

MEMORY AS SELF-EMPOWERMENT

BEATRACE ANGUT OOLA
IN CONVERSATION
WITH MASEHO

Born in Hamburg, Maseho has spent the past thirty years working as a Black German multidisciplinary artist and curator, bringing together art, community, and cultural empowerment. She stands for consistency, style, and spiritual depth, and a form of memory that takes seriously collective and spiritual healing.

BEATRACE ANGUT OOLA: Maseho, it's so good to have you here. When you think of remembrance, what comes to mind first—and how would you describe your personal connection to Hamburg?

MASEHO: Allegorically speaking, Hamburg feels to me like an alluring yet ruthless former courtesan—now risen to the ranks of a respectable, upper-class Hanseatic lady doing everything in her power to conceal her disgraceful past. That image captures my ambivalent relationship with my birth city quite well. When I returned to Hamburg on my own in the early 1980s as a minor, I encountered pervasive racism and sexism—on every level. I felt completely lost. Over time, I met people who helped me endure life here. Above all, the Black clubs of that era meant everything to me. They weren't just

nightlife venues—they were cultural sanctuaries, informal community centres where I felt seen, understood, and held. Through my travels, my daughters, and my cultural—and inevitably socio-political—work, I also came to understand that I may not be a ‘Hamburger’ in the traditional sense, but I can, with confidence, call myself *Afro-Hanseatic*. What I still miss, however, is artistic inspiration. Hamburg—and arguably Germany as a whole—is at least thirty years behind when it comes to Afro and Black culture. This is evident in the absence of it in the discourse as well as in the creative diversity of our communities. There’s little space and recognition, few networks—but above all, an almost general lack of courage to engage meaningfully with Black cultural forms of expression.

For us as the African diaspora, memory is not something that should be in academic halls or sealed in archives. Memory is lived. We are, as many people, including Namibian Nama activist Sima Luipert so aptly put it, *living archives*. White people—and many Eurocentrically socialized people of colour—tend to think of archives as collections of documents, files, objects, and material things. In African and Afro-diasporic cultures, however, memories are also embedded in stories, in dance, in song, and in customs, and especially in the oral transmission of knowledge across generations.

Of course, we also maintain archives in the Western sense. But because each of us is a living archive—because memory is embodied, sensory, alive—we have the potential to break through these exclusive structures. At least momentarily when we come together with shared intention.

BEATRACE: You move across different cultural and political spaces, and collective memory plays a vital role in your work. How has Hamburg shaped you—as a city, as a stage, and as a contradiction?

MASEHO: I think many young people don't realize that we are, for the first time, witnessing the emergence of an older Black generation in Germany. When I was younger, I was always puzzled by the lack of elderly Black people we could talk to about their experiences. I was raised by my grandmother, and I also knew my great-grandmother. On my travels, I actively sought out conversations with elderly Black people—those between the ages of seventy to one hundred. These encounters were deeply meaningful to me.

In Germany, there is massive age discrimination, especially toward women—despite, or perhaps because of, the rapidly aging population.

This affects us as Black people as well. We need to ask ourselves: Is this hype around intergenerational conflict truly ours—or was it imposed on us? Given our distinct histories, perhaps we need entirely different generational frameworks.

Our political work is shaped by an imposed infantilization that keeps us small and disconnected. Every decade, the Black struggle seems to be reinvented from scratch, because there is so little awareness of what came before.

Many people don't know, for instance, that Katharina Oguntoye and May Ayim were met with hostility at their universities for researching Black history in Germany. Or that the capitalization of 'Black' was

proposed by Eleonore Coulibaly as early as 1992. There are countless such examples—enough to fill a book.

Personally, I still find it strange to be an old woman. As a Black woman, you're quickly erased.

You become invisible. Everyone—and I mean everyone—expects you to either be silent or die. But I will not be silent, as long as my voice goes unheard. Even though my strength is waning with age, the fight is only just beginning. Because the beautiful thing about growing older is this: you no longer let yourself be intimidated. You have nothing left to lose—except your life. And if that makes some call me a 'bitter old dragon'—so what?

BEATRICE: You often speak of Black women's movements. What role do they play in honouring the contributions of women of African descent in Germany and in the global Black diaspora?

