



Special Section: “Imagined pasts: photography, colonialism, and archives”

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Introduction

This special section, with texts by six researchers, three of whom are also the volume's editors, spans diverse geographical spaces – Portugal, Angola, São Tomé and Príncipe, Indonesia, and the Netherlands – and a long chronology from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. The authors employ diverse methodologies to examine the meanings and uses of photographic images and archives within the Portuguese and Dutch colonial contexts, across religion, medicine, state bureaucracy, independence wars, ethnology, and private and commercial uses. Most contributions focus on specific archival collections or on tracing photographic materials dispersed across different repositories. Together, they examine how photographic images are produced, circulated, and revisited, and how they shape intimate, historical, and political understandings of the colonial past. “Imagining” – the play between image and imagining that inspired our title – reminds us that the past is always approached from the present, even as the present itself becomes history.



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“Other lives” of photography

A recent special issue, edited by Patricia Hayes and Iona Gilbert, draws on Georges Didi-Huberman’s notion of the “afterlife of the image” to propose instead “other lives”, avoiding the death connotations of “afterlife” (2020: 10). We adopt this insight to frame the contributions in this special section, which examine how photographs acquire new meanings across contexts, formats and temporalities.

This is evident, for example, when archival documents become available through digital projects, as in Marleen Reichgelt’s article *Zooming in. Children as Guides and Informants in Merauke, West Papua 1905-1910*, which opens this special section. It was precisely the digitisation of photographs held in a Dutch colonial missionary archive that made it possible to “zoom” into the images and, by enlarging them, see details that would not have been visible in the previous analog formats available in the material archive – an insight that Antonioni’s film *Blow-Up* (1966) portrays. Lobo Antunes’ article analyses the fascinating transformations that occur when former Portuguese soldiers post personal photographs taken in Angola during the war of independence (1961-74) on digital platforms open to public scrutiny, turning them from objects of personal affect into objects of debate. These cases illustrate how photographs acquire “other lives” when reactivated in new contexts and viewed through new interpretative frames, such as those pursued by the authors brought together in this special section to reflect on *Imagined Pasts: Photography, colonialism, and archives*.

Like Hayes and Gilbert’s special issue in *Kronos*, ours grew out of an international workshop held in Lisbon in November 2019 at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon (ICS-ULisboa), where the three editors are based (two anthropologists and one historian). The two-day workshop focused on photographic collections from the colonial period. Living in Portugal, where such materials are abundant yet dispersed across institutions and largely understudied, we issued an open call to attract researchers working on other colonial contexts. With 22 presentations and around 30 speakers, the workshop was broad and diverse in scope. Although this diversity cannot be fully reproduced here, the workshop marked the conceptual starting point for this special section.

Time and space are central to both history and photography. As Elizabeth Edwards argues, photographs are “visual incisions through time and space” linking personal experience, culture and history. Yet photographic time is not fixed: images are encountered across multiple temporal presents, acquiring new meanings in changing contexts. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer’s notion of “liquid time” captures this condition, describing photographs as “dynamic” and “unfixed” objects that shift meaning over time (2019:13). The temporalities addressed in this special section range from early colonial photography in the mid-nineteenth century to contemporary digital circulation, where archival images are reactivated,

recontextualised, and reinterpreted across analogue and digital environments. Diverse forms of preserving and circulating images coexist, from colonial archives that have remained largely untouched in postcolonial contexts to digital platforms where “old” photographs - whether dated or undated – are shared and re-exposed. “Old” may refer to black-and-white prints, but also to the faded colour of photographs taken by Portuguese soldiers during the wars of African independence in the 1960s and early 1970s, or to the vibrant colour slides produced during the five ethnographic and photographic missions led in Angola by an employee of the Lisbon Ethnology Museum, discussed in Ponte’s article *Wholes and Parts*.

