

## **Dissonant notes, intrepid explorers: a reading of *Angola and the River Congo*, by Joachim John Monteiro, between ecology and violence**

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**Abstract (197):** Over the course of the 19th century, several campaigns in African territories led by white European or North-American scientists, explorers, entrepreneurs, or military officials have been transposed into travelogues where different stages of imperialism and colonialist presences are portrayed. While most of the approaches to these writings tend to favor a post-colonial framework for the interpretation of the interactions depicted there, it is also possible to employ a critical apparatus modeled after the recent developments in the field of the environmental humanities. In this essay, I discuss how Slavoj Žižek's contributions to the debates around the ideas of nature, ecology, and global capitalism have the potential to deepen our understanding of colonial regimes of oppression, serving as a powerful (if also nuanced and provocative) tool to explore processes of world-making involved in the imperial projects developing over the course of the 19th century. To do so, I propose a close reading of several instances of the travel book *Angola and the River Congo* (London, 1875), by Joachim John Monteiro, focusing on the entanglements between the human and non-human agencies, vegetable landscapes and extractive transnational economies, and the articulation of racism and scientific projects in the Angolan territory.

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Under the rain and the scorching sun, a melancholic creature has been traveling for many months across the jungle and the drylands. Deep in the heart of the black continent, no beast nor cannibals seem to instill fear in the intrepid explorer. (...) But if, by the mercy of some superior divine or sovereign will, his feet keep walking, his heart, of the whole anatomy the most undisciplined among the muscles, dictates other reasons to keep on marching. Poor and hopeless man, for more than king or eternal, he is commanded by the capricious organ, and here shall the true law of his expedition be revealed.

Miguel Gomes, *Taboo*

### ***Geographies of wandering***

To the sound of “Variações Pindéricas Sobre a Insensatez,” by the composer Joana Sá, the opening sequence of *Taboo* (Miguel Gomes, 2012) introduces a white man walking in the African savannah, wearing clothes reminiscent of the exploratory campaigns into the “dark continent” of the late 19th century. Carrying a large backpack, a water bottle, and a safari pith helmet, the intrepid explorer marches across dense vegetation, in the company of a group of black porters who clear the way before him with machetes. The story of this white man is told by an ominous voice-off, bringing us a tale of love and sorrow, of a death that took place far away from there, of a long walk through the most remote areas of the world, of silent and melancholic despair, of the death drive burning inside him and, eventually, of his final meeting with his destiny, in the dark waters of a river where a crocodile awaits him, while his men witness, horrified, the violent encounter. The spectator will then learn that in those times, and even after, there were those who would swear to have seen a “sad, melancholic crocodile, in the company of a lady of times past, inseparable couple that a mysterious pact had conjoined, and that death was unable to tear apart.”

In a prologue where the poetic discourse flirts with a subtle and almost imperceptible irony (who would be able to tell apart the drama from the parody here?), the tone is set for the remaining of the film, moving continuously between the tragic and the satirical (Medeiros 207; Ferreira 18). The “intrepid explorer” is, after all, a familiar ghost: the white European’s quest for the last frontier, a pseudo-heroic epilogue to the romantic fantasy of

adventure. This ghost adrift in the early scenes of the film is well aware that the time for such ideals of grandeur is long gone. That's perhaps why he tries to reinvent his enterprise in far-away regions, bewildered and appearing before the spectator as a form of anachronism, with a vaguely scientific research project that cannot redeem the altogether uncanny presence of the character. This familiar ghost, at once intimate and disturbing, will, in a certain way, constitute the main subject of this essay.

Throughout the second half of the 19th century, the projects of scientific exploration and political occupation of the African continent frequently go hand-in-hand, and are sometimes mutually implied (Whitfield 233). By creating and promoting transnational organizations with scientific designs — such as the Royal Geographical Society, in London, the National Geographic Society, in Washington DC, or in Portugal, the Geographic Society of Lisbon — the number of exploratory travels to Africa spiked, propelled by the purpose of studying the fauna and the flora, charting topography, collecting and classifying specimens, producing reproductions of animals and plants, and elaborating detailed descriptions of places and people, resulting in a great number of articles published in specialized journals, reports, and conferences delivered before the social and scientific elite (Pratt 17; Vicente 31; Ryan 34).

The two volumes of *Angola and the River Congo*, published in London in 1875, are part of this landscape where scientific institutions and political designs are never far apart, and are linked by arguments evoking the need to explore natural resources. The author of this travel book, Joachim John Monteiro, was a member of the Royal School of Mines and was also affiliated with the British Zoological Society. Monteiro's professional activities were related to the extraction of minerals in the coast of Angola and the trade with British companies. In *Angola and the River Congo* the author provides the readers with an account of what he considers the most remarkable events that took part during his travels in the region, framed by numerous observations on the peoples and places he visits.

In the first volume the author offers a wide overview on the history of colonial Angola, starting with the early contacts between the locals and Portuguese sailors, and up until the 19th century. Monteiro makes extensive use of J. C. Feo Cardozo's *História dos Governadores de Angola*, published in Paris in 1825. This is followed by a general commentary on the landscape and orography of the territory, and, from chapter 3 onwards, the reader finds successive

descriptive essays, organized according to the region they refer to: River Congo, Ambriz, Bembe, Quibala, and Quilumbo in the first volume; Luanda, Mossulo, Libongo, Quifandongo, Cambambe, Cazengo, Calumbo and the Cuanza River, Massangano, Dondo, Cassanza, Novo Redondo, Catumbela, Benguela and Mossamedes in the second volume. The descriptions of landscapes, where emphasis is placed on vegetation and animals, are alternated with general



Image 1: "Laniarius monteiri"

in Proceedings of the general meetings for scientific business of the Zoological Society of London, Zoological Society of London, March 10, 1870, p. 142.



observations concerning societal issues, culture, religious practices, and political aspects of the governance of indigenous populations, almost invariably conveyed through the author's personal experiences.

