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Watery Eyes, Drifting Images: Visual Ecocriticism, Photographic Archives and the Muddy History of the Maputo Bay, Southern Mozambique

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Abstract

The flourishing field of environmental humanities has increasingly called for a shift in perspective, urging scholars to de-centre the human and engage deeply with the materialities of both organic and inorganic matter. This approach requires broadening our understanding of historical agency and perception, recognising the roles of randomness, matter, climate, weather, and non-human forces in shaping historical narratives. Moreover, environmental histories challenge us to reimagine the archive, moving beyond the nation-state's authority as the primary custodian of historical knowledge. In this article, I explore these by bringing an ecocritical lens to the practice of visual history, focusing on the shoreline of southern Mozambique. I engage with the materiality of the shore – its multiple temporalities, fractal nature, and amphibian quality as a space that is neither fully terrestrial nor oceanic. Thinking with the shoreline, I argue, compels us to take its materialities seriously as a dynamic contact zone between soil and water. But how can we construct such a 'muddy' history? This article draws on three sets of images to address this question: colonial photographs of weather events such as cyclones and floods in Lourenço Marques; underwater images of marine hunting and wildlife, a popular activity during the late colonial period; and personal photographs of gay men at the beach, which reimagine the coast as a queer space. Together, these images invite us to reconceptualize the (visual) history of Maputo Bay, moving beyond conventional narratives to embrace a fluid, archival imagination – one that sees with watery eyes and drifts with the images themselves.

Keywords

Maputo Bay, Photography, Archives, Visual History, Race, Non-human.

I have recently had the pleasure of watching the play *The Fire Eater*, at the Market Theatre, in Johannesburg. A one-woman show performed by actress Mpume Mthombeni, it narrates the convoluted life story of Zenzile Maseko, a Zulu woman who, in her old age, is declared dead by Home Affairs. The entire play unfolds in a single space, Maseko's own private room in a women's hostel in Durban. While the show was certainly focused on the life of this woman in her relationships with the people around her, I was intrigued by the ways in which natural elements were incorporated in the performance: rivers and sand, rain and lightning not only permeated the narrative, but were storytelling devices on their own: they determined pace and continuity; they set the scene, infiltrating the stage through light and sound; they consistently *did* things to the storyline. Given that the play was inspired by the life narratives of African women, collected during an oral history project, I wondered whether the engagement with nonhuman elements may be situated as a feature of African storytelling, which then displaces, transforms, and reframes the anthropocentrism of other narrative traditions.[1] To me, the play was a powerful rendition of what Cajetan Iheka has described as an 'aesthetics of proximity' of human life and nonhuman forms (organic and inorganic), thus pointing to the creative and imaginative interdependence and entanglements between human and nonhuman ontologies in African literature and media.[2] In a particular scene of *The Fire Eater*, the rain, the shadows of the water running down the window breaks into the stage and stands in for the tears that Maseko cannot, or will not, cry.

While *The Fire Eater* is surely embedded in the history of South Africa, Kwazulu-Natal, and of Zulu politics during and in the aftermath of apartheid, it also tells an expansive story of how, as Jeffrey Cohen has put it, 'the elements work, matter, and thrive', a story of our 'our utter embroilment within a world of plants, animals, winds, seas, sky, stone'.[3] In this reading, the play can be reinterpreted as consistent with the 'elemental turn' in academic critique and popular culture. The appeal of the elements is – forgive me the pun – *in the air*, from the global reality TV show *Survivor* to the environmental humanities. Of late, no other matter has received so much public attention as water, and the ocean in its more emblematic form. From *Avatar* and *Wakanda Forever* to the certainty of climate change and rising sea levels, we have all been submerged, in visual experience and existential expectation. Amid these contemporary popular imaginations, the literature in environmental humanities, new materialism, and ecocriticism have been suggesting that thinking about and with the elements (with water, fire, earth, air) demands that we de-centre, relativise, the human and engage seriously with *matter*, with the question of materiality, both organic and inorganic.[4] The elements also require that we rethink our understanding

1 E. Nabulya, 'Rethinking Human-Centredness and Eco-Sustainability in an African Setting: Insights from Luanga Folktales', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 34, 2, 2022, 308-324.

2 C. Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). C. Iheka, *African Ecomedia: Network Forms, Planetary Politics*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021).

3 J. J. Cohen, 'The Sea Above', in Jeffrey J. Cohen and L. Duckert (eds), *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 105-133, 123.

4 J. J. Cohen and L. Duckert, *Elemental Ecocriticism*. S. Engelmann and D. McCormack, 'Elemental worlds: specificities, exposures, alchemies', *Progress in Human Geography*, 45, 6, 2021, 1419-1439.

of historical agency beyond the human, to accommodate the roles of randomness, of climate, of weather, and of non-human agents in our historical narratives.[5] Environmental histories, in my view, may also require a reimagination of the archive itself, beyond the authority of the nation state, and the centrality of human politics, as gatekeepers of how we are to know, to engage with, the past.[6]

In this article, I want to explore the question of the elemental from the point of view of my historical research on southern Mozambique. I intend to think with the materiality of the shore, with its multiple temporalities and fractal nature, and to attempt to reimagine the amphibian history of this region, as it has been forever unsettled by its ambiguity as both a terrestrial and oceanic space. I suggest that thinking with the shoreline, doing a visual history of the shore, demands that we take its materialities seriously – that we think of matter, of mud, opacity, as constitutive of this contact zone between soil and water. But what does such a muddy history look like? What are the archives we can resort to? Can we 'read' the archive of the Maputo Bay for water? Reading for water, as Isabel Hofmeyr, Sarah Nuttall and Charne Lavely have argued, is a method 'that follows the sensory, political and agentive power of water across … texts'.[7] As they describe it, it allows a reader to 'move laterally, vertically and contrapuntally between water-worlds' that are not necessarily limited by human-made political boundaries, hence accessing plots that are not fully human-driven.[8]

If reading for water is surely a productive method and mode of critique, can we *see* for water? *With* or *through* water? I ask this question considering that, in comparison to its literary counterpart, ecocritical visual studies have been regarded as being in their 'infancy'.[9] This is, in a sense, surprising. While the elements are not things or sentient beings, they are, as Sellis has put it, '*of* the sensible': insofar as they are integral to the physical arrangement of the world, they are 'that which makes visibility possible'.[10] Specific elements, from water to silver, are necessary conditions to the existence of photography as a modern technology and material practice. As Iheka reminds us, not only was the photographic camera always an integral part of colonial epistemology's drive to capture, order, and classify the environment in the Global South – its exuberant fauna and flora – but a photograph is itself embedded in a global supply chain network that requires regimes of extraction and produces its own toxicity, its own environmental footprint.[11]

Yet, at the same time, the forms of environmental degradation that we associate with the violence of imperial conquest, modern extractivism, and industrial pollution – and, hence, with the contemporary crisis of anthropogenic climate destabilisation – have historically gone unnoticed and unremarked, rendered

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5 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa.* S. Aderinto, *Animality and Colonial Subjecthood in Africa: the Human and Nonhuman Creatures of Nigeria* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2022).
6 S. Ray and V. Maddipati (eds.), *Water Histories of South Asia: the Materiality of Liquescence* (Oxon: Routledge, 2020).
7 I. Hofmeyr, S. Nuttall and C. Lavery, 'Reading for Water', *Interventions*, 24, 3, 2022, 303-322, 303.
8 *Ibid*, 304.
9 S. Boettger, 'Within and Beyond the Art World: Environmentalist Criticism of Visual Art', in H. Zapf (ed), *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 664-682.
10 J. Sallis, 'The Elemental Turn', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 50, 2, 2112, 345-350.
11 Iheka, *African Ecomedia*, 8, 15.

