

# The Past Is a Foreign Photo: Image and Travel Writing in the Benguela Railway. Angola, 1920-1930

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## Abstract

The introduction of railways in Europe throughout the 19th century is the origin of a new perception of space defined by the “annihilation of the traditional space-time continuum which characterized the old transport technology” (Schivelbusch 36). In the Portuguese colonial spaces in Africa, however, these changes would not occur until the early 20th century, thus resulting in the conflation of the narratives of colonization, territorial occupation, and modernization. However, this design is frequently at odds with the superposition of the railway line and the commercial tracks historically used for the trade of enslaved human beings, as was the case with the Katanga-Benguela Railway in Angola. In this paper, I examine three travelogues written between 1922 and 1933 by British travelers in Angola—*Through Angola, A Coming Colony*, by Colonel J. C. B. Statham, London 1922; *Angolan Sketches*, by Alexander Barns, London 1928; and *A Fossicker in Angola*, by Malcolm Burr, London 1933. Reconstructing their journeys, I intend to explore the tensions between text and photography as they shape colonial relationships.

## Keywords

Angola; Benguela Railway; travel writing; colonialism; temporalities; speed.

## Resumo

A introdução de linhas ferroviárias na Europa ao longo do século XIX encontra-se na origem de novas modalidades de percepção do espaço definidas pela “aniquilação do tradicional contínuo espaço-tempo que caracterizara as antigas tecnologias de transporte” (Schivelbusch 36). Nos espaços coloniais portugueses esta transformação só viria a ocorrer no princípio do século XX, resultando daí a sobreposição das narrativas de colonização, ocupação territorial, e modernização. Esse projecto, porém, encontra-se em permanente tensão pela coexistência, no mesmo espaço, de linhas ferroviárias e antigas rotas de comércio de seres humanos escravizados, tal como se verifica na Linha de Caminho de Ferro Katanga-Benguela. Neste artigo analiso três narrativas de viagem escritas entre 1922 e 1933 por viajantes britânicos em Angola: *Through Angola, A Coming Colony*, de J. C. B. Statham (Londres, 1922); *Angolan Sketches*, de Alexander Barns (Londres, 1928), e *A Fossicker in Angola*, de Malcolm Burr (Londres, 1933). Através da focalização de cenas críticas testemunhadas pelo texto e pelos registos fotográficos das expedições

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procuo explorar as tensões entre ideias de atraso e modernização enquanto elemento estruturante de relações de tipo colonial.

Palavras-chave

Angola; Caminho de Ferro de Benguela; escrita de viagens; colonialismo; temporalidades; velocidade.

Travel is the traveler. What we see isn't what we see but what we are.

Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

## Time and Speed in Colonial Travel Narratives

In 19th-century Europe, the construction of railway lines allowed for an unprecedented interconnection of distant spaces in short periods of time, thus determining deep changes in the perceptions of space and time. As Schivelbusch pointed out in his groundbreaking *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*, it meant the “annihilation of the traditional space-time continuum which characterized the old transport technology” (Schivelbusch 36). In Portuguese colonial spaces it was not until the early decades of the 20th century that railway started replacing traditional roads and paths (Esteves 50). While this brought about a considerable change in the representation of these colonial spaces, the challenge was now to replace the narratives of backwardness associated with peripheral territories for the discourses of modernization and integration into the wider capitalist networks and the flow of international trade.

This challenge would pose poignant questions to all the interested parties, and also to the travelers who experience first-hand the conflicting nature of colonial spaces undergoing an accelerated process of change, recasting them as belated travelers whose discursive practices, according to Ali Behdad, are “split, for they are inscribed within both the economies of colonial power and the exoticist desire for a disappearing Other” (Behdad 14), while witnessing, all along, the transformation of these spaces into extractive territories in a global interconnected economy. The haunting presence of imperialistic formations casts a shadow over the physical presence of the railways (and their time/speed effects), determining what Beatrix Heintze and Achim von Oppen described as the “significant ambivalence toward the experience of the new transport technologies” (Heintze and von Oppen 11).

In this sense, travel narratives—and the photographic records that are often published alongside them—offer a particularly interesting insight into how, at a given moment, certain bodies see and react to each other, how their presence in the imperial space is disputed, in a context of change and negotiation of identity: not from the official point of view, but from the perspective of the one who sees (and, hopefully, the one who is seen) and might resist the “cultural cartography” that assigns fixed identities to the body of the other (Porter 20-21).

Railways promised new perspectives for the economical exploitation of areas removed from the networks of global trade and not yet under a strong direct colonial control. In West Africa, complex systems of railway lines for passengers and cargo brought about a new stage for the Atlantic trade, creating new dynamics between European and North American markets and the Global South. These relationships are generally characterized by the structural imbalance at their core, with the African colonies being used as suppliers of cheap labor and raw materials and the imperial economic clusters benefiting from this far-from-fair trade.

