

Protracted Congolese refugees, return aspirations, and the (re)imagining of Congo:

The mediating effect of imagination in the process of memorialized territorialization

Nicolas Parent
Department of Geography
McGill University





Memorialized territorialization

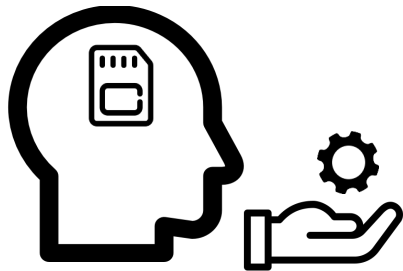
Foundation:

- ❑ Social constructivist vision of territory
 - Territory is (re)made through **material** and **non-material** practices
- ❑ Critical perspectives on territory and memory
 - Both invoke questions of power

Memorialized territorialization

Result:

- ❑ Memory (internal-individual) and memorialization practices (external-communal) play a part in the process of territorialization
- ❑ Conversely, territory stands as the substratum for the development and maintaining of memories and memorialization practices



Memory and
memorialization practices

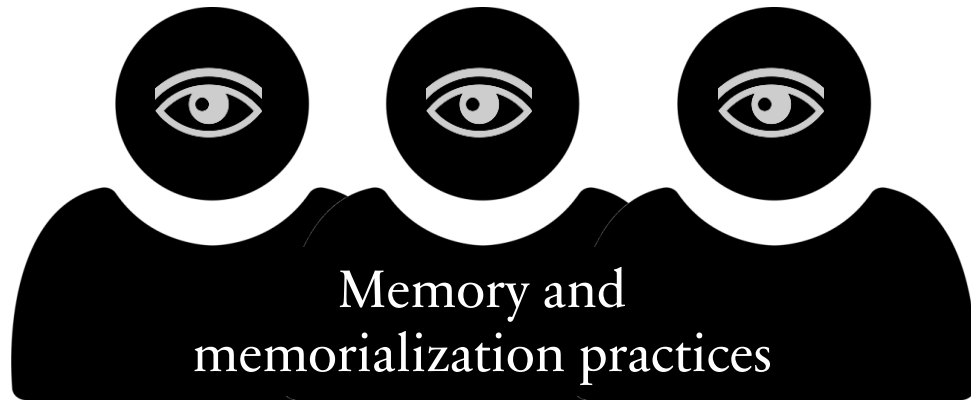


Territorialization

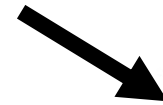
Exile and spatial separation

Factors at play (diaspora studies):

- Conditions and place of exile
- Political agency across geographies
- Continued connectivity
- Continued claims and grievances



Memory and
memorialization practices



Territorialization



Imagination as a social practice

Within a camp setting and in the context of voluntary repatriation (i.e. return), memorialized territorialization is articulated through the social practice of imagination:

“The **image**, the **imagined**, the **imaginary** – these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: *the imagination as a social practice* ... the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practices), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility.” (Appadurai 1996: 31)

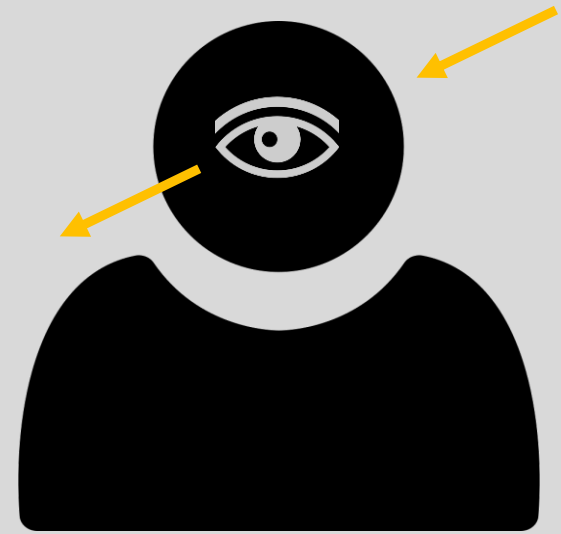
Image

“The so-call violence of my people, of Central Africans, is a violence that was made and sharpened by colonials. This is the violence that has torn our bodies and lands apart. If we are to rid ourselves of this sickness, we must show that we are united and peaceful.”

– A.A., Congolese refugee, Mahama camp, Rwanda

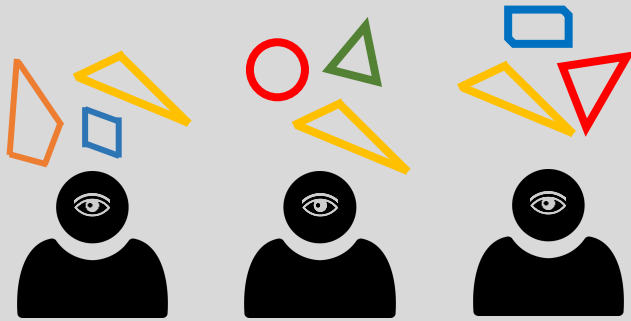
“For my people who have an agrarian heritage, land is everything. It is sacred and the most precious gift from the heavens. With the blood of conflict, we have denigrated this gift ... We must transform our violation of land and those who work it, and prove through peaceful collaboration that we appreciate this gift that gives life.”