The detailed description of the biological diversity of the Angolan territory is probably the most prominent feature of the book. The author's name became associated with a subspecies of bird present in the Cameroon and in Angola, the Monteiro's Bush-shrike (*Malaconotus/Laniarus monteiri*). Joachim John Monteiro's role as a well-known bird watcher and author of numerous classifications earned him a reference in the correspondence of Charles Darwin. On February 12th of 1876, in a letter addressed to Darwin, the writer and environmentalist Arabella Buckley alludes to the occasion when she was personally introduced to John Monteiro, at the British Museum, inquiring whether the author of *On the Origin of Species* had already had the chance to read *Angola and the River Congo*.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I will explore some reading keys to Monteiro's book, highlighting specific passages in an effort to track how the account relies on strategies of narration designed to frame "nature" as an object of aesthetic experience and a resource for exploitation, both components intimately connected to the practices of racial violence. By doing so, I hope I will be able to contribute to the current debates highlighting the necessary links between post-colonial approaches and environmental studies, by focusing on the production of regimes of transnational circulation centered on the exploitation of local resources. With this in view, I shall concentrate on specific segments of the narrative where scientific and technical information is obtained, particularly of the botanical type. My approach follows the practices suggested by Ann Laura Stoler as reading "along the archival grain", in order to grasp the instances of epistemic anxiety and imperial mutations inscribed in the text (Stoler 2). It should become clear how travel literature lays the foundations for a colonial discourse foregrounded by scientific claims and ecological anxieties, by constructing complex operations of framing the bodies of the indigenous, the non-human bodies, and the traveller's body into specific categories of meaning within the local environments.

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<sup>1</sup> "Letter from Arabella B. Buckley to Charles Darwin, 12 February 1876," in *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, Volume 24, Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 4.

### *Always-already lost: ecology, colonialism, and dispossession*

Over the course of the past two centuries global capitalism and its networks of production/distribution/consumption brought about successive changes in the structure of power relations. Such transformations shaped transnational geographies, as they rely largely on the dynamics of imperialism, colonialism, and postcoloniality, creating new landscapes that emerge from the needs of the extractive economy. At the core of the worldwide project of the global capitalist system, a number of antagonisms should prompt us to question the possibility of indefinite reproduction of this system, not the least because of the ecological threats undermining the expansion of the reproductive model of capital. This excess generated by the dynamics of capitalist investment and competition and the inherent logic of the excluded and the included in the system is the fundamental problem discussed in Slavoj Žižek's "Nature and its Discontents" (2008). Here Žižek argues that today, for the first time in history, the act of a socio-political agent can alter or interrupt dramatically the global historical process, potentially leading to the radical destruction of life on Earth.

The relationship between contemporary capitalism and ecology exposes the core antagonism of the capitalistic project — it cannot go on forever, as it was designed to. The management of those who are allowed to take part in the distribution of wealth and those who are secluded from it points towards the inescapable finitude of the reproductive logic upon which the system is predicated, while creating a mass of exclusionary zones (slums, environmentally unsafe areas, peripheries of the megalopolis, ghost deserted cities and factories, etc) that are connected through geopolitical and environmental nexus. The "new proletarian position" might very well be, therefore, that of the inhabitants of slums in new megalopolises. Žižek's claims are akin to Jason W. Moore's argument on the inextricability of the capitalistic process of world making and our ideas about "nature:" world-ecology forces us to conceptualize nature as a co-production of human activity, global power and production, and the "web of life", while, at the same time, understanding that capitalist accumulation exists within the mosaic of nature. In this sense, Moore speaks of a "double movement — of capitalism through nature, of nature through capitalism", a mutual implication that he calls "the double internality." One of the consequences of this reasoning is to acknowledge the inseparability of modernity and crisis and to either refuse

the emphasis on the contemporaneity of the crisis (and the infatuation of the novelty character) or making the case for a broader definition of contemporaneity. Moore seems to be sensitive to this relevant premise:

The crisis today is therefore not multiple but singular and manifold. It is not a crisis of capitalism *and* nature but of modernity-in-nature. That modernity is a capitalist world-ecology. Rather than collapse distinctions — the danger of a Green holism — this perspective allows for the multiplication of questions that turn on the oikeios: the creative, generative, and multi-layered relation of species and environment. (Moore 4)

In what follows, I would like to put to test some of Žižek’s hypothesis, by revisiting Monteiro’s *Angola and the River Congo*, a textual document where questions of management of resources, ecology, exclusions, and work are addressed in the context of colonial world making. I want, however, to keep Moore’s remarks in hindsight: the double internality should serve as a reminder that there is no split or discontinuity between the political categories of violence and the local ecologies, but rather a mutual implication and co-creation that must be faced in all its complexities and consequences.

In one sense, Slavoj Žižek’s arguments confront us with a horizon of radical thought that one might want to retain before going any further. According to him, ecology turns into a problem of “sustainable development if one loses sight of the included/excluded antagonism” (thinking ecology as the “outside of nature”, and, similarly, taking slums as the outside of the social). In “Nature and Its Discontents” he develops a critical apparatus meant to dismantle this conundrum. The pressure of the excluded from ecology/world-making projects manifests itself as the imminence of *terror* — for, in a sense, their sudden inclusion would open the doors to the large-scale catastrophic event. Against the backdrop of the Hegelian notion of freedom (the freedom of the enslaved, as opposed to the captivity of the “master”), Žižek proposes a radical reconceptualization of ecology: it is precisely at the point where we have nothing to lose that we become truly free. The dispossession of the self that takes place here is of the same nature of what happens when one falls in love. You are fully aware that your emotional experience is no longer under your control, but you agree to surrender to an external being, allowing that the innermost center of your subjectivity be displaced elsewhere. It is no coincidence that Žižek

uses Christ and Che Guevara, two referential figures in processes of passionate individuation, to exemplify what he means by the abandonment that ought to define our relationship with nature. Love is the ultimate exposure to utter despair — and, finally, *terror*, as our intrepid explorer may (or may not) have learned. The experience of political subjectivation under these conditions is, therefore, an experience of dispossession. It develops in the face of something over which one has no control whatsoever, and thus willingly surrenders to. Confronted with the possibility of environmental catastrophe, the emancipated political subject lets go of his will and accepts the inner failure of the process of “keeping things under control” (which constitutes, one should bear in mind, the essential drive for the world making imperialist projects). Here something remarkable takes place: the subjects “exceed ordinary humanity towards the dimension of the inhuman” (Žižek 2008, 49). In the purview of our focus, that might imply recognizing that the web of life constitutes an ecology that one cannot change — it will survive us, in the sense that, under one form or another, it will remain here long after all of us are gone, as it has always. Pursuing this argument to its ultimate consequences implies “accepting the nullity of that which we are afraid to lose,” and lending oneself to the shattering experience of negativity. If we take seriously the actual state of the affairs, Nature is nothing but what is already lost — always-already lost. To put it bluntly, the efforts of self-preservation required by the capitalist logic (and, one may add, the colonial and imperial logistics of power) promoted by the “ecology of fear” — a discourse dominated by the impulse of pessimism and the desire for safety, that takes nature as man’s pure fantasy, as the “Big Other” once played by religion — should be countered by the brutal realism of accepting “the utter groundlessness of our existence: there is no firm foundation, no place to retreat on which we can safely count” (56). Only then, once we accept that the catastrophe is already among us, can we create a new imaginary for our web of life, and perhaps undo the catastrophic conditions.