Specters of slavery roam through these territories. Foreign travelers such as John Statham, Alexander Barns, or Malcolm Burr—the authors of the travelogues that will be discussed here—signal, even if inadvertently, the traces left behind in the landscape by the slave trade in Angola. However, strikingly more real is the material dimension of the relationships between the railway company officials and the locals hired to work on the tracks. The instances of travel writing analyzed here echo systemic imbalances of power, and the exploitation of the labor force under the politics of contracts in effect in the Portuguese colony.

While developing a philological or anthropological inquiry lies beyond the scope of my investigation, this paper is a critical examination of the evolution of social imaginaries: how ideas concerning speed and time, manifested at singular encounters, collaborate in the creation of a socio-political reality. What I intend to track here is how some of these ideas are created through these encounters, how more-or-less fortuitous collaborations shape a political space and a sense of regulation of interactions, and how these travel and are subject to change but also might be disrupted and challenged by these very encounters. It is, then, a matter of what Mary Louise Pratt saw as the domain of the *imperial gaze* and the resistance of the subaltern (Pratt 10) that will be at stake here. I believe this critical engagement with travel narratives to be all the more important when one considers that they are not yet widely known. This fact alone can account for their practical exclusion from the canonical archives of colonialism. The focus on English-language travelogues adopted here allows for a closer look at interactions informed by economic interests and framed around the circulation of technology surrounding railway lines, mostly imported from England. Typically published in major cities, these books tend to be short lived, even if the number of publications and printing volumes indicate a broad readership.

In this paper I examine specific sites of interaction and explore social spaces of circulation as they frame the relationships between agents in divergent positions of power.

I would like to address these spaces by thinking through *scenes*, as settings collectively produced by the interaction of individuals, "set within the fabric of everyday life but also function[ing] as an imagined alternative to the ordinary, work-a-day world" (Woo, Rennie & Poyntz 287). Such scenes can be perceived as ephemeral and elusive units of research, given the limited access we have to what exactly took place. While there is not much we can do to offset the ever-present voice of the traveler as narrator, looking at these scenes over the course of the *longue durée* has perhaps the advantage of highlighting continuities and repetitions that may shed some light on what Ricoeur would call a "surplus of meaning." (Helenius 149)

### Colonial Photography and the Construction of a Colonial Visual Regime

As a key component of travel books aimed at a broad audience, photographic records play a central role in most of the travelogues published in the period after 1900, creating an intimate relationship between colonial spaces and photography. James R. Ryan pointed out how the camera became part of the apparatus of compilation and circulation of images of the colonial space, not only depicting the colonial economy, but also constructing and framing the colonial modes of seeing the world and, more often than not, showing more than intended by the photographer (39). In this sense, one can interpret the imagery of travel narratives against the grain, using the material condition of photography, oscillating between image and object, as the grounds for a dispute about the colonial gaze: in the words of Nuno Porto, "in their efforts to create a temporary illusion of control over a broad history" they depict the "very instability of the colonial regime" (129).

The space of indefiniteness that is opened up by the problems of *adherence of the referent*. This concept was coined by André Bazin in 1945 when referring to photography as a technique akin to the mummification of relics, and defined by Sontag as the traces of the real that are transferred to the domain of the photographic reproduction and that bear some resemblance to the death masks, and that Barthes compared to the windowpane that retains in itself the landscape outside. Such space of indefiniteness creates new possibilities of interpretation of the problematic content of colonial travel photography. It conveys an inherently excessive content, or what William Mitchell labeled the "representational commitments" of photographs: "they record certain kinds of things and not others, and they record some kinds of things more completely and accurately than others" (Mitchell 1992, 221). These commitments challenge us to engage in a critical reappraisal of the uses

to which colonial photography lends itself. W. J. T. Mitchell proposes a method for performing this engagement based on the task of “showing seeing,” that is, “to make seeing show itself, to put it on display, and make it accessible to analysis” (Mitchell 2002, 166), rendering possible research on the “intersubjective vision”: to ask not only what these pictures are about or what they mean or do, but also what do they want from us as viewers (176).

The tasks of decoding or recoding this visual archive, however, cannot be restricted to a straightforward and universalizing postcolonial program of dialectical interpretation. It has become necessary to engage with the photographs as contested sites of encounters and intersections of gaze, and in order to do so the reader/spectator must complicate the photographic narrative and allow space for indigenous agency and indigenous experiences of the encounter to emerge from the points of fracture of the image (Morton and Edwards 4). Ariella Azoulay offers a daring model to engage with these images on the premise that no single agent in the photographic act has the capacity nor the power to contain the effects of the photograph and determine its sole meaning, hence requiring from the observer participation in the space of political relations negotiated by the photograph, assuming a role in the “civil contract” summoned by the mere existence of it:

The photographed person’s gaze seriously undermines the perception that practices of photography, and watching photographs taken in disastrous conditions can be described and conceptualized as separate from the witnessed situation. (Azoulay 20)

The contract, therefore, is one between the participants in the act of photography and its various users, exploring “the hypothetical, imagined arrangements regulating relations within this virtual political community.” (23) In addressing a very small sample of the photographic archive contained in the travelogues, this paper engages with scenes created by narrative and photographic records in a critical manner that approximates the notion of civil contract formulated by Azoulay.