'natural, right, and beautiful' in the modern/colonial visual canon.[12] Rob Nixon has alerted us of the existing representational biases against these forms of 'slow violence', which are neither instantaneous nor spectacular, but 'incremental and accretive', thus actively contributing to racialised regimes of invisibility and disposability.[13] To me, the question then becomes how thinking elementally can open up new forms of countervisuality, new modes of visual critique that are attuned the materiality of the natural world, that are aware to the forms of agency connecting humans and nonhumans, but that are also attentive to the historical currents by which precarity and violence continue to be differently inflicted upon racialised, de-humanised and queered bodies? After all, the turn to the elemental is only politically justified as long as it furthers our understanding of the ways in which materialities, organic and inorganic, are 'implicated in the distribution of forms of living and dying'.[14]

Taking histories of colonial violence, capitalist extraction, and heteronormative affect seriously is important, I contend, because the turn to the elemental and to the non-human, as I propose here, should not be taken as an unqualified and simplistic rejection of the 'human'. As Kathryn Yusoff has argued, rather than a universal and unproblematic category of being, the modern (white liberal) definition of the 'human' relies on processes of racialisation and erasure by which certain bodies and subjectivities have been historically deprived from their humanity in the first place.[15] The ecocritical lens, thus, is the most politically transformative and intellectually productive not when it seeks to sideline human actors, whoever they are, in favour of non-human plots, but, rather, when it allows us to interrogate the regimes of (in) humanity undergirding *both* colonial violence and environmental ruination. In this sense, the 'human' emerges not in opposition to or in separation from the non-human, but 'in, and as, the relational potentials these assemblages – these diverse material ecologies – make possible'.[16] This becomes critical if we consider that mainstream environmental discourses have failed to address 'the integrated nature of environmental injustice, across questions of racism and coloniality, gender and sexual difference'.[17] By the same token, academic debates on the Anthropocene have been, by and large, 'unequipped to face the racial histories of our current ecological predicament'.[18] In southern Africa, where large population groups have been denied humanity and citizenship under colonial and apartheid racism, an environmental history that simply obfuscate human actors – and by extension the regimes of power invested in their marginalisation and de-humanisation – can only perpetuate what Christina Sharpe has dubbed as a 'climate of anti-blackness'.[19]

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12 N. Mirzoeff, 'Visualizing the Anthropocene', *Public Culture*, 26, 2, 2014, 213-232, 220.
13 R. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.
14 S. Engelmann and D. McCormack, 'Elemental Worlds: Specificities, Exposures, Alchemies', *Progress in Human Geography*, 45, 6, 2021, 1.
15 K. Yusoff, 'The Inhumanities', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 111, 3, 2021, 663-676. 419-1439.
16 M. Jackson, *Coloniality, Ontology, and the Question of the Posthuman* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018).
17 A. Naimanis, C. Åsberg, and J. Hedrén, 'Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities', *Source: Ethics and the Environment*, 20, 1, 2015, 67-97, 79.
18 A. Karera, 'Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics', *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 7, 1, 2019, 32-56.
19 C. Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 106.

To address these questions, I use two related frameworks, that work on a both literal and metaphorical level. *Watery eyes*, in my title, makes reference to the many people portrayed in the photographs I analyse, people who are wet, submerged, drenched. But it also gestures to the 'agentic prowess of the elements' – a formulation I borrow from Iheka[20] – in shaping regimes of visibility and the possibility of visual representation. While water may cloud one's vision, it may also open up new forms of perception. It does so precisely by dislodging any pretensions of transparency and welcoming an always present *opacity*. I borrow the concept from Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant, who introduces the term as a way to resist the reductive and homogenising impulses of Western/colonial epistemologies and ways of knowing. For Glissant, opacity gestures to a state of being that is irreducible, unknowable, and resistant to complete comprehension or assimilation, thereby affirming the right to exist without needing to be understood, seen, in particular ways.[21]

In this article, opacity operates both literally and metaphorically in relation to water and visual perception. As far as it limits the photographic camera's ability to capture, water physically disrupts clarity – its elemental and material qualities mirror Glissant's philosophical opacity, inviting a form of seeing that does not seek mastery or total comprehension but instead embraces ambiguity and resistance to definitive representation, inviting multiplicity and an openness to non-human lifeworlds and sensibilities. If considered in the context of an emergent visual ecocritical lens, opacity disrupts the colonial and anthropocentric frameworks that have historically dominated conventional visual regimes and photographic archives, and invites a critical aperture to other forms of agency and meaning. The refusal of transparency encourages a deeper engagement with the material, historical, and affective dimensions of the images and their contexts – acknowledging the entangled, sedimented, and fractal nature of histories like those of Maputo Bay. Thus, in this article opacity becomes a methodological and ethical stance, challenging the privileging of clear visibility and fixed narratives in favour of layered, fluid, and relational ways of seeing and knowing.

Likewise, *drifting images* is an indication of the open-ended, even awkward, nature of the photographic archives I am exploring below. Many of the images I will show have not been catalogued or regimented in a modern archival sense, but they belong to a fluid and often digital archive of memory, being privately collected and shared through various means and in various platforms, often digitally, such as in the *delagoabayworld* website, where former Portuguese settlers upload images from their lost lives in Mozambique.[22] Many of these images are drifting objects, having travelled across the continents, and transformed in their very nature from analogic to digital. Placed alongside more conventional archival materials, I will engage these photographs through the lens of drift, as a means to reimagine their subject matter and to destabilise their human-centricity and colonial visuality. As Carl Lavery has put it, drift involves randomness and rootlessness, being a mode of

20 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 47.
21 E. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999).
22 https://delagoabayworld.wordpress.com.

thinking 'characterized by flow and sedimentation'.[23] It is also 'a process that exposes the body to [the elements], entangling it [with] a sticky universe' in a 'suspensive and undecided relationship in which agency is perturbed by multiplicities'.[24] As I explore it below, the concept of drifting images offers a novel methodological angle in visual history by emphasising movement, fluidity, and contingency in the interpretation of visual materials and archives. Unlike conventional archival methods that often fix images within static historical, geographic, or institutional contexts, drifting images highlight the unsettled and evolving nature of visual artifacts as they traverse physical, temporal, and digital spaces. This approach disrupts the linearity and human-centric focus of traditional visual histories, inviting an exploration of images as active, relational entities shaped by both human and nonhuman forces. In what follows, I intend to embrace drift not only as a conceptual framework but also as a way of seeing.

