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VISUAL ESSAY

DAEMONICYCLES

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Abstract

This visual investigation begins with an image from the photographic album of a border delimitation mission on the Angolan/Congolese (DRC) frontier. The image shows a lunch at the Portuguese camp on October 5, 1914. Sitting at the table are six white men – three commanding officers from each colonial power, Portugal and Belgium. Standing at the back of the construction that serves as a dining room, is a black servant. His head, merged into the background, is invisible. From the original glass negative, it was possible to retrieve this man's features. The image was printed, cut up and reworked in various manners including collage, drawing and photography, originating the short animation *O Festim (the Feast, 2021)* and a web-based experiment, *Daemonicycles*. The work intends to reflect upon history and colonialism, considering power dynamics, cosmology and culture and the enduring phantoms that haunt us still today.

Keywords: Colonial science, Counter-narrative, Cosmology, Photography, Artistic research





caracol

notes

glass negative

RESEARCH NOTES

1. The image that caught my attention did so because the man's face is missing. The hole in the image became persistent. I returned constantly to this dark space; it became a portal, a door, a passage.

2. One does elaborate, in retrospect, that the image condenses the whole of the colonial project: the easygoingness of these six white men, probably seven, if one counts the photographer. On and around the table are bottles of Belgian beer and Portuguese Port wine, plates and glasses, cutlery and a cigarette case, objects made of tin, glass, crystal, porcelain, silver and in the back: a man, not important enough to have been properly exposed in the darkroom. I saw the original glass negative; there, encased in conservation paper, is the gaze this man directed at the camera. So yes, the emulsion latitude was sufficient to fix the man's features and darkroom techniques could have rendered them on the final print that appears in the album.¹

3. I read the report² that complements the album and that accompanied the men on this mission that lasted two years, learning that the mission was hindered by the dry season when visibility is too low for proper measurements because the air is full of mist and smoke from slash and burn fires. It was interrupted when World War I broke out and eventually, it resumed. Not much is written on the workers and carriers. There is a mention that the chief of the mission was able to buy flour at a bargain price to feed them; he's very proud of himself for having obtained a large quantity and much cheaper than the Belgians. The competition is tangible, the desire to work better and faster than the other team. There was one mortal accident: a man fell 30 meters from a tree. At various moments the carriers run away and it's hard to find men to work. Two expressions come up: *mueneputo* and *bulamatar*... I'm looking for a way to unlock the passage, so I deviate.

4. *Mueneputo*, *Muene Puto*, *Mwene Mputo*, *Mwene Mputu*... I encounter the words with different spellings in different contexts, but they all point to the Kingdom of Kongo. *Mwene* means chief in Kikongo, and apparently *Mputo* is Portugal. *Mwene Puto* then is the chief of Portugal; so called for the first time by the Mwene Kongo around 1480. But what impresses me the most is finding *Mwene Puto* transformed into the "Lord of the Dead"; an insatiable cannibal, who steals from the land the bodies he craves, taking them to his realm — *Mpemba* — the "underworld", beyond the water.³ To someone brought up in a Western Christian culture this description evokes images of demons and Hell, but there are elements of another mythology as well.

5. In the words of Busenki Fu-Kiau: “The N’Kongo thought of the earth as a mountain over a body of water which is the land of the dead, called Mpemba. In Mpemba the sun rises and sets just as it does in the land of the living. Between these two parts, the lands of the dead and the living, the water is both a passage and a great barrier. The world, in Kongo thought, is like two mountains opposed at their bases and separated by the ocean. The ‘land of the dead’ is called Ku Mpemba.”⁴

6. *Mpemba* or *Ku Mpemba* is not Hell. It is on “the other side”, beyond *Kalunga*, the great water. It is also the immensity or the original life force. The “land of the dead” is (in) the negative, spiritual world as opposed to the world of day, that of material, positive existence.⁵ The two are intertwined since the world of day is shaped by what happens in the world of night. There, ancestors and other spirits convene. This idea comes up, again and again, in things I read or watch or listen to. One might say that the spirits of the past cohabit with the living.

7. I had the opportunity to speak with Joseph Tonda, whose work became central to my research. During our conversation he muses: “The Christian Devil is not ambivalent, it is radical. But here... well the priests, the missionaries, they translated the traditional cults into the devil... so we said to ourselves: ‘our cults are devils’. What we called the Mwiri, that is to say the ‘forces’ in the traditional cults... the colonist said that they are called ‘devil’...so devil becomes the cultic power...the Devil changes from its Christian position of radical evil to become a positive as well as a negative power.”⁶

8. This interview with Joseph Tonda is one of various I decided to carry out. I ended up interviewing eight people whose lives are in some way connected to both the European and African contexts. Every narrative is unique, every story is different, one thing is constant: it is complicated.