### **John C. B. Statham: A Problem of Time(lines) and Speed**

On July 27th, 1920 John Charles Baron Statham, an officer with the British army and fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, arrives at the Port of Luanda onboard the

steamer *Mossamedes*, sailing from the Island of Madeira. Statham was on a hunting expedition in search of the giant sable antelope, a rare and almost mythical prize at the time. The officer, who became acquainted with the Angolan fauna thanks to some remarks made by his comrades while fighting with the British Expeditionary Force on the Western Front during the 1914-1918 war, was a lifelong admirer of his fellow countryman David Livingstone. During the war in Europe, Statham befriended Mr. Frank Varian, an Irishman serving in the Royal Engineers attached to the Fourth Army on the Somme. Varian met Cecil Rhodes while working on the Beira Railway in Mozambique and, before being drafted, was in charge of the construction of the Benguela Railway in Angola. The engineer Frank Varian had become famous for being credited with the first sightings and descriptions of the giant sable antelope.

The primary purpose of Statham's trip was to capture specimens and take photographs of the animal while following Livingstone's footsteps. Statham's extensive notes from the field would give origin to the book *Through Angola: A Coming Colony* (London, 1922), a travelogue describing in detail several aspects of the wildlife, plants, geography, stock produce, insects, diseases, native customs and religion, and, for several chapters, dealing with the railway line from Benguela to Katanga, in the Belgian Congo.

Upon his arrival in Luanda, Statham's first impressions of the city impose a divide over the landscape between past and present, pointing out the railway as one of the symbols of the modernization of the country and signaling a cut with the past: "down by the beach the little sixteenth-century fort of San Francisco reminds us of Luanda's past; the railway station and a wireless mast speak for the present and future" (33). Statham was received by the Governor-General who, according to him, felt relieved when he realized that the sole purpose of Statham's trip was to hunt and photograph, and not to request a concession for economic exploration, as had become increasingly frequent.

In Malange, Statham hires carriers to accompany him on the expedition. He ostensibly favors what he perceives as the need to develop the infrastructures and communications in the area, even if that implies the use of violence (45). The author seems aware of the modalities of forced labor practiced in Angola, adding that the Portuguese administration would be unable to afford the wages the British government paid in its colonies. The existence of "hut taxes" in the Portuguese provinces being nothing but a legal device for the imposition of forced labor, Statham favors this practice over the British system of wages, considered to be expensive and hard to control.

The journey inland starts on August 7th, with a detailed inventory of weapons, ammunition, photographic machinery, and film. Statham takes with him two domestic servants and twenty carriers, of whom several were children. They walk southeast from Malange, toward Cangandala. In Belmonte (Kuito), Statham was forced to stop because his carriers refused to go on without seeing their wages increased. He notes that the city will certainly expand once the Railway is completed. From there they go to Chinguar, where Statham provides a brief account of the history of the Bihé people, making reference to the slave trade routes that passed through the Bihé plateau:

Today, a motor track is where the old slave path ran; and beyond Chinguar, westwards, the steel rails run over 300 miles; while to the east and centre of Africa they are pushing their way, a sign to all men that the peace of civilization has come at last and to stay. (113-114)

Whatever the author means by “the peace of civilization,” it becomes clear that it has to do with the introduction of heavy machinery produced in Europe and managed by the colonial government, with the purpose of expanding the global networks of commerce for the benefit of the metropolis. This same idea is embedded in the framing and composition of Statham’s photographs (see image 1). In a panel composed of two juxtaposed photos meant by the author to illustrate the contrast between the past (the ox wagons and the predominance of agriculture) and the present (the railway), stress is placed on the paths opened along the landscape, central to both images. The latter features a locomotive being set in motion and pulling several crowded carriages in the midst of a cloud of steam. In the foreground, the viewer can observe two human figures. The one to the right, a white male, wears a white robe-like vest, girded at the waist, and appears to have a long beard. Possibly a missionary, this person walks toward the photographer while the other body, on the left side of the picture, merges with the darker tones of the locomotive in the background. This second figure, a black man in white trousers, is barefoot and holds a stick in his hand. We cannot see his face, as he seems to be looking backwards. While the figure in white is highlighted by the bright sky, and his body is in direct contact with the compositional central subject of the photograph (the steel rails), the black figure is decentered and barely visible in the dim corner of the photo.





