding audience positionality and their processes of interpretation are important, as they demonstrate how a performance can offer more than a polemical viewpoint on complex colonial issues if the aesthetic is significantly nuanced. South African theatre director Mark Fleishmann suggests that performance can involve a kind of transformation when ‘a physical action or gesture begins as one thing and metamorphoses into something else passing through a range of possibilities in between.’66 This is most evident in the
embodied performances, which remain ambiguous in this play. The physical action ‘opens up a plural field of possibility for the spectator. Each image is in this sense dialogical: a play of open-ended possibilities interacting between two fixed poles which exist in some form of dialogue with each other’. These two fixed poles could include spectators’ perceptions of their own identity and history, and the spaces between these perceptions and what is being performed could open up an awareness of alternative possibilities and perspectives on the past, and these resonances allow us to resituate ourselves relationally.

This production questioned everything, even its own documentary form, which suggests the performance as live and authentic, despite its being clearly scripted (with translations projected onto the screen in South Africa). The limits of performance are also raised when, at the end, the commission handed over specific recommendations regarding the processing of African artists’ visas, reparations of wages for Senegalese descendants of those in the Human Zoo of 1913, and the inclusion of this aspect of Flemish history in the school curricula (see Catherine Gilbert’s chapter in this volume) to Belgian government officials. This act raises questions regarding the potential efficacy of theatre beyond facilitating awareness, to suggest that it could influence cultural policymaking regarding the colonial past. Although seemingly utopian, this may be an extension of documentary theatre’s attempt to ‘construct the past in service of a future the authors would like to create’.

Theatre’s role in facilitating a dialogic re-engagement of contemporary audiences’ senses of accepted history and how this relates to their current values was most obvious when Chokri and Zouzou Ben Chikha requested the audience actively support their insistence that the African performers hand over their passports to prevent their illegal disappearance at the end of the show. The debates between audience members that followed in Ghent and Cape Town became quite heated. This move from documentary theatre to invisible theatre forced audience members to analyse their attitudes towards contemporary ‘others’ against the backdrop of the show’s engagement with the Ghent human zoo, thus demonstrating the possible gap between values articulated in theory and those tested in a highly charged context, which further complicates processes of re-evaluating actions, views, and values of the past.

However, both pieces raise the question of where such work needs to be done – as neither has been performed in the areas of the two Congos discussed. They primarily address the European coloniser from the perspective of supposedly previously colonised subjects who continue to face the legacies of colonialism as immigrants or post-apartheid subjects. This suggests that addressing colonial amnesia is shifting from national histories to more transnational perspectives, as people continue to move from the Global South to the Global North, and thus
unavoidably insist on disavowed stories being heard. These works indicate the ways in which performance can ‘open the space between analysis and action, and […] pull the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice’, and thereby make visible silences in archives and demonstrate how colonialism continues to resonate in the contemporary world. However, it also exemplifies the potential impact aesthetic choices and resonant spaces may have on people for whom these images and experiences may be painful. Thus, it underscores the critical importance of cultural institutions involving subjugated peoples in the processes of negotiating contested or disavowed histories and memories. Arranging these kinds of mediated encounters between colonial archival material, embodied audiences, and performers in significant resonant spaces can play a crucial role in facilitating transnational echolocation that allows us to lay our colonial ghosts to rest by finding appropriate cultural expressions that ‘promote reconciliation, outline needed reforms, allow victims a cathartic airing of their pains, and represent an important, official acknowledgement of a long-silenced past’.71
Notes


4. Ibid.

5. Jo-Anne Duggan, ‘From memory to archive’, editorial for \textit{Archival Platform}, 26 July 2011 <From memory to archive | Archive & Public Culture (uct.ac.za)> [accessed 18 August 2011].


11. In the post-colonial period, critical voices have emerged, particularly from the 1980s onwards, see Jean Stengers, \textit{Congo, mythes et réalités. 100 ans d’histoire} (Paris; Louvain-la-Neuve: Éditions Duculot, 1986).


17. Ibid., p. 30.


20. This is a huge historic debate. About this aspect of colonial rule, see congo, \textit{Mythes et réalité} by Stengers.


29. Other work engaging in similar explorations include European Attraction Limited’s controversial restaging of a human zoo in Oslo from May to August 2014, to mark the hundredth anniversary of the Norwegian Jubilee Exhibition of 1914; and Swedish filmmaker Göran Hugo Olsson’s 2014 documentary Concerning Violence, which juxtaposes images from multiple African subaltern histories against verbatim extracts from Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth, that are delivered by singer, songwriter and activist Lauryn Hill, see Concerning Violence Press Kit, 2014 <http://dogwoof.com/files/concerning-violence-press-kit/> [accessed 12 May 2014].


38. Staged in 2010: Wiener Festwochen (Vienna), Theaterformen Festival (Hannover); 2011: Kiasma Centre (Helsinki).

39. Staged in 2012: Kunstfesten Festival des Arts in partnership with KVS (Brussels), National Arts Festival (Grahamstown, SA), Berliner Festspiele (Berlin); 2013: Holland Festival (Amsterdam), Vooruit Centre (Ghent), Avignon Festival, Le 104 (Paris), Le Maillon (Strasbourg).


42. Quoted in Michael Bellon, ‘KFDA012: Brett Bailey Takes to the Courtroom,’ Agenda magazine, 3 May 2012, paragraph 4, KFDA012: Brett Bailey takes to the courtroom | BRUZZ [accessed 18 July 2014 and 2 September 2021]

43. On this notorious figure, see Elise Font naille-N’Diaye’s Blue Book (Paris: Calman-Lévy, 2015).


45. Buehnenwatch is an association of people from the arts, science and journalism established in 2011 that keeps watch over German theatre performances and speak out against perceived racist practices or performances. https://www.facebook.com/buehnenwatch/ [accessed 1 August 2022].

46. Quoted in Shirley Atpnor, ‘Black “Human Zoo” Fury Greets Berlin Art Show,’ Bloomberg News,
Performative Challenges to Belgium’s Colonial Amnesia


47. Cited by Apthorp in ‘Black “Human Zoo”’.

48. Ibid.


50. In BBC, ‘Exhibit B: Is Controversial Art Show Racist?’.


52. Quoted in Apthorp, in ‘Black “Human Zoo”’.


59. The VDE photographs were taken in Belgium by Kurt van der Elst. All photographs are reproduced with permission of Action Zoo Humain.


61. There is a vast literature from various disciplines that analyses the form and impact of South Africa’s TRC, and it is well beyond the scope of this chapter, see Yvette Hutchison, South African Performance and Archives of Memory (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013).