Elemental Exposure: Colonial Weathering and the Racialised Distribution of Environmental Hazards

Having done archival and oral history research in Maputo intermittently for the last decade, I quickly became aware of the city's harsh exposure to the elements. When heavy rain falls, it is not uncommon for flooding to occur in various parts of the city, at times destroying transport infrastructure, creating pockets of temporary immobility, islands surrounded by water or by a muddy layer that vehicles and people struggle to cross. Rain and mud have often affected my own research: I had many interviews cancelled owing to the weather, to interlocutors' – and my own – inability to move under the storm, and its aftermath. If the rain's impact is particularly brutal in the urban outskirts, in narrow sand or dirt roads I have been left stranded in the city centre, too. During my last visit to the newspaper collection of the National Library, I waited for the waters around the building to subdue, *ilhado* – a Portuguese word that captures the condition of one temporally becoming an island (*a ilha*). I am narrating these anecdotes to share my own embodied experience of the Maputo weather, which is, of course, a complex ecological, social and culturally mediated system.

But I also want to gesture to a necessary reimagining of Maputo less as a modern city defined by its terrestrial constitution – its paved walkways, avenues and concrete buildings – and more as a complex social and eco-system in which man-made infrastructure, earth, water, and weather converge. This is partially explained by its geographical location, as the city was first established as a littoral military and trade outpost facing a sheltered body of water, the Maputo Bay (originally named Delagoa Bay). In Indian Ocean studies, Michael Pearson has already attended to the geohistorical specificities of 'littoral societies', as they are shaped by their 'amphibious' situatedness at the edges of land and sea, between terrestrial and oceanic networks,

23 C. Lavery, 'Rethinking the *Dérive*: Drifting and Theatricality in Theatre and Performance Studies', *Performance Research*, 23, 7, 2018, 1-15, 1.
24 *Ibid*., 2.

influences, and lifeworlds.[25] Social and cultural studies have further elaborated on this point, demonstrating that coasts, shores, mangroves, and the like, are 'interzonal spaces' carrying with them particular histories, environmental linkages, aesthetics, and place-making possibilities.[26] Lindsay Bremner's work on the monsoon as a global, socially integrated eco-system has been particularly productive in moving away from an understanding of land and sea as somewhat discrete geohistorical formations, to focus instead on the assemblages and multiplicities tying together earth, water, and weather across ecological, socio-political, and urban-spatial dynamics.[27] Thinking of entanglements rather than divides, Bremner suggests that we need a 'muddy' analytic to better understand those 'mutating zones' that are 'neither liquid nor solid', but 'sludgy', 'archipelagic', and 'anti-pattern'.[28] In architecture and urban design, too, the concept of *terra viscus* has been proposed to name a shifting terrain that is 'never in stasis but in a continuous state of being made' due to a combination of ecological, climacteric, and manmade conditions, ultimately challenging the modernist assumption that nature can be fully controlled by planning and technology.[29]

Building on this work, I want to make a case for a 'muddy' history of Maputo and its surrounding area, the Maputo bay, understood precisely as a viscous terrain where ambitions of colonial control and development rub against the pressures of environmental stress and its racialised effects. Some of this work is already ongoing. In David Morton's study on housing, space-making, and politics of urban modernity in Maputo, for instance, concrete emerges as a nonhuman agent, a heavy composite that both shapes the built environment and works as a conduit for social aspirations. Yet, water is an ever-present elemental force permeating the entire narrative. After all, Morton points out, the city has had a 'waterlogged past'.[30] In the colonial period, the absence of extensive sewage and adequate drainage systems left most of the city vulnerable to flooding (and to infrastructural failure and disease outbreaks, mostly cholera, as a consequence of recurrent floods). The symbolic power of water in the vernacular cultural imagination was expressed through naming practices, with neighbourhood names attesting their very 'wetness': *Xitala Mali* and *Chamanculo* in Ronga, meaning respectively the 'place of the abundant waters' and the 'place where the great ones bathe', and *Lagoas* in Portuguese, meaning 'lagoons'.[31] Water was consequential to people's own modes of self-narration and periodisation: one of my interlocutors, António, struggled to situate events of his childhood in a precise calendar chronology. Growing up in the Lourenço Marques (as Maputo was then

25 M. N. Pearson, 'Littoral Society: the Concept and the Problems', *Journal of World History*, 17, 6, 2006, 353-373, 353.

26 S. Sen and M. Joseph, *Terra Aqua: The Amphibious Lifeworlds of Coastal and Maritime South Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 4 and 6. M. Samuelson, 'Coastal Form: Amphibian Positions, Wider Worlds, and Planetary Horizons on the African Indian Ocean Littoral', *Comparative Literature*, 69, 1, 2017, 16-24. K. Gagné and M. Borg Rasmussen, 'Introduction – An Amphibious Anthropology: The Production of Place at the Confluence of Land and Water', *Anthropologica*, 58, 2016: 135-149.

27 L. Bremner, *Monsoon [+ other] Waters* (London: Monsoon Assemblages, 2019).

28 L. Bremner, 'Muddy Logics', in Sheppard, Lola and Maya Przybylski (eds), *Bracket 3: At Extremes* (Barcelona: Actar, 2015).

29 U. E. McClure and M. McClure, 'Hybrid Tectonic Nature: Terra Viscus' in R. Hejduk and H. van Oudenallen (eds), *The Art of Architecture, The Science of Architecture* (ACSA Press: Washington DC, 2005), 583-588, 583.

30 D. Morton, *Age of Concrete: Housing and the Shape of Aspiration in the Capital of Mozambique* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2022), 19.

31 *Ibid*.

called) of the 1950s and 1960s, he referenced his life before or after the 'great floods', a time when his family was uprooted by the force of water.[32] The question then becomes: how do we tell such histories of viscosity? How do we develop a 'muddy' analytic to our historical narratives of spatial and urban change where weather events such as tropical cyclones and floodings are both extraordinary occurrences and recurring processes, becoming traumatic nodal points in collective chronologies but also permeating the domain of the everyday. How do we make space for things and elements in otherwise human-centric imaginations of the past? How do we recalibrate our ecocritical lens to decentre the human, but without losing track of the social justice imperative of postcolonial historiography, where attention to intersectional inequalities is an intellectual and political preoccupation?

The case of Lourenço Marques is, again, instructive. Despite the often destructive abundance of water, a consequence of extreme weather events (such as tropical cyclones) and seasonal rains (the annual 'rainy' season, from November to February), the majority of the black population living in and around colonial Lourenço Marques has lacked access to basic amenities, including electricity and sanitation, but also running water.[33] Morton's study demonstrated that colonial inequality determined both access to fresh water, but also vulnerability to flooding. In this assertion, it dialogues with a long tradition in environmental justice activism and ecocriticism, which has insisted on the intersectional and uneven distribution of environmental hazards across (post-)colonial hierarchies of race, class, gender, sexuality, and species.[34] I am particularly invested in Christina Sharpe's theorisation of weather as 'a pervasive climate of anti-blackness', which, in constituting black bodies by and through 'continued vulnerability', always pushes 'toward black death'.[35] In this sense, 'colonial weathering' points to the geo- and biopolitical processes by which racialised bodies become differentially exposed to specific forces of the elemental world.[36] That being our point of departure, we may then start asking specifically visual questions: how do we visualise these instances of slow violence beyond the documentary mood of colonial governmentality, in which nature or weather photography was often a form of classification, evidence-making, and mapping that ultimately served the political purpose of domesticating colonial landscape, including its human and nonhuman beings?[37]