Alongside time, space is the other key dimension for exploring photographs’ multiple intersections with history, culture, and personal experience. First, there is the space where photographs were taken, the original “incision” captured by the camera. Second, there are the spaces through which photographs travelled, moving from the locations where they were produced to the places where they are now preserved and studied. Photographs, photographers, and those depicted often circulate, and their meanings, uses, and effects change along the way, shaped by these spatial and temporal movements. Third, there is the space in which photographs are placed: where they are printed, glued, posted or stored. This includes archives of many kinds, with various formats and diverse classificatory systems: digital platforms, institutional and personal albums, images embedded in documents, or reproduced in books, journals, newspapers, leaflets, and photographic postcards, and even, as in this case, in the pages of an academic journal such as *Culture Unbound*.

Although most of the special section’s contributions address Portuguese colonial histories, the inclusion of a Dutch colonial case broadens the comparative scope of this special section and highlights the wider relevance of these questions. Together, the articles examine the material legacies and the “imagined pasts” that continue to shape contested understandings of colonial history. These include the lingering lives of colonial visual and material legacies; the ways photography can reveal unexpected colonial encounters and the lives and humanity of particular subjected individuals; the different scholarly disciplines that used photography in their inquiries and preserved these images in their archives; and the diasporic lives of images and image-makers, crossing national and colonial frontiers and thereby subverting fixed identities.

Images that move

Images are often on the move. Travel, circulation, and migration - experiences inseparable from space and time - lie at the heart of photography and shape all 6 articles in this special section. Decades after the fall of European empires –

and across subsequent political transitions – these studies trace the trajectories of images across time and space, highlighting their movements between formal and informal archival contexts, the blurring of private and public spheres, and the diasporic lives of both photographers and their subjects. Sometimes photographs remain immobile, preserved where they were created, yet the individuals depicted were travellers, forced or otherwise. In Silvio Marcus de Correa's *Beyond the image of the pain of others*, sick Africans brought to Lisbon for medical trials become the subjects of images in contexts of ambiguous consent. Similarly, in Cláudia Castelo's *Black Images Matter*, photographs are central to bureaucratic files that African residents in Portugal submitted to request state-supported travel back to Africa. Castelo's study brings to light forms of intra-imperial mobility that are often obscured in other sources, going beyond the more obvious movements of white Portuguese settlers or administrators. Importantly, she works with documents that reference specific, individual stories. While the exact locations where the photographic portraits were taken are unknown, they were annexed to Lisbon-based documents and remain there today.

In both cases, photography appears either at the beginning or the end of a journey, becoming a key moment in the process itself. In Correa's article, we encounter a medical context in which the photograph is produced in the same hospital where the therapeutic trial takes place, a practice that, by the early twentieth century, already had a genealogy in other hospital settings and across different pathological conditions. Jean-Martin Charcot's photographs of his patients, for example, are a well-known and widely studied case from the Parisian Salpêtrière hospital in the second half of the nineteenth century. In Castelo's article, on the other hand, photography forms part of the bureaucratic procedures through which states sought to know their citizens and to control their movements and actions. In this case, the issue concerned the state's coverage of the expenses of a long journey from Portugal to several African countries. This required the submission of specific information to make a decision, and a photographic portrait was among the documents required. Then and now, photographic portraits are indispensable to the movement of people crossing borders.

Diverse movements shape the photographic archives studied by Reichgelt, Ponte and Lobo Antunes. In Reichgelt's article, the images were produced in the early twentieth century in Western New Guinea (Papua) in the context of a religious mission, and were later likely transported together to the missionary archive in the Netherlands, where they remain today. Antunes' private photographs travelled from Angola to Portugal at different times: some were sent directly to relatives, while others were carried by soldiers completing their military service. Within Angola, images also circulated among barracks, battlefields, and local laboratories. In Ponte's case, the photographs she analyses were taken in Angola

at different moments in the 1960s, but were quickly printed by Lisbon's Ethnology Museum, which had supported the missions and where the fieldworker worked. Today, the images remain in the same archival space, seemingly detached – as Ponte suggests – from the paradoxical legacy of a late colonial project that combined modern anthropological methods and documentary technologies with imperial domination. Across these cases, what emerges is not only the physical movement of photographs, but also their circulation through shifting social, institutional and temporal contexts. As they travel, photographs acquire new meanings and archival lives – other lives.