Now, it is important to note here something Žižek fails to mention: accepting the fact that we already live in the midst of the total catastrophe, and a shattering experience of negativity has visited upon us, is not a new statement at all. On the contrary, such experience, taken as the foundation for a political emancipatory subjectivation, has been around for a quite long time. It has happened again and again in contexts of the colonial destruction of environments. In fact, the unavoidable presence of the ecological catastrophe can only be perceived as a novelty by the Western intellectual who looks at the world from behind a glass window. But it certainly is a

fundamental component of everyday life for millions of women and men. It might very well be the central aspect of colonial oppression.

While my reading will be informed by some of the ideas that are put forward by Žižek, the colonial context introduces significant nuances to the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion and, of course, to the ecology of terror. Nevertheless, it might be worth exploring the challenges opened up by Žižek's environmental hypothesis as possible reading keys. His political subjectivation as the experience of negativity leading to the acceptance of the irredeemable arbitrariness of life is not the exception but the rule in a scenario of colonial oppression. More than that, it may very well be the only means to keep on going — and exceed ordinary humanity.

### ***Some notes on the vegetable life and the body***

At a conference delivered before the Geographic Society of Lisbon in 1901, Vicente Almeida d'Eça emphasized that the *Landolphia florida* (rubber vine) constituted

(...) in the opinion of the botanists, the second (from top to bottom) of the rubber producing creepers, and one whose natural habitat are the plains inhabited by the Makondes; and the samples of such product have obtained, without any complaints whatsoever, the gold medal in the latest Exposition Universelle in Paris (Almeida d'Eça 836)

The close association between the plant and the people that share its native territories is here used to something more than simply recording the geographic space where the rubber vine can be found. What seems to be at stake here is the production or the evocation of a certain affinity between both, through the associative logics of nature and human life. In this sense, the scientific analysis serves as a pretext to the racialization of the presence of bodies in the same space. Travel books would provide the perfect discursive format to fit this design, by creating a context where the author — racially removed from “the locals” — has at his disposal tools to shield himself from the environment, while disseminating multiple shortcuts between the landscape and the indigenous. I would like to argue that such an approach already implies the fundamental antagonism of global capitalism stressed by Žižek (the large-scale destruction it demands fundamentally precludes a “market solution”). The identification of nature and

subaltern bodies, promoted by the imperialistic projects and evident in the travel literature generated in colonial contexts, construct the presence of the black African men and women as the “always already lost.” The extractive principle of transnational imperial projects activates processes of disintegration of nature, displacement of elements, consumption, and elimination of unneeded/unmarketable components. These might be the untamed geographies of colonial territories, mineral debris, the excess of animal life, or the resistance of the black colonized to the logic of the white men, all of which mark the impossibility of the perpetuation of a system predicated on structural imbalances. While travel writing often serves as a platform for the views of the author, it also documents the conflict engendered by the antagonisms of capital vs. environment. This is the context where we shall place John Monteiro, one where knowledge operates as a distributor of rationality. In Pungo Andongo, the traveler affirms to have spotted a narrow valley entirely covered by thick interweaved vegetation, featuring at the surface an immense layer of flowers: nothing less than a vast extension of rubber vine flowers, or *Landolphia florida*. After registering the fact, however, the narrative turns to the porters hired by Monteiro:

The very blacks that accompanied me, so little impressed as they are usually by the beauties of nature, beat their open mouths with the palm of the hand as they uttered short “Ah! ah! ahs!” their universal mode of expressing astonishment or delight, so wonderful, even to them, appeared the magnificent mass of colour below us as the head of the valley, down one side of which we descended to the plain below. (Monteiro 32)

The absence of surprise of any kind recorded by the author would not necessarily signal ignorance, but rather familiarity with the species that had previously provoked Monteiro’s astonishment. Here, however, he is acutely aware of how surprised the indigenous were by the floration of the rubber vines. The choice of words, nonetheless, aims at highlighting the indifference of the porters before the natural phenomena. A stylistic approach that is far from trivial, inasmuch as it dialogues intimately with the reasons evoked by European investors to justify the exploitation of natural resources--namely, the alleged lack of interest on the part of the local leaders. It is about elaborating, at the micro-discursive level, a *topos* grounded on the very logistics of colonial occupation and extraction of raw materials, one that demands a primordial

divorce between nature and “us” (and thus the denial of Moore’s “double internality,” or Žižek’s “shattering experience of negativity” in face of nature). The future history of farming and exportation of rubber from Angola, using indentured labor as a way of dissimulating the afterlife of slavery would confirm this possibility.

Black bodies, in this sense, never cease to be assimilated by the vegetal backgrounds of the journey. In the chapter dedicated to the plants of Angola, John Monteiro delves into the bodily odour of the hired porters, producing a racist and racializing account where successive iterations of the black workers are practically indistinguishable from the vegetation:

In going through places where the grass has nearly choked up all signs of a path, it is necessary to send in advance all the blacks of the party, so as to open aside and widen it sufficiently to allow the traveller in his hammock to be carried and pushed through the dense high mass: even if there be a moderate breeze blowing it is, of course, completely shut out; the perspiration from the negroes is wiped on the grass as they push through it, now shoving it aside with their hands and arms, now forcing their way through it backwards, and it is most disagreeable to have the wetted leaves constantly slapping one’s face and hands, to say nothing of the horrible stink from their steaming bodies. It is a powerful odour, and the quiet hot air becomes so impregnated with it as to be near overpowering. (Monteiro 34-35)

The narrative oscillates between the non-human body and the working body, the latter at the limit of its strengths, a bare and almost vegetal body of labor, utterly separated from the body of the “explorer” and close to the bodies of Nature. These violent and oppressive distinctions repeat Žižek’s dynamics of the *excluded* (the “animals,” according to global capital, Žižek 2008 44) and the included (“political animals”, *idem*). The frontier between bodies and plants fades: black body and vegetation become blurred and intermingled. A body that must be devalued, dispossessed of its humanity, impure, unnamed, vegetal, bestialized through the senses:

It is difficult to compare it with any other disagreeable smell; it is different from that of the white race, and the nearest comparison I can give is a mixture of putrid onions and rancid butter well rubbed on an old billy-goat. In some it is a great deal worse than in

others, but none, men or women, are free from it, even when their bodies are at rest or not sensibly perspiring; and it being a natural secretion of the skin, of course no amount of washing or cleanliness will remove it. (Monteiro 35)

The prose carries on in this tone for several pages, detailing formulations analogous to this one: Monteiro expands on what he classifies as the repulsive reaction of a dog to the odour of black Africans (Monteiro 36), as well as the reaction of a donkey in Benguela, docile to white men but intolerant of the presence of black workers (Monteiro 37), concluding with extensive remarks on how, in the hunting journeys in Africa, the animals would feel the presence of the white hunter before becoming aware of the presence of the black porters (Monteiro 38-39).

