

Julia Rensing

TROUBLING ARCHIVES

History and Memory in
Namibian Literature and Art

[transcript] POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

Julia Rensing
Troubling Archives

Editorial

Postcolonial research has brought critical perspectives on colonialism in history and its heritage nowadays into public and scholarly focus. Similarly, postcolonial theorists have shown how deeply European scholarship and education are intertwined with the history and present of colonialism. For quite some time now, this postcolonial critique has triggered important public debates on the colonial past and how it should be remembered. The series **Postcolonial Studies** offers an editorial platform to continue these important discussions in an interdisciplinary framework.

Julia Rensing, born in 1991, is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at the Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel, Switzerland. Her research focuses on discourses related to archives—particularly photographic archives—and their role as sites of knowledge production and contestation. She is a member of freiburg-postkolonial.

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The present work was accepted in the fall semester of 2023 at the Faculty of Philosophy and History at the University of Basel as a dissertation for the award of the doctoral degree. Reviewers: PD Dr. Lorena Rizzo, Prof. Dr. Julia Tischler und Prof. Nomusa Makhubu

The open access edition of this publication was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <https://dnb.dnb.de>



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transcript Verlag | Hermannstraße 26 | D-33602 Bielefeld | live@transcript-verlag.de

Cover illustration and layout: Lina Flüthmann; Cover art: Tuli Mekondjo: detail of “Olutu Lange Nomutima Wange Owa Mangwa Mokaxwa/My Body and Heart is Tied in a Bush,” 2021

Proofreading: Sean O’Dubhghaill, Keely Shinnors

Printing: Majuskel Medienproduktion GmbH, Wetzlar

<https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839406526>

Print-ISBN: 978-3-8376-7760-7 | PDF-ISBN: 978-3-8394-0652-6

ISSN of series: 2703-1233 | eISSN of series: 2703-1241

Printed on permanent acid-free text paper.

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Acknowledgements

I have many people to thank, not just for helping me (in different ways) write this book, but also for accompanying me on my research journey. I am forever grateful for the incredible academic community in Basel, to Luregn Lenggenhager, Giorgio Miescher, Sindi-Leigh McBride, Dag Henrichsen, James Zimmermann Merron, Melanie Sampayo Vidal, Andrea Rosengarten, Kadiatou Diallo, Veit Arlt and for all of my other colleagues. Special thanks go to Lorena Rizzo, who never tired of reading my endless pages and was always supportive of my projects and ideas. Julia Tischler and Nomusa Makhubu taught and inspired me greatly. Their comments, time and help were decisive for gearing my work into (hopefully) the right direction.

Thanks to Sieglinde Lemke, Wolfgang Hochbruck and to Andrea Strothmann for their support during my years both studying and working at the University of Freiburg and thanks once again to Wolfgang for providing access to what would become such a crucial part of my research: the Williams/Dömski family estate. I am grateful to Allan Williams for trusting me with the material and for sharing information about his family history. Thanks to Dag Henrichsen for helping me to find Rosine and Immanuel Rooi and thanks to the Rooi family who were hospitable, trusting and who were always open to my questions; I learned a lot from our conversations. Thanks to Frauke Vrba for navigating the hurdles of reading the old German script *Kurrent* with me.

My time in Namibia was crucial for thinking and for writing this book and was primarily shaped by incredible friends and hosts. I am forever grateful to the Nakatana family, who always made me feel welcome and who taught me a lot – as did Hildegard Titus, who is fighting important struggles on all social fronts and whose energy is, quite simply, impressive. Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja was a great workshop co-organiser and friend to me during all of my stays in the country, as were Nicola Brandt, Vitjitua Ndjiharine and Tuli Mekondjo. Trudie Amulungu and Ulla Dentlinger have taught me so much about their life stories, not just through their books but also through our countless conversations. Thanks also to Imke Rust and Karina Brink who welcomed me into their homes and who shared so many important insights with me. Thanks to all of the participants of the “Knowledge Re-Creation Workshop” (Windhoek, 2022) for giving me valuable feedback on one

of my chapters. I am grateful for what I have learned from Nicola when working together on different (some smaller and some bigger) projects and for the many great conversations we shared.

Thanks to Nelson Mlambo and Coletta Kandemiri for fruitful discussions and collaborations and for providing platforms for me through which to present my work at the University of Namibia. Thanks to Reinhart Kößler, Talita Bangarah and again Tuli Mekondjo for the amazing memories of our trip to the South of Namibia. I am very grateful for what I have learned from Heiko Wegmann, and from working with him for freiburg-postkolonial.

I am thankful to the Humer-Foundation for granting me a 3-year scholarship for my PhD and to the University of Basel's Forschungsfonds for funding my final year of dissertation writing. The SNF's generous support made it possible to publish this book open access.

Thanks also to all of my friends who helped me stay social and to remain sane during this period. A special thanks is owed to Ali Hosseini, who is not only an inspiring thinker and scholar but also the best PhD support and friend that I could imagine. Thanks to my family, particularly my parents and my sister, who always supported me. Finally, thanks to René and Cleo for everything.

Introduction

“The archive is [...] a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhoea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history.”

— *Saidiya Hartman*¹

“The archive as evidence to discover.

The archive as a cemetery.

The archive as matter.”

— *Onyeka Igwe*²

“The archive was not a building, nor even a collection of texts, but the collectively imagined junction of all that was known or knowable, a fantastic representation of an epistemological master pattern, a virtual focal point for the heterogeneous local knowledge of metropolis and empire.”

— *Thomas Richards*³

“The archives are multifaceted and a dynamic inheritance from the ancestors that can be found in all spheres of life.”

— *Wanelisa Xaba*⁴

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- 1 Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 2; see also pages 16–17 in this book.
 - 2 Onyeka Igwe, *Unbossed and Unbound: How Can Critical Proximity Transfigure British Colonial Moving Images?* (PhD diss., University of the Arts London, 2021), 60.
 - 3 Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993), 11; see also page 21 in this book.
 - 4 Wanelisa Xaba, “An Awkward Dance With the Black Middle Class: On Decolonial Scholarship, Grief, Anthropologised Ancestry and the Cleansing Role of Fire,” *Imbiza Journal For African Writing* 1, no. 2 (August 2021): 86; see also chapter 2 pages 147 and chapter 3 page 199 in this book.

“The archive means we are counted in history.”
— *Muholi*⁵

The archive as a death sentence, a tomb, as a cemetery, as inheritance, the archive as a nodal point in the production of knowledge – there are a myriad of ways in which the archive is defined and conceptualised by thinkers from various disciplines ranging from history to cultural and post-colonial studies, from the social sciences to contemporary art. This ambivalence around the concept forms the core subject matter of this book. My interest is specifically informed by the creative and innovative ways in which contemporary authors and artists from Namibia both respond to and engage with archives’ different push and pull forces to negotiate the country’s complex history.

As I was writing this introduction, I listened to a comment made by performer, artist, and cultural worker Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, who addressed the ‘trouble’ of the archive. During a talk, he reflected on an artist residency at a German museum, at which he was commissioned to explore the institution’s photographic repository. Mushaandja asserted: “As a young Namibian being invited to work in a colonial archive that has images from this history, is immediately entering into a crime-scene.”⁶ His statement resonates with an observation made by the late Nigerian-born curator and art critic Okwui Enwezor who deduced that “archives represent scenes of unbearable historical weight.”⁷

However, despite this unbearable weight – or perhaps because of it – there seems to be a growing interest among both Namibian artists and authors to turn to archives in the endeavour to engage with the past, to speculate about the present and to craft new visions for the future, as we will see throughout this book. For the post-colonial nation, this work remains an important yet troubling one, given that the colonial past casts a long shadow on the present: Namibian society grapples with the legacy of a long struggle against two consecutive colonial rulers, officially starting with German occupation in 1884 and ending in March 1990 when the country was liberated from South African colonial control and from their system of apartheid. Autobiography and art offer avenues to negotiate this history and to attest to personal experiences and perspectives on the past for Namibians who

5 Quoted in Suyin Haynes, “‘The Archive Means We Are Counted in History’: Zanele Muholi on Documenting Black, Queer Life in South Africa,” *Time*, 3 December 2020, <https://time.com/5917436/zanele-muholi/>; see also pages 34–35 and page 93 in this book.

6 Visual Arts Network of South Africa, “VANSA – Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja Artist Talk,” *Facebook*, 20 October 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/VisualArtsNetworkSouthAfrica/video/os/nashilongweshipwe-mushaandja-artist-talk/526932745926772/>.

7 Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument* (New York and Göttingen: International Center of Photography and Steidl Publishers, 2008), 33, https://site.s.duke.edu/vms565s_01_f2014/files/2014/08/enwezor2008.pdf.

continue to feel impacted by and implicated in this history. This book pursues a reading of literary and artistic works that draw on public, private and alternative archives in order to express personal views about the reverberations of history. In four case studies, I interrogate how authors and artists position themselves in the present, address identity crises and traumata and find new commemorative strategies to further healing and express calls for justice.

As the title of this book suggests, I understand this practice as both a response to and a way of ‘troubling archives,’ and I deploy the term’s ambivalent meaning as a conceptual framing in my book. The Oxford English Dictionary defines:

trouble, v.

(ˈtrʌb(ə)l)

“to put into a state of (mental) agitation or disquiet; to disturb, distress, grieve, perplex.”⁸

The archives that the creative practitioners grapple with, in the case studies presented in this work, do exactly that, albeit in different ways; they distress, agitate and perplex those who access them. At the same time, it is this troubling nature that draws artists and writers to the archival repositories. The archive’s traction may be linked to what scholars in the field of critical archival studies identify as its potential for contestation.⁹ By means of reflecting on these dimensions, I appropriate another sense of the verb for my readings. According to the OED, to trouble also means:

“to disturb, derange; to interfere with, interrupt; to hinder, mar.”¹⁰

Hence, by troubling the archive, authors and artists actively disturb, derange, interfere and interrupt the logic of the archival order. Their creative intervention, with archival material, challenges gendered and racialised modes of representing Black life, fabricated narratives on family identity or inadequate routes by which to commemorate the past.¹¹

8 Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), s.v. “trouble,” CD-ROM (v.4.0.0.3).

9 Carolyn Hamilton, “Archive and Public Life, in *Babel Unbound: Rage, Reason and Rethinking Public Life* by Lesley Cowling and Carolyn Hamilton (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2020), 125.

10 Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), s.v. “trouble,” CD-ROM (v.4.0.0.3).

11 Throughout this book, I capitalise ‘Black’ to denote a political and social category, as well as a cultural group with shared experiences, rather than referring to a color. ‘White,’ on the other hand, is written in lowercase, as it is historically tied to power and privilege, which I do not wish to perpetuate symbolically by capitalising it. Additionally, I place the term in single quotation marks to highlight the constructed nature of ‘whiteness.’

The works that I have selected for analysis share a focus on the experiences and lives of women throughout the history of Namibia; they are also mainly written and created by women writers and artists. While this choice was strongly influenced by a sensitivity for gender and post-colonial theory, the central incentive to focus on the selected texts and artworks was inspired by the distinct ways in which these authors and artists proffer new perspectives on the past that contest dominant narratives and modes of history writing. The strategies and their effect are the central interests of this book. Thus, this study's main concern lies in questioning *how* Namibian creative archival interventions challenge the foundations of knowledge production both with and without the archive. By centring women's accounts of colonial experience, this book's core aim is to explore how their works not only enrich our understanding of the past but actively contribute to a re-conceptualisation of what counts as 'archive.' In following this aim, each chapter explores how the selected artworks and literary texts critique the ways in which archives influence the production of knowledge, how an intervention in knowledge practices might offer more nuanced, personal approaches to the past and, quite importantly, how the materiality of archival findings bears potential for intervention.

The role of photography is crucial in all of my case studies. As we will see, my interrogation of auto/biographical accounts by writers from the generation that experienced the country's transition from apartheid to a post-colonial nation shows how the authors Tshiwa Trudie Amulungu and Ulla Dentlinger interlace their written narratives of life with photographs gathered from diverse repositories. In doing so, they generate hybrid image-texts that proffer a certain narrative of self and simultaneously speak to the development of visual cultures in rural Namibia from the 1960s onwards. The subsequent case studies shift the view to Namibian multimedia artists from the following generation. Over the course of the following two chapters, I explore how the artists Tuli Mekondjo, Imke Rust, Vitjitua Ndjiharine and Nicola Brandt use their creative modes of expression as a way to modify and refigure archival photography. My analyses of selected artworks by Mekondjo, Rust, Ndjiharine and Brandt reveal how these artists convert problematic modes of representation into redesigned aesthetics, thereby challenging the archival order and critically interrogating the place of memory among their families and within the post-colonial nation.

My final case study moves on to question the practice of archival research and its relation to history-making more explicitly, by means of conflating my interest in visual and narrative texts. In the last chapter, I investigate a family estate that I was entrusted with and the history of a German settler woman whose home – farm Frauenstein near Windhoek – serves as a central setting in a novel by South African author André Brink. In attuning my analysis to the unexpected links between my research on the entirely unexplored historical material, and Brink's fictionalised account, this chapter makes explicit the central questions at the heart of this book:

how is knowledge with and against the archive produced? What kind of potential for contesting the archival logic do literature (namely, auto/biographical accounts and fiction) and art hold? Finally, what are the lessons that these creative archival interventions teach us in the humanities, academia and archival research at large?

Interrelations: Cultural Projects and Contemporary Political Discourses

In a global political and cultural climate, in which the issue of restitution of cultural goods and calls for the decolonisation of institutions, public spaces and practices of knowledge production remain heatedly debated, the questions outlined above are evidently of larger socio-political interest and exceed the academic terrain exclusively. The international discussion on material belonging and practices of keeping forms the discursive space in which my interrogation on creative archival interventions is situated. The authors' and artists' responses to archival dynamics may also offer avenues out of discursive impasses, given that the debate on restitution seems to have become stalled and preoccupied with legal questions that pertain to 'owning' and the duties to repatriate primarily.

With regards to the legacy of colonialism in Namibia more specifically, the country's complex colonial history and its repercussions on the present received heightened attention around the world when the Namibian and German governments started their bilateral negotiations in 2015 on the issue of reparations for the genocide between 1904–08.¹² As I am writing this introduction, both governments are in the final stages of completing their joint declaration on the genocide. The initial draft, completed in May 2021, drew significant criticism, prompting negotiations for an addendum. Following changes in political leadership in both Germany and Namibia, the parties have resumed talks, aiming to conclude the agreement in 2025.¹³ It is clear, however, that this agreement will remain controversial. Key criticism centres on the negotiated apology, which many Herero, Nama, Damara,

12 It is important to note, however, that Namibians have been petitioning the United Nations as early as the late 1940s (with Herero Chief, Hosea Kutako, being one of the first to do so in 1946), calling global attention to the South African regime's human rights violations. (See: Dennis U Zaire, "Namibia and the United Nations until 1990," *Konrad Adenauer Foundation*, n.d., 39–40, https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=326947fe-2317-be35-a68a-0a7a2d2afe75&groupId=252038.) However, I am focusing on the most recent developments in terms of world-wide recognition and engagement with Namibian colonial history.

13 Loide Jason, 'Genocide Talks to Resume ... NNN Encapsulates Oil, Land, Unemployment, Corruption', *new era*, 8 April 2025, <https://neweralive.na/genocide-talks-to-resume-nnn-encapsulates-oil-land-unemployment-corruption/>

and San people feel will be imposed without their proper inclusion in the process, as well as on the scope and distribution of financial compensation.¹⁴

While the question of an appropriate acknowledgement and reparation remains disputed, a growing number of cultural institutions responded to the increased pressure to publicly address their implication in histories of injustice. Examples of this can be found in the high number of projects and art residencies commissioned by German institutions that were devoted to German colonialism and its legacy.¹⁵ The German cultural sector at large also shows a heightened sensitivity to the country's colonial history and has similarly been funding more projects in the last decade, following the trend of 'decolonising knowledge'.¹⁶

These developments are often promoted as positive trends towards greater cross-cultural exchange and mutual understanding, paving the way for a possible future reconciliation. However, scholars and creative practitioners have expressed serious scepticism towards the political agenda and in terms of these projects' authenticity. One example is writer Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor who gave a powerful and provocative keynote to the international conference 'Colonialism as Shared History. Past, Present, Future' (October 2020), a conference organised by the Federal Foreign Office, the German historians and by the Gerda Henkel Foundation.¹⁷ In it, she dismantled the idea of a 'shared history' as a hypocritical framing.¹⁸ As a metaphor for the horrors of colonialism, she paints a picture of a violated, raped, robbed

14 For further points of critique, see: Henning Melber. "Germany's Genocide in Namibia: Deal Between the Two Governments Falls Short in Delivering Justice," *The Conversation*, 7 January, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/germanys-genocide-in-namibia-deal-between-the-two-governments-falls-short-of-delivering-justice-246719#>

15 See, for example, the exhibition *Freiburg und Kolonialismus: Gestern? Heute!*, at the Augustinermuseum Freiburg im Breisgau; the project *Confronting Colonial Pasts, Envisioning Creative Futures*, at the Humboldtforum Berlin or the cross-institutional collaboration *Ovizire · Somgu* at the MARKK in Hamburg, explored elsewhere in this book; for other examples of cultural 'de-colonial' work see projects by the literary archive Marbach, the arts academy Schloss Solitude or events by Goethe Institutes across the globe.

16 In this book, I will use single quotation marks to flag the contested character of the term 'de-colonisation' as raised by different academics, cultural workers and activists who draw our attention to the ways in which it has increasingly become co-opted, appropriated and hijacked for both different discourses and projects. See for example: Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2022); Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (September 2012): 1–40.

17 Gerda Henkel Stiftung, "Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor | Derelict Shards: The Roamings of Colonial Phantoms," *L.I.S.A. Wissenschaftsportal Gerda Henkel Stiftung*, 9 October 2020, https://lisa.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/sharedhistory_keynote_owuor.

18 Published keynote address: Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, "Derelict Shards & The Roaming of Colonial Phantoms," *The Elephant* (blog), 6 November 2020, <https://www.theelephant.info/analysis/2020/11/06/derelict-shards-the-roaming-of-colonial-phantoms/>

and murdered family whose experience of violence and trauma cannot possibly be conceived of as a shared one with the very same psychopath who inflicted this pain on them.¹⁹ She continues to ask, then, what it is exactly that is being shared in the aftermath of colonialism by addressing the conference organisers, Germany at large and her broader audience:

The purpose of the colonial project was singular:

Seize wealth and profit by all means necessary, even genocide. And your people did so with extraordinary success. Nothing says ‘shared’ as does African goods building European economies for 400 years. [...] There is a Mount Everest of debt to the African continent that has not ever been repaid, let alone referred to; it includes royalties in commodities illegally benefitted from for over 400 years. These include coffee, diamonds, gold, and uranium. Human labour, taxes. This is just a start. [...] If we are to trust in the shared intent to repair historical wrongs, are you suggesting that you are prepared to endure what assessing and unravelling the economic matrices would entail? Are you yourselves prepared for what you will lose?²⁰

Ending her speech with similarly strong remarks, Owuor states: “We are weary and wary of you. [...] We are tired of bleeding every time we meet you. You are exhausting [...] You are soul-draining. You feed off violence.”²¹ With a view to the power imbalances between those who initiate cultural and academic projects and their invited interlocutors from the Global South, Owuor prompts us to question who really profits from a commissioned cross-cultural engagement with the ‘shared’ colonial past. Cultural worker, writer and musician Asher Gamedze and Mushaandja similarly express their weariness in a conversation about what they term the “contradictions of colonialisms” in today’s cultural sector.²² Both are suspicious of how the recently achieved global attention to the Herero and Nama genocide and the issue of reparations coincided with a sudden increase in projects and funding from Germany.²³ They argue that the very fact that allegedly collaborative projects are being mandated and “bank-rolled by the Europeans” is sadistic.²⁴ From the very onset, these cultural projects largely rely on the historical injustices and imbalances that they aim to address, while simultaneously maintaining, perpetuating and making money from them.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Asher Gamedze, “New (i.e. Old) Migrations,” *People’s Stories Project*, 29 December 2019, <https://www.psp-culture.com/culture/new-i-e-old-migrations/>.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

Reflecting on his experience with German administrators, and their extractive approaches in commissioned arts residencies, Mushaandja argues: “Them being interested in the memory, culture, politics [...] automatically comes with control, they want to control the narrative. That’s not even a hidden thing” but is instead illustrated by the often-echoed reminder “this is German taxpayers’ money.”²⁵ However, despite these strong points of critique, many (African) artists remain dependent upon networking and funding opportunities to advance their careers. This is particularly true for Namibian artists who are living and working in the post-colony, where the financial support for creative practitioners in the cultural sector is rather limited. This is not only due to Namibia’s restrictive cultural policies, but also to prevailing colonial structures that mark the country’s cultural and social landscape.²⁶ As we learn from artist Vitjitua Ndjiharine: “There are challenges for Black artists living and working in an economy controlled not only by foreign interest, but a minority White population.”²⁷

Due to these power dynamics, many Namibian creative practitioners’ income and artistic future often rely on their participation in residencies abroad that are committed to the issue of colonialism, which reduces their freedom of expression to an exclusive engagement with this theme and historical frame. The predicament that emerges from this is that African experiences remain imagined as being tied to the history of imperialism and colonialism exclusively.²⁸ Topics independent from or outside of this frame – such as love, futurism, self-determination, local experience, present-day culture – appear inconceivable.²⁹

Commemorative Practices With and Without The Archive

Circling back to Saidiya Hartman’s epigraph to this chapter, and considering archives as “a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body,” we are reminded of the emotional challenge implied in these (allegedly lucrative) art residencies that are devoted to exploration and engagement with archival reposi-

25 Ibid.

26 Naemi Meier, *Narrative Dekolonialer Kunstpraxen in Archival Art: Besprochen an Den Beiden Künstlerischen Zeitgenössischen Positionen Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja Und Vitjitua Ndjiharine* (Master’s thesis, unpublished, University of Basel, 2022), 56.

27 Paula Alexiou, Camilo Angola, Maling Freytag, Moritz Gemmeke, Tilman Garenflo, Hanna Siegert and Michael Pröpper, “Encountering Post-Colonial Realities in Namibia,” *Ethnoscripts Zeitschrift Für Aktuelle Ethnologische Studien* 22, no. 1 (2020): 139.

28 Thembinkosi Goniwe, “Debating and Framing *SPace: Currencies in Contemporary African Art*,” *African Identities* 9, no. 2 (May 2011): 189.

29 Ibid.

ries.³⁰ Mushaandja illuminates how troubling this highly sensitive task can be for creatives and scholarship recipients:

For some of us, it is incredibly triggering and traumatising to re-encounter these images and moments. The work of reconciliation, remembrance and healing require[s] safety and sensitivity especially for the communities that inherited the pain and long-lasting trauma of colonial violence.³¹

As we have seen, however, whether European museums and cultural institutions are able to offer the necessary safe space for artists to revisit the past remains questionable. Moreover, both Hartman's and Mushaandja's words powerfully evoke the violence that resonates from photographs of the colonial era, the brutality that led to the creation of archival holdings in the first place and the ways in which archives continue to haunt those who feel impacted by the history of colonialism and imperialism.

This sinister dimension has become increasingly important in public debates on the issue of 'decolonising' European institutions. In their seminal study on the importance of restitution of cultural goods from the colonial era – which has significantly contributed to bringing these themes onto a global political agenda – Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy emphasise how the great majority of objects in European museums “have been ripped away from their cultures of origin by way of colonial violence.”³² Reflecting on the insights shared by African interlocutors during their research, Sarr and Savoy conclude that “archives have become a veritable topos of *missing links*,” explaining further that “the conditions – of exchange, purchase, gifts, and symbolic or physical violence – in which the removal of these objects took place, have left their marks on the collective memory as much as the absence of the actual physically displaced objects themselves.”³³ The recent efforts of institutions to reinvent themselves, to reform archival politics and to question the issue of ownership may be understood as positive developments against this backdrop. However, precisely how sustainable these endeavours will be remains to be seen, given that issues of control and accessibility remain a bone of contention in these discourses. After all, it is only through residency programmes that temporary access to previously locked up archival repositories is granted for many artists and researchers from the Global South. And structural problems remain: cultural objects, artworks, documents and photographs from the colonial era were not only taken to European

30 Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 2.

31 Mushaandja, “Documenting and Representing Legacies of Violence: (De)Coloniality?” 38.

32 Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, “The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics,” trans. Drew S. Burk (Paris: Philippe Rey/Seuil, 2018), 87, https://www.about-africa.de/images/sonstiges/2018/sarr_savoy_en.pdf.

33 *Ibid.*; emphasis in original.

archives, libraries and collections, but are still often exclusively kept there; this implies that so-called 'source-communities' often barely know about their existence.³⁴ How are these stakeholders ever to claim ownership and express their interest in such material? Scholars in the field of critical archival studies have increasingly addressed the coloniality of power that defines archival structures, calling for a reform to make previous owners the core target group and to gear archival practices to their needs specifically.³⁵

In many ways, Sarr and Savoy's framing of archives, as the topos of missing links, also holds true for the context of Namibia in which, and ever since the period of looting, there have been relentless demands for the return of cultural objects, 'human remains' and other archival holdings.³⁶ While it may be argued that this material absence left "marks on the collective memory" of the communities, as Sarr and Savoy have, it remains equally important to stress how Namibians have always engaged in diverse commemorative strategies by which to maintain and pass on their knowledge and memories of the past. Oral narratives – transmitted from one generation to the next – are examples of this. In Herero oral culture, *Omitango*, so-called *praise songs*, are particularly crucial as media to "praise and comment on a particularly remarkable subject, place of person," as Larissa Förster writes.³⁷ Other examples include annual commemorative rituals practised by the Herero community, re-enactments and the use of material elements or the establishment of cultural institutions to either remember or reinterpret the genocidal war.³⁸

Commemorative practices attend not only to the horror of the genocide, but to German colonialism at large, experiences during South African colonial rule and the terror of apartheid as well as to the long battle for freedom during the Namibian liberation struggle, which officially ended in 1990. While these practices can take many

34 The term is to be conceived with caution since it implies that 'source communities' were solely the *origin* from which an object, artefact or even a member of that group (often equally problematically called 'human remains') came from, but now might *belong* somewhere else. The term 'previous owners' captures that the rights of belonging still pertain to that group more accurately.

35 Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives," *ARCHIVARIA, The Journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists* 81 (2016): 24.

36 See the earlier footnote on 'human remains'; many critics argue that the term 'ancestors' is more accurate, capturing that we are talking about relatives of certain groups and not simply a 'remainder' of a person.

37 Larissa Förster, "Land and Landscape in Herero Oral Culture: Cultural and Social Aspects of the Land Question in Namibia," *Namibia: Analyses and Views* (Berlin: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2005), 4, https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=3692d0b0-10eb-74da-d4df-6c022907371c&groupId=252038.

38 Larissa Förster, "From 'General Field Marshal' To 'Miss Genocide': The Reworking of Traumatic Experiences among Herero-Speaking Namibians," *Journal of Material Culture* 13, no. 2 (July 2008): 192.

forms – being performed either publicly or privately – Namibian independence and the emergence of the sovereign nation-state saw the establishment of new collective and state-organised commemorative events, symbols and rituals.³⁹ At the same time, the formation of an independent government also made it possible to call for international and official recognition of the war against the Herero and Nama as genocide.⁴⁰ We have seen how this state intervention, by bringing the memory of this gruesome period onto a global political agenda, might also fail to meet the demands of those still suffering from the aftermath and the trauma of the genocide ever since the fraught negotiations between Germany and Namibia that started in 2015.⁴¹

What is notable, however, is how Namibians have always found ways to transmit knowledge, to keep up commemorative practices and (in different ways) to archive material elements in the face of colonial oppression of both regimes – Germany and South Africa – and in the face of a post-colonial state pushing to dictate national commemorative narratives and practices.⁴² The colonial exploitation of labour, the apartheid regime and particularly the system of contract work made it difficult for Black Namibians to accumulate and to safeguard possessions or to build commemorative infrastructures. Yet, people have crafted avenues to do so. In the following case studies, we will explore some of these strategies and will also direct our attention to the ways in which Namibians both question and challenge state-mandated routes of memorialising, celebrating and remembering the past. Such practices and repertoires contribute to vast repositories of resources that can be understood as Namibian alternative archives or counter-archives to national or colonial ones. This assertion calls for a more detailed unpacking of the prevailing understandings of ‘archives’ as well as of how conceptions of the term have shifted over time.

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- 39 Consider, for example, the official establishment and annual celebration of Namibia Independence Day on 21 March or the ways in which Namibia’s cityscape is dotted with statues honouring the heroes of the freedom struggle.
- 40 Förster, “From ‘General Field Marshal’ To ‘Miss Genocide,’” 192.
- 41 For Herero and Nama activists and those in solidarity with the communities, the struggle for recognition and compensation remains unresolved, which implies an active opposition against the state’s negotiations in the matter.
- 42 In reference to this, confer: Justine Hunter, “Getting the Balance Right Between Justice and Sustainable Peace?” in *The Long Aftermath of War: Reconciliation and Transition in Namibia*, eds. André Du Pisani, Reinhart Kößler and William A. Lindeke (Freiburg i. Br: Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institut, 2010), 403–33; Reinhart Kößler, “Facing a Fragmented Past. Memory, Culture and Politics in Namibia,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 33, no. 2 (June 2007): 369–373.

The Archival Turn

Conventionally, ‘archives’ are understood as cloistered spaces, where stuff is packed away and safely stored. If not actively sealed off from public scrutiny, there their treasures wait, accumulating dust until, perchance, a lonely (and duly accredited) researcher arrives.⁴³

This basic definition, as introduced by Carolyn Hamilton, frames archives as neutral or innocent repositories of documents and material that attest to the past and that offer access to stories and biographies from long ago. However, the anthropologist and historian is also quick to dismantle this understanding as a misperception, stressing how already “the *presence of an archive* is invariably a power-laden assertion in public life,” given that it lays bare a claim about the archived subject or area “as having a history worth preserving, investigating and reinvestigating, in perpetuity.”⁴⁴ The archive’s power dynamics have become a focal point in the social sciences and humanities, as well as in critical archival studies and cultural discourses at large, ever since the so-called archival turn of the 1990s. Informed heavily by post-structuralist thought, and particularly philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, the archive has been questioned and refigured as “at once expression and instrument of power,” as archivist Verne Harris explains with reference to both of the aforementioned French thinkers.⁴⁵

Foucault and Derrida contributed extensively to a shift away from pragmatic conceptions of archives (such as the one outlined by Hamilton above) and towards a critical rethinking of the archive’s interrelations with control, power and knowledge through their pertinent works *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) and *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*⁴⁶ (1995). In *The Order of Things*, published three years before *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault more closely interrogated the mechanisms of knowledge production and laid bare how our conceptions of ‘truth’ and reality always rely on certain epistemological assumptions.⁴⁷ In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he tied his analysis more directly to the role of the archive in knowledge production, proposing in his famously cited quote that: “the archive is first the law of what can be said.”⁴⁸

43 Hamilton, “Archive and Public Life,” 127.

44 *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

45 Verne Harris, “The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (March 2002): 85.

46 The publication was initially a lecture given at an international conference in London in 1994, with the original title “The Concept of the Archive: A Freudian Impression.”

47 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2006). First published 1966.

48 Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 145. First published 1969.

Foucault emphasises the archive's discursive power, its function as the ordering system that both structures and guides what counts as knowledge.⁴⁹ However, his definition of the term remains largely abstract. Ambiguity is also central to Derrida's work, who stated rather directly that "nothing is less reliable, nothing is less clear today than the word 'archive.'"⁵⁰ Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* takes Foucault's analysis of the notions of knowledge and power further by directing our attention to the archivist, the institution and its laws as well as to archival mechanisms.⁵¹ Following his line of thought, we see how the archivist, by virtue of archiving, writes knowledge into being while, simultaneously, the institution and the laws that govern it authorise these knowledge creation processes. It is here that Derrida's analysis has been most influential for post-colonial thinking about the archive, given that he dismantles how:

There is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.⁵²

In countries with a colonial history, such as Namibia, the questions of access, participation, interpretation, ownership and control over archives remain particularly vexed. In contemporary discourses on 'colonial' or 'imperial' archives, the dimensions of who shapes, writes and archives history (and whether, or how, these records can be made to speak to a post-colonial nation) remain troubling for archivists and users alike. On a pragmatic level, 'colonial' or 'imperial' archives can be defined in purely temporal terms, as, for example, Thomas Richards does in his study on how the 19th century British Empire relied on data and information gathering to "control knowledge," thereby both establishing and maintaining its imperial power.⁵³ For the case of the 'Namibian colonial archive,' author and library scientist Ellen Ndeshi Namhila similarly proposes a temporal classification when she writes in '*Little Research Value: African Estate Records and Colonial Gaps in a Post-Colonial National Archive:*

Colonial archives are, in the context of this study, defined as both archival records and archival institutions that were created and maintained under colonial rule, i.e. in the political context of a territory that is not sovereign but ruled by another

49 Ibid., 145–146.

50 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 90.

51 Ibid., 17, emphasis in original.

52 Ibid., 4.

53 Richards, *The Imperial Archive*, 4–6.

country, and in a colonial situation, i.e. in a social context where people are treated in a discriminatory manner according to their ethnicity, race or origin.⁵⁴

In his preface to Namhila's book, Namibian historian Dag Henrichsen emphasises what her research on missing, mismanaged and neglected files and records reveals, namely "the epistemic foundations" of colonial archives: the ways in which the life of the 'white' colonial elite in the country has been meticulously processed and documented, while the "dead Natives" are largely left out in the production of history.⁵⁵

Many scholars in the field follow this tack by linking the 'colonial' archives not only to a particular timeframe, but also to what the content of the repositories both shows and tells. The issue of representation is evoked by various writers who critique the epistemic injustice of how the material attests to Black experiences, which – if they are recorded at all – are "seen through white eyes."⁵⁶ With regards to visual repositories more specifically, the patriarchal mode of representing women, controlled by the male gaze is particularly troubling.⁵⁷ The colonial archive's "aesthetic order, which notoriously put[s] the black female body on display and fixed colonised Africans within essentialist gendered, racial and tribal categories" is a central issue of concern for academics, artists and activists alike who turn to archival photography to dismantle and to challenge these modes of representation.⁵⁸ In the selected case studies, we will engage with the different ways in which scholars and creative practitioners read and re-interpret photographs from the colonial era in greater detail. At this point, what is crucial is how the archive has increasingly come to be seen as a "site of contestation."⁵⁹

Researchers in the field call for a shift in reading practices of archives in the endeavour to rethink the concept. Laura Ann Stoler's reflections were particularly important in promoting a change in approaches to archives, advocating for a reframing from "archive-as-source to archive-as-subject."⁶⁰ For her, this implied no longer conceiving of archives merely as "sites of knowledge retrieval, but of knowledge production."⁶¹ Taking this intervention seriously implies that it is not enough to turn to

54 Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, "Little Research Value:" *African Estate Records and Colonial Gaps in a Post-Colonial National Archive* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2017), 9.

55 Dag Henrichsen quoted in Namhila, "Little Research Value," xiii.

56 Harris, "The Archival Sliver," 73.

57 Margie Orford, "Gathering Scattered Archives," in *Writing Namibia: Literature in Transition*, eds. Sarala Krishnamurthy and Helen Vale (Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, 2018), 43.

58 Darren Newbury, Lorena Rizzo and Kylie Thomas (eds.), *Women and Photography in Africa: Creative Practices and Feminist Challenges* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 13.

59 Hamilton, "Archive and Public Life," 125.

60 Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (March 2002): 87.

61 Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," 87.

archival repositories for the extraction of knowledge. Instead, a critical questioning of the archive's suggestive truth claims, the practices of archiving and the power dynamics therein is also needed. Stoler argues that we must read archives “along their fault lines as much as against their grain” by means of dismantling the epistemological patterns that make up the archival order, while challenging them at the same time.⁶²

Interestingly, despite this radical questioning of traditional understandings of archives and their epistemic foundations, a fascination with archives as sites of knowledge and as a concept seems to remain. Instead of rejecting them altogether, cultural practitioners and researchers explore their multiple layers of meaning and the analytic yield of new reading practices. The definition of what counts as an archive has been opened extensively throughout the course of these changing approaches, as Stoler argues:

In cultural theory, ‘the archive’ has a capital ‘A,’ is figurative, and leads elsewhere. It may represent neither material site nor a set of documents. Rather, it may serve as a strong *metaphor* for any corpus of selective forgettings and collections – and, as importantly, for the seductions and longings that such quests for, and accumulations of, the primary, originary, and untouched entail.⁶³

In my reading of Namibian art practices and auto/biographical accounts, I follow this wider approach to archives, acknowledging what Arondekar terms as the “figurative flexibility of the concept.”⁶⁴ Instead of positing a fixed working definition of archives for my reading of the case studies, I approach the auto/biographical accounts and artworks with openness to the new, innovative formations and reconceptualisations that Namibian artists and writers themselves propose. This mode of analysis helped me to access how cultural practitioners diversify what counts as archives and how their reconceptualisations enrich archival research practices at large. In the conclusion of this book, I will reflect on the potential of creative archival interventions and will also assess the limits and stakes thereof.

The Archival Turn in the Arts

What were the motivating forces that drew artists and cultural practitioners to archival repositories or to the archive as a theme of interrogation? In his seminal

62 Ibid., 109.

63 Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” 94, emphasis in original.

64 Arondekar, *For the Record*, 2.

article “An Archival Impulse,” art historian Hal Foster notes how an artistic interest in archives was already strong in the pre-war period’s art scene, in which artists explored the form of photomontage as political commentary.⁶⁵ Later, artists increasingly engaged with the ‘archival’ by drawing from informal archives and produced those as well.⁶⁶ The upsurge of the archive-trend in the art scene of the 1990s (as part of the archival turn) is strongly connected to broader epistemological shifts at the time, such as post-structuralists’ questioning of what counts as historical fact, or late manifestations of “postmodernist appropriational practices” such as “the turning inside-out of the institutions of modernism,” as Cheryl Simon explains.⁶⁷ The artistic sector’s increasing pull to the archive also occurred during a rising global and interdisciplinary interest in memory that also emerged in the 1990s and continues to thrive.⁶⁸ As part of this development, it has not only been questioned how history is written and from whose perspectives, but more vigorously how we remember, how memory is shaped and controlled as well as who is remembered and who is not.⁶⁹

These preoccupations have been tested and explored in various forms of artistic archival interventions for many years now. In 2008, Okwui Enwezor curated the well-received and much-cited exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* that precisely addressed the central role of archives in contemporary art and showed a selection of works by artists who explored the potential of photographic images to speak to topics such as the ones outlined above: memory, history, identity and loss.⁷⁰ The overall exhibition’s purpose was to show how:

archival documents, information gathering, data-driven visual analysis, the contradictions of master narratives, the invention of counter-archives and thus counter-narratives, the projection of the social imagination into sites of testimony, witnessing, and much more inform and infuse the practices of contemporary artists.⁷¹

65 Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” 3.

66 Ibid., 5.

67 Cheryl Simon, “Introduction: Following the Archival Turn,” *Visual Resources* 18, no. 2 (January 2002): 102.

68 Carbone, “Archival Art,” 258.

69 Ibid., 258.

70 Exhibited from 18 January until 4 May 2008 at the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York. Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument*, 22; International Center of Photography, “Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art” media release, January 2008, https://www.icp.org/sites/default/files/exhibition/credits/sites/default/files/exhibition_pdfs/Archive_PRESS.PDF.

71 Ibid.

From this outline, we can glean how political and philosophical discourses inspire creative practices. More importantly, however, there is a reciprocity in this dynamic that I aim to emphasise in this book by shifting the view to artistic work's potential to open up new perspectives on theoretical debates. Art not only provides visual or textual commentary to the archival discourse, but also actively contributes to a redress and reconceptualisation of the archive, as we shall see.

Today's theoretical and creative archival engagements are often dedicated to archival silences, omissions and discriminations. Both researchers and artists who explore the histories of slavery, colonialism, imperialism or the history of the marginalised in oppressive regimes more broadly grapple with what Carine Zaayman has framed as "the anarchieve," in other words, "that which is not contained by archive, that which is without archive."⁷² Examples of this abound; we may think of Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2007) in which she meditates on the history of the Atlantic slave trade, her own geological implication therein and introduces the story of an elusive archival figure, Venus, a young girl tortured to death on a British slave ship.⁷³ Other recuperative projects committed to the biographies of Black women whose lives figure (often only in the cracks and margins) in colonial archives are Yvette T. Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2007) or Zaayman's article "Anarchive (Picturing Absence)," in which she turns to the biography of Krotoa, also called Eva van de Kaap, who worked as a servant and later translator for the colonial administrator of the Dutch East India Company Jan van Riebeeck.⁷⁴ Krotoa married and had children with a Dutch colonist and in her various roles had to mediate the worlds of the colonial society and her indigenous community. She was eventually abandoned by both and died in 1674 on Robben Island. Krotoa remains an important figure in the South African imagination and collective public memory on the era of slavery and colonialism due to the large number of historical accounts and archival sources that attest to her life. Nevertheless, Zaayman concludes:

Krotoa's is a story of loss. Though there are extant archival documents, originally contemporary with her life, that mention Krotoa, this material is limited and exists only in the writing of others where she makes but a sketchy appearance. There is no coherent or physical archive dedicated to Krotoa as such.⁷⁵

This predicament that Zaayman highlights with Krotoa's story is crucial. She emphasises the frustration with the limits of archival reconstruction that call for critical –

72 Carine Zaayman, "Anarchive (Picturing Absence)," in *Uncertain Curature: In and out of the Archive*, eds. Carolyn Hamilton and Pippa Skotnes (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2014), 319.

73 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008); She continues this contemplation in her essay "Venus in Two Acts."

74 Yvette T. Christiansë, *Unconfessed* (New York: Other Press, 2007).

75 Zaayman, "Anarchive (Picturing Absence)," 305.

and creative – responses. We find various examples of performers, artists and writers who engage rather directly with the archive of historical figures. In the case of Krotoa, spoken word artists Toni Stuart produced a performance that “seeks to re-imagine her story through her own voice, in an effort to disrupt the white male colonial gaze through which her story has largely been told.”⁷⁶ Similar artistic and scholarly engagements with the lives of elusive archival figures are those committed to Sarah Baartman, a Khoi woman born in colonial South Africa who was taken to Europe and exhibited in public shows as spectacle. Scholarly reflections include those of Natasha Gordon-Chipembere, Yvette Abrahams, Pamela Scully and Clifton Crais, Carli Coetzee or H.B. Young, to mention but a few.⁷⁷ As a symbol for (colonial, patriarchal) voyeuristic exploitation, she is reimagined in artworks by Senzeni Marasela (*Sarah Baartman Remembered*, 2005), Lady Skollie (*Untitled. [Hottentot Skollie]*, 2016; *Objectifying Thyself Before Others Do*, 2016) or in the play *Venus vs. Modernity* by poet Lebo Mashile and directed by Pamela Nomvete and Koleka Putuma (2018).

Where are the differences between these forms of engagement – scholarly works and artistic ones – and where do they share grounds? While scholarship often aims to dismantle the epistemic injustice of the colonial archive and its problematic modes of representation, many of the artistic examples listed above show how creative interventions move one step further. Scientific research seems to remain dedicated to reconstructing their biographies, as far as the archival record allows, and to reestablishing visibility for the historical figures when it comes to a recuperation of those who were silenced, marginalised, misrepresented or forgotten. A search for notions of factuality and objectivity seems to prevail in this quest, even though the “role of archives and records as arbiters of truth” has long been debunked as a myth.⁷⁸ Disciplines such as history thus aim for transparency in their methods and approaches, which implies addressing dead ends and archival silences directly. In comparison, writer-researchers like Christiansë, Hartman or

76 Toni Stuart, “Krotoa-Eva’s Suite – a Cape Jazz Poem in Three Movements, by Toni Stuart,” *Africa in Words* (blog), 28 May 2018, <https://africanwords.com/2018/05/28/krotoa-evas-suite-a-cape-jazz-poem-in-three-movements-by-toni-stuart/>.

77 Natasha Gordon-Chipembere (ed.), *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Yvette Abrahams, “Disempowered to Consent: Sara Baartman and Khoisan Slavery in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony and Britain,” *South African Historical Journal* 35, no. 1 (November 1996): 89–114; Pamela Scully and Clifton Crais, “Race and Erasure: Sara Baartman and Hendrik Cesars in Cape Town and London,” *Journal of British Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008): 301–323; Carli Coetzee, *Written under the Skin: Blood and Intergenerational Memory in South Africa* (Rochester: Boydell and Brewer Limited, 2019), 3; Hershini Bhana Young, *Illegible Will: Coercive Spectacles of Labor in South Africa and the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

78 Lesley Cowling and Carolyn Hamilton (eds.), *Babel Unbound: Rage, Reason and Rethinking Public Life* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2020), 11.

Zaayman are not only mindful of the myth to find ‘truth’ or ‘facts’ in the archive, but they also aim to transcend the limits set by purely academic working methods. They turn to narration as a mode by which to fill archival gaps (Christiansë), to develop “critical fabulation” as a strategy to approximate and reflect on what *could have happened* (Hartman) or they employ the camera as a tool to attend to that which the archive withholds (Zaayman).⁷⁹ For artists, poets or writers, the code of conduct in their practices sets no boundaries. Free associations, imaginations and narratives are central parts of the endeavour to create what Foster termed “counter-hegemonic archives.”⁸⁰ A prominent strategy to achieve this is to re-envision and assert the agency and subjectivity of those neglected in official writings of history. The resulting new perspectives on the past challenge dominant historical narratives and commemorative routes. Following anthropologist Ferdinand de Jong:

Postcolonial artists explore colonial archives in order to produce an art of emancipation. Through the return, recuperation, and reenactment of archives, they point to the potential of forgotten pasts and unanticipated futures lingering in the imperial archive.⁸¹

The aspect of temporality is crucial, given that many archival interventions not only aim to address past wrongs, but also to craft new knowledge and an alternative visuality for the future. The term ‘creative archival intervention’ used here – which will reoccur throughout the course of this book – largely follows Vera Heimisch’s understanding, who highlights the concept’s versatile nature.⁸² She argues that a common denominator of interventionist projects is their critical stance towards the extant social order and their aspirations to criticise and challenge the status quo as a form of “decolonial resistance.”⁸³ In a similar vein, theatre scholar Azadeh Sharifi understands ‘interventions’ as crucial strategies for the self-empowerment of marginalised subjects, explaining how they are “necessary ‘disruptions’ of hegemonic cultural discourses.”⁸⁴ With regards to the cultural discourse on the archive

79 Yvette Christiansë, *Unconfessed*; Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11; Zaayman, “Anarchive (Picturing Absence).”

80 Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” 9.

81 Ferdinand de Jong, “At Work in the Archive: Introduction to Special Issue,” *World Art* 6, no. 1 (2 January 2016): 14.

82 Vera Heimisch, *Interventionen* (Bremen: Heinrich Böll-Stiftung, 2020), 29–33, https://boell-bremen.de/sites/default/files/2020-11/Interventionen_o.pdf. Based on Vera Heimisch, *Künstlerische Interventionen als dekoloniale Strategie?* (Master’s thesis, Universität Bremen, 2020).

83 Ibid.

84 Azadeh Sharifi, “Antirassistische Interventionen Als Notwendige »Störung« im Deutschen Theater,” in *Postmigrantische Visionen: Erfahrungen, Ideen, Reflexionen*, eds. Marc Hill and Erol Yildiz (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 209.

itself, I argue that creative archival interventions contribute to new approaches and to critical reflections on the archive as both a term and a concept.

This can also be observed in Namibia's cultural and creative sectors, where an increasing number of artistic interrogations are committed to the issue of the archive in a broader sense, engaging not only with public, state archives but also with private ones. The hegemonic structure of Namibian archives is often prevalent in these works. It is the predicament mentioned previously that records attending to Black Namibians are often sparse, dispersed and scattered, since the German and South African colonial rule not only neglected a proper documentation of Black life, but also made archival practices difficult for private individuals and families. Conversely, vast settler archives in the form of family estates, photo albums or state records were neatly processed and safeguarded and, thus, remain more readily available for critical examination. In the face of this situation, Namibian creative practitioners explore alternative modes of knowledge production and turn to performance and the body as channels to transmit their perspectives on Namibia's past, present and future. Artist and scholar Nicola Brandt has examined this trend in detail in her book *Landscapes Between Then and Now: Recent Histories in Southern African Photography, Performance and Video Art*, proposing a conceptual understanding of these expressive strategies as "new practices of self."⁸⁵ A central element of these vanguard practices is the notion of embodiment. In her analyses of selected works, Brandt unpacks the distinct ways in which contemporary artists use multimedia and performance, as well as cross-disciplinary and documentary strategies, to give physical expression to embodied histories, memories and knowledges of places and landscapes.⁸⁶ Mushaandja shares a similar understanding when reflecting on his own changing approach to archives over the past years, stating:

As a queer, Namibian artist, I no longer see traditional archives as the only place where the past can be preserved. My body is also an archive; it contains memories that go far beyond colonial and post-colonial experiences. The homes of our families in Namibia, the places where our everyday life takes place, are also archives.⁸⁷

What Brandt's observations and Mushaandja's assertion reveal is an undimmed interest in new Namibian archives as well as in individually and collectively shaped alternative archives. Creative strategies in the Namibian art scene stretch from

85 Her analysis is not confined to artistic work in Namibia only, it also looks at creative practices in Angola and South Africa. See: Nicola Brandt, *Landscapes Between Then and Now: Recent Histories in Southern African Photography, Performance and Video Art* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).

86 Ibid.

87 Elisabeth Wellershaus, "Let's Have Tea and Sing Love Songs!," *Goethe-Institut*, 2019, <https://www.goethe.de/prj/lat/en/spu/21732422.html>.

archival intervention, with so-called colonial or imperial photographic archives (as can be seen with works such as those by Mekondjo and Ndijharine, which will be explored in this book), to the production of entirely new forms of knowledge.⁸⁸

Video installations, paintings or documentary practices such as photography or auto/biographical accounts create knowledge that can be materially stored and preserved. In this vein, they become projects of the past and present, for the future. These emerging archives not only reinscribe subjects into history, but they retain prevalence beyond the time of their making. In comparison, live art is rather “ephemeral and immediate,” as Katlego Disemelo argues.⁸⁹ Performance work takes place in the now and is characterised by its instantaneousness and contemporaneity.⁹⁰ Yet, these embodied practices have the potential to work as subversive and immersive interventions in the public sphere, where artists claim a right for visibility, challenge reactionary traditions and propose new visual and commemorative cultural practices that impinge upon the future.

These reflections on archival art offer clues as to how creative practices that ‘trouble archives’ can shape our realities. Approaching these alternative archives, counter-archives, embodied archives and “living archives,” requires an openness to their innovative formations which, in turn, calls for the development of methods to access their meanings.⁹¹ Conventional strategies of mining for “nuggets of fact[s]” and information extraction – which largely defined conservative historical research methods – are no longer adequate.⁹² Instead, more emotive and nuanced readings (as well as tactile or sensory approaches) are needed in order to access the complexities of new, emerging Namibian archives.

