Casper Laing Ebbensgaard, Kerry Holden, and Kathryn Yusoff (Planetary Portals)

Environmental Legacies and Epistemic Reparations in the Afterlives of Colonial Extraction

What remains,
when statues fall, what
infrastructures remain
When statues fall, what
amnesia remains
What remains in the land
What remains on the page
What dance, what run, what dreams of the earth?

Environmental Remains and Repair

If, as Deborah Thomas argues, "remains are ubiquitous and omnipresent" (see this issue), then what are the colonial infrastructures that remain long after the statues have fallen?[1] How are these infrastructures, which enable the continuance of colonial transformation of land and its un-homing repetitions of displacement and dehumanization, continuing beyond their symbolic-material removal from site?

The exhibition *I am in your dreams, but you are not in mine* (2025),[2] produced together with the artist Michel Salu and the curators at the Photographers' Gallery engages with the idea of remains by creating a space in which the viewer is invited to encounter the infrastructural continuities that,

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within a context of racial capitalism and continued resource extraction, connect disparate geographies and temporalities: from nineteenth-century colonial South Africa to contemporary London. To do this, the exhibition is conceived of as a "portal," a space-time vortex that sucks the viewer into an encounter with "what remains." In this way, we understand the portal as a method for identifying the continued resurfacing of colonialism's pasts and exposing how geo-social inequities are continuously re/made and maintained. The portal enables us to connect and reassemble colonial geographies in ways that nurture an ethics of epistemic repair while holding a liberatory potential within the shadows of colonial reach. In the exhibition we focus on two modalities of colonial enterprise that were key to establishing epistemic and environmental orders in a colonial context, namely, bureaucracy (the paperwork necessary to order, classify, categorize, and legally codify the world, rendering it legible and manageable) and photography (the visuality necessary to create a geographic imaginary that instilled a colonial gaze of the world). By exploring the entanglements of bureaucratic and photographic practices in delimiting how we apprehend the world in colonial South Africa, we seek to reclaim an imaginative geography that firmly commits to the emergence of sovereignty through land(ed) relations and environmental histories. In this context the exhibition asks, What might be understood as both the index of resistance, refusal, and reinvention and the index of material rescription of environments that constitute a disruptive poetics in the service of reparations? Understanding the shared spaces of dehumanization and environmental degradation as the context of colonial interventions into South African sociality, environmentality, and geophysics, we unearth the historical imaginations and their neutralization as an origin for the environmental context of today's computational interventions in the realm of artificial intelligence (AI).

Woman in Flux

At the sloping face of the opening into the Sheba Mine, laborers are captured as if turning, in a fleeting glimpse, toward the camera. As a site of extraction, the scene is replete with the pulleys on rails, struts and stilts, corrugated iron sheds, pipes and tubes of mine infrastructure, and the laborers, racialized—a Black laborer heading into the mine, white men standing still to embody linear time—complete the picture of a productive place of colonial extraction. Yet, at closer inspection, you notice that not everything is clearly captured. An indistinct blur toward the middle of the image reveals a woman turning away from it all.

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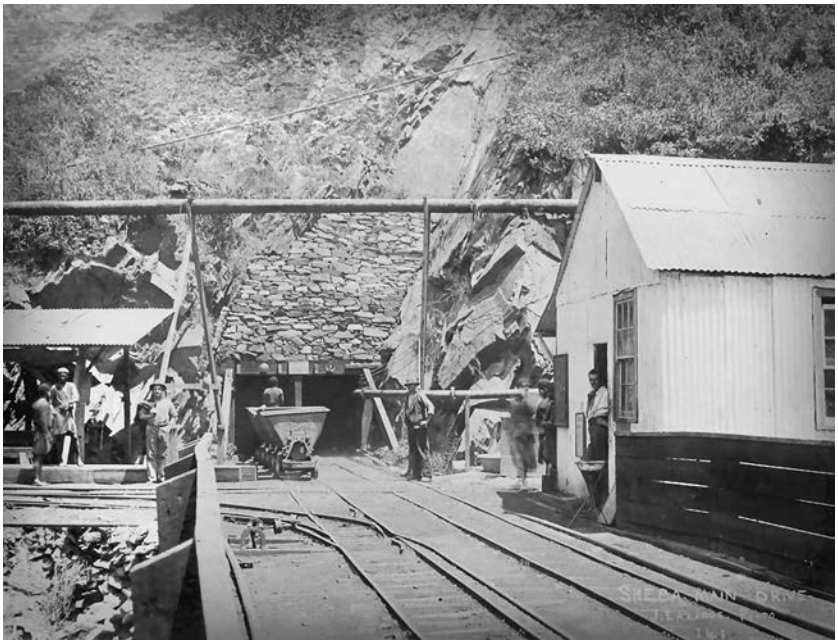


Figure 1. "Sheba Mine Drive." Source: The Bodleian Libraries University of Oxford, Shelf number: MSS. Afr. t. 59 page 3 no. 141.

"The woman in flux" was one of the first "counter-memories" that remained in the strictures of colonial vision, and which we encountered in the archive, orientating our vision and inspiring our thinking about how we might understand and give space to acts of resistance within the frame of colonial photography, rather than imagining these as happening outside the frame. While refusing the gendered role of witness to history and bearer of social reproduction, the woman in flux blurs her trace in time, absconding from the ticktock of the colonial clock. Caught in shadow, the woman in flux is photographed turning away from the camera, caught in shadow and in an act of self-made disappearance from the colonial scene (fig. 1). In the performance of stillness that the camera required to memorialize the fiction of whiteness, the woman in flux pierces the photograph with the realism of continuing the movement of life, being present to herself rather than the geography of the camera and its spaces of travel. Typically, white men were pictured beside machinery or at the rim of the mine, representing the evidence of progress to audiences abroad, including investors, settlers, and prospectors.

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White mineowners posed by the entrance to the mine in white flannels, symbolizing their untarnished relation to the land and indicating that they will never go into the mine and dirty their whites, but that they will remain at a distance to profit from those that do.