In his account, the degradation of these bodies becomes palpable, through rhetoric exercises where a symbolic mutilation of the black body is exercised, aiming at its very destruction by the discourse: becoming a function of the territory, reducing it to the tasks that are ascribed to it, a body of work, at the margin of a scientific project. In this sense, a critical function of travel writing is performed here: the creation of a narrative horizon of nature that instrumentalizes the presence of indigenous peoples. This project echoes three central features addressed by “Nature and Its Discontents.” The first, is the necessity of capital to transform natural organisms into objects amenable to manipulation. Monteiro’s enterprise is not fundamentally different from contemporary biogenetics: colonial projects of world-making concern the identification of hostile elements, the transformation of nature in a way that renders it consumable. The second aspect becoming sensible in the travelogue stems directly from the first: in his effort to tame the colonial territory, the white traveller experiences the “pressure of the excluded” as a form of terror (cf. Žižek 2008, 46). The rhetoric of qualification of the presence of black Angolans is nothing but an attempt to evade that. Lastly, as it should become clear in the following sections, what is at stake for the imperialistic project is not simply to dominate the existing nature, but to generate something new, and therefore to eliminate the possibility of unforeseen results. Ultimately, the triumph of the colonial logic would mean the end of nature, replaced by a network of efficient transactions. The account of the continuous failure of such project is also the account of the resistances to colonialism.



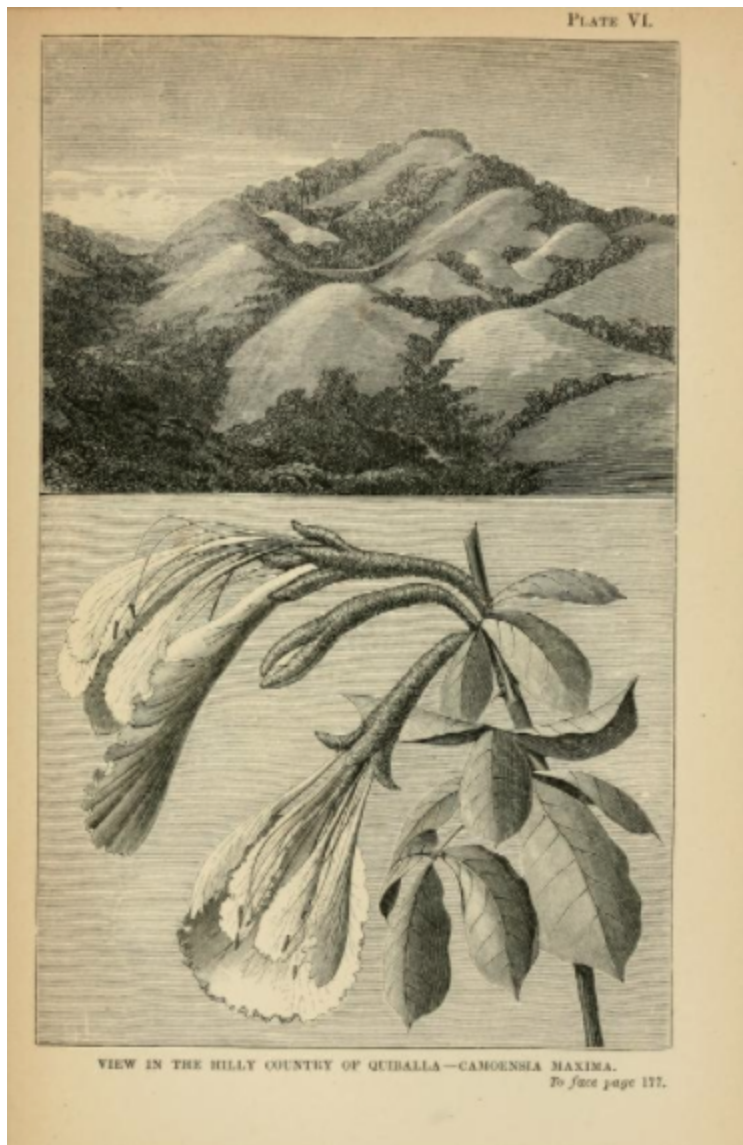


Image 2: “View in the Hilly Country of Quiballa — Camoensia Maxima.”

Monteiro, Joachim John. *Angola and the River Congo*, vol. 2, p. 176.

***Some notes on the environmentalism of the poor and the colonial sublime***

According to Rob Nixon, the scientific discourse focused on the environment should start by examining what the author describes as the “temporalities of place” — the perspectives relating to time, permanently renegotiated in accordance with the challenges coming from inside or outside of a given ecosystem. In order to achieve so, affirms Nixon, it is necessary to pay

close attention to the *vernacular landscapes*, which are non-commensurable with the rationality of global logistics (exploration, transformation, exploitation, profit), but may eventually be analysed under the category of the “environmentalism of the poor” (Nixon 18).

Throughout the travelogue, Monteiro routinely observes the black Angolans engaged in practices that require interaction with their surroundings, practices which he seems to have trouble understanding. Frequently, this is due either to not being in possession of the tools of local epistemologies that would grant him access to interpretation of such practices, or by the perception that they collide with what, according to Boaventura de Sousa Santos, we might label as “colossal thinking” (Santos 25), referring to the presumption of incommensurability of the knowledges of the global North towards the global South. The destruction of underbrush by fire, conceived to promote the renovation of vegetation, offers one of such instances, that can be aptly described as a form of environmentalism.