In Filipa Lowndes Vicente's article, *On the Margins of the Indian Ocean*, mobility concerns the photographers themselves more than the photographic archives. Goan photographers of the nineteenth century were often highly itinerant, practising their craft across Bombay, a major British imperial city, and the East African coast, where a thriving commercial culture nurtured photography's technological and economic potential for producing images of peoples and places. Here, both photographers and photographs emerge as diasporic subjects and objects, travelling across time, space, and empire. This text on Goan photography as a diasporic practice draws from a research itinerary that began much more centred in Goa itself before leaving its borders (Vicente 2014). Across the six articles, these studies reveal that photography is inseparable from movement: whether through the journeys of images, the circulation of archives, or the migrations of those who make and inhabit them.

Recovering marginalised lives in the colonial archives of the present

The originality of Reichgelt's text lies in how a photographic technique, *zooming*, becomes a metaphor for identifying a new subject of the narrative. Digital technologies allowed her to zoom in on archival photographs and notice children who were not the focus of the camera's gaze. Their presence would not have been easily perceived by the naked eye in standard viewing formats, such as photographs. In her article, "small" children become "big" characters within the Dutch missionaries' experiences in distant colonial settings. Through photography and other written documentation preserved in the missionary archive, children and young adults, mostly boys, emerge as key mediators in the missionaries' encounters with the region. The idea of the colonised as mediators has been widely discussed in imperial studies and has taken different conceptual forms to designate those who played this formal or informal role: "colonial intermediaries", "go-betweens" or "indigenous informants", as developed by C.A. Bayly (2009) in his *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*.

Reichgelt's contribution places children within this category. Through her visual and theoretical approach, children move from unseen to seen, and from marginal figures in most historical and anthropological studies to unexpected protagonists. She also gives them "other lives".

In Correa's *Beyond the image of the pain of others*, the archive of the former Institute of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in Lisbon is treated as a historical laboratory linking Africa and Portugal through early-twentieth-century research on sleeping sickness (human trypanosomiasis), which caused widespread mortality in the African colonies. Among its holdings are the papers of a bacteriologist and parasitologist involved in the first colonial medical mission of 1901, which helped establish a scientific network between Africa and Lisbon, sustained through conferences, journals, and clinical trials. Photography was integral to this project, which relied on the circulation of patients, images, and biological specimens between the colonies and the metropole.

African women, men and children appear in these archival materials in a precarious state between life and death; many died shortly after being photographed. They all suffered the same illness and were subjected to human medical experiments in which consent was uncertain despite the early codification of informed consent in 1900. Correa, a Brazilian scholar who often works on the European visual archive, describes encountering an envelope labelled "Photographs of the Blacks". Inside were 9 male portraits taken in Lisbon in 1914, each identified by name and surname, plus two additional unnamed portraits - one male and one female. These materials document only a fraction of those transported to Lisbon from Africa for treatment and experimentation, many of whom died during the process or en route. Likely made at the hospital by the School of Tropical Medicine's photographer, other photographs preserved in the archive depict the disease vectors such as tsetse flies, placing humans and insects within a single visual and clinical regime. Correa draws on Susan Sontag, particularly her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, echoed in his title, and on Roland Barthes, to reflect on photography, suffering, and death, while situating his work within broader histories of tropical and colonial medicine.

Castelo's contribution engages in several dialogues with Correa's work. Both authors focus on the early twentieth century and reveal the presence of "Black lives" in the colonial metropolis, albeit for different reasons, thereby contributing to what Castelo describes as the retrieval of the experiences of the dominated. Both also engage with photographic portraits produced within expanding institutional documentary regimes - police, hospitals, prisons, border controls, and identity systems - that had become widespread by the early twentieth century. Finally, the two archival institutions are located close together in present-day Lisbon, in the Junqueira-Belém area, historically shaped by institutions consolidated in the

mid-twentieth century.