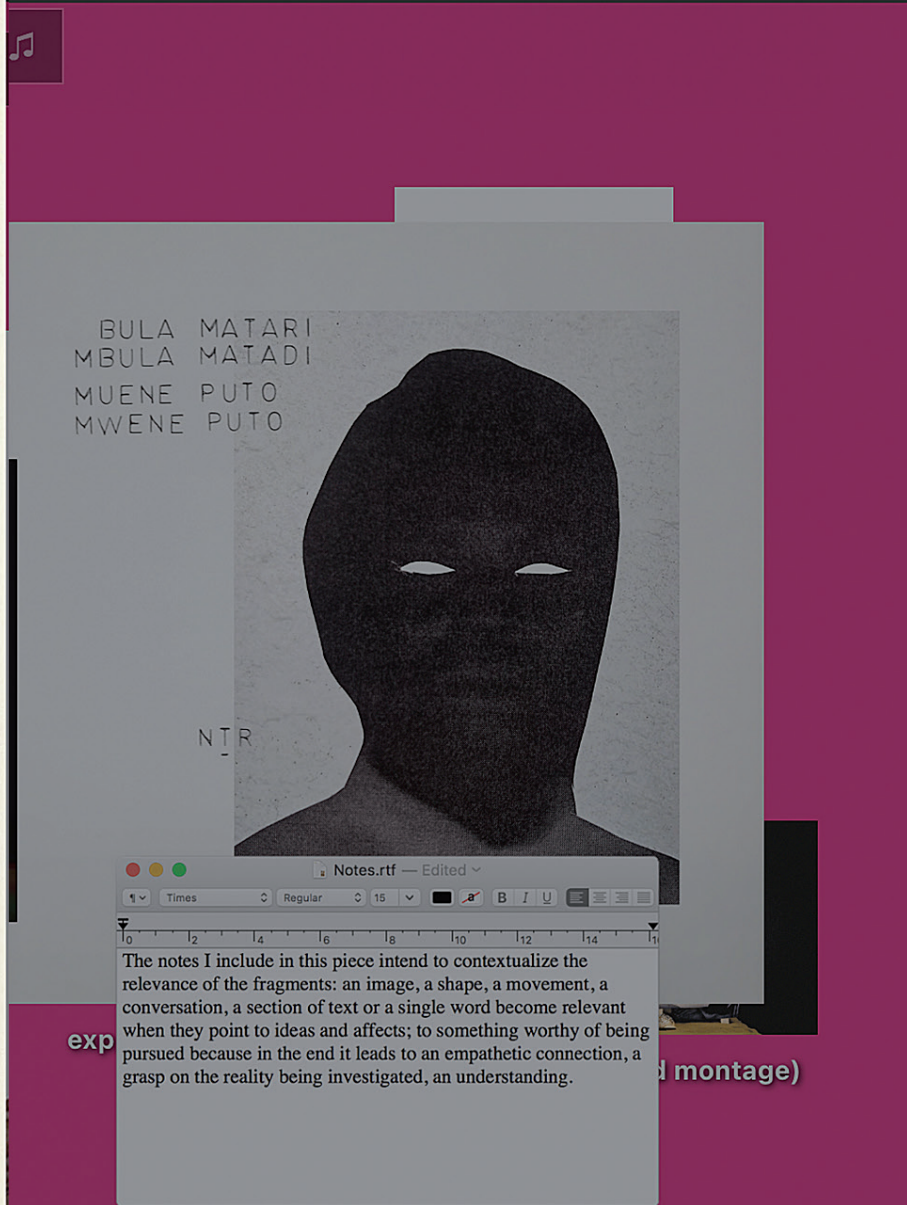
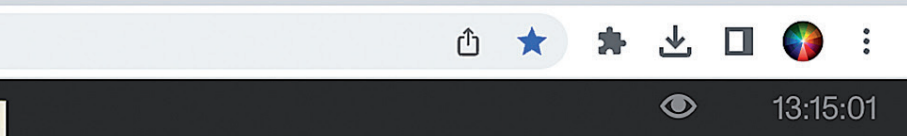
9. *Bulamatari*, *Bula Matari*, *Mbula Matadi*... again, various spellings and different contexts. A first Bula Matari seems to have been a Kongo nobleman, from Mbanza Kongo – the capital of the reign. He was baptized and given the name Dom Francisco Bula Matari but he deviated from Christianity, “falling back” into the “heretical” ways of his ancestors. It is said that demons took his body when he died, reclaiming it during the night from the church where it was buried, amongst a frightful racket.⁷