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- 88 See the performances by Namibian performance artists Nesindano Namises, Hildegard Titus, Ndinomholo Ndilula, Gift Uzera and Muningandu Hoveka.
- 89 Katlego Disemelo, “Performing the Queer Archive: Strategies of Self-Styling on Instagram,” in *Acts of Transgression: Contemporary Live Art in South Africa*, eds. Jay Pather and Catherine Boulle (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019), 220.
- 90 Huda Tayob in conversation with Jumoke Sanwo and Ali Hussein al-Adawy, “The Archive Is a Portal for Reimagination,” *The Archive of Forgetfulness: Conversations with Neighbours*, accessed 31 January 2023, <https://archiveofforgetfulness.com/Podcast-series>.
- 91 Stuart Hall proposed the term “living archives” to debunk the “fantasy of completeness” of archives, and the conception of them as inert, finite collections. By conceptualising archives as “living,” he stresses how they are “present, on-going, continuing, unfinished, open-ended” and how meanings depend on their usability in the future. See: “Constituting an Archive,” *Third Text* 15, no. 54 (March 2001): 89–91.
- 92 Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Michèle Pickover, Graeme Reid, Razia Saleh and Jane Taylor (eds.), *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media, 2002), 9.

Theoretical Framework and Methods

As an African Studies project, this study draws on memory-, post-colonial-, gender and critical-archival studies as well as literary and visual studies, history and political theory. My reflection on these fields helps to develop the theoretical groundwork for my analyses that I will introduce in the following section, but which will be further refined within the single case studies. To be clear: this is not a historical study of colonialism in Namibia with a side glance at the creative sector. Instead, my main concern is to critically reflect upon the production of knowledge with and against the archive through the media of art and literature. Other themes that are central to this book include: the role of photography as a 'document' or 'record' of the past as well as the dynamics of memory. In my reading of the selected case studies, I will explore their relationships and tensions with what is conceived as 'history' and 'knowledge.'

Developing this book's research question was strongly motivated by my reflection on my own role as a researcher in archives. As flagged previously, I was entrusted with a family estate that once belonged to a settler woman from German South-West Africa (analysed in Chapter 4). In approaching this entirely uncharted material, I first began reading the records "along the archival grain," as Stoler calls it, in the endeavour to reconstruct biographical details, to order and to index the hundreds of letters and photographs that I encountered.⁹³ As I increasingly came to face archival limits, gaps and problematic truth claims (this is a 'white' settler private archive which, in many instances, echoes racist stereotypes, deploys ethnographic modes of representing Black subjects and repeats settler myths and fantasies about the colonial world order), I began to question the epistemic foundations of this kind of knowledge production more vigorously. Realising how archival research needed to open up and engage alternative sources and other perspectives, I was inspired by academic, feminist writer and activist Pumla Dineo Gqola. In her book *What is Slavery to Me?*, Gqola argues how current scholarship must be attuned to gender and post-colonial concerns. This requires moving away from strict foci on a single medium and, instead, involves combining and cross-examining different sources together. She proposes a postcolonial feminist methodology that implies reading academic texts alongside creative expressions in order "to broaden the terms of academic debates."⁹⁴ Gqola continuously tests and develops "new ways in which meaning might be further harnessed by placing the creative and the explicitly

93 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7rtrg>.

94 Pumla Dineo Gqola, *What Is Slavery to Me? Postcolonial/Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010), 210.

critical alongside one another,” which was crucial in my own thinking about methodology.⁹⁵

My focus on creative practices is partially a response to this. Beyond that, it is motivated by the selected works’ innovative and subversive interventions with the archive. Taking Gqola’s assertions seriously further implied treating other creative texts, expressions and works as equivalents to standard secondary sources, such as academic reviews and interpretations. Moreover, my data-collection for analysis included input gathered from oral interviews conducted in Namibia, South Africa, Switzerland and Germany as well as clues and information from the mentioned countries’ diverse archives.

Despite my disclaimer that this is not a study in the field of history, by nature of this book’s subject matter, a historicist approach is what the readings of my single case studies require – to a certain extent. Historicism, as an approach, helps to place the auto/biographical accounts, the novel and the selected artworks into the social realities about which they speak. However, since my aim is to question how such realities are constructed, my reading is also influenced by New Historicist thought as developed by Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault whose works, as introduced in my reflections on Foucault’s work, pivot around the critical interrogation of the specific knowledge systems of a certain time, era, geo-political context et cetera.

I also take into account how literary studies have been reforming themselves and will draw from the theory of postcritique. Post-critical scholars argue against critics’ distanced approach to texts, in which they assume the role of a detective, searching for hidden meaning only and considering texts as symptoms of something concealed that they need to debunk.⁹⁶ Post-critics, such as Rita Felski, call for a reading that considers a text’s agency, i.e., the “uses of literature” (and, by extension, artworks) and what it does in the world: “How it acts and reacts, absorbs and inspires, transports and is transported across space and time.”⁹⁷ Instead of considering a work as a mere product of its historical context, she is instead interested in the entanglements of art and politics, their ties and reciprocities.⁹⁸ This implies that postcritical theory encourages a reading of texts with and for empathy, affect and attachment.⁹⁹ In a similar vein, scholars who critically engage with ‘the colonial archive’ underline the importance of affect, “radical empathy” and a “feminist ethics of care” as modes of engaging with archival repositories.¹⁰⁰ This kind of sensitivity

95 Pumla Dineo Gqola, “Whirling Worlds? Women’s Poetry, Feminist Imagination and Contemporary South African Publics,” *Scrutiny* 16, no. 2 (September 2011): 5.

96 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 22.

97 Rita Felski, “Postcritical Reading,” *American Book Review* 38, no. 5 (2017): 4.

98 Felski, “Postcritical Reading,” 4.

99 Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (eds.), *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 10–17.

100 Caswell and Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives.”

and openness is crucial in my approach to the case studies and I elaborate on my distinct methods of analysis in each of the chapters.

Let me now return to the correlations and frictions between history, memory, the archive, photography and knowledge to clarify my intentions in bringing these concepts together in this book. Throughout the course of post-structuralists radical overturning of what had previously been accepted as ‘truth,’ (that is, as metanarratives and knowledge) scholars such as Hayden White applied this line of questioning to the mechanisms of historiography. In the words of Kuisma Korhonen, White revealed the constructed character of history-writing:

The mere collection of facts, which can be compared to the work of a detective or a journalist, is [...] not yet historical discourse [...] but rather formation of an *archive* that can be accessed and analyzed [...] For White, *historical discourse* is, by definition, interpretation of this archive of past events by means of narration.¹⁰¹

White stresses the fictional element in any kind of historical narration and further emphasises the weaknesses of those archives upon which the narration is based. He argues that the archival fragments available for analysis never offer a complete picture on an event or a period and are compiled rather randomly.¹⁰² White states that all “historical knowledge always comes to the present in a processed form” and that our knowledge of the past is unstable and, in itself, only one fictional version of what might have happened.¹⁰³

What is the status of memory in this? Is it similarly just a certain version of knowledge, a particular format to package the experience of history? Contemplating on the differences of memory and history, Gqola argues: “whereas memory is a shadow always hovering and governing our relationship to the present and the future, history is the art of recording and analysing this consciousness of the past.”¹⁰⁴ We might approach this ‘art of recording and analysing’ critically and with a mindfulness of White’s argument about history writing as a construction. However, Gqola’s contention emphasises how memory bears a certain emotive presence that historical reconstruction lacks. This sense of presence in memory is, once again, evoked by Pdezisai Maedza who understands memory as “performing history” and follows Avishar Margalit and Duncan Bell when arguing: “Memory is not defined by the degree of its correspondence of accuracy or validity of its accounts [...] Memory

101 Kuisma Korhonen, *Tropes for the Past: Hayden White and the History-Literature Debate* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 12, emphasis in original.

102 Hayden White, “Historical Discourse and Literary Writing,” in *Tropes for the Past: Hayden White and the History-Literature Debate*, ed. Kuisma Korhonen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 29.

103 *Ibid.*, 29.

104 Gqola, *What Is Slavery to Me?*, 7–8.

can be understood as 'knowledge from the past. It is not necessarily knowledge about the past.'¹⁰⁵

For the artists and writers presented in this book, their modes of expression function as channels to revitalise certain knowledges from the past. To assess the politics of memory in the Namibian context, I will discuss questions about trauma, postmemory (as conceptualised by Marianne Hirsch) as well as the functions and potentials of transgenerational and multidirectional memories, drawing on Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela; Gqola and Michael Rothberg.¹⁰⁶ Following the itineraries of memory, it is vital to proffer an understanding of Namibia's complex history that is not rigidly nation-bound, but which is more encompassing and attuned to the ways memories stretch across or transcend borders. Thus, in specific chapters, I explore Germany's, South Africa's, Angola's as well as Zambia's entangled history with Namibia and also include South African perspectives in the case studies.

In line with the understanding that memory is something that is enacted, performed and alive, Enwezor suggests that it is the artist who can act as the "agent of memory," or the agent that activates memory.¹⁰⁷ In his reflection on the themes of his exhibition *Archive Fever*, he writes how artists turn to archives as "a site of lost origins," where they reconnect with the past, revitalise memories and even renegotiate the relationship between the past and the present.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the connection of memory and the archive is an issue of fierce debate in academic scholarship.¹⁰⁹ Many critics stress how archives function "as spaces of and catalysts for memory," arguing that the holdings and repositories may trigger commemoration.¹¹⁰ On a more critical note, however, scholars such as Verne Harris draw our attention to the politics of the archive, emphasising its incomplete character which implies that the records are nothing but "a sliver of social memory."¹¹¹ With reference to the history of South Africa, he lays bare how state control of archives is directly related to a manipulation

105 Pedzisai Maedza, *Chains of Memory in the Postcolony: Performing and Remembering the Namibian Genocide* (PhD diss., University of Cape Town, 2018), 13, emphasis in original.

106 Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (ed.), *Breaking Inter-generational Cycles of Repetition: A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory* (Opladen: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2016); Gqola, *What Is Slavery to Me?*; Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

107 Enwezor, *Archive Fever*, 46.

108 *Ibid.*, 47.

109 *Ibid.*, 35.

110 Carbone, "Archival Art," 257; Harris, "The Archival Sliver," 65.

111 Harris, "The Archival Sliver," 64.

of social memory that he takes as evidence how archives are placed in the service of regimes in power and, thus, and not as reflections of reality.¹¹²

Similar concerns are central to the debate on the potentials and limits of archival photographs to function as historical sources. It remains a widespread assumption that the camera is a neutral recording device through which to document history, whereby photographs are considered to be authentic representations of the past. In these framings, the photograph's "indexical quality" is evoked repeatedly.¹¹³ However, both scholars and creative practitioners working in the field have long been dismantling photography's implication in particular "discursive regimes of truth;" influential in this regard were the studies by Elizabeth Edwards.¹¹⁴ Her work has been seminal in interrogating the relationship between photography and history.¹¹⁵ In line with Edward's work, Rizzo argues how "photographic images are not unmediated reflections of reality, or the past, but the product of framings and selections."¹¹⁶ She draws our attention to the medium's usages by colonial regimes where it served to identify and classify "colonized subjects along the lines of race, gender, citizenship, and nationality."¹¹⁷ This aspect is problematised by many of the artists discussed in this study who use their practices to craft counter-proposals to what is discursively explored as 'the colonial gaze.'¹¹⁸

Apart from this factor, there are other aspects that draw creative practitioners to the medium of photography, as we will see. For many, photography's ability to secure a glimpse of the past and preserve an image of the present for the future remains an important feature. In this spirit, Teju Cole states: "A photograph shows what was, and is no more [...] in this sense, every photograph is a time-lapse image, and photography is necessarily an archival art."¹¹⁹ With a similar emphasis on the importance of recording a life, a time or an experience, South African artist Muholi emphasises the power of their practice to counteract the historical erasure of Black

112 Ibid., 65–78.

113 Elizabeth Edwards, "Photographs and the Sound of History," *Visual Anthropology Review* 21, no. 1–2 (April 2005): 41.

114 Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 11.

115 Ibid., 41.

116 Lorena Rizzo, *Photography and History in Colonial Southern Africa: Shades of Empire* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019), 217.

117 Ibid., 244.

118 For more in-depth considerations of "the colonial gaze," see: Hartmann, Silvester, and Hayes, *The Colonising Camera*; Awam Amkpa, "Africa: Colonial Photography and Outlaws of History," in *African Photography from the Walther Collection: Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive*, ed. Tamar Garb (Göttingen: Steidl, 2013), 242; Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 12.

119 Teju Cole, "Disappearing Shanghai," *The New Inquiry*, 30 September 2012, <https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/disappearing-shanghai/>.

queer and trans people from public records, asserting, in a nod to the new visual history which they create, that “the archive means we are counted in history.”¹²⁰ However, with a more critical view towards photography, visual artist and photographer Lebohang Kganye calls attention to the “fabricated nature of photographs” and interrogates family narratives by intervening with her own visual family archive.¹²¹ Reflecting on this process she explains:

I have discovered that identity cannot be traced, just like the camera; it is a site for the performance of dreams and to stage the narratives of contradictions, half-truths; erasure, denial, hidden truths. A family identity therefore becomes an orchestrated fiction and a collective invention. While these images record history, it is only a history imagined.¹²²

Family pictures as identity constructions, the photograph as testimony or the photo album as a visual *aide-mémoire* are only some of the central characteristics that occupy the heart of the counter-archives, new Namibian archives and archival interventions that will be presented in this book.¹²³ The function of the photograph as a trigger or conservator of memories makes it an intriguing object of exploration for all of the artists and authors selected. Amulungu and Dentlinger’s curation of photographs for their auto/biographical accounts as well as Mekondjo, Rust, Brandt and Ndjiharine’s refigurations of historical images and manipulations of aesthetic orders are, as we will see, powerful interrogations of hegemonic memory politics.

A Guide to the Case Studies

This book presents four case studies in which I discuss three literary texts, four artistic works and one family estate in tandem with archival and oral research. Each chapter is conceptualised in a way so as to set two texts in relation to one another. My choice to juxtapose these specific works is guided by their shared conceptual themes as well as the texts’ respective formats. Readers may engage with the chapters as single entities and independent analyses of unique works; alternatively, readers may approach them systematically one after the other as a journey to access the diverse

120 Haynes, “The Archive Means We Are Counted in History.”

121 “Ke Lefa Laka – a Solo Exhibition by Lebohang Kganye,” *The Market Photo Workshop*, 2 August 2013, <https://marketphotoworkshop.co.za/2013/08/02/ke-lefa-laka-a-solo-exhibition-by-tie-rney-fellow-lebohang-kganye/>; Simon Njami and Sean O’Toole (eds.), *The Journey: New Positions in African Photography* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2019), 61.

122 “Ke Lefa Laka – a Solo Exhibition by Lebohang Kganye.”

123 Paul Grendon, Giorgio Miescher, Lorena Rizzo and Tina Smith (eds.), *Usakos: Photographs Beyond Ruins: The Old Location Albums, 1920–1960s* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2015), 12.

negotiations of Namibian histories. This tack aims to interrogate the past's significance for the here and now; more importantly, this structure reflects the critical take on history and memory as multidirectional (see chapters 2 and 3) and history as circular. It responds to the need to move away from linear approaches to historical events, and readings thereof, in order to proffer an understanding of the ways in which histories and memories move, travel, linger on and permeate the present in non-linear ways.

Chapter 1 discusses auto/biographical accounts by Tshiwa Trudie Amulungu (b. 1958) and Ulla Dentlinger (b. 1951). In my reading of *Taming My Elephant* (2016) and *Where Are You From? 'Playing White' Under Apartheid* (2016), I investigate the role of photographs in auto/biographical accounts and the reciprocal relations between text and image in order to examine how Amulungu's and Dentlinger's works contest, correct or even complicate 'grander' national narratives. Both writers, in their 50s and 60s, 'returned to the past' to reflect on their lives in constant transition, albeit from very different vantage points. Amulungu uses the genre to record her memories of apartheid rule, her participation in the liberation struggle and her return to the post-colonial nation. With her book, she offers a personal counter-proposal to what 'reconciliation' means in Namibia. Dentlinger reflects on the past through the lens of an (allegedly) 'white' Namibian whose family had jumped the colour-line. In seeking understanding of their 'coloured' identity, she scrutinises family narratives and photographs to confront her implication in colonial histories in order to fill the gaps in the personal archive. This chapter shows how both authors conjure a "poetics of relation" to attest to the past, with reference to Édouard Glissant's work and Judith Lutge Coullie, Stephan Meyer, Thengani H. Ngwenya and Thoms Olver's *Selves in Question: Interviews on Southern African Auto/biography*.¹²⁴ With their creative entanglement of text and images, they set themselves in relation to narratives of others, to past selves as well as to national narratives.¹²⁵ In this way, their auto/biographical accounts function as alternative, affective archives for the authors to find a sense of belonging in Namibian post-colonial society and its cultures of remembrance.

In Chapter 2, I continue to explore the potential of photographic archives to renegotiate the past, but I broaden my research subject to encompass multimedia art. Focusing on the creative practices of Tuli Mekondjo (b. 1982) and Imke Rust (b. 1975), I examine how the past remains meaningful to Namibians from the generation

124 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Judith Lutge Coullie, Stephan Meyer, Thengani H. Ngwenya and Thomas Olver, *Selves in Question: Interviews on Southern African Auto/Biography* (Honolulu: University Of Hawaii Press, 2006).

125 Here I draw on Ciraj Rassool's research on auto/biographies' interrelations with narratives of the nation. See: Ciraj Rassool, *The Individual, Auto/Biography and History in South Africa* (PhD diss., University of the Western Cape, 2004), <https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/The%20Individual%2C%20Auto-biography%20and%20History%20by%20Ciraj%20Rassool.pdf>.

following Amulungu's and Dentlinger's who were born and raised at times of political transition. In the interpretation of a selection of their 'archival art,' I discuss how Mekondjo and Rust turn to "postmemories" (Marianne Hirsch) – memories that preceded them and were passed on to them – in an attempt to seek an understanding of the histories in which they are implicated.¹²⁶ Drawing on Nomusa Makhubu's theory of "visual currencies," I interrogate how the artists engage with private and public photographic archives and 'convert' the 'original meaning' and values that they associate with the images.¹²⁷ With their creative practices, Mekondjo and Rust subvert known visual signifiers as well as gendered and racialised modes of representation. Analysing their mindful and attentive approach to the material, I reflect on theoretical considerations of an "ethics of care" as developed by scholars such as Temi Oduumu, Marika Cifor and Michelle Caswell to better understand the politics, power dynamics and emotional labour involved in opening 'colonial' and family archives.¹²⁸ Putting Mekondjo's and Rust's work in conversation with one another allowed me to access these intricate discourses via subjective routes, as both visualise and interrogate family narratives and personal struggles as well as their own positionality in larger Namibian and transcultural histories, myths and imaginations.

Chapter 3 further advances the analysis of multimedia artworks by female creative practitioners who grew up in Namibia at the time of the country's transition from colonial occupation to independence. These artists engage with the archive as a way of reckoning with colonial and apartheid history. This chapter's focus will lie on the transnational, cross-disciplinary exhibition project *Ovizire · Somgu: From Where do We Speak?* (2018–2020), whereby I single out the works of Vitjitua Ndjiharine (b. 1988) and Nicola Brandt (b. 1983). I compare their artistic responses to contemporary debates on the "colonial ties" of ethnographic institutions, issues of representation and identity politics.¹²⁹ The project began with a critical interrogation of the ethnographic museum's photographic archive in the Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK) in Hamburg. Confronted with the limits of producing art in the confining space of the museum, the team decided to position a series of their works within the MARKK to deliberately criticise the institution while moving a specific set of art out and into

126 Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*.

127 Nomusa Makhubu, "Visual Currencies: Performative Photography in South African Contemporary Art," in *Women and Photography in Africa: Creative Practices and Feminist Challenges*, eds. Darren Newbury, Lorena Rizzo and Kylie Thomas (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 227–248.

128 Temi Oduumu, "The Crying Child: On Colonial Archives, Digitization, and Ethics of Care in the Cultural Commons," *Current Anthropology*, 61, no. 22 (October 2020): 289–302; Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics"; Caswell and Cifor, "Revisiting A Feminist Ethics of Care in Archives," in *Radical Empathy in Archival Practice*, eds. Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Shannon O'Neill and Holly Smith, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (2021): 1–6.

129 *Ovizire · Somgu. From Where do We Speak?* exhibition texts (Hamburg, Windhoek: M.Bassy and Frans Nambinga Arts Training Center, 2018–2020).

the alternative exhibition site M. Bassy. In 2019 and 2020, *Ovizire · Somgu* was further developed and moved to Namibia. With a view to the evocations of Brandt's and Ndjiharine's works in these distinct spaces, I explore the potential of restitution and restorative justice through relocation and artistic intervention. While Ndjiharine manipulates and reconfigures historical photographs from the colonial era, in order to explore collective experiences of formerly colonised and oppressed people, Brandt turns to the private family archive as a way of grappling with her own positionality in German-Namibian entangled histories. For my analysis of their artistic practices, I draw on Michael Rothberg's concept of "multidirectional memory" and other resonating approaches to memory, such as those developed by Pumla Dineo Gqola.¹³⁰ As a way to assess the significance of location for commemorative practices and memory politics, I take my cue from relevant studies such as those by Pierre Nora, Susannah Radstone and Astrid Erll.¹³¹

In Chapter 4, my analysis transcends genres, formats and complicates the relationship between fact and fiction; I propose a cross-reading of a novel with historical material from a family estate with which I was entrusted. In doing so, I combine my interest in the roles, functions and configurations of the archive in contemporary literature as well as my interest in the negotiation of positionality and identity lodged in this practice. In order to achieve this, this chapter moves away from auto/biographic texts in a stricter sense and examines the resonances of a novel that centres on a German woman (protagonist Hanna X) and on her path to German South-West Africa (GSWA) and on historical archival material evolving around the life of a German settler named Lisbeth Otto, née Dömski. This chapter brings fictional and historical sources into conversation with one another because of their shared interface: the farm Frauenstein. Frauenstein was the place in which Lisbeth Dömski lived at the time of the German-Namibian war and thereafter. It is also a place that figures prominently as a temporary home for Hanna X in the book *The Other Side of Silence* (2002) by André Brink.

As a conceptual framework, I develop a reading for the 'resonances' of the novel and the estate, inspired by Julie Beth Napolin.¹³² Gearing my analysis towards the resonances between Brink's book and my own archival research allowed me to uncover the unlikely connections between the experiences of the fictional character Hanna X and those of Lisbeth Dömski in GSWA in the early 20th century. Both

130 Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*; Gqola, *What Is Slavery to Me?*

131 Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de Mémoires (1984–1992)* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1939); Susannah Radstone, "What Place Is This? Transcultural Memory and the Locations of Memory Studies," *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (November 2011): 109–123; Astrid Erll, "Travelling Memory," *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (November 2011): 4–18.

132 Julie Beth Napolin, *The Fact of Resonance: Modernist Acoustics and Narrative Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

women were orphans living in precarious conditions in Germany. In search of a better life, they embarked on their journey together with the earliest 'dispatches' of single women sent by the Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft (German Colonial Society) to balance the 'white' settlers' gender disproportions in the colony. Both women settled on the farm Frauenstein where they experienced and witnessed different forms of violence during the genocidal phase from 1904 to 1908. By following their routes, I came to face the challenges of stepping out of the archive's colonial framework. Searching for ways to broaden my reading of the material, I was able to retrace a person whose letters figured in the estate. Rosine Xoagus was the daughter of a former employee of the Otto family. Our conversations in Katutura (the former Black township of Windhoek) were a way to engage with what Hall calls 'living archives,' that is, knowledge about the past that is embodied and in constant transformation.¹³³ In my reflection, I am mindful of how archival material does not attend to the perspectives of previously colonised people in unmediated ways. Stepping out of the estate's logics allows me to respond to the blind spots in archival repositories and to test possible ways of making the material meaningful today.

With this chapter, my role shifted from external interpreter in my initial case studies to active agent "at work in the archive" in this last study in which I develop my own archival practice.¹³⁴ My impetus for this is not only the coincidental seizure of 'ownership' of the family estate; rather, it is driven more by my curiosity about how we can crack open the epistemic foundations that underlie every kind of archival engagement. In assuming the role of an archival researcher – much like Brink's alter ego narrator – I realise how there remains a drive to find the 'real history' in the dusty, old letters, photographs and files and to excavate the 'facts' about the past in the repositories. Perhaps here I must admit that, yes, in many instances I wondered what *really happened* on Frauenstein, what Lisbeth Dömski's life *truly* looked like and whether she did not ultimately happen to be the same person as Brink's fictional character Hanna X. Juxtaposing my research with Brink's book was a way to critically interrogate the origins of such conceptions and to interrogate the constructed character of historical narrations. Much like fiction, archival researchers write clues, fragments and myths into allegedly coherent narratives.

Thus, by following Gqola and by exploring academic work and scientific readings "alongside more deliberately creative expressions," I show how both are "epistemological projects which gain from, and feed off, one another."¹³⁵ More impor-

133 By "living archives," I stretch Stuart Hall's approach to the term by suggesting how archives are not only constituted by a "heterogeneity of topics and texts, of subjects and themes," but also how they can be embodied and understood as a "never-completed project" of knowledge that rests with a person. See: Hall, "Constituting an Archive," 89–90.

134 See: de Jong, "At Work in the Archive."

135 Gqola, *What Is Slavery to Me?*, 209.

tantly, while both may question the production of knowledge about the past based on archives, purely scientific research cannot do much to counter their logics. In comparison, art and literature offer a broader range of possibilities for contestation. What we can learn from these media is that it is not the reproduction of past events as realistic as possible to “how they really were” that counts, to loosely reference Leopold von Ranke’s famous quote.¹³⁶ Instead, archival interventions critically rethink that which is accepted as ‘knowledge’ and include counter-narratives and perspectives that were formerly silenced. In different ways, the works by Amulungu, Dentlinger, Mekondjo, Rust, Ndjiharine, Brandt and Brink shift our view to nuances that have been forgotten, but which need to be remembered, resonating with questions once posed by South African photographer Santu Mofokeng: “How do we deal with the memory of the past? Who owns this memory? Do we need this memory? What is re-remembered and how? How long is the memory? Who can be trusted with this memory?”¹³⁷

To this, we might add considerations that are central to the works examined in this book. What do we gain if we begin to approach the arbitrary, dynamic and multidirectional itineraries of memories that archival engagements evoke? How can these broaden our understanding of the contested terrains of memory-making and archival knowledge production in Namibia? Perhaps equally importantly, we might ask: What are the limits of creative archival interventions and what is at stake when opening and interfering with archival repositories?

136 Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichte Der Romanischen Und Germanischen Völker von 1494 Bis 1535* (Leipzig, Berlin: Reimer, 1824), vi, my translation.

137 Santu Mofokeng, *Chasing Shadows: Santu Mofokeng: Thirty Years of Photographic Essays* ed. Corinne Diserens (Munich: Prestel, 2011), 149.

Chapter 1: Between Text and the Visual: Auto/Biographical Accounts As New Namibian Archives¹

Prior to turning to the analysis of the auto/biographical accounts by Tshiwa Trudie Amulungu and Ulla Dentlinger, I wish to first provide a brief disclaimer regarding the title selection for this chapter. My incentive to interrogate what lies 'between text and the visual' is less to establish a binary between the two media, but instead to propose a reading of the knowledge space that emerges when both come into contact. In my analysis of *Taming My Elephant* (2016) and *Where Are You From? 'Playing White' Under Apartheid* (2016), I focus on the ways in which the authors interlace textual and visual narratives to construct a narrative of life by drawing on their private photographic archives as well as from public and alternative archives.

Despite stark differences with regards to their positionalities, family backgrounds and the routes that their lives took, the women's accounts bear certain parallels, as we learn from Amulungu's opening remarks at a reading in Zurich on the 23rd of February 2020:

As much as we come from places very far apart, closely 800km – she from Rehoboth and I am really from the north of Namibia closer to the border of Angola – we have a similar experience as Namibians. Both coming from rural areas, both having something to do with land and animals and so on, but at the same time, because of apartheid being confined to certain areas.²

Amulungu and Dentlinger were born in the 1950s in rural areas of Namibia and, due to the political situation, share experiences of deep loss, having been uprooted and displaced from their childhood homes, their communities and their countries. Over

1 I would like to thank Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, Bayron van Wyk and Nelson Mlambo for their input and for the generative discussion of this chapter's contents.

2 Tshiwa Trudie Amulungu and Ulla Dentlinger, *Die Namibische Geschichte Neu Schreiben: Lesung Und Gespräch Mit Tshiwa Trudie Amulungu Und Ulla Dentlinger* (Literatur Haus Zürich, 23 February 2020).

the course of their lives, they found themselves in states of constant transition that required recurring efforts to both reposition and to situate the self. In 2016, when both authors were in their 50s and 60s, they ‘returned to the past,’ reflecting on their histories in writing. The country’s multiple imperialisms constitute the framework within which Dentlinger and Amulungu negotiate notions of belonging. The two wars of the 20th century in Namibia (the genocide and the war of liberation) remain crucial in relation to questions of experience, trauma and identity. Auto/biographical writing functions as a medium to position the self as part of transgenerational communities and cultures of remembrance in the process of reckoning with the past. However, while Dentlinger’s book re-narrates her experiences of ‘jumping the colourline’ and moving from coloured to ‘white’ spaces and subject positions during apartheid, Amulungu’s auto/biographical account attests to her transition from Namibia’s rural north into exile, the liberation struggle and back home again after independence in 1990.

In setting their works in relation to one another, I do not intend to unpack the women’s biographies’ samenesses or differences in closer detail. Instead, my subject of analysis is the books’ aesthetic forms and evocations, and my comparative reading is motivated by an interest in exploring creative archival practices and the ways in which histories are (re-)written, as outlined in the introduction. In order to generate an understanding of how both Dentlinger and Amulungu engage photography in their project to renegotiate the past, we might first question why they resort to auto/biography as a mode for self-expression. Tracing the roots of the genre, scholars commonly refer to autobiography as a “Western product” or a “European phenomenon” that grew increasingly important as a means to constitute bourgeois subjects in post-Enlightenment period and culture.³ Despite these origins, literary and post-colonial studies have long witnessed the trend that writers from the Global South and the diaspora appropriate the genre as a political move to attest to the experiences of colonialism, resistance and liberation, to reject colonial indoctrination and to purport new postcolonial epistemologies.⁴ In these post-colonial readings, certain themes and motifs are recurrently evoked that need further scrutiny.

3 Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (ed.), *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), xv; Susanne Gehrmann, “Africa,” in *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, ed. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 897; Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith and Watson Autobiography Studies Reader* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2017), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub97399> 69. n.pag.

4 Mita Banerjee, “Postcolonialism,” in *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, ed. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 131; Gehrmann, “Africa,” 953.

In the emancipatory spirit of ‘writing back at the centre,’ auto/biography is often framed as “a key component of the narration of nation.”⁵ Historian Ciraj Rassool interrogates the relation of auto/biographical production in relation to narratives of the nation in greater detail and with a focus on South African literary landscapes. He observes how auto/biographical accounts have commonly been used as agitators for the liberation movement, political solidarity, the development of new national identities or as “vehicles for transition narratives of reconciliation, healing and nation-building.”⁶ Shifting the view to authors from Namibia, I explore what kinds of implications ‘the nation’ and changing national narratives had for the writing subject’s identities. Approaching Amulungu and Dentlinger’s work as a ‘corrective’ to larger national narratives is a response to Rassool’s call for heightened attention to biographical – and I would add *auto*/biographical – contestation.⁷ In his analyses, Rassool uses the term “auto/biography” to signal the proximity of both forms of texts.⁸ I choose to speak of ‘auto/biographical accounts’ as a way to acknowledge that other forms and expressions of life exist that resist easy categorisation by borrowing from Coullie, Meyer, Ngwenya and Olver who further indicate how autobiography and biography “flow into each other.”⁹ This point is critical due to the importance of oral histories in Namibia and in Amulungu’s and Dentlinger’s texts in particular.

A second theme that calls for critical interrogation is the framing of auto/biographical writing as “merely personal” and “merely narcissistic.”¹⁰ With their focus on the individual’s lived experience, auto/biographical accounts continue to carry a reputation as self-indulgent and self-centred.¹¹ In comparison to the genre’s tradition as the writing of “great men” and “‘great’ public lives,” the analysis of women’s life storytelling has often been reduced to its tendencies towards using a more personal tone.¹² However, with regards to post-colonial writing, critics often underline how authors from the Global South emphasise collective experiences, thereby positioning the self as an inseparable part of a community.¹³ I was certainly drawn to

5 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 2002); Lydia Wevers, “Autobiography and the Nation,” in *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, ed. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 228.

6 Rassool, *The Individual, Auto/Biography and History in South Africa*, 6, 200.

7 Ciraj Rassool, “Rethinking Documentary History and South African Political Biography,” *South African Review of Sociology* 41, no. 1 (April 2010): 28.

8 *Ibid.*, 46.

9 Coullie et al., *Selves in Question*, 8–9.

10 Smith and Watson, *Life Writing in the Long Run.*, n.pag.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

13 Gehrman, “Africa,” 923; Banerjee, “Postcolonialism,” 131.

both books due to the distinct ways in which they challenge prevalent, male-dominated 'meta-narratives' on Namibian history, proposing more nuanced, personal and previously unseen perspectives on the past and its reverberations in the present. The views that they offer trouble preconceived constructions of what community, 'whiteness' or a commemoration of the past in Namibia might entail. Besides this, in my case study, I intend to show how both women do something more than merely write self-centred narratives on their lives or another, more personal, script of the nation. Through a dedicated analysis of both women's books, I aim to complicate oversimplified readings along post-colonial or gender-lines, while remaining mindful of how the tendencies mentioned above are reflected in the books. Reading their hybrid image-texts with a particular interest in the role and function of photography helps to show how, as autobiography scholar Timothy Dow Adams writes, text and photography are both media that allow for self-retro- and introspection; they are "increasingly self-conscious, and combining them may intensify rather than reduce the complexity and ambiguity of each taken separately."¹⁴

Rassool's theories, as well as Coullie, Meyer, Ngwenya and Olver's *Selves in Question: Interviews on Southern African Auto/biography* serve as a theoretical backdrop to explore how Amulungu's and Dentlinger's auto/biographical accounts relate to narratives of the nation and are placed in larger "web[s] of narratives."¹⁵ Their aesthetic strategies to rethink and rewrite history evoke what Édouard Glissant has termed a "poetics of relation," which brings to the fore the significance of relationality and proximity in *Where Are You From? 'Playing White' Under Apartheid* and *Taming My Elephant* as well as the intimate dimensions at play between the text and the visual.

1.1: Ulla Dentlinger's *Where Are You From? 'Playing White' Under Apartheid*

In *Where Are You From? 'Playing White' Under Apartheid*, Ulla Dentlinger negotiates what she calls "a tormenting question" that haunted her throughout her life.¹⁶ With her book, she 'works through' her family's history. Dentlinger returns to the Rehoboth area and confronts her relationship with her former home. Rehoboth is an actual, concrete place in rural Namibia; at the same time, it is an imagined space, evoking a certain association, representing a specific socio-political constellation and a community of 'racial-mixing.' The 'Rehoboth Bastards' descended from indigenous Khoisan inhabitants of the Cape Colony and Trekboers. They migrated

14 Timothy Dow Adams, *Light Writing & Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), xxi.

15 Seyla Benhabib quoted in Coullie et al., *Selves in Question*, 3.

16 Ulla Dentlinger, *Where Are You From? 'Playing White' under Apartheid* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2016), 7.

from the Cape and established settlements south of the Orange River during the 19th century, but would continue their exodus to Namibia under the leadership of Hermanus van Wyk in 1868.¹⁷ In the 1870s, they peacefully settled in the Rehoboth area approximately 90 km south of Windhoek.¹⁸ Today, the place is most popular for its people “of differing cultural and genetic backgrounds,” and Dentlinger describes the Rehobothers as “the quintessential mixed race community in southern Africa.”¹⁹

Dentlinger’s parents were descendants of German colonial soldiers and local women of mixed backgrounds, Sabina Olivier and Suzanna Bezuidenhout, both of whom were said to have been of Dutch-Slave origin.²⁰ Her paternal great-grandfather and maternal grandfather came to the colony in 1892 and 1905 respectively to join the German Schutztruppe (literally “Protection Force”) – one as a soldier and the other as a saddle-repairer, both hoping “to make it in Namibia,” as the author describes.²¹ Their ideological dispositions or colonial convictions are difficult to grasp for Dentlinger, knowing that they had joined the Schutztruppe at times when the Germans fought against Witbooi at Hornkrans, or later against the Herero and Nama in the genocidal period, while both would then go on to eventually start a family with women from the local communities. They settled in the Rehoboth area with their families after working in several professions as entrepreneurs and craftsmen. Both ended up working as farmers, struggling to make ends meet. When South Africa later established their system of apartheid in Namibia, Dentlinger’s descendants were assigned (although not consistently) the status ‘Coloureds’ – a category which interpellated people into a state of exteriority, placing them external

17 The Afrikaans term denoting the community’s ‘ethnic mixing’ is adopted by the Rehoboth Basters themselves. See: Cornelia Limpricht and Hartmut Lang, “The Trek of the Rehoboth Basters,” in *Rehoboth, Namibia: Past & Present*, ed. Cornelia Limpricht (Windhoek: Solitaire Press, 2012), 8; Shampapi Shiremo, “Hermanus van Wyk: The ‘Biblical Moses’ of the Rehoboth Baster Community,” *New Era*, 27 May 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120331025848/http://www.newera.com.na/article.php?articleid=38914>.

18 Cornelia Limpricht, “Farms and Families: Land Tenure in Rehoboth,” in *Heritages and Cultures in Modern Namibia: In-Depth Views of the Country: A TUSCIN Festschrift*, ed. Cornelia Limpricht and Megan Biesele (Windhoek, Göttingen: Klaus Hess Publishers, 2008), 141; Shiremo, “New Era – Hermanus van Wyk.”

19 Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 21–26. It is crucial to consider that while these may be the most popular associations with Rehoboth and its people, the Basters were, however, for a long time rather minor political players in the area, which was largely controlled by Nama and Herero communities. For a more in-depth discussion of this, see: Patrick Pearson, *The History and Social Structure of the Community of the Rehoboth Baster Community of Namibia* (Master’s thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1986).

20 Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 28.

21 *Ibid.*, 99–103.

to “the space inhabited by the racially pure” as essentialist views would posit it.²² Anthropologist Zimitri Erasmus elaborates:

To be Coloured is to be outside of whiteness and European-ness. It is to be inside of non-whiteness and non-European-ness. To be Coloured is to be outside of hegemonic ideas about what it means to be African. These ideas conflate blackness with African-ness. To be Coloured is to be outside of hegemonic ideas about what it means to be Black.²³

In South Africa, these identity categories were legally cemented by the Population Registration Act of 1950. The act was never implemented in Namibia. However, the categories were still used and were put into effect, thereby impacting the lives of Namibians at that time and in the future to come. While the term had a similar valence in many regards in both countries, the meaning of ‘being Coloured’ in Namibia is complex. Andrea Rosengarten argues that German colonial and South African apartheid rules contributed to the formation of ‘coloured’ as an emergent socio-racial category, whereby she is mindful of how the “category was not a pure invention of the colonial state, but also formed through the claims and agencies of African actors.”²⁴ She asserts how, throughout the years, “African agents [...] continued to challenge, undermine, and/or hone for themselves the meaning of the category and evaluate its consequences for their rights and livelihoods in spheres of local and international power.”²⁵

As we will see, Dentlinger and her family members continuously challenged and partially even defeated the imposed labelling, which implied living with the consequences of what a change of identity statuses entailed. With her heritage, Dentlinger inhabits a position that falls between many cracks of Namibian society and commemorative communities. In her book, she attends to these experiences. In doing so, she occupies a unique position in the Namibian literary landscape. Her book neither centres on the issue of German colonial legacies in particular, since it is not the sole factor that defined her background, nor does it approach the experiences of apartheid and liberation from the perspective of someone who was directly affected

22 Zoë Wicomb, “Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa,” in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970–1995*, eds. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 101–2.

23 Zimitri Erasmus, *Race Otherwise: Forging a New Humanism for South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2017), 7, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/60602/>.

24 Andrea Rosengarten, *Other “Coloureds”: Constructions of a Socio-Racial Category in Colonial Namibia under South African Rule, 1915–1939* (MA-MSc thesis, unpublished, New York and London, Columbia University and the London School of Economics, 2014), 6.

25 *Ibid.*, 55.

by anti-Black racism and who joined the struggle. However, apartheid policies influenced her life journey in various ways. While she is not the first Namibian woman to turn to auto/biography to negotiate the past, her position as a writer originating from Rehoboth and her trajectory from there to cosmopolitan places remains largely unrecorded.

Most prominently known for the genre in Namibia are narratives of life that record the experience of the liberation struggle that were written either by those who stayed in the country or by refugees who lived in exile.²⁶ In reference to the former, critics recurrently consider author and literary scientist Ellen Namhila's *The Price of Freedom* (1997) as the first published autobiography written by a Namibian woman. Mushaandja, however, aptly points out how, long before the appropriation of the genre, Namibian women secured and transmitted their experiences of colonialism and apartheid, for example, through oral narratives.²⁷ Nevertheless, the mode of writing about the self became increasingly popular after independence and remains so to this day, despite the fact that publishing opportunities in the country are rather rare, urging many to turn to publishers abroad.²⁸ This also applies to Dentlinger's book, which was published by the *Basler Afrika Bibliographien* in Switzerland. While writing and publishing is not financially viable as a full-time job for most authors, due to the small market and readership in Namibia, more recent developments such as that of the popular literary magazine *Doek!* show that Namibians continue to find ways to generate platforms for publishing and that an interest in Namibian stories remains undimmed.²⁹

This impulse for Namibian writers to take to the pen may be attributed to an urge to fill "different 'silences' in both pre-and post-independent Namibian literature" as identified by André du Pisani.³⁰ Such silences surround the experiences of exile and return, lingering traumas or feelings such as despair and longing, which are not adequately addressed in official historiographies. Critics commonly refer

26 Martha Akawa, *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2014), 10.

27 Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, pers. comm., 6 December 2022.

28 Sarala Krishnamurthy and Helen Vale, "Introduction," in *Writing Namibia: Literature in Transition* (Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, 2018), 12; Henning Melber, *Understanding Namibia: The Trials of Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5; Henning Melber, "The Shifting Grounds of Emancipation: From the Anti-Colonial Struggle to a Critique of Post-Colonial Society," in *Writing Namibia: Literature in Transition*, eds. Sarala Krishnamurthy and Helen Vale (Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, 2018), 29.

29 This is due to the fact that readers need the economic means to purchase the books, the privilege of time to read and access to bookshops. See also: Krishnamurthy and Vale, "Introduction," 15.

30 André Du Pisani, "Foreword," in *Writing Namibia: Literature in Transition*, eds. Sarala Krishnamurthy and Helen Vale (Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, 2018), vii.

to South-West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) rules and regulation, which dictated the modes of commemorating the past, with regards to the lack of an encompassing, nuanced public debate on certain facets in history. As we will see, while SWAPO's narratives were central to uniting and mobilising people during the struggle and to forging national unity when democracy was achieved, their hegemonic memory-making impeded upon endeavours to collectively address and to engage with troubling aspects of the past.

Although historically "both a European and a male-dominated genre," auto/biographical accounts offer a means to voice alternative histories and to counter official state narratives.³¹ These historical contexts and implications need further consideration, given this chapter's main interest in the role of writing *and* photography. Namibian women not only write against SWAPO narratives, but the records they contest also date back to earlier colonial histories and legacies. As Namhila teaches us, official Namibian historical records privilege the perspectives of the colonisers, while information about Namibians' biographies remains sparse and if they are secured, the records follow the logics of the German or of the subsequent South African colonial regimes.³² Dentlinger was confronted with these archival structures, as she only possessed a slim photographic and material repository from which to draw in her endeavour to revisit the past. By interlacing her literary work with photographs, she reclaims two types of media that were neither easily accessible to her nor to many during apartheid Namibia. Both are technologies of self-representation that follow the impulse to document the past and to portray a certain image of the self for the present and future.³³ Following Karen Redrobe Beckmann and Liliane Weissberg's assertion that "autobiography bears a structural resemblance to photography in both its referentiality and its uncertain relation to truth and fiction," will help us to pay closer attention to how this image of self is constructed.³⁴

While Dentlinger both writes about and visually presents places from the past in her book, she explicitly frames her auto/biographical account as "a women's book,"

31 Kelly Jo Fulkerson-Dikuu, "Conceptualising National Transition: Namibian Women's Auto-biographies about the Liberation Struggle," in *Writing Namibia: Literature in Transition*, eds. Sarala Krishnamurthy and Helen Vale (Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, 2018), 58–59.

32 Namhila, "Little Research Value," 3; Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, "The Role of Archives in Colonial Injustices and Historical Reappraisal," in *Colonial Repercussions: Namibia 115 years after the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama*, ed. Judith Hackmack and Karina Arite Keller (Berlin: European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights and Akademie der Künste, 2019), 52.

33 Lee-Von Kim, "Autobiographical Revisions: Photography in 'Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes' and Claude Cahun's 'Disavowals,'" *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 29, no. 1 (January 2014): 113.

34 Karen Redrobe Beckman and Liliane Weissberg (eds.), *On Writing with Photography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), xiv.

referring to specific women who influenced her life.³⁵ By placing the “self in relation to others,” to follow Coullie et al. here, Dentlinger (re)builds affiliations and renegotiates questions of belonging, identity, detachment and silence.³⁶ Where conversations about the past have been shut down in her childhood, after living more than 30 years outside of Namibia, Dentlinger revisits her place of origin, turning to friends and family members and interviewing them and writing down their stories alongside her own autobiographical account.

Coullie et al. remind us how authors turn to auto/biographical accounts primarily as a means to position themselves. However, their narratives are also always situated in relation to other, larger narratives and embedded in social relations.³⁷ Hence, autobiographical writers relate earlier to later selves, reflect on the self in relation to others and weave their auto/biographical narratives into larger collective accounts.³⁸ What Andrew van der Vlies called “playing host to the stories of others” in his analysis of Wicomb’s novel *Playing in The Light* (2006) can, in Dentlinger’s case, be conceived as a strategy to find an understanding of the developments in the past with the help of the perspectives of others.³⁹ Yet, it is also a necessary move to confront the gaps in one’s family archive. The author explained that, in addition to the lack of transmitted knowledge on family history, written records such as letters, diaries or family photo albums that document the past also barely exist.⁴⁰ While Dentlinger spoke with many informants, raising questions that had previously been taboo, she centred the biographical accounts of her beloved friend and family employee on Ou Lenas as well as on her aunt Hedi to sketch her own life journey. While the women’s stories are closely connected, their biographies speak to the different statuses that the apartheid state assigned to the people living in colonial Namibia. Moreover, her book also illuminates how people found “avenues out” – out of Rehoboth and out of imposed racial categories, thereby resonating with Erasmus’ observations with regards to South Africa:⁴¹

People defied the boundaries imposed by apartheid logics as much as they used these logics to ‘pass’ for White or Coloured [...], and to ‘expel blackness’ from family histories [...] These acts, fraught with emotion, were intricately interwoven with everyday struggles for access to various degrees of rights, opportunities,

35 Ulla Dentlinger, pers. comm. 13 February 2021.

36 Coullie et al., *Selves in Question*, 2.

37 Ibid., 4.

38 Ibid., 1–5.

39 Andrew van der Vlies, “The Archive, the Spectral, and Narrative Responsibility in Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 36, no. 3 (September 2010): 584.

40 Dentlinger, pers. comm. 13 February 2021.

41 Dentlinger, pers. comm. via email, 27 February 2021.

respectability and leeway conferred by the higher tiers of apartheid's legalised racial classification system.⁴²

Dentlinger attends to these performances of defiance and contestations of identity. When loopholes presented themselves, her parents and Hedi “jumped the colour-line” and were (re)classified as ‘white’, as we will see.⁴³ Her writing is an attempt to make peace with these experiences and with the burden of history.

Reflecting on the past from the vantage point of the present means, in Dentlinger's case, looking at Namibia and her experiences in the country from the outside, living in Europe (but visiting Southern Africa frequently) and maintaining strong bonds to places and people. Living a cosmopolitan life, having spent many years in South Africa and the US, and now being based in Germany and France, Dentlinger's life has been one of constant transition. However, while her latter relocations were self-determined, escaping and moving out of her childhood home was a choice that was made for her. Her parents thought that Dentlinger's leaving of Rehoboth (as a specific socio-political and geographical location associated with mixed heritage) was the key to attaining freedom and a better future. The author, for reasons which were unclear to her, has always been officially classified as ‘white’; she could not trace any legal document in which the status ‘coloured’ had been assigned. However, by virtue of living in the Rehoboth area, Dentlinger would have been perceived as ‘coloured.’⁴⁴ To maintain and secure the ‘white’ status for their daughter, escaping and growing up outside of Rehoboth was deemed as crucial.

Her parents' identity statuses were more complicated. The exact developments are messy and incongruous, even to the author. On official documents, Dentlinger could retrace that her parents were once labelled as ‘white’, as, according to the author, all habitants in the area born before 1922 had been given the status ‘white’.⁴⁵ Researching further, she then found that her parents were classified as ‘coloured’ in later documents, which was again revoked when her father bought the farm Seeis in order to leave the Rehoboth area in 1963.⁴⁶ To visually attest to this and to offer an insight into the ambiguous practices of labelling and forming identities during apartheid in Namibia, the author incorporated her parents' marriage certificate, which first categorised them as coloured but was then edited in 1963 to ‘blanke,’ as seen on the top of the document.

42 Erasmus, *Race Otherwise*, 12.

43 Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 59.

44 *Ibid.*, 118.

45 Dentlinger, pers. comm., 18 February 2021

46 Dentlinger, pers. comm., 10 April 2021.

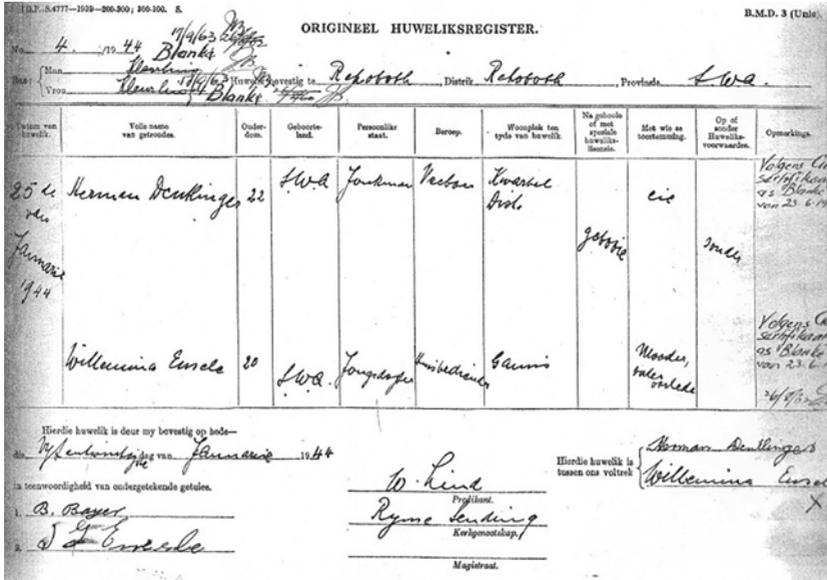


Figure 1: Image on page 117. Caption: “Original marriage certificate for Herman Dentlinger and Willemina Ensele (sic), 25 January 1944, signed by Pastor Lind. Reclassifications in 1962 and 1963 by Pastor Jakobus Beukes.”