Sometimes, women appear in these images. We see this at the diamond mines where they formed part of a live audience to celebrate new machinery or as background figures performing menial tasks in the presumed social reproduction of "native labor" that would carry the colonial-imperial vision into being. In the photograph from the Sheba Mine, we encounter the woman in flux as a blurred fissure in the colonial imaginary of the mine. She creates a rift in the fabric of the cartography of colonial possession and its witnessing in memorializing photography (Brand 2020: 42, 50). She exercises the freedom-making practices that made up a continuous friction in, and resistance to, colonial attempts to dehumanize Black subjects.

This minor act of refusal, in the barely noticeable scene of congratulatory extraction, offers another way of *seeing* and being *in* the mine-space-time. It reaches out from the photographic plate with a "lacerating" effect that "pierces" the viewing experience (Barthes 1980: 32). As a kind of *punctum*, the woman in flux offers an attentive way of seeing that has clear affinities to Ariella Azoulay's (2008: 14) call for the viewer to "stop *looking* at the photograph and instead start *watching* it" (emphasis added), with which she means to pay closer attention to the obscured information that might otherwise appear "within" the photograph.

If we do not adopt a careful watchfulness and instead read the photograph as it was intended — as a triumphalist documentation of white extraction — we not only lose sight of the blur of the self-effacing woman but also, in doing so, foreclose the opening she offers into alternate portals of existence. With the aim of exposing this tension between foreclosing and opening portals of existence within extractive environments, the exhibition *I am in your dreams, but you are not in mine* (2025) establishes a connection between the extractive landscapes of the nineteenth-century gold and diamond mines in South Africa and contemporary data mining, automated learning, and the scripting processes of AI. The exhibition presented a series of single-shot films that use a variety of generative AI and digital processes to edit and alter archival photographs sourced from the papers of Cecil Rhodes at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. Prompted by our narrative scripting of freedom dreams for each of the archival images, the AI's interpretation of the images alters and redraws them to produce a sequence that reveals both the brutal foreclosing and the hopeful opening portals of alternate being.

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Figure 2. Still from *Woman in Flux*. Single-channel video loop, run time 07.39. © Planetary Portals: Casper Laing Ebbensgaard, Kerry Holden, Michael Salu, and Kathryn Yusoff. Source: "Sheba Mine Drive," Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MSS. Afr. t. 59 page 3 no. 141.

In the still image from the film titled *Woman in Flux* (fig. 2), she has been erased from the frame and, true to the logics of white replacement theory, morphs into a white woman who wanders pensively around the mine site before she too transforms into a white man (with flowing blond hair and a linen suit). Through the logics embedded in AI, what began as an act of freedom and refusal is co-opted through the racialized structures of algorithms and rewoven into an explanation. She poses a problem that an AI reading resolves by transforming her image into ready whiteness, fulfilling the dream of white supremacy.

Yet, in addition to this AI-induced hallucination, the film introduces other forms of scripture that overwrite and write against the tides of white teleology, as other bodies regain a hold of the landscape, suggestive of different modalities of seeing and inhabiting environments (fig. 3). In the next still from the film, we see the photographed subjects recede, giving way to line drawings of figures that emerge as specters across the scene. Shadows of bodies are cast on the ground, as if imitating the shadow cast by the viewer, inviting the viewer

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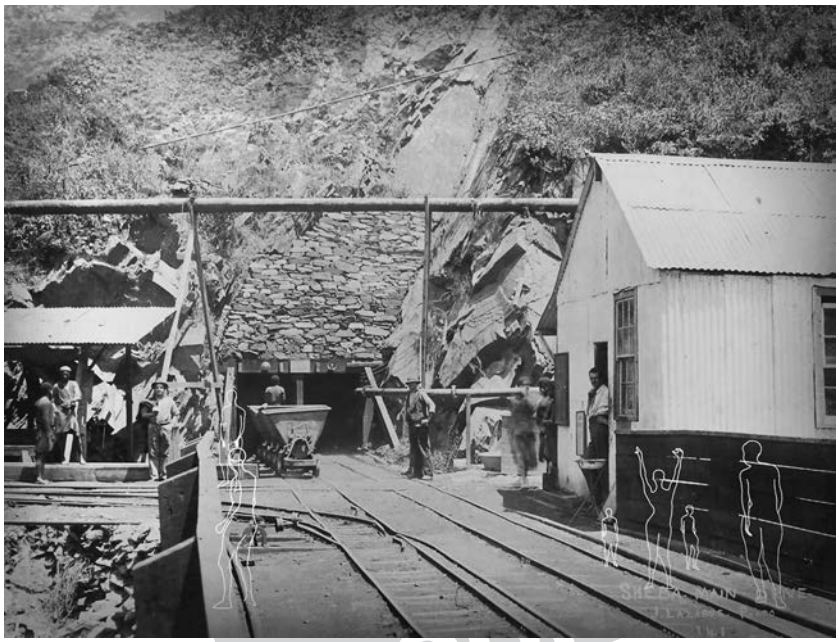


Figure 3. Still from *Woman in Flux*. Single-channel video loop, run time 07.39. © Planetary Portals: Casper Laing Ebbensgaard, Kerry Holden, Michael Salu, and Kathryn Yusoff. Source: "Sheba Mine Drive," Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MSS. Afr. t. 59 page 3 no. 141.

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into considering their own presence as a harrowing ghostly witness alongside the spectral bodies. In this way the film seeks to ask the question of the viewer, how does your body land within the data-infused dreams that make and unmake the extractive spaces fueling our computational future? Here it becomes necessary to consider the idea of an AI archive as an infrastructure of memory (that has no one institutional form or location) that in the context of ever more digitalization reminds us of the archival politics of vigilance. Reclaiming the past from future-orientated AI archives that flatten difference and rescript it again into whiteness is to hold open a space—even a portal—that refuses the rendering of subjects as compliant within the dominating frames of colonial, technoscientific visions.