10. A second *Bula Matari* is Henry Morton Stanley, the Welsh-American expeditioner who, at the service of Belgian King Leopold II, was instrumental in establishing the Congo Free State. The nickname means “breaker of rocks”; possibly because he used dynamite to cut through the territory or because of the manner, in which he dealt with local people.⁸ Whatever the reason, it reflects his brutality. Eventually, the name becomes synonymous with the Congolese colonial and post-colonial authorities.⁹





nd burn

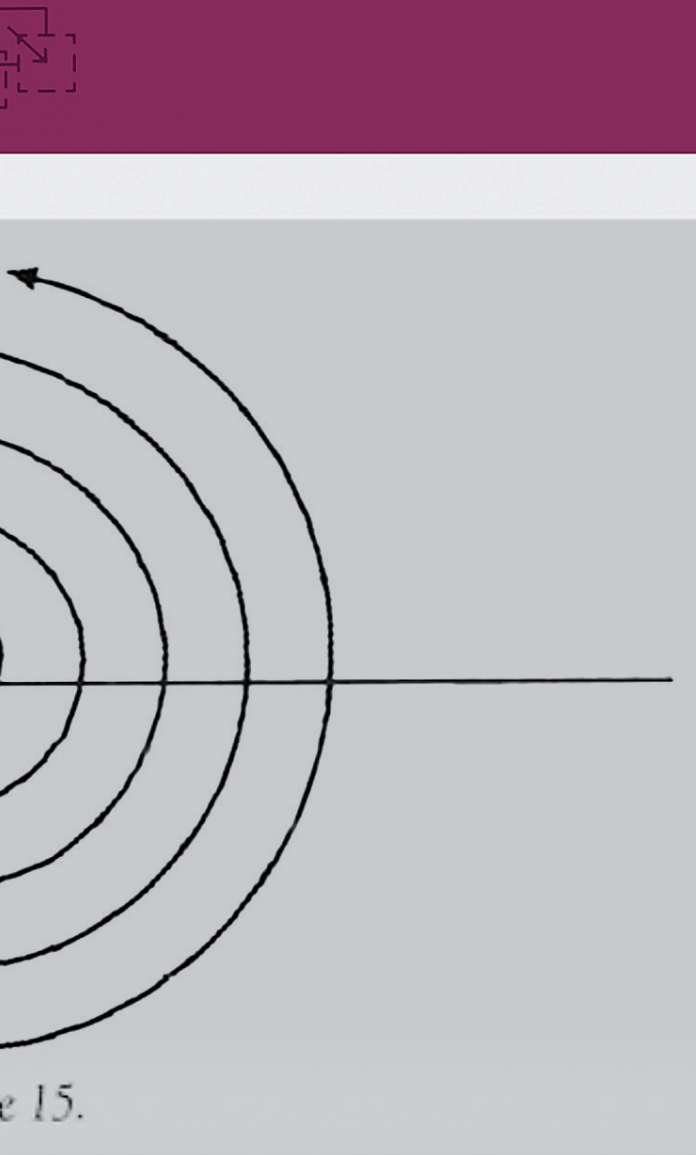


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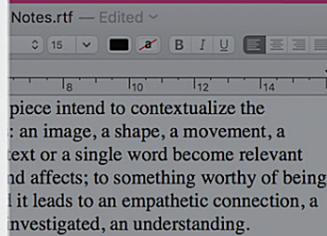
d montage)

research notes





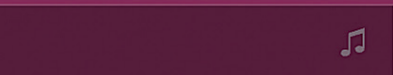
Maps (Dilolo)



search notes



exp.7 (animated montage)

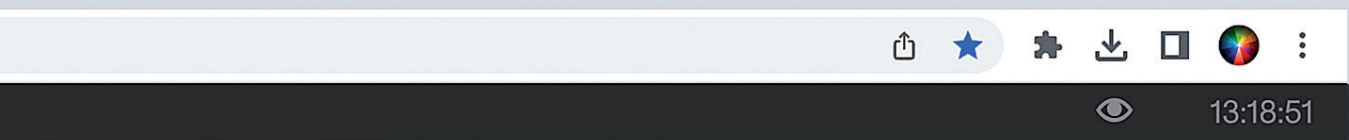


eki Fu-Kiau

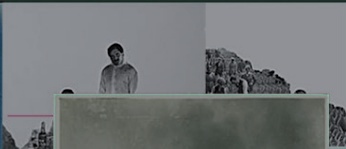




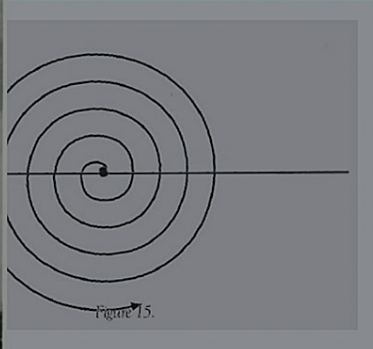




exp.5 (digital collage)