In John Monteiro’s account, the burning of shrubs and small trees is portrayed as extremely detrimental to the travelers passing by. However, the author adds, such fire blazes can also provide an aesthetic effect that he contemplates with fascination at night. The description evidences a sharp contrast with the tone adopted to generally address the issue. The vivid textures dominate the passage, the savannah is suddenly brought to life by the combustions, the style becomes grandiloquent, the natural landscape is dramatized and converted into something entirely other, the scale expands — the traveler’s gaze is now free from the attention to detail, and encompasses vast areas, leaving behind the realm of tactile or olfactory sensorial perceptions to sublimate vision. During all this process, the characterization of the experience evidences the major traits of the aesthetic sublime: John Monteiro elaborates the descriptive boards in accordance with the aesthetic discourse of the sublime, or, more specifically, what G. S. Sahota defines as the *colonial sublime*, incurring in formulations of a neo-epic grandeur (Sahota 8) that assumes proportions of cosmological transcendence:

At night the effect is wonderfully fine: the vast wall of fire is seen over hill and valley, as far as the eye can reach; above the brilliant leaping flames, so bright in the clear atmosphere of the tropical night, vast bodies of red sparks are shot up high into the cloud of smoke, which is of the most magnificent lurid hue from the reflection of the grand blaze below. (Monteiro 40)



Image 3: “*Euphorbia monteiri*”

*Curtis's botanical magazine, comprising the plants of the Royal gardens of Kew and other botanical establishments in Great Britain.* London, Reeve, 1865, volume 91, plate 5534.

Here, however, the experience of the sublime does not take place as a purely subjective perception on the part of the intrepid explorer. An experience of solitary contemplation (as the Eurocentric tradition of the concept of sublime, at least after Edmund Burke, suggests) doesn't seem to be at stake here. On the contrary, it is critical that the extreme, incommensurable, and potentially devastating character of the experience be validated by the black Angolans, so that the perception can be taken to the level of the sublime. Therefore, it is the fear felt by the black men and women that feeds and stimulates Monteiro's experience of sublime:

Great is the alarm of the natives on the near approach of these fires to their towns, the whole population turning out, and with branches of trees beating out the fire. It is seldom, however, that their huts are consumed, as the villages are generally situated in places where trees and shrubs abound, and the different huts are mostly separated by hedges of different species of *Euphorbiaceae*. (Monteiro 41)

Such sublime is produced as a consequence of the entanglement of a gaze that refuses to apprehend the object of contemplation, but that does so while trying to stand in a place of domination: he invests himself in the role of the spectator presupposed by the spectacle offered to him by an insurmountable natural scenario and, in that condition, he has nothing to fear (not more, for example, than the spectator of a play at the theater or the listener of opera fear the rage of an especially malevolent character). But in contemplating the fear of the others — the terror expressed by the black bodies around him — his role as spectator is reified and reinscribed in the body of the others. This structure of apprehension resonates with Žižek's comparison between the sublime and the reduction of the idea of nature to a "material pretext" for experience. The tradition of the aesthetic sublime offers, in this sense, probably the best example of the creation of a "second nature," or an object specifically conceived and designed to stand in for something else, in order to be conducive to certain ends (i.e., consumed as an instance of the sublime, but also, in other moments, described, controlled, pictured, photographed, etc.) As one must bear in mind, this signals the utterly fantastical status of nature in the colonial imaginary:

"nature" *qua* the domain of balanced reproduction, of organic deployment into which humanity intervenes with its hubris, brutally derailing its circular motion, is man's



fantasy; nature is already in itself “second nature;” its balance is always secondary, an attempt to negotiate a “habit” that would restore some order after catastrophic interruptions. (Žižek 2008, 56)

Yet, one element seems to resist this logic of assimilation. The environmentalism of the poor to which the black Angolans are committed leads Monteiro to a certain confusion, when he senses that there is an area of expertise that he cannot access and that is linked to the science and techniques deployed to manage the living areas and landscapes, as expressed by the architectural options of the Angolans, in close articulation with the natural context:

Many villages are entirely surrounded by a thick belt of these milky-juiced plants, effectually guarding them from any chance of fire from the grass outside. Where the huts are not thus protected, the danger, of course, is very great, but the natives sometimes take the precaution of setting fire to patches of the grass to clear a space around the huts or village. (Monteiro 41-42)

### *Some notes on water and harvests*

Monteiro examines the records of precipitation, pinpointing the increasing rarefaction of rainwaters in the hinterlands of Angola. The author notes that the black residents suffer disproportionately with these meteorological changes, and blames the careless habits of the populations, who allegedly did not take preventive measures against the droughts:

The rains are very much abundant and constant towards the interior of the country, where the vegetation is densest: on the coast the rains are generally very deficient, and some seasons entirely fail; this is more especially the case south of about 12° Lat., several successive rainy seasons passing without a single drop of rain falling. A three years' drought in the interior of Loanda is still vividly remembered, the inhabitants, from their improvident habits, perishing miserably by thousands from starvation. In my mining explorations at Benguella, I was at Cuio under a cloudless sky for twenty-six months, in the years 1863 and 1864, with hardly a drop of water falling. (Monteiro 42)

The historic period to which Monteiro is alluding is approximately the one corresponding to the years of 1860-1870. While we do not possess specific data on the precipitation in the interior of Angola for these years, we can, however, look at the economic factors that have influenced the crisis to which Monteiro makes reference. The interval of time he experienced in Angola corresponds to the last years of the exchange economy in the non-urban areas, where the circulation of currency was scarce and the bulk of economic transactions was done in goods. From the 1860's onwards the local ecology in Angola would be drastically changed, due to a combination of factors (Wheeler and Pélissier 93).

The political project of the Marquis of Sá da Bandeira for the colony implemented by the Overseas Council focused on replacing the sources of revenue connected to the traffic of enslaved people for tariffs on commerce and "hut taxes" collected coercively from the natives. In concert with this, the colonial administration expanded its reach in the region, under the direction of the Governor General José Rodrigues Coelho do Amaral (who served two terms in office, from 1854 to 1860, and from 1869 to 1870). This heightened bureaucratization of the administration, served by a repressive apparatus that was growing more violent, would add even more obstacles to basic survival for the majority of black Angolans, many of whom were now deprived of productive activities (mostly farming and cattle raising) on which the economy of vast populations was previously based. One needs only to add to this context the deliberate destabilization of the local political structures of governance, and it becomes clear that the right conditions were set for a perfect storm. All of this would culminate in what has been labeled as *the extension of a barren sovereignty*, in Lord Russell's formulation in a letter addressed to the Count of Lavradio, dated from October of 1860 (British and Foreign State Papers 1000). All the while, the rising investments of foreign capital into the economy of the province of Angola led to political attempts to restrain and suppress the economy of exchanges, with a barrage of legislation designed to regulate the informal commerce. This period, defined by Daniel dos Santos as being one of "articulation of non-capitalist formations with the hegemony of the European capitalism" (Santos 103), favored the establishment of large scale plantations, owned and explored by foreigners, and the crush of pre-existing sustainable practices of subsistence farming. As a consequence, black workers were deprived of their stocks of food and family-owned areas of plantation, an adversity that was only aggravated by new legislation approved in

Lisbon with the purpose of raising obstacles to the ownership of land by black indigenous individuals (Wissenbach 177).