Photography was an essential technology of imperial communication and imagination, and later a tool of resistance in which subjects, either by refusing to be photographed in certain ways or (as became evident later in the twentieth century) by taking their own photographs, challenged the intent of colonial place making. The source images used to produce the films

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in the exhibition provide a visual representation of Rhodes's dreams of building an imperial Africa from Cape to Cairo, imagining mastery at the scale of "continents" (Yusoff et al. 2022). By critically intervening in how AI renders and responds to archival photographs, the exhibition draws the viewer into the uncomfortable act of double witnessing, not only the colonial past through photography but also the added layer of datafication and algorithmic calculation through which racial violence and environmental harm are normalized: hardwired through code into what we call the AI archive, interrogating what AI remembers of the world, and how this memory structures its interpretative capacities and limits. Each of the films therefore establishes a portal as a tool for repairing the environmental and epistemic violence of colonial legacies as they repeat into the present day. By exposing AI's mechanics of representation, the exhibition issues a call for new imaginings and narratives that rescript and repair epistemic and environmental relations: how we know the world connected to how we live in it.

In this way the exhibition challenges the extractive logics and monoculturalism of AI in interpreting and representing colonial photography, questioning whose voices continue to be silenced and whose lives are erased. We explore how AI imaginaries demonstrate the continued racial injustices and preservation of epistemic violences that marked colonial-era photography in its imagination of the landscape and environment of South Africa. The films explore the epistemic and environmental worlds of the AI "archive" in the context of the debt of inhuman land reparations that still marks relations with the possibility of environmental sovereignty. The exhibition seeks to open a space of the imagination and pave the way for a decolonial affirmation of ecological aesthetics. And, in doing so, to make an intervention in claiming the condition of subjectivity and environment as an intra-dependent state (informal rights-based) claim to sovereignty, in which the inhuman is a medium of expression for reparative claims and decolonial counter-memory. Intra-sovereignty is an approach to sovereignty grounded in the conditions of land and the arrival of the subject through environmental conditions of emergence.[3]

Central to our argument is the idea that repairing imaginaries is as much about repair to environmental conceptualizations and realities as it is about addressing injured colonial subjects. Decolonization beyond personhood and the realm of nonhuman rights advocates that a new model of subjectivity must address the racial injustices of colonialism as a consequence of the epistemic debt that forms of categorization, land theft, and dehumanization put in place. Considering land and landings as a way of understanding

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how environments make subjects and carry them into being, to be codified under the banner of human rights, we insist that the restitution of subjective rights requires an environment capable of supporting and historically repairing that sovereignty and its fabric of human, nonhuman, inhuman relations (understood here as a speculative knowledge of inhuman or intra-human right). Another way to say this is, What is a decolonial subject of rights in relation to colonial powers and their ongoing production of vulnerability if they are made distinct from the earth, which is the site in which sovereignty must be raised and returned?

Portal Analytic and Method

The films rupture the ethical grammar of address contained within colonial photography and that sees subjects only as background, labor, native, landscape, and so forth. Foregrounding marginalized subjects is a precept to creating portals to landscapes that are being reshaped materially, socially, and intimately through time—not as something that is confined to or remains in the past, but as something that keeps shaping the present moment, as something that remains with us. As portals into a heliography of enlightenment through photography, these images are evidence of how the colonial legacies and geo-traumas of extraction condition the contemporary planetary crisis, the Anthropocene.

The portal is a method that enables us to see imperial imaginings not as projections over space but as a radical transformation of socio-material dimensions. The portal engages with material changes of state—geophysics—rather than simply the conquest of territory or the politics of extraction. For example, a portal opens up when tracing the Rhodes estate in east London that was built by turning clay into bricks; bricks into Victorian slum housing and the rentier economy that leveraged capital flows into the business ventures of the Rhodes brothers on the Kimberley diamond fields in South Africa; thus, accumulating the immense wealth to enact white supremacist dreams of empire manifest in the mechanized mine and continental infrastructures of rail, telegram, and agriculture. These infrastructures cut grooves through the African continent that remain today—as referred to at the head of the article, they are "ubiquitous and omnipresent" (see Thomas, this issue). They form a scaffold or skeleton of physical, bureaucratic, affective, psychological, and digital infrastructures that continue to make and unmake Africa as a continent *for* extraction, whether of gold and diamonds in accumulating colonial wealth and power or carbon and rare earth minerals in expanding the reach of global technology corporations.

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But the portal is also a permissible space. It tears into that scaffold of remains to ask who else or what else remains, and it is not overdetermined by the inexorable force of colonialism's relentless resurfacing, again and again. Responding to the theme of *inhuman reparations*, we ask: What epistemic work is needed to transform our understanding of environmental relations, and how can it repair the severance of environmentally displaced lives that cannot land? To respond to this question, we situate the links between the technologies of photography and bureaucracy and then discuss how we retool colonial photography and administration in the exhibition to open up portals for epistemic repair.

Colonial Photography

Photography was an essential technology of imperial communication. The British South African Company (BSAC) commissioned photographers to produce large, high-quality volumes of landscape photographs that mirrored the iconography of the American pastoral: bringing Manifest Destiny to Africa.[4] Vast, seemingly empty landscapes visualized a frontier lying passively in wait for settler economies and patriarchal dreams. These photos aimed at incentivizing British investors to leverage their capital and expand infrastructural networks of mining, rail, telegraph, and farming, and their secondary arms of maintenance, of hospitals, citizen society, clubs, bars, police, legislation, bureaucracy, gardening, hunting, and mythology. Ethnographic photography represented African societies as disparate tribes living simple, traditional lives. African people were photographed in poses close to the ground, crouching, sitting, and lying next to huts—the motif of premodern life. Modernization was captured in the photographs of extraction and construction industries in developing urban centers. These photographs were produced with the intent of making white people dream of colonizing the Cape Colony as the natural right of the English, bestowing on the audience (white, English, male) the moral authority to annex and displace people and place in establishing settler subjecthood and society. When visiting colonial archives and consulting catalogs of colonial photography, it quickly becomes evident that this dream is partial: Whose dreams are omitted? Whose voice is not heard? Who is silenced? Whose lives are erased? And what materials cannot be archived? These imperial dreams initiated a rupture in being, geography, and relation, tearing at the fabric of subjective rights. These calm and natural images of landscapes, mines, huts, and people are the scenes of subjection, and, in conveying the "riot inside" as Saidiya Hartman argues (2019: 30), they also expose spaces of trespass and refusal

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where subjects challenged the present and intent of colonial place making. The photographs we handled showed figures in the background mimicking, turning away from, ignoring, dodging, and blurring the colonial dream. To produce the dream, the photographer required stillness as the picture developed, which some figures, such as the woman in flux, deny.