coll

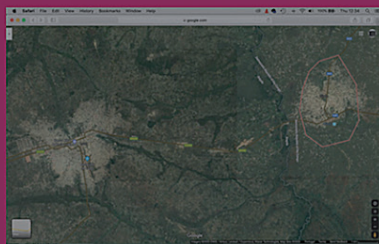


g.15 Bunseki Fu-Kiau

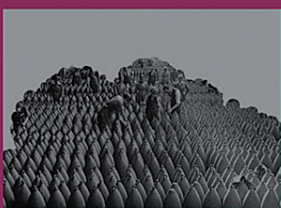


rubber

and burn

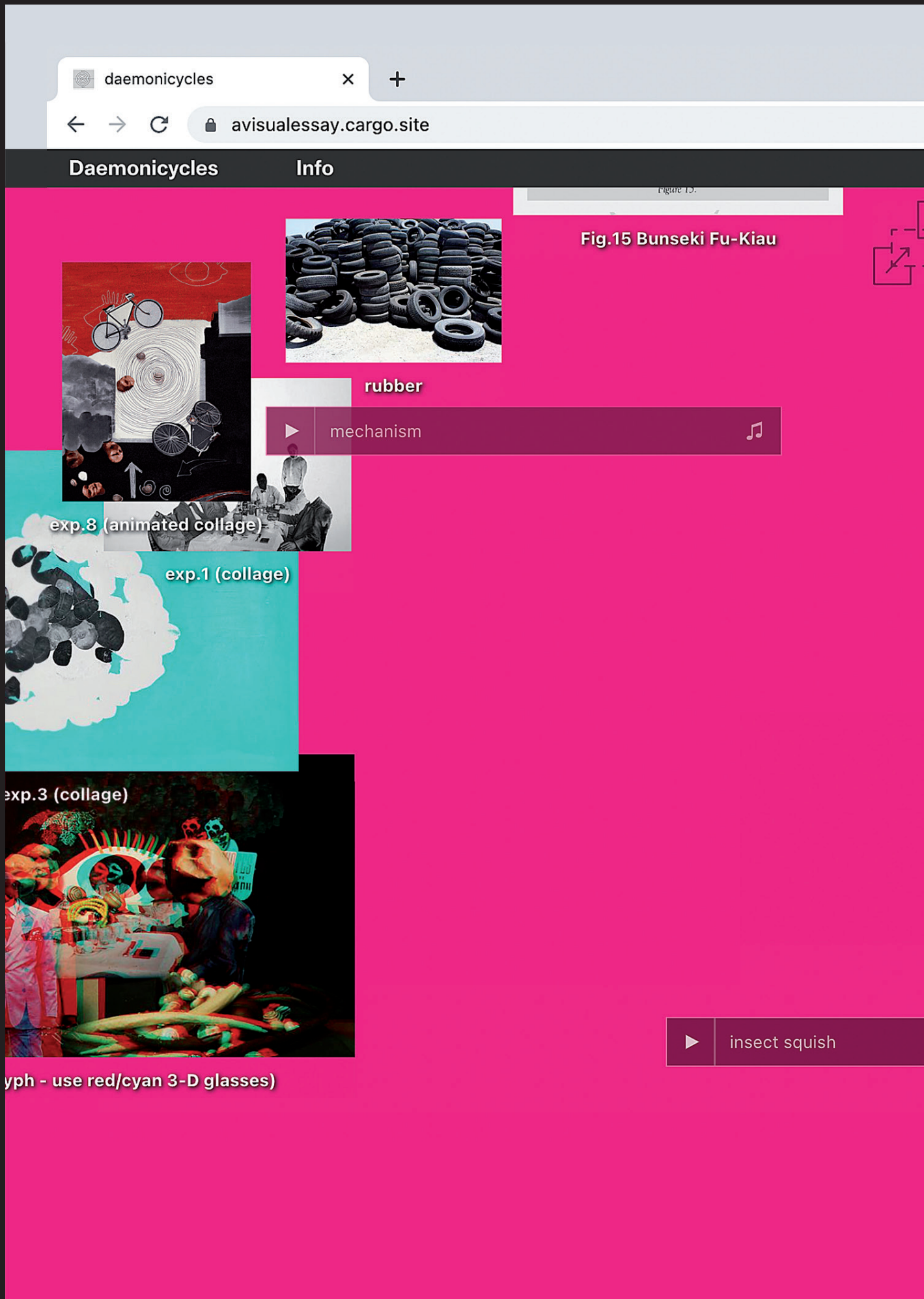


Maps (Dilolo)