The text passages and photographs I will focus on were selected for my analysis because they speak to key places, moments and people in Dentlinger’s life; I will prioritise the accounts in which she re-narrates her own story over those focusing on Ou Lenas and Hedi explicitly. The entanglement of both media play an important role in the practice of situating and constituting the self through writing and curating.⁴⁷ Integrating the insights gained from interviews and conversations with the author, I chose to specifically focus on photographs that she spoke about at length and that were particularly dear to her, as well as those images in the book that are not shown, but are instead being remembered and re-narrated and, through this, crafted and conjured.

47 The author had an editorial team that accompanied her writing process and guided her curatorial decisions in terms of images selections with her publishing house, the Basler Afrika Bibliographien in Switzerland. Choosing a publishing house outside of Namibia speaks to the academic circles which are accessible to the author. Simultaneously, this decision has had an impact on which audience her publication can reach.

1.1.1: Renegotiating the Childhood Past

From the very first contact with the book, readers are offered a visualisation of the narrating voice. The cover shows a photograph of a small girl with a light complexion, approximately 5 years old, in a white dress and with a ribbon in her blond hair, holding a white doll in her arm. She is looking sternly back at the photographer, standing in front of what appears to be a clay house wall. She must be exposed to the sun, as sharp contours of her shadows are cast on the crumbling façade. In many ways, this image introduces certain key aspects that allow for some contemplation about Dentlinger's complex subject position growing up in apartheid Namibia.



Figure 2: Original version of the title cover. Courtesy: Ulla Dentlinger

From the text, we learn that Dentlinger was first raised on the farm Kwartel, 45 kilometres west of Rehoboth, where the family lived in very simple and poor conditions: “Being stock farmers during the early 1950s and owning no land, we had to

be mobile, much as pastoralists had been during the previous century.”⁴⁸ Thus, in dry seasons, in need of pasture for the animals, the family moved to other farms temporarily – to Namtses or Verlos – where the image above was presumably taken around 1956.⁴⁹

The image’s background locates young Dentlinger in this arid, pastoral Namibian landscape while the conceivable social markers, such as her doll and what she assumes to have been her Sunday-dress, stand out from the rural environment. The white doll is a reminder of how racism is deeply ingrained in the global capitalist market, manifested in commercial products (the doll) and in questions of representation (photography). Similarly, the doll speaks to the identity status that was deemed admirable in the Dentlinger family. Despite a general awareness of the family’s mixed background in the community – even though it was unspoken – there was a strong strive towards ‘whiteness’ amongst family members. It was the idea of ‘Deutschtum’ (Germanness) in specific that they longed for. With an ironic undertone, Dentlinger explains: “The Germanness in Namibia is a wonderful avenue – a wonderful ‘hat rack’ to hang your identity on. If you wanted to invent yourself [...] you can easily use German culture as an avenue. It presents itself very easily.”⁵⁰

After World War II, many German speakers in Namibia saw themselves confronted with the end of their colonial revisionist hopes, facing the need to reposition themselves in the colony.⁵¹ Consequently, they continued to grow their alliances with Nationalist Afrikaners – a rapprochement that, on the one hand, promised additional voters for the Nationalist Party while allowing German speakers to secure their racially based privilege in the colony on the other.⁵² Reinhart Kößler explains that this alliance relied on shared ideological worldviews, allowing for German speakers to safeguard their “cultural and linguistic profile.”⁵³ After 1949, German immigrants continued to move to what was then South-West Africa and, thus, German speakers “regained and consolidated their position in farming, commercial and professional sectors.”⁵⁴ Throughout the course of this transition, the association of Germanness with economic wealth (as much as with a distinct culture and identity) was becoming further cemented – for which the period of German colonial rule had laid the groundwork.⁵⁵ In Dentlinger’s words, there existed a “dominant

48 Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 74–75.

49 See image caption on the imprint page.

50 Dentlinger, pers. comm., 13 February 2021.

51 Reinhart Kößler, *Namibia and Germany: Negotiating the Past* (Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, 2015), 107–108.

52 *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

53 *Ibid.*

54 Thomas quoted in Kößler, *Namibia and Germany*, 109.

55 *Ibid.*

cultural ideal that Germanness is desirable.”⁵⁶ Due to the German line in the family, they felt drawn to claim it, which is what her aunt Hedi ended up doing. In the early 1950s, she left Rehoboth, moved to the popular ‘white’ settler town of Swakopmund that aimed to emulate Germanness. Her strive for an uplift, modernity and for a life outside of the Rehoboth rural farming communities is reflected in the image above. While only little knowledge was passed on about the few existing images, Dentlinger assumes that it was her aunt Hedi who was the photographer of the early family images, since she acquired access to the ‘European’ technology through her new environment of Swakopmund. In an interview, Dentlinger explained that photography was a foreign concept for her family who neither had a camera in the house nor had photographs of relatives hanging on the walls.⁵⁷ In addition to a lack of familiarity with the medium, Dentlinger explains that the family also had no interest in photography:

It was [...] this concept of shame, feeling inadequate, shame about your background, mostly because you were uneducated. It was shameful, it was low-class, it was nothing to show off about but to hide and keep it secret. You were just ashamed and felt demeaned and inferior, so you are not going to hang photographs of your ancestors on the wall.⁵⁸

As Wicomb (with reference to Liz Gunner) illustrates, this notion of shame is “located in the very word *Coloured*.”⁵⁹ The construct, designed by the South African nationalist government, is based on the idea of miscegenation, “the origins of which lie within a discourse of ‘race,’ concupiscence, and degeneracy.”⁶⁰ In Dentlinger’s book, we learn how her family responded to these apartheid logics and ideologies. She speaks about the subtle ways in which notions of shame and guilt would linger with the family and would cloud the atmosphere whenever attempts were made to address the past.⁶¹

However, despite the mythic presence of a family burden, Dentlinger’s text uncovers how childhood memories of home contain a diversity of sentiments and associations. At the place in which the family’s archive leaves voids, the author herself conjures images of places from the past that were formative for her. She illustrates her childhood home in Kwartel in detailed accounts. The “little red brick house” with its “corrugated iron pitched roof,” the design of the rooms, their interior as much as precious memories of the *kleinhuisie*, the simple outhouse toilet, are all described

56 Dentlinger, pers. comm., 13 February 2021.

57 Dentlinger, pers. comm., 10 April 2021.

58 Ibid.

59 Wicomb, “Shame and Identity,” 101.

60 Ibid., 92.

61 Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 9.

meticulously and with a nostalgic tone.⁶² Similarly, the “humble home” in Kwartel Wes, where the family would move after 1957, is described comprehensively, with depictions of the house’s architecture, the furniture or the kitchen’s “mud and dung floor.”⁶³ These reflections on the family’s homes and life-style speaks to the ways in which cultures and communities were entangled in the Rehoboth area. Dentlinger describes how the family’s culture would be a “mélange” that was interspersed with “bits of Khoikhoi culture and bits of German culture” – one example being the fact that the family spoke Khoe, Afrikaans and would later switch to German.⁶⁴

She would also recall certain family artefacts in her descriptions of her childhood memories, such as enamel tableware or specific delicate glasses which were cherished objects – some of which are still in the author’s possession.⁶⁵ These moments are reminders of how material objects can be laden with significance, can trigger memories and can conjure a wide range of emotions.⁶⁶ Teju Cole, in *Known and Strange Things*, elaborates how objects can be much more than mere *aide-mémoires*:

Objects, sometimes more powerfully than faces, remind us of what was and no longer is [...] Objects are reservoirs of specific personal experience, filled with the hours of some person’s life. They have been touched, or worn through use. They have frayed, or been placed just so. [...] We look at them for the way they cooperate with the imagination, the way they contain what cannot otherwise be accommodated, and the way they grant us, to however modest a degree, some kind of solace.⁶⁷

As Dentlinger had been socialised to believe that wallowing in history was taboo, objects might provide this kind of solace when the past remains burdensome and troubling. They are cherished heirlooms that make up her sparse family archive. By re-narrating these memories, which are connected to spaces and objects, Dentlinger not only crafts and secures a mental image of her home *in lieu* of a photograph, but she also counter-acts the family’s silencing of conversations about the past.

62 Ibid., 32–34.

63 Ibid., 79–80.

64 Dentlinger, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 25 April 2021.

65 Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 79–80.

66 Zosa De Sas Kropiwnicki observed this with interviewees who grew up as children in exile during the South African liberation war. See: *Exile Identity, Agency and Belonging in South Africa: The Masupatsela Generation* (New York: Springer, 2017), 60. Following a similar argument, Memory Biwa also investigates how memories and perceptions can be “passed on through artefacts which were embedded with sensory meanings.” See: “*Weaving the Past with Threads of Memory*,” 98.

67 Teju Cole, *Known and Strange Things: Essays* (New York: Random House, 2016), 143.

Reflecting on her narrative strategies, I take my cue from literary scholar Kentaro Kawashima who proposes the pairing of the binaries *collecting* and *scattering* in his reading of autobiography in the 20th century.⁶⁸ Kawashima explains how the notion of scattering has become central in writing about the self at that time, when identity came to be understood as fragmented and was defined by difference, rather than coherence. Additionally, he notes: “Without *collecting*, however, there would be no autobiography at all, because from the very outset it is written for the archiving of biographical data and facts.”⁶⁹ I follow his assertion and remain mindful of how auto/biographical work usually adheres to a chronological logic. Just like archiving, it structures information, arranges material, conceives of a corpus and suggests rationality and relation between time, places, individuals and events. Dentlinger’s work equally pivots around the extremes of a scattered, sparse archive, a fragmented self and the desire to make sense, to collect and to re-connect the loose ends with the aim of finding meaning in the process.

In her account of her childhood past, the domestic space – the family home – appears as a place of retreat amidst a socio-political environment that was both unwelcoming and unaccommodating to the difficult subject position that the family had obtained. This reflects in the author’s explanation: “I feel very much attracted towards miniature, social spaces in Namibia but that doesn’t mean to the larger, national space” and she similarly rejects the “Rehoboth Gebiet,” claiming she feels “nothing about it.”⁷⁰ The family’s endeavours to pass as ‘white’ while living in the Rehoboth area also made them vulnerable. Resorting to the safe family space, the everyday life with its chores, the farm labour, braais, familiar smells and sounds allows for nostalgic reminiscences despite, or in light of, a complex colonial history and colonial presence that defined and regulated the lives of the people in South-West Africa. The symbolic mustard-coloured curtains that “remained tightly drawn across the single window” speak to this image of an external world that was to be shut out.⁷¹

Dentlinger’s auto/biographical account offers further clues that indicate how narratives of identity and culture manifested themselves in the family space: She recalls a print on the wall, one of the only and rare images that were ever displayed openly in the Dentlinger home. It showed Berchtesgaden – a rather dark, sinister, dreary forest landscape with a light-coloured castle standing out from the landscape. It was inherited from Dentlinger’s maternal grandfather, was never cleaned or reframed, and it is still in family possession today with her uncle, who

68 Kentaro Kawashima, *Autobiographie Und Photographie Nach 1900: Proust, Benjamin, Brinkmann, Barthes, Sebald*, (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011), 23.

69 *Ibid.*, 26, emphasis in original, translation mine.

70 Dentlinger, pers. comm., 13 February 2021.

71 Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 80.

“was particular about having it.”⁷² While a German audience might immediately link this image to Hitler’s favourite holiday resort, the author is sceptical that her family knew about this history. Yet, this image allows for contemplation on how images function as “tools for identity formation,” as literary scholar Hazel Tafadzwa Ngoshi asserts, and how the photograph serves as a vehicle for family members to fashion the self, to build a relation to an imagined German space and culture.⁷³ Furthermore, it is a reminder of how the home is also a space in which subjects are being socialised and where certain perceptions of selfhood and identity are being transmitted.⁷⁴



Figure 3 (left): Photograph on page 73. Caption: “My parents on their wedding day, 25 January 1944.”

Figure 4 (right): Photograph on page 76. Caption: “My father with myself, May 1952.”

72 Ibid., 78–79.; Dentlinger, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 25 April 2021.

73 Hazel Tafadzwa Ngoshi, “When the Written and Visual Texts Collide: Photographic Images and Acts of Memory in Zimbabwean Autobiography,” *Scrutiny* 217, no. 2 (September 2012): 60.

74 There are further instances in Dentlinger’s narrative that speak to the family’s tendencies to construct and to claim a sense of ‘Deutschtum’ – her grandmother’s much-loved German pop songs “blaring out into the air of the dry, hot, semi-desert of the Basterland” is one such example. See: Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 74.

Dentlinger recalls excavating images from the family archive that were never openly shown, neither in her maternal nor in the paternal family's households. Two of them were portrait photographs, presumably taken in Germany, of the two men in the families that first settled in Namibia. As official and professional portrait photographs, they could have functioned as a material link to Germany and were a visual testimony to the family's German line. However, they were neither displayed in the family homes nor in Dentlinger's book – except in the form of a narrative description of one of them, which speaks about the opacity in practices of curating, showing and safe-keeping.⁷⁵ Just like these framed portrait images, the two photographs below were retrieved from Dentlinger's mother's estate. Dentlinger suspects that they were kept secured and hidden, since she had not known about them prior to inheriting the estate.⁷⁶ She contests her family's rules of display and secrecy by inserting these images into her narrative and by exposing them (verbally or visually) to a broader reading audience.

Auto/biographical writings and collections of photographs can never offer a comprehensive account of a person's or family's history; instead, they are merely selective records of certain moments in time. The fragmentary nature of Dentlinger's family archive adds to this. Her implemented photographs casts spotlights on specific events and situations; there are gaps that remain only partially re-narrated by the author. In many instances, there is no direct correlation between the images shown and the accompanying text, indicating, as Adams remarks, that photographs in auto/biography do not solely serve to supplement or to verify a text; rather they are unreliable narratives in their own rights.⁷⁷

In the case of figures 3 and 4, for example, the images are paired with Dentlinger's reflections on her early childhood, growing up on the farm in poor conditions. She asserts how the family was of "lower economic class, at most lower middle [class]," thereby evoking a dissonance with the images that we see.⁷⁸ In both photographs, Dentlinger's parents are neatly dressed, reminding us of the importance of clothing as a social marker for self-fashioning and the ways in which European aesthetics manifest themselves in peoples' styles. Given their backgrounds, the choice of clothing and the presence of the camera hint at the importance of the occasions being photographed. For the wedding, the camera may have been used to capture this special day, with bride and groom posing for the photo, while the context of figure 4 is less clear. Both images emanate senses of affiliation and affection; we see wife and husband seated closely together and the loving father holding the baby tightly. While the notion of family celebration

75 Ibid. 99.

76 Dentlinger, pers. comm., 10 April 2021.

77 Adams, *Light Writing & Life Writing*, xxi.

78 Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 75.

and togetherness is a reading that the photographs suggest, I am interested in the deeper layers of histories that are lodged within them, mindful of how images can lure us into certain interpretations or affective responses.⁷⁹

If we move beyond what is merely visible and relegate our attention to Dentlinger's auto/biographical text, we learn that the relationship between father and mother was not necessarily romantic, but was instead pushed by a desire to "to marry up," in pursuit of 'whiteness,' forging family bonds that should be, in her grandmother's words, "as German as possible."⁸⁰ Dentlinger's aunt would explain to her: "You had to marry *half-slag* – someone of mixed ethnic background [...] The lighter, the better."⁸¹ Such moments in her book offer counter-narratives in juxtaposition to the sense of family harmony that photographs, such as those above, might emanate when isolated from the text. However, as much as images themselves are fabrications or visual constructions, an auto/biographical text is equally a form of construction or, in Avtar Brah's words, an "*interpretive retelling*" that can centre, accentuate or omit information.⁸² I was confronted with this more directly in the author's and my conversation about figure 4. In an interview, Dentlinger spoke about a nebulous family narrative that she connects with the photograph, remembering that it presumably shows a special kind of family outing. She assumes that it was, once again, taken by her aunt Hedi who took the camera along on the family's first attempt to escape the Rehoboth area. By moving to Mozambique, her parents and aunt hoped to discard their identity status as mixed-raced. Her father's dressing up and their constructing and recording of a certain self-image was, thus, an essential part of the family's cultural/aesthetic practices to substantiate their aspirations to 'whiteness,' respectability, a different life and a different status. Dentlinger recounts how, with their light complexion – "the prerequisites for jumping the colour line" – they had hoped to live up to this constructed self-image.⁸³ However, for reasons unknown to the author, the undertaking failed and would only be repeated six years later:

[The] uncomplicated and sheltered rural way of life came to an abrupt and painful end when I turned six. It would take me decades, with extensive personal growth and leaving the country, to once again consider Rehoboth and its surroundings as a home of sorts. The changes that came about in 1957 and the following year were related to my schooling and underlying that, to our ethnic identities.⁸⁴

79 Rizzo, *Photography and History in Colonial Southern Africa*, 216.

80 Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 98.

81 *Ibid.*, 98.

82 Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora, Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 10, emphasis in original.

83 Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 83.

84 *Ibid.*

Hoping to gain access to ‘white’ schools and a better future, one free of the confinements of the coloured identity status for their daughter, the parents had agreed that aunt Hedi would take her to Rhodesia. The separation from her parents and sister would forever rupture a previously unquestioned bond with her home. Dentlinger’s narrative attends to her struggles and to the experience of deep loss, being displaced, homesick and the experience of having been offered neither explanations nor affection in Rhodesia.⁸⁵ Her life would remain in constant transition from this point on. Dentlinger was sent to a German boarding school in Cape Town. While family plans had paid off, being placed in this new ‘white’ environment required recurring efforts to both position and situate the self. In many ways, Cape Town offered new possibilities – and expectations – to identify and reinvent the self.

1.1.2: In Re/Search of the Self

As we have seen, the family’s reticence towards engaging with practices of self-presentation and building a family archive (in the form of photographic work, written texts and oral histories) was closely connected to their attempts to “jump the colour line,” their discomfort with family history and their socio-economic position as pastoralist farmers in rural Namibia.⁸⁶ Having been uprooted from Kwartel Wes and moving to Cape Town would recalibrate Dentlinger’s approach towards these issues. In different ways, her auto/biographical account speaks to her endeavours to re-interpret and re-build her relation to home by constituting the self through writing and photography.



Figure 5 (left): Photograph on page 79. Caption: “My sister at Kwartel Wes, early 1960s.”

Figure 6 (right): Photograph on page 78. Caption: “My mother at Kwartel Wes, early 1960s.”

85 Ibid., 84–85.

86 Dentlinger, pers. comm., 13 February 2021; Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 117.

Having been introduced to a vividly practised visual culture at the boarding school, Dentlinger began to document her life, to take family pictures and to craft a photo album with the images accessible to her. Figures 5 and 6 are the first examples of her earliest moments of contact with photography as a practice. According to the author, they were taken with her first camera during one of her holiday visits to the farm in Kwartel Wes in the 1960s.⁸⁷ In her writing, she reveals that, at that time, she developed a growing discomfort about being associated with the Rehoboth area.⁸⁸ These moments in her book speak to the ways in which race and class consciousness had been internalised and how Dentlinger's uplift to a new milieu pushed her to dissociate herself from her home and from what it stood for. At the same time, she emphasises the persistence of a strong family bond and, in particular, the deep affection between mother and daughters. The images above offer clues about these ambivalences. Reflecting on their context, the author remembers grappling with the contrast between her new home, Cape Town, where people had big, lush gardens and her arid and dry family home in Kwartel Wes, reasoning, "Of course, you would go and place yourself in front of the only green tree there was."⁸⁹ Thus, these images reflect Dentlinger's early race and class aspirations. Unlike the majority of the other, older photographs in *Where Are You From?*, which predominantly locate the photographed subjects in front of a distant horizon and vast, dry land, these images with the green cactus (as seen in the original photo print, but not in the book's version) stand out as a backdrop. Despite Dentlinger's desire to circumvent an easy identification with the dry farm location, the massive plant as well as hints of green and brown fields in the background do connect these images to a Southern African landscape. With sister and mother posing for the camera, their warm smiles directed towards the photographer, the images emanate a sense of intimacy. In light of the photographs' context, however, the images seem to host a complex amalgam of dissociation, affiliation, love and distance. These notions are neither immediately evident at first glance from the photographs, nor from her text, in which she recounts the family's move to Kwartel Wes, daily routines and anecdotes. Here we are reminded of what Adams called the "referential dilemma" of photography and autobiography: we expect them to speak to reality in direct ways but, as he concludes, "Since reference is not secure in either, neither can compensate for lack of stability in the other."⁹⁰ Instead, he draws our attention to how both media complement each other, often in affective and evocative ways.

Thinking along these lines elucidates how both photography and text can be used to reminisce about loved ones who have passed on. Years after her mother's death,

87 Dentlinger, pers. comm., 10 April 2021.

88 Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 91.

89 Dentlinger, pers. comm., 10 April 2021.

90 Adams, *Light Writing & Life Writing*, xvi–xxi.

Dentlinger would remove her photograph from the album, frame it and position it on her desk. For the book, it was then digitised, incorporated and reassembled with the photograph of Dentlinger's sister. Her careful handling of the photograph speaks to her attachment and to her devotion as a curator and compiler. In printing the images in her book, Dentlinger partially relinquishes control over the images, exposing them to a larger public. However, inserting them into her auto/biographical account also allows for new strategies to *frame* the images by means of narration. She emphasises her admiration for her mother and sister with her text, integrating their pictures to "advance claims of affiliation."⁹¹

However, the outlined context of the photographic occasion considered in conjunction with these claims reminds us of the difficult position that Dentlinger occupied, echoing Susan Sontag's observation: "As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure."⁹² In a position of uncertainty, Dentlinger carves out a space for herself as a writer, striving to find closure through the means of writing and photography. Part of this endeavour was Dentlinger's (re)search into the self and the family, which implied travelling back home, conducting archival research in Germany, Namibia and Switzerland and contesting certain family myths.⁹³

1.1.3: The Narratives of Others

The research for her book prompted Dentlinger to re-establish old bonds, for example with the family friend Ou Lenas, who had been employed by both her mother and grandmother to help in the household. Years after her leaving Rehoboth, the process of self-introspection also led the author to look more closely at the biography of the family's former employee. At the same time, writing about Ou Lenas also allowed her to reflect on apartheid politics, the hierarchical structures of the time and how her family contested or navigated these. Dentlinger recalls:

I felt that the relationship between my mother and the female farm employees was exceptional. [...] I truly loved the two women. [...] They interacted with us casually and confidently. Yet, already to a child's eye, I could notice odd distances being imposed and maintained. One was the differently reserved drinking uten-

91 Lee-Von Kim, "Scenes of Af/Filiation: Family Photographs in Postcolonial Life Writing," *Life Writing* 12, no. 4 (2 October 2015): 403.

92 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: RosettaBooks, LLC, 2007), 8. First published 1973.

93 For example, her previously glorified ancestor was hailed as a successful entrepreneur but, as archival records have shown, then went bankrupt. See: Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 104.; Dentlinger, pers. comm., 18 February 2021.

sils. Another was an unspoken physical distance. I picked up the subtle clues and acted accordingly.⁹⁴

Kößler explains how the forms of discrimination enacted against other ethnic groups in Rehoboth by those who were of mixed-race background and considered themselves – as Dentlinger’s family had – as *whiter* is represented symbolically in the dish cloth that young Dentlinger would put on Ou Lenas lap before sitting on it.⁹⁵ Today, the author conceives of this as an ambivalence between seeking “physical closeness” while at the same time having internalised ideas of racial difference and feeling urged to take a certain distance from her “surrogate mothers” – as she calls both Ou Lenas and the second employee Ou Marias.⁹⁶ This ambivalence emerges as a typical characteristic of the relationship between German-Namibian employers and domestic workers in Namibia.⁹⁷ Brigitta Schmidt-Lauber defines this relation as one marked by a “tension between proximity and distance,” whereby the notion of proximity or even intimacy is often emphasised on the side of the employers, with reference to the fact that their employees were seen as virtually part of the family.⁹⁸ This resonates strongly with Ena Jansen’s study on domestic work in South Africa, entitled *Like Family: Domestic workers in South African History and Literature*. Jansen critiques how “the lives of practically all South Africans have been touched by the institution of paid domestic work” and yet there remains a “textual silence” around the issue – a lack of representation of the experience of domestic workers in literature, politics, culture, et cetera.⁹⁹

Dentlinger’s return to Namibia – her tracing of Ou Lenas to speak with her about the past – may be an act to fill this silence, to listen to Ou Lenas’ version of the past and, perhaps, to find an understanding of old childhood perceptions and family habits. As we have seen, autobiographical writers relate earlier to later selves as a way to make sense of their experiences and to place themselves in the present.¹⁰⁰ Reflecting on her childhood, now that apartheid was over, appears to be a way of

94 Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 33–35.

95 Reinhart Kößler, “Rezension: Ulla Dentlinger *Where Are You From? ‘Playing White’* under Apartheid,” *Afrika Süd* 1 (2017): 42.

96 Dentlinger, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 25 April 2021.

97 Brigitta Schmidt-Lauber, “Die Ehemaligen Kolonialherren: Zum Selbstverständnis Deutscher Namibier,” in *Namibia-Deutschland: Eine Geteilte Geschichte; Widerstand, Gewalt, Erinnerung. Publikation Zur Gleichnamigen Ausstellung Im Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum Für Völkerkunde Der Stadt Köln*, eds. Larissa Förster, Dag Henrichsen and Michael Bollig (Cologne: Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum of Ethnology, 2004), 232.

98 Schmidt-Lauber, “Die Ehemaligen Kolonialherren,” 230–232.

99 Ena Jansen, *Like Family: Domestic Workers in South African History and Literature* (Wits University Press, 2019), 5.

100 Coullie et al., *Selves in Question*, 1.

grappling with her position to the politics of the past. The photograph that accompanies Dentlinger's reflection seems to break with previous efforts of distancing.



Figure 7: Photograph on page 34. Caption: "Ou Lenas, my son Stephan and myself at Tierkolkies, 1994."

The image shows Dentlinger and her son together with Ou Lenas on one of their family visits to Namibia in 1994. All three are laughing and interacting with each other. The photograph emanates the closeness, light-heartedness and intimacy that Dentlinger describes in her book as being much more central to their relationship than the gesture of distancing. The image seems to both accompany and amplify her words, due to its emotive qualities. It may touch the viewers and make them smile along with the photographed subjects. However, the photograph does not speak to reality in unmediated ways and, thus, needs a narration in order to make sense.¹⁰¹ The entanglement of both media crafts meaning by combining the practices to show *and* tell, thereby guiding the viewers'/readers' perception.

The notions of trust and familiarity between the women further emanate from Dentlinger's retelling. Ou Lenas confides in her and, after years of separation, speaks to her about the violence that she had experienced in her marriage. The position of Ou Lenas' biographical account in Dentlinger's book is crucial, given that it generates insights into complex gender and race structures within the Rehoboth community. As "the communal midwife, doctor and healer," she was indispensable

101 Matthias Christen, "Photography," in *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, ed. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 650; Rizzo, *Photography and History in Colonial Southern Africa*, 217.

for the people: “All and sundry came to her for treatment.”¹⁰² However, the author also attends to the difficult status of Damara-women¹⁰³ in the Rehoboth community because, historically, they “were looked down upon by other pastoralists such as the Nama and particularly the Herero” who, in the 18th and 19th centuries were very influential in the area, even up until the 20th century and, more specifically, under apartheid, when the mixed-race Baster community would gain the highest status in the social hierarchy.¹⁰⁴ Considering her family’s relation to their former domestic worker, Dentlinger argues:

By rights she was an employee, but was never treated as one, nor did she act as one. She was simply part of our lives, as an equal in her own right. [...] Ou Lenas never once made any mention of prejudice towards her on the basis of genetics or ethnicity. I would like to believe that on the farm, we actually defied apartheid in many ways.¹⁰⁵

Reflecting back, she describes the relationship with the two employees Ou Lenas and Ou Marias as unconventional in light of apartheid’s logic. Both of them were strong-willed, eloquent, lively and humorous women, whom she barely ever saw working.¹⁰⁶ However, such a reasoning is intricate when considering the fragile position of domestic workers in Southern Africa during the colonial era and the insecurity that they faced in terms of their livelihood. Again, this claim to family membership, rather than employment relations, resonates with Jansen’s research on how domestic workers’ precarious statuses continue to have an impact on their (mis- or under-) representation. She explains “For many decades, fieldwork done by ‘white’ sociologists and anthropologists was the only written source of information about the experiences of domestic workers,” and further elaborates how ‘white’ authors increasingly began to take to the pen and to tell the stories of a Black person.¹⁰⁷

Similarly, Dentlinger’s account of Ou Lenas leaves us solely with her perspective on how the women on the farm in rural Namibia perceived their relationship, reminding us, like literary scholar Tracey L. Walters did, of the “intersectional oppression that denies black women opportunities to control their own narratives.”¹⁰⁸

102 Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 48; Kößler, “Rezension,” 42.

103 According to Dentlinger, Ou Lenas identified herself as Damara. See: *Where Are You From?*, 33.

104 Rosengarten, *Other “Coloureds,”* 15–20; Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 128.

105 Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 48.

106 In other passages, the author would, however, also reflect on the more discriminating attitudes of her father with regards to his behaviour towards sheep herders, whom he punished violently if errors occurred. See: Dentlinger, *Where Are You From?*, 77; Kößler, “Rezension,” 42.

107 We may think of Elsa Joubert or André Brink. See: Jansen, *Like Family*, 9, 118.

108 Tracey L. Walters, *Not Your Mother’s Mammy: The Black Domestic Worker in Transatlantic Women’s Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 2.

This also prompts the question how a narrative *about* and not *from* Ou Lenas is able – or not – to attest to her subjectivity. A crucial point to consider is the fact that her full name remains unmentioned. While the reference to Dentlinger’s friend and former domestic worker as ‘Ou Lenas’ might be a sign of affection for the author, it also mirrors a naming practice that was and remains common in (former) apartheid societies where local names were adjusted, replaced or Christianised by the ‘white’ minority. These naming practices reflect blind spots in archives that make it difficult, if not impossible, to fully attest to someone’s identity and to restore their biography.

While the domestic space was a point of juncture in which intimacy and friendship across racial lines might have been possible, Namibian activist and artist Hildgard Titus calls for heightened attention to the fact that domestic workers had their own family obligations and were often forced to put their own and their family’s needs behind.¹⁰⁹ The contact that results from this relationship is one of structural difference. While Black domestic workers, by virtue of their job, are and were commonly intimate and well acquainted with the world of their employers, the opposite is often not the case. Conducting oral interviews with Ou Lenas and integrating her story in the book emerges here as an attempt to counteract this imbalance. However, as debates on positionality in literary studies show, writing about somebody else’s life from a different perspective remains controversial. Reflecting on Ou Lenas and the issue of identity categories, Dentlinger asserts in a reading in Zurich:

The government can make all sorts of policies and tell you what to do and how to behave but people on the ground will kind of self-identify [...] On the farm in Namibia, I realised how people were really self-identifying themselves – which is something that we can do now today that apartheid is over. I mean we can call ourselves now what we want to – or nothing at all.¹¹⁰

While her call to contest apartheid labels is important, especially in a country still grappling with extreme socio-economic inequality, this liberty of self-fashioning is not easily feasible to everyone – and has never been.¹¹¹ The grade of accessibility to freely constitute the self differs for Namibians and people’s confinements are closely

109 Martha Mukaiwa, “Titus’ ‘Without Question’ Explores Intricacies of Black Servitude,” *The Namibian*, 14 June 2019, <https://www.namibian.com.na/index.php?page=archive-read&id=189549>; Gabeba Baderoon, “The Ghost in the House: Women, Race, and Domesticity in South Africa,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (September 2014): 178.

110 Amulungu and Dentlinger, *Die Namibische Geschichte Neu Schreiben*.

111 Ralph Marenga and Job Shipululo Amupanda, “The Coronavirus and Social Justice in Namibia,” *Politikon* 48 (April 2021): 1; Reinhart Kößler, “Namibia | bpb,” *bpb.de*, accessed 27 April 2021, <https://www.bpb.de/internationales/weltweit/innerstaatliche-konflikte/54796/namibia>.

linked to the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. German and South African colonialism are “the root cause” for the prevailing unequal distribution of resources and prospects for progression.¹¹² In the face of this socio-economic situation, Dentlinger speaks about her past life in poverty and free identity constitution in the present from the position of someone who left the area and could uplift herself because she passed as ‘white’, thereby paving the way to a German school that would eventually lead to a cosmopolitan life.

However, it is crucial to attend to the tone that she chooses to narrate this trajectory when assessing these aspects. In contrast to the common reproach of auto/biography, as a self-centred, self-celebratory genre, Dentlinger approaches the past and her own developments with self-doubt and mindfulness.¹¹³ Her work shows that despite – or, perhaps, precisely because of – the sensitivity of the discourse on identity formation during and after apartheid, engaging in a dialogue and sharing one’s experiences, struggles and sacrifices is vital in a nation that is still wounded by the past. In this regard, Dentlinger explains how she sympathises and identifies with “the coloured people” in Namibia who, according to her, “have a very difficult position” under the SWAPO government, claiming “the issue of us mixed – but who is not mixed? I mean, that’s my message. It is swept under the carpet because our voice was not strong enough.”¹¹⁴ Writing her own auto/biographical account, as well as the narratives of Ou Lenas and her aunt Hedi, is a contribution to making Namibian historiography more polyphonous.

Her choice not to centre her own story alone, but instead to highlight, interrogate and visually represent the relations that influenced her reminded me of Glissant’s notion of a “poetics of relation,” which describes how identity is formed and constructed in relation to others, instead of being a “root identity.”¹¹⁵ Drawing on his concept, while reflecting on the stakes of dismantling the construction of ‘whiteness’ as pursued by Dentlinger’s family, elucidates the book’s particular strength. It is an important contribution to a discourse on identity that remains vexed and, in many instances, silenced in Namibia. In my discussions with the author, she shared that renegotiating her history was a sensitive endeavour.

112 Namibia ranks as one of the world’s most unequal countries, with a Gini coefficient of 59.1 (2015), second only to South Africa. Poverty rates increased, due to the Coronavirus-pandemic, with the country ranking 117th among 157 countries on the Human Capital Index. See: “Namibia – Overview,” *World Bank*, accessed 14 February 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/namibia/overview>; Kößler, “Namibia | bpb;” Marenga and Amupanda, “The Coronavirus and Social Justice in Namibia,” 1.

113 Smith and Watson, *Life Writing in the Long Run*. n.pag.

114 Dentlinger, pers. comm., 18 February 2021.

115 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 18; “From the Archives: Édouard Glissant & Derek Walcott in Conversation about the Epic,” *Poets House* (blog), 15 October 2018, <https://poetshouse.org/from-the-archive-edouard-glissant-derek-walcott-in-conversation/>.

Dentlinger had strong concerns about opening the family archive, contemplating (for example) the risks of reprinting the photographs of her maternal grandmother Susanna Bezuidenhout, who came from the local community. She was uneasy about possibly racist reactions from her reading public or the vulnerability to which she would expose the photographed subject. It was in those moments that Dentlinger feels “taken aback,” by the powerful reverberation of racist ideologies.¹¹⁶ Despite the long process of working through the past, the socialisation under apartheid has left its marks. Dentlinger’s grappling with these legacies elucidates the need for a more emphatic discourse on how the past impacts the individual in Namibia and its diasporic world. Her newly build “affective archive” and her intimate writing about her ambiguous racial heritage undoes the myth of allegedly finite identity categories.¹¹⁷ In this way, her book destabilises apartheid narratives on ‘whiteness’ and racially separated worlds. By opening her private photographic archive and entangling the images with a textual reflection on her life, Dentlinger shows how grappling with the incongruities of racial identifications impacted on people’s lives.

1.2: Tshiwa Trudie Amulungu’s *Taming My Elephant*

Tshiwa Trudie Amulungu first began to write about her life in 1998, aiming to provide her family with an understanding of her cultural background and the path that she had travelled “before settling into the posh Windhoek suburb of Ludwigsdorf.”¹¹⁸ In her prologue, she explains: “I had to travel a long route to adjust to my life as it is today, but they don’t know much about this effort.”¹¹⁹ Raised in the rural north of Namibia, Amulungu was part of the first cohort of missionary schoolgirls who – overnight – would become members of the liberation movement, when SWAPO soldiers took them across the border to Angola. Her life in exile – with sojourns in Angola, Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, Senegal, France and Yugoslavia – would only end 12 years later when Amulungu returned to Namibia after independence in 1990. She

116 Dentlinger, pers. comm., 18 February 2021.

117 I am borrowing loosely from Marietta Kesting’s analysis of Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi’s and Lebohlang Kganye’s practices as “affective archives” and from Andrew van der Vlies interpretation of how Muholi produces “a new archive of affect and affiliation.” See: Marietta Kesting, “Affective Archives: Re-Animating Family Photographs in the Works of Lebohlang Kganye and Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi,” in *Women and Photography in Africa: Creative Practices and Feminist Challenges*, eds. Darren Newbury, Lorena Rizzo and Kylie Thomas (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 205–226; Andrew van der Vlies, “Queer Knowledge and the Politics of the Gaze in Contemporary South African Photography: Zanele Muholi and Others,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (December 2012): 152.

118 Tshiwa Trudie Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant* (Windhoek: UNAM Press, 2016), 4.

119 Ibid., 3.

would then become the ambassador to Senegal and was based in Dakar. Today, she is retired and permanently settled in Windhoek with her family. Reflecting on her experiences, Amulungu felt both perplexed and amused upon seeing how her own children and the younger generations did not know much about the struggles of those who had either experienced apartheid or went into exile.¹²⁰

In the years before her debut book was published in 2016, further impulses encouraged her to create a more encompassing account of her life. One such impulse was the surprised reaction that she would often get in response to her family constellation, being married to a 'white' Namibian of German descent and having three daughters together.¹²¹ In her writing, she discusses the lines of division that continue to separate the Namibian population as a result of colonialism and apartheid, and she attends to both the importance and challenges of reconciliation. Here, the personal insights that she shares are instructive responses to the state-written, celebratory narrative of reconciliation as manifested in slogans "from 'One Namibia, One Nation' towards 'Unity in Diversity,'" as we shall see.¹²²

In the analysis of Amulungu's representation of the self through writing and incorporating visual material, it is vital to take into account how her publishing team accompanied her curatorial decisions and had a say in the composition of her book. Amulungu chose to publish her book with UNAM press, the University of Namibia's scholarly publishing unit.¹²³ With this, she located her book in a Namibian literary landscape, thereby positioning her own voice as a writer in post-colonial Namibia. In consultation with UNAM press, and due to technical (and financial) reasons, the photographs in *Taming My Elephant* are not located separately within the text, but they are grouped together, printed in black and white and colour in one batch towards the last third of the book. This design generates a different reading experience when compared to Dentlinger's text-image constellation. Instead of engaging with the visual and textual narrative simultaneously, readers study one after the other in its current incarnation, perhaps taking more time to explore the photographs when approaching their position in the book or going back and forth between reading and viewing.

120 Ibid., 3; Tshiwa Trudie Amulungu, pers. comm., 11 May 2022.

121 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 4.

122 Michael Uusiku Akuupa and Godwin Kornes, "From 'One Namibia, One Nation' Towards 'Unity in Diversity'? Shifting Representations of Culture and Nationhood in Namibian Independence Day Celebrations, 1990–2010," *Anthropology Southern Africa* 36, no. 1–2 (January 2013): 34–46.

123 Melber, "The Shifting Grounds of Emancipation," 29.

1.2.1: Remembering Home

In many ways, Amulungu continues the tradition of other Namibian women writers before her who documented (and thus preserve) their journey to exile and back home and their simultaneous transition from childhood to adulthood.¹²⁴ In doing so, these authors are writing women's experiences into the historiography of Namibia. However, Amulungu's crafting of her auto/biographical account goes further. She chose a distinctly personal tone in order to secure her family history as well as the history of her ancestors.

The visual entry to Amulungu's book already directly links *Taming My Elephant* to a specific cultural context: a drawing of an elephant's head embellishes the cover, framed by red and pink stripes on top and bottom, typical for Odelela clothing. The author explains that the elephant is a reference to the Oshiwambo saying, "We will do as agreed if the night does not give birth to an elephant."¹²⁵ If an elephant appears, then it becomes a priority for all villagers to get rid of it, while everything else would remain on hold. Her title, thus, indicates how she faced so many challenges in her life that she had no other choice but to adapt and to remain strong in the face of obstacles. However, her auto/biographical account is more than a mere testimony to these experiences; it is also, as she calls it, a "family effort."¹²⁶ She is not only locating her book in Oshiwambo culture, but also amidst a loving family who, with joint forces, supported her auto/biographical project.¹²⁷ Her daughters contributed the idea for the title and designed the cover image, while her husband created maps which visualise Amulungu's journeys, as well as a family tree that retraces her family lines.¹²⁸

The centrality of family is also reflected in her endeavours to reconstruct her ancestors' movements. Similar to Dentlinger's approach, Amulungu is "playing host to the stories of others" in the way that she returned to her childhood home to interview people and to generate an account of their experiences, where they came from, how they settled in the village and how they crafted their lives during colonial rule.¹²⁹ She was inspired by seeing how her husband Wilfried Brock, and his well-known settler family, had their history neatly documented with a rich family archive

124 In a similar vein as authors like Lydia Shaketange, Libertina Amathila or, as mentioned previously, Ellen Ndeshi Namhila. See: Fulkerson-Dikuua, "Conceptualising National Transition," 59–60.

125 Original: "Ongula osho tatu ningi ngele uusiku ina wu uvala ondjamba," Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 2.

126 Amulungu and Dentlinger, *Die Namibische Geschichte Neu Schreiben*.

127 Amulungu, pers. comm., 30 March 2021.

128 Ibid.

129 van der Vlies, "The Archive, the Spectral, and Narrative Responsibility," 584.

consisting of letters, memoirs, family trees and pictures dating back to 1800.¹³⁰ In an interview, Amulungu attests: “But in my case I had none of that.”¹³¹ When asked whether she consulted other archives for her book research, Amulungu would explain: “The archive would not speak about the Oshiwambo-speaking people. It will talk about church, because that’s when people started writing. But if you really want to understand the background of tribes in Namibia, you need to talk to people.”¹³² In bringing people’s oral histories into textual form, she generates this archive herself, reminding us of the potential of auto/biographical contestation in the face of a history of silencing African experiences in the archive through systematic “mis-keeping” of records that attend thoroughly to the lives of the colonised.¹³³

We learn from Amulungu’s re-narration of her ancestors’ oral histories, for example, about the mobility of Oshiwambo-speaking people in northern Namibia and how love relations, cultural codes, pregnancies or colonists’ land claims were important factors that all pushed people to move. By exploring her ancestors’ *routes* and *roots*, Amulungu responds to the absence of written accounts on their experiences.¹³⁴ In ‘*Little Research Value*,’ Ellen Ndeshi Namhila elucidates “the emotional and social value of genealogical data,” by emphasising the importance of such recorded information for the individual with regards to “citizenship matters, inheritance and property disputes.”¹³⁵ Here, similar to Dentlinger, Amulungu’s recuperation of her family’s narratives evokes the image of collecting and scattering – of (re)composing a fragmented archive.¹³⁶ She returns to her origins and claims a sense of belonging despite the years of absences and the cosmopolitan life that she would eventually lead. After the long phase of living in exile, she generates an account of affiliation in order to transmit it to future generations.

The description of her ancestors’ movements throughout various villages in the north, with the ultimate settling of her grandparents in the village Omayanga, is contrasted with the experiences of forced mobility during the contract labour system, established by the German colonial regime and extended by the South African apartheid regime. The recruitment of men would separate families, shatter family structures and make letter writing a necessity for staying in contact. However, the

130 Amulungu, pers. comm., 30 March 2021.

131 Ibid.

132 Ibid.

133 Rassool, “Rethinking Documentary History,” 28.; Henrichsen quoted in Namhila, “*Little Research Value*,” xi.

134 For a more detailed discussion about the significance of *routes* and *roots* in relation to diasporic identity see: Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 112.

135 Namhila, “*Little Research Value*,” 1.

136 Kawashima, *Autobiographie Und Photographie Nach 1900*, 26.

lack of infrastructure or equipment did not allow for easy communication, often requiring improvisation. Amulungu's account speaks about these conditions and the long periods between letters: Recruited sons were thought to be dead; they would only learn about deceased family members months later or would find conflicting information written in the letter and on its envelope, in cases when the letter's content had to be updated. As the author explained, there is no family archive that safeguarded these letters and only oral narratives about them prevailed.¹³⁷ In these regards, Amulungu's work speaks to the structural absence of her ancestors' biographies in conventional archives. Entry was only granted through documentary records of the contract labour system, which increasingly affected all aspects of life in the north. The number of recruited men from northern regions grew from 17,494 in 1948 to 30,129 in 1960s.¹³⁸ The implications of this were far reaching and can be approximated through archived accounts by workers. Men spoke out against oppressive working conditions, the brutal ways in which they were treated, the low payment and the hardships of traveling to the places of employment.¹³⁹ When resistance to these conditions was increasingly organised and with the foundation of the Ovamboland People's Organisation (OPO) and later SWAPO, the record-keeping would increase further. However, these records barely attend to the feelings and emotions of those affected by the system. Amulungu responds to this by setting the focus on her relatives' lives. Her references to the socio-political environment provide an understanding of the context in which these narratives were located, yet they do not take centre-stage in her narrative.

The author's text and her use of imagery become more personal when she turns to her own childhood past. In light of the absence of any visual representation, either of the places in which she grew up or of herself as a child, Amulungu resorts to her memory:

Home will always remain a place that is full of childhood memories. Every time the notion of home occurs to me, I travel back in the past and see myself running in the green *omahangu* field, or stopping at a fig tree to pick figs on my way to my grandmother's homestead. I see myself walking next to the oxen assisting my father to plough the field.¹⁴⁰

With a nostalgic tone, she conjures up an image of home that is peaceful, thereby locating herself as a child in a pastoral, idyllic Namibian landscape and in a safe family space, leading an innocent, harmonious village life. There is a sense of longing

137 Amulungu, pers. comm., 30 March 2021.

138 Marion Wallace, *A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 255.

139 *Ibid.*, 256.

140 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 42, emphasis in original.

in her reminiscences, her interactions with family members and the places that she traversed. She describes:

It is this rural setting which comes to my mind when I recall my childhood. And it is not only the images of this village life, it is also the smells attached to it: the smell just before the rain, the smell of fresh milk, the smell of fresh wild spinach cooked with home-made butter, the smell of firewood in the sleeping hut. It all smelled special and different. Today, whenever I go back home, that smell is no longer there. Or at least, I can no longer smell it. Is it because I have been elsewhere? Or has my childhood village lost its origin?¹⁴¹

Amulungu's return to the scents of the past illuminates the "embodied, relational and temporal nature of memory-making."¹⁴² Resorting to these sensory memories speaks to a deep connection to places from one's past and the specific embodied experiences of locality, albeit in terms of the disruption through relocation and diasporic *errantry*.¹⁴³ In relating the present to the past self, the author articulates the felt discrepancy between the now and then. The elapsed smell becomes emblematic of a greater experience of loss – an unimpaired return to home is impossible. As her open question suggests, the self and the places of the past have changed.

By retracing her own path from childhood to adolescence, Amulungu paints a picture of a humble village life. She grew up surrounded by relatives, with daily routines defined by chores from cooking to attending to kids and cattle. She intersperses these village memories with observations of transformation: roads being built, the increasing presence of cars and 'white' men and the spread of Christianity. The Okatana Roman Catholic Mission Station would become particularly central for Amulungu when she started going to school there. She happily moved to the hostel and enjoyed studying, given that life in the village was defined by work. The author recalls how these were her first acquaintances with an "outside world," whereas previously her only conceptions of home and belonging were defined by her immediate surroundings and the family space.¹⁴⁴ South Africa's homeland policies actively crafted this framework:

We were restricted to certain areas, I as an Ovambo-speaking person would have to stay in Ovamboland and go to school in Ovamboland. [...] At the time I grew up,

141 Ibid.

142 De Sas Kropiwnicki, *Exile Identity, Agency and Belonging*, 26. See also Memory Biwa's exploration of *sensory memory* "as conscious and unconscious embodied histories." Biwa, "Weaving the Past with Threads of Memory," 99.

143 Framed by Glissant as a condition of identity in exile that is rhizomatic and understood "no longer completely within the root but also in Relation." Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 18.

144 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 62.

I was not even aware of the word apartheid. South Africa made sure that we did not know about these things. So, I knew about my village, the people who spoke the same language as me and that's it.¹⁴⁵

Amulungu's earlier, narrow conception of home would be broadened in 1973, when she went to the Canisianum Secondary School, first in Okatana and then in Anamulenge.¹⁴⁶ She encountered other Oshiwambo speakers with different intonations than hers, prompting her to recalibrate her conception of the north, Ovamboland and the community of which she was a part. These clues resonate with Coullie et al.'s observation:

While the actual experiences of many individuals in southern Africa are regionalist rather than national (in the sense that they either cross state borders or do not share in the real or imagined community of the nation-state in a meaningful way), most auto/biographical accounts lean towards a narrative alliance with national identities.¹⁴⁷

Stepping out of her village proffered new reference points for identification to the author, which implied crafting bonds with other members that claimed belonging both to the region and her culture. Amulungu would later extend this practice of identifying with broader collectives and, finally, with the "imagined community" of the nation when she joined the struggle for independence.¹⁴⁸

1.2.2: Exile: Visual Cultures in Transition

At the Canisianum Secondary School Amulungu would be acquainted with new practices of documentation, knowledge production and media imported from Europe by Catholic teachers. In 1975, Amulungu had her first photograph taken by her German language teacher when she was 17 years old. Amulungu's caption indicates how she dressed up in her "favourite yellow Sunday dress."¹⁴⁹ We see her in a long shot, with her gaze averted, immersed in a flowery bush. Edda van Gompel, who came to Namibia as a volunteer and her partner, then known as Frater Gerhard, took the image (figure 8). The couple would make it a habit to photograph students, initially, as van Gompel explained, as a leisure activity.¹⁵⁰

145 Amulungu and Dentlinger, *Die Namibische Geschichte Neu Schreiben*.

146 Amulungu, pers. comm., 30 March 2021.

147 Coullie et al., *Selves in Question*, 6.

148 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 2016).

149 See caption of figure 7.

150 Edda van Gompel, pers. comm. via phone, 19 May 2021.

She recalls how, while it was natural for the couple to own cameras, local people did not have access to the apparatus. Hence, the students of the Canisianum developed a great interest in photography.¹⁵¹ It would become a tradition at the missionary station that students dressed up on Sundays and approached the couple, excited to have their pictures taken. Two images in her book were taken as part of the Sunday tradition. Amulungu smiles radiantly into the camera in the close-up shot with her friend Agnes. In the image below, her expression is rather modest, her gaze directed pensively towards an unidentifiable destination.



Figure 8: Photograph after page 190. Caption: "At Canisianum in my favourite yellow Sunday dress in 1975. We looked our best on Sundays."

