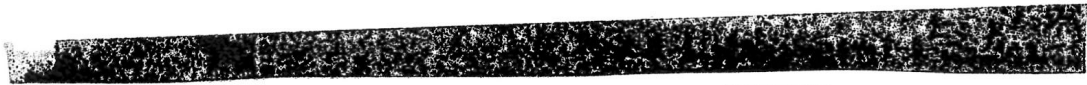


# Repression



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In its most basic form, repression as a mode of colonial heritage practice or management signifies the various ways in which communities might refuse or reject dealing with their colonial heritage – or at least with its problematic ('traumatic') elements. Repression is, as such, at stake in heritage practices which either simply ignore that given objects or sites are enmeshed in a colonial history, or which articulate that colonial history in heroic or apologetic discourses, thereby reproducing established social hegemonies through its recycling of the fundamentally binary imaginaries of colonialism: civilized/savage, metropole/colony, modernity/backwardness. This grand narrative of European modernity, and of its supposedly benevolent extension to the entire world, has tended to repress not just the systemic violence entailed in this process and the often predatory motives behind it, but also the entire alternative chronology that European modernity was born of the exploitation of

non-European territories (in South America), rather than justifying their later occupation (as regards Africa and Asia) [Quijano 2007].

I am, however, fully aware that to signify such practices with the concept of 'repression' is not uncontroversial, and it potentially invites the well-known critiques which have in recent decades sought to expel 'psychologizing' or 'psychoanalysing' language from the (sociological) study of collective memories and their attending heritage practices. But while the choice to, nonetheless, stick with 'repression' here is not meant to signal a return to Freudian dogma, it is also not simply an empty stylistic gesture solely aimed at maintaining alliteration across the four main concepts in ECHOES (Repression, [Removal](#), [Reframing](#) and [Reemergence](#)). Rather, I believe it is exactly the 'psychoanalytic baggage' in the concept of repression which makes it – for our purposes – what might be called a generative analogy; not a strict theory to be applied to a social phenomenon, but a way of discovering new ways to think about certain kinds of colonial heritage and its practice/ management. This is because – even while I do not want to import the link to instinctual drives or the Freudian theory of the unconscious [Freud 1953 (1915), Jones 1993] – 'Repression' does direct our attention to aspects and elements of heritage practices (and collective memory) which are lost in too strict a separation between that which is articulated and that which is silenced. Repression connotes a rejection of the past which is never

completely successful, and therefore a situation where the past haunts the present, establishing a space *between* what is articulated and what is not; a space of ghostly remainders neither fully acknowledged nor able to be completely dispelled from communal life [Frosh 2013]. Therefore, unlike what is at times claimed in Memory Studies in order to justify its rejection [cf. Smelser 2004: 51], Repression does not signify an 'Orwellian' notion of the past as completely malleable by those who hold power in the present. On the contrary, the concept of Repression simultaneously connotes the forceful rejection of a past experience, and its 'return' or lingering existence despite this effort. 'Repression' carries with it, therefore, a more complex understanding of the interaction between past and present than notions such as the 'silenced', 'marginalized' or 'forgotten' past which seem to constitute its major conceptual alternatives in contemporary Memory Studies.

By using 'Repression' as a generative analogy for certain heritage practices we can question not only the reduction of collective memory processes to the dichotomy between presence (what is clearly articulated) and absence (what is forgotten), but also its accompanying strict separation between the individual and the collective. Sweeping claims rejecting psychoanalytic ideas as only relevant to the individual level, such as Wulf Kansteiner's remark that "*[n]ations can repress with psychological impunity; their collective memories can be changed without a*

*'return of the repressed'* [Kansteiner 2002: 186] or Iwona Irwin-Zarecka's insistence that *"collective remembering has to be out in the open, as it were"* [Irwin-Zarecka 1994: 116], ignores the fact that, as Dominic LaCapra insists, *"there is nothing 'individual' about such concepts as repression (...)"* [LaCapra 1998: 43]. Indeed, in the post-Freudian theories of, for example, Laplanche or Lacan, the unconscious itself unfolds in language and in interaction with others [Frosh 2013].

