Chapter 3: Multidirectional Memories and Contested Spaces: The Exhibition *Ovizire Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?*[1]

In the context of heightened public awareness around the repercussions of histories of injustices, such as slavery, European expansion and colonialism, we have seen how the practices of European museums and institutions of knowledge production have come under increasing critical scrutiny. The report by Felwine Sarr and Benedicte Savoy, "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics," published in 2018, has been seminal in advancing such discussions and in prompting European institutions to rethink their strategies of collecting and exhibiting objects and artifacts 'acquired' from the Global South.[2] The ongoing debates in this context impact the former prestige of European museums, ethnographic institutions and archives alike.

As a response to the growing critique, many museums have begun engaging in processes of reconsidering and reinventing their curatorial and conceptual practices. As part of the attempt to reposition itself in heated contemporary political discourses, the Museum am Rothenbaum Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK) in Hamburg, in cooperation with the University of Hamburg, commissioned three Namibian artists and one German historian to engage with its photographic archival collection from the colonial era. Following extensive research on more than 1,000 images taken in German South-West Africa, the exhibition *Ovizire · Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?* opened on 4 December 2018 in two venues in Hamburg:

1 This chapter builds on my published article "'Ovizire · Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?': Artistic Interventions in the Namibian Colonial Archive (2018–2020)" in *The Journal of Southern African Studies* 49, no. 1 (February 2022) and my chapter "Contested Memories and Spaces: Art, Archives, and Ambivalence in 'Ovizire · Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?'" in *Curating Transcultural Spaces: Post-Colonial Conflicts in Museological Perspectives*, edited by Sarah Hegenbart, (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 109–130.

2 Sarr and Savoy, "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage." The study was commissioned by French President Emmanuel Macron in November 2017.

the MARKK and an alternative exhibition site called M.Bassy.[3] Over the course of their residency in Germany, the artists Vitjitua Ndjiharine, Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja and Nicola Brandt, alongside the historian Ulrike Peters, developed diverse strategies to negotiate their ambivalent attitudes towards the fraught archival material and the ethnographic institution.

In this chapter, I will discuss some of the curatorial and artistic decisions made in the transnational exhibition to reflect on how (or whether) the museum and exhibition spaces might function as sites of critique and contestation. In advancing my previous exploration of the role of photographic archives for creative practitioners from the previous chapters, I will continue to examine how artists' archival interventions relate to critical scholarly discussions on the ambivalence of photography. I will single out the works of the Namibian artists Vitjitua Ndjiharine (b. 1988) and Nicola Brandt (b. 1983) in order to interrogate how both engage with historical photographs by means of reflecting on the archives that stored them. In the analysis, I am particularly interested in the affective responses to the images and their archives as well as in the question of how the emotive dimensions guided their artistic work. Towards the end of the chapter, I will briefly discuss a particular photograph that gained a central function in the various iterations of *Ovizire · Somgu* and became seminal in the artistic work of other Namibian artists, such as Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja and Tuli Mekondjo. Interrogating the resonances and itineraries of the historical photographs helps elucidate the potential of, and the stakes involved in, recuperative and interventionist creative projects.

In my analysis of Brandt's and Ndjiharine's artistic responses to archival photographs in the framework of the exhibition, I am particularly interested in how space and memory influenced their work. Drawing on Pumla Dineo Gqola's and Michael Rothberg's theories on memory, as well as other critical texts in the field of memory studies, I will interrogate how both locality and situatedness (the different exhibition spaces in Hamburg and Windhoek, national terrain and geographic location) prompted the artists to address the unexpected links of certain chapters in history. As we will see, both artists intervene with the historical material to discard old (often nationalistic) practices of commemoration and to enable new ways to remember the past, which are much in line with Rothberg's conception of 'multidirectional memory.'[4] The artists in *Ovizire · Somgu* show how their creative archival interventions can actively contribute to intricate public and political discourses and

3 Barbara Plankensteiner and Jürgen Zimmerer, "Preface," in *Ovizire · Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?* eds. Johanna Wild and Bisrat Negassi (Hamburg: Museum am Rothenbaum, 2018), 5; Cordula Weißköppel, "Ovizire · Somgu: Von woher sprechen wir?" *UniKöln* (blog), accessed 20 August 2021, https://blog.uni-koeln.de/gssc-humboldt/ovozire-somgu-von-woher-sprechen-wir/.

4 Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory.*

call for institutional change through recycling photographic material from different archives, entangling histories and exhibiting them in distinct spaces.

3.1: At Work in the Colonial Archive[5]

The collaborative work of Namibian artists Vitjitua Ndjiharine, Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, Nicola Brandt and the German historian Ulrike Peters began with an in-depth investigation of the photographic inventory of the MARKK in Hamburg. The roughly 1,000 images were produced by German scientists, settlers or military personnel during the period of German colonial rule in Namibia from 1884 to 1915.[6] Many depict African landscapes and cities or private moments of 'white' colonial agents at leisure; however, the majority of the photographs are portraits and ethnographic images of Africans.[7] The inventory bears testimony to colonial violence, showing forced labourers working for the colonial regime or prisoners of war in the context of genocide in Namibia.

A key concern for the group was to examine these images critically in relation to questions of power and colonial representation and they engaged deeply with the intricacy of retrieving silenced voices and counter-histories from the colonial archive. The title signals this: *Ovizire* and *Somgu*, from Otjiherero and Khoekhoegowab respectively, translate as *shadow* and *aura*, evoking the narratives occluded in and by the archive, as well as the ways in which legacies of the past linger in the present.[8] The exhibition's subtitle, *From Where Do We Speak?*, hints at the political issues surrounding positionality and knowledge production with which the team grappled during their collaboration.

Museum guests are confronted with these issues as they encounter the artwork in the MARKK. On ascending the wide, marble stairs of the museum building, with its imposing late art nouveau architecture, visitors reach the exhibition hall. It is a peculiar situation. One cannot help but notice that, in this historic museum's adjacent rooms, objects and artworks from all around the world are displayed, in line with rather conventional ethnographic exhibition programmes of European museums. Yet, visitors come to see this post-colonial project that critiques these very programmes. Life-size black and white archival photographs greet the viewer upon entering the exhibition space. From the sides, shiny reflections affixed to some of these

5 This is a reference to de Jong, "At Work in the Archive."

6 Pröpper et al., "Encountering Post-Colonial Realities in Namibia," 134.

7 Wild and Negassi (eds.), *Ovizire ·Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?* (Hamburg: Museum am Rothenbaum, 2018), 8.

8 Martha Mukaiwa, "'Ovizire – Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?'" *The Namibian*, 26 July 2019, https://www.namibian.com.na/81246/read/Ovizire-%E2%80%93-Somgu-From-Where-Do-We-Speak.

archival images battle for our attention. As we turn to the installation on the left, we take a closer look at these unusual, shimmering, historical – but reworked – images (figure 1).

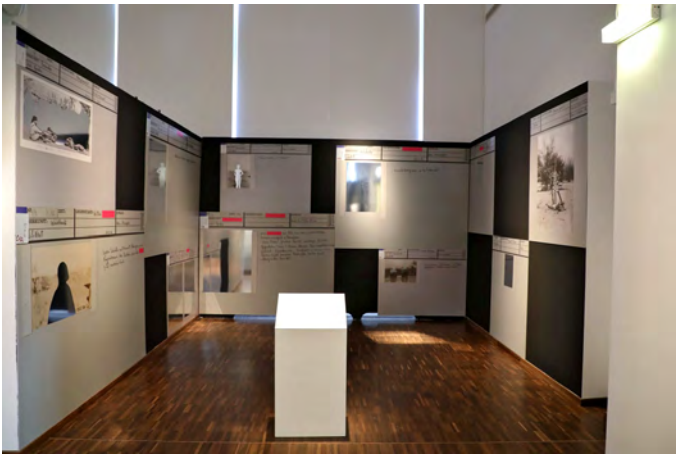

Figure 1: Vitjitua Ndjiharine, Ikono Wall/Mirrored Reality, *2018. Courtesy of UHH/Schliehe.*

The source of the radiant reflections is Ndjiharine's installation *Ikono Wall/Mirrored Reality* (2018). What we see here are blown-up prints of so-called Iconocards from the MARKK, formerly the 'Völkerkundemuseum.'[9] From the early decades of the twentieth century through to the 1990s, employees gathered photographs from overseas that were in the museum's possession (as 'purchases' and 'donations') and glued the photographs on cards in order to organise them, adding labels, themes and local descriptions, to then assemble the cards in Iconoboxes (original: 'Ikonokästen').[10] The consequences of these processes of categorising and collecting are profound, as the head of the photographic archive explained to me: texts and captions that were once on the photographs' backgrounds cannot be retrieved; in some instances, it is impossible to identify who the authors of the labels were – the photographer or the museum employees. Additionally, photographs from single collections were taken out of context and were distributed into different boxes.[11]

9 It was renamed MARKK in June 2017 as part of a self-reflexive repositioning process.

10 Catarina Winzer, pers. comm. via email, 23 October 2020.

11 Ibid.

These archival processes and "dynamics of colonial representation" are a central concern for historians and scholars in the fields of both photography and critical archival studies.[12] They remind us of the need to contextualise and theorise how, for example, historical photographs are stored and archived, or how they circulate and appear before the public's eyes.[13] In the case of the MARKK's Iconocatalogue – as with many archival systems in European museums – historical retrieval is complicated and, at times, impossible. What do these challenges mean for artists and for their creative practices?

Ndjiharine worked with photographs from the MARKK repository that were labelled as originating from Southern Africa and the territory of present-day Namibia in particular. The multi-media artist was born in Upstate New York to Namibian parents and was raised in Namibia. In an interview, she states that as a "Namibian and more urgently as a Herero woman whose ancestors are 'victims' of this [colonial] history," working in Germany on archival repositories was an intense experience.[14] "I knew I had to do something to distort them," she explains to me while reflecting on her artistic interventions with the photographs and with the process of conceptualising the exhibition.[15]

From life-size scans, the artist cut out the photographed subjects and replaced them with a mirror foil. In these unexpected voids, visitors to the MARKK now encounter themselves (or their reflections) caught in the act of looking. The ordinary visitor to the museum, who might be familiar with 'conventional' European modes of exhibiting historical photographs from the colonial era, is urged to pause here. Puzzled by the alteration, viewers might begin to reconsider the histories of these photographs, their own unembellished act of looking at these images and the people originally portrayed therein. Ndjiharine's work is, thus, a form of institutional critique staged inside the very place that houses the photographs. She claims a right to ownership of the images and power over representation, which is traditionally usurped by European photographers and museums. More importantly, her installation offers an ethical and sensitive reconsideration of the photographed subject. Considering her experience with archival photographic repositories, she summarises:

> The setting and the circumstances leading to the production and distribution of colonial photographs was predominantly controlled by white European men. In

12 Patricia Hayes, Jeremy Silvester and Wolfram Hartmann, "'Picturing the Past' in Namibia: The Visual Archive and Its Energies," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Michèle Pickover, Graeme Reid, Razia Saleh and Jane Taylor (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 117.

13 Hayes et al., "'Picturing the Past' in Namibia," 115.

14 Pröpper et al., "Encountering Post-Colonial Realities in Namibia," 138.

15 Vitjitua Ndjiharine, pers. comm. via email, 4 January 2021.

> the Namibian colonial setting the photographs therefore represent a projection of German white male dominance over the [sic] colonized Namibia and its peoples, and thus, they will always require a critical intervention.[16]

She encountered this projection in a number of photographs that were stored in the archive that show women, children and men exposed to the camera, often in demeaning postures, portrayed as 'ethnographic curiosities' and nameless figures.[17] For her, this mode of representation called for interference. Figure two is one such intervention, showing the silhouettes of two children, labelled as 'Herero Mädchen' on an Iconocard.

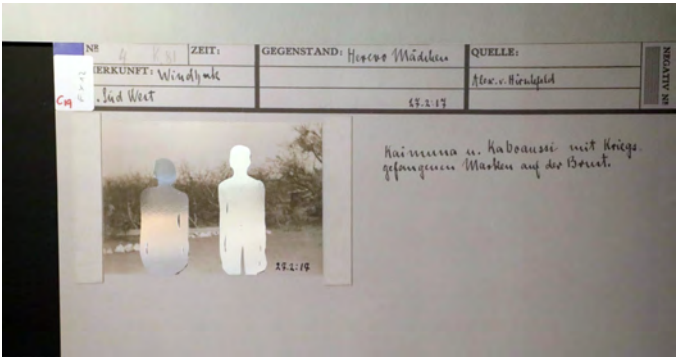

Figure 2: Vitjitua Ndjiharine, Ikono Wall/Mirrored Reality *(detail), 2018. Courtesy of UHH/Schliehe.*

As described previously in this book, archival photographic repositories are often silent about the context of the photographic moment, the names of the photographed, their identities and histories.[18] If the makers of the images did not provide this information, they might remain lost forever. In searching for details about the 'Herero girls,' the viewer spots a handwritten note, stating: "Kaimuna a. Kaboaussi with prisoners-of-war-tokens on their chests."[19] The card also indicates that the picture was taken in Windhoek, presumably by Alexander von Hirschfeld, as the category 'Quelle' indicates. Von Hirschfeld was a German lieutenant who was

16 Pröpper et al., "Encountering Post-Colonial Realities in Namibia," 135–136.

17 *Ovizire · Somgu* exhibition texts.

18 *Ovizire · Somgu* exhibition texts; Lorena Rizzo, "A Glance into the Camera: Gendered Visions of Historical Photographs in Kaoko (North-Western Namibia)," *Gender & History* 17, no. 3 (November 2005): 685.

19 My translation from Ikonocard.

stationed in Namibia from 1905 to 1907.[20] "600 photographs are registered under his name today in the photographic inventory of the MARKK," as Peters, one of the team members, found out in her research on von Hirschfeld's photographic legacy.[21] A majority of his photographs were sent to the museum in the 1920s.[22] His images, such as the one of Kaimuna and Kaboaussi, reoccur in the travelling exhibition, as will be discussed below.

The strategies of cutting, altering and manipulating 'colonial' photographs are ways for Ndjiharine to both re-interpret and subvert the image. The blank spaces gesture to the voids in the colonial archive, to the unknown that remains irretraceable. Additionally, the mirror foil functions as a form of protective shield for the individuals in the photograph. Viewers no longer have visual access to Kaimuna's and Kaboaussi's faces or bodies. However, from their silhouettes, we can deduce that they were young children and, as the note reminds us, prisoners of war. Artist Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, who chooses similar strategies in her work *Unearthing. In Conversation* (2017), refers to these methods as 'Black annotation' and 'Black redaction' – terms coined by Christina Sharpe in her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*.[23] In intervening with the material, she either adds a new layer of meaning to the original document (Black annotation) or deploys strategies to render the original image indecipherable (Black redaction).[24] Similar modes of interference are engaged throughout Ndjiharine's work in *Ovizire · Somgu*. The method of redaction (by cutting out the photographed subjects, thereby rendering them indecipherable) prompts us to reflect on how we remember the past, how we 'see' victims of the genocide and how we commemorate the pain inflicted on them. Moreover, her artistic redress of the images encourages us to reconsider the function of photography for colonial aspirations, thus adding an annotation, a new layer to the material.