These parallels are best understood within the broader political and institutional context of the late Portuguese empire, in which decolonisation elsewhere was met with renewed imperial investment and the redefinition of the colonies as “overseas territories”. This period saw the expansion of archival institutions and “tropical” disciplines, including the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino (AHU), the “Overseas Historical Archive”, and the Escola de Medicina Tropical, “School of Tropical Medicine”, which retained their colonial nomenclature after 1974-75.

Castelo (2012) wrote about the institutional “colonial complex” in mid-twentieth-century Lisbon and was already familiar with the AHU when she encountered the fonds underpinning her article in this special section. She approaches the archive as both field and object of study, following Antoinette Burton (2006) and Ann Laura Stoler’s (2009) call for “archive stories along the archival grain”, and draws on decolonial approaches inspired by Elizabeth Edwards’ notion of “presence” and Temi Odumosu’s “ethics of care”.

While researching Portuguese settler migration, Castelo encountered the “settler files”, applications for free travel to a Portuguese colony submitted to the Ministry of the Colonies by would-be settlers who claimed insufficient means for the journey but had guaranteed employment or financial support at their destination. Nearby, she found the “files of the repatriated”, which she initially assumed concerned settlers returning from Africa to Portugal without the means to do so. To her surprise, however, these files contained photographs of Black women, men and children living in Portugal who were requesting support to return to Africa. This unexpected direction of migration; from Portugal back to Africa rather than the reverse – only became visible through close engagement with the archival material, which offered no such indication in its classification. *Black Images Matter* draws on a small portion of the much larger “files of settlers and repatriates” preserved at the AHU, underscoring the need for further research. The fonds comprises around 150 boxes, of which the article analyses only 20 – about ten per cent of the total.

Photography is central to this archival discovery. In the “files of the repatriated”, photographic portraits – rather than names – make it clear that the documents concern Africans living in Portugal. For Castelo, this reveals fragments of “Black Lives” in Portugal and compelling evidence of a wider African and African-descent presence in the country. Within state bureaucratic procedures, photography functioned as a technology of identification, as applicants were required to submit two photographs alongside a birth certificate and a “poverty certificate” to qualify for travel assistance. The files describe these Africans as working in menial, underpaid jobs, as servants or port workers.

Africans living in Portugal who sought to return home appear in the archive alongside Portuguese citizens applying to emigrate to African colonies. These

groups are described within markedly different juridical, racial, colonial and symbolic worlds, even if poverty and difficult living conditions sometimes brought their trajectories into proximity. As Castelo notes, these populations intersected both aboard ships linking Lisbon and various African ports and within the same bureaucratic system of imperial mobility. As Castelo also shows, while the place of birth determined archival classification, only Black applicants had their racial identities explicitly recorded. The archive thus both connected and differentiated these populations, revealing the asymmetries of colonial documentation.

A final note concerns the impact of Castelo's research on the AHU itself. With Castelo's input, the archival description was revised to acknowledge traces of African lives in Lisbon. These files reveal names and images, making individual identities visible, in contrast to the many anonymous Black portraits that populate other Portuguese colonial visual collections. The explicit recognition of "blackness" within the classification thus became a form of archival reparation, consistent with Temi Odumosu's "ethics of care" and broader efforts towards more inclusive and reflexive descriptions. By adding new layers of interpretation to these files, Castelo pays tribute to lives long neglected or subalternised. As Elizabeth Edwards argues, photographs "inject a particular form of *presence* [Castelo's italic] into the historical landscape".

In different ways, all the articles in this special section share a concern with recovering forgotten or marginalised lives through contemporary archives. The first three do so through Reichgelt's focus on Papuan children, Correa's exploration of photographs taken at the threshold of death, and Castelo's attention to suspended lives within the colonial bureaucracy, as revealed in written and visual records.