The history of photography in Africa has a particular relation to refusal because it has been mobilized and developed to dream other dreams, to imagine other ways of inhabiting the environment. In South Africa, Ernest Cole, Santu Mofokeng and the Afrapix collective, and more recently Lindokuhle Sobekwa and Zanele Muholi showcase how photography is used to mobilize resistance by drawing attention to subjects who dream of different worlds or different versions of the world outside the colonial dream: *I am in your dreams, but you are not in mine* . . . Our work for the exhibition follows in the tradition of this work of photographic resistance in retooling dreams of an otherwise.

Bureaucracy and AI

The epistemology of AI, which we challenge in the exhibition, is already in existence; it is nothing new (despite the hyperbole of Silicon Valley ideology that AI brings the shock of the new). The bureaucracy of the modern world continues to embody forms of social reproduction that exercise little recourse to understanding the layered histories of epistemic violence that silence, ignore, and erase *others*; but it does show a willingness to accept formal representations as given and universal.

Throughout the late nineteenth century, the Cape Colony was subject to an imperial administration that tied property, persons, and natural resources to territory and centralized government into what appeared a seamless and natural whole through which power operated. From as early as 1873, Griqualand West, where the diamond fields were located, was annexed as part of the British Crown Territories. This annexation ensured that the regulatory and legal landscape complied with British colonial rule in exercising oversight over mining claims, labor, and economic activities. In 1889 the British South Africa Company was awarded a royal charter, which spurred the survey and annexation of mineral-rich lands to the north, to Mashonaland, and folded a thick administrative fabric around Rhodes's dreams of building a red line of infrastructure from Cape to Cairo.

Across the colonial world, administrative systems epitomized the logics of racial capitalism that utilized and naturalized dominant systems of

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thought through which people and things were classified and emplaced. As Cornelia Vismann (2008) argues, paperwork and filing open a transaction in settling the reality of what is being administered. This produces an expectation of meaning that is not designed to understand circumstances and subjects, but to formalize and order in creating new spatial orders in governing society and economy. Administration operated as a technology of the imagination in making the Cape Colony legible (especially in terms of its mineral wealth and labor power) while ignoring the entailed violence of land grabbing, displacement, and dehumanization. What emerged was a warped body politics in which earth and bodies were formalized in the productive logics of racial capitalism as though that were the natural state of their being.

In 1894, as prime minister of the Cape Colony, Rhodes delivered the Glen Grey Act, which justified legal restrictions to Black ownership of minerals, land, and trade on the basis of preserving the financial interests and international trade of white investors, and governing local populations under the aegis of the British Crown, who saw Black people as inferior and in need of the protections of state institutions (Arendt 1951). This act of parliament represents a key piece of bureaucracy that used race as an abstract signifier of social disruption and disorder. Writing race into bureaucracy, as a natural category, negated any responsibility on behalf of authorities for the material violence that was constitutive of settler colonialism. The Glen Grey Act formed the blueprint for the apartheid regime's racial segregation policies, and it continues to inform environmental and welfare policies that enact race as the signifier of social, economic, and environmental difference (Green and Planetary Portals 2025).

For Keith Breckenridge (2014), the history of identity politics in South Africa is, worryingly, being used to substantiate the digital transformation of social and governmental services. Biometric databases, such as those based on fingerprinting, that were used to record labor and racial identity throughout apartheid, provide classificatory architecture in the digitalization of government services, such as the payment of social grants and the building of a biometric identification system. Historic datasets are used around the world to train algorithms and develop AI products for use across public and private sectors of society. In these datasets, the category of race is enacted as an abstract signifier, a bureaucratic category that mirrors reality. The historical and political circumstances and context of its configuration and mobilization as a category are lost and ignored in the coding language of algorithms. In the exhibition we draw attention to the problems of racialized algorithms, seeing them not as a problem of bias but, more importantly, as

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structural in conditioning what an algorithm can read and interpret, and how. Hard-wiring race into computer code, as Ramon Amaro (2022) argues, commits epistemic violence by rendering race a natural category in hierarchies of being, reenacting the racialized science that undergirded colonial morality and order in establishing the universalized subject of rights.

Administration employed the same power of colonial photography to project seamless imaginaries of ownership and belonging over environments and people to the advantages of white settlers, while negating and forgetting the violence and disruption of colonialism. In photography, absence and erasure, mimicry and defiance pierce this veneer, imprinting a speculative realism onto the imaginary that other worlds are here, present, and actively engaged in everyday life. Administration exerts the same desire for naturalness and ease in denying the violence of colonial expansion. Yet examples of resistance take shape in defying and disrupting administrative systems, such as Gregory Bowker and Susan Leigh Star's (2000) examination of how the passbook, used under apartheid to identify race, was manipulated and forged to defy the racially segregated geographies of South African towns and cities. In her study of water-meter management, Antina von Schnitzler (2008) showed how residents in Johannesburg townships tapped into infrastructures and tinkered with readings in establishing their independence from the apparatus of the neoliberal state and its interpellated model of good citizenry.