But more importantly, such strict divisions between absence and presence, collective and individual, might cause us to overlook how certain heritages can be a part of social life even if they are not clearly or fully articulated; even if they are reduced to a haunting disturbance or potentiality at the edges of social practice. It is such omissions, silences or taboos – shared across generations – which constitute the 'collective' character of repression. To enlist repression as a generative, therefore, does not mean that we have to accept Freud's pseudo-Lamarckian ideas of traumatic experiences being literally inherited. In Torok and Abraham's work on the idea of the Phantom, there is no 'inherited trauma' but instead a silence communicated in a communal sphere, and as such passed between socially interacting generations [Abraham and Torok 1994]. The phantom is the cultural inheritance of a lack, of a realm about which we do not talk, without necessarily being fully aware why or exactly what it is that is, as such, prohibited. Insofar as the dynamics of

repression can be said to play themselves out *socially* in language (as well as in other socially-communicative practices) – in what is said, not said, unsaid, indicated, hinted at or surrounded by *uncomfortable* silences – their exile to a pristine and neatly bordered sphere of 'the individual' becomes hard to maintain. Instead, repression as a mode of heritage practice should direct our attention to the conspicuous or 'noisy' silences in communal life and collective memory.

### **Repressed heritage practices**

It is crucial to emphasize that the forms of colonial heritage practice which might fall under the mode of repression are various, multifaceted and might even accommodate the partial articulation of colonial atrocities. Elements or objects of a colonial heritage can be articulated, displayed and admitted in ways that in fact serve to repress it. Most straightforwardly this would be true for practices which make of the colonial heritage something else, which retain its material objects or sites, but signify these with little reference to their embeddedness in a colonial context and relationship; for example, warehouses for colonial goods admired *solely* as mercantile architecture or railways in postcolonial territories becoming entirely decontextualized emblems of engineering and technological progress. Unlike reframing, where the colonial signification persists even as it is inserted into novel frames, such

practices would constitute repression to the extent that the colonial signification is not simply reframed but crossed out; to the extent that the practice seeks to entirely free the railways of their meaning as an infrastructure of domination and subjection, and the warehouses from their echoes of slave labour. And yet, as argued above, even in such instances we should still pay attention equally to the extent to which such echoes are not entirely eliminated – silenced once and for all – but remain as a ghostly presence, something about which questions could be asked, but no one does.

Perhaps especially the realm of popular culture seems replete with examples of such ghostly remnants, in and through which the colonial past is simultaneous present and absent. A poignant example, mentioned by Astrid Nonbo Andersen in her book on Danish colonial memory [Nonbo Andersen 2017: 259–260], is that of the Danish children's Christmas TV sequel 'The island of the pixies' (2003). This is the story of a group of Santa's elves, set in the former Danish colonial possessions in the West Indies. As Nonbo Andersen remarks, these islands are portrayed as a tropical paradise where everybody speaks Danish, but while the sale of these possessions to the US in 1917 is mentioned, little else about Danish colonialism is openly dealt with. And yet clues and reminders seem to be enigmatically strewn across the production. The Danish elves meet up with two coloured local elves (one played by a Danish-Ghanaian

actor, the other by a Danish actor in heavy makeup) who – as it is somewhat euphemistically remarked – were 'left behind when the Danes left the island'. Even though one of these West-Indian elves is called 'Sugar' and they live in an abandoned sugar mill, any explanation of why these local elves are African/ coloured in appearance or why sugar seems to be such a central referent in this context (slave labour being the answer to both questions) is simply neglected.

My point here is that this is more than a simple silencing. The Danish colonial past is not eradicated, silenced or disallowed in some banal totalitarian fashion – it is the very setting and context of this production. And yet, it is simultaneously denied articulation, robbed of its own signification. It becomes instead something that disturbs or unsettles this harmonious tableau of Christmas joy through a series of non sequiturs. Slavery, for example, becomes a kind of ghostly presence, at the same time blindingly obvious and studiously ignored. An exploration of repression as a heritage practice might start from the question of how such simultaneity of presence and absence, this conjuring trick of something made transparent – 'spectral' – right before our eyes, is achieved and maintained in concrete political, cultural and social performances.

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