In the previous chapter, we have discussed how in the history of photography in Africa the camera has been used as a medium to construct difference.[25] In ethnographic and ethnological studies of Africa and its people, photography was a vital instrument to acquire, produce and disseminate knowledge of "the colonial other."[26] Writing about photography from the German-Namibian War, Lorena Rizzo argues that the German government had no strategic or systematic visual

20 Wild and Negassi, *Ovizire · Somgu*, 49.

21 Ibid.

22 Ulrike Peters, pers. comm. via email, 14 January 2021.

23 Kazeem-Kamiński, "Unearthing," 91.

24 Ibid.; see also: Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017), 113–118.

25 Makhubu, "Visual Currencies," 236.

26 Harris Brent, "Photography in Colonial Discourse: The Making of 'the Other' in Southern Africa c. 1850–1950," in *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History*,

propaganda at the time of the war and yet "thousands of illustrations, postcards, and photographs – all authored by the colonial rulers – circulated widely in contemporary German magazines, colonial literature, and coffee-table books."[27] These images were intended to gain public support for the war in the metropole. On the one hand, they portrayed German soldiers as heroic fighters on the battlefield; on the other, they showed public killings of the demonised enemy or groups of Africans in concentration camps who were held in captivity or were coerced into forced labour and framed as evidence for "the just punishment inflicted on those who had dared to revolt."[28]

With these considerations in mind, revisiting the iconocard is troubling. These were children who were exposed to the camera, taken hostage and oftentimes claimed as daring rebels. However, we do not know anything about the use of this photograph in Germany based on the information given in the installation. Directing the view to the broader usage of photographs from the period of German colonial rule in Namibia, however, shows how the large majority of images has almost inevitably either been attributed to or associated with the war of 1904–1908.[29] Rizzo argues that, in more recent discourses, there has been a growing and disconcerting trend to deploy historical photographs from the era as "evidence underscoring the discourses of both genocide and resistance."[30] Such simplistic framings, arbitrary uses of historical imagery and purely discursive analyses of a colonial aesthetic are blind to "the multiplicity of possibilities, histories and counter histories lodged within photographs," as Elizabeth Edwards reminds us.[31]

This raises a host of questions with regards to the image at hand: Who were these children? What was their relation to Alexander von Hirschfeld – if he was indeed the photographer? What were the specifics of their encounter? All this – and much more – remains unanswered in Ndjiharine's work, evincing that an in-depth historical retrieval might not be artists' main objective. However, if this is indeed so, then what is art's response to scholarly calls for a nuanced and in-depth investigation of photographs from the archive? How does Ndjiharine negotiate the ambivalence of photographs?

The artist, asked about her approach to the material from the MARKK repositories, explains: "The archive is a small lens into the past with many wide gaps. I wanted to fill these gaps."[32] In another interview, she asserts that "a critical reflection

---

eds. Wolfram Hartmann, Jeremy Silvester and Patricia Hayes (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1999), 21.

27 Rizzo, *Photography and History in Colonial Southern Africa*, 1.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid. 1–2.

30 Ibid.

31 Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 12.

32 Ndjiharine, pers. comm. via email, 4 January 2021.

is only a starting point, and on its own is not enough."[33] Instead, a direct intervention would be needed, which *Ikono Wall/Mirrored Reality* provided. However, the installation was only the first step to scrutinising and engaging with the archival material. As established previously, after the team's work within the MARKK repositories, they installed a set of their artworks inside of the museum as a form of institutional critique.[34] However, feeling exposed to the "cruel radiance of the colonial archive" and the problematic legacy of the ethnographic museum, the artists felt the urge to step outside of the biased, charged terrain of the MARKK.[35] The art salon M.Bassy offered the distance that the group needed to continue their artistic engagement with German-Namibian colonial legacies.[36] M.Bassy is a non-profit institution focusing on art from Africa and the diaspora; its location near the MARKK allowed for cross-institutional collaboration and conversation.

3.2: Alternative Spaces and Multidirectional Commemoration

As the concept of the exhibition envisages, visitors leave the museum and walk to Hamburg's upper-class Grindel quarter towards M.Bassy to see the second part of the exhibition by Ndjiharine, Brandt, Mushaandja, Peters and invited artist Isabel Katjavivi (b. 1988).[37] During this short walk, one experiences a stark change in atmosphere. In the residential area, the alternative exhibition space seems unobtrusive and is rather difficult to locate amongst the numerous beautiful old buildings located in this quiet, peaceful street. Upon entering the building, visitors walk through a spacious empty apartment on the mezzanine floor. The apartment boasts stucco ceilings and beautifully ornamented, geometric-patterned wooden flooring – a reminder of imported 'orientalist' tastes from the previous century. Despite the generous space, now largely devoid of furniture, there is an immediate feeling of intimacy – of something domestic and rich with personal histories. Perhaps one of

33 Pröpper et al., "Encountering Post-Colonial Realities in Namibia," 135.

34 For example, Peters created a replica of von Hirschfeld's hut, based on his photographic archive. By reimagining von Hirschfeld's space, and centring him as a character performing colonial masculinity, the installation questions the institution's interlocuters and networks it relied on for the acquisition of ethnographica and photographs.

35 *Ovizire · Somgu* exhibition texts and a reference to Susie Linfield's *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), in which she argues against the notion that it is unethical to engage with photography of violence, trauma and suffering and, instead, considers such imagery to be vital to working through the past.

36 Nicola Brandt, "Nicola Brandt, Artist Statement,' in *Ovizire · Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?* eds. Johanna Wild and Bisrat Negassi (Hamburg: Museum am Rothenbaum, 2018), 40.

37 Brandt invited Katjavivi to participate in the exhibition to further the polyphonic dialogue on the countries' histories; however, the artist was not part of the core research team that conceptualised the exhibition.

the clues can be found in the walls themselves, which appear to have been recently stripped bare of paint and wallpaper, revealing much older layered surfaces of colour and cement beneath. Moving through the site, one notices piles of sand on the floor with faces out of clay half-submerged in them (figure 3, left). These 'graves of sand' are part of Katjavivi's installation *The Past is Not Buried* (2017), which figures the victims of the Namibian genocide.

Figure 3: Installation view: Ovizire Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?, *M.Bassy, Hamburg, 2018. Courtesy of Björn Lux, M.Bassy e.V.*

In close proximity to these faces, we see a banner featuring the poem "Ondaanisa yo pOmudhime (The Dance of the Rubber Tree)" by Mushaandja. The work recalls histories of suffering, suppression and exploitation of Black lives, while simultaneously challenging the potentials of reconciliation in light of persistent structures of discrimination. Colonial continuities in the structures of European archives and museums are central targets of his critique – as he provocatively exclaims: "Let us burn the museum/Let us burn the books, the art, the walls of toxicity/Let us disrupt white monopoly capital/Let us go to the funeral of the curators."[38] I reflected more deeply on the artist's powerful message in his performative intervention elsewhere.[39] To

38 Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, "Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, Artist Statement," in *Ovizire · Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?* eds. Johanna Wild and Bisrat Negassi (Hamburg: Museum am Rothenbaum, 2018), 35.

39 See: Julia Rensing, "'Critical Intimacy' in Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja's Tea-Time Performance Ondaanisa yo pOmudhime (Dance of the Rubber Tree) in 2018 in Hamburg," in *Live Archives: Namibian Contemporary Performance in Fragments*, eds: Nashilongweshipwe

do justice to his complex work requires a more in-depth analysis of Black Radical Thought within the context of the Fallist Movements in South Africa, the protests and petitions organised in Namibia that demand the removal of colonial monuments (see "A 'Curt' Farewell" or #GallowsMustFall and #NotAtAlteFeste) and the role of post-colonial strategies of disruption that falls outside of the scope of this chapter.[40] Nevertheless, the excerpt of his poem offers insights into the ways in which the artists individually renegotiated the resentment and discomfort that they felt while artistically engaging with the MARKK archive. Their different ambivalences oscillate between radical dismissals of European institutions (as hinted at in the excerpt from "Ondaanisa yo pOmudhime"), strategies to appropriate the public archive in order to subvert its colonial aesthetics (Ndjiharine's *Ikono Wall/Mirrored Reality* and *We Shall Not Be Moved*) and endeavours to turn away from the public archive by directing attention to private archives (Brandt's work, which we will explore in greater detail at a later stage).

For Ndjiharine, M.Bassy functioned as the safe space for her cut-outs from the archival photographs to re-emerge. In what appears to be a wide dining room, we encounter a larger-than-life montage of canvasses – a piece named *We Shall Not Be Moved* (2018) (figure 4). In this artwork, we see some of the photographed subjects who were secured from the viewer's gaze on the *Iconowall* refigure – albeit in a redesigned fashion. What immediately strikes the eye is the changing tone of this assemblage. In contrast to the previous black-and-white installation, this compilation of canvasses exudes a sense of liveliness with its use of bright blue, pink, red and yellow. Central in each canvas and encircled by the colours are black and white portraits. These cut-out, close-up shots of individuals are combined, assembled and interlaced with further archival photographs, paint, gold leaf and newspaper snippets. As Ndjiharine explained, this kind of intervention was her way of responding to the voids in the archive, to fill them "with something a bit hopeful and with a bit of personalization."[41]

This large-scale compilation has a powerful resonance due to the arrangement of the canvasses. In the collage's set-up, each person is either looking right at the viewer or directing their eyes towards one another. A sense of unity and solidarity emanates from this, which is equally reflected in the use of the first-person plural pronoun in the title, *We Shall Not Be Moved*. This statement is reminiscent of a famous song of resistance by the same name. Throughout history, various social justice movements around the globe, such as Spanish and Chilean antifascists, South

Mushaandja and Nelago Shilongoh (Windhoek: Owela Live Arts Collective Trust, forthcoming).

40 The Fallist Movements refer to the Rhodes Must Fall and FeesMustFall student movements that started in Cape Town in 2015.

41 Ndjiharine, pers. comm. via email, 4 January 2021.

African freedom fighters or labour and civil rights activists sang "We Shall Not Be Moved" to challenge and confront repression and injustices.[42] With this in mind, I encountered the artist's caption stating that it was the poem "Our Grandmothers" by famous American poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou that served as the inspiration to the piece, which is printed in Angelou's collection of poems *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990).[43]

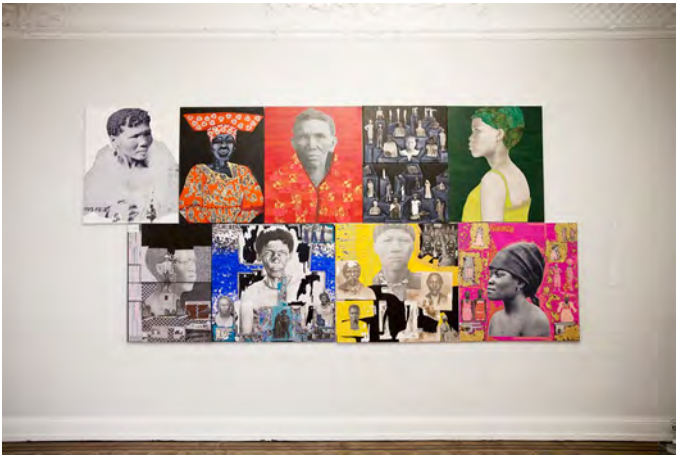

Figure 4: Vitjitua Ndjiharine, We Shall Not Be Moved*, 2018. Courtesy of Björn Lux, M.Bassy e.V.*

The diverse associations that Ndjiharine's work conjures are tied to the Black Atlantic. Referencing entangled Black cultures and identities, her art opens up new frameworks to engage with the past and with connected histories. These multi-layered evocations reminded me of Pumla Dineo Gqola's *What is Slavery to Me? Postcolonial/Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, in which she explores how slavery is remembered and invoked in both artistic and cultural productions to negotiate ways of being in South Africa's post-apartheid present. While Ndjiharine does not explicitly centre her attention on the commemoration of slavery, Gqola's work resonates with *We Shall Not Be Moved*, given that the artist similarly explores the unpredictable character of memory and its potential to "move in several directions at once," which Gqola identifies in her analysis of "artistic production[s]

42 Michael Honey, "We Shall Not Be Moved/No Nos Moverán: Biography of a Song of Struggle," *Journal of American History* 104, no. 2 (September 2017): 553–554.

43 Maya Angelou, *I Shall Not Be Moved* (New York: Random House, 1990).

and other imaginative spaces."[44] With reference to both Dorothy L. Pennington and Toni Morrison, Gqola conceives of memory as a dynamic process that moves helix-like, thereby changing the present and our conceptions of the past.[45] A similar line of approach can be found in Ndjiharine's way of remembering multiple and diverse chapters in history to illuminate how these impact the present. As the artist explained, she chose the bright colours in her canvasses deliberately to "represent both the current German and Namibian National Flags, Pan Africanism and Herero Nation," while pink hints at her "feminist lens and silver and gold for wealth lost."[46] Again, Ndjiharine points to the entanglements of nations and local communities, international and transnational connections as well as the power of solidarity and unity beyond borders. In this vein, Ndjiharine is contributing to a more encompassing, shared Black collective memory. In this respect, Gqola reminds us of how creative practices explicitly explore the "dynamic movement within memory politics" for the recasting of identities – a potential that we can glean from Ndjiharine's work which produces alternative forms of representation that are empowering.[47]

In addition to these broader referential frameworks, her art also speaks more directly to Southern Africa's – and in particularly Namibia's – apartheid and colonial history. *We Shall Not Be Moved* points to the experiences of Namibians from numerous areas in Southern Africa who were forcibly removed in various periods of colonial rule, but most particularly in the 1950s. Most prominent are the forced removals of Black people in urban spaces, from the 'Old Location' in the capital of Windhoek to a designated and more distant area in the north of the town called 'Katutura,' which Mushaandja translates as "a place where we do not belong."[48] These measures to increase and enforce residential segregation and "to seal off the white population" caused major protests that culminated in violent responses and shootings from the police – a crucial historical moment that still looms large in the memory of many Namibians today.[49] With this in mind, Ndjiharine's installation appears as a powerful gesture to these events, one that reclaims the prerogative of interpretation over issues such as movement or localisation. The artist takes control as to where the subjects – whose visual images were circulated, shared and distributed widely without their consent – would now be positioned.

This idea to recalibrate the politics of representation was central to the artistic group. In *Ovizire · Somgu*, the team asked: "Can the colonial gaze be challenged

44 Gqola, *What Is Slavery to Me?* 10–15.

45 Ibid., 19.

46 Ndjiharine, pers. comm. via email, 4 January 2021.

47 Gqola, *What Is Slavery to Me?*, 10–15.

48 Wallace, *A History of Namibia*, 254; Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, "Ons Dala Die Ding by Odalate Naiteke: The Curative, Performance and Publicness in Katutura," *Journal of Namibian Studies* 28 (2020): 68.