Photographing during the "colonial wars": leaving violence out of the picture frame

Maria José Lobo Antunes and Inês Ponte, authors of the next two articles, share the same historical period, taking us to the final decades of long Portuguese imperial rule (1961-1974), marked by the independence wars in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau - or, in the terminology of the authoritarian regime, the "overseas wars" (*guerras do ultramar*). Lobo Antunes examines how, around 2000, Portuguese veterans began using blogs and other digital platforms to share private photographs taken during the conflict. In Ponte's study of António Carreira's five ethnographic and photographic missions to Angola between 1961 and 1969, the wars remain in the background, surfacing only in private correspondence. Lobo Antunes and Ponte recently collaborated on the exhibition and catalogue *A War Kept*, devoted to photographs taken by Portuguese soldiers during the colonial wars. Their project explored how memories of the colonial wars resurfaced through

vernacular photographs preserved in private homes decades after the conflict had ended (Antunes and Ponte 2024).

In this special section, Lobo Antunes asks: “What occurs when soldiers’ private photographs enter the public domain?” She examines a digital vernacular repository launched in 2001, which now holds around 5,000 images. Initially created for teachers, the site soon became a space where former soldiers shared personal photographs from the Portuguese colonial wars. Its founder, a former soldier and amateur photographer, serves as archivist, selecting images and writing captions that privilege war-adjacent scenes while excluding graphic violence – focusing instead on the *before* and *after* of violent moments. As the digital archive’s founder explained, images depicting severed corpses or other extreme brutality were withheld, revealing a pattern of selective memory that avoids confronting Portuguese violence towards African populations.

Lobo Antunes explores the ambiguities of this digital archive, in which the historical actor and the archivist are one and the same. Drawing on long-term work with veterans, she shows how personal memories of the colonial wars often sidestep critical engagement with violence and colonialism. The exclusion of this violence from the digital repository thus reflects a broader difficulty in Portuguese society in confronting the violent end of its imperial history. Such silences, she argues, are themselves political and resonate with Ann Laura Stoler’s notion of “colonial aphasia”: not speaking – or not showing – functions as a way of keeping the Pandora’s box safely closed.

In Angola during the 1960s and 1970s, soldiers used personal cameras or bought photographs from others, producing unofficial images that circulated separately from official war photography, which served propaganda purposes (Ramos 2015). Thirty years after the wars ended, the digital turn transformed the circulation of this vernacular imagery: photographs once confined to albums, memoirs, or veterans’ reunions became accessible to wider publics. This shift enabled the public visibility of previously private images, raising the question of what these curated online displays share with earlier official uses of war photography. In both cases, Portuguese violence against African populations remains largely absent.

Ethnographic interviews with war veterans, conducted over many years, together with archival research, have served as Lobo Antunes’ laboratory (2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2022, 2017a, 2017b, 2015). Photography, her article shows, lies at the heart of these remembered experiences, functioning as a medium of storytelling and a means of regulating what is revealed and what remains private. Drawing, like Castelo, on Temi Odumosu’s “ethics of care” (2020), she argues that seemingly small interventions – such as revising captions to acknowledge African agency – can function as decolonial gestures, restoring visibility to subjects often marginalised in archival and photographic narratives, as Marleen Reichgelt also demonstrates

in her working archive.

One could argue that Ponte's close reading of an institutional archive in *Wholes and Parts* is itself a decolonial exercise. Rather than reproducing photographs from Carreira's field cards and slides, she redraws them, introducing another layer of mediation that encourages a more critical engagement with the National Museum of Ethnology [Museu Nacional de Etnologia] archive in Lisbon. In this approach, Ponte follows a reflexive trajectory developed in earlier research on ethnographers' photographic archives and institutional collections (2020, 2023). Building on Stoler's reading of colonial archives "along the archival grain", she turns to the overlooked photographic archive created in 1965 at the museum to document the cultural diversity of the Portuguese colonies, reading it both along and against its grain. She explores its ambivalent history: established in the final decade of the country's long colonial rule, as part of a modern sociocultural anthropology, as Castelo (2012, 2014) has shown for the 1950s and 1960s, the archive became largely dormant after decolonisation and the democratic transition of 1974-75, turning into an anachronistic remnant of knowledge production during colonial times.