There is a conceptually productive connection to be drawn between 'exposure' as susceptibility and vulnerability to environmental hazards, and 'exposure' as a parameter of (in)visibility, as that which fundamentally shapes what can be rendered visible, what can be seen, and in what ways. In photography, exposure determines the amount of light that is captured by the camera, and the duration of that capture in time. In doing so, as photographer John Szarkowski has argued, it defines the time

32 Interview with António, carried out in Maputo, on 04/10/2021, by the author.
33 Morton, *Age of Concrete*, 1.
34 Alaimo, *Elemental Love*, 303.
35 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 16.
36 Engelmann and McCormack, 'Elemental worlds', 1429.
37 S. Sud, 'Water, Air, Light: The Materialities of Plague Photography in Colonial Bombay, 1896-97', *Getty Research Journal*, 12, 2020, 219-230, 225.

of the photograph as the moment of that initial capture, whereby those 'thin slices of time' are immobilised visually.[38] Photography's commitment to the present explains why the medium may not always and immediately lend itself to the representation of those more incremental, and slow, forms of environmental ruin that exist beyond the spectacular mode of the 'event'. While photographs of the aftermath of a tropical cyclone, for instance, can merely serve to register the damage to people, places, and things, they may also expose the otherwise invisibilised work of colonial weathering, as they visually bring into the frame the colonial fracture itself. This is the case of photographs of the cyclone Claude that hit Lourenço Marques in 1966. In Figure 1, a car, a symbol of settler affluence, is immersed in mud. Around it, African workers carrying shovels represent the racialised distribution of labour required to clean up, to unearth, colonial property.

Photograph 1. 'Na Estrada Marginal, um automovél soterrado em areias caídas das Barreiras de Polana.' Tropical cyclone Claude. Photograph Paulo Badinha. https://delagoabayworld.wordpress.com/category/historia/ciclone-claude-em-lm-jan-1966/, accessed 29/5/2025.

In Figure 2, a multiracial audience gathers to observe the damage caused by the storm, which cut open the colonial city. In the faded background, we see the juxtaposition of cement and brick houses, on the left, and more precarious forms of habitation, represented by the reed fence, in the back. Facing the edge of the pit, the unevenly built environment fractures the sense of apparent shared spectatorship, by alluding to the necessarily differential nature of colonial publics.

38 J. Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 10.

Photograph 2. 'Uma das ruas da Cidade.' Tropical cyclone Claude. Photograph Paulo Badinha. https://delagoabayworld.wordpress.com/category/historia/ciclone-claude-em-lm-jan-1966/, accessed 29/5/2025.

Photographic exposure – the camera's ability to freeze a moment in time – also pushes the limits of human perception by rendering visible forms of moving and being that are otherwise lost to the naked eye. Figure 3 engages the cyclone itself, as opposed to its presence in absence, that is, through the material markers of the destruction it caused. This photo seems to exist outside of the documentary mode. Here, the elements themselves – such as strong wind and flying water particles – set the parameters, and the very possibility, of visibility. As photographer Jeff Wall points out, photographs of, say, splattering water, may challenge our belief in stable forms, but they may also call into question the very notion of looking as a one-way relationship between a (human) spectator and a 'thing'.[39] This photograph displaces the human as the main subject of climate destruction, by centring palm trees and the agentic power of wind and water, as 'vibrant matter'.[40] It also switches the representational dynamic around, not by questioning how humans are exposed to the elements, but by postulating how the elements may be exposed to photographic capture in particular ways, via the camera. In it, the cyclone looks back at the viewer, summoning a sense of 'relationality'.[41] Such visual renderings of weather events open interesting and yet unexplored possibilities for thinking about human-nature connectedness in a settler

39 J. Wall, 'Water in the Camera', in P. Galassi (ed), *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York: MOMA, 2007), 67-85.
40 J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).
41 Wall, 'Water in the Camera'.

Photograph 3. 'A Estrada Marginal de Lourenço Marques no dia 5 de Janeiro de 1996.' Tropical cyclone Claude. Photograph Paulo Badinha. https://delagoabayworld.wordpress.com/category/historia/ciclone-claude-em-lm-jan-1966/, accessed 29/5/2025.

colonial setting. But the tensions around exposure, visual representation, and the environment (natural and manmade) were, too, clearly articulated in photographs taken around water in its various manifestations: the beach, the swimming pool, the coral reef, and the like. It is to this set of images that I now turn.

Colonial Mermen: Waterplay, Racial Viscosity, and the Making of Settler Masculinity

As explained above, colonial weathering determined both access to running water and vulnerability to flooding. To this, I want to add that colonial racism also established forms of policing and control that limited access to 'water play', by which I mean forms of immersion, of engagement with water and with waterworlds, that take place in the registers of leisure and pleasure, through modalities of what Ananya Kabir has termed 'alegropolitics', or a politics of 'embodied happiness'.[42] The question of who could have access to water for survival and who could enjoy the pleasures of waterplay, was, I argue, one of the contested arenas around which colonial racism was being articulated, normalised, and continuously reproduced. In the late colonial period, the urban beachfront and modern swimming pools remained deeply racialised,

42 A. Kabir, 'The Fleeting Taste of Mazaa: From Embodied Philology to an Alegropolitics for South Asia', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43, 2, 2020, 1-12.

Photograph 4. Icon 479, Arm 1, Gav 2. National Archives of Mozambique, photographic collections.

Photograph 5. Icon 436, Arm 1, Gav 2. National Archives of Mozambique, photographic collections.

gendered, and classed spaces. One could conceptualise the beach as a playground of whiteness, as the natural and political space where settler privilege was the most visible and severe. The swimming pool – often situated in racially exclusivist clubs and hotels – was, too, a difference machine, a site of settler racialisation.

Figures 4 and 5 are representative of this. On the one hand, a postcard shows the swimming pool of Hotel Polana, one of the most exclusivist spaces of white leisure in colonial Lourenço Marques. On the other, a photograph of African children playing in a natural pond is granted the hand written label *piscinas indígenas* (native pools). Belonging in the same (visual) colonial archive, the photographs engage in a shot/reverse-shot tension. I borrow the concept from Jean Luc-Godard, who

reinterprets the familiar shot/reserve-shot visual technique as an 'analytic instrument for interrogating difference', drawing our attention to the contested space of (colonial) discourse.[43] Placed in the same analytical frame, in friction with each other, the photographs embody colonial difference: white swimming pools become a postcard; black 'swimming pools' become nature photography.

In bringing water to the centre of our theorisation of colonial racial formations, I also dialogue with Arun Saldanha's work on the making of racism at the beach in contemporary Goa. Saldanha argues that, rather than a solid, unequivocal, regimentation that keeps people apart, racial segregation is materialised through the viscous quality of the racialised body, the ways in which certain bodies stick together or the ways in which they may become slippery, resistant, to some forms of contact.[44] In this view, water may serve to lubricate the 'viscosity of race', thus working as a medium and an index of settler colonial governmentality. The colonial visual archive is abundant in its representation of one could call 'aquatic racism', a racial formation that is mediated by water, not in the least because the Mozambican shoreline, and particularly the coast around Lourenço Marques, with its pristine beaches and natural beauty, had been for long imagined as an inviting space for white pleasure, leisure, and entertainment, as a tourist poster – inviting a visitor to 'make a dive' into the city – suggests.[45] Indeed, colonial beaches and swimming pools were racialised spaces where white bodies stuck to each other, a process closely linked to the transformation of the seaside into a desirable commodity to settlers and tourists.