49 Wallace, *A History of Namibia*, 254.

and returned? Might we find instances of agency and resistance in the photographic archive?"[50] In their exhibition texts, they offer direct responses to these questions, claiming the ways in which there is "agency in colonial photography," pointing out that "[t]he people displayed show agency by their gestures, their gazes, their expressions and body language."[51] With *We Shall Not Be Moved,* Ndjiharine explored the field of tension between objectification and notions of empowerment and agency in photography. She explained to me: "I saw many types of expressions in the photographs. Some exposing a possible personality, some looking pensive while posing in front of the camera, while others looked on with a sense of stoicism and every now and then a sense of vulnerability."[52]

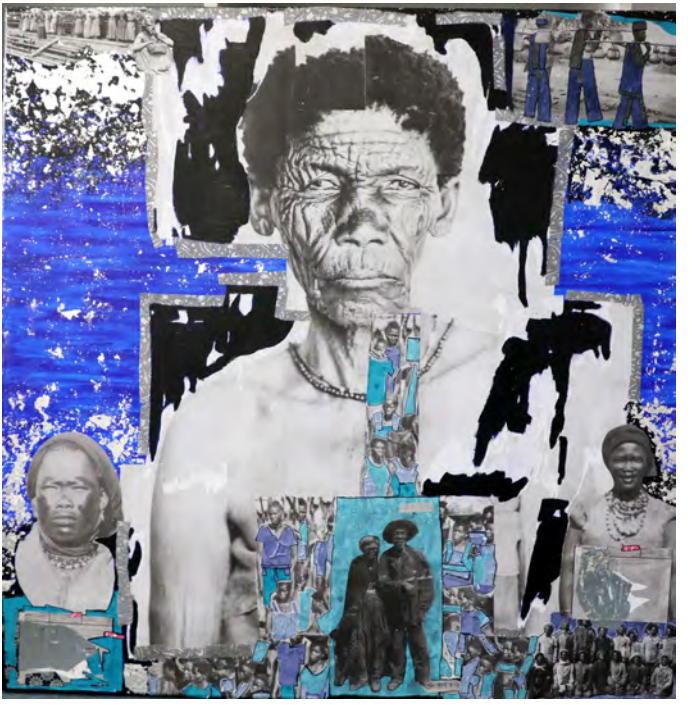

Figure 5: Vitjitua Ndjiharine: We Shall Not Be Moved *(detail), 2018. Courtesy of UHH/Schliehe.*

50 *Ovizire · Somgu* exhibition texts.

51 Ibid.

52 Ndjiharine, pers. comm. via email, 4 January 2021.

Figure 5 is one canvas from Ndjiharine's installation in which the artist incorporated these diverse meanings and expressions. Looking right back at the viewer (and the photographer), the subject in the centre communicates a strong and rather cold, perhaps even defiant, demeanour. The person seems surrounded by blue water, which invokes the idea of the ocean as a metaphor that gestures to transcontinental entanglements as well as to the forced mobility of people for the exploitation of their labour. This association is repeated in some of the photographic cut-outs that show men and women at work, as we will see. The photographed subject in the centre is encircled by numerous smaller images of groups of people or individuals, many of whom are covered up by blue snippets that function as their pants, shirts or hats. After speaking with Ndjiharine and revisiting the exhibition texts, I wondered: what kinds of images are these? Is it possible to identify how the photographs speak to clear-cut notions, such as agency or vulnerability? Reminiscing about the ambiguous, slippery nature of photographs, I was reminded of an observation by Rizzo:

> The analytical theme 'colonial photographs' does not suggest that the photographs were 'signature images' of a colonial practice or vision. Visual representations from a colonial context – photographs or others – do emerge from and relate to particular truth regimes. They are shaped by uneven power relations and compulsory forms of knowledge production. But there is no predictability or inevitability in the dynamics of the relationship between photography and colonialism.[53]

Hence, when 'reading' an image from the archive, we need to be wary about superficial interpretations of the 'colonial' nature of a photograph. Straightforward signs of resistance, agency, submission or processes of 'othering' are difficult to identify and verify when little context and background information is available. In her seminal work, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*, Elizabeth Edwards observes how "we expect photographs to *tell*, but find them remarkably resistant, for, like history, they do not lend themselves to being dealt with in any definite way."[54] She claims that, just like other historical sources, they have to be combined with other ways of interpreting and accessing the past.[55] For this, it is essential to engage more deeply with the MARKK archive.

Quite a number of the photographs that Ndjiharine used for her collage were taken from the Museum's iconoboxes, glued to iconocards with categories assigned to the pictures. The central image in figure 5 is said to be showing a 'Korana-woman,' further classified as 'H*stamm,' – a degrading term from the colonial era for the

53 Rizzo, "A Glance into the Camera," 685.

54 Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 9.

55 Ibid.

Khoikhoi, nomadic pastoralists from Southern Africa. In the iconoboxes, there is another photograph of the same woman, shown in profile. According to the information on the card, both images were taken in 1928 in South Africa. They are labelled "durch Prof. Meinhof," which might indicate that Meinhof was either the photographer or the intermediary who established the contact between the author of the photographs and with the museum. German Africanist scholar Carl Meinhof worked on the systematic recording and research of African languages and oral traditions; his linguistic theories were infused with racist beliefs that argued for the inferiority or superiority of certain African peoples and language groups.[56] The artistic team conceived of these modes of portrayal – similar to the aesthetics of police photography and mug shots with a portrait posture and profile pose – as a way of photographing people like "ethnographic curiosities."[57] The language used on the iconocard and the absence of a name for the subject are insightful about processes of (visual) knowledge production and 'othering' during the colonial era and beyond. Reconfiguring this photograph, taken in South Africa after the official period of German colonial rule, is a way for Ndjiharine to engage with the entangled histories of Namibia and South Africa that resonate into the present. Both countries remain much more intertwined than the imposed national borders suggest.

Ndjiharine explained to me that she chose to combine and overlay what she considers to be "ethnographic, phenotypic images that justified racial eugenics" with those photographs of women whose names she knew from the von Hirschfeld photo collection.[58] In this way, she confronted the archive's tendencies of "decontextualizing and anonymizing people and places" while bringing them into dialogue with photographed subjects whose names could be secured.[59] There is, for example, a full shot of a young woman named Sarah Dragoner that stuck out from the archival repository and from Ndhijarine's collage (in the bottom right corner) and it specifically caught my attention. From the iconocard, we learn that von Hirschfeld took the portrait photograph in Rehoboth, Namibia at a time during which the country was still under German colonial rule. A scrabbling indicates '27.2.14' as a possible date and another note refers to the woman portrayed as a 'H*' (again, the degrading term from the colonial era for the Khoikhoi). Sarah Dragoner was around 20 years old. In the original photograph, we see her posing against the background of a Namibian landscape with bushes and with open fields behind her; silhouettes of

56 Meinhof would also become the first German professor for African Studies. See: Ursula Storost, "Neue Biografie – Carl Meinhof, umstrittener Begründer der Afrikanistik," *Deutschlandfunk*, 23 June 2022, https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/carl-meinhof-afrikanistik-kolonialismus-rassismus-100.html.

57 *Ovizire · Somgu* exhibition texts.

58 Ndjiharine, pers. comm. via email, 4 January 2021.

59 *Ovizire · Somgu* exhibition texts.

Rehoboth's Hardap or Khomas mountains are discernible far in the distance. The aesthetics of the photograph allow us to assume that the photographer was, presumably, not a professional. The frame leaves a fairly large headroom – one half of the image shows the sky, while Sarah Dragoner is positioned in the bottom half with her feet cut off. She is standing upright, her body turned to the camera with a smile on her face as she looks straight at the photographer. She is wearing a long dress, an apron with stains, a headscarf and many broad necklaces and bracelets. Ndjiharine encountered details like jewellery or textile accessories as "an indicator of self-love and self-care" and explored these notions on her canvasses.[60] In her intervention with Sarah Dragoner's archival photograph, Ndjiharine disposed of the Namibian background, perhaps to focus our attention on the woman's upper body and on her face. A shred from the iconocard covers the rest of her body as a small reminder of the photograph's source.

With the multiple faces looking back at us from the canvas, Ndjiharine's piece engages with the potentials of portrait photography. The team considered it as a "special form of photography," arguing: "Unintentionally, they [portrait photographs] bind photographer and photographed together. Putting their names may be one expression for that relation."[61] With the given name and the cheerful gaze of Sarah Dragoner directed at von Hirschfeld, one might indeed speculate about a friendly relation between the two. Her posture and body language does not emanate a sense of discomfort; rather, she seems to face the camera confidently and willingly. These notions indicate how portraiture allows for individuality; it offers a small stage for the photographed subject to self-fashion, a quick and ephemeral choice to smile, to frown, to present oneself in a distinct way.

This take on historical photographs is in line with contemporary studies that explore how women's agency figures in historical photographs and how photography can be understood as a site of contestation and social interaction.[62] However, the potential for self-fashioning, individuality and contestation on the basis of photographs from the colonial era should by no means suggest that photography was freed from colonial power structures. With a view to these complexities, scholars have called for nuanced analyses that go beyond a simple divide between agency and objectification. Here, Tina Campt reminds us how "photography and the portrait in particular are neither wholly liberatory vehicles of agency, transcendence, or performativity nor unilateral instruments of objectification and abjection. They are always

60 Ndjiharine, pers. comm. via email, 4 January 2021.

61 *Ovizire · Somgu* exhibition texts.

62 Rizzo, "A Glance into the Camera," 706; Lorena Rizzo, "Reframing Women in Namibia's Early History of Photography," *The Conversation*, 7 September 2020, http://theconversation.com/reframing-women-in-namibias-early-history-of-photography-144678.

already both at once."[63] Hershini Bhana Young calls this the "illegible will" of Black historical subjects.[64] In her book of the same title, she laments how scholars and theorists are "desperately searching for signs of resistance to which we have little or no access," thereby replicating archival erasures or filling archival absences artificially instead of engaging critically and imaginatively with such silences.[65]

Art offers new ways to explore these complexities. In *We Shall Not Be Moved*, Ndjiharine chose to display and to combine a multitude of gazes that were captured by the camera. She explained that showing "varied expressions […] allowed me to imagine multiple perspectives within the story of German colonialism in Namibia. That not everyone experienced this process the same and that multiple truths can exist within the same timeline."[66] By entangling histories of forced removal, the Black Atlantic, South Africa, Namibia and Germany, the artist commemorates a past that spirals in various directions, much in line with Gqola's approach to memory. In this vein, Gqola's conceptualisation of memory and Ndjiharine's work resonates with Rothberg's seminal theory on multidirectional memory. He argues that when different memories come into contact in the public sphere, these memories do not engage in a competitive struggle where they "crowd each other out" according to a "zero-sum logic."[67] Instead, he claims that "memory works *productively* through negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing."[68]

Taking a step back from studying Ndjiharine's 'tapestry of canvasses' alone, I pondered about how the different artworks by Ndjiharine, Brandt, Mushaandja and Katjavivi were all in conversation with one another, commemorating the past from different angles, with different foci. As I shifted the gaze further through the room, subdued voices reached my ears; flickering lights of a video installation right opposite Ndjiharine's *We Shall Not Be Moved* caught my attention. The source of the sound and lights was a darkened room in which a large-scale triptych was installed screening Brandt's video installation *Indifference* (2014).

63 Tina Campt, *Listening to Images*, 59.

64 Young, *Illegible Will*.

65 Ibid., 23, 70–71. Mattia Fumanti takes this imaginative approach a step further by fictionalising the hidden stories in the archives as a way to "retell a difficult story in a more ethical fashion." See: Mattia Fumanti, "The 'Haunting' and the 'Haunted': Whiteness, Orthography and the (Post)-Apartheid Condition in Namibia," *History and Anthropology*, 3 June 2021, 2; Mattia Fumanti, *Imagining the Future* (Rome: Lighthouse Publisher, 2014).

66 Ndjiharine, pers. comm. via email, 4 January 2021.

67 Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 2; Michael Rothberg, "Multidirectional Memory," *Témoigner. Entre Histoire et Mémoire* 119 (31 December 2014): 176.

68 Rothberg, "Multidirectional Memory," 176.

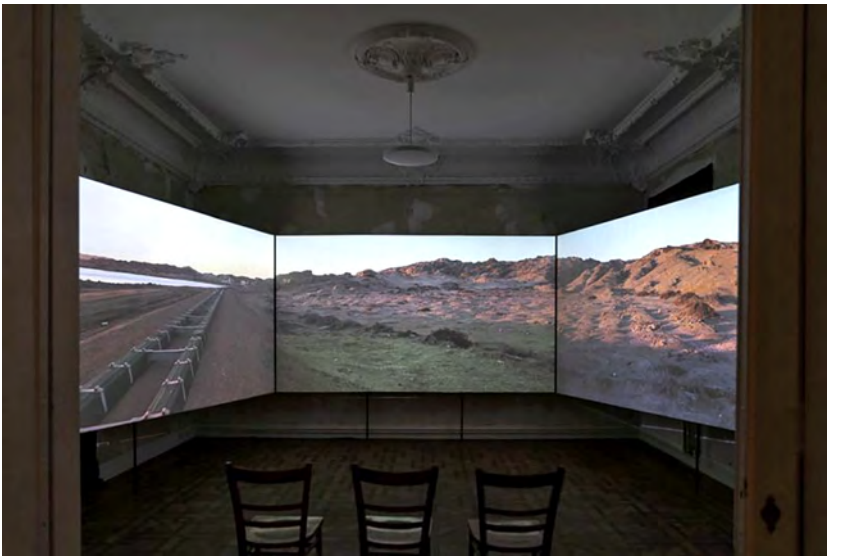

Figure 6: Nicola Brandt, Indifference, *2014. Installation view: M.Bassy, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.*

The work explores the ways in which the genocide against the Herero and Nama is remembered in Namibia today by centring on the perspectives of two women. The voice-overs of a Herero woman and of an elderly German-speaking woman are superimposed over video footage showing different Namibian landscapes and places. Throughout the film, we never see the protagonists speaking. While we do observe the Herero woman from the back, often wandering afar in the distance through the vast and arid Namibian landscape, the woman of German descent remains invisible. The only way in which the camera approaches her is through the representation of her living room furnishings – specifically, her bookshelf is shown repeatedly, coupled with her voice-over musings about the changes in modern-day Namibia. On the middle screen of the triptych, a third woman emerges – a young, blond and 'white' woman who remains both voice- and faceless. Her view on history or its legacies remains both untold and unseen.[69] Instead, we watch her from behind, getting (un)dressed (the video is played backwards), peeling off/on the different layers of a green Herero dress.