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Using AI to deliver government services such as welfare payments means that citizens are identified according to historically situated classifications of race and class that calcify their emplacement. This continues the use of race as an abstract signifier; a bureaucratic classification without recourse or responsibility for how and why it was configured and enacted as a social category. In this way AI exists as a colonial afterlife, repeating and retracing the imaginative geographies of empire, with global technology forging a new imperialism that is harder to negate and disrupt (figs. 4a–b). The proposed Google "Umoja" fiber-optic pipeline— *Umoja* means "unity" in Swahili— retraces the route of Rhodes's dreams of the "red line" of infrastructure, cutting through the center of the African continent, and docking in the English-speaking countries of Kenya and South Africa. The monolingualism of Silicon Valley imposes another Western dream of the connected continent. By implication, Google's rhetoric of hope in connectivity denies the imbricated histories that have and continue to link Africa to the rest of the world.[5] Like the Equiano pipeline, Umoja is privately owned by Google and will be configured within its business plan to open up and harvest data from

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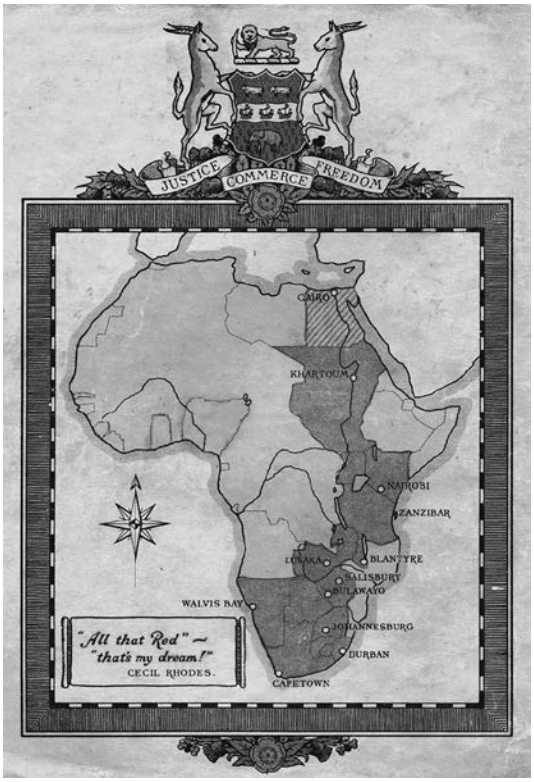


Figure 4a. The British South Africa Company poster from the Empire Exhibition held in Johannesburg in 1936 shows the "red line" and a famous Cecil Rhodes quote, "All that red, that's my dream." Source: Public domain.

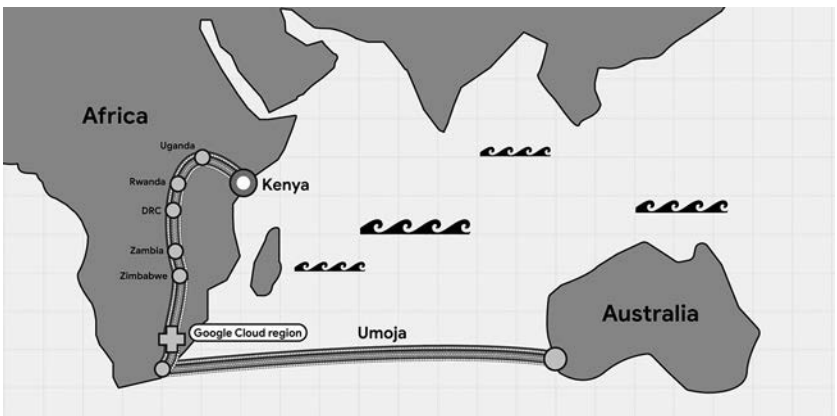


Figure 4b. Map of the Google Umoja pipeline connecting east and southern Africa to Australia via undersea cable. Source: Google Africa Blog, available at https://blog.google/intl/en-africa/company-news/improving-connectivity-and-accelerating-economic-growth-across-africa/. Accessed June 2025.

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African markets in another extractive enterprise (Holden and Harsh 2024). However, we know little of the granularity and informality that differentiates technology cultures across Africa that again parody, resist, and refuse the lineality of data colonialism and disrupt the AI archive.

Anti-aesthetics, Unsettling the Recolonizing Gaze

I am in your dreams, but you are not in mine works from a series of four durational fixed-shot films of archival photographs. Colonial photography sets the vernacular for Western understanding of foreign landscapes and locals as docile material of conquest fantasy, and the films engage with this controlled fantasy by foregrounding and reinscribing the temporal resistances and dynamism of the natural environment. By transforming the photograph into a film, we appropriate time as a material of intervention to disrupt the power of the frozen frame. We add another temporality to the frame, one that holds a secret time in which we ask questions about how large-language models understand time within the narrow frame of a singular dataset. Here we focus on "inferences," the hallucinations that language-learning models (LLMs) render when filling gaps of insufficient training data. When faced with queries that are missing from their training data and when encountering patterns that they do not recognize, LLMs hallucinate. In the films we identify these inferences and map them onto the syntax of four different archival photographs to expose the negative space that is created through the gaze of colonial photography and which now is replicated by LLMs. Rather than re-creating an archive of the past (and conditioning historicity, as official and formal archives do), *I am in your dreams, but you are not in mine* exposes AI's role in actively plotting the future afterlives of colonialism, and we do so in four discrete scripting acts:

> **(1) Selection**: Our purposeful sampling of photographs from the Cecil Rhodes archive takes place within the colonial genre of images that show white subjects in a triumphalist mood, often posing in front of mining machinery, railway stations, farms, or hoards of workers, with the intent of re-creating racial hierarchies of domination, ownership, and positionality. Working against the white supremacist logic that is scripted in the photographic composition, contrasts, and exposure, we select images in which we detect a space of refuge and resistance, a shadow space that holds the silenced people and environments as imminent potentiality offering alternative narratives within colonial shade.