THE OLD TRANSPORT METHOD—OX WAGONS



AND THE NEW—BENGUELLA-KATANGA (CENTRAL ANGOLOAN) RAILWAY

**Image 1:** “The Old Transport Method - Ox Wagons;”  
 “And the New - Benguella-Katanga (Central Angolan) Railway,” in Statham, John Charles Baron.

In a chapter entirely dedicated to the central Angolan railway, the author compares the mythical founder of the Bihé people to the contractor of the railway, Robert Williams. Williams, a Scottish engineer, went to South Africa in 1881 to assist Cecil Rhodes and worked with the controversial explorer on the Cape to Cairo railway project (Hutchinson and Martelli 141). When this project proved unfeasible due to local resistance, Williams played a pivotal role in diverting the line to the Belgian Congo, an advantageous alternative due to the rich Katanga territory. Shortly afterwards, however, the costs became too high, and the project was halted. It was then that he obtained the license from the Portuguese government to implement a railway line even more favorable for his financial purposes. Decisively cheaper than a connection to the Beira in the Eastern coast of Africa, and shorter than a route to Cape Town, the Benguela-Katanga railway was an avenue to one of the richest sources of minerals (including diamonds, uranium, cobalt, and the world’s largest copper deposit), connecting the mines to the Atlantic and providing an easy and fast route to the British steamers.

In 1902, Robert Williams was commissioned with planning and developing the Benguela-Katanga line. By 1920, the line ran along the coast from Lobito to Benguela and

inland up to Chinguar. Statham takes the train from Chinguar to Lobito on October 1st and arrives at his destination two days after. In Lobito, the railway station is staffed both by the Portuguese and the British, and Statham mentions “the Machados,” father and son, the British officials, and “Messrs. Varian, Clark, and Johnston, who are the technical experts” (121). Frank Varian, the Chief Construction Engineer for the Benguela Railway, was an old friend of Statham, the one who mentioned to him the giant sable and by now almost a celebrity among circles of hunters worldwide.

The way Statham describes the city of Benguela suggests a concealed tension between the slavocratic and tumultuous past and the present, somehow mediated by the railway line:

Benguella lies dormant, but jealous; as a woman who seems a younger rival growing to fame and power by her side. She cannot compete with Lobito; Nature itself forbids it. The harbour is worthless, the deadly mosquito is here, and the fever it brings; but the town has several thousand inhabitants, of whom some 3000 are whites, and the Governor’s palace and such society as the district boasts are still at Benguella. The line passes through the Benguella plantations, and is moving now due east over the foot-hills to the valley of the Lengue.” (123-124)

Statham seems to tap into this implicit tension between the landscape and the history of slave trade, using it to frame adaptation to modern times and the decline of the historical sites. On more than one occasion, the reference to the slave trade is a disruptive element to the narrative: there seems to be a continuity of the memory of slavery and the description of the conditions under which the natives carried out the infrastructural works for the colonial administration.

Railway lines offer a chance to restructure the territory in accordance with the interests of economic exploration, hunting, and the implementation of an effective colonial presence. In regards to what concerns Statham, the railway line serves as a map of the big game in the country, a conception with deep implications concerning the landscape. The activity of hunting and the incremental speed in transportation are interestingly correlated. While big-game hunting demands very wide areas that need to be carefully scouted (thus taking up a substantial amount of time), the railway makes the distances shorter, rendering the hunting locations interconnected and friendlier to foreigners. In a way, speed tames

geography. Nature and technology come together to satisfy the need of the cosmopolitan man who finds in Africa the stage of his recreational activities. At the same time, railway lines allow for technology to bridge the gap between the territory and the visitor and, in doing so, they make the intermediation of Angolans more and more peripheral, preempting their role as guides, carriers, or trackers, and thus decreasing the level of dependency on the locals.

