

Inner Congo

Unveiling Matters of Violence through Art and Interactive Documentary

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Abstract

This research-creation project, part of the DE\GLOBALIZE artistic research cycle presented at the #IFM2022 Conference, investigates the complexities of Congo violence, care, and colonialism. Drawing on Michel Serres' metaphor of the great estuaries, the study explores the topology of interactive documentaries, blending theory, emotion, and personal experiences. Accessible through the interactive web documentation at <http://deglobalize.com>, the platform offers a media-archaeological archive for speculative ethnography, enabling the forensic processing of single documents in line with actor-network theory.

Focusing on the ambivalence of violence and care, the field trip to the Congo in March 2022 involved collaboration with local artists and was based on a postcolonial reflection from 1996. The outcome, a 30-minute autoethnographic essay titled *Inner Congo*, reflects on inner violence and its

connection to colonialism, transcending the dichotomy between art and science. The study examines political, technological, and psycho-geographic borders, engaging with local communities to interrogate the displaced consumption of resources, ghost acreages, and self-lies.

Informed by the works of Achille Mbembe and Franz Fanon, the research confronts the foreign, the dark, and the displaced ghosts within the participants. DE\GLOBALIZE is problematized as an example of epistemic violence for the ethnographic memory of (Western) knowledge. The study emphasizes the importance of caring for the sensitivity of the researchers' skin, the g/hosts, and mother earth.

The encounters in the Congo reveal the palpable legacy of violence and the continued exploitation in post-colonialism. The Art Academy and the Mission Station serve as both havens for wounded souls and witnesses of a bloody European heritage. In Isiro, the researchers confront their own greed when meeting Trésor, a mine owner with 6,000 workers digging for gold. Violence constantly finds new ground, with totalitarian folds increasing in our psyches.

Inspired by Sven Lindqvist's *Gräv där du står* (1978), the research emphasizes the need to face our brutality and demons through symbols and calculations that protect yet disenchant us simultaneously. *Inner Congo* offers a poignant and immersive exploration of the complexities of violence in the Congo, unearthing hidden narratives and inspiring critical reflection.

Keywords

care, epistemic violence, interactive documentary, speculative ethnography

Africa has no secret at all, no one does. We are just estuaries, deltas, and swamps.

Eric Vuillard, CONGO

As we know, the Nile does not emerge in Lake Kivu, on the eastern rim of the Great Rift Valley, but in the deepest interior of ourselves. In the [Nile Vodoo performance](#) in 2019, I was heaved back on board just in time. Otherwise, I might have drowned in the river - and drunk the milk of paradise.

So, we are indeed nothing but estuaries, deltas and swamps. Michel Serres describes the great estuaries of the Congo and the Nile as a metaphor for accumulated knowledge nourished upstream from infinitely small sources. Together with his thoughts about Venetian bridges (Fetzner 2017), this applies perfectly to understanding the topology of interactive documentaries.

The artistic research cycle DE\GLOBALIZE is a media ecological search movement for the terrestrial. After examining *matters of fact* in India (2014-18), *matters of concern* in Egypt (2016-2019) and *matters of care* in the Upper Rhine (2018-22), the focus turned towards *matters of violence* in the Congo (2022). From matter to mater, mother earth, the garden to exploitation, science, water and climate to migration, oppression, and extermination.

The long-term research is accessible through the interactive web documentation at <http://deglobalize.com>. The platform serves as a continuous media-archaeological archive for a speculative ethnography. The relational structure of the videographic essay is enabling the forensic processing of single documents in the sense of the actor-network theory.

The field trip to the Congo in March 2022 focused on the ambivalence of violence and care in collaboration with local artists. The field trip was based on the postcolonial reflection [Luderitzcargo](#) by the author from 1996, in which a freight container was transformed into a translocal cinema in Namibia. The outcome is the autoethnographic essay [Inner Congo](#) of 30min, as a reflection on inner violence and its connection to colonialism. The movie tries to overcome the dichotomy of art and science. Research can be strictly theoretical and analytical and, at the same time, emotional, personal and even therapeutic.

Finding Africa means experiencing a loss of identity, writes Achille Mbembe. He describes the word Africa as a mask. Through the journey to Congo, a group of media artists, a psychotherapist, a theatre dramaturg, a filmmaker and a philosopher explored political, technological and psycho-geographic borders. Artistic interventions with locals interfered with relational string figures as part of the new Earth Politics. They were focusing on the displaced consumption of resources which are hard-fought and guarantee prosperity in the global north. The so-called ghost acreages are repressed and justified as part of a civilizational mission. On this trip, we also confronted our self-lies with the ones of our hosts. We are confronted with the foreign, the dark and the displaced ghosts within ourselves. In the presentation at the [#IFM2022 Conference](#), the platform DE\GLOBALIZE will be problematized itself as an example of epistemic violence for the ethnographic memory of (Western) knowledge.

We were not the missionaries but perplex travellers. On our search movement we dealt with psychoanalysis, video, performance and trance. As disoriented white men we tried the reversal of *Black Skin and White Mask* by Franz Fanon without blackfacing. We did not only care about the sensitivity of our skin, but that of our g/hosts and the one of mother earth.

“What can we learn from Africa? The colonial leaves or dies,” writes Fanon (1961). This certainly applies not only to nations but also to internal occupations. An overpowering body colonized me for a long time. Matter, matter, mater, the mother.

Today it is called caring abuse. I could only find my breath by freezing my own feelings.

On research trips, the academic mask keeps the world at bay. The rambles are continuous metamorphoses: the cinema container in Africa, the suspension bridge over the San Francisco Bay, the insect laboratories at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, and the pickup truck in revolutionary Cairo. The crazy things were all going well until our homemade space probe burst over the Murg Valley of all places, from which I had been fleeing all my life. The artifact landed right in my inner Congo.

The reversal of the colonial perspective does not dissolve structures of violence. On the contrary, idealizations are usually the continuation of exploitation by other means—a breeding ground for self-deception and self-humiliation up to new orgies of annihilation that occur unspectacularly in secret. Today, in what is known as post-colonialism, Africa continues to be seamlessly enslaved by clans and corporations. Fatefully this continues, we benefit from an abject: down there, it just keeps rumbling and stinking.

In the encounters with the people in the Congo, the legacy of this violence becomes palpable. Our hosts, the Art Academy and the Mission Station, are havens for wounded souls. And witnesses of a bloody European heritage. In the monastery, you put a child soldier in front of the camera to record her story. The apparatus is already running when you position it in the picture. Her eyes darted around the room. The crucifix on the wall is our patron and our ticket.

When we are stranded in Isiro, we meet Trésor. He has 6,000 people digging for gold in deep shafts in his mine with your bare hands. If a new vein is found or a person is buried, he goes down himself. He picks up the bodies himself. That's what his people expect. He then takes my question as to whether there is gold in heaven personally. The mood changes. The eerie figure suddenly frightens us because we feel what the person we are looking at is capable of. But maybe also because Trésor reflects the ghostly entanglements of our own greed. Our gold is strong pictures, interviews and a cool story.

Violence is constantly breaking new ground. The totalitarian folds increasing into our psyches. Night after night we roam the inner Congo, bringing contradictory spirits before our eyes. We face our brutality and our demons in the form of symbols and calculations that protect us but disenchant us at the same time. Here we must start in the sense of Sven Lindqvist's *Gräv där du står* (*Dig Where You Stand*, 1978).

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