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(2) Re/Scripting: In response to each photograph, we composed speculative texts that tear into the shadow space opened up between the white supremacist logics of photographic scripture and those dreams of other worlds not captured in the colonial dream. These texts provide a source code that rescript the photographs and a selection of the text, which appears at the bottom of the films as a running commentary guiding the viewer to see and unsee conventional ways of viewing, while also providing the source material that are fed into LLMs for a second intervention into the image composition.

(3) Hallucinate: As the speculative texts that rescript the photograph are fed into LLMs, a new layer that actively edits the photograph is added to the filmic composition. To the LLMs the image and the text together become a puzzle that it tries to solve with pattern recognition, exposing how its "solutions" are founded on historical racial logics of subjugation, erasure, and expulsion: it reproduces a clear hierarchy in which, for instance, as in *Woman in Flux* a Black woman (in the original photograph) is "replaced" with a white woman, who later is replaced with a white man, replete in the white garments typical of colonial settlers of the time (fig. 2).

(4) Resisting: Layered across the films are manual animations foregrounding the sensory poetics of landscapes, weather, and bodily movements. These animations reinscribe the image with emotions and human agency erased by colonial memory. This intervention questions the manual work that is necessary to be seen and heard through the glare of an automated worldview. The animations take direct inspiration from Aimé Césaire's ([1956] 1995: 17) reclaiming of language and bodily and psychic autonomy from the colonizer's grip: "And above all beware, my body and my soul too, beware of crossing your arms in the sterile attitude of the spectator, because life is not a spectacle, because a sea of sorrows is not a proscenium, because a man who screams is not a dancing bear."

Battle Ground

Mine laborers worked nine to ten hours a day throughout the week, Monday to Saturday; Sunday was their day off. As recreational facilities on and around the mines were poor, illegal bare-knuckle fights and mine dances became a recreational pastime.

In his study of boxing culture, the French sociologist Loïc Wacquant (1995) describes the boxing ring as a "space of forgetting," where fighters relocate themselves away from the strictures of everyday life. Bare-knuckle fighting in the mines too can be understood as a deliberate act of forgetting

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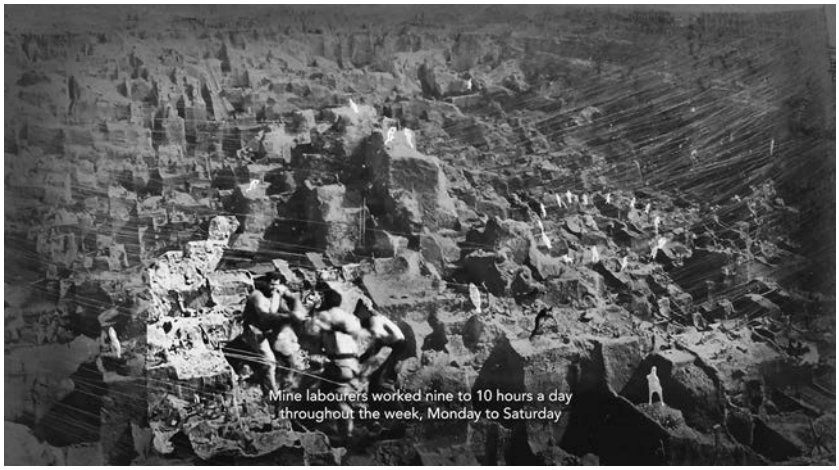


Figure 5. Still from *Battle Ground*, 2025. Single channel video loop. Run time 07.39. © Planetary Portals: Casper Laing Ebbensgaard, Kerry Holden, Michael Salu, and Kathryn Yusoff. Source: Morning View of the South Reef, The Bodleian Libraries University of Oxford, MSS. Afr. s. 2175 box 1.

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the labor conditions under which they worked, an active denial of the exploitative complex of the mine mind. If Kimberley Mine was a hellish underworld that brought workers into touching distance of death (fig. 5), illegal bare-knuckle fighting can be understood as a way of refusing the social organization of the mine and defusing vexations by wedging temporal disjunctures into imperial orders.

Battle Ground draws attention to the injurious, negative space of the mine where fighting is practiced as a form of survival, not as a spectacle of violence for entertainment and consumption, but as necessary sacrifice of the self to survive. Following in the footsteps of scholars like Tina Campt (2017), who in *Listening to Images* attends to the whispers and murmurs that emerge in the negative spaces of archival photographs, *Battle Ground* encourages a cautious form of listening that does not shy away from nor fetishize the violence of the negative space. Playing up against what Césaire labeled the "thingification" of colonial subjects, that is, their denial of emotions, agency, and abilities to dream, the animated layer reinscribes the image with emotions and human agency erased from colonial memory.

Battle Ground points toward the mechanism by which colonial photography actively disavows the damaging and scarring of the colonized body and psyche and continues to do so through computation and machine learning.

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As Frantz Fanon ([1963] 2005: 19) reminds us, the colonized mind and "the colonised's affectivity is kept on edge like a running sore flinching from a caustic agent." It is only through "the ecstasy of dance," through "this muscular orgy," that the colonized is able or permitted to channel "the most brutal aggressiveness and impulsive violence" (19). It is in this way, Fanon continues, that "the dance circle is a permissive circle. It protects and empowers" (19–20). In *Battle Ground* as well as in the wider exhibition, we attempt epistemic care by challenging and disrupting the probabilities embedded in computer vision. The animations evoke the continued work necessary to bring to light the symbiotic relationship between Africa and the West, both domestically and in the diffused liminality of diaspora. What manual work is necessary to be seen and heard through the glare of an automated worldview?