### Alexander Barns: Memory and Landscape

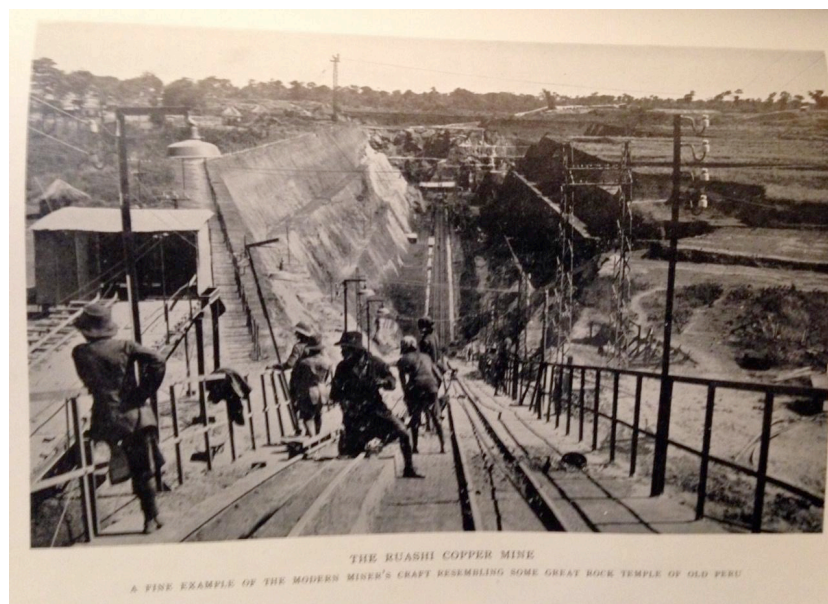
A few years later, Alexander Barns, author of *Angolan Sketches* (London, 1928), traveled from Cape City to Katanga, via Elisabethville, on his way to Benguela. Mr. Barns compares the Rouashi Copper Mine in the Katanga basin to “some old rock temple in old Peru:” the excavation, being the starting point of the Katanga-Benguela railway line, reminded Barns “of some vast Inca temple-dwelling of ancient Peru, or terraced catacombs of some titanic race long since dead” (64). This seems to be the subject of one of the photographs taken by Barns and published in his travelogue (see image 2). The train tracks are featured in the center of the photo, leading the carts to the underground mines. Barns compares this structure to ancient tombs. The network of metaphors he employs here ends up summoning more than what were likely his intentions, and the vicinity of the slave trade routes cannot but assign new meaning to these allusions.

Opening his narrative, Barns retells the history of the Portuguese maritime expansion from the 15th century onwards, centered on the figure of Henry the Navigator. He then analyzes the decline of the Portuguese Empire and the partition of Africa, highlighting the role played by King Leopold and Cecil Rhodes. From them, he turns to Robert Williams and the construction of the Benguela-Katanga railway:

(...) in 1903 there was still time for King Leopold, Robert Williams, and his colleagues to take stock of their surroundings! They found themselves in a fabulously rich country, surrounded by wealth only guessed at then, but still a very, very long way from the sea. But with a trunk line so slowly coming towards them why not take time by the forelock and push out a lateral line to shorten the way? Why not? An old slave and caravan route lay ready to their hands—a *via dolorosa* of enslaved humanity, already partly surveyed by the faltering feet of a million black people. As has happened before in East

Africa and elsewhere, an old slave route, being the shortest, was selected, in this case, its outlet the now new and improved port of Lobito. (27-28)

While attempting to overcome that past, however, not only does Barns repeat the prejudice against the locals, but his travelogue also echoes the kind of racism at the origin of the slavocratic societies. The association between the domestication of the territory and the subjugation of the local structures of power appears to be closely related to the expansion of the railway. Speaking of the Walunda people who live in the highland country between Angola and the Congo, Barns describes them as “truculent” and “harbor[ing] untamed elements amongst them,” and points out the recent findings of diamond fields in the region as a decisive factor for “the advancement of the district and the taming of the inhabitants” (34), managing to dovetail the narrative of economic development and racist aggression. If the colonial presence in the region of the Walunda is embodied by the discourse of modernization and economic exploration encompassing the narrative of the “civilizing mission” of the white man, the railway serves these purposes as it identifies the territory with an order at odds with the “untamed elements.”



**Image 2:** “The Ruashi Copper Mine. A fine example of the modern miner’s craft resembling some great rock temple of old Peru,” in Barns, Alexander.

The decay of Amboim (Old Benguela) is juxtaposed with the promising benefit of the railway lines running inland from that area, assisting the exploration of palm oil, coffee and nuts: the products for which slave labor had been employed (Barns 41). The fact that the author refers to the modern city of Huambo—founded in 1912 by General Norton de

Matos and strategically placed on the railway line—as the likely future capital of the colony, instead of the “unhealthy and not so central” Luanda (42) only testifies to this representation of a break with the past while projecting a shadow over the historical process of exploitation of the resources. On the other hand, Alexander Barns backs the option for the trade with Congo, repeatedly underscoring the advantages of the use of black labor from Angola in the Katanga region.

After Luacano and Busaco, he finally gets to Villa Luso. Barns is introduced to Mr. Frank Varian, the Chief Engineer who, as we saw, met John Statham in Lobito. Varian came from Huambo on an inspection trip and the two set out together for the railhead, about forty miles from Villa Luso.

There, he is met by “over a thousand natives”—the plate-lying Angolan workers. They are barely visible in Barns’s account, and the focus is placed on the British origin of the materials they are handling. After lunch with the workers, Barns returns to Villa Luso and heads south to the Cuanza.