– J.B., Congolese refugee, Mahama camp, Rwanda

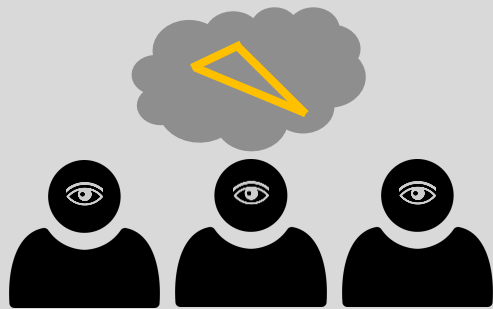


The image is the perceptual
(imagery, representation, and perception)

Imaginaries and imagined community

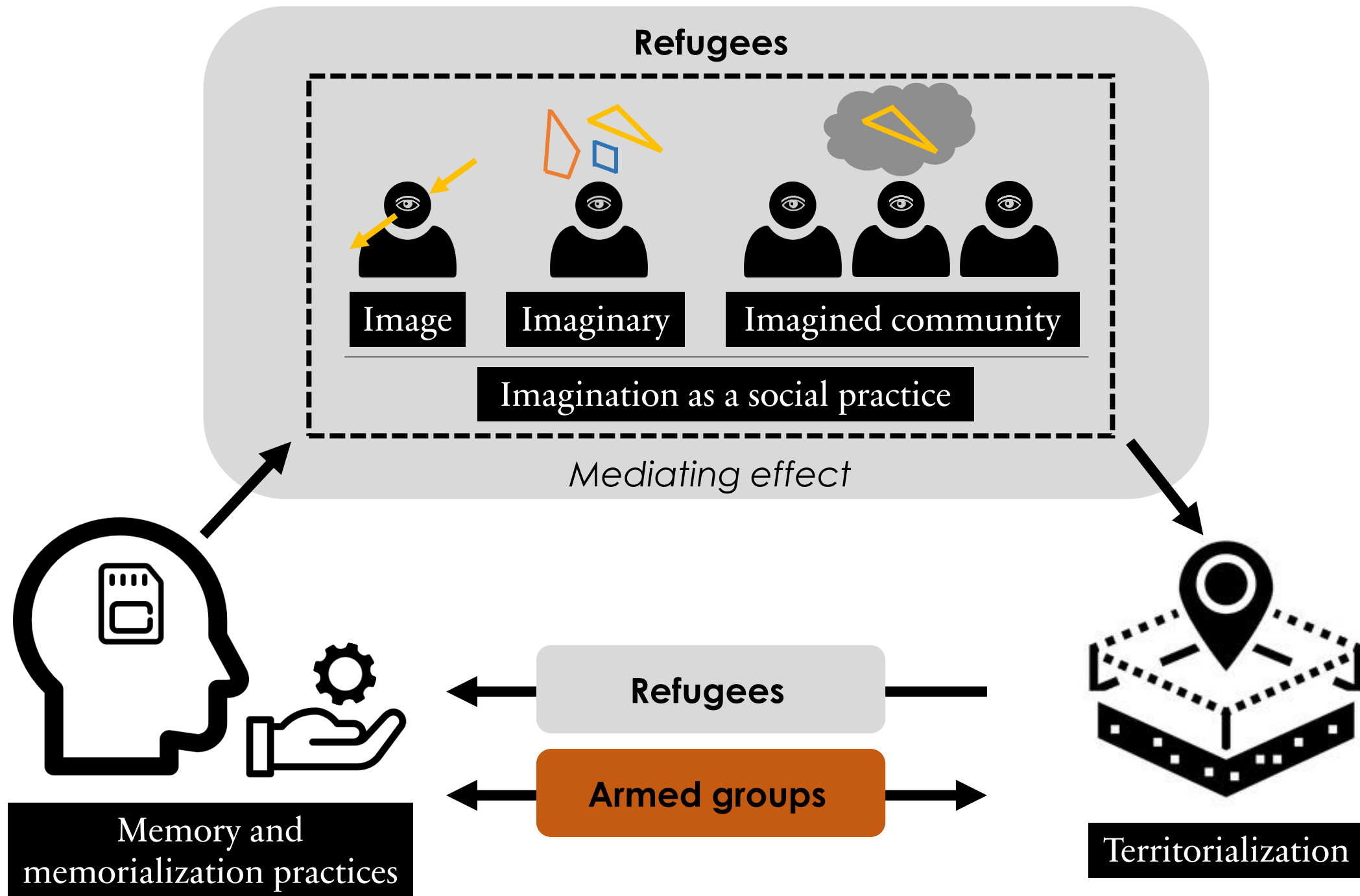


The imaginary (subjectivity)
(meaning and symbolic value; worldview)



The imagined community (collectivity)
(intersubjectivity; group formation)







Important take aways

- ❑ For refugee return
 - ❑ Experiences of exile and spatial separation alters the relationship between memory and territory, mediated by imagination
 - ❑ Refugee aspirations and desired conditions of return should therefore not be assumed → consultation is key for safe, dignified, and sustainable return
- ❑ For the brokering of peace in the Congo
 - ❑ Currently → Futile peace efforts are exclusionary
 - ❑ In comparing how local armed groups and refugees lay claims on histories and land (memories and territory) differently, we see that territorial peace is not only about reconciling groups, but also memories