151 Ibid.

Reminiscing about the photographic moment, van Gompel recalls how her sitters would pose upright and stiff with stern and serious expressions on her faces in the Sunday tradition's beginning phase – much in line with early European family portrait photographs, when long exposure times would not allow for movements.¹⁵² This resemblance allows for contemplation as to whether students learnt about these forms of posture through contract labour portraits or through the European photography that they encountered. As a way to capture more jovial expressions and faces, the couple would increasingly take snapshots, which encouraged students to eventually pose in more casual and friendly manners. Amulungu in particular was not shy about smiling and performing for the camera, according to van Gompel.¹⁵³

However, apart from a reflection on the development of visual culture in Amulungu's life, Edwards reminds us that “[o]wnership of photographs, and access to photographs is an important material consideration.”¹⁵⁴ This consideration is crucial with regards to the image at hand because it is Amulungu's earliest visual documentation of herself and, as such, occupies a special position in her personal photographic archive today. While van Gompel maintained that the couple habitually shared the photographs that they took with their students after developing them, Amulungu explained that the picture only came into her possession after she visited her former teachers in Germany, when she was in exile and studying in France.¹⁵⁵ She remembers: “We would go through all the photo albums, they had quite a lot of photos of us.”¹⁵⁶ She further explains:

Amazingly, they kept the photographs to themselves. They gave me my photographs whenever I visited them. [...] Finally, now that they are getting old, they asked me if I wanted to receive the entire album [...] They decided to send me all the photographs (our old memories) so that I can share them with my old schoolmates. [...] So, I am busy scanning and just circulat[ing] it among us former students.¹⁵⁷

Retracing the itineraries of the image raises questions with regards to the politics of restitution between Africa and Europe, material possession as well as claims and values connected with photographs. Amulungu considered the images to be their

152 Ibid.

153 Ibid.

154 Edwards, “Photographs and the Sound of History,” 35.

155 Amulungu, pers. comm., 30 March 2021; van Gompel, pers. comm. via phone, 19 May 2021.

156 Amulungu, pers. comm. via email, 28 April 2021.

157 Ibid. Notably, Amulungu's and van Gompel's explanations differ here – the couple claims to have immediately shared most images, only keeping a few specific ones, such as single portrait shots of each student, class photographs or pictures taken during festivities held at the school.

“old memories,” resonating with Kawashima’s understanding of photography as a “mnemonic storage device” for writing auto/biography.¹⁵⁸ Her practice of reprinting the fragments from a distant past and exposing the images to the public gaze can be understood as a way of safeguarding, archiving and sharing transient imaginaries as well as cherished material objects. Moreover, by incorporating the photographs into her auto/biographical account, Amulungu claims ownership *and* authorship of framing the past and the self, thereby recovering and “gathering scattered archives.”¹⁵⁹

For her auto/biographical account, the author retrieved and reflected on the dispersed traces she left in the world, living in permanent transition as a refugee. Her 12 years in the diaspora were heralded in the middle of the night in April 1977, when SWAPO soldiers entered the girls’ dormitories at the mission station and – without questions raised or explanations given – embarked with them on the path into exile, across the border to Angola.¹⁶⁰ Many documents in Western archives consider the events to be an abduction, setting forth how the Catholic school “was ambushed by around 30–50 SWAPO-people,” explaining how “[t]he school kids [...] were kidnapped and taken by foot to Angola [...] Some of the kids could escape, 126 were abducted.”¹⁶¹ For example, the Ernst and Ruth Dammann archival repository, housed in the Basler Afrika Bibliographien, speaks critically of the occurrence. Wary of SWAPO as an organisation and their influence on the young students, the couple notes: “The children were ‘re-educated’ in Angola and trained to use weapons. One never heard again of the boys.”¹⁶² While the van Gompels had always sympathised with SWAPO and their mission to liberate the country, the couple also still speaks of a kidnapping when thinking back to the night in 1977.¹⁶³ They particularly remember the fear that they felt when the girls were taken away by soldiers. Still being shocked about the occurrence, the couple is today understanding about SWAPO’s move as well as today’s reframing of the event.¹⁶⁴ In official SWAPO narratives, the heroic deeds and achievements are glorified and hailed as part of the ‘clean,’ albeit bitter, struggle for liberation.¹⁶⁵

Amulungu’s book paints a more personal and reflective picture of the experiences in exile, written from the perspective of someone who identifies strongly with

158 See: Christen, “Photography,” 652.; Amulungu, pers. comm. via email, 28 April 2021.

159 Orford, “Gathering Scattered Archives,” 39–56.

160 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 74.

161 BAB, Ernst und Ruth Dammann, PA.39 III.G.2, my translation.

162 The Dammanns were a German couple who went on a research trip to Namibia (1953–1954), during which they photographed Namibian families, couples and individuals and recorded their voices as part of their research on Namibian languages and oral literatures. *Ibid.*

163 Van Gompel, pers. comm. via phone, 19 May 2021.

164 *Ibid.*

165 Akawa, *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle*, 2.

the liberation movement and with SWAPO as a political party today. When describing the early days of entering the liberation struggle, she does attend to the fear, perplexity and worries amongst her group; however, the author equally elucidates how the students would soon be politicised and, after military and educational training in the camps, began to embrace SWAPO.¹⁶⁶ She recalls: “Slowly but surely, we glided from the naïve, narrow minded and traditional human beings to vibrant members of a liberation movement.”¹⁶⁷ In many ways, her recollections echo Frantz Fanon’s claim that anti-colonial movements introduced “the notion of common cause, national destiny, and collective history into every consciousness.”¹⁶⁸ Amulungu remembers:

To start off, we had to get used to the name Namibia. [...] Back home, we spoke of our respective villages, churches, schools, and that was almost it. And specifically for me, my world started at Oshakati and its surroundings and ended at Anamulenge and surroundings. What was beyond these two places, irrespective of which direction, was foreign [...] We finally understood that being Namibian meant so many things. We did not speak the same language. Neither did we share the same culture. The struggle was our unifying factor.¹⁶⁹

Forging a sense of unity in the exile communities was critical to overcoming ethnic divisions, introduced by the German regime’s “divide et impera” strategies, which forcefully restructured space and fragmented the population.¹⁷⁰ These were continued by South African policies such as the Odendaal Plan, which implied systematic and comprehensive forced resettlement and the creation of ethnic identities and communities.¹⁷¹ Amulungu’s narrative speaks to the shift in identification that grew out of the liberation struggle, where the idea of a united Namibian identity was born.¹⁷² Looking back, she reflects on how these new conceptions of nationhood and home would become strong reference points for the refugees in exile: “We were to carry this sense of belonging and responsibility wherever we went in the world.”¹⁷³

In many ways, the author’s narrative of her involuntary entry into the liberation struggle speaks to Glissant’s theory that “[e]xile can be borne, even when it comes as

166 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 98.

167 *Ibid.*, 121.

168 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 51. First published 1961.

169 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 91–122.

170 Reinhart Kössler and Henning Melber, *Völkermord – Und Was Dann? Die Politik Deutsch-Namibischer Vergangenheitsbearbeitung* (Frankfurt am Main: Brandes & Apsel, 2017), 12–14, emphasis in original.

171 Akuupa and Kornos, “From ‘One Namibia, One Nation’” 7.

172 Melber, “The Shifting Grounds of Emancipation,” 22.

173 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 119.

a bolt from the blue.”¹⁷⁴ While her auto/biographical account attends to the painful experiences of uprootedness and the struggles of a life in transition, Amulungu also acknowledges how the agony of the past and liberation were a “collective achievement.”¹⁷⁵ In stressing the centrality of the shared commitment to the struggle, the writer partially chooses “not to focus on the *distinctiveness* of the subject’s experiences, but rather on its *typicality*” as a way to appeal for recognition for the generations’ sacrifices and for the value of solidarity.¹⁷⁶ It is in these moments that readers might feel reminded that the author writes from a position of a (former) state worker and (former) ambassador. The present, remembering voice seems closely entangled with discourses about the nation and about national identity. However, by sharing more personal insights, emotions and private experiences, Amulungu’s auto/biographical account oscillates between collective and individual narration. Through the interplay of the written and visual texts in her book in particular, Amulungu allows for intimate glances at the writing self. In this respect, Lee-Von Kim reminds us that “[t]he presence of family photographs” in auto/biographical accounts “draws the reader in as an intimate, a confidant. Here, photography supports and augments autobiography’s claims to intimacy, familiarity, and revelation.”¹⁷⁷ In this vein, Amulungu’s book does not straightforwardly or simplistically align with narratives of the nation and “ready-made stories of the nation in microcosm,” to echo Rassool’s framing.¹⁷⁸

The image below is particularly instructive for contemplation about diasporic identity formation, the function of the photographic archive and regarding practices of forging a sense of belonging in a state of transition. It was taken in 1978 or 1979 at the Okatana Catholic Mission about two years after Amulungu’s departure.¹⁷⁹ We see her family posing together for the photograph. The photographic arrangement and the presence of chairs hint at a negotiated occasion.¹⁸⁰ Both parents are seated and, while the younger boys are leaning on their mother, the older brothers are standing upright, their eyes directed at the camera. Apart from the slight smile on the boy’s face, all family members are looking sternly and seriously towards the photographer, thereby highlighting the staged character of the photographic moment. What strikes the eye are the photograph’s signs of decay: a multitude of thin lines and creases and a sepia tone that signals the fading of colours. These traces

174 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 5.

175 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 7.

176 Coullie et al., *Selves in Question*, 27.

177 Kim, “Autobiographical Revisions,” 109.

178 Rassool, *The Individual, Auto/Biography and History in South Africa*, 7.

179 While the book indicates the year 1979 as the date of the photographic occasion, Amulungu stated in an interview with the author that it must have been taken in 1978. Amulungu, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 6 May 2021.

180 Grendon et al., 8.

are signs of the photograph's trajectories and travels through different spaces and times.¹⁸¹ Amulungu remembers: "We did not have many belongings and when we left a place, we left with all our few belongings. So, we also moved with our photographs, which we kept very precious in envelopes between our clothes."¹⁸² As an aide-mémoire of loved ones on Amulungu's journey, the picture serves to evoke a sense of family presence in times of transition. It emerges as a cherished and precious item, one safely guarded and yet heavily used and worn by practices of affection. After more than 40 years of circulation, the image found its safe, digitised position in the book.

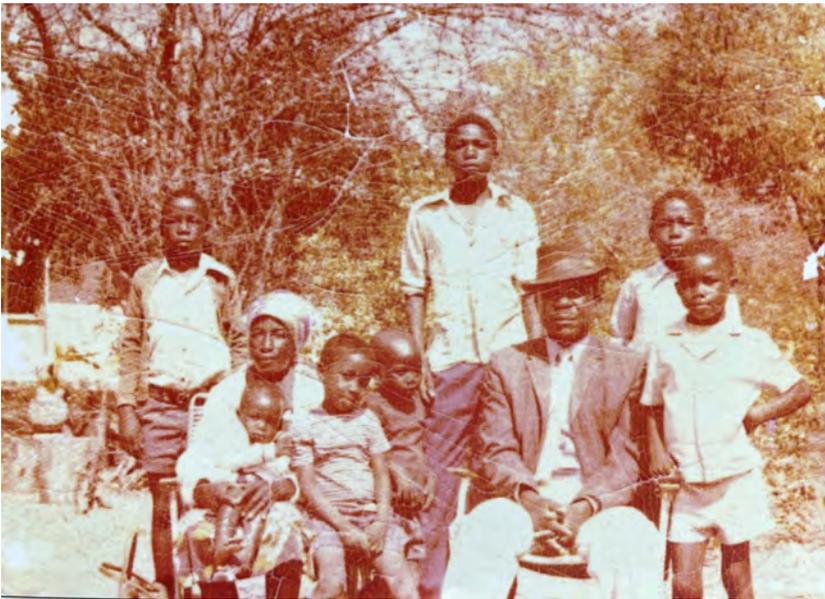


Figure 9: Photograph after page 190. Caption: "My parents and my seven brothers in 1979, just before the death of my mother."

While her text does not refer to the picture directly, Amulungu speaks about the significance of letters and photographs during her life in exile. Since communication with families during the war posed a danger to their security, both types of media remained a rarity and had to travel complex routes with the help of trusted indi-

181 Ibid.

182 Amulungu, pers. comm., 30 March 2021.

viduals.¹⁸³ It was not unusual that photographs went missing from the envelopes on the itineraries from Zambia and Namibia to Germany and back again.¹⁸⁴ The context of figure 9 speaks to this complex, organised transfer while, simultaneously, dismantling the family portrait as a fabrication. The author explains how Father Houben, via whom she would contact her family, had taken the image specifically for Amulungu. When seeing Amulungu's mother at church, he would ask her to bring the whole family: "So my parents had dragged all these many boys to church on a Sunday so that this image can be taken," the author reflects.¹⁸⁵

The idea was for us in exile to keep in touch with our family members at home and vice versa. Having photographs of our loved ones whom we could not meet for a long time meant a lot to us. It kept us going and gave us hope. In my case, it was interesting to see my little brothers growing up over the 12 years. My youngest brother was born when I was already in exile and I knew him only from pictures.¹⁸⁶

Photographs function as "cherished objects and important tokens of affection" that serve to advance a sense of affiliation in the face of absence, resonating with Susan Sontag's consideration that pictures may "supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives."¹⁸⁷ The different forms of dispersion and absence connected to the image directly relate to the visual economies of apartheid Namibia and South Africa. In consideration of the position of photography in South African families, Marietta Kesting asserts how "[t]he apartheid regime had left traces that were mostly marked by the absence of photographs showing the whole family together."¹⁸⁸ Notably, Amulungu's own absence is most striking in the picture at hand. The author further asserts that, on the occasions that Father Houben wanted to take the family picture, it was common that not all family members would be home. In the case of the image above, her sister was at nursing school and her father was on contract work in Walvis Bay, from which she deduces: "I am sure Fr Houben waited until my father was back a year later [after the birth of my brother] so that he could take and send me this image."¹⁸⁹ In other instances, when members were absent, Houben, as photographer

183 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 133.

184 Ibid.

185 Amulungu, pers. comm., 30 March 2021.

186 Amulungu, pers. comm. via email, 28 April 2021.

187 Grendon et al., *Usakos*, 13; Kim, "Scenes of Af/Filiation," 403; Sontag, *On Photography*, 8.

188 Marietta Kesting, "Affective Archives: Re-Animating Family Photographs in the Works of Lebohang Kganye and Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi," in *Women and Photography in Africa: Creative Practices and Feminist Challenges*, eds. Darren Newbury, Lorena Rizzo and Kylie Thomas (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 217.

189 Amulungu, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 6 May 2021.

and intermediary, would seek family members out individually to take additional photographs.¹⁹⁰

It is a common characteristic of family photography to portray the family in an idealised fashion. However, the example above emphasises the additional complexity of crafting an idyllic family portrait in an apartheid context in which families were often dispersed, separated either by apartheid laws or by death.¹⁹¹ This looming absence due to a death, which would take place after the taking of the photo, is foreshadowed by Amulungu's caption: "My parents and my seven brothers in 1979, just before the death of my mother."¹⁹² The text guides the reading of the image and indicates how, for the author, the significance of the photograph goes beyond what is merely seen, given that it symbolises the family's loss. In reference to her choice to insert the image, she explained to me: "I wanted to show the faces of my little brothers, just one year before the death of my mother."¹⁹³ Incorporating the image accompanied by the caption was a way to express her sympathy with them and to acknowledge how they had to "face the world without a mother."¹⁹⁴

With her book, Amulungu also negotiates her own pain by returning to the moment when the tragic news was conveyed to her via a letter. Interestingly, while Amulungu re-narrates the letter's content and pays testimony to the meaning of the words, the author did not either store or safeguard these material relicts from the past: "Now that I am thinking about it, it is surprising that I haven't kept any of the letters I received while in exile. [...] My conclusion is that unlike the photos, we do not value letters. Once I have learnt about the letter's content, I do not see any reason of keeping it."¹⁹⁵ In the historical contexts of colonialism and apartheid, it was common practice for readers to destroy letters after receiving them. The network of communication or the letters' contents might endanger the writer, recipient or friends and families of both. Examples of this can be found in Kaujende's *Sister: "Letter from Karibib"* (1909), Tsitsi Dangarembga's "The Letter" (1985) or Motshabi Molefhe's "Lend me a Dress" (1991).¹⁹⁶ This practice might have been a subconscious one because Amulungu did not recall actively deciding against keeping the letter. The auto/biographical recollection offered an alternative means to archive the letters. Through re-narration, Amulungu remembers the grief she felt and she works through her losses in re-narrating it. The author incorporates further

190 Amulungu, pers. comm. 30 March 2021.

191 Kesting, "Affective Archives," 207.

192 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, after page 190.

193 Amulungu, pers. comm. via email, 28 April 2021.

194 Ibid.

195 Amulungu, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 6 May 2021.

196 All of them have been referenced and printed in: Margaret J. Daymond et al., eds., *Women Writing Africa. The Southern Region*, 1st ed. (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003).

photographs of beloved, deceased friends in her book, thereby commemorating and paying tribute to them.¹⁹⁷ Closely grouped together, these images resemble a form of photographic album, a medium to revisit and to commemorate the past and those who perished. The images are crucial to the work of memory, as they provide a sense of continuity, comfort, solace and thus they helped their viewers and keepers to remain strong in face of hardships and to prevail.

In this vein, Amulungu's narrative attests to how constant adjustment and prevailing became a "normal way of life" in exile.¹⁹⁸ While the liberation struggle waged on at home in Namibia, Amulungu travelled to France where she would further her studies, become a wife and a mother. The author illuminates how she and others adapted to the diasporic condition and crafted their lives in changing circumstances. Interrogating what the diasporic condition implies for a sense of self, Glissant argues how the concept of identity can no longer be tied to a notion of a central, core root; it must instead be reconsidered as rhizomatic.¹⁹⁹ His "poetics of relation" does not discard the idea of rootedness altogether, but emphasises the idea of "an enmeshed root system," a spreading network, a concept of self that centres the "relationship with the Other."²⁰⁰ Examining narratives on exile in the South African context, De Sas Kropiwnicki notes how these are primarily told as stories of "liberation, mass movement and a triumph over adversity," emphasising that exile meant much more for the people who experienced it: "It was about everyday struggles, far removed from politics; about personal relationships and their failings; [...] about children and their searches for belonging and meaning."²⁰¹ The photos that Amulungu incorporated attest to this.

Figure 10 shows Amulungu on her wedding day, marrying her first husband Aaron in Ljubljana in 1983. Today, the writer reminisces how the image transmits a multitude of meanings. Looking at the picture, she sees herself "getting married unsuspectingly that a year later I would be thrown into a turmoil far away from home."²⁰² In her auto/biographical account, readers learn about the agony and pain that would follow in the aftermath of the photograph when her husband abandoned her, leaving her alone and pregnant in Ljubljana: "This was certainly too much for me to bear. I was away from my usual base, France, I had no money to purchase another ticket, and I was simply at a loss. [...] I considered everything, including committing suicide."²⁰³ The tone of her text transports Amulungu's sorrow and

197 See, for example, the images of Agnes and Marina with whom she spent her adolescence (Agnes) and with whom she went into exile (Marina).

198 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 114–162.

199 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 11.

200 Ibid.

201 De Sas Kropiwnicki, *Exile Identity, Agency and Belonging*, 2.

202 Amulungu, pers. comm. via email, 28 April 2021.

203 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 173–174.

devastation. Photographs as “visual incisions” or “fragments of time and space” can remind us of slippery moments of joy that were simultaneously embedded in broader histories.²⁰⁴ Looking at the past from the vantage point of the present, Amulungu is now at peace with this chapter in her history, stating: “It’s part of my life and that it ended up badly, I had no control over that but from that marriage I have also a child – Paleni. So, I thought I should also put it there [to show] that, in the end, things turned out good for me.”²⁰⁵



Figure 10 (left): Photograph after page 190. Caption: “My first wedding, to Aaron in Ljubljana, Slovenia (former Yugoslavia) in October 1983.”

Figure 11 (right): Photograph after page 190. Caption: “With my first daughter Paleni in Clermont-Ferrand, France, in May 1985. A calm baby is a delight for a young student mother.”

While the images show private moments of her daily life, Amulungu’s writing continuously ties her experiences back to the political situation. In this way, the hybrid image-texts place the subject simultaneously in an everyday as well as a broader political context. The author states: “No matter where we were, we remained close to our struggle. This had become our *raison d’être*, an inexplicable source of inspiration and belonging. Whatever we were doing, wherever we were, the ultimate objective was clear in our minds: the independence of Namibia.”²⁰⁶ Her being part of the liberation movement remained crucial as she longed for the country’s independence abroad. These repeated gestures to the nation remind us of her status as a refugee.

204 Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 3; Grendon et al., *Usakos*, 14.

205 Amulungu, pers. comm. via email, 28 April 2021.

206 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 147–148, emphasis in original.

Ariella Azoulay's analysis of the relationship between photography and citizenship is instructive in shifting the attention to the photograph's resonances. In *The Civil Contract of Photography*, she examines the possibility for stateless people to pursue political agency and resistance through photography, stating: "When the photographed persons address me, claiming their citizenship in photography, they cease to appear as stateless or as enemies, the manners in which the sovereign regime strives to construct them. They call on me to restore their citizenship through my viewing."²⁰⁷ Amulungu's personal images convey this notion of restorative agency and this is furthered by her narrative.

The author repeatedly evokes her strong alliance with SWAPO politics, the cause of the struggle and the exile condition in various statements in her book.²⁰⁸ However, even with her strong focus on relations, her book is not a political manifesto; rather, it is an account of how the self has been constituted in exile. This becomes tangible not only in her photographs, where we see her as a loving mother, friend, fellow student or sister (and barely ever alone), but also in her tireless emphasis on the centrality of collectivity, solidarity and togetherness. This sense of unity, which was actively crafted by SWAPO amongst the members of the liberation movement in exile, would be probed when Amulungu met her future husband Wilfried Brock at the United Nations Institute for Namibia in Lusaka and even more when both returned to the liberated nation after independence.

1.2.3: A New Namibian Family Archive

In *Taming My Elephant*, Amulungu speaks at length about her internal struggle to overcome prejudices against the "white comrade" who had joined the liberation movement.²⁰⁹ The national consciousness forged in exile to unite Namibia's different ethnic groups could not easily encompass Namibians of European descent:

Although it was not an official position, we at the back of our minds knew that whites in Namibia were the reason for our struggle. Yes, it was a system, but the system was run by whites and at the same time this system gave privileges to whites only. [...] If things were all right for this white person back home, what was he doing here?²¹⁰

Amulungu's question became more pressing as the two of them developed romantic feelings for one another. Her explanations of the difficult path to find trust in the possibility of a relationship with a 'white' man is coupled with a black and white

207 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 17.

208 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 188.

209 Ibid., 198–227.

210 Ibid., 200.

snapshot that shows both “right at the beginning of everything.”²¹¹ Below the image, their marriage photograph from 1990, attests to both their love and perseverance, despite the author’s difficulties to overcome her reservations as well as the obstacles both faced upon their return to Namibia. While this would be the long-awaited journey to Amulungu’s country of origin, the relocation implied renewed efforts to re-position the self and to find a place in the new nation together with her partner. Her understanding of home – the abstract concept that she had longed for during her 12 years in exile – had to be negotiated yet again. Amulungu recalls her thoughts upon her arrival: “Is this Windhoek, the capital, we have been referring to whenever we spoke about home? [...] Well, this was apparently home.”²¹² A feeling of belonging could not easily set in. We are reminded that, before leaving, Amulungu’s conception of home was in Brah’s words, her “lived experience of a locality” – hence confined to the north of the country.²¹³ The sense of unity and belonging, as it had been crafted in exile, is juxtaposed with her feeling of a strangeness, one pointing to the mythic nature of national identities and, effectively, dismantling the nation as an “imagined community,” as conceptualised by Benedict Anderson.²¹⁴

How does auto/biography serve to constitute the self in the post-colonial nation? With regards to the challenges of forging a sense of belonging back in Namibia, the author’s responses to the state-crafted narratives of reconciliation are particularly instructive. As Michael Akuupa and Godwin Kornes explain:

During the anti-colonial struggle, people were united in their state of oppression and identified as opposing colonial rule. However, once the state of colonial oppression had come to an end, the newly and hard-fought freedom allowed for multiple, political subject positions which go beyond the colonial dominator-dominated dichotomy and may be ‘national’ as much as they may be sub-national, regional and/or ethnic.²¹⁵

As a way to translate the spirit of unity from the liberation struggle into the post-colonial Namibian nation, SWAPO spurred the programme of national reconciliation through slogans such as ‘Unity in Diversity,’ and political speeches that celebrated an allegedly achieved reconciliation and covered prevailing lines of division in the country with a veil of silence.²¹⁶ These policies towards nation-building and uniting a highly fragmented population were important in light of the heavy marks

211 Caption of photograph.

212 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 232.

213 Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 188–189.

214 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

215 Akuupa and Kornes, “From ‘One Namibia, One Nation,’” 19.

216 Hage Geingob, “What the President Said on 21 March,” *New Era*, 24 March 2015, <https://newerlive.na/posts/president-21-march>; Akuupa and Kornes, “From ‘One Namibia, One Nation’”;

left by both colonialism and apartheid. However, the incongruencies of the narrative of reconciliation and the prevailing lines of division (with regards to political, economic and social factors) in the nation remain heatedly debated by various scholars, activists and authors.²¹⁷ A central bone of contention in SWAPO's approach to reconciliation is its glorification and celebration of certain parts of history, while other chapters remain disregarded and concealed.²¹⁸ Akawa calls this SWAPO's "we-liberated-this-country' eulogy," while Heike Becker refers to the celebration of SWAPO's foundation myth as Namibia's "master narrative," that hails how "SWAPO brought us freedom through the barrel of the gun."²¹⁹ The state-decreed partial forgetting was meant to reunite Namibia's Black and 'white' community, reintegrate former enemies (i.e., Koevoet, see below) into the nation as well as to cover SWAPO's own atrocities and human rights violations committed during the liberation struggle – to mention only a few points of friction.²²⁰ Despite the existing research on these issues, as well as repeated critique articulated in Namibia's public press, there remains a lack of national debate around the past and its legacies.²²¹

Against this background, Amulungu's auto/biographical account contributes to the attempts of earlier autobiographical writers to further a discussion on the country's history. She addresses remaining cleavages and obstacles that hamper national reconciliation – for example, when meeting fellow members of the new Namibian nation, such as former Koevoet soldiers who had moved back into the family neighbourhood. Koevoet, the counterinsurgency unit, consisted of young black men who were recruited by 'white' officers and were placed under their command; they committed numerous brutal crimes against civilians.²²² After independence, they returned to Namibia, "were back at their homes and were now mingling with civilians,"

Sabine Höhn, "International Justice and Reconciliation in Namibia: The ICC Submission and Public Memory," *African Affairs* 109, no. 436 (2010): 475.

217 Akuupa and Kornes, "From 'One Namibia, One Nation,'" 11.

218 Melber, *Understanding Namibia*, 2–3.

219 Akawa, *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle*, 2; Heike Becker, "Commemorating Heroes in Windhoek and Eenhana: Memory, Culture and Nationalism in Namibia, 1990–2010," *Africa* 81, no. 4 (November 2011): 522.

220 For a more detailed account see: John S. Saul and Colin Leys, "Lubango and After: 'Forgotten History' as Politics in Contemporary Namibia," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29, no. 2 (2003): 333–353.

221 See, for example: Ndumba J. Kamwanyah, "Reconciliation At The Crossroads," *The Namibian*, 1 September 2017, <https://www.namibian.com.na/index.php?page=archive-read&id=168783>; Nadja Ofuately-Alazard and Nicolas Grange, "ReMIX: Africa in Translation: Namibia," *bpb*, 2016, <https://www.bpb.de/mediathek/254149/remix-africa-in-translation-namibia>.

222 Becker, "Commemorating Heroes in Windhoek and Eenhana," 523; Justine Hunter, "Getting the Balance Right Between Justice and Sustainable Peace?" in *The Long Aftermath of War: Reconciliation and Transition in Namibia*, eds. André Du Pisani, Reinhart Kößler and William Lindeke (Freiburg i. Br: Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institut, 2010), 404–405.

as Amulungu observes.²²³ The author speaks about the fear she felt when learning of Koevoet's presence in the communities:

Koevoet had inflicted untold suffering including death among the black Namibian population during the war. Since they were part of the apartheid military machinery, they had stayed in army barracks and they only appeared among the population when there was need to terrorise them. And here they were now, back just like everybody else. [...] Uncertainty, mistrust and suspicion were automatically unavoidable.²²⁴

Reflections like these show how the post-colonial nation was war-torn, scarred by the legacies of apartheid and was fragmented.²²⁵ Amulungu had to face these lines of division personally, when she and her partner disclosed their relationship to their respective families. Her present voice looks back at the period of silence that followed when Brock dispatched the news to his family: "I knew what they thought and felt about me. I did not blame them. I understood and did not expect anything different. I was born and bred in the same country. That was simply how things were those days."²²⁶ Mindful of her own initial reservations, she understood how "antagonistic views about one another were certainly present and were going to accompany us for a while as a nation."²²⁷ Here, Amulungu's family situation mirrors the challenges of the broader society as a micro-history.²²⁸ Her narrative of private reconciliation emerges as an example on how to overcome cleavages: through empathy and mutual encounters. In many instances throughout her text, the author shows understanding for her husband's family and their prejudices against her: "Today, when I think back as a mother, I can feel what went through the mind of my dear mother-in-law. All mothers want the best for their children. And that best can only be associated with what one is familiar with. Anything else is suspicious, if not mistrusted."²²⁹ By marking her speaking position in the present, Amulungu hints at the possibility

223 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 246–247.

224 *Ibid.*, 247.

225 Akuupa and Kornes, "From 'One Namibia, One Nation,'" 9.

226 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 259.

227 *Ibid.*, 267.

228 Similar to Rassool, literary scholars often speak of auto/biography as "micro-history," *The Individual, Auto/Biography and History in South Africa*, 7. See, for example: Klaas van Walraven (ed.), *The Individual in African History: The Importance of Biography in African Historical Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 33–37; Sigurður G. Magnússon, "The Life Is Never Over: Biography as a Micro-historical Approach," in *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History*, eds. Hans Renders, Binne de Haan and Jonne Harmsma (London: Routledge, 2017), 43–52.

229 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 257.

of perseverance, emphasised by her appreciation of her – today – “*dear mother-in-law*.”²³⁰

The hard-won mutual acceptability, appreciation, and trust between Amulungu and her mother-in-law receives special attention in the book. From a gender perspective, it becomes visible how the women’s relationship and Amulungu’s daughters in particular were crucial in the slow process of building affiliations. This implied getting acquainted with the places and homes of the respective other families for all family members. Amulungu explains how she was reluctant upon entering the Brock’s exclusive worlds in Swakopmund and Klein Windhoek, finding herself in places “where black people would not be.”²³¹ Her need to orient herself in democratic Namibia once again evokes the reverberations of apartheid administration and restriction of spaces, land and territories. With time, Amulungu was able to craft a feeling of home in these previously unknown places of the country and family spaces, to the point where “mingling with each other became a natural state of affairs for our two families.”²³²



Figure 12: Photograph after page 190. Caption: “The Brock Clan in Brock Street in Windhoek in 2006.”

230 Ibid., my emphasis.

231 Ibid., 263.

232 Ibid., 290.

The author visualises this with numerous family photographs of herself with her children, her husband and both of their families. With regards to the picture above, she explains that it was taken in the context of her husband's German settler family's reunion. As we learnt previously, the Brocks have always actively kept a family archive, documenting their history and cultivating family photography – a tradition that had an impact on Amulungu. Brock's mother, "being a very family loving person, looked for every opportunity to celebrate her family," enjoyed taking photographs – which gestures to the consideration of family photography as gendered practices, as evoked by Langford and to be explored in further detail in chapter 3.²³³

On the occasion of his father's 80th birthday, the family walked to the Brockstrasse to create this family picture. As Amulungu and her husband explained in an interview, the street is named after the family business 'Woermann, Brock & Co.', as well as after the great-grandfather Max Brock, albeit indirectly, who came to Namibia in 1895.²³⁴ Even today, the family is well-known for their business established in 1894 as well as their private shipping company, the 'Woermann-Linie'.²³⁵ They built important structures for the trade between the colony and the metropole through their different enterprises, thereby playing a central role in Germany's colonial project as entrepreneurs. According to Wilfried Brock, his great-great-uncle Adolph W. Woermann in particular was crucial in these involvements, acting as an outspoken advocate of German colonialism and as an advisor to Otto von Bismarck in colonial affairs.²³⁶

Casper Erichsen, Nadja Ofuately-Alazard and Nicolas Grange state how the early generations of the family are said to have participated in the establishment of concentration camps during the war against the Herero and Nama, exploiting prisoners as forced labour for their business.²³⁷ To this, Brock adds that the company organised the transport of 'Schutztrupplern,' horses, war equipment, et cetera and, through such different activities, they emerged as profiteers of German colonial policy in Africa and from the colonial war.²³⁸ Brock speaks directly and in unembellished fashion about the involvement of his family, highlighting how he had no impact on what his ancestors did. He always felt strongly about taking his own stance

233 Amulungu, pers. comm. via email, 28 April 2021; Langford, *Suspended Conversations*, 26–27.

234 Brock, pers. comm., 16 May 2022.

235 The business was formerly entitled 'Damara & Namaqua Handelsgesellschaft.' The name was changed in 1909 once other partners were bought out. Brock, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 15 March 2023.

236 Brock, pers. comm., 16 May 2022.

237 Casper W. Erichsen, "The Angel of Death Has Descended Violently among Them." *Concentration Camps and Prisoners-of-War in Namibia, 1904–08* (Enschede: PrintPartners Ipskamp B.V, 2005), 49, 119; Ofuately-Alazard and Grange, "ReMIX."

238 Brock, pers. comm., 16 May 2022.; Ofuately-Alazard and Grange, "ReMIX."

towards politics – for example, when he decided to refuse conscription and instead become a member of SWAPO during the liberation struggle.²³⁹

Amulungu's decision to incorporate the photograph of the broader Brock family, with its many links to Namibia's violent colonial history, carries many implications. In the face of ongoing campaigns in Namibia and beyond to rename streets that honour European settlers and/or explicitly refer to colonial actors from the past, this image emerges as a sign of conviviality, harmony and reconciliation. Amulungu positions herself in this family constellation as "a proud, tested member of the Brock clan."²⁴⁰ She neither seems to align straightforwardly with political calls for a 'decolonisation' of the public sphere, nor for the removal, intervention or critique of relics from the colonial past. If she does, then her politics are kept private. In posing for this image, Amulungu claims access to places that had not been welcoming previously. In a way, she inscribes herself into history and positions herself in the public spaces in which the legacies of the past remain visible. Perhaps, like her husband, she takes more private political stances without generalising past and present historical entanglements and the legacies of families. Speaking about the image today, Amulungu explains that, for her, it stands for the couple's achievements, having transcended initial tensions and differences. Looking at the image makes her both acknowledge and appreciate what it means to belong to two distinct cultures.²⁴¹

The author couples the picture with further photographs of everyday life with her daughters and her husband in various places around Namibia, as well as family snapshots in the north, showing the reciprocity of family exchange and the mingling of cultural and social worlds that shape their lives. We see her grandmother sitting on the ground in a homestead, holding Amulungu's twin daughters, or her daughter carrying a baby on her back, pounding Mahangu, while other photographs show mothers and daughters as grown-up women wearing Odelela dresses. With this visual documentation of family life, the author reaffirms her belonging to the north and asserts her remaining bond with Ovambo culture. The poetics of relation and aesthetics of reconciliation that Amulungu conjures with her photographic assemblages allow for contemplation about the ways in which they may "advance claims of affiliation," as Lee-Von Kim writes, asserting how photographs "can be marshalled in the service of a [...] family narrative."²⁴² The narrative evoked is one that celebrates both family harmony and cultural diversity. With images such as the ones

239 Ibid.

240 See, for example: Peter K. W. Tan and Christoph Purschke, "Street Name Changes as Language and Identity Inscription in the Cityscape," *Linguistics Vanguard* 7, no. 5 (August 2021): 1–13; Dagmar Wittek, "Berlin Swaps Signs on Streets with Colonial Names," *DW*, 12 February 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/berlin-swaps-signs-on-streets-with-colonial-names/video-63973566>; Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 293.

241 Amulungu, pers. comm. via email, 30 March 2021.

242 Ibid., 403; 414.

described above, or statements like, “[s]uch is the beauty of cultural diversity,” Amulungu’s auto/biographical account seems to align with SWAPO’s conception of unity “through the tolerant accommodation of cultural difference.”²⁴³ Much in line with SWAPO ideals, the family is conflating Namibia’s diverse cultures in one space – in the microcosm of the family and as citizens of the national space Namibia.

However, despite this proximity to SWAPO narratives, Amulungu’s auto/biographical account is not a mere reflection of the nation as a microhistory. She attends to the difficult path as a “mixed-couple” to feel accepted and to feel at home in post-colonial Namibia.²⁴⁴ Reflecting back on their marriage just after independence, the author writes: “I could feel the heavy look at us. This was not a common wedding in the Namibia of those days.”²⁴⁵ She continues: “By the time we married, there were no more than five other mixed couples in Windhoek, if not in the entire country. It was a novelty and we attracted attention as we moved around.”²⁴⁶ Even today, many Namibians are still perplexed about her family constellation, which is often still perceived as a rarity: “In Namibia, although bit by bit it’s happening, many people still think it’s a difficult life. Some of my friends look at me and say ‘poor you.’ But I don’t feel poor.”²⁴⁷

Amulungu claims visibility and acceptance for her family and her design of life by positioning herself and her book in this larger Namibian community and confronting such reactions. She writes to attest to her experiences, as a mother, a wife, a refugee, a repatriate and as a Namibian. Stuart Hall reminds us: “It is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are.”²⁴⁸ Hence, in writing her auto/biographical account and constituting the self through photographic curatorial practices, Amulungu gathers scattered fragments from the past, fills gaps in family histories and constructs an archive herself, to pass on to her children and the following generations, for them to draw on and learn from as a way forward to a better future.

243 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 274; Becker, “Commemorating Heroes in Windhoek and Eenhana,” 538.

244 Amulungu, pers. comm. via email, 30 March 2021.

245 Amulungu, *Taming My Elephant*, 274.

246 *Ibid.*, 281.

247 Amulungu, pers. comm. via email, 30 March 2021.

248 Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” *Social Justice* 20, no. 1/2 (51–52) (Spring-Summer 1993): 111.

1.3: Conclusion

As referenced in this book's introduction, Muholi once remarked that "the archive means we are counted in history" – a statement that evokes that some kind of visual or textual record is a prerequisite for being inscribed into the past, present and future.²⁴⁹ We have seen how, in the cases of Ulla Dentlinger and Tshiwa Trudie Amulungu, their slim family archives as well as official archival repositories were unable to attest to their life journeys. To counter this, both authors have created hybrid image-texts that document their childhood past in rural, colonial Namibia, personal sacrifices, separation and identity crises. Placing these accounts alongside each other helps to transcend an internal partition of Namibian historiography that commonly runs along racial lines. While both writers share ground, in how they attempt to correct the ways in which Namibian history has been written, a closer look at the distinct meta-narratives that they are writing against uncovers the distinct corrective impulses that are central to their works.

Dentlinger's *Where Are You From? 'Playing White' Under Apartheid* speaks to the permeability of race and class statuses and the ways in which these were interconnected. Her book reveals the fluidity and inconsistencies of racial identifications: Where apartheid narratives on clear-cut identity categories suggested clarity around subject positions, Dentlinger's deconstruction of 'whiteness' offers intimate insights into the emotional struggle connected with imposed identity categories as well as with aspirations to escape them. In this way, her book not only contests apartheid narratives, but also family taboos that aimed to hide and to silence a complex and difficult legacy. By comparison, Amulungu's *Taming My Elephant* also generates a personal archive that was priorly absent. However, the voids that she addresses are different to those that Dentlinger sought to fill. As official framings of exile, the return to the post-colony and national reconciliation omit the challenges and personal sacrifices, Amulungu shares her private family story to trouble and extend one-dimensional SWAPO narratives.

Discussing Dentlinger's and Amulungu's auto/biographical accounts alongside one another elucidates the challenges connected to this work. For both, writing their books involved gathering scattered or previously undocumented information, conducting oral research and tracing photographs of the past. Moreover, both share their personal experiences of loss, pain and longing in a life of constant transition. While for Amulungu the struggle to find a place in Namibian society and historiography ended well, for Dentlinger, after having left Namibia and maintaining a critical distance from her country of origin, the post-colonial nation did not seem to hold any promises. Reaffirming her roots in the country remains difficult in light of the identity crises that she has endured. In this vein, the women's auto/biographical

249 Haynes, "The Archive Means We Are Counted in History."

accounts are not self-indulgent celebratory success stories, but are instead negotiations of a troubling past that remains haunting in Namibia.²⁵⁰

Photography's role plays a crucial part in this. As we have seen, family photographs can trigger auto/biographical storytelling; as memory images, they prompt processes of reflection.²⁵¹ In addition to these functions, the selected images in Amulungu's and Dentlinger's books contribute decisively to both the tone and affect of their work. Interlacing their narrative with photography evokes a sense of intimacy. Shirley Jordan writes: "As it explores the potential of telling through showing, visual autobiography plays with photography's propensity to position us as intimates, privy to what only those closest to the autobiographical subject would normally see."²⁵² Her observations point to the potential of positing the reader as an intimate. Yet, Dentlinger and Amulungu also expose themselves to a degree of vulnerability in this practice, given that they open their narratives of self and family photographs to a public audience.

In doing so, they not only allow for empathetic engagements with an individual's past and Namibian complexities, but there is also a subversive, political dimension to this practice. The authors themselves craft "affective archives" in the face of Namibia's history of knowledge extraction (with colonial archives having been established and built by the colonial regime and with history largely having been written and told by colonial agents), and in the face of a sparse family archive to hold on to.²⁵³ Amulungu and Dentlinger restore, secure and renegotiate the past as curators, authors, archivists and as researchers. Their affective archives are not only repositories of the self, but – as introduced previously when borrowing from Andrew van der Vlies – both women are "playing host to the stories of others" as they are accommodating and paying tribute to the experiences of friends and family members with their auto/biographical accounts.²⁵⁴ Drawing loosely on Édouard Glissant helped to show how, with their self-reflexive, affective approach, Amulungu's and Denlinger's intimate counter-narratives employ a 'poetics of relation' to situate themselves in relation to others, past selves and past homes that are no longer there. They also po-

250 In reference to Smith and Watson's discussion on the reproach that autobiographies as narcissistic and self-absorbed narratives of a subject's life. See: Smith and Watson, *Life Writing in the Long Run.*, n.pag.

251 Kawashima, *Autobiographie Und Photographie Nach 1900*, 9.

252 Shirley Jordan, "Chronicles of Intimacy: Photography in Autobiographical Projects," in *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography*, eds. Amy L. Hubbell, Ann Miller and Natalie Edwards (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 53.

253 Kesting, "Affective Archives"; van der Vlies, "Queer Knowledge and the Politics of the Gaze in Contemporary South African Photography," 152.

254 van der Vlies, "The Archive, the Spectral, and Narrative Responsibility," 584.

sition themselves in the present by conjuring a poetics of identity construction that allows for an empathetic discourse about the past.²⁵⁵

255 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*; Coullie et al., *Selves in Question*, 1–2.

Chapter 2: Artistic Archival Interventions and Memory Conversions¹

“One cannot transform society without transforming the art and culture it creates and consumes every day. Art is invested with deep meanings of belonging, group identity, patriotism and social values [...] It is deeply political because it catalyses emotive politics.”

— *Nomusa Makhubu*²

Art historian, curator and artist Nomusa Makhubu's quote touches on many of the central issues introduced in the previous chapter and further explored in the following pages. She points to the ways in which the arts, in a broader sense, serve to negotiate questions of belonging and identity or to critique societal issues by allowing for empathetic openings and by catalysing “emotive politics.”³ Continuing my interrogation of creative methods used to trouble the archive, this chapter shifts the focus from literary expressions to artistic practices and to their potential for navigating complex colonial legacies. I will examine a selection of artworks by Tuli Mekondjo (b. 1982) and by Imke Rust (b. 1975) to explore how both women use their art to negotiate the past and to situate the self by drawing on and contesting public and private archives. My choice to bring their works into conversation with one another was inspired by Mekondjo's and Rust's shared repertoires of visual vocabularies, which speak to themes such as dislocatedness, rupture, genealogy and longing. However, while both artists work with photography, multi-media art and performance to interrogate Namibia's colonial history and their subject positions therein, they use distinct strategies of archival intervention to do so, which are strongly connected to the

1 Many points and themes discussed in this chapter were raised in instructive conversations with Nomusa Makhubu, whom I would like to thank for sharing her thoughts on the matrix-archive, on arboreal symbolism as well as on the limits and rules of engagement of artistic archival interventions.

2 Nomusa Makhubu, “Art-Rage and the Politics of Reconciliation,” in *Babel Unbound: Rage, Reason and Rethinking Public Life*, eds. Lesley Cowling and Carolyn Hamilton (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2020), 233.

3 *Ibid.*, 233.

specific resources with which the artists engage. In the analysis that follows, we will take a closer look at the *troubling* archives that Mekondjo and Rust explore as well as at the archival formations that both artists produce as part of their creative interventions.

While chapter 1 has shown how Amulungu and Dentlinger safeguarded, cherished, secured and *archived* photographs from the past, through their auto/biographic practices, we will now direct our attention to how artists approach photographs as raw material. The question of accessibility to personal family archives is a crucial one here, as was also the case with Amulungu and Dentlinger. Rust, as a Namibian of German descent, was able to draw from vast archival repositories that document her family's history, while Mekondjo only possessed single photographs of deceased loved ones and herself as a child. In the face of a sparse family estate that could attest to her childhood in exile and back home, she began photographing herself to generate her own archival repository. Additionally, she turned to public institutions to gain visual access to the past. What unites both artists in their engagement with photography is a shared sense of unsettlement with the past and an interest in contesting prevalent memory politics. Rust and Mekondjo turn to histories that preceded them, or that they experienced indirectly (as children, for instance) in order to understand prevailing senses of disconnection, uprootedness and rupture. These reverberations of the past impinge upon the ways in which they can position themselves in post-colonial Namibia – or Germany, where Rust lives at present. Being born in 1975 and 1983 respectively, Rust and Mekondjo are part of the generation that succeeded Amulungu and Dentlinger. Thus, the artists perceive colonialism, apartheid and liberation differently. Both grapple with specific challenges related to questions of inheritance. In addition to the colonial era's material legacy (in the form of archival photography), the renegotiation of intergenerational trauma and postmemory are central modes of interrogation in their works. To unpack these aspects in greater depth, I will draw on Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory' and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's theory of 'intergenerational transmission of trauma' which help to examine the role of archives in artistic quests for healing.⁴

The links between the archive and memory, absence, silence and forgetting as well as the role of photography as a mnemonic device are prominent issues of debate in scholarly research in the fields of history, memory studies and photography, as we have seen in the introduction. Confronted with archives and a visual economy in which they do not see themselves and their perspectives on the past represented, Mekondjo and Rust use their creative practices to alter visual worlds and one-dimensional commemorative routes that trouble them. I was inspired by Makhubu's

4 Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*; Gobodo-Madikizela, *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition*.

theory on ‘visual currencies’ in my thinking about these interventionalist strategies. Analysing how contemporary South African artists use performative photography to both challenge and recalibrate “the representational value of images,” Makhubu shows how “the politics of photography operate like currency through recurrence, repetition, circulation and exchange.”⁵ Drawing on this theory, I propose reading Mekondjo’s and Rust’s practices as a form of *memory conversion* that enables both artists to remember the past differently, foreground previously suppressed memories and to proffer a “conversion of representational values” about historical and personal photographs.⁶

As part of their interventionalist strategies, the artists’ specific approaches to the material are crucial and will be considered against the backdrop of a growing interest in ethics of care. Driven by feminist discourses, the recuperation of a care ethics found its way into various fields, spanning from art institutions to museums and universities.⁷ Increasingly, for artists and curators, the term has become a buzzword for conceptualising the engagement with particular themes and materialities. Curators, creative practitioners and scholars all propose care as a crucial mode of engaging with material from the colonial era.⁸ In this regard, Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, for example, argue for the need for radical empathy, affect and responsibility – what they call a “feminist ethics of care” – in handling archival repositories.⁹ This is crucial since, as we will see, all kinds of archival engagements – from indexing and ordering to creative refigurations of archival material – are practices of power that raise moral and ethical questions, such as those posed by Temi Odumosu: “Who looks after and who receives care? [...] How do we accommodate needs? And what are the rules of engagement?”¹⁰ With a view to this chapter’s central interest in artistic archival interventions, we might add: *are* there any rules of engagement for those who set out to actively disturb the archival order? When and how does artistic care materialise? Drawing our attention to Rust’s and Mekondjo’s approaches to archival photography will help to elucidate how care figures in their practices, for whom they

5 Nomusa Makhubu, “Visual Currencies: Performative Photography in South African Contemporary Art,” in *Women and Photography in Africa: Creative Practices and Feminist Challenges*, eds. Darren Newbury, Lorena Rizzo and Kylie Thomas (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 229.

6 *Ibid.*, 245.

7 Nomusa Makhubu, “After All Is Said and Done: On Fluid Solidarity and Survival,” *African Arts* 55, no. 3 (1 September 2022): 6.

8 “Curator Conversations #15 | Renée Mussai,” *1000 Words Mag*, 15 July 2020, <https://www.1000wordsmag.com/renee-mussai/>; see for example: Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, “Unearthing. In Conversation: On Listening and Caring,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 75–99.

9 Caswell and Cifor, “Revisiting A Feminist Ethics of Care in Archives,” 1–6.

10 Temi Odumosu, “The Crying Child: On Colonial Archives, Digitization, and Ethics of Care in the Cultural Commons,” *Current Anthropology* 61, no. 22 (October 2020).

care and *how* the difficult task of caring for hurtful histories can be performed by means of archival intervention.

2.1: Rhizomatic Identities, Nature and Embodiment

Let us briefly return to Édouard Glissant's take on identity in order to bridge the last chapter's discussion on identity construction and the connection of the self to places, land and the national space of Namibia. Glissant argues:

We have shifted from believing in identity as a single root to hoping for identity as a rhizome. We must have the courage to admit that identity conceived as a rhizome or as a form of relation is neither an absence of identity, a lack of identity, nor a weakness. It is a vertiginous inversion of the nature of identity.¹¹



Figure 1 (left): Tuli Mekondjo, *Bedloe Landscape II/The Naked Soul/Of the Hermit/Tree*, c. 2007–2008. *Courtesy of the artist.*

Figure 2 (right): Tuli Mekondjo, *Chant, Shawoman, Chant*, 2015. *Photograph, acrylic paint/ink, paint markers, permanent markers on canvas, 46x61cm. Courtesy of the artist.*

11 Andrea Schwieger Hiepko, "A Europe and the Antilles: An Interview with Édouard Glissant," in *The Creolization of Theory*, ed. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, trans. Julin Everett (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 259.