MASEHO: The contributions of Black women in Germany are not being recognized—not in any meaningful way. This is not an isolated oversight; it's a structural issue replicated throughout the Western world. Germany is no exception.

Once in a while, a Black woman may receive media attention—usually framed as a 'model migrant'. But a collective recognition of Black women's contributions remains absent. Yet it was precisely Black women's movements that played a vital role in advancing discourses on critical whiteness, white supremacy, and intersectionality—understood as the interlocking of multiple systems of oppression. Even if the language has evolved over time, the pioneering analytical and political work of Black women is undeniable.

Though I've distanced myself from the ISD (Initiative of Black People in Germany) over the years, I always point out that it was founded by Black women and lesbians—a fact far too rarely acknowledged today. I remember the African women in Hamburg who were tired of being relegated to note-taking and catering duties in male-dominated African associations. They created their own organization: AWAH, the African Women Association Hamburg e.V. It didn't last long but it was a statement.

In Germany, terms like ‘migrant’, ‘Black’, or ‘African’ are still overwhelmingly associated with masculinity. I’ve been to numerous events where neither the mostly white organizers nor the audience noticed that Black women were entirely absent—even when the topic was African art or fashion.

That’s why I founded the Ukubona initiative—as a platform for Black women artists and designers. Because no matter what we do, as Black women, if we don’t publicly frame ourselves as ‘multiply marginalized’ and perform our suffering, we remain invisible.

Already in 1929, the Nardal sisters opened the Salon de Clamart in Paris—a space where Black intellectuals from around the world could gather. In the midst of colonialism, racism, and societal exclusion, the salon offered room for exchange, networking, and self-empowerment. Visitors included Marcus Garvey, Jean-Price Mars, Marian Anderson, and René Maran. It was also a haven for Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon Gontran Damas—later known as the founders of the Négritude movement.

Today, the Salon de Clamart is rightly celebrated as the birth-place of Négritude. Yet it is often forgotten who created that space in the first place: the Nardal sisters—especially Paulette Nardal, who launched the journal *La Revue du Monde Noir* and sparked essential debates around Black identity, diaspora, and the role of Black women. Though the journal lasted only a year, its legacy lives on—and continues to inspire the work we do today.

BEATRICE: In Hamburg, there are many blind-spots when it comes to colonial history and Black presence. What is needed for memory to become a lived practice?

MASEHO: Hamburg still harbours many blind spots regarding its colonial past and the historical and contemporary presence of Black people. Lived memory requires far more than symbolic gestures or one-off projects—it demands continuity and structural sustainability. Institutions too often engage in ‘cherry-picking’, inviting a few African voices while systematically excluding others. What’s missing is a holistic approach. Perspectives from the Caribbean, Latin America, and the US, for instance, are rarely included—even though these regions are essential to understanding Afro-diasporic history, resistance, and memory.

What we truly need is stronger financial and structural support for Afro-diasporic and Afro-Asian-Caribbean activists in Germany—especially to help foster connections with networks in other European countries. The German discourse is often insular, lacking the inspiration and critical impulses that come from transnational movements. Looking at struggles in other contexts could invite in urgently needed perspectives.

Events and workshops must not remain confined to academic or curatorial elites—they should be open and accessible to all. Only then can a broader societal engagement emerge. And it is crucial that local communities—particularly descendants

from regions directly impacted by Hamburg's colonial exploits—have a voice and decision-making power in these processes.

Finally, we must improve access to existing documentation and publications—such as materials from the 1990s related to the '500 Years of Conquest' or archives from institutions like the Heinrich Böll Foundation and city authorities. Much of this knowledge remains relevant but is hard to access. Memory culture needs not only new impulses but also the illumination of already existing knowledge so that collective memory can unfold as a living, resistant practice.

BEATRACE: When you look toward the future—what do you hope will be remembered of us?

MASEHO: I hope it will be remembered that:

We were here.

We loved.

We dreamed.

We triumphed.

We didn't just survive—we created spaces where we could flourish, shape the world, and reclaim control of the narrative.

I hope that our joy and our resilience are remembered—not just our pain.