The photographer responsible for most of the Angolan photographic collection was António Carreira (1905-1988), alongside archivist Fernando Rogado Quintino (1907-76). Both, born in Portuguese colonies and long embedded in the colonial administration, became invisible or uneasy figures after 1974. Ponte reconstitutes Carreira's negatives, slides and field cards across a dispersed archive, treating archival work itself as fieldwork. Her familiarity with the archive since 2017 has shaped her practice as forensic "archival hunting" (Roque 2022), tracing each field mission's trajectory from Angola to the museum in Lisbon.

Like the other contributions, Ponte reads photographs alongside reports, correspondence, and administrative records. These textual layers - mission reports, manuscripts, and letters, as in Reichgelt's work on religious missions or Correa's study of tropical and colonial medical history - reveal dimensions absent from the images alone. In Ponte's article, this method is particularly effective in bringing visibility to the colonial wars unfolding in the background of the missions.

While apparently absent from the photographs themselves, war emerges in Carreira's private correspondence from Angola, where he describes collecting a large drum intended for the Lisbon museum and notes that similar drums had likely been destroyed by Portuguese troops because they were used for "long-distance transmission of news" and were thus considered subversive. By cross-referencing different sources, Ponte's article illuminates both specific cases and broader historical processes. To borrow a photographic metaphor, she shifts between a macro lens - grasping colonial war and the development of modern Portuguese anthropology - and a zoom lens, focusing closely on the photographic archive produced through fieldwork in Angola.

Dispersed Pasts, Unstable Archives

Finally, the last article of this special section remains at the macro level, rarely zooming in on specific photographic archives. In *On the Margins of the Indian Ocean*, Filipa Lowndes Vicente adopts a bird's-eye view, focusing on photographers rather than individual photographs. Her attention lies more with the spaces where photography occurred than with the archives where these images now reside. Unlike the other articles, her chronology predates the twentieth century, tracing the early decades of photography across multiple Indian Ocean sites, with Goa as a geographical centre. Here, local men became photographers, sometimes running shops or studios, while others migrated in search of better opportunities.

By tracing the diasporic movements of photographers and their practices, Vicente raises a key question: is it meaningful to analyse early photography through the “nationality” or “origin” of the photographer, or is it more relevant to focus on the place depicted? In Goa, Bombay, and East Africa, photographers of diverse origins, nationalities, and religions produced postcards, portraits, ethnographic surveys, and commercial images, highlighting a contrast with the more tightly circumscribed medical, bureaucratic, or ethnographic collections examined in some of the other articles.

Vicente also addresses the challenge of studying photography in contexts where no consolidated photographic archive exists (2023; 2025; 2026). Early photographs are often scattered, missing, or known only through written references in exhibition catalogues, advertisements, books, or poetry. These fragmented traces require scholars to look beyond images to written sources on photography. Differences in early photographic cultures – such as Bombay's relatively rich photographic societies and publications versus Portuguese India's sparser visual documentation – continue to shape the histories that can be reconstructed today.

In the present moment, marked by heightened attention to Europe's colonial past, private photographic collections in former imperial metropolises have become central to scholarly inquiry across anthropology, history, the visual arts, literature and film. At the same time, those who lived through colonialism, including those who fought as young adults in the so-called “colonial wars” or “independence wars” – people who have memories and materialities of their colonial pasts – are now elderly or have passed away, while the digital turn has shifted archives from material storage to increasingly unstable technological formats.

Colonial photographic archives thus remain both past and present objects. Their material traces persist but rarely align with the histories they are expected to convey. This makes continued archival work essential and raises a broader question: whose pasts can we imagine, and how?

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