There is something aspirational and hopeful about the framing of identity as rhizomatic.¹² Glissant critiques conventional ideas of identity as tied to a single root, instead arguing for an enmeshed root system as a metaphor for a network of relation that defines exilic identities.¹³ The selection of artworks above and below resonates strongly with the imagery that Glissant evokes, and they offer a visual entry to recurrent themes in Mekondjo's and Rust's artworks.



Figure 3 (left): Imke Rust, *Verwurzelungsversuch1*, from the *Roots and Branches* series, 2019. Collage, charcoal and forestry marker on paper, 59 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4 (right): Imke Rust, *Burning with the Bush* (detail), from the *Home, Land & Me* series, 2019. Mixed media on paper, 29 x 42 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

In both Rust's *Verwurzelungsversuch1* and *Burning with the Bush* as well as in Mekondjo's *Bedloe Landscape II* and *Chant, Shawoman, Chant*, both artists entangle the human body (their own bodies) with rhizomatic trees and branches. For this, they transfer photographs of themselves onto new backgrounds (figure 4), edit and

12 In his development of the rhizome theory, Glissant has been significantly influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's thinking. However, a more detailed discussion of their work *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), for instance, falls beyond the scope of this chapter.

13 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 11.

redesign the prints (figures 2 and 3) or use their mirror images as models for their drawings (figure 1). Their bodies are enmeshed with nature; the human form or face is intertwined with shrubs or superimposed by roots and twigs. These plant-like rhizomes recall veins or nervous systems in a variety of Mekondjo's other works – a resemblance that makes the entanglement of nature and body even more explicit. However, and in contrast to Glissant's positive conception of the rhizome, Rust's and Mekondjo's uses of the arboreal symbolism in the works shown above appear rather tragic. We see a photomontage of Rust's naked avatar bleeding roots into the ground and a remodelled photo of Mekondjo with her eyes closed, tears stretching like roots down her face. Arms and legs, entangled with (or morphing into) branches, seem to long for a hold or grounding. In many ways, these notions of disconnectedness, uprootedness and disjuncture resonate strongly with Namibia's history of rupture and displacement in general, as well as in terms of the biographies of both artists in particular.

Born in 1982 in an exile camp in Angola and growing up during the liberation struggle, Mekondjo uses her art to 'work through' the early death of her mother and what it meant to live in unstable family conditions at times of political transition.¹⁴ By entangling personal and national histories, many of Mekondjo's works reference early missionary influences, the loss of Kwanyama cultural traditions as well as collective and individual experiences of the genocide during both the German colonial and the apartheid eras. In contrast, Rust artistically interrogates human connectedness to land as well as her own place in the world by critically reflecting on her genealogy. Her descendants from her maternal and paternal side of the family were German missionaries, settlers or members of the German Schutztruppe who emigrated to the country for diverse reasons, with the earliest arriving in 1874.¹⁵ As a fifth generation German-speaking Namibian, Rust grew up in Windhoek on her parents' farm near Okahandja and attended the boarding school in Swakopmund. In 2015, she moved permanently to Germany and lives in Oranienburg today; however, she repeatedly returns to Namibia – physically as well as metaphorically by means of her artistic practice.¹⁶

For both, claiming an untroubled sense of belonging to Namibia remains complicated. In Mekondjo's work, the painful experiences of discrimination and the repression of those who lived during the colonial eras, as well as her own grappling with scattered roots, are brought back to the surface like roots that break through the soil. In a national climate in which certain memories of the colonial past are silenced, even though colonial continuities continue to mark the present (see chap-

14 Tuli Mekondjo, pers. comm., via WhatsApp, 14 May 2020.

15 Imke Rust, pers. comm., 30 September 2020.

16 Ibid.

ter 1), Mekondjo grants visibility to those legacies and explores them artistically. In a social media post from 23 June 2021, she states:

Within my being/
 Trauma/
 Created a permanent/
 Map/
 Of/
 Loss and pains/
 Of the self/
 And of the/
 Land/
 Permanently/
 Logged/
 Within my being!¹⁷

Her words powerfully evoke the relations between identity, the self, trauma, space, land, (dis)possession and loss. Together with this poetic reflection, she uploaded a photograph of a piece that she was working on during her contemplation on the aforementioned issues. For Mekondjo, her artistic practice allows for a therapeutic mending of traumatic experiences, which remain forever inscribed in the self (“logged within my being”).¹⁸ Her words and the use of arboreal symbolism further evoke how knowledge is stored and inscribed in the landscape, which is a concern that is increasingly explored by artists and scholars from different practices and fields.¹⁹ The most prominent example is South African photographer Santu Mofokeng, who argues that places are “steeped in history and memories.”²⁰ In his photographic essay, “Trauma Landscapes and Landscape and Memory,” he approaches landscapes and sites where historical events played out as “silent witness[es] to history and narrative.”²¹ Silent, because these locations do not reflect the past in unmediated ways:

17 Caption: “SWA Namibia Postcards Series II/Generational stitches of pains/work in progress,” *Facebook*, accessed 28 June 2021.

18 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 25 June 2021.

19 For other examples, see: Uriel Orlow, *The Memory of Trees* (2016). Orlow approaches trees “as witnesses of history,” arguing that they “hold an embodied memory of events and, like ghosts, remind us of how the past lives on in the present.” See: Uriel Orlow, “The Memory of Trees,” *Uriel Orlow*, accessed 5 April 2023, <https://urielorlow.net/work/the-memory-of-trees/>. For academic discussions on the topic, see: Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern (eds.), *Landscape, Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).

20 Corinne Diserens (ed.), *Chasing Shadows: Santu Mofokeng, Thirty Years of Photographic Essays* (Antwerpen: Extra City Kunsthal, 2012).

21 *Ibid.*

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. That's when I began to look at the landscape and trauma, landscape and memory. When people come to me and say, 'This place is beautiful,' I say, 'We have to look at what 'beautiful' means.'²²

Referencing Mofokeng, artist and scholar Nicola Brandt argues about the ways in which landscape as a genre, and the depiction of nature through artistic practices, has been compromised for Black South Africans – and by extension Namibians – in light of the countries' shared histories of dispossession, denial of access to land and heated debates around the issue of land redistribution.²³ Additionally, with the constructed colonial dichotomies of European modernity and civilisation in contrast to African 'primitivism,' Black artists rejected nature and landscapes as motifs in their works. However, like Mofokeng, they increasingly came to reclaim these motifs as objects for their artistic interrogation.²⁴ For 'white' artists in Southern Africa, the representation of landscape is also a fraught project with regards to the legacy of settlers' and colonial officials' claims to space and their practices of usurping the prerogative of photographing and visualising landscapes and places. I follow Mofokeng's understanding of the term 'landscape,' who uses it broadly and in order to encompass its diverse meanings and the ways in which people view, appreciate and relate to landscape. He argues that the term is "informed by personal experience, myth and memory" as well as "knowledge and, sometimes, stories."²⁵

While the representation of landscapes is, thus, historically charged, we see how it remains a prominent motif, particularly as settings in Rust's practice. With a view to her larger oeuvre, it becomes striking that her depictions of Namibian sites repeatedly go hand in hand with a figuration of herself and her own body. One example is *Under the Witgat Tree* (figure 5), which is an assemblage of a post-edited photograph, a linoleum print based on a photograph and painting.

Similar to landscape representation, the artistic turn to the body is loaded with questions of power. As Brandt argues: "Historically in documentary fine art or lens-based work, the use of one's own body – particularly by black, female and genderqueer artists – was extremely limited."²⁶ Black artists are grappling with the legacy of eras of misrepresentation and visual regimes that are discursively labelled as the 'colonial or ethnographic gaze.'²⁷ Reflecting on the developments in

22 Santu Mofokeng quoted in Corinne Diserens, "Santu Mofokeng in Conversation with Corinne Diserens," in *Chasing Shadows*, 93–99.

23 Brandt, *Landscapes Between Then and Now*, 1–2; 27–28.

24 Diserens, *Chasing Shadows*, 148.

25 *Ibid.*, 149.

26 Brandt, *Landscapes Between Then and Now*, 172; 191.

27 *Ibid.*, xix.

the South African art scene after apartheid, Penny Siopis, Sarah Nuttall and Nontobeko Ntombela attest how, from the 1990s onwards, artists began recalibrating the ethics of representation in response to the history of “speaking for and to ‘the Other.’”²⁸ Siopis describes: “With liberation came both crises and opportunities for renewal of selfhood. For many ‘white’ artists this prompted an inward turn. And many black artists went public. The body figured in both tendencies.”²⁹ With a view to contemporary art scenes in Namibia, South Africa and Angola, Brandt identifies a “burgeoning of new creative subjectivities” and emerging, cross-disciplinary and multi-media artistic expressions, in which the physical body remains a central focus of interrogation for both Black and White artists alike, while simultaneously functioning as a medium through which to transmit ideas.³⁰

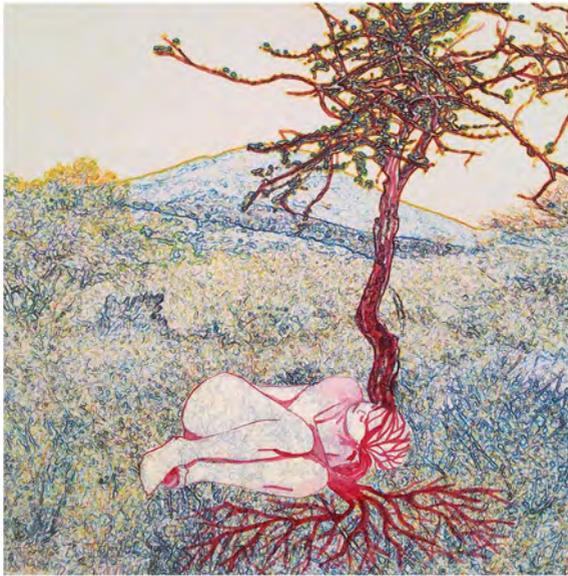


Figure 5: Imke Rust, *Under the Witgat Tree*, 2019. Mixed media on paper, 42 x 29 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

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- 28 Nontobeko Ntombela, “Shifting Contexts: Contemporary South African Art in Changing Times,” in *Tribing and Untribing the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton and Nessa Leibhammer (Scottsville: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2016), 101; Sarah Nuttall and Penny Siopis, “An Unrecoverable Strangeness: Some Reflections on Selfhood and Otherness in South African Art,” *Critical Arts* 24, no. 3 (November 2010): 457.
- 29 Nuttall and Siopis, “An Unrecoverable Strangeness,” 457.
- 30 Brandt, *Landscapes Between Then and Now*, 23.

Rust's use of her own body in her work appears as one such self-reflexive, inwards move. The artist recalls grappling with a sense of not belonging while in Namibia, due to her positionality and family history. She senses a deep connection with all of the places conjured in her artworks, as explained in an interview. The artist stresses, however, that this sense of affiliation always felt troubled. Appropriating the motif of roots and inserting herself back into Namibian spaces allowed her to contemplate this condition. In figure 5, she entangles her body with the Witgat tree that, for her, is deeply connected to childhood memories of climbing the tree to gaze into the vast landscape.³¹ By inserting herself and her naked body into her artwork, she turns herself into the object to be gazed at. She assumes a posture that is humble, yet restrained and protective.

As we will see, motifs such as Namibian landscapes, plants and nature as well as her own body are similarly prominent in Mekondjo's works, but they are realised through different aesthetic techniques. Both Rust's and Mekondjo's practices are responses to the historically charged politics of representation outlined above. Photography and performance are central tools in the artists' efforts to subvert the power dynamics in depicting landscapes and bodies, as seen both in the examples introduced thus far and in the works to be discussed.

2.2: Matriarchives and Transgenerational Trauma

Ferdinand de Jong observes how, in the last two decades, artists have increasingly turned to archives as "source or resource, matter or metaphor" to address and critically scrutinise the past.³² The archive, he argues, "enables them to confront the legacies of our colonial pasts and provides them with possibilities to conceptualize the hidden histories and counter-memories that have been suppressed."³³ For Mekondjo and Rust, the search to unearth what has been hidden and suppressed is a deeply personal endeavour. Both turned to either inherited archival material or family photographs. As we will explore in the following sub-chapters, their mother's, grandmother's and female ancestor's perspectives, as well as their own memories and photographs, occupy a central position in their works.

When speaking about both Namibia and her own personal history, loss figures prominently in Mekondjo's reflection on the past. Having lost many family members at a young age, with the most tragic being her mother's death in 1994, Mekondjo holds her memories of the past as sacred. She grapples with the absence of loved ones, the weight of trauma, and the fear of forgetting.

31 Rust, pers. comm., 30 September 2020.

32 Ferdinand de Jong, "At Work in the Archive," 3.

33 Ibid.



Figure 6: Tuli Mekondjo, *Elende Lange lo Malududi/My Head-dress of Feathers: Ode to Mother*, 2019. *Mixed Media on canvas*, 90 x 61 cm. *Courtesy of Guns&Rain Gallery.*

Loss is also reflected in her personal family archive: there is little personal documentation of her childhood growing up in exile. Being born amid the war in the Kwanza-Sul refugee camp in Angola, Mekondjo's and her mother's lives were marked by instability, conflict and separation. When Mekondjo was around four years old, her mother went to study in the UK, leaving her daughter behind in the care of others at the Nyango camp in Zambia.³⁴

34 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 24 July 2021. We have seen, in chapter 1, how sending its cadres abroad for further education was central to "construct educational infrastructures"

The experiences of family division, dislocation and the longing for her mother are addressed artistically in Mekondjo's interventions with the few family photographs that she safeguards. In an interview, the artist repeatedly stressed the immeasurable emotional value of those photographs that she possesses as *aide-mémoires* that connect her to her mother and to the time they had together.³⁵ This sanctity is also observable in the ways in which the artist has protected her mother's archive ever since she inherited it at the age of 12. Stored in a box, the slim photographic estate accompanied her to all of the different places that she lived in Namibia. At times, it was sealed and left in the possession of relatives when Mekondjo was abroad; yet, younger relatives have opened the box and interfered with the material.³⁶ Recognising the dangers of material transience, Mekondjo began incorporating photographs from her personal archive into her art, transforming the material within her creative practice.

In figure 6, we see how Mekondjo inserted a print of her mother's photograph into botanical, colourful landscapes. The idyllic, florescent plants are coupled with signs of decay that signal both ephemerality and pastness. Her mother's face is nearly obscured, almost melting with the background's sepia, golden and brown tones. The strategy that the artist uses to evoke this tone has become her signature technique. Mekondjo applies resin on her canvasses onto which she sprinkles Mahangu meal which then fuses with the canvas. She transfers the archival images onto this textured surface in order to draw over them, adding feathers, leaves and plants with acrylic ink and permanent markers.³⁷ In this special procedure, Mekondjo deploys the Mahangu as a natural product to create texture while the plant simultaneously functions as a metaphor in many of her paintings. She reminisces how, as a young girl, she would work in the field with her mother and grandmother and together they worked the land, throwing the seeds of the Mahangu in the soil, later harvesting the plant to then pound and process it.³⁸ This gendered labour, as well as the consumption of Mahangu, encompass a broad span of memories, as the artist explains.³⁹ The plant conjures memories of home and belonging; it is a symbol for a landscape with which she affiliates.

for SWAPO during the period of the freedom struggle. See: Akawa, *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle*, 6.

35 Martha Langford, *Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expressions of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art* (Montréal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 287; Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 24 July 2021.

36 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 24 July 2021.

37 Ibid.

38 Tuli Mekondjo, *Ways of Reading: Contemporary Art and African Studies*, University of Basel, Basel, 23 March 2021.

39 Ibid.

Upon close inspection of the painting, we detect another typical trademark strategy. A delicate line runs horizontally across the canvas, a suture which refigures in the vast majority of Mekondjo's paintings. Her canvasses are cut and then carefully stitched back together, often with additional embroidery that provides extra texture. In his analysis of South African photographer Muholi's artworks, Andrew van der Vlies centres the meaning of the seam, arguing how "representations of suturing recall a metaphor that has received much in attention in South African cultural studies over the past decade."⁴⁰ Van der Vlies references writer and academic Leon de Kock who invokes the metaphor to think about South African literature, explaining that the seam stands for "the representational suture" that holds together a body of literature that was, in reality, diverse and quite distinct.⁴¹ Van der Vlies extends this imagery to cultural productions more broadly, claiming, "it is to be found in imagery of fissures [...] scars, and in the representation of inequality of conflict."⁴²

If we think along these lines about embroidery in Mekondjo's work, we can see how, for the artist, engaging with the seam may help to meditate, process and reflect on the past as a way to reconcile with it. Additionally, Julie Taylor reminds us how stitching is a "gendered modality," an activity traditionally exerted by women, as confirmed in Mekondjo's connection with embroidery.⁴³ Mekondjo explains: "It's rooted in the memory of my mom, but mostly my grandmother. Whenever we'd go to the village she would be sitting and she'd be weaving these traditional baskets with the needle, using these natural fibres from the makalani tree."⁴⁴ Hence, embroidery allows her to keep both this tradition *and* the memories thereof alive, as the stitching is her way of mending the connection between her and her ancestors.⁴⁵ Suturing also upholds the promise of healing, as Mekondjo continues: "This process of stitching is bringing back all the broken pieces of pain and trauma which are scattered all over. Embroidery means bringing it all back, so that the mending process can come

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- 40 Andrew van der Vlies, "Art as Archive: Queer Activism and Contemporary South African Visual Cultures," *Kunapipi* 34, no. 1 (2012): 100.
- 41 Leon de Kock, "Does South African Literature Still Exist? Or: South African Literature Is Dead, Long Live Literature in South Africa," *English in Africa* 32, no. 2 (October 2005): 71; Leon de Kock, "South Africa in the Global Imaginary: An Introduction," *Poetics Today* 22, no. 2 (1 June 2001): 276.
- 42 van der Vlies, "Art as Archive," 100.
- 43 Julie J. Taylor, *History, Gender and "New Practices of Self": Re-Interpreting Namibia's Independence War through the Work of Tuli Mekondjo and Helena Uambembe* (Master's thesis, unpublished, University of Witwatersrand, 2021), 2.
- 44 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 25 June 2021.
- 45 Elize van Huyssteen, "A Conversation with Tuli Mekondjo," *ASAI* (blog), 18 January 2021, <http://asai.co.za/a-conversation-with-tuli-mekondjo/>.

about.”⁴⁶ As a form of therapy, stitching allows Mekondjo to contemplate on the images with which she works and the pain and trauma that they conjure. She explains: “It’s like bringing the traumas to the foreground because the images are now in the background and the embroidery is now quite vibrant on top.”⁴⁷ Thus, embroidery is a tool for deliberate and active confrontation with the past. This creative interference is quite physical in its form of intervention, considering how the stitch both punctuates and fractures the canvas.

Despite this heavy interference with the material, the notion of care is crucial in Mekondjo’s practice. In an interview, the artist shared how *Elende Lange lo Malududi/My Headdress of Feathers: Ode to Mother* was her way of honouring her mother and her beauty. The picture was taken when her mother was around the age of 18. In the original image, she was seated in a field of long grasses and reeds. While Mekondjo knows nothing about the context of it, she marvels at the look of her mother who seems pensive, resting her head in her hand, contemplating, as Mekondjo suspects.⁴⁸ While single photographs can be important “tokens of affection” for the artist, this photograph also represents what is irretrievable – the knowledge of the past that rests with her mother.⁴⁹ The artist’s reconfiguration of the print allows for visual conversion: she exchanges notions of loss, absence or pain that resonate from the original photograph with an aesthetic that evokes the unknown and the mythic but, at the same time, is peaceful and idyllic. In the act of intervention, Mekondjo’s ethics of care are devoted to the photographed subjects and her deep sense of affection for them. Care, as understood by Tamar Garb, is “a mode of attention” which, as it is increasingly argued by scholars engaging with historical photography, needs to be applied when interpreting and working with photographs. Garb calls for cautious, attentive readings of clues and signs in the images in order to avoid misrepresentation and to avoid instrumentalising them for one’s own “political or ideological agendas.”⁵⁰ However, Mekondjo seems less occupied with the danger of misinterpretation. Her strategies to exercise care take the forms of suturing, cutting, layering and altering, as similarly reflected in figure 7.

46 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 25 June 2021. Similar notions are evoked in Memory Biwa’s dissertation. Biwa refers, for example, to the work on the patchwork quilt as an alternative way to remember the past, where weaving becomes a way of ‘writing’, transmitting and representing knowledge on history with a view to diverse commemorative practices in southern Namibia that recall the colonial war. See: Memory Biwa, “*Weaving the Past with Threads of Memory*,” 1–10.

47 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 25 June 2021.

48 Ibid.

49 Langford, *Suspended Conversations*, 18.

50 Tamar Garb and Hlonipha Mokoena, “Navigating the African Archive: A Conversation between Tamar Garb and Hlonipha Mokoena,” *Critical Arts* 33, no. 6 (2 November 2019): 43.



Figure 7: Tuli Mekondjo, *Nyango Refugee Camp, Zambia 1987/My Mother's Request: "Natuminwe Odelela Yaye Noka Ndjeva Ee" - Send Tuli-Mekondjo's Odelela (Traditional Attire) and her Ondjeva (Traditional Waist Beads)*, 2020. *Photo transfer, collage, acrylic, millet grain and resin on canvas, 61 x 81 cm. Courtesy of Guns&Rain Gallery.*

For *Nyango Refugee Camp, Zambia 1987/My Mother's Request* (figure 7), the artist again returned to the family estate where she encountered the second, and last, existing single photograph of her mother. Again, the slim personal archive does not provide any background information on the portrait that she juxtaposed with one of the only two photographs that she has of herself as a toddler. Both image transfers are sewn together by a vertical stitch and additionally encircled with a golden thread. The oval shape of the embroidery resembles the kind of golden frames common as home décor for portrait photographs. The aesthetics and associations connected with portrait photographs are important. Looking back at the history of photography in Africa, Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley argue that in light of the negative colonial mode of portraying African people and African life, studio, personal and family collections are conceived of special importance.⁵¹ Scholars and curators celebrate the subjectivities that, as they argue, studio portraits are able to express

51 Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley (eds.), *Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019), 12.

and capture, as well as their ability “to redeem Africans from their histories of objectification.”⁵²

This evocation of subjectivity is furthered by the association with the photograph in figure 7 as home décor, but is then ruptured by two additional horizontal seams. These seams are stitched in beige and red across the canvas. Other signs of radical intervention figure in the form of heavy stains, burn marks and holes as well as delicate embroidery on the mother's collar or the toddler's balloon. Reminiscing about the photograph of herself, Mekondjo recalls that it was taken together with her adopted brother at the Nyango refugee camp in 1987 in Zambia. Both children were dressed up in their Sunday best, carrying their balloons, perhaps as a special set-up for the sake of the photograph.⁵³ However, the burn hole in the canvas at the place where Mekondjo's face is located unsettles this evocation of harmony and childhood innocence, functioning as a powerful reminder of the war context in which the image was taken. The physical photograph carries further meanings that Mekondjo translates in her title, thereby replicating the inscription that was scribbled onto the back of the photograph. This reference is a way to celebrate her mother's attempts to uphold a connection to Avambo culture in her daughter while living abroad. Nura Yuval-Davis points out how women are often assigned the role of transmitting a wide array of cultural customs and traditions, which illuminates how they are conceived of as “intergenerational reproducers of culture.”⁵⁴ Mekondjo understands her mother's practice as actively counter-acting a looming loss of culture while in exile. Her mother sent the photograph to her relatives back in Namibia, instructing them to dispatch the traditional Odelela costume and the Onjeva waist beads back to Mekondjo in the camp while simultaneously using the photograph as a channel to communicate and maintain her own connection to her family back home.⁵⁵

This gendered dimension – in acts that pass on cultural customs as well as safeguard family inheritance, memories and knowledges – is a crucial link between Mekondjo's and Rust's archival interventions. Uhuru Portia Phalafala's analysis of ‘the matriarchive’ in Es'kia Mphahlele's work is particularly instructive as a concept to think about this dimension. Phalafala conceptualises the matriarchive as “matrilineally inherited influences, values, wisdoms, relational subjectivities, philosophies, and aesthetics” which are, thus, diametrically opposed to colonial

52 Ibid.

53 Wolfram Hartmann, Jeremy Silvester and Patricia Hayes (eds.), *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1999), 9.

54 Nira Yuval-Davis, “Gender and Nation,” in *Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism: The Politics of Transition*, ed. Rick Wilford and Robert E. Miller (London: Routledge, 2005), 25. First published 1998. See also Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 67.

55 Mekondjo, *Ways of Reading*.

archives that are “male, patriarchal and patrilineal.”⁵⁶ Phalafala’s matriarchive encompasses corporeal memories and other “modes of knowledge” that were previously silenced and that fall outside of the value system of conventional archives.⁵⁷ While her analysis focuses on Black women’s repertoires of resistance against South Africa’s racial and patriarchal order of apartheid, I would extend the argument that matriarchives can also be exilic archives or archives of migration. As knowledges, memories, values and materialities scattered across places, these archives are held together by women transgenerationally. In Mekondjo’s work, creative interventions with personal photographs and her evocations of several cultural and personal references emerge as strategies to (just like her female ancestors) pass on, safeguard and contribute to these archives. However, her devotion to matriarchives extends the framework of inheritances beyond immediate family members. When reflecting on her work, the artist repeatedly stresses how she conceives of herself as a “channel” for all of those women that came before her, including ancestors that she never knew, arguing:⁵⁸

They are seeking: are we doing anything to heal our traumas? Not only our traumas in our current bodies and mental state but they are asking us: are we doing anything to also heal *their* traumas and of those ancestors that came before us and before them?⁵⁹

Her approach resonates with a growing awareness of the multidimensional itineraries of residues from the past. In this respect, for example, Pedzisai Maedza explains, with regards to performance practices in Namibia, how “memories circulate across time and place – transnationally and across generations.”⁶⁰ Looking more closely at the South African context, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela underlines the subtle ways in which trauma is being passed on intergenerationally, for example “through stories or silences, through unarticulated fears and the psychological scars that are often left unacknowledged.”⁶¹ In an online panel discussion, scholars and cultural practitioners Jay Pather, Nomusa Makhubu, Senzeni Marasela and Rémy Ngamiye considered intergenerational trauma to be “the black family archive” –

56 Uhuru Portia Phalafala, “The Matriarchive as Life Knowledge in Es’kia Mphahlele’s African Humanism,” *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 35, no. 3 (1 September 2020): 733.

57 In developing the concept, she reworks Derrida’s notion of the matriarchive and draws from the project “Matriarchive of the Mediterranean” by Silvana Carotenuto. See: Phalafala, “The Matriarchive as Life Knowledge in Es’kia Mphahlele’s African Humanism,” 733–734.

58 van Huyssteen, “A Conversation with Tuli Mekondjo.”

59 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 12 October 2021, my emphasis.

60 Maedza, *Chains of Memory in the Postcolony*, 4.

61 Gobodo-Madikizela, *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition*, 3.

narratives from a dire past that are being passed on to descendants in Black families.⁶² Mekondjo explores this archive with her practice, most prominently with her vast body of work that remodels historical photographs from the colonial era, one example being *Onangula/Sacred Cattle as Human Soul (Kwanyama 2)*.



Figure 8: Tuli Mekondjo, Onangula/Sacred Cattle as Human Soul (Kwanyama 2), 2019 Mixed media on canvas, 61 x 45 cm. Courtesy of Guns&Rain Gallery.

62 Jay Pather, Nomusa Makhubu, Senzeni Marasela and Rémy Ngamije, Black Family Archive: Unpacking Intergenerational Trauma through Literature and Performance, Zeitz MOCCA, Cape Town, 29 July 2021, accessed 30 August 2021, <https://zeitzmocaa.museum/exhibition/events/black-family-archive-unpacking-intergenerational-trauma-through-literature-and-performance/>.

In figure 8, we see a woman embedded in a golden, shimmering Mahangu field. Again, the plant figures as a cultural reference to Namibia's natural resources. The woman's face and body emerge in a sepia tone, visually harmonising with the Mahangu abundant beside her as well as with her headdress in the form of a bird and its extensive feathers that extend the scope of the canvasses' frame. With her body slightly turned to the side, she directs her eyes at the viewer. Her posture is upright, exuding a sense of strength and pride. Apart from her face and her upper body, she is fully submerged in the plants, but as her breasts are only half-covered by the Mahangu, she seems to be photographed naked, adorned only by a pearl necklace and the painted bird feathers on her head. With the title, Mekondjo gestures to Avambo spirituality and to the belief that the dead live on through their cattle.⁶³ The artist honours how the Ovambo people maintain a strong connection to their ancestors. To signal this, she recurrently deploys the symbol of the bird which alludes to the presence of the ancestors and the ways in which "they are hovering above."⁶⁴

The tone of the image and the woman's gaze evoke gracefulness. For the artist, it was a similar sense of power that drew her to the original photographic image. In an interview, she described how she encountered it in a book on Namibian hairstyles (*Mythos Haar: Ethnographische Photographien aus Alten Sammlungen Südwestafrikas*) by Anneliese and Ernst Scherz that she found a rejected copy of in a book shop in Windhoek. She later came across the image again in the National Archive of Namibia (NAN) in Windhoek, where she actively sought to engage with the past by seeking out historical photographs. Reminiscing about the encounter, Mekondjo explains how she was touched and amazed to see, for the first time, how the Kwanyama people looked like and how they dressed. Nobody in her family, let alone in her village, had spoken about this, which made her curious to learn more about what her ancestors' lives looked like prior to the introduction of Christianity.⁶⁵

For Mekondjo, the photograph visualises loss and the absence of knowledge about the past. It provided her access to a forgotten heritage and to lost cultural practices. In this sense, photographic archival repositories emerge as sites for the preservation of history for the artist. The image allowed her to both claim and regain fragments of a culture to which she feels affiliated, but that remains distant and elusive. Interestingly, however, in contrast to Mekondjo's emotive responses to the material, academic discourse is much more sceptical about the alleged ways in which photographic repositories speak to and preserve history. While critical archival studies do not deny the potential of archives to function as sources through

63 Mekondjo, *Ways of Reading*.

64 Inspired by famous Namibian printmaker John Muafangejo, Mekondjo repeatedly uses bilingual names for her artworks in order to indicate her affiliation with Ovambo culture. Mekondjo, pers comm. via WhatsApp, 12 June 2022.

65 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 4 July 2021.

which to access the past, they heatedly contest conceptions of archives as reflections of reality or “repositories of unvarnished historical truth,” as stated in the introduction.⁶⁶ We have seen how, in this respect, Stoler argues for an approach to archives as sites of “knowledge production,” which becomes graspable when looking at Mekondjo’s creative engagement with the material. To unpack her strategies of intervention, let us first consider the image’s origins and itineraries.

The publication by the Scherz couple is a collection of ethnographic photographs of Namibian hairstyles, many of which Anneliese Scherz took herself of the Ovambo people in the 1940s or, in later years, other Namibian communities whom she photographed during her travels through the country.⁶⁷ Interested in “lost hairstyles,” the German couple who emigrated to Namibia in the 1930s, began turning to other collections and to archival repositories in search for documentation of earlier styles and cultural practices.⁶⁸ One of the collection holders from which they drew was Kurt Schettler, who was a resident officer who worked and lived in Northern Namibia from 1930 to 1948 and, according to ethnologist Gregor Dobler, worked as a rodent inspector in Ondangwa from 1932 to 1948.⁶⁹ From the publication *Mythos Haar*, we can glean that the couple gained access to a number of photographs from the Schettler collection after his death as well as permission from the museum in Swakopmund to reprint further negatives that are part of their repositories.⁷⁰ These images found their way into the BAB repositories through the transfer process of the Scherz collections to the Basler Afrika Bibliographien (BAB)

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- 66 Harris, “The Archival Sliver,” 65; Jason Lustig, “Epistemologies of the Archive: Toward a Critique of Archival Reason,” *Archival Science* 20, no. 1 (March 2020): 68.
- 67 Anneliese Scherz and Ernst Rudolf Scherz (eds.), *Mythos Haar: Kopfbedeckungen & Schmuck in Namibia & Südangola* (Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan, 1981), 4.
- 68 Scherz and Scherz, *Mythos Haar*, 4; “Ernst Rudolf Scherz,” *Namibiana Buchdepot*, accessed 15 July 2021, <https://www.namibiana.de/namibia-information/who-is-who/autoren/infos-zur-person/ernst-rudolf-scherz.html>; Lorena Rizzo, “Seeing Through Whiteness: Late 1930s Settler Photography in Namibia under South African Rule,” in *Visualizing Fascism: The Twentieth-Century Rise of the Global Right*, eds. Julia Adeney Thomas and Geoff Eley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 145. Central to their publication were photographs taken by colonial officials, one of them being C.H.L. “Cocky” Hahn, who is a rather prominent figure who is referenced in various publications. See, for example: Patricia Hayes, “‘Cocky’ Hahn and the ‘Black Venus’: The Making of a Native Commissioner in South West Africa, 1915–46,” *Gender & History* 8, no. 9 (November 1996): 364–392; Napandulwe Shiweda, *Omheddi: Displacement and Legitimacy in Oukwanyama Politics, Namibia, 1915–2010* (PhD diss., University of the Western Cape, 2011).
- 69 “Angaben zur Datierung,” BAB, So32; Gregor Dobler, pers. comm., 7 October 2021.
- 70 A. and E. Scherz express their gratitude to A. Weber for granting permission “to use the photographic material of Mr Schettler available in the Swakopmund Museum for this publication,” Scherz and Scherz, *Mythos Haar*, 6, my translation. See also A. Scherz’ notes in her manuscripts, such as: “Nach dem Tod von Mr. Schettler erwarb ich dessen Negative” BAB PA.4 X.III.1.4.

in Switzerland.⁷¹ Consulting the archive in Basel brings to light how these complex acquisition processes complicate endeavours to disentangle questions of material belonging. Diverse routes led to the dissemination of conflicting information with regards to authorship and the ownership of images in the process of archiving. While Anneliese Scherz labelled herself as the photographer of the image in her book, research in the BAB reveals that the photograph used in figure 8 was indeed taken by Schettler during his residency in Ovamboland between 1930 and 1948.⁷²

According to the BAB, the images that are stored in their repositories as part of the Scherz collection today, and in the NAN repositories as copied prints, should no longer be protected by copyrights that regulate public access thereto.⁷³ This particular archive is quite open in granting access to its repositories. However, the artist highlights that this is rather an exception, as, in her experience, archival structures often still hinder accessibility for untrained users. One example being that her requests to use historical photographs artistically were repeatedly denied by various institutions and stakeholders. She argues:

I always wonder: what is the purpose of housing these images in institutions so that anyone who wants to make use of them has to ask permission and have to give – in some cases – extremely good reasons why they need these images or why they want permission to use them in their work?⁷⁴

Even if copyrights may no longer be in place, in many instances, institutions reinforce their claims to possession of historical photographs by virtue of archiving them (which comes with its own rules and regulations). However, with a view to the images' historical contexts, and the power dynamics in place during the time of colonialism and apartheid, we may question whose laws and claims to possession should apply when it comes to Namibian historical photography. Mekondjo cannot comprehend why institutions continue to hold a grip on the images, with the consequence that “the contemporary people are unable to look at their ancestors.”⁷⁵

71 BAB team, pers. comm., 1 October 2021.

72 The information on envelopes and boxes indicates which collections were part of Schettler's photographic work in the Scherz repositories. Additionally, the difference in aesthetics of Scherz's and Schettler's photography allows us to identify this image as part of his photographic works. BAB, S032.

73 BAB team, pers. comm., 1 October 2021. As established with the Copyright and Neighbouring Rights Protection Act in 1994, images become public domain 50 years after the photo was taken or 50 years after the creator's death. See: Business and Intellectual Property Authority, “Copyright,” *BIPA* (blog), accessed 18 October 2021, <https://www.bipa.na/intellectual-property/copyright/>.

74 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 12 October 2021.

75 Ibid.

In this regard, Marika Cifor calls for a reform of archival practices, arguing how the archival field should “expand its ethical orientation to address considerations of emotional justice.”⁷⁶ In a similar vein, scholar of photography and visual culture Ariella Azoulay notes how questions of accessibility and material belonging are too often approached with a narrow view to legal aspects based on current policies, arguing for the need to reform these frameworks to acknowledge that the collections were “formed under regimes of violence” – a violence that is perpetuated if the original photographer or institutions remain the central stakeholders.⁷⁷ Azoulay proposes that we redress predominant foci in debates around access, restitution and claims to photographs from the colonial era, arguing that a “photograph is a social document, not an object to be possessed.”⁷⁸ What possibilities of redress and restorative justice does Mekondjo’s artistic archival intervention with the Scherz/Schettler photograph conjure?

With a view to the historical material, we learn that Schettler produced a vast collection of photographs during his time in Namibia, of which the large amount of close-up shots of African women strikes the eye.⁷⁹ Casting a critical glance at his portraits of Africans or the position of the young women’s pictures in the Scherz book brings forth how his images were often framed in line with ethnographic and anthropologic methods as can be seen in the front, back and profile views and the variety of angles used to capture the young Kwanyama woman’s hairstyle.⁸⁰ Attending to these ‘colonial’ conventions of representation lays bare how the camera in Africa was central for the production of difference as Makhubu states, explaining that “colonial photography became a tool to justify, spectacularise and commercialise scientific racism.”⁸¹ Without recording people’s names, to attest to their subjectivities, such images served to categorise ‘types’ instead of portraying individuals.⁸² However, scholars, art historians and curators lament how simplistic framings of ‘colonial aesthetics’ or the ‘colonial gaze’ are reductionist and blind to “the multiplicity of

76 Marika Cifor, “Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (March 2016): 9.

77 Ariella Azoulay, “The Captive Photograph,” *Boston Review*, 21 September 2021, <https://bostonreview.net/race-philosophy-religion/ariella-a%C3%AFsha-azoulay-captive-photograph>.

78 Ibid.

79 BAB, S032.

80 Natalia Krzysztofek and Vishruti Shastri, “The Image-Text Event: Framing Famine in Namibia 1953,” in *Sites of Contestation: Encounters with the Ernst and Ruth Dammann Collection in the Archives of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien*, eds. Julia Rensing, Lorena Rizzo and Wanda Rutishauser (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2021), 119.

81 Makhubu, “Visual Currencies,” 236.

82 Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 49.

possibilities, histories and counter histories lodged within photographs,” as Elisabeth Edwards reminds us.⁸³

For Mekondjo, connecting the historical image to her own memories of land and landscape from northern Namibia allows her to convert how the photographed subject emerges in front of the viewers’ eyes. A glance at the original archival photograph shows how the camera centres on the woman’s upper body, choosing an angle slightly from below that lays bare the view of her breasts. Upon close inspection, we can detect blurred schemes of trees in the background, yet a proper view of the landscape is denied. As is the case in the great majority of the photographs from the Schettler repository, the photographer works with stark contrasts: the bright background sets the focus on the subjects’ features, the back of their heads and hairstyles. We can locate the girl neither in terms of space nor biography because clues about the context are unknown.⁸⁴ Inserting the young woman into the Mahangu field allowed Mekondjo to restrain the view of her body and to shift the focus of attention.

Moreover, for the artist, the archival photograph specifically enabled her to revisit the celebration of *efundula* – the traditional female initiation ceremony, in which young women pass from girl- to adulthood.⁸⁵ According to Napandulwe Shiweda, at the onset of *efundula*, the girls’ *elende* hairstyle is crafted from “*eefipa* (sinews), fat, hair and *ombaba* (cowrie shells).”⁸⁶ Mekondjo was in awe at the sight of the *elende*: “It’s a reminder of who I am and where I come from.”⁸⁷ Re-embracing the ancestral traditions, Mekondjo laments how, with the introduction of Christianity, missionaries rejected local customs and practices. People were forced to change their hairstyles, shave or cut-off their hair ornaments. “It is almost like a death, the death of a culture, the dying of an art,” the artist claims.⁸⁸ Contemplating these issues, she marvels at the beauty of the image, but also elucidates the challenges of working with historical photography:

There are times that I really step away because there is too much intensity. You feel the intensity of the pains of the people in their faces, you start seeing their trauma, they have it in their expression. Even though they are made to stand in this stylised manner, you could see it in their body language.⁸⁹

83 Amkpa, “Africa,” 242; Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 12.

84 Research at the BAB only revealed that Schettler took his images in Namutoni and Ondangwa, but no further specific information is provided (BAB, S032).

85 Hina MuAshekele, Michael Akuupa, Erastus Kautondokwa, Onena Shivute, Saara Katariina Kuoppala, Hiskia Akuupa, *Olufuko Festival: Practice and Perspectives of the Female Initiation Rite: A Research Study Prepared for Outapi Town Council* (Windhoek: Outapi Town Council, 2018), 39.

86 Shiweda, *Omheddi*, 48, emphasis in original.

87 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 4 July 2021.

88 Ibid.

89 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 12 October 2021.

Mekondjo is unsettled by the power dynamics at play between photographed subjects and the photographer, grappling with, what Rizzo and Makhubu describe as the “heightened visibility” or “hypervisibility” of African women’s objectified, sexualised, naked bodies in archival photographic records.⁹⁰ By means of conversion, Mekondjo replaces previous registers connected with the image with a positive, celebratory visuality to honour the photographed subjects and their traditions. Like currency, she trades the meanings of certain visual signifiers and replaces them with other multi-dimensional cultural references.⁹¹ Her care and devotion seem to be focused on the matriarchive and on the impulse to contribute to its preservation and transmission. In this mode of archival intervention and image conversion, however, something of the old remains intact. As a resource to access material, the archive pertains its prevalence. Okwui Enwezor is critical about this perseverance, arguing how our familiarity and continued, almost obsessive usage of historical photographs of Africans locks the photographed subjects in a state of Otherness.⁹² His argument hints at the limits of image conversion that draws on the colonial era’s visual economy of photography. In a similarly sceptical tone, Makhubu reflects on the archive’s stubborn presence and its role for contemporary artists, arguing: “You are sort of stuck with the colonial archive, you were once rejecting it and once critiquing it but also sort of drawn [to it], and your work is entrenched in it.”⁹³ Her contention shows that the ideological and material legacies of colonialism remain persistent, troubling and need to be addressed.

2.3: Refiguring Postmemories

Shifting the view to Imke Rust’s artistic responses to troubling photographs and abstract legacies of the past, we come to see how the notion of the matriarchive can also be applied to her archival refigurations. In 2005, the artist created a series called *Memories*, in which she casts a critical glance at her own biography, her family histories and at a memorial culture that she considers partial, flawed or distorted. When the artist inherited her grandmother’s family estate, the material prompted

90 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>; Art on Our Mind (AOOM), “Art on Our Mind Creative Dialogue: Curating As World Making (Excerpt 1),” 22 October 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVe-6rKKCso>.

91 Makhubu, “Visual Currencies,” 229.

92 Okwui Enwezor, “Reframing the Black Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation,” *Third Text* 11, no. 40 (September 1997): 28.

93 Art on our Mind (AOOM), “Art on Our Mind Creative Dialogue.”

her to question family narratives, relationships and the members' role as 'white' settlers in Namibia.⁹⁴ Notably, the matter of inheritance for Rust has been rather overwhelming, when compared to Mekondjo's slim family estate. In an interview, Rust explained how her grandmother had always been adamant about passing on the family history to her. As the only granddaughter, Rust was often chosen as the interlocutor with whom to share the family stories and, after her grandmother's death, she would be entrusted with a vast and diverse family estate, encompassing various objects, furniture, jewellery and memorabilia.⁹⁵ Her grandmother meticulously and conscientiously recorded and secured the information on the items' backgrounds to pass them on.⁹⁶ Rust also came into possession of family photo albums and a cookie box with well-kept and neatly filed postcards and single photographs. The postcards functioned as the medium for communication between her grandmother and grandfather during his imprisonment in a detention camp at the time of the Second World War until the family's reunion after six years of separation, as we will see.⁹⁷

Rust's grandmother took it upon herself to preserve the family history – a gendered labour division that resonates with Phalafala's observation that "(grand)mothers and (great) aunts are tasked to stand in for the collective, as guardians and transmitters of knowledge, and they have done so through informal modalities of the domestic, the intimate, the corporeal, and the oral."⁹⁸ Continuing this tradition and the task to keep the matriarchive alive, Rust's grandmother implored her to ensure that the material prevails. Rust felt a "deep respect" in the face of the extensive heirlooms and a sense of responsibility for the material.⁹⁹ In a similar vein, Cifor speaks about the need for respect as well as an affective, empathetic and ethical approach to archives, arguing how "witnessing is a relation that comes with certain responsibilities."¹⁰⁰ Paraphrasing Ann Cvetkovich, Cifor considers archival material to be "repositories of feelings and emotions," stressing how archivists (and by extension estate heirs and those who engage with archives) are implicated in "webs of affective relations."¹⁰¹ Similar to Mekondjo, Rust's care for the material would, however, not be enacted through conventional measures of preservation and safekeeping, but instead through interference and modification. The artist chose this path as she realised, when studying the material, that the narratives that she encountered did not

94 Rust, pers. comm., 30 September 2020.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 Exhibition catalogue *Memories*, 2005.

98 Phalafala, "The Matriarchive as Life Knowledge in Es'kia Mphahlele's African Humanism," 736.

99 Rust, pers. comm., 30 September 2020.

100 Cifor, "Affecting Relations," 9.

101 Ibid.

match the stories she knew so well from her grandmother and mother. Being confronted with multiple versions of the past, Rust decided to engage more deeply with the theme of memory. The artist interrogated the elusive memories connected to the photographs, including those that were not necessarily her own. She turned to post-memories that were passed on to her, to evoke Marianne Hirsch's famous concept, which the literary scholar defines as follows:

Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor re-created.¹⁰²

With a view to the family's traumatic experiences and their historical background, the *Memories*-series speaks to the fate that many German speakers in South-West Africa shared at the time of the Second World War. In 1940, Rust's grandfather Paulo Doll was taken to the detention camp Andalusia in South Africa, 3,000 km away from his family. It is estimated that 1,966 German-speaking men from South-West Africa had been interned in camps in the period between 1939 and 1946.¹⁰³ Many wives and children stayed behind, suddenly responsible for running the farms and businesses, while others were interned in their houses or on the farms and were only allowed to leave those with prior permission.¹⁰⁴ These developments were related to the political changes that followed after World War I, when Germany lost its colonies and DSWA came under South African mandate administration. In due course, more than 6,000 settlers were either expelled or repatriated voluntarily to Germany, while approximately 7,000 German speakers remained and, with the London Agreement of 1923, this group would be naturalised as British South African citizens.¹⁰⁵

102 Marianne Hirsch, "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile," *Poetics Today* 17, no. 4 (1996): 662.

103 Paul Schamberger, "Ein Besuch in Andalusia weckt Erinnerungen und Fragen," *Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 January 2011.

104 Martin Eberhardt, *Zwischen Nationalsozialismus und Apartheid: die deutsche Bevölkerungsgruppe Südwestafrikas 1915–1965* (Münster and Konstanz: LIT Verlag, 2007), 414; Rolf Kock (ed.), *Erinnerungen an Die Internierungszeit (1939–1946) Und Zeitgeschichtliche Ergänzungen: Berichte, Erzählungen, Fotos Und Zeichnungen von Kameraden, Die Dabei Waren* (Windhoek: Selbstverlag Andalusia, 1975), 34.

105 However, in the years that followed, the demographic structure changed again: with new migration movements, Germans returned to South-West Africa and until the 1930s, the number of German speakers in the colony rose again to just under 10,000. Simultaneously, White Boers increasingly migrated from the Union to South-West Africa, with the effect that, by 1936, Germans made up just under one-third of the White population out of a total of 30,677 people. Reinhart Kößler, "Historischer Wendepunkt, Strukturelle Kontinuität," in *Deutschland Postkolonial? Die Gegenwart Der Imperialen Vergangenheit*, eds. Joachim Zeller and Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst (Berlin: Metropol, 2018), 53; Eberhardt, *Zwischen Nationalsozialismus und*

In the years that followed, German speakers obtained the status of a “tolerated minority” in the colony, as this remained relevant for South Africa who needed their ‘white’ allies as a “buffer against the ‘black peril,’” as Martin Eberhardt explains.¹⁰⁶ South Africa’s aspirations to strengthen the ‘white’ camp to control the African population were the reason why the mandate administration was rather lenient towards the defeated colonial power.¹⁰⁷ However, resentments and tensions amongst the ‘white’ settler societies in South-West Africa prevailed and increased with the rise of National Socialism and the Second World War.¹⁰⁸ The German speakers’ loyalty to the “motherland” and to a persistent “mythical devotion to the *Kaiserreich*” was increasingly considered to be a threat by South African authorities, which culminated in the establishment of the NSDAP in South-West Africa and the foundation of a local group (*Ortsgruppe*).¹⁰⁹ In September 1939, the parliament decided to join the war against Germany, siding with England, which heralded the internment of German-speaking men.¹¹⁰

In her configuration of this chapter in settler history, Rust shifts the focus to the implications of the political transitions on family relations. She centres the emotional labour of settler women, their practices of photographing, writing, communicating and archiving as means to maintain family bonds and to construct a sense of family identity in times of separation and in the face of estrangement after reunion. Figure 9 shows scenes just before Rust’s grandfather was taken to the internment camp when daughter Freya was only seven weeks old. Figure 10 visualises the first reencounter of father and daughter six years later.¹¹¹ What strikes the eye in both pieces is the material intervention that Rust conducted by adding a translucent curtain with butterflies onto the photograph with a replication of her grandmother’s original inscriptions from the photo album.

Rust explained how she engaged artistically with the family estate in search of understanding the tense relationship between her mother, Freya, and father Paulo Doll.¹¹² The passed-on memories and archival photographs functioned as clues for her interrogation. From family narratives, Rust learned about the grandfather’s

Apartheid, 17–18; 150; Joachim Zeller, “Review: Creating Germans Abroad by Daniel Joseph Walther, Ohio University Press, 2002,” *H-Soz-Kult*, 10 May 2004.

106 Zeller, “Review;” Eberhardt, *Zwischen Nationalsozialismus und Apartheid*, 62.

107 Kößler, “Historischer Wendepunkt, Strukturelle Kontinuität,” 54; Zeller, “Review.”

108 Kößler, “Historischer Wendepunkt, Strukturelle Kontinuität,” 54.

109 Tobias Pech, “The Internment Camp ‘Klein-Danzig’ in Windhoek 1939–1941,” *Journal of Namibian Studies* 21 (2017): 92, emphasis in original.

110 Kock, *Erinnerungen an Die Internierungszeit (1939–1946) Und Zeitgeschichtliche Ergänzungen*, 34; Eberhardt, *Zwischen Nationalsozialismus und Apartheid*, 410.

111 *Portfolio Memories*, 2005.

112 *Ibid.*

prestigious status amongst the settler community, where Doll was well-respected and conceived of as a charismatic, charming figure.¹¹³



Figure 9 (left): Imke Rust, *Ein (Letztes) Küßchen* (diptych), 2005. Digital print on film, Ao. Edition 5/5. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 10 (right): Imke Rust, *Wiedersehen* (diptych), 2005. Digital print on film, Ao. Edition 5/5. Courtesy of the artist.