As Mattia Fumanti writes, "*Indifference* is a complex and subtle engagement with the personal and the collective in the face of what remains hidden or is left unspo-

69 Fabian Lehmann, *Postkoloniale Gegenbilder: künstlerische Reflexionen des Erinnerns an den deutschen Kolonialismus in Namibia* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2021), 265.

ken in Namibia's contested narratives of the past."[70] It does so by interrogating the relationship of memory and landscape, thereby creating an aesthetic that neither repeats the "clichéd touristic representation of Namibia's landscape" nor perpetuates the trope of romanticised, empty, untouched land, flora and fauna.[71] Brandt's visual language chooses a different tone and approach, as Fabian Lehmann observes:

> Through twilight, silence and slowness, with simultaneous thematization of transience and violent past, the places stand out from their environment [...] They are uncanny because they break with the dominant suggestion of a lack of history and untouched nature.[72]

Brandt's method to invoke the ways in which history is inscribed in the landscape is strongly informed by Santu Mofokeng's photographic documentation of diverse sites in South Africa and Namibia as well as his thinking about landscape. As we have learned previously, Mofokeng traced places of historical significance to explore how they were imbued with meaning – often invisible to the eye – in his photographic essays, *Chasing Shadows*, *Trauma Landscapes* and *Landscape and Memory*.[73] Travelling to these sites was, for him, an act of "reclaiming the South African landscape, not merely as achronic and neutral, removed from human struggles, but as the repository of politics, history, and memory," as paraphrased by Sam Raditlhalo.[74] Referencing Mofokeng, Brandt states how landscape is both experienced and embodied. It cannot be separated from the self; rather, "identity is implicated in the landscape."[75]

Similar to Mofokeng, Brandt's camera retraces sites of historical relevance. Many of the seemingly idyllic, beautiful, often isolated and sometimes derelict sites were witnesses to historical violence. This context is not self-evident from the footage that we see. Her work demands an historical consciousness and sensitivity from the viewer. We see the ruin of a building on a grey and rocky shoreline. The warm light of dawn conjures a stark contrast between the glimmering sky and the seemingly cold, harsh and wind-whipped bay at Diaz Point where, in the 15th

70 Mattia Fumanti, "Nicola Brandt, Director. Indifference. 2014. 14 minutes. Herero and German. Namibia. No Price Reported," *African Studies Review* 58, no. 3 (December 2015): 289.

71 Ibid., 290.

72 Lehmann, *Postkoloniale Gegenbilder*, 407, my translation.

73 Santu Mofokeng, *TAXI-004: Santu Mofokeng* (Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing, 2001), 68; Jeu de Paume, *Santu Mofokeng, Chasing Shadows. 30 Years of Photographic Essays* (Concorde: Jeu de Paume, 2011), https://jeudepaume.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/PetitJournal_SantuMofokeng_GB.pdf.

74 Mofokeng, *TAXI-004*, 68.

75 Mofokeng quoted in Nicola Brandt, "Under Fire: The Concept of Landscape," *Goethe-Institut*, accessed 21 October 2022, https://www.goethe.de/prj/zei/en/pos/21693148.html; Brandt, *Landscapes Between Then and Now*, 2.

century, Portuguese sailors first docked. The tone and atmosphere evoke an eerie mindfulness for the ways in which the past haunts the place. The relicts of man-made interventions at the site still remain and are yet in decay – a history long gone that continues to mark the present.

These scenes are followed by footage of the railway lines in Lüderitz and of subtle bulges that stretch far across the sandy fields next to the tracks (figure 6). These are the mass graves of forced labourers who were incarcerated in the concentration camps at Lüderitz and who had been recruited for the construction of the railway line by the German colonising power.[76] The tracks are remnants of the colonial government's endeavours to expand and modernise the settler colony, while the unmarked graves are signs of what this entailed: the exploitation of land and people. Brandt alerts us to how such remainders are inscribed in the landscapes in often unmediated ways. The ambivalence of the images is evident from the footage that shows sandy dunes or arid hill formations with vast landscapes stretching far beyond the frame of the screens. This mode of representation resonates with Mofokeng's assertion: "What is not in the photograph is in the memory, in the mind; there is no violence, it is what you know that is violent."[77]

Indifference similarly approaches the meaning of Namibian landscapes critically. By interlacing the landscape footage with the voiceovers, the artist interrogates two different (though seemingly coexistent) ways of recalling the past. In contrasting the narratives and ideological standpoints of the Herero woman and the German-speaking woman, Brandt explores how divergent perspectives on history seek to usurp the power to define how the past and present should be understood. While the voice-over of Uakondjisa Kakuekuee Mbari tells us about Lothar von Trotha's extermination order, death in the concentration camps, buried corpses in Lüderitz and Swakopmund and the resilience and survival of the Herero people, the German-speaking woman's account seems to gloss over the past, emphasising that the power dynamics have changed, asserting: "The blacks are the masters now. Right? Whites no longer have any say."[78] Her lack of sensitivity to colonial continuities and 'white' privilege echoes from further utterances, thereby uncovering the woman's racist disposition, which figures more forcefully from a reoccurring shot that shows the woman's bookshelf. One particular publication attracts the viewer's attention. Crammed with notes, paper clippings or paper bookmarks, Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* stands out with what emerges as signs of intensive use and reading. The scene remains uncommented upon, but functions as a clue for how attempts of 'working through' the past and the long-needed acknowledgement of historical

76 Lehmann, *Postkoloniale Gegenbilder*, 356.

77 Santu Mofokeng, *Chasing Shadows*, 94.

78 Nicola Brandt, *Indifference*, 2014. Three-channel HD video installation, colour, surround sound (14'10").

responsibilities still remain unachieved and deficient. The insights gained through the perspective of the German-speaking Namibian indicate how, for many in the community, a conclusive break with the (colonial and National Socialist) past has not been made, and an ideological paradigm shift remains a long time coming.[79]

The footage of the younger 'white' woman wearing the Herero dress, however, complicates overgeneralisations of Namibian commemorative cultures. In reference to her, the original exhibition text reads: "A woman in her twenties has returned to Namibia, the country of her birth, after years of living in Europe, and grapples with her heritage."[80] This 'grappling' manifests in her visit to different locations in Namibia and her wearing of the Herero long dress. While a proper view is denied (we only see her from the back), her long blond hair and posture suggest that it is the artist who has inserted herself as the object of interrogation into her own work. Brandt's wearing of the Herero dress might appear as a provocative gesture of cultural appropriation; however, from one of her exhibition texts we learn that Brandt was invited by her interlocutors to wear the historically laden attire.[81] According to Lehmann, the fact that the 'white' woman travels through Namibian spaces and landscapes wearing the dress may also be read as a gesture of accepting historical responsibility.[82] He writes about how the dress is a cultural element that the Herero people appropriated from the Europeans at the time of heightened missionary work in the mid-19th century and speaks to the deep entanglement between German and Ovaherero cultures.[83] The artist's act of wearing it visualises this entanglement. However, Brandt's work remains speculative and suggestive here, thereby allowing room for the viewers' own evocations and associations with regards to this artistic move. Since the woman does not share her views, the focus of attention centres on Mbari, whom we both see *and* hear.

Central in Mbari's voice-over account is her contemplation on the role of photography. Reflecting on the attitudes of German tourists travelling through Namibia, she claims: "If they see me in this town, they take photos of me the whole day," continuing further:

> You take the photo the same way you photograph a stone or anything. But if you are taking a photo of your body, we say no. Then we must ask for something if you

79 Lehmann notes how, in close proximity to *Mein Kampf*, we find two volumes of novellas by Stefan Zweig whose books were banned by the National Socialists. Reflecting on this encounter of poet and dictator in the women's bookshelf, Lehmann concludes that the woman remains difficult to grasp and her political disposition ambiguous. See: Lehmann, *Postkoloniale Gegenbilder*, 363.

80 Exhibition text quoted in Lehmann, *Postkoloniale Gegenbilder*, 362.

81 Caption for *Legacies of Whiteness*, Windhoek, Namibia, 27 August 2012.

82 Lehmann, *Postkoloniale Gegenbilder*, 389.

83 Ibid.

> take our picture. I ask N$20 or N$10. The Ovahimba ask N$50. Then I take those few cents and I can eat; my children will get bread. Sometimes you sell our photo to someone we don't know. Maybe when they are sitting at the table they laugh at us, saying 'these are people that we killed.'[84]

Her tone speaks to a strong suspicion about whether Germans actually came to face their colonial responsibility, which manifests in the issue of photography. By putting a halt to the history of visual exploitation in Southern Africa, in which the camera was used to purport and spectacularise scientific racism, Mbari takes back what was once denied.[85] Her demand for payment is a claim to her right to protect the modes of her representation.

The different conceptions of past and present, juxtaposed in *Indifference*, bring to the fore how, seemingly without contact, different memories co-exist within the country. A collective commemoration of the past and working through the traumas of colonialism seems impossible. How does this condition relate to Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory and his argument against a so-called "competitive memory"?[86] Rothberg asserts that when different forms of memory "bump up against one another in contemporary multi-cultural societies," they activate a productive force, which results in *more* memory.[87] The opposite seems to apply to the commemorative isolation depicted in *Indifference*, wherein both women hold on to their own perceptions of past and present. Here, Brandt's work emerges as an artistic response to Rothberg's theory by providing a moment for contact and relation. In visualising a Namibian impasse, *Indifference* prompts us to question the politics of memory, photography and representation. In this vein, the installation may pave a path to approach the past collectively and productively, with an openness to different views, conflicts and tensions.

Setting the distinct ways of remembering in relation to one another is the first ruse through which Brandt explores the resonances of National Socialist and (post-)colonial ideologies in contemporary Namibia. This method is continued in other works installed in *Ovizire · Somgu*. As I wandered further through the apartment rooms in M.Bassy, I encountered an archival photograph of forced labourers during German colonial rule – a visual reminder of the cruelty of past regimes and the horrors experienced by those who lived through them. We have seen a miniature version of this photograph previously. It was incorporated in Ndjiharine's collage seen in figure 5, in the top left corner. Looking at this larger print of the historical

84 Nicola Brandt, *Indifference*, 2014.

85 Makhubu, "Visual Currencies," 236.

86 Michael Rothberg, "From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory," *Criticism* 53, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 523.

87 Ibid.

photograph of women building the railroad whilst listening to the railway sounds, the viewer is drawn into the photographic moment, and a sense of proximity is established. In the photograph, we see the women working on the railway sleeper in their traditional clothing. Their backs are turned to the photographer (probably von Hirschfeld) and from today's viewer.[88] This viewing position evoked an uncomfortable feeling of intrusion: with their faces averted, these women had no control (or knowledge) of their picture being taken. The tone of the photograph from the period of the German-Namibian War (1904–1908), together with the visual language of the adjacent image of two women in the Łódź Ghetto kissing before their deportation (figure 7), stirred affect in the viewer and set a certain mood – which exemplifies how they release new energies and new readings become possible when historical photographs move out of their archival storage spaces.[89] Brandt's method of contesting the archival order enables a deeper dive into this chapter's core interest in how artistic interventions fuel alternative discourses about the past by setting distinct memories and historical events in relation to one another, prompted by the specific experience of locatedness.

Paying closer attention to Brandt's curatorial strategies elucidates how her reframing of the historical photographs makes the images resonate with viewers in unexpected ways. The white wall against which the two photographs with their black frames are placed reconfigured the images in such a way that they do not straightforwardly appear as archival images any longer. In other words, the photographs' relation to particular ideological regimes are not directly evident. At first glance, what might strike the eye is the intimacy of the moment and the women's togetherness and solidarity. The domesticity of the M.Bassy apartment engenders this affective reading and invites us to question their relation to one another. As we look closer, the captions designate the photographs' sources, indicating their historical references and archival materiality.[90] This work was one of the rare instances in the exhibition in which Brandt draws directly from public archives. With her caption, the artist encourages us to scrutinise the ethics of repurposing photographic material from a ferocious past, asking: "What does it mean to look at photographs of violence and suffering?"[91] Brandt critically reflected on photography's potential to perpetuate trauma and pain, while elucidating the image's power to envisage new

88 The iconocard provides the following information: "Women constructing the railway. Forced labor during the German-Namibian War 1904–1908," glass negative, collection Alexander von Hirschfeld, Inv. Nr. 2018.1:298.

89 Hayes et al., "'Picturing the Past' in Namibia," 104.

90 The first photograph is a part of the MARKK's Alexander Hirschfeld collection, while the second photograph was taken by Mendel Grossman, *Women Kissing Before Deportation. Łódź Ghetto, Poland*, c. 1940–1944.

91 Caption of *The Crushing Actuality of the Past*, 2018. This question is also central in many pertinent works by, for example, Susan Sontag or Georges Didi-Huberman.

and sensitive discourses on traumatic histories. In this vein, *The Crushing Actuality of the Past* (2018) allows visitors to sense the ubiquity of the past – its eerie presence in the here and now.

Figure 7: Nicola Brandt, The Crushing Actuality of the Past, *2018. Courtesy of the artist.*

The resonances and emotions that the piece evoked impart how photographs can speak to their audience in unmediated ways, reflecting how "their truth-telling, their performance of histories, their reality has a painfulness," something which Edwards calls "rawness."[92] While the rawness of Holocaust imagery is quite ingrained in Germany's collective memory, the proposed relation to African forced labourers is unusual, thereby encouraging viewers to consider and engage with the ways in

92 Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 6.

which historical periods are possibly entangled. For the artist, it was the exhibition's specific *locatedness* that prompted her to explore the dynamic flows of multiple memories. In an interview, Brandt reflected on how working in Germany and the historically Jewish neighbourhood Grindel, where both the MARKK and M.Bassy were situated, unexpectedly encouraged new forms of reflection on the connected histories between Germany and Namibia. She described that she "felt like the location was seeped in complex layers of history and biographies linked to the horrific time in German history. The building in which M.Bassy was located also once was the home of deported Jews."[93] Born in Windhoek in 1983 as a Namibian of German descent, the artist had not encountered this traumatic past in the same overwhelming way while growing up in Namibia. Suddenly being confronted with the "unintentional links" between the remembrance of the Nazi era and that of slavery, colonialism and decolonisation, she felt motivated to artistically explore the resonances of the Holocaust alongside the Namibian genocide.[94]

With regards to the issue of working with and against the ethnographic institution with its colonial history, the artist states how stepping out of the MARKK was crucial for her, as she refused to show her work "within ideologically burdened contexts."[95] Brandt further explained how she conceived of the distance between the MARKK and M.Bassy as the space that was needed to help "creators, and […] viewers, to reflect on complex questions related to power, institutional politics and the role and inadequacies of contemporary art in negotiating these issues of legitimacy."[96] I thought more deeply about the interrelatedness of space and commemorative practices after visiting the exhibition in Germany. From the insights that Brandt shared, I gleaned how the specific location – being in Germany, in an alternative art space *and* a formerly Jewish neighbourhood – brought forth commemorative strategies that are directly related to the environment.