Photographs of this period, produced as tourist propaganda or by settlers themselves, as memorialist objects, engaged in a form of settler colonial world-making, in which racialised bodies were out of sight, except as labourers (as in Figures 6 and 7). This imagery is, to be sure, consistent with the social hierarchies always already inscribed in the colonial leisure/tourist economy, where white comfort was predicated on the availability and exploitation of black labour.[46] These processes were, too, intersectional, and some of the photographs articulate the crosscurrents of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In Figure 8, a white man in white swimming trunks poses for the camera, contorting his body to expose his muscles. The background is provided by a white sheet held by two black men, whose bodies are out of sight. The position of the white male body exudes hegemonic masculinity, which is implicated on the reproduction of heterosexual desire, but also on the erasure of black masculinity and desiring subjectivity. In the photograph's framing and composition, the white sheet exiles the two black men to the background of the scene, as if they had turn into things, hangers foregrounding the muscular appeal of the white body.

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43 B. Barr, 'Shot and Counter-shot: Presence, Obscurity, and the Breakdown of Discourse in Godard's Notre Musique', *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, 18, 2, 2010, 65-85.

44 A. Saldanha, *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

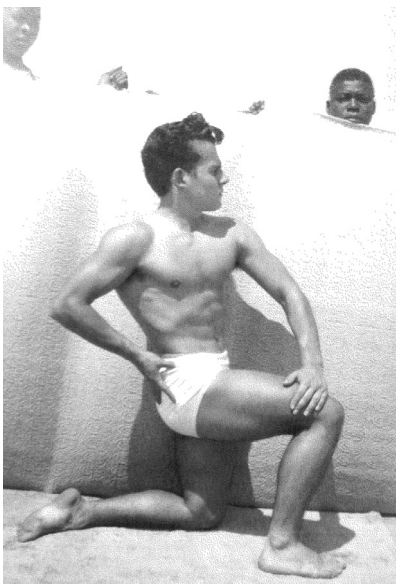
45 T. Cleveland and A. Marino, 'A convergência entre turismo, cultura popular e propaganda no império colonial português: o caso de Moçambique', in N. Domingos (ed), *Cultura Popular e Império: As Lutas Pela Conquista do Consume Cultural em Portugal e nas Suas Colónias* (Lisbon, Instituto de Ciências Sociais, 2021), 281-318. P. Gupta, 'Consuming the Coast: Mid-century Communications of Port Tourism in the Southern African Indian Ocean', *Comunicação, Mídia, Consumo*, 12, 2015, 149-170. N. Domingos, 'Visões de Marracuene: Propaganda, Cultura popular, Turismo e Terreno Colonial em Moçambique', *Análise Social*, 4, 2019, 664-692.

46 T. Cleveland, *Alluring Opportunities: Tourism, Empire, and African Labor in Colonial Mozambique* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023).

Image (1). Tourist poster, Lourenço Marques. N/D.

Photograph 6. Icon 84. National Archives of Mozambique, photographic collections.

Photograph 7. 'Mozambique, people pulling sail boat from water at yacht club in Maputo.' University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, AGSL Digital Photo Archive, Harrison Forman collection, Volume 106, 17.



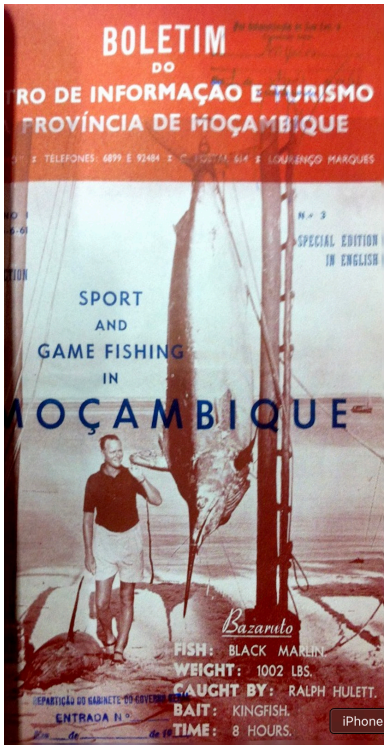
Photograph 8. 'Andava na Moda a Mania dos Músculos.' In N. R. da Silveira, *Lourenço Marques: Acerto de Contas com o Passado*, 1951-1965 (Lisboa: Edições Colibri, 2011), 264.

Body building was, as other sports or leisure activities, a means of cultivating identities – including gender identities – and drawing boundaries between communities.[47] While many of these activities took place in private and associative spaces, such as the 'colonial club', the twentieth century saw a significant expansion and commodification of outdoor recreational activities in Africa, a shift facilitated by innovations in transport communications (such as four-wheel-drive vehicles) and visual technology (the popularisation of personal photographic camera). In addition to the already established economy of game hunting, the postwar period also saw a significant increase in other outdoor activities, such as photographic safaris.[48] Moreover, the introduction of scuba breathing equipment in the tourist market for the first time exposed the underwater to general audiences, and diving became a leisurely pastime in the 1950s.[49]

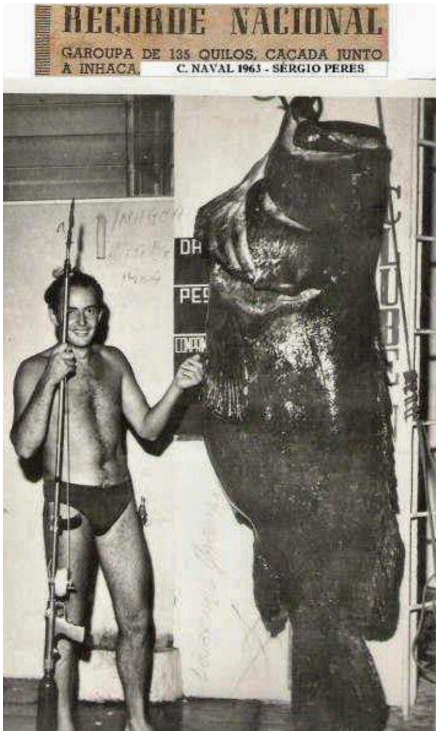
In Mozambique, access to these technologies and to the leisure activities associated with them were – just like the swimming pools – raced, classed, and gendered. After all, as scholars have argued, colonial hunting had typically been linked to a glorification of white masculinity, predicated on the imagination of African primitivism and the consumption of the continent's natural abundance.[50] While hunting could also be a place of negotiation where both Africans and European women had their own agendas,[51] in settler colonial contexts practices of nature sports, game hunting, and recreational outdoors activities remained dominated by white men, attached to imaginaries of heterosexual virility, racialised fitness, and exerting power over the natural, nonhuman, world.[52] In this perspective, the killing of animals for sport could be a means through which men 'imagine[d] and negotiate[d] their gender identity'.[53] With its multiple social and gendered implications, hunting was a popular sport in late colonial Mozambique. This included not only game hunting on land, but also in the ocean, underwater. Game fishing, the so-called 'undersea hunting' (*caça submarina*) grew in popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, with phallic pictures of men and their trophy prey – the bigger, heavier, meatier, the better – coming to occupy the pages of magazines and newspapers (see Figure 9).