In contrast, however, her mother's recollections of the father tell a different story. Rust's mother recurrently spoke of a sense of distance and alienation from her father, considering him to be an aloof character, with a sense of coldness defining the father-daughter relationship.¹¹⁴ The artist's cautious, creative and light-hearted mode of intervening with the inherited material (in the form of the butterfly curtains) allow her to carefully explore these dissonant perspectives. Upon close inspection, the notions of estrangement might emanate from the original photographs, for example, as seen in the father's and daughter's upright postures or their averted gazes. However, the images also show a sense of proximity, figuring in the father's gentle kiss or in his hand holding onto his daughter gently. In observing these different notions, I was reminded of Elisabeth Edwards reflections on photography, who underlines that photographs mislead their viewers because images "do not lend themselves to being dealt with in any definite way,"

113 Rust, pers. comm., 30 September 2020.

114 Ibid.

although they do suggest a kind of immediate reflection of ‘truth’ or reality.¹¹⁵ Rust superimposed the images with additional layers that complicate easy readings of them, thereby mirroring their deceptive character in order to visually depict the frictions between memories, the photographs ‘truth-claims’ and family narratives. The curtain emerges in many of the pieces that Rust edited. Symbolically, it reflects the dynamics of commemoration.¹¹⁶ Over time, memories seem vague, fuzzy or slippery, and historical events become coloured by one’s own perspective and ideas.



Figure 11 (left): Imke Rust, *Fading Memories (Butterflies)*, 2005. Digital print on Material Tyvek. Edition 5/5. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 12 (right): Imke Rust, *Fading Memories (Roses)*, 2005. Digital print on Material Tyvek. Edition 5/5. Courtesy of the artist.

Rust further explores the “subjective component” in how we remember in figures 11 and 12. The “rosy veil” in the artwork *Fading Memories (Roses)*, which partially covers certain elements from the original photograph (the mother) while highlighting others (the father), is a gesture to the German saying, ‘seeing the past through rose-tinted glasses,’ indicating how people idealise or reframe the past positively in retrospect.¹¹⁷ The sense of nostalgia also features in the artistic ruse of blurring the images. Many of the photographs only become properly recognisable when viewers take a step back, which reflects the critical distance Rust herself assumes towards

115 Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 9, emphasis in original.

116 Irmgard Schreiber, “Hinter Einem (Dusch)Vorhang Aus Rosen: Imke Rust Verarbeitet Erinnerungen an Eine Afrikanische Kindheit,” *Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 October 2005.

117 My translation, original: “Die Vergangenheit durch eine rosa-rote Brille sehen.” Exhibition catalogue *Memories*, 2005.

her family history and the archival material. The fabric used for her modification was Rust's grandmother's original flower curtain that featured prominently in her home décor. This reference to cherished material resonates with an earlier observation introduced in chapter 1, concerning how objects can function as triggers of memories and emotions.¹¹⁸ In summoning and scrutinising postmemories, Rust's artistic intervention takes on the form of memory conversion. By layering, cutting out, highlighting and blurring certain elements, she exchanges the status of formerly accepted family narratives and exposes passed-on memories as myths.



Figure 13: Imke Rust, *His Absence Filled Their Lives*, 2005. Digital print. Edition 5/5. Courtesy of the artist.

In figure 13, Rust engages with the format of the family photo album for her interrogation of the subjective and constructed character of memory-making by means of family pictures. She photographed the open book and post-edited it digitally. Martha Langford understands the family photo album as a “mnemonic framework” that serves to keep memories accessible and alive, arguing how organising photographs into albums is a way of “preserving the structures of oral traditions for new uses in the present.”¹¹⁹ In line with this thought, Hirsch contemplates photo albums and their function for the heirs of family estates and bearers of postmemory. For her, the personal and often difficult work of analysing family pictures allows viewers to reassemble and reconnect with the past.¹²⁰ Her own practice of reading family narratives and images against one another allowed Hirsch to reconstruct

118 De Sas Kropiwnicki, *Exile Identity, Agency and Belonging*, 60.

119 Langford, *Suspended Conversations*, 21.

120 Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 214–215.

a sense of familial continuity in light of a fractured personal history.¹²¹ However, she also draws our attention to the potential of the artistic modification of family photographs, which centres on notions such as fragmentation, discontinuity, and rupture, arguing that “[i]t is the consciousness of a break, exposed in the radical and irreverent manipulation of images, that enables intervention, contestation, and change.”¹²²

South African artist Lebohang Kganye, for example, explores the potential of contestation and engages with the constructed nature of family narratives, identities and memories by elucidating the “fantastical elements” of the family album, which she considers as a form of “storybook.”¹²³ In her process of curating the family archive, Rust similarly exposes, to use Kganye’s words, the “orchestrated fiction” around family narratives.¹²⁴ She intervened with her grandmother’s affectionate compilation by digitally inserting the grandfather’s contours and shadows onto the women’s photographs. With this, she violates the photo albums’ original order and inserts her own ideas into the material. By adding the whitened silhouette, she emphasises the (grand)father’s absence and visualises his ghostly presence.

The ethics at stake here are connected to the disturbance of her grandmother’s archival project. If the original archivist of the family estate attempted to construct a certain family identity and transmit a particular version of the past, the power over interpretation and presentation was now in the hands of Rust as the objects’ heir and the keeper of postmemories. The grandmother’s endeavour to document family life at a time of separation may have followed the desire to reassemble, collect and connect what in reality was dispersed and fragmented. At the same time, the album may have functioned as a way to secure and transmit that which could not be shared physically during the years of separation. It would allow the (grand)father to return to and visually witness a past from which he was excluded. After their death, and with the material now being in Rust’s hands, their original functions are being discarded and the heirloom now serves as material for both knowledge scrutiny and production.

The aspect of critical reflection on past narratives also figures in the title, *His Absence Filled Their Lives*. In an interview, the artists explained to me how it is a reference to a drawing by William Kentridge.¹²⁵ In a scene from Kentridge’s film *Sobri-*

121 Ibid., 214.

122 Ibid.; Examples from the artistic scene that engage creatively with the photographic family archive are: Isabel Katjavivi, *An Everyday Archive of Independence* (2021); Loraine Kalassa, *Untitled* (2018); Hans-Peter Feldberg, *Retrospective* (2016) or Maria Miesenberger, *Sverige/Schweden* (1993–2000).

123 Astrup Fearnley Museet, “Interview with Lebohang Kganye | ‘Alpha Crucis – Contemporary African Art,’” *YouTube*, 23 July 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKtzcFQpO_s.

124 “Ke Lefa Laka – a Solo Exhibition by Lebohang Kganye.”

125 Rust, pers. comm., 30 September 2020.

ety, *Obesity and Growing Old* (1991), we see an old man alone with his cat, standing on top of a hill with the words “her absence filled the world” looming large in the open space above his head. While the film centrally revolves around the invented character Soho Eckstein (a “greedy mining magnate” and “symbol of South African white power”) whose wife leaves him for another man, the message has a broad reach, resonating with viewers in different ways.¹²⁶ For Rust, this statement mirrored how, at the time of family division, life revolved centrally around absence and the longing for reunion. While this conception has been repeated constantly, perpetuated and handed down amongst generations, it was also in dissonance with other postmemories that the artist inherited. From her mother, the artist learned that, indeed, the father’s absence accompanied her throughout those six years of her life and beyond. However, she also actually conceived of her childhood as a happy one – the sense of lack was partially constructed through the narratives themselves.¹²⁷



Figure 14 (left): Imke Rust, *Passed by Censor*, 2005. Digital print on Material Tyvek. Edition 5/5. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 15 (right): Imke Rust, *Gruesse an Internierten Vater*, 2005. Digital print on film. Edition 5/5. Courtesy of the artist.

Rust’s reprints from the family archive partially recover the “banal, cute mundanities” of her mother’s fatherless (but happy) childhood. At the same time, the imposition of texts and additional layers as well as her strategies of distorting, blurring

126 The story metaphorically reflects the political changes that were unfolding in South Africa in the 1990s. For the image, see: Zeitz MOCCA, “William Kentridge Drawing For Sobriety,” *Zeitz MOCCA*, accessed 15 September 2021, <https://shop.zeitzmocaa.museum/product/postcard-multi-colour-william-kentridge-drawing-for-sobriety-a5/>.

127 Rust, pers. comm., 30 September 2020.

and editing the images are reminders of the ambivalences of postmemories.¹²⁸ Figures 14 and 15 illustrate the impact that the political climate, as well as the father's internment, had on the family's life. These are invoked literally by the imprint on the material. Simultaneously, both works also elucidate the multifaceted usages of photography in these historical contexts. During the period of interment, all modes of communication were monitored by the South Africans and, to pass their censor, Rust's grandmother wrote her letters from the child's perspective, assuming an innocent tone, focusing only on "straightforward reports on banal happenings" and anecdotes.¹²⁹ Carefully perforated, bound together, filed and stored in a box, the texts and attached photographs still bear witness to the grandmother's efforts of informing her husband about the everyday affairs at home, thereby securing a sense of connection in the family.

Opening the family archive, revealing these private dialogues to the public and interfering with the material, was a sensitive task for the artist due to her deep attachment, particularly to her mother and grandmother. Rust explains how she often felt confronted with German conceptions of the 'white' settler woman as the culprit who actively maintained 'white' supremacy.¹³⁰ Against this background, Rust was wary about rendering the women in her family vulnerably and probed ways to navigate their potential exposure cautiously, or to argue with Cifor and Caswell, with a (feminist) "ethics of care."¹³¹ In their proposed approach to historical photography, they engage with the literal meaning of the word care as the "ability to understand and appreciate another person's feelings, experience, etc."¹³² Similar challenges apply with a view to private archives. But to whom should Rust direct her loyalties – to her grandmother's memories, the historical context or her own view towards the past?

The artist was two years old when her grandfather died but, from passed-on narratives, she learned that Doll's father came to Namibia first as a trader and later as a volunteer to join the Schutztruppe.¹³³ With her critical distance towards the politics of German speakers in colonial Namibia, the family's background as well as the members' motivations to actively participate in the war against the Herero and Nama remain troubling and ungraspable to her. In light of these uncertainties, her artistic response seems to follow Penny Siopis' "inward turn," as Rust relegates the attention away from broader political issues and questions concerning power and

128 Schreiber, "Hinter Einem (Dusch)Vorhang Aus Rosen."

129 Exhibition catalogue *Memories*, 2005.

130 Rust, pers. comm., 30 September 2020. In Chapter 4, we will engage in more depth with the complex entanglements of German (settler) women in colonialism.

131 Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 24.

132 *Ibid.*

133 Rust, pers. comm., 30 September 2020.

privilege in favour of the private family sphere, its tensions, emotions and memories.¹³⁴ In doing so, the careful approach she uses centres her female relatives and is devoted to keeping the matriarchive alive. In this mode of archival intervention, the structural and political dimensions of the family archive remain intact. However, a meaning-conversion takes place through Rust's challenging of inconsistent family narratives. By adding additional layers to the material and by entangling different symbols and references, Rust evokes the subjective and elusive nature of memories, thereby elucidating, how Ciraj Rassool states that "commemorative politics can take the form of participation, inscription and of contestation."¹³⁵

2.4: Troubling Legacies Revisited

The drive to actively shape commemorative politics and to propose new routes of remembrance is also a central impulse in Mekondjo's archival interventions. She is continuously pulled back to historical photography during her artistic interrogation of transgenerational traumas and her ancestors' experiences during the colonial and apartheid eras. As stated previously, this prevalence of the colonial archive is due to the fact that Mekondjo's matriarchive is a shattered one. As an exilic archive, it is dispersed across continents and institutions. For her relatives, it was impossible to generate and safeguard an encompassing and stable material family archive. Hence, the artist continues to search for clues to access the past in other archives and to build, reshape and transmit her own matriarchive for the future.

One of the troubling chapters in Namibian history to which she returns is the liberation struggle and the intergenerational traumas of those who went into exile. The earlier introduced piece, *Nyango Refugee Camp, Zambia 1987/My Mother's Request*, is part of a body of works from the exhibition *The Borders of Memory* (2020).¹³⁶ In the 14 artworks that she produced for the show, Mekondjo shifts attention to the implications of the war on individuals, particularly the ways in which women and children crafted their lives in unstable conditions. In doing so, as Taylor argues, she uses strategies of "counter-rupture," as a way to push back against "dominant Eurocentric and/or 'patriotic history' discourses" and to "proffer new ways of knowing about the past and being in the present."¹³⁷ We have seen how SWAPO's patriotic history was centrally constructed by its male members and leaders, who celebrated the

134 Nuttall and Siopis, "An Unrecoverable Strangeness," 457.

135 Memory Studies Association, "MSA Conference 2019, Keynote Roundtable 'Connecting Memory Traditions Around the World,'" *YouTube*, 22 October 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_4u1eJhznig.

136 The exhibition was a collaboration with artist Helena Uambembe and curated by Julie Taylor of Guns & Rain Gallery, Johannesburg.

137 Taylor, *History, Gender and "New Practices of Self,"* 31.

“liberation gospel” as Henning Melber puts it, which “swept under the carpet contestations about the past.”¹³⁸ One example of painful events that Mekondjo revisits is the Cassinga Attack on 4 May 1978, when South African army forces bombed the refugee camp in Angola, killing approximately 600 people.¹³⁹



Figure 16: Tuli Mekondjo, *Om'dilo Mo Cassinga/Fire at Cassinga*, 2020. Photo transfer, collage, acrylic, millet grain and resin on canvas, 62 x 82 cm. Courtesy of Guns&Rain Gallery.

In *Om'dilo Mo Cassinga/Fire at Cassinga* (figure 16), the artist uses fire as both metaphor and method to reimagine the chaos at Cassinga when bullets were fired and people moved in all directions while the camp was being destroyed. Mekondjo also attempts to capture the strange silence and eerie sensation of death that lingered in the air after the conflict.¹⁴⁰ In depicting the pain of the massacre, Mekondjo hopes to further efforts of healing, arguing: “We need more dialogues to discuss the pain, but unfortunately our communities are silent. They are fearful to speak about

138 Melber, *Understanding Namibia*; Taylor, *History, Gender and “New Practices of Self”*, xvi; 19.

139 South African authorities claimed that Cassinga was a SWAPO military base and this was the reason why they attacked the site. However, it was civilians who died in this massacre. Ever since Namibian Independence, on 4 May their loss is being commemorated (Cassinga Day). See: Akawa, *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle*, 94–95.

140 Mekondjo, pers. comm., via WhatsApp, 14 May 2020.

what happened at Cassinga.”¹⁴¹ Due to the scope of this chapter, I will not provide a detailed analysis of figure 16. Rather, I will continue to centre on artworks in which Mekondjo and Rust share a focus on the entanglements of land, identity and the role of the matriarchive in negotiating troubled legacies. However, what is crucial in the *Border of Memory* series overall is how the artist engages with memories and traumas that were not directly her own. Her concern with her ancestors’ experiences of the liberation war resonates with Hirsch’s argument that descendants of perpetrators, victims or bystanders can connect with the memories of previous generations so deeply that they adopt these memories as part of their own.¹⁴² Hirsch stresses that “[p]ostmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through projection, investment, and creation.”¹⁴³ Let us look more closely at this aspect of investment in commemorative practices and how it aligns with my contention that Mekondjo’s archival intervention takes the form of memory conversion.



Figure 17: Tuli Mekondjo, *Ohango Ya Meme, Ko Mbada/My Mother's Wedding In Exile*, 2020. Photo transfer, collage, acrylic, millet grain and resin on canvas, 61 x 82 cm. Courtesy of Guns&Rain Gallery.

141 van Huyssteen, “A Conversation with Tuli Mekondjo.”

142 Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 3.

143 Marianne Hirsch, “Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy,” in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan V. Crewe and Leo Spitzer (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), 8.

For *Ohango Ya Meme, Ko Mbada/My Mother's Wedding In Exile* (figure 17), the artist paired a photograph from the National Archive of Namibia of women in the camp in Kwanza-Sul in Angola with a photo transfer from her own private family archive. Mekondjo gleaned that the photograph was taken in Angola in 1983 from information provided in the public archive. It shows women laughing while working the fields, cultivating the land with their hoes. The wedding photograph was taken when her mother married Mekondjo's stepfather on 31 May 1986 at the Nyango camp in Zambia. The interesting *mélange* of the guests' dresses strikes the eye: while bride and groom wear rather conventional Western wedding costumes, the women to the left are wearing skirts that resemble the more contemporary traditional *odelela* dresses, reminding us again of women's social roles in furthering and transmitting a sense of cultural affiliation.¹⁴⁴ The ruse of pairing the material from different archives shows how, for the artist, neither the private nor the public archive alone invokes to the past adequately. When asked about her reason for pairing the photographs, the artist stated how, for her, both images tell "the same story of the work of women living life in these camps."¹⁴⁵ For Mekondjo, they offered insights into everyday life in exile, where people got married, cultivated the land and where it was "still the duty of the women to make sure that everyone was taken care of."¹⁴⁶ Mekondjo honours how women fulfilled several roles at once, being mothers, wives, freedom fighters and refugees as well as individuals with hopes and dreams in an atmosphere of instability and conflict. Akawa similarly emphasises women's diverse (and crucial) forms of participation in the struggle, which implied that gender roles would partially shift – women were emancipated, involved in politics and claimed access to the public sphere, which implied that they entered "into the male arena *in addition* to doing traditional women's chores."¹⁴⁷ Besides emphasising women's perseverance and strength, with figure 17, Mekondjo is accentuating positive sceneries and events. The photographs show the celebration of love in the form of marriage and a social activity (the cultivation of land) in which participants express a sense of light-heartedness, which is captured by the camera. In her refiguration of the historical images, the photographs function as testimonies to the ease and beauty of the *everyday* in exile, a visual proof of positivity, despite all hardships.

And yet, as is the nature with postmemories, these recollections are not mediated by recall, but by Mekondjo's projections and her imaginative recreation of past events.¹⁴⁸ By means of converting the images' resonances for her own use, the artist

144 Mekondjo, *Ways of Reading*; Yuval-Davis, "Gender and Nation," 25.

145 Mekondjo, *Ways of Reading*.

146 Ibid.

147 Akawa, *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle*, 60–65; 106–108.

148 Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 5.

uses the “malleability and slipperiness” of photographs and the impossibility to retrieve their “true” meanings, which opens up the potential for imaginative interference.¹⁴⁹ In intervening with the material, she trades the predominant conception of the war period as a time of sacrifice and misery for a visuality that recalls both the adversities (evoked by the sombre tone) and the love, togetherness and mundanity that defined people’s lives. In shifting the predominant registers of historical photographs from the colonial and apartheid eras, in which the photographed subjects are often exposed to the photographer’s and viewers’ gazes, the power dynamics in her works are inverted: “Now their gaze is upon us, and they are asking us questions, like: Do we actually know who we are, where we come from? [...] we are being looked at now by our own ancestors and they have a lot of questions.”¹⁵⁰ In centring their gazes and experiences, the artist refigures historical photographs to illuminate her ancestors’ agency and achievements. However, what is reinvoked in these pieces is a red stitch, as we have seen previously in figure 7, which functions as a symbol to indicate the lines of division that continue to separate the nation, as Mekondjo explains.¹⁵¹ It represents the veterinary defence line in Namibia, which was established by the German colonial authorities in 1896, originally erected, as Giorgio Miescher argues, to control animal diseases and prevent their spread from northern into central Namibia.¹⁵² However, he highlights how, in reality, the separation of territories allowed for better protection for “white-owned livestock and the white settler economy to the south,” a strategy that was further refined with the establishment of the ‘Police Zone’ under German rule in 1906, which comprised central and southern Namibia and was intended as an exclusively ‘white’ settlement area.¹⁵³ Under South African rule, these forms of territorial control were extended, and the exact line of demarcation has been relocated a number of times.¹⁵⁴ Simultaneously, the visualisation of a drawn border line – a red line – on Namibian maps became a common inscription.¹⁵⁵

During the liberation struggle, the South African military used the fence as a military border to control the mobility of Africans, particularly preventing people

149 Patricia Hayes, “Introduction: Visual Genders,” *Gender & History* 17, no. 3 (November 2005): 525.

150 Mekondjo, pers. comm., via WhatsApp, 12 October 2021.

151 Mekondjo, pers. comm., via WhatsApp, 14 May 2020.

152 Giorgio Miescher, *Namibia’s Red Line: The History of a Veterinary and Settlement Border* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1.

153 Miescher, *Namibia’s Red Line*, 1; Taylor, *History, Gender and “New Practices of Self,”* 43; Patricia Hayes, Jeremy Silvester, Marion Wallace, and Wolfram Hartmann, *Namibia under South African Rule: Mobility & Containment, 1915–46* (Oxford: James Currey, 1998), 3.

154 Miescher, *Namibia’s Red Line*, 1–2.

155 *Ibid.*, 2.

who engaged in the liberation struggle from crossing the territories.¹⁵⁶ Mekondjo conceives of the territorial separation as “a political ‘cage,’” explaining how the Red Line was “instrumental as a regulator of contract labourers in colonial and apartheid Namibia” and was also used to control the movement of the PLAN fighters (People’s Liberation Army of Namibia) and for South Africa to plan its attacks in Angola and Zambia.¹⁵⁷ The border remains in place, even after independence and until this day. With it, the post-colonial government controls the traffic within the inner-Namibian territories, particularly monitoring the transportation of livestock and animal products.¹⁵⁸ Namibian activist and politician Job Amupanda took legal actions to have the fence removed and declared it unconstitutional; however, his case was dismissed by the High Court, and at the time of writing, Amupanda is preparing an appeal to the Supreme Court.¹⁵⁹ Reflecting back on the history of this border, it becomes visible that, by evoking the Red Line and its implications, Mekondjo brings multiple narratives of the past into conversation with one another. She is reminding us to pay closer attention to colonial continuities and ruptures that are, like a thread stitched onto a map, inscribed in the land, thereby impacting people’s livelihoods and freedom.

Circling back to figure 17, and to the question how the artist engages with archival images to speak to the entanglement of identity, land and belonging, helps to elucidate how her art emphasises the perseverance of the people and the notion of togetherness, even at times of disruption and despite colonial aspirations to displace the people, shatter communities and to divide or claim the territory. The artist conjures the tragic histories of resettlement and dislocation, which then become part of her visual currency: the notions are exchanged by a shift in focus on people’s continued connection to land across national borders. In cultivating the land, her ancestors provided for their families, communities and the generations to follow and, as evoked in the wedding photograph, they built new relations and families in an atmosphere of rupture.

Rust’s performative video work *A Thorny Issue* (2017) (figure 18) foregrounds a different perspective on the issue of access to (and separation from) Namibian land. Her “lens-based mediative performance” begins with an extreme long shot showing a wide, dry field with bushes, an adjacent forest and a bright blue sky. From this perspective, the artist, standing in the field, is barely recognisable.

156 Ibid.

157 van Huyssteen, “A Conversation with Tuli Mekondjo.”

158 Miescher, *Namibia’s Red Line*, 2.

159 Werner Menges, ‘Amupanda Wants to Redo Redline Lawsuit’, *The Namibian*, 14 February 2024, <https://www.namibian.com.na/amupanda-wants-to-redo-redline-lawsuit/>.



Figure 18: Imke Rust, *A Thorny Issue*, 2017 (film still), 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

The natural scenery and the vastness of the setting prompt associations with the “popular settler trope of [...] empty land.”¹⁶⁰ Lorena Rizzo interrogates this colonial construction in depth in her analysis of photographs by a German settler and amateur photographer and she argues:

Vacant land is a well-known *topos* in imperial and colonial imagery, suggesting the absence of indigenous people and visualising territorial claims by the colonisers. Colonial spaces appear as if willing to be appropriated and occupied by particular groups – in southern Africa, ideally male settlers.¹⁶¹

Through her performative engagement with the landscape, Rust speaks to these historical legacies. She frames her work as a “quiet reflection about my ancestors, my personal connection to the land, the colonial history of Namibia and the land issue.”¹⁶² The camera zooms onto the performing artist, showing her predominantly from the back and from the side. The video was filmed on Rust’s father’s farm Otukarru, in the Otjozondjupa region.

160 Hayes, “Introduction,” 530.

161 Lorena Rizzo, “A Glance into the Camera: Gendered Visions of Historical Photographs in Kaoko (North-Western Namibia),” *Gender & History* 17, no. 3 (November 2005): 690, emphasis in original.

162 Imke Rust, “A Thorny Issue – Performance,” *Imke Rust* (blog), accessed 21 April 2023, <https://imkerust.com/video-2/2017-a-thorny-issue-performance/>.



Figure 19: Imke Rust, *A Thorny Issue*, 2017 (film still), 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

Accompanied by meditative music, the video shows the artist picking up large, thorny branches from the ground, which she then holds up high above her head, as an allusion to “a family tree.”¹⁶³ Again, the use of arboreal symbolism and the choice to stage the performance on the farm remind us, like Nicola Brandt does, how “[t]he concepts of space and place, land and landscape, are closely related and are simultaneously entangled with identity, belonging and power.”¹⁶⁴ With her broad reference to “the land issue,” Rust gestures to the ways in which, as a member of the ‘white’ community and of a family owning farmland in Namibia, she is implicated in discourses on land redistribution.¹⁶⁵ By ‘implication,’ I am drawing on Michael Rothberg’s proposition to understand *the implicated subject* as a person who is connected to “regimes of domination” and “who participates in injustice, but in indirect ways,” a concept which will be explored in further depth in chapter 3.¹⁶⁶ Ever since colonial times, the topic of land has been a bone of contention that remains unresolved and that impacts heavily upon the country’s gross inequality today. Luregn Lenggenhager and Romie Vonkie Nghitevelekwa note that “about 70% of the freehold agricultural land is still owned by white people. The previously disadvantaged (black and

163 Ibid.

164 Brandt, *Landscapes Between Then and Now*, 1.

165 As, for example, demanded by the Namibian Economic Freedom Fighters (as a political party) but also groups such as members of either the Herero or Nama communities.

166 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 1–20.

coloured people) own only 16%.¹⁶⁷ Lenggenhager and Nghiteveleka further explain how the persistent injustice results from the fact that those who profited from owning land in the past and accumulated capital are still those with economic power today: “A national and international elite has withdrawn its capital from the land, while the majority of the people never had a chance to accumulate land or capital.”¹⁶⁸ Rust’s voice-over in the video offer clues on her perspective on these issues:

I am standing in a waterless dam during a time of drought. We are white. We do not belong here. They say. We stole this land. They say. Give back the land. Holding up these stamps like a family tree, I remember – and dare I say honour? – my ancestors. I am acutely aware of the thorns of the past. The violence and genocide. The weight of the past is heavy. The pressure is high. The wind is strong. I sense the accumulation of personal suffering, loss and dreams of my ancestors aching in my body. Yet I dare not. I open my hands to let go, release the past into the wind. Thorns are crashing down.¹⁶⁹

The *datura ferox*, as a “naturalised alien plant” (as the video tells us), emerges as a metaphor for Rust’s own troubled belonging: while Namibia is her country of birth, she remains forever conceived of as alien, outsider or intruder.¹⁷⁰ Once again, the artist evokes arboreal symbolism to interrogate the implications of being a ‘white’ Namibian and the impossibility of claiming a sense of affiliation to the land.¹⁷¹ From her voice-over, we learn that expressing affection, empathy and connection to her ancestors is equally problematic. Her relatives cooperated with or were beneficiaries of the colonial regime, albeit in different ways and to different degrees – a legacy that is hard to reconcile with the artist’s own critical view towards colonialism and apartheid. Her self-reflexive voice-over stresses being “acutely aware of the thorns of the past,” acknowledging the genocide and violence committed by the ‘white’ minority. At the same time, however, the repeated use of “they say” expresses uncertainty about potential restorative justice by means of land redistribution. The artist questions those narratives that generally attribute land ownership by ‘white’ Namibians

167 Luregn Lenggenhager and Romie Vonkie Nghiteveleka, “Why Namibians Want Fresh Impetus behind Land Reform,” *The Conversation*, 26 September 2018, <http://theconversation.com/why-namibians-want-fresh-impetus-behind-land-reform-103379>.

168 Ibid.

169 Rust, “A Thorny Issue – Performance.”

170 Ibid.

171 Various other White creative practitioners from Namibia explored their practices as a way to grapple with their positionality. See, for example: Erika von Wietersheim’s *Nur 24 Zeilen: Eine wahre Geschichte über den Krieg, die Liebe und den langen Weg zurück nach Afrika* (2017), *Aus-Zeit. Mit Mozart und den Buschleuten in der Namib* (2017), or *Guten Morgen, Namibia! Eine Farm, eine Schule und unser Weg von der Apartheid zur Unabhängigkeit* (2019); Sylvia Schlettwein’s short stories, such as “Framing the Nation” (2010) or artist Silke Berens’ *Brothers in Arms* (2017).

to land grabbing. To shift the perspective, she brings attention to postmemories of her ancestors' hardships and traumas that have been passed on intergenerationally: "I sense the accumulation of personal suffering, loss and dreams of my ancestors aching in my body."¹⁷² Enacting the image of a family tree, she summons the matriarchive that contains these postmemories and posits them as counter-memories to the dominant presupposition of a general 'white' privilege in Namibia.

The role of the body is polysemiotic in the performance and for the matriarchive: we are reminded of Brandt's observation that contemporary artists turn to the body as "a vessel to transmit ideas," or of Mekondjo's approach to her own body as a "channel" for her ancestors.¹⁷³ Both functions are being engaged in Rust's embodied performative practice. With a view to the postmemories and traumas that are "aching" in the artist's body, we may also consider how her body *becomes* the matriarchive: the storage site of transmitted knowledges from the past. This consideration resonates strongly with Julietta Singh's book *No Archive Will Restore You*, in which the scholar and writer rejects conservative approaches to "what constitutes an archive, what knowledge is and how it can be stored," and proposes understanding her own body as an archive.¹⁷⁴ Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja follows a similar line of argument when he explains that his body incorporates memories connected to experiences beyond colonial or post-colonial timelines and that "the homes of our families in Namibia, the places where our everyday life takes place, are also archives."¹⁷⁵

In following this turn away from conventional (and predominantly material) archives towards conceptions of archives that are abstract, embodied or spatial (the land, the farm), Rust enacts the difficult quest to express empathy for those who came before her and made her who she is today. Throughout the performance, her face is only momentarily captured by the camera and remains mainly averted, with her eyes closed. There is something restrained and vulnerable in these gestures. She upholds the family tree in the video, speaking to her longing to honour her genealogy, to claim a belonging to a Namibian community and to cherish her ancestors' histories and achievements. Yet, she 'dares not,' as the voice-over explains towards the end of the performance. The artist lets go of the branches, "releas[ing] the past into the wind. Thorns are crashing down."¹⁷⁶

The imagery offers prompts to speculate on the layers of meaning in letting go of thorny issues and of setting the past free. The tone of the performance frames the

172 Rust, "A Thorny Issue – Performance."

173 Brandt, *Landscapes Between Then and Now*, 23; van Huyssteen, "A Conversation with Tuli Mekondjo."

174 Julia Rensing, "Lost or Found: Reckoning with Archival Ruins," in *Lost Libraries, Burnt Archives*, eds. Sindi-Leigh McBride and Julia Rensing (Cape Town: Michaelis Galleries, 2023), 74; Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You* (Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2018).

175 Quoted in: Wellershaus, "Let's Have Tea and Sing Love Songs!"

176 Rust, "A Thorny Issue – Performance."

artist's troubled legacy as something that seems irresolvable. Since the matriarchive that stores postmemories and transgenerational traumas is an embodied one, there can be no redemption, no 'letting go' of the heavy weight of the past. In this vein, the site-specific performance foregrounds the inescapable entanglement of history, identity and the land. And yet, her 'letting go' may also gesture to an acceptance of the position as an "implicated subject" and an attempt to move forward with the past.¹⁷⁷ While the video does not provide final answers, it once again reminds us of the predicament of how the representational politics of bodies and landscapes are connected to positionality. Rust's work asks rather straightforwardly: as a 'white' artist, how much and what may she dare to say about her ancestors, the land and about the intricacy of representation? To continue this exploration, and to further unpack the potentials and limits of artistic meaning conversion, let me bring other examples of Rust's performative works into conversation with Mekondjo's practices.

2.5: Performative Archival Interventions

As we have seen in the selection of Imke Rust's and Tuli Mekondjo's works, the role of their own bodies is central to both artists. They are mindful that the body, as Nandipha Mntambo reminds us, "is a complex political space," which Rust's *A Thorny Issue* demonstrates vividly.¹⁷⁸ Arguing in a similar vein, Awam Amkpa explains:

I come from a continent where the body is spoken for. We don't have the luxury of stepping in and out of the textuality of the body. From that very moment when the body is born, that body is immediately named and sometimes mired with all kinds of social crisis.¹⁷⁹

Amkpa then notes how performers use the body to challenge such prescribed meanings and labels, which resonates strongly with Makhubu's theory on visual currency. In looking at a selection of performance artists who link their practice with photography, she argues that "performative photography is [...] not only a mode of conveyance (of ideology) but it is the locale for the conversion of representational values."¹⁸⁰ Mekondjo's impulse to use the body as a "performance venue" and as a means

177 Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*.

178 Quoted in: Sean O'Toole, "Through the Lens: How Photography Became Africa's Most Popular Art Form," *Art News*, 19 June 2018, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/photography-a-fricas-most-popular-art-form-10519/>.

179 Awam Amkpa, "A State of Perpetual Becoming: African Bodies as Texts, Methods, and Archives," *Dance Research Journal* 42, no. 1 (2010): 83.

180 Makhubu, "Visual Currencies," 245.

to reinterpret established signifiers, ideas and conceptions was prompted by political and moral questions connected to the medium of photography.¹⁸¹ The artist felt urged to engage more deeply with the ethical concerns connected with the medium after having produced a vast oeuvre of artworks based on historical archival images. For her solo exhibition *Limbandungila* (2019), she decided to step out of the archives and to “go on the street” in Windhoek.¹⁸² She felt inspired to pay homage to the women that she encountered and wanted to capture their strength.¹⁸³ Hence, she asked strangers for permission to take a picture of them, reflecting:

That’s when I realised there is a certain way you approach people. You cannot out of the blue say, ‘Let me take a picture of you.’ You need to explain yourself and do it with compassion and be vocal about why you are doing this. That’s the most difficult part because people need to earn your trust, trust you that you are going to do the right thing with their images.¹⁸⁴



Figure 20 (left): Tuli Mekondjo, *performance with Oihanangolo/White Things I*, 2020. Photograph uploaded on Facebook, 9 July 2021. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 21 (right): Tuli Mekondjo, *Oudano Wo Ma Kishi/Spirits at Play I-III*, 2019. Mixed media on canvas, 120 x 44 cm. Courtesy of Guns&Rain Gallery.

These experiences confronted Mekondjo with the implications of photographic authority. Paraphrasing Martha Rosler, Nicola Brandt explains how, at the heart of representational politics lies the question, “What right have *I* to represent you?” or, as increasingly and more relevantly demanded in current discourse, ‘What right

181 Amkpa, “A State of Perpetual Becoming,” 87.

182 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 12 July 2021.

183 This is reflected in the Oshiwambo title *Limbandungila*, which means “doing things with your own strength,” as the artist explained.

184 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 12 July 2021.

have you to represent me?”¹⁸⁵ Facing these issues for *Limbangungila*, the artist would increasingly direct the camera towards herself. Following different strategies of figuring the self as both subject *and* object in her art, her photographs would be incorporated as either prints in her multi-media artworks (figure 21) or function as performative conversations with her paintings (figure 20).

Her picture, taken in front of the large-scale painting *Oihanangolo/White Things I* (figure 20), and the piece *Oudano Wo Ma Kishi/Spirits at Play I-III* (figure 21) are two examples of the artist’s versatile engagements with the photographic medium. In both cases, Mekondjo used her typical resin and Mahangu infusion method, transferred photographs onto canvasses and inserted them into bountiful landscapes and botanical vines. While the pictures in *Oihanangolo (White Things) I* (background of figure 20) were again retrieved from the Scherz publication, Mekondjo chose herself as the model to pose for the camera for *Oudano Wo Ma Kishi*. In multiple ways, the photographed subjects in both works (as well as herself as the model in *Oihanangolo*) reference the *efundula* or similar traditional ceremonies from Northern Namibia, introduced previously. This shows in the *omhatela* headdress, with its characteristic horns, that married women would wear as part of the female initiation rite or in the *efungu* cattle tail that Mekondjo holds. Both are central elements during different stages of the ceremony.¹⁸⁶ However, the most prominent feature that Mekondjo recurrently references is the practice of smearing the body with white clay and ashes, which transforms the initiates into *oihanangolo*: ‘white things.’¹⁸⁷ Their temporal transition to *oihanangolo* allowed for an experience of “gender inversion” since, as white things, the young women assumed roles that were typically reserved for men.¹⁸⁸ In an interview, Mekondjo celebrated this empowering aspect of the *efundula*, fascinated by how women were “reclaiming their masculinity” and were allowed to express that side of themselves.¹⁸⁹ As various Namibian scholars have shown, cultural practices were repressed and altered extensively due to Christian influences and the eras of colonialism, the liberation

185 Brandt, *Landscapes Between Then and Now*, 19.

186 Vilho Shigwedha, “The Pre-Colonial Costumes of the Aawambo: Significant Changes under Colonialism and the Construction of Post-Colonial Identity,” in *Aawambo Kingdoms, History and Cultural Change: Perspectives from Northern Namibia*, eds. Lovisa T. Nampala and Vilho Shigwedha (Basel: P. Schlettwein Publishing, 2006), 150–156.

187 Heike Becker, “Efundula Past and Present: Female Initiation, Gender and Customary Law in Northern Namibia” (paper presented at *Gender, Sexuality and Law Conference*, Keele University, Keele, UK, June 1998), 7.

188 This included wandering freely through the villages, being entitled to food at every space they enter or either mocking and beating the men. See: Becker, “Efundula Past and Present,” 7.

189 Frac Nouvelle-Aquitaine MÉCA, “Entretien Avec Tuli Mekondjo,” *YouTube*, 8 February 2021, ht tps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSvbStHQR7U.

struggle and post-independence – and yet survived.¹⁹⁰ Mekondjo is concerned with the lack of collective memory of the pre-Christian traditions and this motivates her to search for the practices and customs that were celebrated *before* Christianity.¹⁹¹ In re-enacting and embodying these cultural traditions, Mekondjo revitalises them, staging a form of reconnection to past practices and to the natural material that they incorporate (the clay).

In approaching the archival images as interlocutors, the artist restages the postmemories and cultural practices that the historical photographs allowed her to rediscover. However, accuracy and authenticity seem secondary in this endeavour. Instead, her invocation of lost traditions and memories is more committed to “projection, investment, and creation,” as is the nature of postmemories, according to Hirsch.¹⁹² In this way, Mekondjo’s work is responsive to the unreliability of both memory and photography. With a view to the latter, this becomes more graspable when casting a glance at the historical photographs used in figure 20. Reprinted in the hairstyle publication, they were originally taken by C.H.L. “Cocky” Hahn, who held the position of ‘Native Commissioner of Ovamboland’ from 1921 to 1946. He worked to ensure that traditions in Ovamboland, especially efundula, would be maintained and documented the cultural practices meticulously in order to ensure this.¹⁹³ A lot has been said about Cocky Hahn, and I do not intend to explore this character in greater depth.¹⁹⁴ Interestingly, however, he was against Christian conversion and disagreed with missionaries who were eager to abolish the efundula.¹⁹⁵ His practice of recording and photographing emerges as an attempt to both secure and preserve knowledge of vanishing traditions. However, Napandulwe Shiweda’s intriguing study on Hahn’s photographs uncovers how he composed many of his images as a way to portray the illusion of untouched, timeless traditions in idyllic, rural homelands.¹⁹⁶ Hahn instructed the people to pose in a certain way or in certain roles that were not genuinely theirs, to the point that “[s]taged photography was the order of the day.”¹⁹⁷ This context and background of his photographic practices is

190 MuAshekele et al., *Olufuko Festival*; Shigwedha, “The Pre-Colonial Costumes of the Aawambo.”

191 Mekondjo, pers. comm., via WhatsApp, 14 May 2020, emphasis mine.

192 Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 3; Hirsch, “Projected Memory,” 8.

193 Hayes, “‘Cocky’ Hahn and the ‘Black Venus,’” 5; Patricia Hayes, “Northern Exposures: The Photography of C.H.L. Hahn, Native Commissioner of Ovamboland,” in *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History*, edited by Wolfram Hartmann, Jeremy Silvester and Patricia Hayes (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1999), 171.

194 For further extensive studies on Hahn, see: Hayes, “Northern Exposures”; Hayes, “‘Cocky’ Hahn and the ‘Black Venus’”; Shiweda, *Omheddi*.

195 Hayes, “‘Cocky’ Hahn and the ‘Black Venus,’” 5.

196 Shiweda, *Omheddi*, 58.

197 *Ibid.*, 57–58.

quite revealing with regards to the fiction of photography as an unmediated reflection of reality.¹⁹⁸ Mekondjo's response to these visual fabrications offers insights into how artistic archival interventions are committed to knowledge production, rather than knowledge retrieval from archival repositories. She argues: "I am very much aware – I look at that history and I can see the people were really stylised to stand in a certain way. But for me, it's about my ancestors. I am taking these pictures and I create my own narrative."¹⁹⁹

How and where does *care* materialise in this form of archival engagement? We learn from Patricia Hayes that physical force and the production of knowledge were central to exerting colonial power.²⁰⁰ In reference to Hahn's role as Native Commissioner, she outlines in-depth how physical violence was part and parcel of how he exercised his job.²⁰¹ How, then, can we use and engage with his photographs through care? Mekondjo's response to this ethical challenge is to centre the cultural practices, dignity and beauty of the photographed subjects. And yet, in doing so, she revitalises a moment that was marked by power asymmetries and (quite likely) by violence. I am reminded here again of Saidiya Hartman's reflection on the role of narrative to fill archival gaps and to resurrect biographies of those who were historically erased, silenced and violated. She asks: "What do stories afford anyway? A way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation? A home in the world for the mutilated and violated self? For whom – for us or for them?"²⁰² We may extend this thought to artistic archival intervention and ask once again: whom does it serve? Who grants authority to re-expose, refigure, reimagine the lives of those who are locked in the archive?

Mekondjo's solution is to free her ancestors from this form of imprisonment by allowing them to reappear in a different light. Additionally, in response to the issue of authority, she exposes herself to the camera too, thereby entering into a conversation with her photographed subjects. One example for this is figure 22, in which she explores and redesigns historical postcards that she discovered at a stand in the Windhoek CBD, which usually targets tourists. The vendor was an elderly German-speaking Namibian who explained that his range of old postcards and stamps were part of his own personal collection. The prevalence and continuous circulation of this visual economy speaks to an undimmed interest and an ongoing hunger for imagery that perpetuates ethnographic modes of representing Black life. Upon this discovery, Mekondjo felt urged to purchase the postcards and claim them as part of *her own*

198 Lorena Rizzo, *Photography and History in Colonial Southern Africa*, 244.

199 Mekondjo, pers comm. via WhatsApp, 15 July 2021.

200 Hayes, "Cocky' Hahn and the 'Black Venus,'" 386.

201 Ibid., 380.

202 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 3.

archival collection, which would allow her to decide on the frameworks and conditions of their visibility.²⁰³



Figure 22: Tuli Mekondjo, Olutu Lange No-mutima Wange Owa Mangwa Mokaxwa/ My Body and Heart is Tied in a Bush, 2021. Image transfer, collage, mahangu, resin, acrylic ink, cotton fabric, and cotton embroidery threads on canvas, 219 x 91 cm (variable). Courtesy of Guns&Rain Gallery.

203 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 12 April 2023.

Neither the previous owner nor the postcards reveal information with regards to the origins of the material or the background of the photographer. For the artist, the unknown offered an opening to approach the photographed subjects as potential ancestors and to creatively interfere with the material. She transferred the postcards' imagery onto the canvas, inserted miniature photographs of herself next to them (bottom right corner in figure 22) and added further texture in the form of embroidery for the body of work that she produced for the Investec Cape Town Art Fair 2022. Her stitching of plants and stems serve as lines of connection between her avatar, the photographed subject and the figure of a baby, which is embroidered onto the extension of the canvas. Mekondjo repeatedly incorporates imagery of organs such as wombs, brains, embryos or veins into her works in order to invoke transgenerational connectedness. She argues how this allows her to represent "the essence of trauma," which is "constantly being birthed and rebirthed. And the only place in which these traumas are stored is within our bodies and within the organs we have."²⁰⁴

The sense of intergenerational connectedness is additionally evoked by the avatar's interaction with the photographed woman. While both seem to be turned to each other, the woman's upper body is directed to the camera and to the viewer – a reminder of the photographic moment in which she might have been prompted to face the photographer. I chose this piece of work as the cover image for this book because it speaks so powerfully to the central concern of this publication; namely, to interrogate how Namibian creative practitioners respond to troubling (hurtful/problematic) archives *by troubling* (as in subverting and contesting) these themselves. Inserting her own avatar into a historical setting that played out in a colonial power dynamic between the photographer and the anonymous photographed subject changes the modalities of viewing – and is thus troubling the archival order. While the act of intervening in archives is an important political move, it is also evoked here as something playful and cheeky, if we direct the attention to how Mekondjo's little avatar lifts her arms in a gesture of engagement, playfulness and confrontation. *Olotu Lange Nomutima Wange Owa Mangwa Mokaxwa/ My Body and Heart is Tied in a Bush* converts the meanings and resonances of the historical photograph as it does not foreground the question of objectification either explicitly or exclusively. What is special about this piece is that it is able to convey these heavy topics implicitly while remaining frisky at the same time – through clues such as the photographed woman's subtle smile and the depicted interaction between Mekondjo's figure and the woman. Choosing a miniature format for her avatar, the photographed woman remains the focus of attention in the work, which speaks to the artist's care and affection for her.

However, to return to the opening questions raised in the introduction to this chapter, we have to ask: what are the rules of engagement for creative archival in-

204 Ibid.

terventions? Are there any at all, or is everything allowed for artists at work in the archive? The problem in setting ethical parameters for artistic archival work is that care and empathy are deeply subjective notions. The contentions of gender activist and decolonial education scholar Wanelisa Xaba are insightful with regards to the limits and potentials of empathy and care in working with historical photographs. She argues for the need to secure “ancestral consent” for those who engage with the colonial past.²⁰⁵ This implies developing ethical methods to centre the concerns of ancestors. Xaba explains:

Ancestral consent is the belief that [...] we need consent about which stories to tell. You cannot just tell your ancestors' story as if you have ownership to their life and journey when there may be parts of their lives that require privacy. Our ancestors' lives and stories require the very same deep care, sensitivity and respect we would require from our grandchildren when they write about this current historical moment.²⁰⁶

Since there are no available background information on the historical photograph used in *Olotu Lange Nomutima Wange Owa Mangwa Mokaxwa/My Body and Heart is Tied in a Bush*, the task to secure a form of consent from her ancestors for using the specific image creatively is almost impossible to achieve for Mekondjo. However, she is actively seeking routes and methods to connect with her ancestors (i.e., by ‘channeling’ them) and to gain an understanding of their lives and situations. Spirituality is also crucial in this endeavour, as Xaba states. Another factor that speaks to Mekondjo’s deep sensibility to the issue of representational politics and consent is her decisions to insert herself into the sceneries that she creates. In this way, she turns external gazes at the self too and does not expose the photographed subject from historical images to the public eyes alone. To do so, she gets into costume, as seen in figures 21 and 22. In both instances, she is covered in white clay, wears necklaces made of leaves and skirts from sticks as well as elaborate headdresses (one resembling the traditional Herero hat, a horizontal horned headdress, the other a basket, originally a fishtrap that she bought in Rundu and found useful for her performances). In combining these elements, the artist does not follow particular dress codes for specific cultural practices. Rather, she cross-references transnational mythologies and draws from elements of Avambo culture and modern-day Namibian landscapes.

The role she assumes in costume is, as titled in a Facebook post (figure 23), that of a *kishikishi*. Mekondjo explains how, in the Oshiwambo language, *wo ma kishi* refers to Avambo oral narratives about spirits that roam around in the villages to scare the

205 Xaba, “An Awkward Dance With the Black Middle Class,” 87.

206 Ibid.

children.²⁰⁷ What fascinated her about this figure is how it re-emerges in myths of various Bantu-speaking communities (i.e., in Zambia or Angola), from which she concludes that there are cross-cultural experiences, connections across borders and shared stories to tell.²⁰⁸ Mekondjo converts the original meanings of cultural rituals and activates multidirectional memory politics by evoking these multi-dimensional and transnational references. Thinking along these lines about performative practices, Amkpa argues how performers are “deliberately subverting the sanctity of [...] mythologies,” explaining how, for stories to be useful, artists dig in the archives, but reject the laws and rules connected with the material and stories they find to create something new.²⁰⁹ Artists use their bodies to craft alternative texts and they carry these to spaces in which they previously did not appear.²¹⁰



Figure 23: Tuli Mekondjo, untitled photographs uploaded on Facebook, 3 September 2021. Caption: “modern day female kishikishi.” Courtesy of the artist.

207 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 12 July 2021.

208 Ibid.

209 Amkpa, “A State of Perpetual Becoming,” 86–87.

210 Ibid.

Reflecting on Mekondjo's approach to archival material and historical narratives elucidates how she also engages with performance to embody, re-embrace and subvert fragments from the past and grants visibility for what she conceives of as having been lost. In this way, she claims presence for her own body in spaces, sites and in fashions that have not been seen before. These notions highlight the potential of conversion through art, as opposed to more pessimistic conceptions of African artists being merely "stuck with the colonial archive," as we have discussed previously or the predicament of Black cultural practitioners continuously having to speak to "the burden of history," as Ntombela writes.²¹¹ For Mekondjo, engaging the archive and 'taming' the technology of photography are liberating acts in her artistic practice.²¹² Can archival interventions and performative photography offer the same modes of free expression for Rust?

In a selection of her more recent works, the artist edits and remodels photographs of herself as site-specific responses to certain spaces and landscapes in Namibia. Prominent in Rust's exhibitions *Roots and Branches* (2019), *Home, Land and Me* (2019) or *Schwarz—Weiss* (2021) is a recurring motif: the pieces conjure divergent formats of the artist's naked body, taken in 2013 at Spitzkoppe in the Erongo region (originally seen in figure 24). She transfers the images onto different backgrounds, painting and stitching the photocopies and linoleum prints or digitally editing the picture. In some instances, she reduces the body to its silhouette, additionally highlighting and redesigning the backdrop (figure 25).



Figure 24 (left): Imke Rust, *Höhle 1/Cave 1*, 2013. Photographic print on photo paper, 29 x 42 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 25 (right): Imke Rust, *The Comfort of the Bush*, 2019. Digital print, acetate, wool and ink on paper, 21 x 29 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

211 Art on Our Mind, "Art on Our Mind Creative Dialogue"; Ntombela, "Shifting Contexts," 91.

212 Amkpa, "Africa," 245.

What strikes the eye with regards to the broader body of work in the *Roots & Branches* or *Home, Land and Me* exhibitions is that her photographs show her in a protective posture. By way of comparison, Mekondjo (re)figured the self in a rather extroverted, subject-centred fashion (we may think here again of figure 1, copied from Mekondjo's mirror image that shows her rather explicitly naked). In an interview, Mekondjo emphasised the ease with which she modelled for her photographic interventions: "I was never shy with my body, I have always been very comfortable. It just came naturally to me to pose and take a selfie of myself and use those as references."²¹³ In contrast, we see Rust's bodily representations enmeshed and entangled with rhizomes, twigs and roots, crouching in foetal positions to partially shield the naked body from external gazes.