This line of thinking about memory resonates strongly with famous scholars in the field such as Maurice Halbwachs, who taught us about how memory is bound to social groups, or Pierre Nora and his *Les Lieux de Mémoires*, which concentrated on the sites in which memory crystallises and expresses itself (nationally).[97] In more recent studies, the focus has shifted increasingly towards memory's cultural dynamics, its capacity to travel and its intrinsically fluid and unbounded nature.[98] Still, scholarly interest in memory's sites and in the importance of space with regards to memory

93 Nicola Brandt, pers. comm. via email, 17 March 2020.

94 *Ovizire · Somgu* exhibition texts.

95 Ibid.; Brandt, "Nicola Brandt, Artist Statement,' 40.

96 Ibid.

97 Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire Collective* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950); Nora, *Les Lieux de Mémoires (1984—1992)*.

98 HumanitiesUU, "NITMES – Travelling Memory," *YouTube*, 8 February 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psV9D09Swho; Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*.

remains solid. An example is Gqola, who approaches memory as "a living organism influenced by forces in its environs."[99] Another is Susannah Radstone, who argues for an attentiveness to memory's specific locatedness in culture as well as to the ways in which diverging spatial locations impact on memory studies as a field. She claims that only with an understanding of the meaning of memory's place can we continue to explore how it wanders – or how it might as well remain fixed in a specific place.[100] Rothberg similarly explored this line of thought by probing a "located approach to transnational [and multidirectional] memory."[101]

This tack in memory studies that pertains to how memory is always "*instantiated* locally, in a specific place and at a particular time," seems mirrored by Brandt's artistic strategies.[102] For her, it was indeed the experience of the site that made her return to her own family archive. Working in Germany and on the MARKK's archival photographs, the artist recalled her discomfort when facing the initial task to 'reactivate' the colonial archive from the MARKK, with their objectifying tendencies that "fix colonised Africans within gendered, racial and tribal categories," as Rizzo writes.[103] Commissioned with this task, Brandt realised that she had yet to work through her own family archive from similar contexts and time frames. She recalls: "For years, I felt a strong urge to work through feelings of trans-generational guilt and responsibility."[104] Paraphrasing the philosopher Susan Neiman, Brandt reflects on her own childhood:

> I began life as a white girl in a privileged and yet segregated neighbourhood in apartheid Namibia, and now I spend part of the year working in a historically Jewish quarter of Hamburg and Berlin. It is from these spaces that I have increasingly begun to reckon with my own family's history [...] The [MARKK] images made me feel how little is known about my family history. They became indicators of something mysterious, because in our family, conversations around the family's path to the colony as well as their position in World War Two were at best partial or revealing of only a few skeletal facts.[105]

99 Gqola, *What Is Slavery to Me?*, 15. See also: Jenny Wüstenberg, "Locating Transnational Memory," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 32, no. 4 (December 2019): 371–382.

100 Susannah Radstone, "What Place Is This? Transcultural Memory and the Locations of Memory Studies," *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (November 2011): 111–115.

101 Michael Rothberg, "Locating Transnational Memory," *European Review* 22, no. 4 (October 2014): 652–656.

102 Radstone, "What Place Is This?," 117, emphasis in original.

103 Rizzo, "Reframing Women in Namibia's Early History of Photography."

104 Brandt, pers. comm. via email, 17 March 2020.

105 Ibid.

As "a resonance chamber for the artists in their artistic efforts to grapple with their own identity," M.Bassy, rather than the museum, offered the appropriate space for the artist to both engage with and to exhibit her private family photographs.[106]

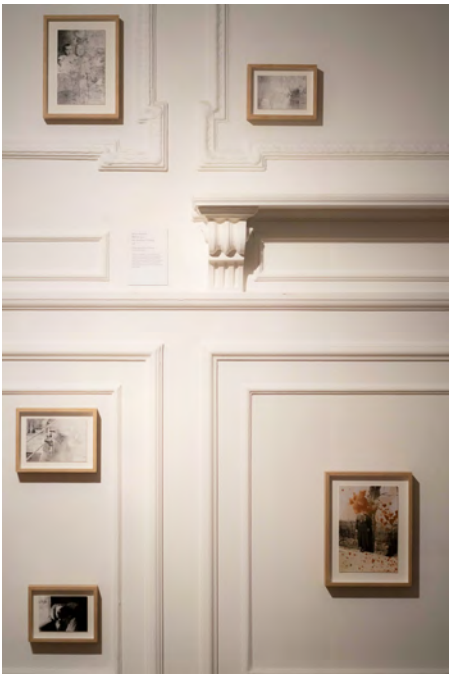

Figure 8: Nicola Brandt, Mother Says Her Memory is Fading, *2018. Courtesy of the artist.*

Numerous scholars on photography remind us how the photographic image is always subjected to multiple processes of selection, filtering and framing: from the photographic occasion, to the printing process, to their positioning on walls, family albums or to public spaces.[107] The same applies to the five pictures that form part of Brandt's *Mother Says Her Memory is Fading* (2018) exhibited in M.Bassy (figure 8). They travelled from a box in Namibia, in which her grandmother kept and secured them as precious memories, through processes of selection and artistic intervention be-

106 Bisrat Negassi, "From Where Do We Speak?" in *Ovizire · Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?* eds. Johanna Wild and Bisrat Negassi (Hamburg: Museum am Rothenbaum, 2018), 14–15.

107 Hayes et al., "'Picturing the Past' in Namibia," 114–115; Harris, "The Archival Sliver," 136.

fore finally arriving at the exhibition site.[108] With their materiality transformed and artistically refashioned, these images are integrated into the intimate atmosphere of the M.Bassy apartment – almost resembling living room decorations. They are strategically positioned on the walls, inviting viewers to bend down, to stretch to the side or gaze upwards, engaging in an active practice of looking carefully and closely.

Let us move closer, just like the spectators in *Ovizire · Somgu*, and look more closely at the photograph in the bottom left corner (figure 9).

Figure 9: Nicola Brandt, Mother Says Her Memory is Fading *(detail), 2018. Courtesy of the artist.*

The photograph shows a young man sleeping on a train; the location and destination are unknown. The view out of the window only offers the barest glimpse of trees silhouetted in the landscape. Our intimate – almost intrusive – sight of this sleeping person introduces Brandt's grandfather. He is an elusive figure, even to the artist: Brandt explains how little is known about the family's settlement history in Namibia other than that they arrived in 1910, shortly after the Namibian genocide, and that her grandfather fought as a soldier in the Second World War for Germany.[109] It is these silences in her family history that she tries to fill with her engagement with the family's photographic legacy, calling these photos 'placeholders' for what is unknown.

108 Brandt, pers. comm. via email, 17 March 2020.

109 Ibid.

In Brandt's case, it the unclarity about the family's legacy in particular that unsettles her; daunting questions arise around the "complicity and contradictions of ordinary people who knowingly live in systems that are immoral and violent," as the caption reads.[110] She scrutinises her own family's role in such regimes as either possible followers or 'perpetrators.'[111] This intimate interrogation resonates from her grandfather's photograph, which oscillates between the personal and the political. The apparently peaceful scene carries deeper and troublesome implications with regards to its political and historical setting. The sleeping young man wears a uniform, and his train ride is part of his journey as a soldier during the Second World War. Yet, just as the shadow nearly obscures the figure's face, much more remains in the dark with regards to the man's ideological dispositions, his actions, his guilt and his experiences in both Europe and Africa. In elevating this family photograph from the private to the public sphere, Brandt opens these controversies to a wider audience, while equally confronting her own inherited role as a descendant of presumed 'perpetrators.'

In one of his more recent publications, *The Implicated Subject* (2019), Rothberg puts forward the conception of a descendant – as his title suggests – as an *implicated subject*, a person "who participates in injustice, but in indirect ways."[112] Implicated subjects – often involuntarily – "help propagate the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mar the present."[113] With her work, Brandt exposes herself to the implications of her complex subject position as a Namibian of German descent, while also displaying the burdens and limits of her critical interrogation. The artist speaks about her doubts with regards to the ethics of opening the family archive, being aware of the vulnerability that she imposes on her own family. Moving the photographs into another sphere changes their viewing conditions. Brandt relinquishes control over who engages with these personal photographs and how her family is judged for their role in history.[114] However, through her artistic intervention, she reclaims a certain power by reframing and refurbishing the photographs. The effects that she uses – slightly blurring the image and disturbing the already fading surfaces even further with marks and erasure techniques – protect the photographed subjects from an unrestrained gaze: we are denied a clear view of them. The effect is part of a strategic move to change the photograph's materiality from an old proof of the grandfather's itineraries as a soldier into a contemporary artwork, thereby allowing Brandt to take a critical distance from the material

110 Caption of *Mother Says Her Memory is Fading*.

111 Ibid.; Brandt, pers. comm. via email, 17 March 2020.

112 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 20.

113 Ibid., 1.

114 Langford, *Suspended Conversations*, 18.

as an artist. Yet, on the other hand, the strategy of 'spoiling' the image also points toward notions of nostalgia and the ephemeral, which clouds her family history. The smudging, staining and blurring of the surface becomes a visual metaphor for this lack of knowing and, thus, is also a reference to the opacity of the archive: it provides neither clarity, nor unobstructed access to the past. This artistic ruse reappears in the other pieces in *Mother Says Her Memory is Fading*. If we move our eyes across the series, we encounter more family photographs, such as a refurbished studio portrait of three children or a wedding snapshot of wife and husband and a group of children.

These images raise important questions with regards to gender roles in the former imperial centre and in the colony. More specifically, they interrogate conceptions of motherhood, the family and marriage. However, in view of this chapter's interest in the politics of memory, what is all the more revealing is the question: who designs, frames and safeguards these visual family constructions? In this respect, Brandt elaborates on the meaning of her title, stating: "When I say *Mother Says Her Memory is Fading*, I do not explicitly refer to *my* mother but more a mother as a carrier of memory, or women who are the constructers of family albums, the keepers of family history. And it is these stories and anecdotes that become passed down."[115] Brandt's work invites us to recognise women's roles as "photographic curators" with and beyond family units, doing the "work of collecting, preserving, displaying and narrating photographs" as observed by Darren Newbury, Lorena Rizzo and by Kylie Thomas.[116] Moreover, by engaging in these gendered processes, women become active agents in memory-making by means of handing down or transmitting specific narratives and omitting or silencing others, as we have seen in chapter 2 with reference to the matriarchive. In Brandt's case (and similar to Imke Rust), it was her grandmother who both kept and protected the family photographs and their connected memories. She was also the one to uphold the voids in the family history that obscure their implicated subject positions in past regimes of domination.[117]

The photographs in Brandt's series carry these multi-layered meanings and they are part of Brandt's confrontation with troubling questions of belonging and implication and her commitment to opening this intimate discourse up to the public sphere. *Mother Says Her Memory is Fading* prompts us to consider the place of memory in the personal family archive in relation to archives housed in colonial institutions. The private, careful and considerate tone of Brandt's series appears in stark contrast to the visual aesthetic of photographs in the colonial archive of the MARKK. However, it is this juxtaposition, this intimate dialogue between works such as *Mother Says Her Memory is Fading, The Crushing Actuality of the Past, We Shall*

115 Brandt, pers. comm. via email, 17 March 2020.

116 Newbury, Rizzo and Thomas, *Women and Photography in Africa*, 10.

117 Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 1.

Not Be Moved and "Ondaanisa yo pOmudhime" that allows these contrasts not to emerge as divisions. Rather, they are powerful evocations of how different histories are entangled, thereby elucidating the potential in commemorating the past multidirectionally.

This was the impression that I was left with after visiting the exhibition in Germany in 2018. It was always this potential that stuck out for me personally in my writing and thinking about *Ovizire · Somgu* as a creative application of Rothberg's theory. I was then powerfully reminded of the stakes of multidirectional memory making in Germany, when in 2021 Rothberg's translation of *Multidirectional Memory* was published and sparked heated debates. The critique centrally draws attention to the danger of trivialising the Holocaust or denying its singularity when engaging in comparative readings of violent histories.[118] From these responses, we see how, on a discursive level, entangling histories and setting memories in relation to one another remains a bone of contention in post-colonial, post-Nazi Germany. Against this critique, the exhibition's attempt to grapple with the entanglement of complex and violent histories and to address one's own implication in these is particularly important. However, a crucial aspect in the exhibition's design, as part of a larger project, was that the multidirectional memory-making was not tied to the nation-space of Germany alone. In 2019, *Ovizire · Somgu* had a second iteration in Namibia and, in 2020, the project reinvented itself and continued in the form of workshops in different regions of the country with a final exhibition in Havana, a township in Windhoek. Let us follow these itineraries in order to further assess the significance of location for both memory politics and artistic memory-making.

3.3: Archival Reconfigurations in Namibia

Half a year after the MARKK exhibition, the second iteration was opened in the National Art Gallery of Namibia (NAG) in Windhoek. The exhibition was shown from 11 July to 24 August 2019, with certain alterations with regards to the work exhibited. As Vitjitua Ndjiharine moved her pieces to the NAG, the artist decided to recalibrate her focus. Her critique of the ethnographic museum was no longer a central to the exhibition in Namibia.[119] She explains:

118 For a more in-depth exploration of the critique and Rothberg's responses thereto , see: Elisabeth von Thadden, "Interview with Michael Rothberg: 'Wir brauchen neue Wege, um über Erinnerung nachzudenken,'" *Die Zeit*, 27 March 2021, https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2021-03/michael-rothberg-multidirektionale-erinnerung-buch-holocaust-rassismus-kolonialismus/seite-2.

119 Ndjiharine, pers. comm. via email, 4 January 2021.

> In Windhoek [...] we rather wanted to highlight the agency of the photographed through the five women and girls who are named in the photo collection. Their names and surnames would be recognizable to someone in Namibia and therefore making the archive itself less abstract in a way, and less removed from Namibian society today.[120]

Thus, Ndjiharine would not reinstall the *Ikonowall* again, but instead exhibited her canvasses from *We Shall Not Be Moved*. This time, they were showcased separately in the gallery, rather than compiled in an installation. Next to the canvasses, visitors could see large-scale prints of the aforementioned individuals whose names could be secured from the von Hirschfeld collection. One of the images that is of particular interest to this chapter is Ndjiharine's creative intervention with the medium-full-shot of Kaimuna and Kaboaussi, whose contours we examined previously in relation to the *Ikonowall* installation (figures 1 and 2). Having the photographs return to Namibia, where they were taken, provided the kind of safe space where the artist felt free to show the faces of the Herero girls again, albeit in a redesigned fashion.