Some of these photographs were produced not to feed the growing game fishing sector – which, by the late 1960s was relatively structured, as competitions and clubs were organized around it – but played a predominantly memorialist role. In my research through the former settler blogosphere, I came across a document on *A História da Caça Submarina em Moçambique* (The History of Undersea Hunting in Mozambique), prepared by former undersea hunters, now scattered around the world,

47 P. Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
48 T. Cleveland, *A History of Tourism in Africa: Exoticization, Exploitation and Enrichment* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2021), 116.
49 M. Cohen, 'Underwater Optic as Symbolic Form', *French Politics, Culture, and Society*, 32, 3, 2012, 1-23.
50 J. M. Mackenzie, *Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).
51 A. Thopsell, *Hunting Africa: British Sport, African Knowledge and the Nature of Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
52 D. L. Rivers, "Into the Woods: The Creaturely and the Queer in 20th century US American Hunting Narratives", in K. Maiti (ed), *Posthumanist Perspectives on Literary and Cultural Animals* (Cham: Springer, 2021), 153-165, 155.
53 *Ibid*.



Photograph 9. Sport and Game Fishing in Mozambique. Cover, *Boletim […] de Informação e Turismo Provincia de Moçambique*, n.d.

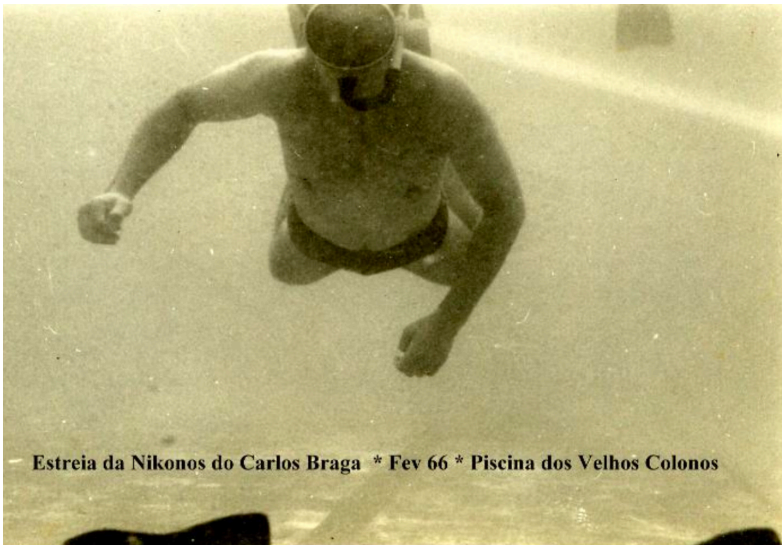


Photograph 10. 'National Record.' In *História da Caça Submarina em Moçambique*, 4.

living in the United States, South Africa, and Portugal. The document contained a wealth of photographs, many of which in the celebratory trophy style (Figure 10). But it also includes underwater photographs, made possible by a Nikonos Calypso, a 35mm underwater photo camera that one of them, Carlos Braga, had purchased in South Africa in 1966. First used in the swimming pool of a settler club (Figure 11), the Nikonos was also carried in undersea hunting expeditions in the Maputo Bay. In a way, these images fit within the familiar exploration trope of visual modernity, in which, as Elias has argued, 'the desire to look at animals, to hunt with cameras, and to consume the exotic world through [photography]… embodied symbolic as well as physical violence'.[54]

But the photographs are also interesting because they represent what Margaret Cohen has called an 'underwater optic', a way of seeing and a symbolic form that defies 'the reality of terrestrial perception'.[55] Cohen highlights how the physical conditions of the undersea space pose fundamental problems to terrestrial visibility, including by undermining the conventions of linear perspective: sea water is denser than air, it refracts light differently, and is in constant motion.[56] For these reasons, underwater photography has the potential to 'suspend everyday expectations, and

54 A. Elias, *Coral Empire: Underwater Oceans, Colonial Tropics, Visual Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 9.
55 Cohen, *Underwater Optic*, 2.
56 *Ibid.*, 8-9.



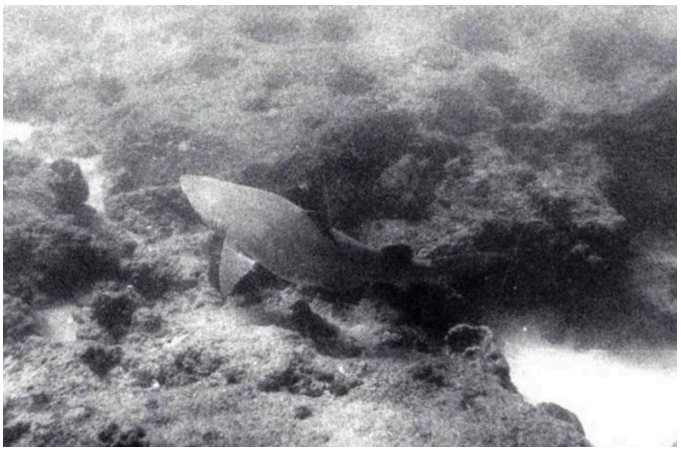
Photograph 11. 'Trying Carlos Braga's Nikonos, Fev 66, in the Swimming Pool of the Association of Old Settlers.' In *História da Caça Submarina em Moçambique*, 28.

to open to enchantment, hallucination, and dream'.[57] The photographs of undersea hunting in the Maputo Bay seem to be amenable to this interpretation. Regardless of the intentionality of the photographer and their production in the context of an expedition, the photographs seem to defy any heroic narrative of settler masculinity. In them, the ocean is an incredibly opaque environment that resists human occupation and desire for visibility. The sea floor is home to shipwrecks (Figure 12), sharks (Figure 13), and fish (Figure 14).

In these photographs, I suggest, we are perhaps seeing the agency of the sea itself, a subversion rather than a reproduction of settler colonialism and its visual regimes. They have a 'muddy' quality, resulting from the materiality of sea water itself, and from the limits it puts on visibility and the desire for clarity. Interestingly, the hunters are, themselves, oddly distorted, almost a nonhuman, multispecies lifeform, like mermen embedded in the oceanic milieu (Figure 15). Read as such, some of these images point us away from conventional hunting imagery – where the trope of 'mastering the wilderness by killing the creature' drives the plot[58] –, and in the direction of what Daniel Rivers has described as 'becoming creaturely', a critical framework that opens up a space for alliance and intimacy with 'more-than-human environments'.[59] As Rivers points out, to become a creature, in this sense, involves embracing animality and cultivating a mode of queerness that challenges the colonial frames of virile masculinity and heterosexual bravery. It is to this queer potential of an ecocritical lens that I now turn.

57 *Ibid.*, 20.
58 Rivers, 'Into the wood', 157.
59 *Ibid.*, 158.

Photograph 12. No Title. In *História da Caça Submarina em Moçambique*, 41.



Photograph 13. No Title. In *História da Caça Submarina em Moçambique*, 47.

Photograph 14. No Title. In *História da Caça Submarina em Moçambique*, 43.

Photograph 15. No Title. In *História da Caça Submarina em Moçambique*, 42.