References to the slave routes in this area of the “Hunger Country” (Upper Zambezi to Bihé) occur sporadically: “the day before yesterday the slave gangs passed along it; yesterday the wagon transports of copper from the mines to the sea; today the railway and the motor!” (84). It is not far from here that Barns meets Malcolm Burr and Mr. Nazaroff, two prospecting agents working for the company and encamped beside the railway. Burr invites Barns for lunch, and they remain together for several hours by the line, discussing the wildlife of the country and the potential of the railway.

Barns continues his journey toward Lobito, passing through Munhango, Kohemba, and the western Cuanza valley, visiting several farms on his way before arriving in Benguela. Similar to Colonel John Statham, he also shows repulsion for the Old Benguela and is likewise haunted by images of the past city (125). Like Statham, Barns rapidly continues his trip toward Lobito where he finishes his railway trip praising the achievements of Robert Williams:

So I had come down the 770 miles length of Africa’s newest and in some ways most important railway—a line of immense potentialities with a great future. (...) Truly Sir Robert Williams, the good genius loci of Angola—R.W. or Bob Williams, as he is called by his followers or friends—may sleep well o’ nights. As a benefactor to thousands of human beings his task is

already accomplished and success comes out to grasp him by the hand as he turns the last corner of his great railway project. (126-127)

### **Malcolm Burr: Temporalities under Prospecion**

The two men with whom Alexander Barns had lunch by the line are the protagonists of another travelogue, published shortly after *Angolan Sketches*. In fact, Captain Malcolm Burr's journey had started just before we spotted him in the Cuanza Valley, at the exact point where Barns's came to an end: the bay of Lobito.

The maintenance of the railway lines demanded hiring highly specialized staff in England and elsewhere. Burr, author of *A Fossicker in Angola* (London, 1933), was one of them. Like Statham, Burr was a veteran of WWI, stationed in the Macedonian Front. Malcolm Burr became notorious for his linguistic skills, being able to communicate in more than five languages in Salonika. *A Fossicker in Angola* is published with eight illustrations and a map of Angola.

Burr was sent to Villa Luso to prospect for fuel destined for the railway line after rumors had gone forth that there was a coal basin in that area. He travels in the company of the Russian naturalist and geologist Pavel Stepanovitch Nazaroff. The two take the train in Lobito and travel up the plateau. They disembark in Huambo (Nova Lisboa) where they meet Frank Varian, who hosts them. They proceed to Silva Porto, where Burr claims to have seen "their first sample of the naked savage:"

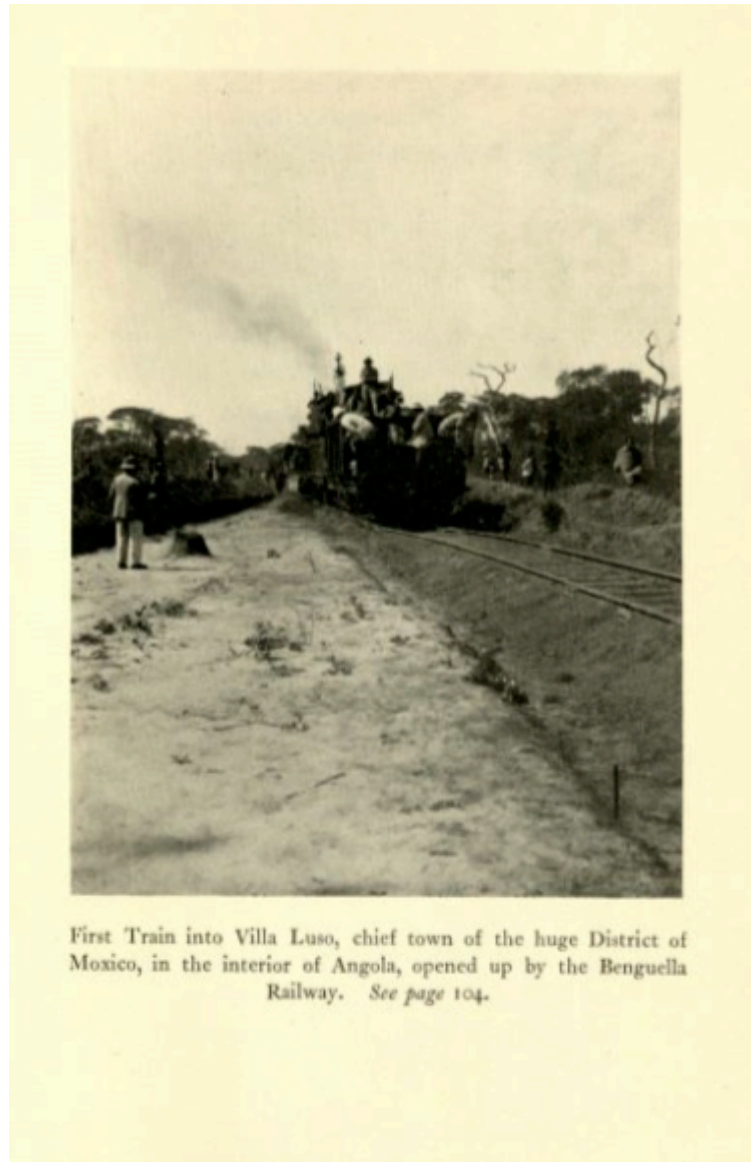
Wearing nothing but a flap of bark, they were of a dull, sooty complexion, not shining black, and mostly unprepossessing. The children had huge tummies, probably due to cramming them with mealies, or perhaps to hookworm, and protruding navels are common. (Burr 22)