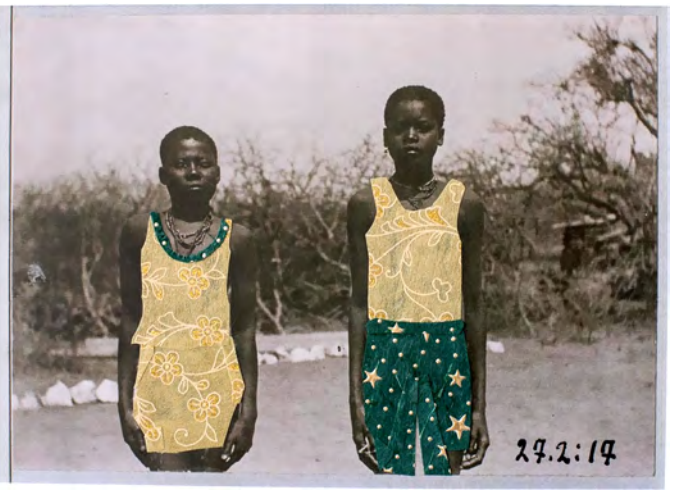

Figure 10: Vitjitua Ndjiharine, Kaimuna and Kaboaussi, *2019. Courtesy of StArt Art Gallery Namibia.*

120 Ibid.

While we encountered them as 'prisoners of war' on the iconocard, they now emerged as young girls in colourful clothing, appearing as someone's family members or friends. Ndjiharine produced these new conceptions by covering up their bodies with patterned fabrics, thereby interlacing certain visual elements and contrasting old and new aesthetics. While the black and white of the colonial image was a reminder of the historical nature of the photograph and its source (the archive), the modern yellow flowery dresses and the green trousers with yellow stars emanated a sense of contemporaneity. The repeated pattern on both girls' clothing creates an air of togetherness, protecting them in the face of the viewer. Their newly acquired clothes not only shelter their bodies from being nakedly exposed to the audiences' gazes, but the modernity of their fashion makes them seem lively.[121]

These modes of interfering with the archive were vital strategies for the artist to speak more directly to her Namibian audience. Ndjiharine hoped to make her artwork "more accessible and less abstract, especially for non-scholarly Namibians and to let others who look like me see themselves in history."[122] Covering up the bodies was a deliberate choice, one reflective of the ethical implications of presenting historical photographs to a Namibian audience. Ndjiharine had been mindful about the tensions that define ongoing public debates in Namibia, where issues around recognition and reparation of the genocide as well as calls for 'decolonisation' of public spaces and institutions are heatedly discussed. Again, her methods resonate with Kazeem-Kamiński's artistic take on Sharpe's Black annotation and Black redaction. They, too, pursue the desire to "see blackness otherwise, beyond the violent and traumatic history."[123] Adding new layers to the material, in the form of protective clothes, is a refusal to perpetuate and recreate explicit scenes of Black suffering.[124]

Interestingly, there were mixed responses to Ndjiharine's mode of intervention. Journalist Jemima Beukes explores these ambivalent reactions in greater depth. While she states how some viewers responded positively to the exhibition, conceiving of it as "an important eye-opener and […] a fascinating processing of old archive pictures, which make people think about the past," Beukes also elucidates how many Namibians felt that the exhibition was "white-washing history."[125] The

121 While this is one possible reading, it needs to be considered how the labelling of clothes as 'modern' carries a colonial undertone that tribalises 'traditional' clothing and purports a clear-cut divide between 'modern, European' and 'traditional, African' cultures. However, due to the scope of this chapter, I cannot go into further detail and can only flag these implications here.

122 Ndjiharine, pers. comm. via email, 4 January 2021.

123 Kazeem-Kamiński, "Unearthing," 91.

124 Ibid.

125 Jemima Beukes, "Macht ist keine Landschaft," *Neues Deutschland*, accessed 15 January 2021, https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/1123092.namibia-macht-ist-keine-landschaft.html, my translation. Other positive reviews particularly appreciated "the personalization

artistic team was perceived to be "cautiously skirting around the facts," as they did not expose the violence as it was being exerted and experienced.[126] Beukes quotes Gordon Joseph, a Nama descendant, who declares: "People were treated like slaves, they did not wear clothes. That was part of the brutal history. Why should you falsify that? How can you educate people about history if you wash its stains clean?"[127]

With a view to the stakes of engaging archival photographs, the artist was primarily concerned that exposing the original image of Kaimuna and Kaboaussi to the public would have implied restaging processes of dehumanisation that the Herero girls had to endure. It could contribute to the "disturbing and distressing continuity of violence" that produced the image in the first place and might cause pain and trauma to those who relate to what is seen.[128] Such questions about activating historical photographs of violence are both troubling and intricate. There is a difficult tension between these consequences and the danger of "image fatigue," whereby photographs lose their efficacy as "viewers' eyes [grow] unseeing," as Ariella Azoulay describes.[129] When images are frequently circulated and exposed to the public, they might gain a "generic imprint" or become, what Patricia Hayes calls "empty photographs."[130] In line with these considerations, Vilho Shigweda discusses so-called iconic photographs. They are:

> widely disseminated with a view to conveying the menace of atrocity and its effect on the victims and to activate strong emotional responses among viewers. More particularly, they are also seen to shape public understanding of specific events and periods and to influence political and humanitarian action.[131]

And yet, these images might lose the ability to do exactly that. Shigweda studies one specific photograph of death and violence. It is a picture of a mass grave at the SWAPO refugee camp at Cassinga in the south of Angola, taken three days after the Cassinga Attack in May 1978; this was a key operation during the Namibian liberation war, when the South African Armed Forces (SADF) bombed the camp and killed

---

of these photographs" as well as "the creativity and re-thinking of these images," (Mukaiwa, "'Ovizire – Somgu.'")

126 Beukes, "Macht ist keine Landschaft."

127 Ibid.

128 Vilho Shigwedha, "Photography, Mass Violence, And Survivors," in *Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History*, eds. Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019), 168.

129 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 11.

130 Patricia Hayes, "Empty Photographs: Ethnography and the Lacunae of African History," in *Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History*, eds. Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019), 60–61.

131 Shigwedha, "Photography, Mass Violence, And Survivors," 158.

at least 600 people, injuring many more, as we have learned in chapter 2.[132] On the basis of the example of the mass grave picture, Shigweda exposes how the reproduction and circulation of photographs of atrocity "unleashes an ambivalent 'nothingness.'"[133] This 'nothingness' refers to the "exclusion of the emotional and physical suffering that […] the victims endured […] but to which the so-called iconic photograph is astoundingly oblivious."[134]

The artistic team of *Ovizire · Somgu* reflected deeply on such ethical issues. Ndjiharine's strategy to distort the historical material was an attempt to respond sensitively thereto. Yet, as we have seen, exploring the visual legacies of the colonial past and proposing new ways to remember histories of violence remains a controversial undertaking in the post-colony. This predicament must be considered against the background of contemporary discourses, events and transformations that are taking place in Namibia. Activists' demands for a 'decolonisation' of the public sphere are not new to the country, whether in terms of access to land or in relation to questions of representation.[135] The global Black Lives Matter Movements gave these causes new impetus, with petitions and campaigns being organised to remove colonial monuments in Windhoek and throughout Namibia.[136] Simultaneously, descendants of the Herero and Nama have fought tirelessly for acknowledgement, apology and reparation for the genocide to be paid by the German government for many decades, as we have seen in the introduction.

Against the backdrop of such political agendas, Esther Muinjangue visited the exhibition and expressed her puzzlement. She has been an outspoken and globally known Herero activist, the chairperson of the Ovaherero Genocide Foundation and is today the party president of the National Unity Democratic Organisation of Namibia (NUDO). In an interview, she explained:

132 Christian Williams, "'Remember Cassinga?' An Exhibition of Photographs and Histories," *Kronos* 36 (November 2010): 213.

133 Shigwedha, "Photography, Mass Violence, And Survivors," 170.

134 Ibid.

135 For example, concerning ongoing debates around problematic street names, colonial architecture and buildings or statues.

136 See the petition by H. Titus, "A 'Curt' Farewell," *Change.org*, accessed 20 January 2021, https://www.change.org/p/mayor-of-the-city-of-windhoek-fransina-kahungu-a-curt-farewell. See also #GallowsMustFall, #NotAtAlteFeste. Titus' petition was successful and the statue was removed in November 2022.

> We appreciate the initiative; it is a good one. But I would say that before they put up things, they also need to make sure what is the correct historical facts? For example, I am coming because they are saying it's 1904–08 period, right? But I am seeing the Heroes' Acre there. What relevance does it have on 1904–1908?[137]

Muinjangue's intervention elucidates how, in a situation in which historical wrongs have neither been adequately addressed nor compensated, a broader approach to commemorating the past remains controversial for some. As the psychological trauma and economic consequences of the genocide have not yet been repaired, those who feel implicated and affected by the past might not be willing to look at broader entanglements of colonial and post-colonial histories. With the reference to Heroes' Acre, the activist and politician was gesturing to the work *Changing Histories* (2008–ongoing) by Nicola Brandt (figure 11). With the compilation of multiple postcard-sized images of commemorative sites primarily in Namibia (but also in Germany), taken over a period of ten years, Brandt reflects on the politics of memory-making in both countries. In her caption, she explains how the work combines "snapshots of diverse commemorative sites largely related to the Namibian-German War and Genocide," urging us to rethink official memorial landscapes and their relations to one another.[138]

With the collage-like assemblage of graveyards, tombstones and public memorials such as Heroes' Acre, Brandt explores the politics of memory-making and power dynamics in knowledge production, questioning the ways in which states "function as arbiters of public memory."[139] Her installation is an attempt to contest the "hegemonic systems of memory brokerage" by contrasting national forms of commemoration with alternative *views* on memory. We see photographs of landscapes that were settings of historical events and period. These landscapes, as set forth previously, are inscribed with the knowledge of the past, as Mofokeng taught us.[140] While, for some, such sites are powerful places that store and evoke memories, others may remain oblivious to the layers of meaning that they carry.

137 NBC Digital News, "National Art Gallery of Namibia Hosts Art Exhibition Exploring Namibian-German History-NBC," *YouTube*, 20 July 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzbnh1qTvNg.

138 Caption for *Changing Histories*, 2008-ongoing.

139 Ibid.

140 Mofokeng, *TAXI*-004, 68.

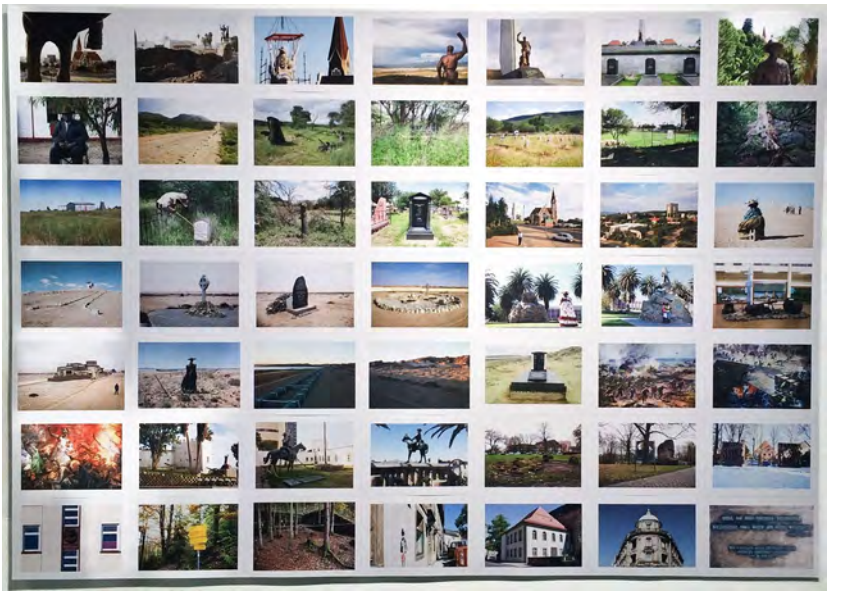

Figure 11: Nicola Brandt, Changing Histories, *2008-ongoing. Installation view: Windhoek, 2019. Photograph by Julia Rensing. Courtesy of the artist.*

Changing Histories not only tracks the relations between different commemorative practices, but also their altering forms, functions and evocations over time. In one image, we see a woman in a Herero dress, gazing at the Marine Memorial in Swakopmund that commemorates the German First Marine Expedition Corps that fought during the war of 1904 to 1908. This memorial is still displayed openly in Swakopmund, but it is continuously contested and, for example, covered with red paint or sprayed with graffiti.[141] With the Herero woman confronting this public site, Brandt contributes to this critique and questions this statue's legitimacy. Another example includes the documentary photographs of the Reiterdenkmal removal in Windhoek. The well-known statue was erected in 1912 to honour the German soldiers who fought and died during the genocidal war of 1904–1908 as well as German settlers who perished in that phase. In 2009, the monument was removed from its position near the Christuskirche and the Independence Museum. In 2013, it was re-

141 See: "Operation Back to Germany: Staff Report, 'Coastal Activists Call for Removal of Marine Denkmal,' Truth, for its own sake," *New Era Live*, 17 July 2015, https://neweralive.na/posts/coastal-activists-call-removal-marine-denkmal.

located to the court of the Alte Feste where it is still housed today.[142] These memory contestations are set in relation to photographs taken in Germany: for example, Obersalzberg in the Bavarian Alps, where Hitler resided; or the Askari monument, a military relief which is located in the memorial complex in the so-called Tanzania Park in Hamburg on the grounds of the former Lettow-Vorbeck barracks. Nearby, we see an image of the anti-colonial monument in the shape of an elephant made of brick located in the Nelson Mandela Park in Bremen. The elephant was erected in 1931 as a "Reichskolonialehrendenkmal" (Imperial Colonial Memorial) to honour German soldiers who died overseas and was rededicated as an Anticolonial Monument in 1989.

Brandt scrutinises the ways in which Germany and Namibia 'decolonised' their commemorative politics – or not – with these cross-references between different sites and modes of remembering. The artist further shifts our view to people and landscapes, thereby reminding us of the opaque dimensions in which the past continues to matter in the present, pushing for greater attention to alternative forms of remembering. In many ways, *Changing Histories* resonates with Rothberg's take on the potential of thinking about the connection of specific sites and memories multidirectionally and which, he argues:

> can help unsettle scalar hierarchies and challenge the hegemony of state-sponsored remembering and forgetting. The dynamic of multidirectional memory comes with no guarantees, but it does help constitute a terrain for practising a politics of location that articulates local concerns with national and transnational scales.[143]

While Brandt's work alerts us to the differences in how the colonial past is being remembered in Germany and Namibia, she also evokes how commemorative politics remain entangled and how both countries share concerns. *Changing Histories* is a demand for an active engagement with colonial remnants in public spaces, for a redress of national symbols and for a shift in attention in memory-making to personal practices and to individual needs in both countries as a way to further processes of 'decolonisation.'

142 Joachim Zeller, "Das Reiterdenkmal in Windhoek/Namibia," *freiburg-postkolonial*, 17 November 2021, https://www.freiburg-postkolonial.de/Seiten/Zeller-Reiterdenkmal-1912.htm.