Cruising Desire: Queering the Shore, Feeling Ruination

In Mozambique, as elsewhere in the colonial world, same-sex sexual acts and desires were deemed as 'vices against nature' (*vícios contra a natureza*), to be punished by law and monitored through medical science. As queer ecocritics have already argued, the conceptual and legal-political rendering of non-heterosexual sex as 'against nature'or 'unnatural' raises crucial questions about dominant definitions and normative imaginations of 'nature' itself. This is important if one considers the central role that the 'nature-culture' divide occupied in colonial epistemologies, as a parameter to determine the boundaries and hierarchies between humans and non-humans, and between civilization and animality.[60] As Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson suggest, a queer lens may help us to attend to 'the powerful ways in which understandings of nature inform discourses of sexuality (as much as) understandings of sex inform discourses of nature'.[61] These entanglements are, to be sure, intersectional, and there are powerful links tying how, in colonial contexts, (white) heteronormative sexuality and the gender binary have been historically constructed as 'natural', on the one hand, while sexual dissidence and gender variance (including indigenous practices contrary to Christian-settler colonial codes) were disqualified as 'unnatural', 'abject', not quite properly human, or even 'toxic' to mainstream society, on the other.[62]

In my view, a queer ecocritical approach is so compelling to a decolonial project of reimagining southern Africa's environmental histories because, as Nicole Seymour

60 C. Mortimer-Sandilands and B. Erickson (eds), *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).
61 *Ibid.*, 2–3.
62 A. Gosine, 'Non-White Reproduction and Same-sex Eroticism: Queer Acts Against Nature', in C. Mortimer-Sandilands and B. Erickson (eds), *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 149–172.

has alerted us, attending to the 'continued dehumanisation' of queer people across time pushes us to cultivate both an intellectual concern and a political empathy for the non-human.[63] After all, a queer ecocritical lens not only allows us to question the racialised and gendered processes by which certain bodies and subjectivities are deemed as 'unnatural' or 'non-human', but it also puts forward the social justice claim that 'sexual diversity (is) part of a larger biodiversity'.[64] In particular, as a physical and imaginative geography, the ocean has for long been a site of queer engagement and theorisation.

From penguins to grey whales, marine wildlife has given hope to queers on land, who rejoice on the imagination of a vibrant 'queer life underwater'.[65] In addition to the various sea animals that partake in homosexual behaviour, the seahorse, a species where the male gives birth, challenges anthropocentric configurations of gender and sexual relations, opening the possibility for new erotic imaginings.[66] *The Little Mermaid*, to reference a fairy tale that resonates in our contemporary popular culture, has been interpreted as a familiar story of transgender becoming, in both the original short story by Hans Christian Andersen, a more brutal and surgical rendition, and in the more palatable Disney reimagination(s).[67] In the 1989 animated film, the character Ursula, widely known to have been based on the iconic American drag queen Divine, has been recently described as a 'nonbinary femme sea witch', a transspecies being whose story is rooted on 'the trauma of surviving trans-becoming' in a binary, hetero-masculinist, and imperial world.[68]

Outside the water, at the ocean's edge, the littoral has also been a space of queer refuge. In a recent book, Hannah Freed-Thall tracks how beaches have worked, for the most part of the twentieth century, 'as gathering sites for those who are excluded from heteronormative spaces and institutions', offering spaces 'for experimenting with nonnormative intimacies and styles of encounter'.[69] The beach, in this sense, is 'a site of spontaneous queer seduction, play, and touch.'[70] While grounded in the US context, Freed-Thall's interpretation seems to be of relevance to southern Africa, too. One of the richest queer photographic collections in the region, the Kewpie collection, holds many images of gender non-conforming people on the beach (Figure 15),

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63 N. Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 12.

64 S. Alaimo, 'Eluding Capture: The Science, Culture, and Pleasure of "Queer Animals"', in C. Mortimer-Sandilands and B. Erickson (eds), *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 55.

65 W. Mackenzie (2021), "The Rainbow Ocean: 6 Ocean Species to Celebrate Pride Month with", Greenpeace, available at: https://www.greenpeace.org/international/story/49721/story-italy-single-use-plastic-bottle-toxic-fossil-fuels/ (Accessed on 23 July 2023). Bracenet (2021), "Homosexuality Among Marine Animals – Queer Life Underwater". Available at: https://bracenet.net/en/blog/queer-marine-animals/ (Accessed on 23 July 2023).

66 J. L. Cahill, *Zoological Surrealism: The Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 196.

67 L. G. Spencer, 'Performing Transgender Identity in The Little Mermaid: from Andersen to Disney', *Communication Study*, 65, 1, 2013, 112-127.

68 Phoebe Osborne (2022), "A True Lover's Kiss: Trans-becoming-ancient as a Mode of Loving", Listening essay. Available at: https://www.airgallery.org/phoebe-osborne-true-loves-kiss (Accessed on 23 July 2023).

69 H. Freed-Thall, *Modernism and the Beach: Queer Ecologies and the Coastal Commons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), 16 and 20.

70 J. E. Anderson, *The Gay of the Land: Queer Ecology and the Literature if the 1960s* (PhD Dissertation, University of Mississippi, 2011). C. Mortimer-Sandilands and B. Erickson (eds.), *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 44.

Photograph 16. 'Kewpie with Sandra Dee at Strandfontein.' In Ramdsen-Karelse, 'Moving and Moved,' 425.

an archive that has already been brilliantly explored by Ruth Ramsden-Karelse, albeit without specific mention of its ecocritical possibilities.[71]

To think about the coast in terms of a queer history of sexuality, Freed-Thall argues, is to explore the crosscurrents of queer theory and ecological thinking,[72] an approach I am keen to pursue. In the case of Lourenço Marques, historicising the coast as a queer eco-social space demands that we consider the environmental materiality of the beach, as well as the forms of embodied 'littoral choreographies' that this materiality invites, from lying on the sand to the exposure of the body.[73] But it also requires an understanding of the Maputo Bay as a space of flux where multiple currents, elemental pressures, and forms of life meet. For one, as a vibrant port city, Lourenço Marques was a corridor through which organic and inorganic matter, as well as human and nonhuman lives, moved, transported by cargo and cruise ships. Of course, these networks are representative of colonial and capitalist forms of entanglement, as well as of a racialised cruising industry, which turned the African littoral into an object of consumption for the leisure of affluent (white) publics.[74]

71 R. Ramsden-Karelse, 'Moving and Moved: Reading Kewpie's District Six', *GLQ*, 26, 3, 2020, 405–438.
72 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
73 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
74 P. Gupta, 'Consuming the Coast: Mid-Century Communications of Port Tourism in the Southern African Indian Ocean', *Comunicação, Mídia e Consumo*, 12, 35, 2015, 149–170.

Photograph 17. Eduardo with friends at the Catembe beach. Reproduced with permission.

Photograph 18. Eduardo, camping on the beach around Lourenço Marques. Reproduced with permission.