Burr does not fail to recognize here the conversion of the slave trade landmarks into symbols of the modernization of the territory: "Today the once redoubtable slave mart is a station on the Benguela Railway" (23). They go further to Chindumba and eventually reach Villa Luso. While hiring the carriers for their journey, they are confronted with the brutality of the social relations between servants and the staff of the company:

The native staff made a good impression on us. Fine upstanding men with pleasant smiling faces, they looked smart in the red or blue and white singlets and length of white material for skirt with which we provided them. (...) “No need to stand in ceremony with the boys,” explained Neezer and, going up to one, forced open his lips to show us his teeth, just as though he were a horse, without so much as “by your leave.” (27)

In what seems to be a demonstration of ease toward the natives, destined to appease the newcomers, the guide, Neezer, repeats a repertory of gestures inextricably embedded in historical meaning, activating a body language modeled after the practice of enslavement.

They were travelling with a party of about one hundred and fifty men, among them carriers, cooks, and servants. The conditions were clearly not adequate for that expedition, and it became evident that the hired Angolans were not being compensated for their work, having to eat “grubs, termites and caterpillars” along the journey. Once more, the imbalance between the visitors and the locals suggests something more than the face-value of this encounter, revealing ambiguous layers of meaning beneath the surface of the interaction. The high death rates among Burr’s company documented throughout the travelogue speak to this reality: poor nutrition, paired with severe weather conditions, resulted in a debilitating context for most of the black people serving the two foreigners.



**Image 3:** “First Train into Villa Luso, chief town of the huge District of Moxico, in the interior of Angola, opened up by the Benguella Railway,” in Burr, Malcolm.

The fossicker tends to assume a patronizing attitude towards the natives, but at no point acknowledges that their conditions of extreme poverty and deprivation are tied to the politics of the company. Instead, Burr diverts his attention to what he perceives as the naivety of the contracted locals:

(...) I was in a yielding mood when the servants waited on me in a body to ask for an advance of pay to enable them to buy some coats that were on sale in the store. Foolishly, I consented, but then I was still green to Africa, but I had my reward at the sight which later presented itself. They filed by in procession to show off their finery, led by Chutungu [chief of one of the



groups among the contracted], his breast puffed with pride under his smart grey town overcoat with black velvet collar, with a grey Homburg on his head at a rakish angle. How was he to know that it looked odd to see his naked legs and feet beneath? The rest were dressed in a similar way. (80-81)

The traveler fails to understand the potentially ironic mimetic character of this demonstration, as well as the political intervention of the protest. The porters, unable to buy adequate clothing and shoes fit for work, might have borrowed what was available from the nearby stores. The articles available in such a remote area would be suited for the white population and more likely than not consisted of expensive imported clothes, targeting the local elites and occasional travelers. By using that attire, the porters may have engaged in a demonstration of the shortcomings of the regime of exploitation of their labor force by rendering evident that their needs were not taken into account, and thus possibly engaging in a demonstration of colonial mimetism. Michael Taussig explored the notion of “colonial mirror” as a practice of imitation of the colonizer’s otherness that “reflects back onto the colonists the barbarity of their own social relations, but as imputed to the savagery they yearn to colonize,” noting that “the power of this colonial mirror is ensured by the way it is dialogically constructed through storytelling” (Taussig 134). At the same time, the “procession” created a moment of destabilization of the dynamics of power and authority in the camp, recasting the relationship between the engineers and the servants who might have used the fancy urban overcoat and the Homburg hat as devices for a parody of the foreigners. One might even ask to what extent this intervention echoes Taussig’s remarks on the critique, by indigenous populations in South America, of what Karl Marx portrayed as “commodity fetishism.” In more than one way, the procession implicitly questioned the self-proclaimed “civilizing mission” of European colonialism, bringing up what Ricardo Roque described as a threat to such a project by confronting it with the possibility of its annulation through the dissolution and destruction of the differences upon which it was predicated, comprised of a set of borders (moral, symbolic, and cultural lines that ought not to be crossed) and therefore interpellating and disrupting colonial hierarchies (Roque 106). Burr, however, seems to be completely oblivious of the intention of this performance. Immediately after that, the workers gathered and addressed the engineers to demand a raise in their pay from thirty to a hundred escudos, or else they would desert. Burr refused to meet their demands and, with the intervention of the local Portuguese Governor, the servants were deterred from their designs.