It is no use disguising the fact that the negro race is, mentally, differently constituted from the white, however disagreeable and opposed this may be to the usual and prevailing ideas in this country. I do not believe, and I fearlessly assert, that there is hardly such a thing possible as the sincere conversion of a single negro to Christianity whilst in Africa, and under the powerful influence of their fellows. No progress will be made in the condition of the negro as long as the idea prevails that he can be reasoned out of his ignorance and prejudices, and his belief in fetish, or that he is the equal of the

white man; in fact, he must remain the same as he is now, until we learn to know him properly, and what he really is.

Loanda was discovered in the year 1492, and since 1576 the white race has never abandoned it. The Jesuits and other missionaries did wonders in their time, and the results of their great work can be still noticed to this day: thousands of the natives, for 200 miles to the interior, can read and write very fairly, though there has hardly been a mission or school, except in a very small way, at Loanda itself, for many many years; but those accomplishments are all that civilization or example has done amongst them. They all believe firmly in their fetishes and charms, and though generally treated with the utmost kindness and equality by the Portuguese, the negro race, and even the mulattoes, have never advanced further than to hold secondary appointments, as writers or clerks, in the public offices and shops, and to appear (in public) in the most starched and dandyfied condition. I can only

Image 4: Monteiro, Joachim John. *Angola and the River Congo*, vol. 1, pp. 78-79.

In light of these structural changes leading to increased social and environmental imbalances, it is more than likely that the devastating effects of the draught witnessed by Monteiro (and for which he assumed the locals were responsible) are related to major modifications in the economic structure of the colony, largely enabled by foreign investment and the disruption of traditional farming practices.

Monteiro's perspective, however, implies a deliberate condemnation of black Africans for what he considers to be an ineffective management of the resources, even suggesting a relationship of causality between the waste of water and the alleged inability to handle logistical problems:

I had under my charge at that time twenty-four white men, and between 400 to 600 blacks at work on a copper deposit, mining and carrying ore to the coast, distant about four miles; and no one accustomed to a constant supply of water can imagine the anxiety and work I had to go through to obtain the necessary amount for that large number of thirsty people, very often barely sufficient for drinking purposes; (...) It was impossible always to be looking after the blacks told off daily on water duty, and words cannot express the annoyance and vexation that the rascals constantly caused us, by getting drunk on the road, wilfully [sic] damaging the kegs, selling the water to natives on their way back, bringing the filthiest water out of muddy pools instead of clear from the proper place, sleeping on the road, and keeping all waiting, sometimes without a drop of water, very often till far into the night. (Monteiro 42-43)

It is important to point out that Monteiro's bias as a white European traveler in a position of power prevented him from realizing something that would become apparent over the course of the following years. The management of water, as a vital resource in the colonial context, assumes strategic importance for the black population in Angola, providing them leverage against the hegemony of the foreigners and settlers. It is plausible, therefore, that in the passage quoted above certain strategies of negotiation of power come into play, under the form of a passive resistance to the access to water. The tactics employed to that end constitute, in their



whole, a means of reclaiming political agency — the dispute for holding decisions in the logistics of managing the resources — that should not be overlooked. What seems to be under negotiation here is what Hardt and Negri call “commons,” a domain used by Žižek to explore the struggles that emerge from the perception of the antagonisms of capitalism (Žižek 2008, 44). In sum, it can be interpreted as one more instance of the environmentalism of the poor, taking the form of a particular obstinacy inscribed in the travelogue, and still resisting the colonial gaze more than one century after the facts took place.

### ***Some notes on labor and resistance***

The book *Angola and the River Congo* achieved international recognition thanks to a few paragraphs where the author expresses his views on the practice of enslavement in Angola. The travelogue is quoted in the report delivered to the Congress of the United States on March 26th, 1884, by John T. Morgan, president of the Committee on Foreign Relations. The document (*Reports of Committees: 30th Congress, 1st Session — 48th Congress, 2nd Session*) focuses on the links between the USA and the peoples living in the Congo Valley, and evokes the book by Joachim John Monteiro to assure the members of the Congress of the allegedly benign character of forced labor practices in Angola. The passage selected by the authors of the report illustrates Monteiro’s approach to the forced capture of African men and women, but the implications of the original text go far beyond this, confirming some of the interpretations that have been suggested so far:

There is very little cruelty attending the state of slavery among the natives at Angola, I believe I may say even in the greater part of the rest of tropical Africa, but I will restrict myself to the part of which I have an intimate knowledge. It is a domestic institution, and has existed as at present since time immemorial; and there is no more disgrace or discredit in having been born of slave parents, and consequently in being a slave, than there is in Europe in being born of the dependents or servants of an ancestral house and continuing in its service in the same manner. (Monteiro 57)

While it is far beyond the scope of this essay to scrutinize the factual value of Monteiro’s bold and manifestly unsubstantiated affirmations (something which has been done, nevertheless,

by several scholarly works deconstructing the myth of the benevolent colonization, under the disguise of the “civilizing project” reclaimed by Portuguese authorities), it is crucial to acknowledge how such declarations serve the perspective adopted throughout the travelogue. This position, that I propose to take as a confluence of the narrative of scientific superiority of the foreigner and the racialization of the other according to a grammar of discrimination grounded in the culture of enslavement, is often translated into gestures of violence towards black bodies. Such is the case of the following passage:

There is something patriarchal in the state of bondage among the negroes if we look at it from an African point of view (I must again impress upon my readers that all my remarks apply to Angola and the adjacent provinces). The freeman or owner and his wife have to supply their slaves with proper food and clothing; to tend them in sickness as their own children; to get them husbands or wives, as the case may be; supply them with the means of celebrating their festivals, such as their marriages, births, or burials, in nearly the same way as among themselves. The slaves, in fact, are considered as their family and are always spoken of as " my son" or "my daughter." If the daughters of slaves are chosen as wives or concubines by their owners or other freemen, it is considered an honor, and their children, though looked upon as slaves, are entitled to special consideration. There is consequently no cruelty or hardship attending the state of slavery. A male slave cannot be made by his master to cultivate the ground, which is women's work, and the mistress and her slaves till the ground together. A stranger set down in Angola, and not aware of the existence of slavery, would hardly discover that such an institution prevailed so universally among them, so little apparent difference is there between master and slave. A not very dissimilar condition of things existed in feudal times in England and other countries. (Monteiro 57)

Monteiro’s account configures an attempt at describing the institution of enslavement purged of the fundamental traces of violence at its core. His text — that, as one should keep in mind, was aimed at an international readership in the English language, having found its way to such disparate places as the circle of Charles Darwin and the members of the United States Congress — means not only to water down the relationships of power and violence created through enslavement and its afterlives, but also to render invisible the racial grounds for the

exploration of black Africans in Angola, as well as the violations of human rights implicated in such practices.