143 Rothberg, "Locating Transnational Memory," 655.

3.4: Art as Restitution

In Namibia, *Ovizire · Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?* would become a platform to collectively engage with stubborn remainders of the past and with the role of memory in post-colonial Namibia. Throughout 2020, the project (FWDWS) was continued and renewed, whereby the artistic team was expanded with local artists and creatives to "generate community dialogues" on legacies of colonialism.[144] Vitjitua Ndjiharine was one of the FWDWS 2020 facilitators who was involved in the restructuring of the project. In an online Zoom talk during the Coronavirus pandemic, the artist explained how a main objective was to extend the conversation beyond the gallery spaces of Hamburg and Windhoek and, thus, to "decentralise" the project.[145] The team would organise workshops in the//Kharas, Omaheke and Otjozondjupa regions of Namibia and involve the youth in these creative explorations.[146] This 'decentralising aspect' also influenced the choice for the final physical exhibition space in which the workshop results were presented throughout November 2020 alongside the *Ovizire · Somgu* artworks from the shows in 2018 and 2019.[147]

The facilitators chose the Frans Nambinga Arts Training Centre in Havana, a township in Windhoek as a way to step out of the traditional, often bourgeois and exclusive art spaces, and which, according to Ndjiharine, is "historically tied to […] colonial legacy and colonial struggle."[148] They emphasised that this was vital to "reach within the community and reach Namibians, not just Namibians who are art gallery goers or Namibians who are educated or academics."[149] Moving the art to yet another 'alternative space' (and here, Ndjiharine reminds us to ask: "Alternative to whom?") is a powerful step to further conversations on colonial legacies beyond classist art discourses.[150] In a digital walk-through, FWDWS opened this new space, the Frans Nambinga Arts Training Centre, to a wider public that, due to the Coronavirus pandemic, was unable to visit the site. In the presentation of the contributed artworks, we encounter large-scale prints of the two Reiterdenkmal photographs from Nicola Brandt's *Changing Memories* – a prompt for the audience to engage once again with the transformative meanings of the symbol whose prevalence in Namibia seems haunting. In an interview, the artist explained to me that the exhibition space in Havana was limited, and she had to select which artworks

144 "Ovizire · Somgu, From Where Do We Speak?" *StArt Art Gallery*, accessed 17 January 2021, https://www.startartgallery.com/from-where-do-we-speak.

145 Vitjitua Ndjiharine, *Virtual Art Talk & Launch | Ovizire · Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?* (Zoom, 19 November 2020).

146 "Ovizire · Somgu, From Where Do We Speak?"

147 Ndjiharine, *Virtual Art Talk & Launch*.

148 Ibid.

149 Ibid.

150 Ibid.

she would install. Brandt chose to show large-scale posters of the Reiterdenkmal deconstruction as a way to reflect on the issue of spatiality and to learn about people's attitudes towards this changing symbol that has always been at the heart of CBD.[151] The distance and lack of infrastructure between Havana and Windhoek's city centre makes it an ordeal for people to commute. However, as working and living structures continue to be segregated along class and racial lines, it remains a necessity for many of the residents to travel the distance and to endure the heavy traffic on a daily basis. With this notion of mobility and movement between two worlds in mind, bringing the dismantled memorial to the Frans Nambinga Arts Training Centre was crucial for the artist. Brandt was fond of how the photographs were installed: as posters, they were glued directly onto the corrugated tin wall, morphing with its shape – a set-up not intended to be removed. Brandt reflected: "It makes me happy to know that these pieces are still there somewhere on the wall and that they are disappearing over time, as that is the nature of paper – being torn, or just fading."[152] In this vein, the fading of a deconstructed symbol becomes a reminder of a past gone and a sign for another future to be shaped.

In close proximity to Brandt's works, we re-encounter Ndjiharine's distorted archival photographs (figure 12), as the FWDWS team guides their digital audience through the exhibition.

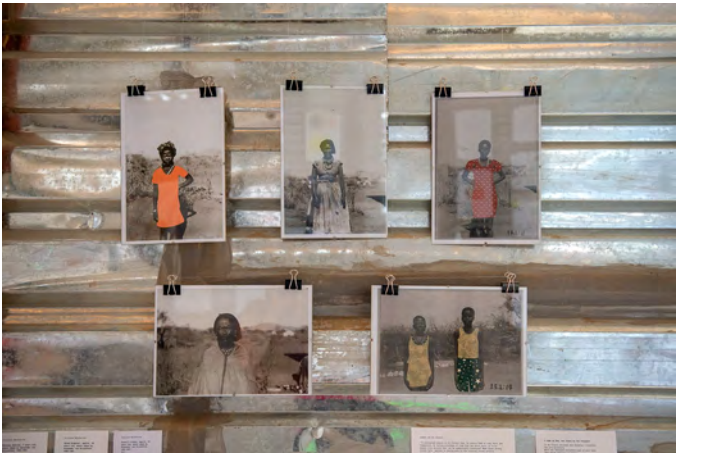

Figure 12: Vitjitua Ndjiharine, Havana installation view, 2019. Courtesy of StArt Art Gallery Namibia.

151 Nicola Brandt, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 28 October 2022.

152 Ibid.

On the corrugated iron wall, a small-scale photograph of Kaimuna and Kaboaussi was aligned next to portrait photographs of those children whose names could be secured from the von Hirschfeld collection. Ndjiharine redressed Gauus Drakus and Molnina Andries with colourful clothes. Others, like Sarah Dragoner's photograph or Lydia Goliath's picture, remained unmodified; Ndjiharine let the girl's gazes speak for themselves.

Without frames, as small prints covered with simple glass pane which were pinned to the wall with black bulldog clips, the curatorial decisions did not create a stark contrast between the artwork and the background. Instead, both seemed to function in symbiosis. Resembling typical township shack walls, the images could be someone's cherished home décor. This set-up invites the viewer to consider the relation between township history, housing conditions and photography. As established previously, since family photographs, photo albums or private archives were largely constituted by the 'white' bourgeoisie, these practices of representation and memory making may have been difficult to access for many Namibians.[153] With Southern Africa's history of forced removals and apartheid's various regulations and interventions in private lives, storing or safeguarding photographs was complicated. Yet, the installation invokes what would have been just and right – that the photographs were supposed to be located there, in somebody's home in Namibia. When read along these lines, the images of Sarah Dragoner, Kaimuna and Kaboaussi, Gauus Drakus, Molnina Andries and Lydia Goliath return to their broader Namibian community, where more personal relations between audience and images might be established, compared to the confining, exclusive art spaces of Hamburg's and Windhoek's art galleries. In this way, the curatorial and artistic strategies prompt questions about the debate on restitution, which is often centred too rigidly on the provenance of cultural objects, artefacts and 'human remains.' Ndjiharine urges us to ask about the 'belonging' of the photographs, of possible claims and connections that could be associated with them beyond straightforward demands for restitution.

While these evocations are of "national and transnational scales," to again gesture to Rothberg here, they are also deeply personal, as I learnt from the artist.[154] In a conversation, we circled back to the early stages of conceptualising *Ovizire · Somgu* in Hamburg, as I asked about the different motivations for the participating artists to either work with the institutional photographic repositories or family archives (as Brandt had). Njiharine emphasised that, for her, the strong division of these archives often felt too simplistic, centring too narrowly on an overgeneralised structural divide between vast 'white' settler archives in contrast to an absence of Black family archives. Family archives of Black Namibians, of course, exist, but may,

153 Grendon et al., *Usakos*, 13.

154 Rothberg, "Locating Transnational Memory," 655.

at times, be dispersed across multiple locations or might materialise in unconventional ways. Her intervention echoes scholars', activists' and other creative practitioners' calls to widen and to expand our definitions of archives.[155] Ndjiharine's deep reflection on what constitutes (family) archives was heralded with the *Ovizire · Somgu* project, which offered a framework for a personal approach to photographs. Despite the fact that these were stored in public institutional archives, Ndjiharine explained:

> The way I looked at the photographs was by thinking that the photographed subjects could be my ancestors. The people whose names haven't been secured, who remain anonymous, might be my family members. In a way, I was tracking my ancestors.[156]

This claim resonates strongly with Wanelisa Xaba's assertion that "when we invoke the archive […] we invoke our ancestors," introduced in the previous chapter.[157] Xaba emphasises the notion that archives are alive, growing and moving by drawing our attention to the powerful presence of ancestral spirits in the here and now. She challenges approaches to subjects who figure in historical photographs, archival documents or records as dead figures locked "in a violent stagnant colonial past."[158]

What changes if we begin to consider photographed subjects as subsisting spirits in the present, meaning that their "genealogy and genetic archive is alive in people living today"?[159] How might this influence debates on restitution and justice? Here, Xaba specifically addresses her African audience and asks: "If we as Africans believe that our ancestors are not dead, then does the fact that we […] do not advocate for the return of these archives to the community not further propagate violence? How are we so comfortable that these artifacts exist in these institutions?"[160] In a way, Ndjiharine's work speaks to such concerns raised by Xaba. Her empathetic reading and creative recycling of the archival photographs – as well as the team's decision to 'move' the images out of institutional spaces, into alternative exhibition sites and, furthermore, to diverse locations in Namibia – emerge as deliberate acts

155 Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You* (Santa Barbara: Punctum Books, 2018); Mushaandja quoted in: Wellershaus, '"Let's Have Tea and Sing Love Songs!"'; Xaba, "An Awkward Dance With the Black Middle Class."

156 In the years that followed, the artist moved on further to scrutinise photographs from her direct relatives (for example, in *Patchwork Realities*, 2021) as well as researching dispersed family items that were taken during colonial times and are today stored in the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich, Switzerland; Ndjiharine, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 10 October 2022.

157 Xaba, "An Awkward Dance With the Black Middle Class," 86.

158 Ibid., 86.

159 Ibid.

160 Ibid., 87.

of contestation. These interventions are a strong signal to European institutions that their hold on the material is neither no longer accepted nor acceptable.

Both Ndjiharine's and Brandt's engagements with photography's ambivalence are crucial in making these claims. In considering the photographed subjects as family members (as *potential* family members in Ndjiharine's case and as *actual* family members in Brandt's *My Mother Says Her Memory Is Fading*), they ask: whose histories matter today? Whom do we remember, and how? With regards to the connection of photography, history and memory, Martha Langford writes:

> Photography is not an equivalent for memory, or even its faithful servant. Service is rendered, without a doubt, but to many masters and mistresses [...] Photography serves forgetting as readily as it operates as an *aide-mémoire*. It also conspires with the imagination to trick memory. It smiles on history while slyly proposing that alternative accounts are being overlooked.[161]

Both Brandt's and Ndjiharine's works engage these notions. They uncover how alternative readings of history might be possible and explore photography's potential as an *aide-mémoire* of an elusive past – but they do not provide certainties or play into the myth of historical clarity. In remembering and centring ancestors, their multimedia artworks examine the connection of past, present and future to open up new ways through which to find healing. Photography emerges as a pivotal instrument to prompt such reflections and to evoke new modes of memory-making.

Photography's ability to trigger multidirectional memories became most evident in one particular photograph that travelled through all of the exhibition's iterations. We first encountered a large-scale print of figure 13 upon entering the MARKK exhibition hall, which reoccurred as a minute version on Ndjiharine's canvas at M.Bassy and, later, in Windhoek (figure 5). In the National Art Gallery and Frans Nambinga Arts Training Centre, the team again exhibited a medium-sized print of what was captioned as "woman sitting in front of the train tracks."[162] The picture shows an unidentified woman in front of railway lines, with iron rails stacked behind her. With a cigarette in her hand, close to her mouth, she gazes right back at the viewer and at the camera. Her look is piercing. In their research on the archival photograph, as well as on the picture showing women working on the railway sleeper (which Brandt had installed at M.Bassy as part of *The Crushing Actuality of the Past*), the artistic team found out that the women were forced labourers in the German-Namibian War.[163] Both images were part of the von Hirschfeld collection.

---

161 Langford, *Scissors, Paper, Stone*, 287.

162 Frans Nambinga Arts Training Centre, *Ovizire · Somgu*, 2019. Caption for photograph Inv. Nr. 2018.1:40, collection Alexander von Hirschfeld, MARKK.

163 Mushaandja, "Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, Artist Statement," 34.

Figure 13: Inv. Nr. 2018.1:40, collection Alexander von Hirschfeld. Courtesy of Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK), Hamburg.

Their prominence throughout the exhibitions speaks to multiple discourses at once: the history of forced labour, women's neglected roles in colonial history, their expressions of resistance and agency in photography. Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja explains in an interview: "Everything about her pose shows resistance, just as if she wanted to say: 'You can't break me.'"[164] Inspired, Mushaandja invoked the piece in his performance *The Dance of the Rubbertree*:

> A womxn at forced labour in history, name erased, yet she is so present
> My body relates to hers in that historic and brutal moment
> She is super queer, deviant and feminist
> I read her as a queer archive
> The homosexual and transarchive that will not be buried by you
> She is smoking dagga and she says fuck the heteropatriarchy
> I read resilient, resistant womxn at work
> Doing double the labour here and at home.[165]

As the artist explains, his work critically scrutinises and subverts heteronormative and patriarchal narratives that dominate Namibian historiography.[166] Namibia's memory culture is still heavily informed by the trauma of the genocide and by the liberation war, from which women's and queer narratives remain largely absent.[167]

164 Wellershaus, "'Let's Have Tea and Sing Love Songs!'"
165 Mushaandja, "Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, Artist Statement," 35.
166 Wellershaus, "'Let's Have Tea and Sing Love Songs!'"
167 Ibid.

By retrieving these perspectives from the archive and restaging them, he reinscribed women's and queer lives into historical consciousness. Mushaandja read the woman's posture in figure 13 as a symbol of defiance, resilience and transgression. The team's collective reading followed a similar track. In their exhibition text accompanying the photograph, they stated:

> Take this photograph of a woman sitting and smoking, defiantly looking back at the photographer, at us. The train tracks behind her situate her in a context of forced labor during the German-Namibian war, as women were coerced to build the railroad. Yet, her composure and her confident gaze seem to resist objectification.[168]

I paused and reflected more deeply on this proposition to read a gaze as a sign for resistance. Reminiscing about the debate on agency and objectification that I set out previously, there seems to be a paradox in this approach to the image. Is the act of reading a photograph as a symbol *of* something not just another mode of categorisation? Did Tina Campt, Hershini Bhana Young, Elizabeth Edwards and others not warn us of these kinds of overgeneralised readings? Alternatively, does the postulate for contextualisation and historical accuracy not apply when it comes to artistic approaches to the photographic archive? What art does (and what historical analyses cannot achieve) is provide a visual counter-construction to the imagery and imaginaries produced by members of the colonising regimes. Thus, in their opening of the institutional archive and their recirculation of the found material, the artists have brought new forces into motion. Once excavated from the archive, the material invigorates dynamics of its own. As Edwards asserts, "Meanings are not necessarily in the photographs themselves, but in their suggestive appearances within different contexts, as people and things decontextualised within them are transposed within the culture of viewing."[169]

Following the photograph's further itineraries helped to exemplify this. After my visit to the exhibition in Hamburg, I was surprised to repeatedly encounter the images of the women at the railway sleeper in a number of contexts. For example, reviewers referred directly to them in their reflections on the exhibition, considering the image to be "a tribute to this anonymous woman as well as a bow to the abused and dispossessed."[170] Moreover, the photographs were used in quite a num-

168 *Ovizire · Somgu* exhibition texts.