Epistemic Repair: A Portal for Rewriting Subjectivity into Environments

Each of the films addresses the amputation of the social body through colonial racism and its severance from the environments that it inhabits with the aim of seeking an inhuman jurisprudence: a reconfiguring of the subject through a series of spatial reparations. Specifically, photography and bureaucracy are epistemes, and to begin inhuman reparations, we need to change the episteme from one that separates the human from the environment, to instead talk about inhuman jurisprudence. Epistemes represent the chrono-geographies of power/knowledge relations that function to create fictitious spaces of control and management. They bind together the mine, the compound, and the administrative offices so that ontologically they can exist in hierarchical relations to each other. As every imagined subject that populates a classificatory relation is defined and thus represented, a relation that is the product of an environmental materiality and mode of becoming is erased, negating a deep history of violent erasures in environmental relations through colonial theft of land, ground, and belonging. Understanding the earth as a concomitant archive of relation, knowledge, philosophy, and history, we seek to reimagine worlds beyond the epistemic cuts of colonial pasts that render natural the apartheid of land and Black subjects in enduring racializing injury.

Alongside a consideration of what inhuman reparations might look like in representational orders, the films' disruptive poetics fosters a chrono-geographic vigilance toward the erasure of earth relations in the constitution of decolonial subjects of rights that are indivisible from land or earth. The portal emerges as a spatial analytic, a way to navigate the asymmetrical and geophysical relations that are sustained through extraction and the

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forces of silencing that are historically erased through the photographic gaze and bureaucratic violence of colonial structures. The portal becomes a way to think about a chrono-geography of harm and vulnerability in relation to environmental destruction that does not rely on solely state-based or territorial cartographies, or on the segregation of racial geographies that reinvest in the hierarchies of the human (and its ideal type). Conceived in this way, the portal enables us to think about epistemic and material repair to "correct" the geographic imaginations of imperialism past and forestall their appearance in the present in new guises in the AI archive. Understanding spatial theory to unearth the structuring of space, narratives of temporality, bureaucratic and infrastructural maintenance, rights to environmental repair, removal of landlessness, and right to be free is a way into the interrogation of the basis of long-term environmental damage, which is renewed through the environmental demands of data centers and computational cultures.

The exhibition recasts a geo-social history of mining that links slum housing in East London and diamond mining in South Africa to contemporary data mining and machine learning processes through training AI. It responds to the theme of *inhuman reparations* by presenting a portalled perspective through which to read the past in ways that are attentive to silences and erasures of the environmental harms of extraction in archival records. It seeks to mitigate against ongoing silences and normalizations of violence and brutality that might organize the conditions for reparative claims in representative, symbolic, and environmental orders. And it configures inhuman reparation as a drafting of environmental futures through an attentiveness to the geologics and epistemic registers of colonial pasts and their continued reproduction in and through the earth. Our concern is that norms and mores in bureaucracies of classification circulate as an aesthetic and affective field, cemented by historical social norms that continue to populate the "new" archives that inform and shape the interpretative grids of LLMs and the algorithmic patterns of AI. In this way, we extend the critique of Rhodes's dream of capturing the entire continent of Africa—what we elsewhere have discussed as his colonial proclivity to "dream in continents" or "dream incontinence" (Yusoff et al. 2022)—as it resurfaces in the imaginary of Africa as a computational problem to be fixed by global technology corporations such as Google or Microsoft by investing billions in the "digital transformation of Africa."[6] Data and digital economies that increasingly include LLMs and AI continue to re-create colonial imaginaries of Africa as a problem that can be solved by relying on the colonial infrastructures that were laid down more than a century earlier.

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Africa was seen by Cecil J. Rhodes as "the last place" to dream a white empire as a planetary possession: a racial portal to salve the antagonism of revolt elsewhere. Contemporary narratives of "Africa Rising" imagine the subterranean continent lifted out of poverty through data infrastructures and entrepreneurialism (*Economist* 2011; Perry 2012). *Portalling*, as a verb, is a way of apprehending how physical and data infrastructures, the engineering spectacles of planetary technoscience (as racial infrastructures), continually make and unmake Africa as a technological problem of surfacing and depletion, promise and terror (in debt relations, humanitarian "aid," global health, population management, fiscal monitoring, Belt and Road, etc.). "Google Africa," fed by its privately owned undersea fiber-optic cable, named "Equiano" after the abolitionist writer and formerly enslaved Olaudah Equiano, ushers in the redemptive development-philanthropic complex promising shiny techno-utopian futures of a connected continent (Holden and Harsh 2024). These are dark dreams of new empires that intern Africa as an empty spatial unit, sucked into the vortex of privatized racial debt relations in which temporal durations fold into the structures of colonial time, engineered from elsewhere, connected to the geographies of European and Western infrastructures and programming. The Jamaican theorist Sylvia Wynter (1996: 300) names the colonial extractive approach as a "material redemption narrative" that leaves African societies, communities, and peoples waiting for transformation via "development." The colonial portal perpetuates a neocolonial model of development by dispossession, whereby wealth is systematically removed from the continent and redistributed to colonial and settler colonial countries (or the "developed").

Considering the relation of the archive as crucial to how the operative spaces of environmental politics live and breathe environments into the future, there is a distinct need to think with AI geographies and their memory work while also reckoning with the distinct environmental cartographies that ready environments for interventions. In the discussion we connect language models and bureaucracy to stretch the history of AI into much longer colonial configurations of technologies that operate through formal institutions and cultural practices of language. Our attention is on how classifications become conduits to algorithmic patterns and data intensities that reiterate the color line as naturalized process, instructing future cartographies and flattening the histories of environments and technologies. Our epistemic work in creating portals of remembrance is a salve to disrupting this flattening effect to bring attention to the quieted and accumulative values of

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environment and density of earth relations (as the woman in flux reanimates the dimensionality of her life within the flattening of the colonial plane of representation). As environmental policy is getting made in the datatification of newly rendered environmentality (Gabrys 2016), rendering it relevant for policymaking, we join scholars such as Lesley Green (2020, 2024) in manifesting other experiences into these dominant frames. Further to the visible sphere of environmental adaptation and repair as essential to forms of livingness and survival in the aftermath of colonial environmental transformations, the films raise the question of what reparations are needed to repair the severance of environmentally displaced lives that cannot land in a place that is reparative. Rather than merely revealing the environmental harms of colonial extraction, the films and wider exhibition consider reparation as an imperative to reconfigure existing epistemes that repeatedly align bodies (of earth and personhood) along an axis of geo-trauma. (This is about how techno-imperialist imaginaries are continuing to erase place-based connections and imagine in the registers of cheap labor, labelers, global fiscal networks, etc.) Connecting colonial modes of representations and new neocolonial imaginaries that re-naturalize and thus neutralize imperial worldviews is a mode of apprehending a reparative frame.