It is worth noticing, at the same time, that Monteiro's statement does not diverge, in its essential claims, from the central tenets of the theory of *lusotropicalism* that would be developed by, among others, Gilberto Freyre, nearly half a century later. Both discourses are marked by the attempt to deny the inherently violent nature of forced labor and enslavement, through a conceptual displacement of the realm of slavery to the domain of the familial, along with the alignment of such practices with a patriarchal system applied to the relationships of ownership, and the insistence on the alleged advantages of such system. In a sense, all of this anticipates the lusotropicalist discourse and the its support of Portuguese-led colonialism under the Estado Novo dictatorship, particularly as promoted by Oliveira Salazar.

But perhaps the most surprising aspect of the account is the troubling absence of white men from the scenes of enslavement. Monteiro jumps from his considerations on the allegedly soft nature of enslavement in Angola, to some observations on the practices of endogenous slavery prior to the European occupation of the territory. From these he shortcuts to the links between enslavement and the local institution of *fetiche*, suggesting that the vast majority of men and women sent to the ships that would sail through the Middle Passage were condemned to that by the members of their own communities, in the context of the accusations of the practice of witchcraft, as told by Monteiro.

The author then reviews some of the trials by ordeal used in many peoples across Angola to ascertain the liability of the accused individuals. Monteiro's attention is particularly drawn by the ordeal of the *Erythrophleum guineense*, known as the *sassywood*. The process is described in detail, focusing on the toxic effects of the injection of a poisonous concoction made with the bark of the tree. The author's insistence on the process is highly revealing, for a number of reasons. Most prominently, it intends to ascribe responsibility for the practice of enslavement to the native Angolans (derisively designated throughout the book as "poor devils", "poor wretch", to express what Monteiro perceives as the native's extreme cruelty), while, at the same time, describing the ancestral ritual in terms that are familiar to the botanist. Science is, once again, used to legitimate the superiority of the white foreigner, and, therefore, the exercise of power mediated through racial categories (cf. Monteiro 61). This disposition achieves a peak of notoriety when the narrator reveals that he once witnessed, in Mangue Grande, a trial based on

Image 5: Manilha, Angola, c. 1875

The British Museum



Purchased from Henry Bassett, J. J. Monteiro's brother in law, in 1958. Catalog number:  
Af1958,14.14

Curator's notes:

*Manillas were used extensively as currency in West Africa from the 15th to the 20th century. During the Transatlantic slave trade manillas were a frequent medium of exchange for slaves. Register 1958:*

*Bronze penannular anklet with incised decoration at the ends. Weighs c. 6 1/2lbs  
Illustrated in J. Monteiro, Vol. I, Pl.IV., 1. [See Af1958,14.1]*

this method, and sought, along with a party of merchants, to offer a monetary ransom for the person being judged. His attempt is met with acrimony, and Monteiro seizes this opportunity to remind his reader that the white man does not always succeed in rescuing the black man, in what constitutes an obvious variation on the colonial topic of the “white man’s burden.”

Something similar could be said of the narrative focusing on three women collecting water from a river in Ambrizete (now N’Zeto), when a crocodile emerged from the river and attacked the woman in the middle, dragging her into deep water. The family of the victim attributed the responsibility for the death to the two surviving women, and John Monteiro engages in a fierce dispute with them, arguing that there was no basis for such accusations. To this the women from the village replied asking Monteiro why, if things were such as he said, didn’t the crocodile take any of the other women. The two survivors were put on trial by ordeal, which was, according to Monteiro, probably fatal to both. Following the logics of the travelogue, the reader is supposed to interpret this as a conflict between the Westerner and the native African. This conflict between systems of explanation of everyday life, however, is far from being neutral, and it certainly does not take place in a context isolated from the dynamics of power clashing in the Angolan territory at this point. The bonds between black Angolans and their ancestral spaces, the systems used to predict and explain reality, the culture and the sciences upon which their habitus was predicated were under threat, being contested by the very logics of colonial occupation.

In a section named “Insensibility of the Negro,” John Monteiro elaborates on the variety of physical punishments inflicted on black bodies, as well as the violent deaths and executions, connecting those to the climate and vegetation along the coast of Angola, which had purportedly conditioned the psychological traits of black people. Botany is thus used to justify the dehumanization of black men and women (“the sun and fevers of their malignant and dismal mangrove swamps, or the mists and agues of their magnificent tropical forests, no more affecting them than they do the alligators and countless mosquitoes that swarm in the former, or the monkeys and snakes that inhabit the latter.” Monteiro 70). Shortcuts are promoted once again between non-humans and humans, serving as mediations between regimes of power and visibility.

Unlike many of the travelogues written in this area during the same period, we know that Monteiro's perspective cannot be entirely classified as external. On the contrary, the author held several economic assets in Angola, and had direct interest in the exploitation of black labor. Interests and assets that, in more than one case, were intimately connected to the projects of scientific exploration espoused by Monteiro. One of them is directly related to his activity as a naturalist. The task of collecting and treating the inner cortex of the baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*) led him to come up with innovative techniques of manufacturing paper from the bark. The process quickly gave origin to a commercial network focused on exportation, controlled by Monteiro himself. A 1876 review of his book singles out the creation of a regional market responsible for a volume of exportations amounting to 1.500 tons of baobab bark from Angola in 1874 (*The Athenaeum*, No. 2515, Jan. 8, 1876, p. 48).