169 Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 8.

170 Mauricio Isaza Camacho, "Hay una sombra y un lugar vacío en los documentos del colonialismo/Es gibt einen Schatten und eine Leerstelle in den Dokumenten des Kolonialismus," *Ojalá*, 22 October 2018, https://ojal.de/politik/la-vida-del-estado-nacional-das-leben-vom-nationalstaat/hay-una-sombra-y-un-lugar-vacio-en-los-documentos-del-colonialismo-schatten-und-eine-leerstelle-in-den-dokumenten-des-kolonialismus/.

ber of television documentaries on Germany's period of colonial rule, produced by renowned German (or German-French) channels in cooperation with German public service broadcasters.[171] Considering the use of the pictures in these productions illuminates once again how historical photographs are often arbitrarily deployed to visualise genocide, resistance or German colonialism in general. The documentary filmmakers seemed less interested in the photographs as such, but instead use them to *stand in for* these discourses. Artistic appropriations, however, have their own agenda. Yet, the same kind of caution is required in our reading of them, reflecting back on Xaba's warning of the moral implications in "plucking" stories from the archive without any guarantees of "ancestral consent."[172]

An intriguing example for a creative engagement with the photograph of the woman at the railway are Mushaandja's multi-faceted recyclings and refigurations. After the exhibition project, he developed his performance *Ondaanisa yo pOmudhime* further and produced a music record that draws upon the image for the album cover (figure 14) while interlacing it with other photographs from diverse archives. Upon close inspection, we can identify both prints of the women at the railway tracks from the von Hirschfeld collection, superimposed with a photographic snippet of Mushaandja's own face and of a robe of Marula seeds, which covered his shoulders when performing the piece.

In the live arts workshop, "Body As Barometer," by the arts organisation Khoj in New Delhi, India on 2 October 2022, Mushaandja gave a presentation and posted a photo of his talk on Instagram. The photograph showed him seated in front of a blown-up photograph of the woman, which was commented with the words: "I take her with me everywhere I go."[173] His continuous engagement with the image again evokes the significance of the "ethics of care" when working with archival photographs, as examined in greater depth in chapter 2.[174] Referencing back to Cifor and Caswell helped to foreground radical empathy in any kind of archival engagement, which should be oriented to seeing implicated communities as not just one group amongst many potential archival users, but as "central focal points in all aspects of the archival endeavour."[175] Mushaandja's reconfigurations centre the anonymous woman and her inaccessible biography, thereby prompting us to reflect on both her thoughts and experiences.

171 See for example: "Hamburg: Deutschlands Kolonialmetropole," *Arte*, 6 February 2020, https://www.arte.tv/de/videos/095411-000-A/hamburg-deutschlands-kolonialmetropole/; Wettpinguin, "Der deutsche Kolonialismus in Namibia, Unter Herrenmenschen," *YouTube*, 16 January 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9W6WnKruCs.

172 Xaba, "An Awkward Dance With the Black Middle Class," 87.

173 Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja (@tschukutschuku), *Instagram*, 2 October 2022.

174 Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives," 24.

175 Ibid.

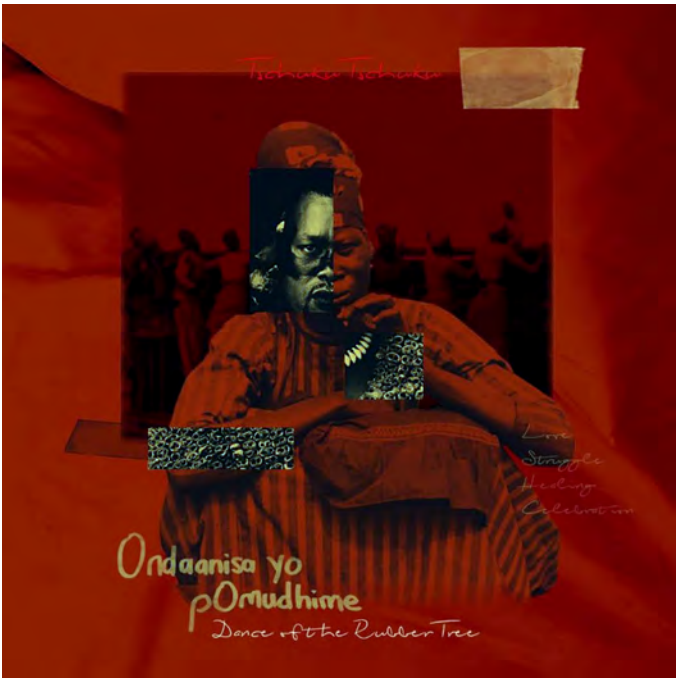

Figure 14: Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, Ondaanisa yo pOmudhime *album cover, 2021. Courtesy of Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja.*

Strikingly, the team's engagement with this particular archival finding inspired further artistic explorations; this points to a shared need to trouble archival repositories stored in Western institutions as well as a strong interconnection between Namibian artists who mutually influence and who inspire one another. On 22 November 2022, Brandt gave a talk entitled "Embodied Memory Work, Memorialisation and new 'Practices of Self' in Contemporary Decolonial Art & Performance Work in Namibia," together with performance artists Gift Uzera and Muningandu Hoveka at the Goethe-Institut of Namibia, in which she referred to a photograph and performance piece by Tuli Mekondjo, whose work I explored in greater detail in chapter 2. The image shown in Brandt's presentation depicts Mekondjo in a similar attire as the woman on the railway tracks, imitating her posture, her gaze and the act of smoking (figure 15).

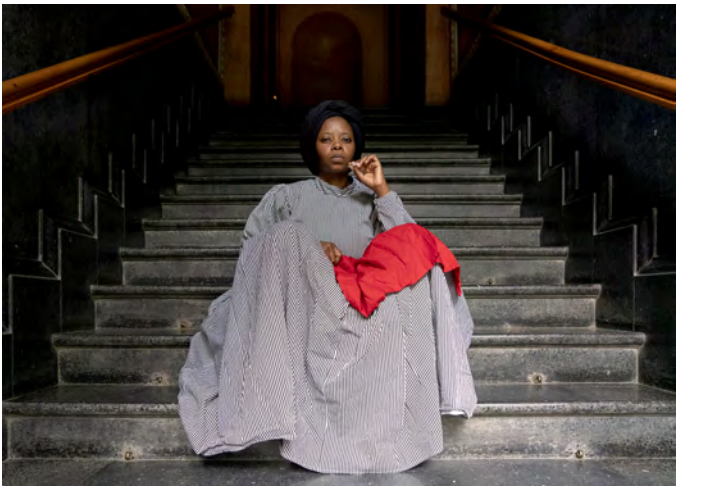

Figure 15: Tuli Mekondjo and Nicola Brandt, Descendants, *Berlin, September 2022. Photographer: Nicola Brandt. Courtesy of the artists.*

Brandt interprets Mekondjo's reenactment of the photograph as an example of a recent trend in the creative scenes of Southern Africa, which she conceptualises as "new practices of self."[176] She observe how artists increasingly turn to the body and performance in Southern African art practices in order to reject the "colonial and ethnographic gaze" and to challenge visual regimes connected to the histories of colonialism and apartheid.[177] In her analysis of transgressive and vanguard artistic practices in Namibia specifically, Brandt underlines how, in a situation where earlier visual regimes still seem to prevail, Mekondjo's work is important and subversive as the artist "becomes her own counter-memorial."[178] She does so through performative and photographic practices, but also by actively working towards the building of new, alternative memorials. The photograph in figure 15 is part of an ongoing project that Mekondjo, Brandt and Hoveka are developing together and that aims at the construction of a counter-memorial that honours and remembers the experience of Namibian women during colonial times. They were awarded third place for their design of a larger-than-life bronze figure inspired by the photograph of the anonymous woman on the railroad tracks in a competition run by Berlin global

176 Brandt, *Landscapes Between Then and Now*, 4.

177 Ibid, xix.

178 Nicola Brandt "Embodied Memory Work, Memorialisation and new 'Practices of Self' in Contemporary Decolonial Art & Performance Work in Namibia," (Windhoek, Goethe-Institut Namibia, 22 November 2022).

village with the name "dekoloniales denkzeichen." The artists envisioned the woman rising up, standing with open arms, being a force and a present and a figure of peace and safety.[179] Their design of walk-in female effigy envisions:

> a woman transitioning from hardship and submission to a position of joyful defiance, openness and peace. Her presence shall represent those who were underrepresented in the history of post colonialism. This is to highlight a feminist basic concept defying any form of structural violence caused by inequality, sexism, patriarchy or homophobia.[180]

Building on the success in the competition, the artists are now working towards realising the sculpture and erecting it in Namibia.[181] Bringing the counter-memorial to Namibia is a crucial step in their aim to decolonise the public sphere (in a country that is still replete with colonial signifiers) and to provide sites for a critical engagement with the colonial past.[182] In a personal conversation, Mekondjo told me about the lack of alternative memorial sites in Namibia in general, the lack of national initiatives to commemorate the genocide and about the lack of other commemorative signs or symbols that speak more explicitly to the experiences of women during the genocidal period.[183] Consequently, her collaboration with Hoveka and Brandt is a pro-active measure to address these aspects. Their approach to the photographed woman, as well as to Mushaandja's engagement with the historical image, entails acts of radical empathy that strive to set the woman free from the colonial archive. The diverse refigurations of the photograph emerge as claims to restitution and to the prerogative of deciding when, how and where archival material figures. More importantly, and to follow this chapter's core interest, the artists' archival interventions with the image and the *Ovizire · Somgu*'s team repeated commitment to the photograph in general centre and remember the people who were (and are) implicated in Namibia's complex colonial history.

Circling back to the overall exhibition, this focus on the subjective is crucial in the diverse multi-media artworks shown throughout *Ovizire · Somgu* and its diverse iterations. Reminiscing about the visual legacies of colonialism, their significance for Namibians today and the possibilities to advance processes of 'decolonisation' to create a better future, Ndjiharine explains: "I think the most important work being

179 Nicola Brandt, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 30 May 2024.

180 berlin global village, 'Unbound. 3rd Rank', dekoloniales denkzeichen, n.d., https://www.berlin-global-village.de/en/dekoloniales-denkzeichen/digital-exhibition/unbound/.

181 Nicola Brandt, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 30 May 2024.

182 See for example: fernsicht im iz3w, "Post-Koloniales Namibia von Vitjitua Ndjiharine (Windhuk 2020)," *YouTube*, 10 March 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoVParp4RMU.

183 Tuli Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 2 January 2022.

done right now is the redefining and reclaiming of these traces of the past in order to usher in new ways of thinking. And most importantly: new ways of viewing ourselves."[184]

3.5: Conclusion

The analysis of selected multi-media artworks by Vitjitua Ndjiharine and Nicola Brandt in the exhibition *Ovizire · Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?* shows how both artists seek creative strategies to understand how their personal biographies are entangled with Namibia's colonial past. In this quest, photographic archives emerge as points of entry to access the past and the ways in which colonial histories are being remembered. However, both the photographs from the public archives of the ethnographic institution MARKK as well as from the private archive that Brandt explored is emotionally challenging, laden with meaning and *troubling*. The photographic material calls for critical interventions and for creative recycling. In tracing the different iterations of *Ovizire · Somgu* and the multidirectional memories evoked throughout the exhibition, we have seen that memory is dynamic organism that is influenced and prompted by forces in its environment, as Pumla Dineo Gqola points out.[185] In the transnational, cross-institutional exhibition, this manifests in the ways in which the different exhibition spaces and national locations influenced the artists' works and curatorial decisions.

The artistic team began their investigation of archives by interrogating the MARKK's vast photographic repositories. As part of this process, Vitjitua Ndjiharine interfered with the material, cut out the photographed subjects and portrayed her modifications in the German museum by means of appropriating the archive for her critique of European institutions' neo-colonial practices. In *Raw Histories*, visual and historical anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards writes: "Increasingly archives and museums have become not places only of exclusion and disappearance, temples of cultural loss, but spaces of contested histories and contesting practices, negotiation, restatement and repossession."[186] With this quote, Edwards simultaneously gestures to the troubling nature and structure of 'colonial' archives and European museums as well as to the spaces' potential for contestation. In a way, with *Ikonowall/Mirrored Reality*, Ndjiharine explored this potential; however, she soon encountered its limits. In their phase of reinvention and self-critical inquiry, European museums struggle to free themselves from their neo-colonial contradictions, and thus remain in an intricate process of transition (for now).

184 fernsicht im iz3w, "Post-Koloniales Namibia".

185 Gqola, *What Is Slavery to Me?*, 15.

186 Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 11.

In response to this, a crucial measure in the artistic project was not to limit the engagement to the discourse on these long overdue transitions in Europe alone, but also to foster cross-institutional and transnational collaborations. In Hamburg, the alternative art salon M.Bassy provided the intimacy needed for the team to continue the sensitive dialogue on the legacies of the colonial past. It offered room for critical interrogations of vulnerability, personal and historical implications and trauma. In M.Bassy, Ndjiharine allowed her cut-out figures to resurface in a redesigned fashion (in *We Shall Not be Moved*), and Brandt installed her work *Mother Says Her Memory is Fading*, thereby shifting attention away from public archives to private photographs and, in doing do, questioning how they can be made to speak to family entanglements in violent regimes. Brandt scrutinises photographs of deceased family members and interrogates how the images relate to fabricated narratives that are often only partially transmitted to subsequent generations. Moving from fading memories to those that seemingly clash, her work *Indifference* juxtaposes two perspectives from different Namibian commemorative cultures to critique the politics of representation in the post-colony and to attune our perception towards concealed memories, traumas and pain inscribed in landscapes, but which often remain invisible to the unknowing eye.

For Brandt and Ndjiharine, the ambiguity of photography opens possibilities for imagination and speculation. At the same time, as I learnt from conversations with the artists, both grappled intensively with the ethical implications connected to opening archives and recycling the material therein. This is mirrored in the careful tone that their works emanate. Covering up the nakedness of the photographed subject and preventing their re-exposition (Ndjiharine) or obscuring a full view of family members (Brandt) are strategies that conjure an aesthetics of affect and empathy. Yet, this approach was perceived controversially by some visitors as the exhibition travelled to Namibia. Those who felt affected by or implicated in the colonial history of the country, specifically the genocide of 1904–1908, lamented that the artworks did not depict the painful 'truth' of the past as it was, instead embellishing and distorting history through certain aesthetic measures.

The different challenges and evocations of the multi-sided exhibition show how post-colonial memory-making for both countries remains a contested arena of debate. For the artists, their creative modes of expression offer channels to negotiate entangled histories and multidirectional memories. By directing the view to the personal and scrutinising their own relation and resonances with the archival photographs, Brandt and Ndjiharine craft visualities beyond colonial paradigms, proposing affective and empathetic strategies of exhibiting and viewing.