Figure 26: Imke Rust, *Memories of the Bush 1*, 2019. Collage and charcoal on paper, 59 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The imagery of Namibian plants and landscapes, coupled with the assumption of protective postures, once again speaks to the artist's grappling with her positionality and the sense of uprootedness. Experiencing the constant sense of not belong-

213 Mekondjo, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 12 July 2021.

ing while in Namibia, due to her family history, the artist additionally faced the challenge of building new connections and affiliations in and with Germany. The relocation made her realise, much more forcefully than ever before, how she was formed by the landscapes with which she grew up.²¹⁴ Hence, the motif of roots and the ruse to re-insert herself back into Namibian spaces allowed her to contemplate a lost home, a troubled identity and to reassert a sense of connection. We see her in the caves of Spitzkoppe (figure 24), in what appears as a farm setting with animals and trees (figure 25) or her body morphing into a bush (figure 26). With all of the sites and plants conjured in the artworks, Rust feels a deep connection that seems to be denied to her, however. She conjures her own memories and reconnects to what is inscribed and buried in the soil, the complex family and settler history, by engaging in an embodied conversation with these plants and sites. Rust further reminisces on how her decision to visualise and centre the naked body – the “trope for acute vulnerability,” as Jay Pather and Catherine Boule call it – was additionally prompted by the fact that her body had not been well after moving to Germany.²¹⁵ Being subjected to physical pain and bodily unease uncovers, once again, how corporeal experiences of spaces, uprootedness and positionality are interlocked. When Rust opens her private archives, she not only allows for personal insights onto “the most intimate space” (the naked body), but she also grants access to identity struggles, personal and family matters.²¹⁶ In this vein, she conjures a *visuality of retreat*, to borrow loosely from Lorena Rizzo.²¹⁷ Rust shifts away from broader politics to the most personal sphere. The *visuality* that she conjures centres interiority and subjectivity and they reject an alignment to broader political discourses.²¹⁸ However, there are further implications in using the naked body in performance art or performative photography that warrant attention. In an interview, the artist explains how she feels strongly and yet ambivalently about nudity as artistic expression:

When you are naked you are very vulnerable, and it shows even more your skin colour which has always been this issue. So, on the one side, nakedness shows a big vulnerability, but on the other side I realised as well that it is our most natural

214 Rust, pers. comm., 30 September 2020.

215 Jay Pather and Catherine Boule (eds.), *Acts of Transgression: Contemporary Live Art in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019), 1.

216 Rust, pers. comm., 30 September 2020.

217 In her study of photography from the late 1930s taken by German women, Rizzo analyses how politics and ideologies manifest themselves aesthetically and argues how the images centre the family's privacy, intimacy and farm worlds as a way to “elude any overt absorption into the political hegemony of late 1930s propaganda,” see: Rizzo, *Photography and History in Colonial Southern Africa*, 119. And Rizzo, “Seeing Through Whiteness,” 147–148.

218 Ibid.

state. So, it has become the double meaning. And it is also a very powerful image to present my body as a naked body and say: 'Here I am, and here I stand.'²¹⁹

We are reminded of this assertive aspect in the act of publicly staging nudity when revisiting Rust's *Verwurzlungsversuch1* (figure 3) and with a view to the piece *Verwurzlungsversuch2* (figure 27), in which the artist discards the restrained postures and reveals the naked body more overtly to the viewer.



Figure 27: Imke Rust, *Verwurzlungsversuch 2*, 2019. Collage, charcoal and forestry marker on paper, 59 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Reflecting on these works against the backdrop of the prevalent (and, as some argue, over-excessive) use of the naked body in performance art elucidates how it not only functions as a trope of vulnerability but, more importantly, acts as a transgressive element and ruse for provocation.²²⁰ With regards to its potential for transgres-

219 Rust, pers. comm., 30 September 2020.

220 Pather and Boule, *Acts of Transgression*, 1; Mary Katharine Tramontana, "Skin in the Game: Is Live Artistic Nudity More than Titillation?" *The Guardian*, 3 December 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/dec/03/artists-nudity-mischa-badasyan-deborah-de-robotis-nona-faustine>.

sion, Portia Malatjie reminds us that “historically it was white men who gazed at the white female nude,” and, for decades, women artists have been pushing back against men’s fetishisation and idealisation of their bodies in what has ever since been debated as “the male gaze.”²²¹ Reflecting on the struggle to claim power over representational politics and self-representation, from a feminist perspective, nudity was a means to counter masculine traditions.²²² Even today, women (particularly Black artists) work against oppressive visual regimes and turn to embodied performances to set and choose the modes in which their bodies are represented.²²³

Following this line of thought, Andrew Mulenga argues how, “in performance or live art, the body has increasingly become an integral component for addressing complex social subjects, particularly by tackling stereotypes and legacies of representation.”²²⁴ We witness a similar impulse in Rust’s work. In enacting restrained postures, she recalibrates the power dynamics of representational politics. Rust’s method to acknowledge the complex role that she inhabits in German and Namibian spaces prompts an exchange of values and meanings inscribed in both: the imagery of the self and the implications of representing landscapes through the ‘white lens.’ Makhubu has intriguingly shown how performance photography engages with an “oscillation in meanings of disempowerment and empowerment” and, in a similar mode, Rust’s designs convert the visibility of ‘white’ bodies in control of space with an aesthetic that evokes vulnerability.²²⁵ And yet, the paradox of nudity as vulnerable and transgressive is not resolved. It remains as a powerful ambivalence that resonates with the viewer.²²⁶ The artist’s performative photography does not aspire to play into the sexual, sensational or erotic themes that nudity in the arts traditionally aims to provoke. Instead, a sense of sadness prevails. We see this in the example

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- 221 LP Malatjie, “Framing the Artwork of Tracey Rose and Berni Searle through Black Feminism” (Master’s thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2011), 53. The concept of the male gaze has been coined by Laura Mulvey. See: Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1 September 1975): 6–18; Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- 222 Carolee Schneemann quoted in Tramontana, “Skin in the Game.”
- 223 Brandt, *Landscapes Between Then and Now*, xix; Malatjie, “Framing the Artwork of Tracey Rose and Berni Searle through Black Feminism,” 53.
- 224 Andrew M. Mulenga, “Does Overexposure of the Black Female Body Draw It Closer to a Sell-by Date?” *Rhodes University* (blog), 23 August 2018, <https://www.ru.ac.za/artsofafrica/writing/outputs/writingreviewsthinkpieces/doesoverexposureoftheblackfemalebodydrawitclosetoasell-bydate/>.
- 225 Makhubu, “Visual Currencies,” 229.
- 226 With regards to the transgression, I am drawing on Pather and Boulle who evoke the term’s multiple meanings, such as “the transgression of boundaries between the aesthetic and the political, performativity and everyday acts, as well as the inclusions and exclusions of archive,” and they also refer to the “provocativeness” of live and performance art. See: *Acts of Transgression*, 10.

of figure 27, in which the avatar is engaged in the heavy labour of growing bloody roots into the ground and shouldering branches as lines of connection. These evocations show how, in expanding the matriarchive and generating alternative photographic and multi-media repositories to those she inherited, Rust creates artworks that call for empathetic approaches. Her performative archival interventions speak to the viewers' emotions, not only by exposing private histories and memories, but by centring on larger societal phenomena: the search for a home and grounding, identity crises and longing for acceptance.

2.6: Conclusion

In "Constituting an Archive," Stuart Hall writes:

Archives are not inert historical collections. They always stand in an active, dialogic, relation to the questions which the present puts to the past; and the present always puts its questions differently from one generation to another.²²⁷

The analysis of selected artworks by Tuli Mekondjo and Imke Rust has shown how the connections and ruptures between generations impact the archive's uses and functions. Both artists turn to inherited archival photographs to critically interrogate chapters in history that preceded them as well as memories that are not their own (postmemories). In their creative interference with the material, they add their personal projections onto the images to make the distortions in contemporary memory practices visible and proffer different routes of remembering in the endeavour to find healing. Both women share an interest in photographic archives as windows to the past and as access points to the intergenerational traumas with which they struggle. In addition to family pictures from their mothers and grandmothers, they draw on memories, cultural practices and knowledges that were passed down to them matrilineally, across generations. With reference to Uhuru Portia Phalafala, we have seen how the artists' matriarchives are exilic, migratory, scattered and 'living'.²²⁸ As part of their creative practices, the artists recompose the fragments that they find, renegotiate and expand the repositories in the process. In this vein, Rust and Mekondjo approach their inherited matriarchives as resources for continuous interference and alternative knowledge production, instead of mere knowledge retrieval.²²⁹

227 Stuart Hall, "Constituting an Archive," *Third Text* 15, no. 54 (March 2001): 92.

228 The term 'living' invokes Hall's theory on archives as discursive and dynamic formations again. *Ibid.*, 89.

229 Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," 87.

Drawing on Nomusa Makhubu's theory of visual currencies elucidated how the artists' archival interventions do not aim at factual historical recuperation. Rather, they are committed to contestation and exchange. They engage in practices of meaning conversion with regards to representational and commemorative politics by layering, transferring, stitching, covering and altering the photographs. In the case of Mekondjo, this implies translating diverse traumatic (post)memories from various eras into the present to exchange one-dimensional commemorative approaches for more nuanced, subjective ones. Moreover, her work with historical photographs from the colonial era trades visual signifiers of the 'ethnographic' or 'colonial gaze' with aesthetics that accentuate the photographed subject's pride, grace and dignity. In this way, she is "converting the visual currency of colonial imagery."²³⁰ The effect is a disruption of the power dynamics associated with historical photographs from so-called 'colonial archives.' A central predicament to such archives is that the large majority of photographs taken by Europeans and that they house are not accessible to Africans, a condition to which Mekondjo responds by claiming the right to exhibit the images and to define the means of representation of the photographed subjects.²³¹ In doing so, she approaches the photographed women as possible ancestors. Her ethics of care are devoted to them and to the restoration of their subjectivity.²³² However, while cherishing, securing and celebrating her ancestors' lives is a driving motif and ethical commitment in Mekondjo's work, Wanelisa Xaba's reflection on "ancestral consent" has shown that confirmation or approval to represent and reimagine the stories of the photographed subjects through art is impossible to obtain. The issue of reconnecting with ancestral legacies is equally intricate in the case of Rust due to her positionality as a 'white' Namibian artist. Rust uses her practice to negotiate the difficulty of feeling empathy for her ancestors, openly expressing a sense of ancestral connection or to claiming belonging to the country of her birth as a 'white' Namibian. Similar to Mekondjo, albeit with different foci, Rust's archival interventions challenge representational politics. As a way to navigate her implication in colonial histories, she disrupts traditional codes of representing family life (by interfering with her grandmother's logic of archiving family photographs) and re-positions herself in Namibian spaces by questioning the power dynamics of representing 'white' bodies and landscapes. Rust, much like Mekondjo, turns to her own

230 Makhubu, "Visual Currencies," 243.

231 Amkpa, "Africa," 245.

232 Memory Biwa's reading of embodied practices and vocal performances in Namibia understands such endeavours as practices to "rematerialize[...] bodies as subjects, as ancestors." See: Memory Biwa, "Afterlives of Genocide: Return of Human Bodies from Berlin to Windhoek, 2011," in *Memory and Genocide: On What Remains and the Possibility of Representation*, edited by Fazil Moradi, Ralph Buchenhorst and Maria Six-Hohenbalken (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 99.

naked body, performance art and photography as media for expression and meaning conversion.

In a way, both artists' works oscillate between notions of assertiveness and longing. Their visual vocabulary of arboreal symbolism and their diverse references to Namibian landscape and to nature repeatedly accentuate the impossibility of growing roots and the tragedy of unattained rootedness. At the same time, Rust and Mekondjo insert themselves into their works by means of *asserting* a place for themselves in Namibian visual cultures. In this vein, they produce their own matriarchives that attest to past and present traumas, unfinished histories and troubling memories that linger on, calling for future engagement by generations to come.

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:

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- 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 'multi-directional 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/ovizire-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 Archive⁵

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 Otjherero 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.

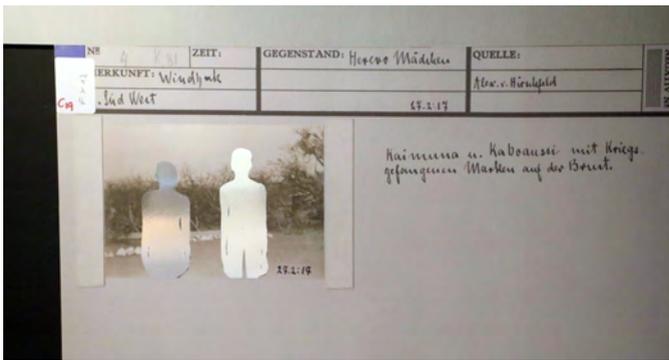


Figure 2: Vitjitua Ndjiharine, *Ikono Wall/Mirrored Reality* (detail), 2018. Courtesy of UHH/Schliehe.

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. Kaboussi 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 interlocutors 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 pOmu dhime (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 pOmu dhime (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 Omudhime”), 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 re-designed 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: Vititua 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 Ndjiharine’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 scabbling 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 re-framing 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=psV9Do9Swho>; 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 constructors 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: Vitjitia 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 Shigwedha 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. Shigwedha 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, Shigwedha 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 Muinjangué 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 #CallowsMustFall, #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

Muinjangué'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=vzbh81qTvNg>.

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

139 *Ibid.*

140 Mofokeng, *TAXI-004*, 68.

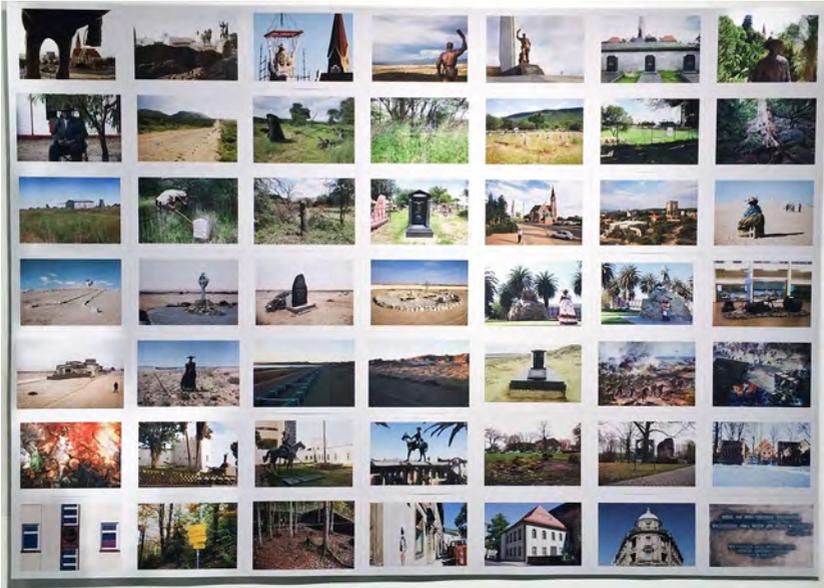


Figure 11: Nicola Brandt, *Changing Histories*, 2008-ongoing. Installation view: *Windhoek*, 2019. Photograph by Julia Rensing. Courtesy of the artist.

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). Ndjiharine 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 Rubber tree*:

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 pOmu dhime* 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 observes 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 under-represented 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-denkezeichen/digital-exhibition/unbound/>.

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

182 See for example: fernsicht im iz3w, "Post-Koloniales Namibia von Vitjitia 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 so, 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.

Chapter 4: Frauenstein: The ‘Sinister Resonances’ of a Place and its Inhabitants¹

“How much can we reduce what happened to what is said to have happened? Does it matter whether events are fact or fiction? [...] What does it mean for our collective experiences? Do we even wish for a common history?”

— *Raoul Peck*²

“Something may in fact have happened, but [...] we can never be sure of it or gain access to it, [...] the best we can do is to fabricate metaphors – that is, tell stories – in which, not history, but imaginings of history are invented. Myth may have preceded history, but in the long run it may well be the only guarantee for the survival of history.”

— *André Brink*³

There are about 100 personal letters, 200 photographs and numerous postcards, papers and other snippets in a family estate (as well as many more documents in public archives) that offer insight into the life of Lisbeth Dömski, a woman from Berlin who emigrated to German South-West Africa (GSWA) in 1898 and who settled on a farm named Frauenstein near Windhoek. Only six years later, this place – her home – would become a central setting in the very early days of the war between the Herero (and later Nama) and German colonial occupiers, beginning in January 1904. Then, there is another narrative – a fictional (or *fictionalised*) account of a character named Hanna X. She is the protagonist of André Brink’s novel *The Other Side of Silence* (2001), who travelled to the colony in the early 20th century and resided

1 I would like to thank the group of the research colloquium “Aktuelle Forschungen zur Geschichte Afrikas” by Julia Tischler and the participants in the workshop “Knowledge Re-Creation” 2022 in Windhoek for the helpful feedback on this chapter.

2 *Exterminate All the Brutes*, season 1, episode 2, “Who the F*** Is Columbus,” dir. Raoul Peck, aired 2021 on HBO; see also page 210 and 284 in this book.

3 André Brink, “Stories of History: Reimagining the Past in Post-Apartheid Narrative,” in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, eds. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998), 42; see also pages 210, 270 and 290 in this book.

at a place called Frauenstein. In the author's words, the place in his book is an "asylum to those women transported to the colony for the support or delectation of its menfolk, and then turned down. [...] Prison, convent, madhouse, poorhouse, brothel, ossuary, a promontory of hell; but also asylum, retreat and final haven."⁴

My encounter with the biographical fragments, as they emerge from the private archive of Lisbeth Dömski, was a lucky coincidence because I was entrusted with her family estate through a distant relative of hers and the friend of my former employer and professor at the University of Freiburg. The first tentative viewing of the historical material already resonated strongly with me. With the predominance of the name Frauenstein as a recurring address or topic of concern in the letters and documents, I immediately drew a connection to the story by South African author Brink in his dark and brutal book. This chapter is an attempt to find answers to the question of how we can read, engage with or understand *both* stories of this mysterious, fictionalised and yet existing place, Frauenstein, and the women who lived (or who were imagined to have lived) there. My point of entry is a set of questions: is one place factual and the other not? Is one biography 'true'? Can it be reconstructed based on archival research, while the other cannot be historically grounded?

I will argue that reading both stories in conjunction with one another offers access to the construction of history as such and to the blending of fact and fiction, to which Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck and author Brink have pointed in the epigraphs. This case study is an attempt to reconstruct the history of a place and its inhabitants based on what research can bring to the surface, thereby highlighting how these excavated elements are multifaceted: they vary from mythical and propaganda stories to oral narratives and diverse archival fragments that circulated – and continue to circulate – in relation to Frauenstein.

As the conceptual approach to cross-examine the lives of Lisbeth Dömski and Hanna X, I will gear my analysis to their stories' *resonances*. For my interrogation of the various relations, tensions and interconnections between both narratives, I take my cue from Julie Beth Napolin's book, *The Fact of Resonance: Modernist Acoustics and Narrative Form*, in which she proposes a study of the sonic materiality of resonance in modernist novels. Napolin's practice of "writing of, thinking with, and listening to resonance" elucidates the affective dimension of literature that may be sensed, but which cannot always be readily localised.⁵ Resonances, thus, are the clues, feelings and thoughts that puzzle us, touch and stay with us after reading a novel or after hearing a story. They are the connections that we make to lived experiences, to happenings which we remember or to other stories that we know about. Interrogating such resonances in greater depth serves to elucidate the relation between things, worlds, literary passages, historical events et cetera. Napolin explains:

4 André Brink, *The Other Side of Silence* (London: Vintage, 2003), 11–12. First published 2001.

5 Napolin, *The Fact of Resonance*, 4, 12.

Resonance would seem to be the primary basis of comparatism, of the comparatist impulse – what it means to say that one passage relates to another. We lack a critical vocabulary for the affective substance of that experience. We say that passages or works 'resonate' when the reasons for their return or hold on us and on each other are difficult to demonstrate.⁶

For my analysis of Dömski's and Hanna X's stories, I follow this comparatist impulse – like Napolin, I am interested in the "modality of [their] relation."⁷ Resonance is more than mere association, given that it is based on affect and in a way imposes itself on us. Perhaps we may understand resonance in a fashion similar to Barthes' *punctum* – as that element "which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)," as a notion we see, perceive, or sense strongly.⁸ In my reading, I understand it to be a connection that cannot be easily named – a material or concrete relation that strikes us as unexpected, illogical but powerful. Resonances may be unlikely, delightful connections, but they can also be sombre. In this respect, the concept of "sinister resonance" that Napolin introduces is particularly relevant for the purpose of this chapter.⁹ It helps me to access both the uncomfortable echoes of colonialism and the eerie reverberations of history that resound in the present – both in relation to painful chapters in the life of Lisbeth Dömski as well as in the dark narrative of Hanna X and Frauenstein.

My structure for cross-examining the resonances between Lisbeth Dömski's and Hanna X's narratives in this chapter is as follows: first, a brief summary introduces the gist of Brink's *The Other Side of Silence* with a focus on the biography of Hanna X. This is followed by an account of my contact with and the travels of Lisbeth Dömski's family estate. In the subsequent case study, I retrace the various surfacings of Dömski's life and of her home, Frauenstein, as they emerge from diverse archives, including from her own private collections and from public archives in South Africa, Namibia and Switzerland as well as alternative sources that I encountered during my research. My interest in this project of recuperation lies less in writing a 'colonial biography,' but instead in understanding the role of the archive and historical research in constructing a narrative of life and place. However, at the level of content, following Dömski's and Frauenstein's traces in resonance with Brink's book also teaches us about the lives of two individuals (Dömski and Hanna X) and the ways in which they were implicated in complex racialised, gendered and class-determined social formations and political landscapes in Germany and (G)SWA.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980), 27.

9 Julie Beth Napolin, "A Sinister Resonance: Vibration, Sound, and the Birth of Conrad's Marlow" *Qui Parle* 21, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2013): 69–100.

In my presentation of the research, the ‘historical’ accounts and oral narratives evolving around Dömski are interspersed with passages from *The Other Side of Silence* to explore their sinister connections and raise questions about the nature of their resonances. My analysis then moves to a final subchapter that assesses Brink’s practice of literary writing, based on archival research and fictionalisation as potential acts of contestation. I close this case study by revisiting the most vibrant echoes between the women’s lives and the multifaceted traces of a fictional, and yet existing, place. This permits me to distil the lessons that resonances teach us about the construction of colonial ‘history’ and opens new paths for knowledge production at the intersection of literature, cultural studies and historical research.

4.1: Brink’s *Frauenstein* and The Protagonist Hanna X

The Other Side of Silence recounts the tragic story of Hanna X, an orphan girl born in Germany who, in 1902 (approximately in her early 20s), emigrates to GSWA.¹⁰ She is in search of a place for herself in a hostile, patriarchal world. At the orphanage ‘Kinder Jesu’ in Bremen, and while working as a maid in numerous families in Germany thereafter, Hanna X experiences sexualised violence, injustice and exploitation. Some of these stations would become the first of Hanna X’s so-called “several deaths.”¹¹ However, the climax of violence awaits her in the German colony, as well as in the interim. It is particularly in the in-between worlds – on the ship from Bremen to Swakopmund and on the train from Swakopmund to Windhoek – where men’s brutality knows no boundaries. German soldiers ‘use’ and approach women’s bodies as if they are commodities. Resistance is hardly possible, or only at great cost, as the fate of Hanna X shows. On the train to Windhoek, she meets Hauptmann Heinrich Böhlke, who attempts to rape her. Hanna fights back, struggling to escape, and eventually she bites into her violator’s genitals. In response to this act of resistance, the men’s revenge is merciless: Hanna is abused, mutilated, her body is desecrated. She is muzzled, silenced: her tongue is cut out.

Hanna X survives, but is forever incapable of speaking for herself and of telling her story. Her name and the ways in which her fate unfolds are nods to the historical and structural discrimination of women – the silencing of women’s voices. The consequence for Hanna is that her story must be told *for* her. At the level of the plot, this is being performed by her young friend Katja, who becomes her translator and soulmate. However, hovering over this is the voice of the narrator, who encounters the fragments of Hanna’s story in archival repositories and who takes responsibility

10 Brink’s narrator estimates Hanna at around 20–25 years old or maximum 30 at her time of departure (Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 6).

11 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 8.

for recounting her experiences in order to trace her life as far as possible so as to give her an air of justice or recognition. According to him (we know that it is a male narrator), the larger silences of the archive make the imagination of the rest of her life inevitable, suggesting that, within his fictional narrative, there are fragments of 'truths' and facts the readers encounter.

After her martyrdom, Hanna is dumped on an ox wagon and transported to Frauenstein, "that out-of-reach place everyone has heard about but no one wants to see, the prison, the nunnery, the brothel, the shithouse, Frauenstein."¹² This is the place where the unwanted women, "the ultimately rejected, found unworthy by even the most disreputable of men," wound up.¹³ Again, Hanna survives. Her fate in Frauenstein seems sealed. She tries to leave several times, but always returns; there is no place for her in the desert colony. However, once her newfound friend Katja is harassed by one of the visiting soldiers, Hanna's urge to resist and her desire for revenge flare up. Hanna X herself becomes a perpetrator in order to protect Katja. She kills Katja's violator, and this act heralds her revenge mission. Together, Katja and Hanna set off through the desert and on to Windhoek. On the journey, their army grows as they meet other marginalised, oppressed and violated people – Herero, Khoekhoegowab and Oshiwambo speakers along with a German woman – who suffered under the German colonial and patriarchal regime. However, despite their joint forces, the army's power remains only symbolic in the face of colonialism's oppressive apparatus.

In the end, Hanna faces her tormentor, Böhlke, alone. After the years of humiliation, in which her body was abused and in which she was constantly looked at with disgust and shock by everyone whom she met, Hanna reverses her gaze to her nemesis. In an act of triumph, she forces him to wander naked through the streets of Windhoek under the eyes of colonial officials and the city's inhabitants (whether this is a dream or 'reality,' we do not know). With this act, Hanna reclaims a sense of power; however, there is no final consolation. How her story ends in the colonial world is left untold and remains uncertain.

How can we set this fictional story in relation to the fragmented, reconstructed biography of another woman who happened to live in a place that was equally named Frauenstein? We might begin by directing our attention to a resonance that prompted André Brink to construct his story. In the article, "In Search of Frauenstein," Brink speaks about the background of *The Other Side of Silence*:

Somewhere in the eighties, if not in the seventies already, George Weideman sent me a cutting from the Namibian newspaper, *Die Republikein*, in which Jan Spies wrote about the women who were shipped from Germany to Duitswes in the late

12 Ibid., 283.

13 Ibid., 12.

19th century and early in the 20th, to fulfil the carnal needs of the Schutztruppe and a handful of early colonists. I was particularly moved by the part of the story dealing with the transport of the women from Swakopmund to Windhoek, and the fate of the few unfortunates who were rejected by all the men.¹⁴

Studying the vast archival material that Brink consulted for his book for many months, I was able to locate the exact newspaper article written by Spies (figure 1). The Afrikaans text translates as follows:

Clean Cargo to the land of soldiers

[...] A soldier needed more than a gun and dry rusks, it was decided one day and shiploads of women were brought from Germany to this unknown African country as young girls to tame a country at the side of Schutztruppe-men.

One after another steamship's human cargo was brought to the pier where lonely soldiers gathered in anticipation of a woman companion that could help share the heat.

The official meeting place for man and woman was at the old station and from there they could find, exchange and try out each other. They had time for this for over five days because that is the duration of the train journey from Swakopmund to Windhoek at that time.

Women who were still without a soldier after the five days were brought to the farm Frauenstein outside of Windhoek where they waited for their knight on a white horse.¹⁵

Again, this newspaper article conjures up more questions than it answers. As a work of non-fiction, can the journalistic text automatically be conceived of as factual? In my discussion on narrative construction towards the end of this chapter, we will explore this and related questions in connection with Brink's mode of knowledge production in greater depth. This alleged "fact of resonance" – to use Napolin's words – prompted me to think more deeply about the practice of historical research, the labour of fiction writing and the suggestive nature of archives.¹⁶ With these thoughts in mind, following the traces of Lisbeth Dömski and studying the 449 archival units that make up the family estate, pushed me to critically interrogate the potentials and pitfalls of (re)writing a life narrative based on archival research.

14 André Brink, "In Search of Frauenstein," *By*, archived copy of the article (26 April 2008), 14–15.

15 Jan Spies, "Skone Vragte Na Land van Soldaat," *Die Republikein*, 7 March 1984, trans. Dominique Wnuczek-Lobaczewski.

16 Napolin, *The Fact of Resonance*.

**Skone vragte na
land van soldaat**
DIE REPUBLIKEIN, 9/13/84

DIT was in die tyd van die Schutztruppe rondom die laaste eeuwisseling dat die Swakopmundse pier 'n ankerplek vir 'n nuwe seslag geword het — en die begin van romans in die barre woestyn.

'n Soldaat het meer as net 'n geweer en droë beskuit nodig, is op 'n dag besluit en skeepsvragte vroue is van Duitsland na hierdie onbekende Afrika-land gebring om as jong meisies aan die sy van Schutztruppe-mans 'n land te tem.

Een ná die ander stoomskip se mensevrag is na die pier gebring waar, eensame soldate saamgedrom het in afwagting op 'n vrou-dingetjie wat die hitte kon help deel.

Die amptelike ontmoetingsplek vir man en vrou was die ou stasie en daarvandaan kon hulle mekaar vind, omruil en uitprobeer. Vyf dae het hulle hiervoor tyd gehad, want dit is hoe lank die treinreis destyds van Swakopmund na Windhoek geduur het.

Vroue wat ná die vyf dae nog sonder 'n soldateman was, is na die plaas Frauenstein buite Windhoek gebring waar hulle op ridders van die wit perde gewag het.

Dit was egter nie net op Swakopmund waar vroue aan land gebring is nie; dit

het ook in Lüderitzbucht gebeur, waar 'n groot verrassing op die skoonhede gewag het.

Hierdie vroue was meestal onder die indruk dat Suidwes 'n woestynland is met pragtige palmome om lawende oases.

Gewoonlik het hulle met die afklim in Lüderitz al gevra waar die palmome dan is. Maar die vrae is netjies deur die manne omseil.

"'n Entjie verder," was die standaard-antwoord.

Op Kolmanskop waar die eerste uitspanplek was, wou die vroue weer weet waar die groenigheid dan is.

"Steeds 'n ent verder. Ons woon nie hier nie," het die manne geantwoord.

Op Pomona is dieselfde vraag gevra, maar die manne het ook nie daar gewoon nie.

Op Elizabethbucht, die eindpunt van alle eendes, was dit afklim en voor die vroue weer oor palmome kon uitvra, is hulle die koel huise binnegelei.

Op die mure van die slaapkamers is groot, geil, groen palmome geskild.

**BRIDGE-INN
TAKE-AWAYS**

Soek u -

**KWALITEIT
REDELIKE PRYSE
ONDERVINDING
VARS PRODUKTE**

*As die antwoord JA is,
besoek ons nou*

↓

Spesialiste in

**VETKOEK
HAMBURGERS
GEBRAAIDE HOENDERS**

asook

**FUN GAMES
VJR OUD EN JONK!**

EEN BLOK OP VAN DIE KAAI
TWEË BLOKKE AF
VAN STRANDHUISE!

Brückenstraat, Swakopmund

Tel. 2468

15 9 1

**Presopis
se
herkoms**

DIE indringer-presopis-bome wat deur baie Suidwesters verfoei word, se geskiedenis loop saam met dié van Swakopmund, se oom Charlie Gürtel.

Saam met die perde en muile wat vir die Schutztruppe op die kUSDorp aan wal gebring is, het ook hul voer gekom en dié waar die presopis-saadjies geskui het — 'n ewel wat saam met die perde en muile uit Argentinië ingevoer is.

Figure 1: Jan Spies, "Skone Vragte Na Land van Soldaat," Die Republikein, 7 March 1984, mss_2006_21_1_2_9. Courtesy of Amazwi, South African Museum of Literature and Karina Brink.

4.2: Background: The Journey of an Archive

My point of contact with the family estate came through an unlikely inquiry by Allan Williams, who reached out to my former doctoral supervisor at the University of Freiburg, Germany. At that time (2018), Williams, an Anglican priest, was about to move to the small island of St. Helena to work there in St. Matthew's Parish. Aged 65 at that time, he had been in the possession of an army trunk with family memorabilia, letters, documents and photographs that he had inherited from his mother and that he had safeguarded for almost 50 years. He was searching for a solution on what to do with the material. When he learnt from his friend Prof. Dr. Hochbruck that I was doing research on German-Namibian history in the framework of my dissertation, they agreed that sending the historical material to me would be a reasonable alternative to disposing of it, mindful of its possible value to others. Williams described to me how the letters, photographs and documents "by and large mean nothing to us," referring to himself and his sister.¹⁷ This was because the siblings had lost their parents at an early age. Their death left them in the possession of relics attesting to a family history of which both had little understanding. William's mother, Erika Flora Wöhler, had been the one archiving, documenting and storing the material in the army trunk. She died in a tragic car accident in 1970. Due to this unforeseeable event, the material was in disorder and was almost impossible for her orphaned children to decipher.¹⁸ Nevertheless, when they were young, Williams and his sister would sometimes explore the trunk's content, aiming to reconnect with the deceased. In this act, they would add to the disorder of the material. In an interview via Zoom, Williams explained, while switching between English and German, that:

From time to time, we would go through the trunk just looking for family artefacts. Asking, you know, who are we? Where did we come from? What did mummy do? Wo sind Mammis Freunde? Wer sind sie? Wo sind sie? Wie heißen sie?¹⁹

His words resonate with Teju Cole's contemplation on the functions of objects in relation to memory and their potential to "remind us of what was and no longer is" as well as to grant "some kind of solace."²⁰ While the material might have provided an air of reconnection with the past as children, Williams lost this sense of attachment

17 Allan Williams, pers. comm. via Zoom, 19 October 2020.

18 This is additionally complicated by the fact that a large bulk of the letters are written in the German 'Kurrentschrift.'

19 Williams, pers. comm. via Zoom, 19 October 2020.

20 Cole, *Known and Strange Things*, 143.

to the material in later years. Realising that he neither knew the names nor recognised the faces in the estate, he was ready to pass the material on to me when his move was imminent. The transfer occurred in different batches. The first two convolutes of letters and photographs arrived in October 2018. Months later, single scans of temporarily 'lost' letters and photographs would resurface either in St. Helena or Cape Town and were sent as digital copies to me over the course of 4 years. The dispersed and reassembled character of this private archive is a central characteristic of all archives. As critical archival studies have shown, the idea of archives consisting of organised, structured and enclosed repositories of knowledge prevails, while the opposite is the case.²¹

Disorder and arbitrariness also struck me as defining notions of this particular private archive. The estate is comprised of a multitude of personal documents from Erika Wöhler such as ID cards, graduation certificates, passport photographs, etc – all of them entirely unordered. However, the bulk of material includes the private possessions of Lisbeth Dömski, which had been passed on to Wöhler after her death. For many months of my research, the women's connection remained opaque to me and Williams was also unable to retrace it. In our conversations, he often stressed how knowledge of family history was largely inaccessible to him, having lost his mother at the age of 17, at a time when details about family genealogy had not yet been shared.²² However, he could recall vague memories about a great aunt from South-West Africa (SWA), whom his mother had visited – a trip that would partially become Wöhler's motivation to migrate to South Africa.

Born in 1920 in Neu-Haldesleben near Magdeburg, Wöhler's family ran a lucrative food import-export business, which offered opportunities for her to travel abroad. After her graduation, the family encouraged Wöhler to visit a great-aunt in SWA in 1939, at the young age of 19.²³ The experience would leave a lasting impression on her, as Williams recounts, knowing that his mother always loved SWA. Wöhler had to return home after the outbreak of the Second World War; the exact circumstances and travel routes she took remain unknown. Back in Germany, Wöhler studied medicine and later worked in the Russian Zone as a nurse.²⁴ After the war, in 1950, she replied to an advertisement for nurses placed by the South African Union government, got accepted and moved to Pretoria, where she would eventually settle, marry and start her family.²⁵ Wöhler upheld her connection to SWA and visited a few times. In relation to narratives around these travels, Williams recalls overhearing the name "Frau Otto" (and Lisbeth Dömski would later be called Lisbeth

21 Hamilton, "Archive and Public Life," 129.

22 Williams, pers. comm. via email, 22 October 2018.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_402.

Otto) as a child, remembering that it was said that she had survived the war from 1904 to 1908.²⁶

The only surfacing in the estate that directly speaks to this connection is a letter by a woman called “Käte,” who writes to Wöhler that Mrs. Otto had been to a hospital, is growing tired of life and wishes to die.²⁷ With joint efforts, Käte and other actors from Swakopmund and Windhoek were helping Mrs. Otto to relocate to a renovated retirement home in Windhoek (presumably the Susanne Grau Heim).²⁸ As part of the relocation process, Käte had taken it upon herself to ensure that Mrs. Otto’s personal belongings – diaries, photos and old records – were kept safe, with the effect that today, more than 60 years after her death, the (partially over) 120-year-old documents are still preserved.²⁹ The circumstances under which the material finally came to Wöhler in Pretoria remain unclear. However, on the basis of research into different archives, genealogical platforms and forums, I was able to retrace the family tree of both families and this helped to identify their connection. The point of contact between Erika Wöhler and Lisbeth Otto was through Otto’s first husband, Moritz Pilet, who had died during the outbreak of the genocidal war, as we will learn in more detail in the following subchapter. Wöhler’s great-grandmother (Sophie Erika Freytag née Hartje, 1870–1922) was the daughter of Moritz Pilet’s uncle (Ernst Wilhelm Hartje, 1840–1917).³⁰ Presumably, Wöhler used these (rather distant) family contacts to help to facilitate her journey abroad. There is only little direct ‘evidence’ (in the form of correspondences, for instance) of a strong bond between the women; however, the fact that Wöhler was contacted at a time of crisis indicates that she took responsibility for her distant relative, which is again emphasised by the fact that she kept Mrs. Otto’s private belongings.

The process of researching the women’s connection has been insightful with regards to questions about how biographical reconstruction is affected by both gender and archival practices. One challenge that I faced during my investigations was how name changes and spellings complicate the retrieval of information. Archival practices of categorisation and indexing make it difficult to anticipate the different ways in which a person’s life is attested in the repositories. There are a myriad versions of Lisbeth Otto’s name, for instance: I found entries in archival lists with her maiden name, varying from Liesbeth Dömsky, Elisabeth Doemski, Lisbeth Dömski, to Doemsky or Dörnisky and it is most likely that numerous additional versions have

26 Williams, pers. comm. via email, 22 October 2018.

27 It is likely that the author is Käte B.von Quitzow (born Katharina Bertha Schultheiss), one of his mother’s only close friends from Windhoek, whose name Allan Williams remembered.

28 StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_047.

29 Ibid.

30 Heiratseintrag vom Standesamt Magdeburg-Altstadt, Reg.-Nr. 1034/1889; Williams, pers. comm. via email, 20 April 2020; shared scan “family tree;” Stadtarchiv Magdeburg, Sterbereg., 1874–1950.

slipped by undetected. After 1899, we then find other combinations of Lisbeth, Elisabeth or Liesbeth with the newly acquired surname Pilet. The same occurred after her second marriage in 1910, when she assumed the surname Otto. Following the most frequent spellings in the sources, I will refer to her as Lisbeth Dömski when speaking about her life from 1878 to 1899, then to Lisbeth Pilet for the period between 1899 to 1904 and, finally, will refer to her as Lisbeth Otto for the time frame from 1910 onwards.

Retracing the family lines to identify the intersection of Wöhler and Otto similarly implied retrieving the maiden names of their aunts, mothers and grandmothers. This hurdle elucidates the ways in which societies' gender norms impact on how subjectivity is attended to in state records as well as in broader archival repositories. In Germany, the Civil Code of 1896 stipulated that women had to take their husband's name when they married; this rule was only revoked with the marriage reform of 1976.³¹ Having been socialised in Germany, Wöhler, Otto and their relatives followed this model. This norm has implications with regards to claims to and the traceability of a person's identity, experiences and history.³² In the archives, this translates to the loss of women's biographical traces, impacting heavily on how archival documents can function as sources to learn about their lives.

To counteract this, I followed diverse routes and sources while delving deep into Wöhler's and Otto's private material. In fact, it was spread all over my bedroom, and I started designing a family tree that covered my wall in order to structure and to understand the biographical details that surfaced from the archives. This entangling of private, public and professional realms would continue further. Many of the letters addressed to Mrs. Otto were written in the old German script ("deutsche Kurrentschrift") that I was largely unable to read. A former librarian from the University of Freiburg, Frauke Vrba, volunteered to help me. For months, we would meet weekly and Vrba would read the letters while I transcribed the text simultaneously. We were often constructing 'knowledge' by filtering and selecting information through our limited and subjective perspectives while trying to understand the histories hidden in the documents.

During my engagement with the material, I grew more wary of the labour that I was conducting, playing detective in somebody else's history, filing, ordering and restructuring the delicate material and documents that were (at times) so fragile that they would nearly break apart in my hands. In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricœur writes: "The document sleeping in the archives is not just silent, it is an orphan. The testimonies it contains are detached from the authors who 'gave birth' to

31 Mareike Nieberding, "Heiraten: Behaltet eure Namen," *Die Zeit*, 12 February 2018, <https://www.zeit.de/zeit-magazin/leben/2018-01/hochzeit-frauen-nachname-ehepartner-metoo>.

32 Ibid.

them.”³³ For those who work with archival material, this statement might offer a form of absolution: once files, photos and documents are no longer in the possession of their original creator, they are free to be ‘taken care of’ by others. As orphans, they need to be embedded into larger structures to be made to speak and to signify. We have seen how the travelling of archival material is a common feature of archival dynamics. The corpuses trespass country borders and continents; they can be passed on between generations of families, between strangers and institutions and between acquaintances and travellers for transport or safe-keeping in unstable times. And yet, the question remains: did the material’s floating status between various times and spaces justify my free engagement with it, as Ricœur suggests?

A sense of intrusion remained. Those whose lives I retraced were neither able to reject or accept my research, nor did they have a say in the decisions about the future usage of the material. My research happened at a time in which the German and Namibian governments made increasing efforts to address the issues of genocide, reparation, restitution and reconciliation, as mentioned in the introduction. In the spirit of these developments, the State Archives of Freiburg expressed an interest in the Wöhler estate. Williams was so kind to donate his estate to the State Archives of Baden-Württemberg, Department of State Archives Freiburg. With the institution, we agreed on a freelance contract which foresaw that I would index and archive the material for their repositories. Thus, again, I would be enforcing and reproducing my perspective on the material, translating it into the ways in which the repository would be both structured and catalogued. It was only later in the course of this task that I felt increasingly uneasy about this decision. At that time, I considered the public archive to be an appropriate space for the material; it implied a professional preservation and digitisation of the old letters and photographs, with the outcome that the material would be accessible to a larger public. This measure felt important, because it would ensure that Williams and his sister received digitised files of their mother’s estate. As I reflect on this process while writing this book some years later, however, other pressing questions arise: what about those people whose photographs were kept in the estate, but whose names have never been secured? I am thinking here particularly of several pictures of African farm, road and domestic workers or about people from the rural villages whom the photographers seemingly visited during a tourist outing. I am also thinking of the affectionate letters written by Rosine Rooi, the daughter of a former employee who worked for Lisbeth Otto. We will learn more about her story in a later subchapter. Introducing her at this point is important, because our encounter would form a crucial reminder to questions that are central to this book, such as: who can lay claims to historical material that ends up in public archives? Who holds and safeguards a family estate? Whose perspectives on the past surface in a Namibian archive?

33 Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 169.

4.3: Frauenstein: A Place Between Fact and Fiction

How and where might we begin to write a study on both a historical and imagined place and its inhabitants? Mindful of how documented sources and narratives on Namibia's colonial history are often those recorded and transmitted by 'white' settlers, missionaries and travellers, it seems inadequate to start with alleged 'origins.' And yet, for the sake of comprehensibility, we may first address what is most striking for those who encounter the place – its name, Frauenstein.

According to oral narratives that have been passed down through generations of the Stöck family, who still own the farm, and as documented by ornithologist researcher H. Kolberg, the term *Frauenstein* is a translation from Otjiherero “okaue mukaendu,” which more literally can be understood as “memorial stone to the women,” as “okaue” means memorial or gravestone, and “mukaendu” translates to “the women.”³⁴ The tale goes that, before 'white' farmers settled on the land, Frauenstein functioned as a buffer zone between Nama and Herero people, who were in a near-permanent state of war in the region.³⁵ Approximately 50 women escaped and fled to hide in the massive rock at the place that would later be called Frauenstein when Hereros attacked and looted a Nama *Werft* (homestead). According to the myth, a barking dog revealed their hiding place. The oral narrative, as reported by Heinz Stöck to André Brink upon his visit to the farm in 2008 (after his novel had been published) is even more gruesome than the rather brief account provided by the ornithologist Kolberg. With reference to Stöck, Brink recounts: “Pandemonium ensued. The Hereros shouted at the women to come out of the cave. Those who did venture outside were killed on the spot. Then the men closed the mouth of the cave with wood and lit a fire.”³⁶

While Kolberg claims that he fact-checked the oral narratives with Herero people, Brink learnt the following during his visit:

To this day, apparently, the Hereros refuse to speak about the incident: because [...] sparing the lives of women and children in a war was a matter of honour for the Herero. The only way that Herr Stöck could ever confirm the truth from Herero spokesmen, was to tell the story and then to say: ‘This is how I heard it. Is it true?’ They would then say: ‘Yes, it is.’ But they would never retell the story themselves.³⁷

I was unable to retrieve counter-narratives that oppose these accounts, but this should not be mistaken as evidence that other versions or rejections do not exist.

34 H. Kolberg, “Frauenstein: Eine Deutung Des Farmnamens,” in *Mitteilungen* vol. 12, IX (Windhoek: SWA Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft, 1969), 5.

35 Christian Stöck, pers. comm., 17 August 2019; Kolberg, “Frauenstein,” 5.

36 Brink, “In Search of Frauenstein,” 14–15.

37 Ibid.

Kolberg's problematic language and framing of the story, indicating that the allegedly violent relation between Herero and Nama people, offers a "deep insight into the psychological behaviour of our native people in their early, precolonial times" and this must be critically considered here.³⁸ It reminds us of how stories of violence amongst African people functioned with regards to pro-colonial propaganda, racist stereotypes and in terms of the myth of colonial civilisation.

How does Brink engage such fragments that revolve around the historical place Frauenstein? From here onwards, excerpts from the book that resonate with Dömski's life, and the historical context in which her life was embedded, will be inserted in italics to reflect on their relations.

The house. More an outcrop of the earth than a house. Set in an Old Testament landscape, a moonscape, a dreamscape. [...]
Then the gradual sloping upward to the high tumulus of eroded rocks which especially at sunset or by moonlight would appear like a congregation of petrified figures [...]
Dominated by what to half-crazed sex-starved men from the desert might seem like a giant woman, a figurehead on grotesque parody perhaps of the Victory of Samothrace. The strayed wife of a Biblical Lot. The Frauenstein, the Woman Rock."
Just beyond the Woman looms the house, improbable even in the full glare of daylight. No one knows its origins. 'It's always been there,' people say if you ask.³⁹

The settler history of the farm Frauenstein (approximately 45 kilometres north-east of Windhoek), as it emerges in documented archival sources, begins in 1895, when settler Max Bremen bought the farm and surrounding land, a total of 5,000 hectares, including the notorious rock formation.⁴⁰ His successor was Moritz Pilet, who bought the property from Bremen two years later.⁴¹ These archival clues establish and construct the place as a farm, thereby following and maintaining 'white' logics of possession and private property. The files and documents in the archives related to Frauenstein strictly follow this logic and negotiate issues around farming and the financing of private land. Reflecting on this, together with the settler narratives around the name, I was curious to see whether my focus on the history of a place would allow me to break free from these limitations. The approach to juxtapose the resonances of a specific and fictional site appeared as a chance to move beyond rigid debates around private property, identity politics and subjectivity – but whether this promise proved true needs to be assessed elsewhere.

On the passenger lists of the Woermann-line located in the archive of Hamburg, Pilet is said to have been a merchant, arriving in GSWA in 1896 and then stayed and

38 Kolberg, "Frauenstein," 6.

39 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 10.

40 ZBU 1901 U.V. f.11.

41 Ibid.

settled there.⁴² Interrogating how Dömski's and Pilet's paths crossed, I came across a book on events and happenings during German colonial rule from 1883–1915. The author H.E. Lenssen lists the new settlers and arrivals for the year 1898 and indicates that Lisbeth Dömski and Moritz Pilet were on the same ship travelling to the colony.⁴³ He further argues that “the ship also brought twelve young girls who had been sent out through the mediation of the Women's League of the German Colonial Society.”⁴⁴ While the Women's League was only founded in 1907, joining the German Colonial Society (GCS) in 1908, what is interesting about this assertion is that indeed, the first selected and single German women migrated to GSWA in 1898 on funding by the GCS and this prompted me to speculate that Dömski could have been one of them.⁴⁵ Her journey – just like Hanna X's – coincided with the third phase of organised women's settlement in GSWA, which stretched from 1898 to 1907.

*At the time of her passage to Africa on the Hans Woermann in January 1902 she might have been twenty or twenty-five, or even thirty (presumably not older, as one of the prerequisites for selection was to be of child-bearing age in order to be of use to the Colony).*⁴⁶

In the first phase (1884–1892), missionary wives and fiancés in particular were sent to GSWA to join their partners in the colony.⁴⁷ Phase two (1892 to 1898) saw the beginning of settlement politics by the GCS in response to emerging debates on ‘the colonial woman question,’ referring to the perceived threat posed by the rapidly growing ‘mixed-race’ population to the power of the German colonial regime.⁴⁸ Thus, German settler wives and fiancés as well as women who would support the health care system

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- 42 StAHH; Hamburger Passagierlisten; Band: 373–7 I, VIII A 1 Band 092 B; p. 249; Mikrofilmnr K_1754.
- 43 H. E. Lenssen, *Chronik von Deutsch-Südwestafrika: Eine Kurzgefaßte Aufzählung Geschichtlicher Ereignisse Aus Der Deutschen Kolonialzeit von 1883–1915* (Windhoek: Verlag der Namibia Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft, 1994), 94.
- 44 Lenssen, *Chronik von Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, 94, my translation.
- 45 K. Walgenbach, “Die weisse Frau als Trägerin deutscher Kultur”: *Koloniale Diskurse über Geschlecht, “Rasse” und Klasse im Kaiserreich* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2005), 165; W. Gippert and E. Kleinau, *Bildungsreisende und Arbeitsmigrantinnen: Auslandserfahrungen deutscher Lehrerinnen zwischen Nationaler und Internationaler Orientierung (1850–1920)* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2014), 226–227.
- 46 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 6.
- 47 K. Smidt, *Germania führt die deutsche Frau nach Südwest: Auswanderung, Leben und soziale Konflikte deutscher Frauen in der ehemaligen Kolonie Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1884–1920; Eine sozial- und frauengeschichtliche Studie* (PhD diss., Universität Magdeburg, 1995, 1997), 26–28; A. Dietrich, *Weisse Weiblichkeiten: Konstruktionen von “Rasse” und Geschlecht im deutschen Kolonialismus* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2007), 253–254; Gippert and Kleinau, *Bildungsreisende und Arbeitsmigrantinnen*, 222–223.
- 48 Smidt, *Germania führt die deutsche Frau nach Südwest*, 26–27; For an in-depth study of the ‘woman question’, see: Birthe Kundrus, *Moderne Imperialisten: Das Kaiserreich im Spiegel seiner Kolonien* (Köln: Böhlau, 2003), 77–95.

in the colony increasingly travelled to GSWA.⁴⁹ For the first time, the GCS sent unmarried women to the colony who were willing to work as servants, aspired to marry and did not yet have established family relations in GSWA with the third wave.⁵⁰ In this period (from 1898 to 1907), a total of 501 women were accompanied in the settlement process by the GCS.⁵¹ The first group of selected women embarked on their journey to the colony in November 1898 on the ship *Marie Woermann*.⁵² 13 women received funding for their journey from the GCS, which means that they were granted free passage from Hamburg to Swakopmund in the third class including landing fees; however, in some cases, women received a travel allowance of 150 Mark for the second class.⁵³ The passenger list reveals that Dömski was with these women on the ship.⁵⁴ Studying the GCS files shows that she was *not part* of the *funded* group; however, their proximity, as well as the cross-examination of her life in relation to the story of Hanna X, raises a number of questions about her motivations and about her biographical background. How did *she* – also a single woman of 20 – end up on the ship amongst the first dispatched women by the GCS to migrate to the colony? What pushed her to leave Germany and what encouraged her to settle in GSWA?