In *Angola and the River Congo*, Monteiro provides his own account of this discovery, and takes the opportunity to complain about the great efforts required to recruit labor among the locals:

For some years that I have been collecting the inner bark of the *Adansonia digitata*, or Baobab tree (the application of which to paper-making I discovered in 1858, and commenced working as a commercial speculation in 1865), I have been unable to induce one single native to hire himself to work by day or piecework; they will cut, prepare, and dry it, and bring it for sale, but nothing will induce them to hire themselves, or their slaves, to a white man. (Monteiro 75)

Monteiro explicitly airs his views on the idleness of black workers, using it as a justification for the social exclusion of black men and women, and the depreciation of black labor. Such arguments serve as a segue to a plea for the enslavement of people:

One great bar to their civilization in Angola, is that no tribe on the coast can be induced to work for wages, except as servants in houses and stores, and even these are mostly slaves of other natives, or work to pay off some fine or penalty incurred in their towns. (Monteiro 75)

Following his apologia of forced recruitment, and having expressed his support for the practice of “hut taxes” (*impostos de palhota* that would serve, in most of the cases, to provide a legal framework for forced labor and the maintenance of the labor dynamics of slavery, Birmingham 47), Monteiro offers as the unique solution to the economic challenges of settler colonialism in Angola the creation of “(...) an emigration scheme, under the direct supervision of the several governments who have entered into treaties for the abolition of slavery, and transport the poor wretches.” Abolition, in his optics, should be regarded as the ruin of the farming industry, and could only be mitigated by transnational plans for the compulsory mobilization of black workers.

It is now clear how, in this instance of travel writing, the domains of scientific exploration, exploitation of local resources, and international circulation of knowledge on botany are intertwined, in a complex network of interests, in which vegetable bodies occupy varied and critical roles. The refusal, on the part of the black workers, to collaborate in the exploitation of the vegetal context at the service of global flows of capital would allow us to tell a different story, maybe an alternative timeline of events, diverse from the traditional accounts of colonisation and the hegemony of globalised capitalism. This history would be articulated along ties of solidarity among human and non-human subaltern agencies (what Monteiro often labels as the “lazy and vegetative”, p. 76), opening up new and challenging perspectives on the subversion of the colonial regime from the standpoint of environmental practices, used as a means of resistance. Such project also allows us to reconsider the potential of what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing refers to as the “world-making projects of non-humans,” that is, the reconfiguration of specific environments through non-human agents that never ceased to exist and serve as important actants and counterparts to the projects of imperialist and colonial expansion (Tsing 22).

### ***Coda***

The reader of *Angola and the River Congo* is aware of the fact that Joachim John Monteiro owned captured Africans, even though he claims to have bought them to release them from the previous owners, allowing them freedom in the realm of the services that they provided to Monteiro, something that he considers illustrative of his own liberalism. For the duration of his lengthy account, one can understand how the logics of obtaining resources and black labor are

juxtaposed in the colonial project he embodies. Not only the language employed is the same, but also the methods share striking affinities, in their common effort to collect, classify, describe, and monetize the labor and the non-human agents. I have tried to demonstrate how this entanglement is aligned with a central antinomy of global capital — the antagonism between ecology and the reproductive logic of capitalism — used by Slavoj Žižek to counter some of the tenets of the ecological discourse, and how a context of colonial exploitation exacerbates the relationship between the two opposing terms. However, in his travelogue, Joachim John Monteiro brings forth a number of other issues intersecting this fundamental antagonism. The stance adopted by the narrative on the topic of black indentured labor, and how it is assimilated to the natural resources, has the effect of revealing the subaltern black Africans as the truly individualized political subjects in the context of the exchanges. Borrowing from Žižek’s arguments, the colonial context in Angola renders the pressure of the excluded apparent in the daily practices of exploitation of resources. Imperialist projects, in their exercise of world-making designed to maximize profits and engender hegemonic networks of circulation, create the conditions for life to become unbearable, to the point that Žižek’s “un-learn[ing] the most basic coordinates of our immersion into our life-world” (Žižek 2008, 59) evolves into a necessity, and, ultimately, a mode of resistance.

In several occasions, Monteiro’s imperial gaze is confronted with situations where he was patently unable to deploy the apparatus of scientific reasoning (the same that justified his presence there in the first place). In such instances, I argue, the very grounds of common sense are being challenged, in order to imagine other ways of entering into a relationship with the environment — and further proving that the relationship of subjects and nature cannot be separated from the relationship between us and reality itself.

The coexistence of the colonial subject and the white European man in the same ecological space produces positions that further validate some of Žižek’s arguments. The colonizer’s project co-produces nature as a fantasy, ready for being packed, dispatched, and consumed. All the while, for the colonized in Monteiro’s travel book, nature, as such (i.e, as a separate object of contemplation and, possibly, redemption), does not exist (Žižek 2008, 56). And that is because it takes part in the same fabric of reality that is being destroyed by the system of colonial aggression. The lack of such a perspective can only produce blind gaps in our



understanding of the world, the kind of which prevents us from realizing that the catastrophe not only is real but has, in fact, never ceased to unfold:

When one draws attention to the millions who died as the result of capitalist globalization, from the tragedy of Mexico in the 16th century through the Belgian Congo holocaust a century ago, and more, responsibility is denied: this just happened as the result of an “objective” process, nobody planned and executed it, there was no *Capitalist Manifesto*... (The one who came closest to writing it is Ayn Rand.) And therein lies also the limitation of the “ethical committees” that sprang up all around to counteract the dangers of unbridled scientific-technological development: with all their good intentions, ethical considerations, etc., they ignore the more basic “systemic” violence. (Žižek 2008, 66)

In my approach, I tried to highlight the blind spots where the catastrophes apparently without a blueprint take place. It is, in this context, illuminating to read Žižek’s remarks on the simulated invisibility of the colonial catastrophe — and how much it resembles the unfolding ecological catastrophes of our days:

The fact that King Leopold of Belgium who presided over the Congo holocaust was a great humanitarian, proclaimed a saint by the Pope, cannot be dismissed as a mere case of ideological hypocrisy and cynicism: one can argue that, subjectively, he probably really was a sincere humanitarian, who even modestly counter-acted the catastrophic consequences of the ruthless exploitation of the natural resources of the Congo (his personal fiefdom!). But the ultimate irony is that even most of the profits from this endeavor went for the benefit of Belgian people, for public works, museums, and so on. (...) What is the dream is that we can go on indefinitely in our expansionism? (Žižek 2008, 66-67)

To conclude, I would like to stress that Monteiro's self-proclaimed liberalism serves both his attitude in face of the commerce of men and women (he purchased enslaved people under the pretext of offering them manumission, while integrating them into his labor force), and his practices towards the environment as a naturalist: prospecting land resources, while collecting specimens, and sending them to museums and other institutions in the United Kingdom, all the while developing projects of economic and scientific exploration of the same resources. In the light of the unfolding catastrophe that arises from the tension between environment and capital, today — as in Angola in the 19th century — the real threat is not the imminent catastrophe, but its absence, as it signals the perpetuation of regimes of exploitation, violence, and destruction of life.

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