Burr and his company march from the basin of the Zambezi to the basin of the Congo river, toward the village of Busaco, and then back to Villa Luso. On their way back, when approaching the township, they reach the newly laid railway, one that was not there at the time they crossed the same path days before. Here, Burr gives an account of the astonishment of the locals and how they were confounded by the sight of the railway tracks. He uses his knowledge of the artifact to exert reassuring authority over “the unsophisticated Wachokwe, Waluena and Waluchase, [who] stopped dead at this uncanny manifestation of the white man’s magic, wondering whether it were safe to cross it” (102).

During their stay in Villa Luso, a major event takes place in the city—the arrival of the first train (see image 3). The contractor’s engine came riding slowly through the streets, “bedecked with flags and received with champagne and appropriate ceremony (...) it was worth it, for it was impressive for what it implied. It was the head, the first feeler, creeping steadily forward, of this last of the great pioneer railways of Africa” (104). Burr takes a photograph to celebrate that moment. In the picture, there is a man wearing a light-colored suit and a hat, apparently welcoming the train by the side of the road, while several others cover the front of the machine, holding on to the large metal structure. On both sides of the train and in the background, small bodies are barely distinguishable from the darker tones of the bushes, but one can recognize black men probably running after the train as it entered Villa Luso. On his last day in Villa Luso, Burr decides to parade the locals on the train for his own amusement (107).

### **Times out of Joint: Railway Lines, Historical Memory, and the *Longue Durée***

These documents constitute an archive of interactions highlighting the structural continuities of imperial relationships at the level of everyday life in Angola between 1920 and 1930, in a way that we might describe through Ferdinand Braudel’s concept of the *longue durée* of imperialism(s). It is this complex hierarchy that manifests itself in the travelogues and becomes notably visible in the points of contact between them: real life characters circulating through the scenes, local leaders, government authorities, and repeated practices that give us a dense picture of this space and time.

Photography plays an important part in these three travelogues. Mobile and relatively lightweight photographic equipment was, at the time, a fairly recent possibility. Considered in a colonial context, photographic records allow the reader to see things that may not be obvious in the written narrative and that might exceed the amount of

information that the author desired to convey. People, in particular, are a constant presence in colonial photography, even when their place is disputed by the very framing or subject of the photograph. Black people are blended with the bodies of the machinery. Their presence is collateral to the subject of the pictures and the mass of dark metal absorbs their bodies, which are rarely individuated, but rather an extension of the railway itself. There seems to be, indeed, the temptation to recast colonial photography, entirely replacing the presence of the black natives with that of the imported machinery of the railway.

Despite the narrative constraints inherent to the genre, the travelogues with which we established a dialogue here served as platforms for the negotiation of meanings and the regulation of colonial otherness in encounter scenes between individuals under different regimes of power. The white male foreign traveler and the black colonial subject meet around a site of technological development with the potential to change the spatial reality of the landscape, disrupting previously held ideas of space and time through the critical intervention of speed. Paul Virilio's foundational work on speed as the driving force of modern political rationality explores possibilities that I would like to further consider in future research. For now, it suffices to note that his concept of dromology, as the logic of speed, being critical to the understanding of modernity, has deeply influenced some of my own readings of colonial encounters. It has been my contention here that railways create a political territory whose potential force and expansive power are related to their condition of "places of intense circulation, on the path of rapid transportation" (Virilio 30) while bringing the human bodies closer to a dictatorship of movement exerted through the metabolic bodies of transportation machines (83). I believe that my critical engagement with some travel narratives may, by focusing on micro-moments of encounter, open up new spaces of discussion about the mediation of colonial relationships through the technologies of railway transportation.

These narratives are often haunted by photographic and discursive presences of the past. As it emerged in specific scenes, mediations are often performed through a language shared with the spectral presence of slavery and forced labor. The narrative and visual excesses contained in the books explored here, however, challenge these presences, allowing space for critical reappraisals of these moments. Such ghostly presences intersect the imperial gaze of the traveler, as it is described by Pratt, and they seem to be highly disturbed by the vicinity of fast machines and what they represent: a certain instability of the colonial regime surfaces from the fractures opened by a longing for a past of seemingly

stable fixed identities and the relentless advancement of speed throughout the landscape. As a result, travelogues from this period bear witness to a certain trouble articulating the intersubjective hierarchies of the present temporality. In his celebrated *The Past is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal showed how the practices of memory in the public space tend to derive from an urge to cut ties with the past and lead to a kind of preservation of such past, undertaken as a gesture of reascribing meaning and reframing the grammar of the encounter, imaginatively displacing and refashioning the inherited codes (Lowenthal 192). I hope I have been able to point out that something of the same nature can be found in the material collections constituted by the travelogues studied here.

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