If the city was a known cruising destination, it was also a place of 'cruising', by which I mean the queer practice of drifting and moving around, looking for same-sex sexual encounters, often anonymously, fleetingly and in public spaces. Elsewhere, I have written in some detail about the queer sexual economy of late colonial Lourenço Marques, much of which revolved around the port and was partially fed by the transient population of sailors and tourists.[75] As one of my interlocutors, Eduardo, a white gay man, told me: downtown, near the dock, it was easy to 'cruise' for sailors.[76] In his autobiographical novella *Persona*, Pitta also describes other (real and imagined) sites of homosexual encounters: the dunes of the beach, the reefs of Ponta Vermelha,

75 C. Simões de Araújo, 'Queering the City: the Politics of Intimacy, Sex and Liberation in Lourenço Marques (Mozambique), 1961-1982', *Revue d'Histoire Contemporaine de l'Afrique*, 2, 2021, 130–150.
76 Interview with Eduardo, carried out in Lisbon, on 19/02/2020, by the author.

the locking room of the Yacht Club, and the swimming pools at friends' homes.[77] In his narrative, water and the littoral environment carried the promise of pleasure, sexual realisation, and queering. Going to the beach and lying on the sand with queer friends (Figure 16) could also be an act of community making and self-expression (Figure 17).

The forms of queer experimentation narrated by Pitta do not necessarily disrupt the racial politics of settler society, as the spaces of socialisation and the opportunities of sexual release he described remained racialised, inaccessible to black queers. Another interlocutor, Abdul, a black gay man, tells a different story, where the beach offered the stage for inter-racial homosexual encounters. Growing up in Polana Caniço, a black-majority neighbourhood bordering the elite Polana beach, Abdul spent his youth paying constant visits to the ocean, where he would go for a swim in the early morning, before going to work. In his narrative, at the dawn of day, before it was caught in the urban rhythm and populated by visitors of all kinds, the empty beach offered the possibility of freedom and cruising. While he mentioned having met many potential fleeting sexual partners there, the seductive potential of the beach also included a loving relationship with his first partner, a Portuguese man he met when sunbathing next to each other. In the late colonial period, he observed, the forest of trees and mangroves offered shelter and privacy to queer lovers. This narrative is not at all exceptional: having sex on the beach or in other public spaces evolved by nature, such as parks, has been a recurrent queer practice virtually everywhere. As queer eco-critics have already argued, the practice of sex 'in nature' turns upside down the heteronormative discourse of homosexuality being 'against nature', and places the burden of environmental degradation on the reproductive drive of mainstream society, especially in the post-war era, a time when deserted beaches and other littoral environments were being transformed into leisure spaces for heterosexual families, carrying their littler, and their carbon footprint.[78]

In the case of southern Mozambique, the civil war that followed independence from the late 1970s until the early 1990s was a major source of environmental stress and ruination. As Estevão Pihale has showed, 40% of the wooded coastal areas were depleted during this period, while the mangrove vegetation was tragically reduced by 70%.[79] It is also estimated that hundreds of thousands of Mozambicans moved to Maputo during the war, intending to escape the violence in rural areas and in the north, which caused unprecedented population concentration and, as a result, significant environmental impact. Pihale assesses that much of the seafront trees were probably consumed as firewood, to make up for fuel shortages at the time, another everyday life indicator of the infrastructural damage inflicted by the conflict.[80] The aftermath of this environmental loss is still being experienced today, considering that the absence of trees and vegetation, as well as the increased use and occupation of

77 E. Pitta, *Persona* (Lisbon: Quidnovi, 2007), 16.
78 Anderson, *The Gay of the Land*, 40–41.
79 E. Pihale, *The Environmental Impact of the Armed Conflict in Southern Mozambique, 1977-1992* (MA Thesis, University of Cape Town, 2003), 61.
80 *Ibid.*, 62.

the beaches by visitors and businesses, makes the coast particularly vulnerable to erosion.[81] It is difficult to find a reliable record of this environmental shift and its multiple implications, but Abdul did tell me that the devastation of the seafront vegetation foreclosed one's possibility of having sex on the beach. This story is so powerful not only because it highlights the affective place 'nature' may have in queer memory, but also because it captures the entanglements between politics and erotics, between human and nonhuman, in the making and unmaking of coastal eco-social worlds, by which ecological, social and sexual fields are symbiotically connected. In this case, ecological ruination is intimately felt, like a lover's touch.

Conclusion

In 2015, Mozambique removed from its Penal Code the colonial-era provisions that deemed same-sex sexual acts as 'vices against nature', a progressive move that was praised locally and internationally. Despite the legal change, LGBTI people in the country still face everyday discrimination and exclusion, not in the least because some political and religious discourses remain married to the idea that homosexuality and gender variance are 'unnatural'. A few years later, in 2019, the Mozambican coast was hit by the tropical cyclones Idai and Kenneth, which brought with it unprecedented destruction. Beira, the country's third largest city, was one of the hardest hit localities: it is estimated that 90% of its urban network was destroyed, while millions were displaced by the cyclones and their aftermath.[82] Separate in time and subject matter, these events remind us that southern Africa sits at the forefront of both the struggle for 'human' rights and for environmental justice. To be sure, imaginations of 'nature', and the socially constructed boundaries of the 'human', have been, and will remain, consequential in shaping the future of the region's ecosystems and lifeworlds, including those directly affecting its most marginalised communities. As the after-effects of the slow violence of colonialism and environmental stress are being felt, recalibrating our historical lenses is an exercise in imagining futurity in manners that serve 'anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-sexist, (and queer) environmentalist ends'.[83]

This article argues for a 'muddy' history of Maputo and its surrounding area, the Maputo Bay. Conceptualising this history as a terrain where ambitions of colonial control and development clash with the pressures of environmental stress and its racialised impacts, I propose that an elemental approach can foster new forms of countervisuality – novel modes of visual critique attuned to the materiality of the natural world. This approach recognizes the agency of both humans and nonhumans while remaining sensitive to the historical currents that perpetuate precarity and violence

81 J. Langa, *Erosão Costeira na Cidade de Maputo. Causas. Considerações sobre Intervenções de Defesa* (MA Thesis, Environmental Engeneering, University of Oporto, 2003).

82 'Beira City "90 Percent Destroyed" by Cyclone Idai, Hundreds Dead', *Aljazeera,* March 18, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/3/18/beira-city-90-percent-destroyed-by-cyclone-idai-hundreds-dead.

83 Seymour, *Strange Natures*, 7.

in diverse ways. Drifting between photographs of weather events and their aftermath, racialised forms of water play on beaches and in swimming pools, and underwater hunting as a site of settler gender construction and multispecies possibility, I highlight how engaging the elements visually shifts our human-centric historical plots, pushing for more expansive analytics and ways of seeing.

By centering fluidity – of images, histories and desires – this study underscores the need for a 'muddy' analytic that embraces the entanglements of environmental, social, and affective processes. Through a queer ecocritical lens, I gesture toward questioning the imagination of nature and animality itself, while also considering how ecological ruination can be intimately felt and remembered as embodied and affective processes. Ultimately, I argue that thinking with the elements and the nonhuman – with wind and water, sand and sharks – and resituating historical actors in multispecies scenes, devising new ways of seeing with watery eyes, and reaching out to drifting images, old and new, are methodological gestures that compel us to reconsider the place of the environment in our (visual) archives. These approaches challenge colonial and anthropocentric frameworks, urging us to reconfigure our archival environments as fluid spaces of relationality and countervisuality. In doing so, they open up possibilities for more inclusive, expansive, and justice-oriented environmental histories of past and present.