ww1

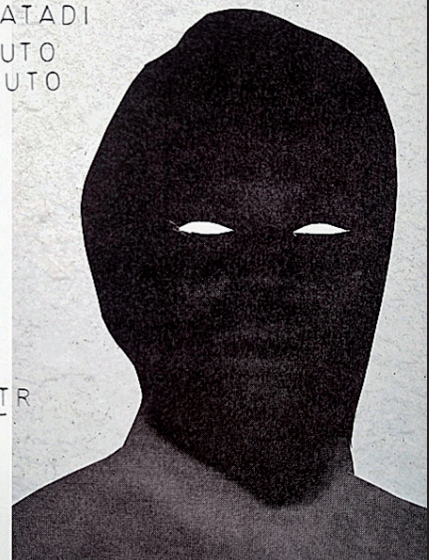






caracol

BULA MATARI
MBULA MATADI
MUENE PUTO
MWENE PUTO



NTR

exp.4 (animated collage)

IMAGE CAPTIONS

- Page 102/103** exp.2 (collage) – cut photocopies, glue and ink on paper; A4.
- glass negative: Album nº12 sp.48 (left page) “um almoço no acampamento português” [a lunch at the portuguese camp]; Missão de Delimitação da Fronteira Luso-Belga –Angola, César Moura Brás 1914-15 [UL-IICT-Col.Foto-MGG-Alb12].
- Page 106/107** slash and burn: Álbum nº6, p.33 “queimadas no mato” [slash and burn fires], Missão de Delimitação da Fronteira Sul D’Angola: Campanha de 1931 [IICT-MGG-Alb6_021].
- Page 108/109** Fig.15 Bunseki Fu-Kiau: [gif] original illustration from FU-KIAU, Bunseki, African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kôngo, Athelia Henrietta Press, 1980.
- ivory: internet stock image, digitally cu.
- exp.7 (animated montage): cut and mounted photo prints, animated through stop motion photography.
- Page 110/111** exp.6 (anaglyph – use red/cyan 3-D glasses): cut and mounted inkjet prints, photocopies, snail shells, and other miscellaneous objects, shot with a Fujifilm Finepix real 3-D W.
- Page 112/113** exp.8 (animated collage): [gif] cut photocopies, glue, tape, paint and ink on paper (detail) 150x150cm.
- exp.5 (digital collage).
- rubber: internet stock image.
- maps (Dilolo): screenshot of Google Maps location using geodesic coordinates in the border delimitation mission report.
- ww1: source: Horace Nicholls, Munitions production on the home front, c.1917, Imperial War Museum Photograph Archive Collection, © IWM Q 30018), digitally cut.
- Page 114/115** exp.1 (collage): cut photocopy, glue and ink on paper; A4.
- exp.3 (collage): cut photocopy, glue and paint on paper; A3.
- caracol: [gif], internet stock image.
- exp.4 (animated collage): [gif] cut photocopy, glue and ink on paper, A3.

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- 1 Album nº12 Missão de Delimitação da Fronteira Luso-Belga – Angola, César Moura Brás 1914-15 [UL-IICT-Col. Foto-MGG-Alb12].
 - 2 Missão da Fronteira Luso-Belga – campanha 1914-15, Comissão de Cartografia do Ministério das Colónias, IICT, Universidade de Lisboa.
 - 3 Alan Rice, *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003). See also: Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).
 - 4 As cited in Wyatt Macgaffey, “Oral Tradition in Central Africa,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 7, no. 3 (1974): 417–42.
 - 5 Bunseki Fu-Kiau, *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kôngo* (New York: Athelia Henrietta Press, 1980).
 - 6 Interview with Joseph Tonda, 09/02/2021.
 - 7 François Bontinck, “Les deux Bula Matari,” *Études Congolaises* 12, no. 3 (July–September 1969): 83–97. See also: Joseph Tonda, *Le Souverain Moderne. Le corps du pouvoir en Afrique Centrale* (Paris: Karthala, 2005): 137–139.
 - 8 Bontinck, “Les deux Bula Matari,” 83–97.
 - 9 Tonda, *Le Souverain Moderne*, 2005: 137–139.