Epistemic repair, then, aims to address the historical legacies of environmental harms on bodies *and* earths, across portals of planetary connection in the scene of the environmental legacies of colonial logics and its *longue durée* of material harms (that continue to remake those environments as unlivable). Investing in developing responsible imaginings and speculative nonfiction[7], the exhibition sought to develop a language (reiterating the importance of aesthetics and imaginaries in the contours of subjectivity) that both exposes the horrors of colonial extraction and allows for an account of a full life of bodies and earths to take place within and against the long shadows of colonialism and its lonely ideation of a subject with nowhere to land, cut off from an earth relation and a multispecies being.

Conclusion

Let us return to what *remains*. By opening the article with a reflection over what remains, we aim to draw attention to the force of colonial infrastructures—whether material, affective, or digital—not merely as ruinous debris of a bygone era but as active co-constitutive forces that condition the present. To apprehend this networked legacy of coloniality, we develop the *portal* as a spa-

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tial theory through which to engage with the long-lasting afterlives of colonialism, enabling us to read continuities across chrono-geographic registers, connecting South African mining economies to contemporary computation in LLMs and generative AI.

Drawing on the recent exhibition *I am in your dreams, but you are not in mine* at the Photographers' Gallery (2025), we trace continuities between colonial photography, administration (and its classificatory power), and generative AI, not only to reveal the violent erasures embedded within these technologies but also to foreground the possibilities of disrupting these frames and inserting resistive imaginaries that bring about alternative ways of relating to land and its afterlives. In *Woman in Flux*, the reading of a reparative script of Black feminist refusal becomes a site of white replacement rendered through the AI archive, thereby overrepresenting (in Wynter's terms) the scripts of whiteness and erasing the tentative marks of historic refusal (which remind us that history holds many possibilities, not one). With the series of films—we reflect on two out of four in this article, *The Woman in Flux* and *Battle Ground*—we do not seek to render colonial harms visible as a mode of restitution but, rather, use speculative aesthetics to open portals of repair—spaces where environmental and epistemic cuts can be apprehended and where new modes of relation between bodies, environments, and technologies might be imagined and older marks of quiet insurrection not erased.

When responding to the theme of *inhuman reparations*, we therefore mobilize the portal as a revelatory and reparative practice, an analytic and method, that allows us to move beyond the conceptions of a bounded human subject to foreground instead the environmental and earthly legacies that tie bodies, environments and technologies into relation. This is important when considering that reparation within the juridical frameworks of human rights tends to isolate the subject from the land, amputating the social body from the environments reeking with colonial toxicity. With the notion of *inhuman jurisprudence*, we instead appeal to an expanded account of rights that recognize the historical legacies that tie human subjects into wider environments and ecologies beyond the extension of the overdetermined human. In this way, it is not simply one story of historical violence endured through colonialism that determines a rights-based charter of the human subject and provides a reason to remove that subject from harmed and harmful geographies in a reparative, redemptive move. The portal offers an invitation and not a closure—an insistence that within the ruins of colonial archives and computational logics, other worlds *remain* possible.

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Notes

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1 For further discussion on remains, see Ann Laura Stoler's (2013: 2) concept of "imperial debris," as "the uneven temporal sedimentations in which imperial formations leave their marks"; Gabrielle Hecht's (2018) "registers of residual governance" at work in the "afterlife of extraction"; and Kate Lewis Hood's (2023) "residual repertoire" in "Black Geo-Aesthetics After the Mine."

2 In 2024 the Photographers' Gallery commissioned the Planetary Portals Collective (cofounded by Casper Laing Ebbensgaard, Kerry Holden, and Kathryn Yusoff) to exhibit a series of works, together with Michael Salu, exploring the intersections of photography, imperialism, and networked culture. The commission took place in the spring of 2025 and was supported by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. You can experience an online version of the exhibition on our dedicated webpage on unthinking.photography: https://unthinking.photography/projects/planetary-portals/ (accessed December 1, 2025).

3 See Yusoff, forthcoming, for a discussion of the inhuman in relation to critical legal studies.

4 The BSAC was established in 1889 by royal charter to consolidate British investment in the exploration of mineral deposits, securing land and mineral rights and expanding the extractive industries in South Africa under the leadership of Cecil Rhodes as he transformed mineral wealth into political power. The Rhodes archive in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford contains large, bound volumes of commissioned photographs that use the iconography of the American pastoral and ethnography to depict the South African landscape and people as attractive to UK emigrants and investors and open to settler colonial economy. We assume that these volumes, now spotted with mold, would have been on display in the administrative offices of the BSAC and colonial government.

5 See Quigley 2024 on the Umoja pipeline as the symbol of unity, promising connectivity and economic growth.

6 The *Google in Africa* blog that reports on Google's activity across the continent is written in the rhetoric of transformation and promise. The blog projects a burgeoning techno-utopia across the continent. See Brittin 2024 for an example. Microsoft

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Research Africa (n.d.), based in Nairobi, Kenya, is presented as a laboratory and uses similar discourse of transformation in deliberating on the continent's digital future.

7 Speculative nonfiction is a method for making visible what is known but excluded by white heteropatriarchal accounts that normalize certain perspectives and theories about environmental histories. The speculative refers not to what is unknown but to what is silenced or marginalized from normative perspectives of white heteropatriarchy that have organized colonial accounts of extraction. Acknowledging that theory emerges from particular geographies of power and colonial imaginaries, and is normalized from there into the universal, is a way to examine and reimagine *what was* and *what could be* in environmental futures.

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