'You are aware of the kind of person we are looking for?' 'I have read the notices, Frau Sprandel: 'All the applicants – and there are many of them – are evaluated on the basis of their merit and health.' She places great emphasis on the impressive-sounding words Würdigkeit und Gesundheit.

49 Gippert and Kleinau, *Bildungsreisende und Arbeitsmigrantinnen*, 223; Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884–1945*, 53; Smidt, *Germania führt die deutsche Frau*, 28, 42.

50 *Ibid.*, 43–45.

51 Dietrich, *Weisse Weiblichkeiten*, 259.

52 Archival sources and Smidt list either the 25th or 26th of November (or some time before the 25th, see: Lensen, *Chronik von Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, pp. 93–94) as the day of departure, see: StAHH, *Hamburger Passagierlisten*; Band: 373–7 I, VIII A 1 Band 100; p. 1109; Mikrofilmnr: K_1759; Smidt, *Germania führt die deutsche Frau*, 45.

53 Lensen, *Chronik von Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, p. 94; Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884–1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 91; Smidt, *Germania führt die deutsche Frau*, 45. The selected women's names were Therese Lange, Luise Schrader, Lina Jung, Wilhelmine Litfinski, Hedrig Geyh, Julie Kuhn, Helene Wolff, Paula Starnitzki, Hildegard Parche, Marie Zülchner, Elise Vormschlag, Lida Blohm and Aline Kriess; BAarch R 8023_172_0395 and BAarch R 8023_172_0439). Wildenthal indicates, as her source for the departing women, an entry by Winkler in *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* 29, no. 16 (20 April 1912): 268. Winkler lists 12 women as departing domestic servants and an additional seven women as wives, daughters or as 'other relatives.' However, the names listed in the archival files of the German Colonial Society count 13. Since Aline Kriess had a brother in GSWA, this might be the reason why she had not been considered as part of the chosen women that came to the colony through the funding by the German Colonial Society, but the records indicate that she did receive funding.

54 StAHH; *Hamburger Passagierlisten*; Band: 373–7, VIII A 1 Band 100; Seite 1109; Mikrofilmnr K_1759.

[...] 'You are interested in going to South-West Africa. Is that not running away?'
 'It is not Germany I want to get away from, Frau Sprandel. It is Africa I want to go to.'
 This prompts much whispering all the way down the long jury table, while Frau Sprandel sits studying Hanna with narrowed eyes. It takes quite a while before she returns to her notes. 'Would you describe yourself as a city girl?'
 'No, Frau Sprandel. Bremen is not a big city. And for the last few years I have been working on a farm.'
 'Hm.' She nods and looks sideways a [sic] her co-adjudicators. 'The one requirement we are very strict about is that our recruits must be vom Lande und nicht von der Stadt.'⁵⁵

Shifting the attention to the resonances between Dömski's and Hanna X's stories reveals how both had similar profiles that 'qualified' them as candidates for the early migrations to GSWA as envisioned by the GCS. As noted previously and as summarised by Smidt: "applicants were supposed to be healthy, strong, modest and 'frugal' and of 'impeccable reputation.'"⁵⁶ Further, the targeted age would have been below 26 years; the young women were expected to be "skilled in all household chores" and should not have been afraid of "rough work."⁵⁷ Moreover, as indicated in Hanna X's application interview, the German Colonial Society preferred women who were from the countryside or small towns, were experienced in gardening and farming and who were ideally of 'low origin.'⁵⁸

The establishment of the Women's League in 1907 ushered in the fourth phase of organised German women's emigration.⁵⁹ While Hanna X's and Elisabeth Dömski's departures were part of the third phase, this phase plays a crucial role for Brink's interest in women's involvement in the organisation of women's settlement. In 1908, the Frauenbund merged with the GCS, becoming the Women's League of the German Colonial Society.⁶⁰ Charlotte Sprandel, whom we know from Hanna X's appli-

55 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 133–134, emphasis in original.

56 Smidt, *Germania führt die deutsche Frau nach Südwest*, 45, my translation.

57 *Ibid.*, my translation.

58 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 133–134; Smidt, *Germania führt die deutsche Frau nach Südwest*, 45. However, in the later following fourth phase of women's migration, there had been increasing aspirations to also send women of middle or upper-class backgrounds to the colonies – especially when the Women's League was entrusted with the selection of candidates. (Dörte Lerp, *Die Kolonialfrauenschulen in Witzenhausen und Bad Weilbach* (Master's thesis, unpublished, Freie Universität Berlin, 2006), 100–102; Gippert and Kleinau, *Bildungsreisende und Arbeitsmigrantinnen*, 227; Smidt, *Germania führt die deutsche Frau nach Südwest*, 55.) These endeavours remained rather unsuccessful because colonial officials in the colony, as well as members of the GCS, criticised the fact that middle and upper-class women were not suitable for rural life in Southern Africa (Smidt, *Germania führt die deutsche Frau nach Südwest*, 66–69.)

59 Smidt, *Germania führt die deutsche Frau nach Südwest*, 55.

60 Walgenbach, *Die weisse Frau als Trägerin deutscher Kultur*, 166; Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884–1945*, 145.

cation interview, joined the Stuttgart branch of the GCS in 1910 and was commissioned by the society to set up the regional Women's League of the German Colonial Society.⁶¹ We can see how Brink appropriated figures and timelines according to the needs of his narrative, considering that Hanna X's application interview must have taken place in late 1901, but Sprandel was only active in her role in the Women's League (and later as Chairwoman of the Württemberg Gauverband of the Women's League) from 1910 onwards. While these are elements of fictionalisation, and the Women's League does not play a central role in Lisbeth Dömski's migration process, let us take a closer look at the organisation's mode of operation in order to better assess why it was so central in Brink's book.

The Women's League was responsible for the recruitment and selection processes; they interviewed and appointed German women who would qualify for emigration and who wanted to settle in the colony as maids, housekeepers or teachers. The GCS would then support chosen candidates with financing and with organising their migration.⁶² Despite this arrangement, there were conflicts between the parties, one issue of debate being that the Women's League pushed the GCS, and particularly president Johann Albrecht zu Mecklenburg, to also send educated women ("gebildete Frauen") to GSWA.⁶³ These women could not, however, be easily allocated, since requests from GSWA were instead targeted at ordinary women. Moreover, the Women's League had agreed to prioritise students from the colonial women's schools as candidates for CGS funding and to promote the schools among German applicants for settlement. Sprandel worked around this agreement, convincing zu Mecklenburg to send women of higher social ranks directly to German settler woman Helene von Falkenhausen's teaching farm in Brakwater, which again caused disputes amongst members of both societies.⁶⁴ Brink's research was strongly based on correspondences between Sprandel and zu Mecklenburg, as interrogation of his sources shows.⁶⁵ However, as seen previously, he made several adjustments in translating her to a character in the novel.⁶⁶

For the sake of comprehensiveness on the chapter of organised women's migration: The final, fifth phase stretched from 1914 to 1920, when the First World War

61 Heiko Wegmann, 'Charlotte Sprandel (1864–1941)', Stadtarchiv Stuttgart, 1 September 2022, https://www.stadtlexikon-stuttgart.de/article/674bc14c-c4bd-48e8-a1b4-c37cc22a7c18/Charlotte_Sprandel_%281864-1941%29.html.

62 Gippert and Kleinau, *Bildungsreisende und Arbeitsmigrantinnen*, 227.

63 Smidt, *Germania führt die deutsche Frau nach Südwest*, 66; Lerp, *Die Kolonialfrauenschulen in Witzzenhausen und Bad Weilbach*, 99–100; Dietrich, *Weisse Weiblichkeiten*, 242.

64 Lerp, *Die Kolonialfrauenschulen in Witzzenhausen Und Bad Weilbach*, 99–101.

65 See: Amazwi South African Museum of Literature, mss_2006_1_2_12.

66 For example, Sprandel, based in Stuttgart, was not from the 'Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft' working in Berlin, as depicted in the novel; and, as indicated previously, she assumed her roles and responsibilities some years later than envisioned by Brink.

brought the project to an end – many women either returned to Germany voluntarily or were repatriated.⁶⁷ The last steamer with a group of women on board left Germany on 26 July 1914.⁶⁸ However, due to the outbreak of the war, the women did not reach their destination; they returned to Germany.⁶⁹

This background information on the developments of settler women migration is useful to distil central common features in Dömski's and Hanna X's stories: Both were born in the 1870s and travelled to GSWA at around the age of 20. Both became orphans at an early age. Hanna X was left at the doorsteps of the orphanage Kinder Jesus; further details that pertain to the event and her biological parents seem non-existent, as Brink's narrator suggests. Dömski was born on 15 March 1878 in Berlin, as one of five siblings.⁷⁰ Their mother died when Lisbeth was six years old, just days after the birth of their fifth child, who then also died in 1884, two months after the mother's death.⁷¹ The father, Friedrich Rudolf Dömski, a baker, passed away just briefly after he remarried and lost yet another child with his new wife, leaving all of his children as orphans in 1889.⁷² How Dömski's childhood looked from the age of 11 until the age of 20 can only be speculated; the estate solely speaks to her life after her arrival in the colony. The only archival clue that I could find that pertains to her childhood was a letter from her sister, Helene Dömski, which is held in her estate. Helene mentions visiting 'her' foster family which suggests that the siblings grew up in separate households.⁷³

All of Lisbeth's brothers and sisters had either travelled to GSWA regularly for extended periods or migrated to Southern Africa as well.⁷⁴ The propaganda that circulated at the time promoted the possibilities of social advancement in the colonies in order to encourage willing Germans to emigrate. Several promises were made to German women to improve their social position and to be liberated from political, social and juridical power relations.⁷⁵ The colonial and racial empowerment lent

67 Smidt, *Germania führt die deutsche Frau nach Südwest*, 28.

68 *Ibid.*, 54.

69 Despite the Women's Leagues and the GCS's efforts, the 'woman question' could not be solved, as numerical discrepancies between White men and women persisted (*Ibid.*)

70 StAHH; Hamburger Passagierlisten; Band: 373–7 I, VIII A 1 Band 294; Seite: 566; Mikrofilmnr: K_1847; Landesarchiv Berlin (hereafter LAB), Personenstandsreg. Heiratsreg.; Laufenden: 126; LAB, Personenstandsreg. Geburtsreg.; Laufenden: 124; LAB, Personenstandsreg. Geburtsreg.; Laufenden: 791.

71 LAB, Personenstandsreg. Sterberg.r; Laufenden: 662; LAB, Personenstandsreg. Geburtsreg.; Laufenden: 124.

72 LAB, Personenstandsreg. Heiratsreg.; Laufenden: 377; LAB, Personenstandsreg. Sterberg.; Laufenden: 126.

73 StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_009.

74 The brother, Friedrich Dömski, moved to South Africa, while Helene and Max Dömski often visited their sister in GSWA. Helene also lived there at various times and for differing periods.

75 Dietrich, *Weisse Weiblichkeiten*, 371.

them new privileges – German women in the colonies became the “inferior gender of a superior race.”⁷⁶ Through the words of Dömski’s father-in-law, we learn from archival sources that she had been rather poor before 1899: “I don’t need [...] to tell you that my son’s widow was completely penniless before she married him.”⁷⁷ From this, we may deduce that it might have been the appeal of advancement (or the lack of prospectives in Germany) that encouraged her to leave her position as a saleswoman in search of a better life.⁷⁸ Considering her economic background and the fact that her future husband Pilet had been in Magdeburg in 1898 travelling back to his new home in GSWA in July, with Lisbeth leaving Berlin four months later, it seems possible that they had met during his visit to Germany and that he had arranged (and paid for?) her journey to follow him to the colony.

Being left with assumptions here emphasises how Dömski’s private estate is largely silent about her life before emigration. Surely, the travelling conditions and dynamics of migration play into this, imposing heavy constraints on which and how many possessions an individual can carry along. However, the practice of documenting one’s story *after* the settlement in a colony may also follow an impulse to construct a sense of belonging in a new place.

How is it possible to respond to these archival voids, for those working with archives, in the endeavour to understand and negotiate the past? As we will later explore in further depth, despite the plethora of archival sources with which Brink worked, gaps remained which the author actively fills. Such is the case with the brutal depictions of the violence that Hanna X endures on the ship to Swakopmund and, worse, on the train from Swakopmund to Windhoek where she meets her abuser Hauptmann Böhlke. In other instances, Brink directly addresses archival omissions as a way to make them visible:

There are a hundred and ten women on the Hans Woermann which leaves Hamburg harbour on a miserable dark day in mid-January. [...] It is on the list supplied by Frau Charlotte Sprandel of the Kolonialgesellschaft in Berlin, on behalf of Johann Albrecht, Herzog zu Mecklenburg, that an unfortunate spattering of black ink first designates one of the passengers as Hanna X.”⁷⁹

“Initially, it seems, the mystery might have been caused quite simply by a blotted scrawl in one of the lists compiled by Frau Charlotte Sprandel’s secretary which her correspondents,

76 Frances Gouda, ‘Das “Unterlegene” Geschlecht Der “Überlegene” Rasse : Kolonialgeschichte und Geschlechterverhältnisse’, in *Geschlechterverhältnisse Im Historischen Wandel*, by Hanna Schissler (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verl, 1993), 185–204, my translation.

77 My translation, NAN NLA 100, 11.

78 StAHH, Hamburger Passagierlisten; Band: 373 I, VIII A1 Band 100; Seite 1109; Mikrofilmnr: K_1759.

79 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 77.

*either unable or too hurried and harried to decipher, replaced with the provisional, convenient, all-purpose X. And after that, most likely, no one could be bothered. Why should they be? What's in a name?*⁸⁰

What resonates from the symbol of the "X" are the histories of discrimination based on gender and race, the histories of colonial expansion and slavery as well as the exploitation and submission of those who were historically 'othered.' It brings to mind Malcolm X, who rejected his official surname because it was a 'slave-owner's name.' Like all members of the Nation of Islam, he would replace it with an "X" as a symbol for his lost, original African family name.⁸¹ In the case of *The Other Side of Silence*, the X similarly symbolises an irrevocable loss of information about Hanna X's roots; however, it also speaks to practices of submission and oppression by a patriarchal, colonial society. As a 'reject' in the colony, her personal details and her story were only documented carelessly. Her name was nearly erased by the black ink in the archival papers and, with it, her identity and integrity.

If we continue interrogating the politics of gender, identity and naming, then we can come to see how matrimony emerges as a central motif in much of the colonial propaganda that circulated in relation to discourses on women's settlement in GSWA. As mentioned previously, the traditional changing of women's surnames after marriage complicates efforts to retrace their lives. Considering the role of matrimony against the background of German women's emigration to the colony uncovers its deeper layers of significance. In an archived newspaper article from the *Friedenauer Lokal-Anzeiger* from 1899, we read:

German West Africa [sic] – an El Dorado for ladies eager to get married. The 'Windhoeker Anzeiger' writes: of our new fellow citizens who register here on 10 January, two have already become engaged. [...] Moritz Pilet, a farmer born in Magdeburg, intends to marry Elisabeth Doemski, resident in Klein-Windhoek, born in Berlin, in Frauenstein near Windhoek.⁸²

A photo taken by Brink from an archived newspaper article upon his visit to farm Frauenstein in 2008 (figure 2) additionally confirms how Pilet and Dömski's engagement was publicly announced only a few weeks after her arrival in Windhoek.

80 Ibid., 6.

81 Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, "Vor 53 Jahren: Ermordung von Malcolm X | bpb," *bpb.de*, accessed 4 February 2022, <https://www.bpb.de/politik/hintergrund-aktuell/201549/1965-ermordung-von-malcolm-x>.

82 ZLB, *Friedenauer Lokal-Anzeiger*, 18 March 1899, Nr. 41, my translation.



Figure 2: André Brink, private photograph, n.d. Source unknown. Courtesy of Karina Brink.

The framing of GSWA as an “El Dorado” for marriages resonates strongly from the *Friedenauer Lokal-Anzeiger* article – as it does with many other journalistic publications reporting on life in the colony.⁸³ Interestingly, not only was Dömski and Pilet’s wedding celebrated as a colonial success story, but so too was her future home, farm Frauenstein, which was referenced in the advertising for women’s emigration. From my visit to the farm, I learnt that the owners today keep an old, printed photograph of the farmhouse amongst their collection of material on the family and farm history (figure 3). It shows a small group of unrecognisable people dressed in white, sitting on horses and standing in front of and inside of the building. A fading inscription in the top left corner indicates the year 1897 – possibly the date of origin. According to the Stöck family, the photograph was reprinted in a German publication, something Brink also learnt during his visit to the farm. With reference to *The Other Side of Silence*, he reminisces:

There is a surprising point of contact: Herr Stöck showed me a yellowed cutting from an early edition of a Duitswes newspaper: a report in which young women from Germany are invited to seek a new life here in the colony. And together with the report ... a photograph of the farmhouse on Frauenstein.⁸⁴

83 See, for example: “Heiratsgelegenheit für junge Mädchen.” *Oldesloer Landbote*, no. 102, 30 August 1898, BArch R 8023_172_0047.

84 Brink, “In Search of Frauenstein.”



Figure 3: photograph by André Brink, 2008. Courtesy of Karina Brink and the Stöck family.

We cannot be certain which *Duitswes* newspaper Brink spoke about, since Mrs. Stöck could not confirm the issue. However, she showed me the text “Skizzen aus dem Leben einer Farmerfrau in Deutsch – Südwestafrika,” written by Else Büchner, in which the very same photograph appears.⁸⁵ It is tempting to assume that this was *the* paper that Brink had seen. However, as we will see throughout this chapter, photographs, trading cards or *cartes-de-visite* circulated extensively amongst the German settler society, as well as between the colony and the German ‘metropole,’ and were often used arbitrarily, which is also the case with this particular photograph.⁸⁶ Let us look closer at the gendered aspects of knowledge production of and with Frauenstein. Büchner’s chapter is a report about the hardships and beauties of farm life in the colony. By means of visualising settler life, her text is accompanied by two other farm photographs (in addition to the one of Frauenstein). Chapter 3 of this book has explored the dynamics of appropriating photographs as material to ‘stand in’ for certain claims and to underscore specific ideologies. Questions around photography’s ‘applicability’ and arbitrariness are also central to this study, but with

85 Published in: *Süsseroths illustriertem Kolonial-Kalender*, 1914.

86 Throughout the later course of my research, I encountered it again in another publication, Walter Peters, in which the photograph reappears as an example of German craftsmanship and architectural skills, see: *Baukunst in Südwestafrika 1884–1914: die Rezeption deutscher Architektur in der Zeit von 1884 bis 1914 im ehemaligen Deutsch-Südwestafrika (Namibia)* (Windhoek: SWA Wissenschaftliche Ges, 1981), 108–111.

a particular focus on the trope of matrimony in relation to Frauenstein: Büchner's text ends with the words: "And once you are in Southwest-Africa, you will rightly recognise it as your second home."⁸⁷ Potentially, her words and the visual teaser to farm life were meant to encourage women's settlement in the colony. However, her framing appears in stark contrast to other (oral) narratives surrounding women's emigration which circulated in GSWA. Smidt writes:

It is striking that both women and men used the same derogatory language towards the women who were sent. The women who arrived in Southwest Africa with the first two steamships in 1899 were referred to by the German settlers as 'Mädchenfuhrer' [girls load] or 'first and second Christmas boxes,' as it were, as Christmas presents for the unmarried settlers. There was talk of 'sending out' or 'transport.' Women constituted a 'much sought-after product.' [...] 'Marriageable' women were, in Clara Brockmann's view, a 'particularly sought-after article.'⁸⁸

The tone resonates strongly with Jan Spies' headline, the "[c]lean cargo to the land of soldiers," which inspired Brink to write his book.⁸⁹ In the article (figure 1), Spies also gestures to the illusions and expectations that brought women to the colonies, which had given way to a harsh reality:

It was not only in Swakopmund where women were brought ashore; it also happened in Lüderitzbucht, where a big surprise awaited the beauties. These women were mostly under the impression that Suidwes was a desert country with beautiful palm trees around lush oases.

On arrival in Lüderitz, they had already asked where the palm trees were. The questions were however neatly bypassed by the men.

'A little further,' was the standard answer.

At Kolmanskop where the first halting place was, the women wanted to once again know where the greenery was.

'Still some distance away. We do not live here,' the men replied.

At Pomona the same question was asked, but the men did not live there either.

At Elisabeth Bay, the end of all ends, it was time to disembark and before the women could ask about palm trees again, they were led into the cool houses.

Large, lush, green palm trees were painted on the walls of the bedrooms.⁹⁰

The palm trees emerge as a symbol for a distant paradise, the German "Platz an der Sonne," to reference a famous line from Bernhard von Bülow's speech in a Reich-

87 Else Büchner, "Skizzen Aus Dem Leben Einer Farmerfrau in Deutsch – Südwestafrika," in *Süsseroths Illustrierter Kolonial-Kalender* (Berlin: Wilhelm Süsseroth, 1914), 81, my translation.

88 Smidt, *Germania führt die deutsche Frau nach Südwest*, 46.

89 Spies, "Skone Vragte Na Land van Soldaat." trans. Wnuczek-Lobaczewski.

90 Ibid.

stag debate on 6 December 1897. The palm tree was also a popular and often-deployed element used to craft a sense of exoticism in pictorial documents, such as postcards, advertising pictures and collector's images (*Sammelbilder*), which circulated during colonial times.⁹¹ The created image-worlds were products of European imaginations, projections and fantasies, shaped by clichés and these functioned to excite potential German settlers about the colonies – for many, a promise that was broken.⁹²

'You realise some of the men offering work to immigrant women may also have an interest in...finding a companion, a spouse.'

Hanna swallows but keeps her face straight. 'If it is a good man I will not have any objection, Frau Sprandel.'

'And what, in your eyes, is a good man?'

'Someone, I hope, who will have some respect for me.' [...]

There follows a long whispered consultation along the table. Then Frau Sprandel turns back to Hanna. 'Now that you have heard our questions, is there anything you would like to ask of us?'

Hanna pauses. Then she asks very calmly and seriously, 'Please, Frau Sprandel, will there be palm trees in South-West Africa?'

This time the laughter is more generous.

'I have told you that it is a desert land, Fraulein,' replies the regal lady in the middle of the table. 'I think we can safely assume that there will be the odd oasis with palm trees.'

*'In that case I shall go,' says Hanna.*⁹³

Hanna X's search for palm trees weaves through the book like a golden thread. Ever since her arrival in the colony, its men, the colonial society and the aspired social uplift have all turned out disappointingly. Yet, Brink's protagonist would hold on to her palm trees in search of some beauty to make life in GSWA bearable. Which imaginations, motivations or promises guided Dömski to the colony, we can never know. However, from archival sources we learn that some life-changing events played out on Frauenstein only five years after moving in with Pilet. On 13 January 1904, the farm would become one of the central settings where the first battles between the Hereros and the German settlers took place, which ultimately culminated in the German Colonial Genocide.

91 Joachim Zeller, *Bilderschule der Herrenmenschen: koloniale Reklamesammelbilder* (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2008), 165.

92 *Ibid.*, 7, 82.

93 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 136–137.

4.4: Narratives and Depictions of War Events on Frauenstein

Ever since the German colonial occupation officially began in 1884, tensions between the African population and the German settlers and soldiers in GSWA periodically exploded into violence. One of the early, brutal attacks by the Germans against African resistance was the massacre of Hornkranz in 1893. Nama leader Hendrik Witbooi had vehemently resisted signing a “Schutzvertrag” (protection treaty) with the Germans for a decade, which would have stripped him of sovereignty over his regional claims and would have placed him under the German Empire’s ultimate authority.⁹⁴ The surprise attack was designed to force Witbooi into submission. While Witbooi was able to escape, more than 80 women and children from his community fell victim to the attack. He capitulated and signed the treaty in 1894.⁹⁵ Within this same period of 1884–1894 other African leaders had agreed to enter into alliances with the Germans. Although there had been phases of relatively amicable cohabitation, African mistrust toward the Germans grew throughout the broader region after the Hornkranz massacre.⁹⁶

Historians have had difficulty pinpointing the exact circumstances around 1904 that led from local skirmishes, to the first shots being fired on 12 January 1904 in Okahandja and to the outbreak of full-fledged war by the German state that would engulf large sections of Herero and, later, Nama communities.⁹⁷ Many view the Rinderpest epidemic of 1896–1897 as a key factor that brought about a rupture in the tenuous relationship between the Herero and the German settlers.⁹⁸ The plague wiped out large parts of Herero-owned livestock and wealth. The related collapse of their political and social structures increasingly forced them to sell their labour to ‘white’ farmers and entrepreneurs as well as to the colonial administration.⁹⁹ However, reasons for

94 Reinhart Kößler, ‘Die Bibel und die Peitsche: Verwicklungen um die Rückgabe geraubter Güter’, *PERIPHERIE – Politik · Ökonomie · Kultur* 39, no. 1–2019 (30 April 2019): 79.

95 *Ibid.*, 80.

96 Jeremy Silvester and Jan-Bart Gewald, eds., *Words Cannot Be Found: German Colonial Rule in Namibia: An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, Sources for African History, v. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 50.

97 Häußler, *Der Genozid an Den Herero*, 7.

98 Jan-Bart Gewald, ‘Kolonisierung, Völkermord Und Wiederkehr: Die Herero von Namibia 1890–1923’, in *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika: Der Kolonialkrieg (1904–1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen*, ed. Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2016), 108–111; Häußler, *Der Genozid an Den Herero*, 56–57; Gippert and Kleinau, *Bildungsreisende und Arbeitsmigrantinnen*, 18; Kaya de Wolff, *Post-/koloniale Erinnerungsdiskurse in der Medienkultur: der Genozid an den Ovaherero und Nama in der deutschsprachigen Presse von 2001 bis 2016* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2021), 384.

99 Jürgen Zimmerer, ‘Krieg, KZ Und Völkermord in Südwestafrika: Der Erste Deutsche Genozid,’ in *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika: Der Kolonialkrieg (1904–1908) in Namibia und Seine Folgen*, ed. Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2016), 46.

the Herero opposition to the colonial regime were multiple and also reflected internal diversity within this community. Matthias Häussler speaks of “a general mood of crisis” amongst the people and underlines the social consequences of the economic disruption of European settler expansion into GSWA that led the Hereros to take up arms in January 1904.¹⁰⁰

There are numerous publications by settlers, German newspaper articles and oral narratives in Namibia, all of which describe different versions of the day of the incident at Frauenstein. The accounts that circulated amongst ‘white’ publics in GSWA and Germany revolve around the German men Max Vorberg, Hermann Finster, Mr. Dames and Pilet. However, perspectives on the events differ in various instances. My aim here is less to verify or dispute the truth claims of these reports and more to explore what the narratives about Frauenstein (and about the life of Dömski) do in terms of knowledge production about the war. Published sources, such as those by well-known members of the settler or missionary society and by German travellers (i.e., Conrad Rust, Wilhelm Vorberg, Heinrich Brockmann, Helene von Falkenhausen or Max Belwe), as well as the oral narratives that the Stöck family passes on, mainly argue the following: Pilet learnt about approaching Hereros on the morning of 13 January 1904, and his farm manager, Dames, rode to the neighbouring farm at Ongeama to get help, hoping to return with owners Vorberg and Finster to Frauenstein.¹⁰¹ However, on their way to the farm, a group of Herero fighters opened fire.¹⁰² Dames and Vorberg were hit by bullets and would eventually succumb to their injuries.¹⁰³ Finster managed to escape to Windhoek – how he succeeded in making his way past the Herero fighters is described in highly embellished accounts.¹⁰⁴

From the report by missionary Brockmann, we learn that, at the time of the event, Helene Dömski had just come from Germany to Frauenstein to be with her

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- 100 Häussler, *Der Genozid an Den Herero*, 70; Helmut Bley, *Kolonialherrschaft und Sozialstruktur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1894–1914* (Hamburg: Leipzig-Verlag, 1968), 176.
- 101 Max Belwe, *Gegen Die Herero, 1904/1905: Tagebuchaufzeichnungen von Max Belwe* (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn Königliche Hofbuchhandlung, 1906), 24–25; Conrad Rust, *Krieg Und Frieden Im Hererolande: Aufzeichnungen Aus Dem Kriegsjahre 1904* (Leipzig: Kittler, 1905), 76.
- 102 Different accounts speak about either 200 Hereros (Rust, *Krieg Und Frieden Im Hererolande*, 76) or 40 Hereros (Mannfred Goldbeck and Sven E. Kanzler (eds.), *Gondwana history III: Momentaufnahmen aus der Vergangenheit Namibias* (Göttingen: Klaus Hess Verlag, 2012), 10).
- 103 Goldbeck and Kanzler, *Gondwana History III*, 10; Hanna Schele, *Immotavirtus: Erinnerungen an Südwest-Afrika 1907–1909. Teilausgabe Der Erinnerungen 1878–1919 Wilhelm Vorberg* (Diepholz: Selbstverlag, 1971), 219.
- 104 Various reports attest to how Finster received help from a Nama woman or that he himself has been disguised as a Nama woman during his escape. See: Belwe, *Gegen Die Herero.*, 28; Goldbeck and Kanzler, *Gondwana History III*, 10.

sister Lisbeth.¹⁰⁵ When the group of Hereros approached the farm, Pilet sent both women into the house, facing the group alone on his veranda.¹⁰⁶ He was then caught, gagged and dragged into the nearest cattle kraal where he was killed by a gunshot.¹⁰⁷ The three men were buried on the farm Frauenstein; to this day their gravestones commemorate the events and mark their final resting place. Following the surfacings that attend to the fate of Lisbeth and her sister Helene brings to light a plethora of conflicting depictions.

As published by Belwe, Finster recounted: “His [Pilet’s] wife and sister-in-law, stripped of all their clothes, were dragged along for a day and were only able to escape to Okahandja about three weeks later, with great effort and agony.”¹⁰⁸ Today’s inhabitant of Frauenstein, Jutta Stöck, re-narrates the events similarly. According to her, at the beginning of the attack, both women ran to their domestic servants for help but, instead of coming for their rescue, the Herero women allegedly made them take off and hand over their clothes.¹⁰⁹ Conrad Rust’s publication recounts how Mrs. Pilet and Ms. Dömski were only left with old sacks and rags to clothe themselves, attempting to hide in a Pontok on the farm.¹¹⁰ Both attest that the women were subsequently taken along by a group of Hereros – the duration of their travel, however, differs starkly in the accounts. As indicated in the quote above, Finster claims the women were only rescued after three weeks and, in a similar vein, Stöck’s account suggests that Pilet and Dömski were made to ‘live’ with and ‘slave’ for the Hereros for a longer period of time.¹¹¹ However, in Belwe’s publication, we further learn that the women arrived at a missionary station in Otjisazu as early as on 17 January.¹¹² This is similarly reflected in Rust’s report: on the journey with the Hereros, the group would soon encounter the boer Keet who negotiated with the Herero to take the women with him.¹¹³ With a *Schutzbrief* – a letter issued by the Hereros to grant the women’s protection – Keet would then bring the women to Heinrich Brockmann’s mission in Otjisazu.¹¹⁴

Following the diverse accounts, and other forms of media representation relating to the events, elucidates how the experiences of Lisbeth and Helene became a

105 Heinrich Brockmann, *Haba Du Ta Gob: Lebenserinnerungen von Missionar Johann Heinrich Brockmann* (Berlin: Verlag Klaus Guhl, 1992), 58.

106 Rust, *Krieg Und Frieden Im Hererolande*, 76; Belwe, *Gegen Die Herero.*, 24.

107 Ibid.; Ibid.

108 Belwe, *Gegen Die Herero*, 24.

109 Jutta Stöck, pers. comm., 17 August 2019.

110 Rust, *Krieg Und Frieden Im Hererolande*, 76–77.

111 Stöck, pers. comm., 17 August 2019; Belwe, *Gegen Die Herero*, 24.

112 Belwe, *Gegen Die Herero*, 46.

113 Rust, *Krieg Und Frieden Im Hererolande*, 77–78.

114 Brockmann, *Haba Du Ta Gob*, 58; Belwe, *Gegen Die Herero*, 46.

heated topic of debate that circulated widely both in and beyond GSWA. In exploring these narratives, however, we must not only ask *what* is being sad about the women, but also *to what ends* certain stories were being constructed and spread. A crucial archival finding to be interrogated in this respect is figure 4. The detail from an article in *Die Woche: Moderne Illustrierte Zeitschrift* that shows one of only three photographs of Lisbeth Pilet that directly connects her name to an image.



Figure 4: detail, “Zum Aufstand in Deutsch-Südwestafrika: Unsere Bedrängten Landsleute in Windhoek,” *Die Woche: Moderne Illustrierte Zeitschrift*, 6 February 1904, August Scherl, Nr. 6, 241.

On the pages preceding the photographs, the author reports on the outbreak of the war and introduces a rumour that recurrently surfaced with regards to the sisters' fate on 13 January, namely that both women, like other settlers “have fallen victim to the fury of the natives.”¹¹⁵ Their deaths, however, had not yet been ascertained at the point of publication. The inscription of the photographs is also noteworthy with a view to practices of knowledge production: “Our harassed compatriots in Windhoek,” perpetuates ideas promoted prominently at the time of the war, that is, the representation of German settlers as innocent victims unjustly attacked by Black aggressors.¹¹⁶ Gesine Krüger looks closely at the media coverage of the war and assesses the circulating accounts on Lisbeth's and Helene's alleged death as particularly “bloodthirsty, disproportionate and implausible.”¹¹⁷ With regards to the background of these narratives, she explains:

115 *Die Woche: Moderne Illustrierte Zeitschrift*, 6 February 1904, August Scherl, Nr. 6, 237.

116 *Ibid.*, my translation.

117 Gesine Krüger, *Kriegsbewältigung Und Geschichtsbewußtsein: Realität, Deutung Und Verarbeitung Des Deutschen Kolonialkriegs in Namibia, 1904 Bis 1907* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht Verlag, 1999), 108.

Captain Franke reported in his estate how the story about the alleged murder spread. A rider told him about the destroyed Frauenstein farm in January 1904. ‘The man gave a gruesome account because he had seen the dismembered bodies of the women. For example, he claimed to have seen the cut breasts of the women hanging from the thorn bushes in front of the house... A story, perfectly usable and similar to the newspaper reports that caused horror and indignation against the “black beasts” in Germany at that time. Indicative of the value of these rumours is the fact that a few days later I found those two women unharmed at Okahandja’s feast.’ Elsewhere there is even the claim that the women had been quartered.¹¹⁸

Krüger describes how the (often dramatised or even fictional) stories about the brutal murder and sexual assaults of women were instrumentalised to provoke public outrage about the war, despite the fact that it was known how the Herero’s conduct of warfare foresaw to protect instead of harm settler women and children.¹¹⁹ As we have seen in the case of Lisbeth Pilet and her sister, who were taken to a mission station and then eventually to Windhoek – despite all hardship and losses – the lives of German women were relatively ‘safe,’ as Samuel Maharero had ordered that women, children and missionaries be spared from Herero attacks as part of his rules of engagement for civilised warfare.¹²⁰

Myth-making and propaganda about the war also spread through visual representations. Since there were no photographs taken at the outbreak of the war, “artistic inventions” would fill this void and came in forms such as sketches, aquarelles, little tobacco images (Tabakbildchen) or collector’s images.¹²¹ They depicted the stereotype of the Hereros as murderous ‘black beasts’ who unjustifiably rose up against the ‘white’, innocent authority and were designed and circulated by the German side to sway a negative image of the ‘attacking enemy.’¹²² The events on Frauenstein were also portrayed along such narrative lines. A collector’s image printed by the chocolate company Riedel & Engelmann titled, “Herero-Uprising in German-South-West-Africa,” and subtitled “attack on a German farm” shows the chaos of the war, burning

118 Ibid., my translation.

119 Gesine Krüger, “Bestien und Opfer: Frauen im Kolonialkrieg,” in *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika: Der Kolonialkrieg (1904–1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen*, eds. Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2016), 143–47.

120 Eric D. Weitz, *A World Divided: The Global Struggle for Human Rights in the Age of Nation-States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 218; Casper W. Erichsen, “German-Herero Conflict of 1904–07,” *Britannica*, 17 February 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/German-Herero-conflict-of-1904-1907>.

121 Wolfram Hartmann, “Pictures Explored,” in *Hues Between Black and White: Historical Photography from Colonial Namibia: 1860s to 1915* (Windhoek: Out of Africa Publishers, 2004), 56.

122 See, for example: J. Zeller, *Bilderschule der Herrenmenschen: Koloniale Reklamesammelbilder* (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2008), p. 16.

farmhouses, a corpse on the ground and a 'white' woman on her knees on the verge of being attacked by a half-naked Black man while a child is clinging to her legs.¹²³ On the back of the card, a text guides the reading of the image:

The atrocities, the destruction and devastation increased more and more, and the Herero activity was no longer limited to theft. On 6 January 1904, they attacked a farm called 'Frauenstein,' murdered the farmer, his wife and child, his sister-in-law and the black servants. But it was not only this farm that was sworn to ruin, there were many more.¹²⁴

The false information on the alleged death of Pilet, her sister and the child that never existed in addition to the wrong date (the war had not even begun on 6 January) indicate how the pictorial document barely served to inform readers about war developments; rather, it portrayed the German settlers as victims of Black violence.¹²⁵ Additionally, the image conveyed ideologically-charged political messages (promoting the need to fight the seemingly brutal and merciless Hereros) and racist stereotypes ('white' innocence vs. Black brutality).

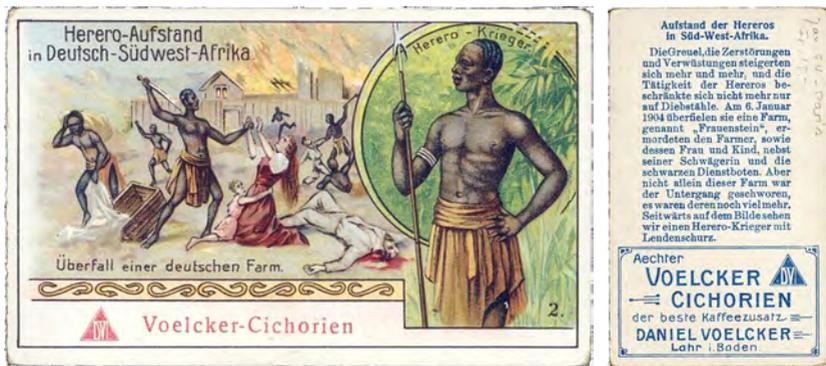


Figure 5: *Sammlung Bernhard Gardi*, FGA 1–556, *Ankauf mit anonymen Mitteln*, Museum Rietberg, Zurich.

123 My translation. See for the collector's image: Inventarnr Do 2005/51, Bildarchiv, Stiftung Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, or: Zeller, *Bilderschule der Herrenmenschen*, p. 183.

124 Back side of the card; *Ibid*.

125 Zeller, *Bilderschule der Herrenmenschen*, p. 182.

Interestingly, the very same image can be found on different collector's images that were circulated by various companies. Figure 5 shows the same motif printed by the coffee-supplement company Voelcker-Cichorien from Baden-Wuerttemberg.¹²⁶ The visual worlds depicted were fed by the (fear-)fantasies of the Germans: For soldiers who fought in the war, they served as channels to process their own experience of helplessness which they projected onto the figure of vulnerable and wounded 'white' woman.¹²⁷

While it remains important to unpack these mechanisms of narrative construction, we must also consider: what is it that is being glossed over by these depictions? We must ask, as Yvette Christiansë does, "What is dis-appearing?" What is it that can barely surface from the depth of history and archival repositories?¹²⁸ Pointing to the limits of biographical reconstruction through archival research, Christiansë laments how the experiences and perspectives of the 'subaltern' are subdued, uncovered, unheard.¹²⁹ Attuning our reading to the more hidden resonances of indigenous perspectives in archival repositories, we come to see how the archival findings and sources that we have gathered so far appear one-sided and inherently problematic. I was not able to collect oral narratives of Herero and Nama people about the history of Frauenstein and I was unable to access counter-narratives, besides the German settler and soldier versions, concerning the events of the war on the farm. However, as Christiansë tells us, the archive remains the "place of possible appearance."¹³⁰ Figure 6 is one example of this. The photograph powerfully evokes the experiences of those who were structurally muted by colonial discourse – African women whose perspectives, voices and narratives were largely dislodged and overwritten by propaganda disseminated by the colonial regime.

126 FGA 1–557, Museum Rietberg, Zurich.

127 Krüger, 'Bestien und Opfer', pp. 149–150.

128 Yvette Christiansë, "'Heartsore': The Melancholy Archive of Cape Colony Slavery," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2009), https://sfoonline.barnard.edu/africana/print_christiansianse.htm.

129 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66–111.

130 Ibid.



Figure 6: BAB, AO3.

The blurry photograph is part of an album titled “Album of a German Farmer from South-West Africa, 1906–1915,” today stored in the Basler Afrika Bibliographien (BAB). Its direct link to the place Frauenstein is the handwritten inscription of the name on the back. Information about the previous owner, the photographs’ origin or the circulation of the album are largely unknown, given that the BAB purchased the album at an auction. From legends, captions and notes on the photos and the album pages, it can be assumed that it covers the years 1906 to 1915.¹³¹ Studying the album, with its 213 pasted and loose photographs, is an uncomfortable task. It consists of numerous pornographic images of naked African women, posing (or made to pose) for the camera. We see groups of Africans lined up or grouped together for the photograph, pictures of landscapes, farms, homesteads, colonial buildings with settlers and colonial officials or ‘white’ men in sexually suggestive postures and interactions with African women.

The resonances of the specific image are unsettling, its *punctum* being the three women couched on the ground, seemingly positioned in the middle of the lined-up Schutztruppen-men (as we can detect from their hats).¹³² How might we interpret the photograph? How can we make sense of its resonances and possible meaning? In *Listening to Images*, Tina Campt argues that, instead of only ‘looking at’ photographs,

131 BAB, AO3.

132 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27.

we should direct our attention to what they emanate beyond what is merely visible.¹³³ She proposes the practice of *listening* to them as a way of “attuning our senses to the other affective frequencies through which photographs register.”¹³⁴ Such a mode of reading implies focusing our senses on the (often extremely limited) possibilities for self-expression reflected in mimics, gestures and postures and on the affective resonances thereof.¹³⁵ In this vein, we notice how the men seemingly sit for the photograph with ease, some of them directing a smile towards the camera or an unidentifiable point in the background, while two of the women shield their faces with their hands as a (possibly) protective gesture. With what appears to be discomfort in her eyes, the woman to the right wearily directs her gaze towards the photographer. And yet, this reading does not allow us to retrieve the ‘truth’ of a photograph – other forms of interaction and relations are possible and can hardly be substantiated based on research. Thus, while attuning our reading to affect and to the multifaceted resonances of photographs is important, it remains an imperative to contextualise their origin as much as possible.

The high concentration of men – soldiers – visually subordinating the women by literally positioning them at their feet conjures up all kinds of questions concerning the exploitation of women in the colony and in the area of Frauenstein in particular. Judging by the Schutztruppen uniforms, it is possible that the photograph might have been taken during the war between 1906 and 1908 (given that the album likely dates from 1906–1915).¹³⁶ Prisoners of war were often made to pose with soldiers in a similar fashion to the one above, and these photographs exist in abundance from the genocidal phase. Quite contrary to the Herero warfare, as portrayed in the narratives spurred by Germans, it was German colonial officials and soldiers who regarded African women as the ‘loot’ of the war, which has, in many instances, been staged for the camera.¹³⁷

What is troubling about figure 6 is how the photographed women remain anonymous, without names, exact dates or any further information, and it appears impossible to reconstruct the specific conditions under which the image was taken. However, relegating our view to the broader historical context in which the image production was embedded, we learn that the German colonial regime erected prisoners-of-war and internments camps to organise the custody of the prisoners all

133 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 50.

134 *Ibid.*, 9.

135 *Ibid.* 51, 59.

136 Yet, the position of the women remains unclear. We cannot ascertain whether they were Herero or Nama or even how or if they were involved in the war.

137 Jürgen Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner: staatlicher Machtanspruch und Wirklichkeit im kolonialen Namibia* (Münster, Hamburg, Berlin: Lit, 2002), 45; Krüger, “Bestien und Opfer,” 149.

throughout the 'Schutzgebiet'.¹³⁸ From these camps, captives were sent to conduct forced labour for the military, the construction of the railway or for companies such as the Woermann shipping line.¹³⁹ Since 1905, civilians were legally allowed to "rent out" prisoners to work in their private businesses, households and on farms.¹⁴⁰ Thus, it is conceivable that prisoners of war were also forced to labour on Frauenstein; however, this could neither be confirmed nor refuted through my oral and archival research.

African women were in a particularly vulnerable position at the time of the war, in terms of gender relations, the racial discrimination that they experienced and due to their role as an important work force of the agricultural sector (due to the shortage of 'manpower').¹⁴¹ Casper W. Erichsen writes that "there was a *de facto* state of lawlessness, a situation that many settlers and soldiers quickly succumbed to," implying that African women were forced into prostitution; they were raped, largely without consequences for the perpetrator or they experienced other forms of gender-based violence.¹⁴² This state of lawlessness and social hierarchy largely continued beyond the genocidal period. While the prisoner-of-war status was formally lifted in April 1908, with the end of the war, many Africans still found themselves forced to remain in their previous labour positions and a state of coercion and exploitation prevailed.¹⁴³

Shifting our attention to the position of women in the colonial society at large reveals how, despite structural differences, the patriarchal, capitalist structures also imposed a threat to German women.

138 Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner*, 45.

139 Erichsen, *The Angel of Death*, 59; Krüger, "Bestien und Opfer," 154.

140 Erichsen, *The Angel of Death*, 47; Krüger, "Bestien und Opfer," 154; Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner*, 45.

141 Ingrid Grienig, "Von 'Melkweibern,' 'Hirtenweibern,' 'Küchenweibern' in Deutsch-Südwestafrika Zu Landarbeiterfrauen in Namibia: Eine Historische Betrachtung," *Forschungsinstitut Der Internationalen Wissenschaftlichen Vereinigung Weltwirtschaft Und Weltpolitik (IWWWW) Berichte* 88 (1999): 61–71, my translation.

142 Erichsen, *The Angel of Death*, 86.; However, Hartman reminds us to bear in mind that even within these social hierarchies, "consensual sexual interaction" was possible (Hartmann, "Pictures Explored," 76). He explains how besides "the highly predatory sexual behaviour of German troops, [...] a rather unknown and deep history of consensual romantic, erotic and conjugal relationships also existed between immigrant European men and local women since the 1850s." (Ibid.). While it is important to acknowledge that African women claimed such loopholes for the exertion of agency, on a structural level, they remained the "weakest link in the social hierarchy" of the colony (Grienig, "Von 'Melkweibern,' 'Hirtenweibern,' 'Küchenweibern' in Deutsch-Südwestafrika," 71, my translation).

143 Erichsen, *The Angel of Death*, 119; Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner*, 183.

*All these military men – they cannot be up to any good. Such visits in the past have been restricted to small patrols of two or three or half a dozen soldiers at a time; and God knows what havoc they left behind. What lies ahead today cannot be imagined.*¹⁴⁴

Brink's suggestive writing of 'visiting men' at Frauenstein prompts us to reflect: What did it mean for a young German woman to live in the colony – and on the farm – in a time of conflict, aggression, chaos, war and in its aftermath? From the debate on women's roles in warfare and academic controversy about settler women's complicity in patriarchal, colonialist social relations, we learn how 'white' women were implicated in colonial politics and discourse.¹⁴⁵ However, I do not intend to further unpack the exact levels of their implication in general or Pilet's role in particular, but instead will explore how engaging the archive can cater to an understanding of a life – and where the limits of this practice are.

4.5: Gender Roles and Relations on Frauenstein After the War

From archival files we learn that Lisbet was 27 when she became a widow. She returned to Germany for about a year after the traumatic events at Frauenstein, as documented in Moritz Pilet's estate files kept in the National Archives of Namibia (NAN) and as outlined in a letter by his father, addressed to the Imperial German Colonial Office:

Since the necessity of my son's widow's journey home has been certified by a doctor, I have no doubt that her health has suffered considerably as a result of the mental excitement and the physical strain she endured during her imprisonment, as one can imagine. For this reason, it is probably best if she returns to Germany for the time being and recovers mentally and physically from all the terrible things.¹⁴⁶

From an exchange of letters between Lisbeth Pilet and Helene von Falkenhausen, the well-known headmistress of the colonial school in Witzenhausen and, later, the teaching farm in Brakwater, it becomes visible that, with the deaths of their husbands (Friedrich von Falkenhausen perished during the early days of the war, too), both widows were in a precarious situation. Uncertain about where to go and how to sustain themselves, von Falkenhaus reached out to Pilet:

144 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 27.

145 For a more detailed account on "the complicity thesis," see: Dietrich, *Weisse Weiblichkeiten*, 283–294.

146 My translation, NAN, NLA 100, P:11.

Major von Francois wrote to my parents-in-law to ask for provisional support of 3,000 M – from this I conclude that Mrs von Francois received this. I only received 600 M. Have you already received a sum of money from somewhere? I would never beg for myself, but I must think of the children. [...] What am I to do now! Could you, dear Mrs. Pilet, give me some advice?¹⁴⁷

In another letter, von Falkenhausen wrote:

I would also appreciate it if you could tell me what your father-in-law thinks about the compensation issue. And whether he thinks that it would be diplomatically correct if we now published some things that we would not like to conceal. For example, the support of the government now etc.¹⁴⁸

In her desperate need for financial support, von Falkenhausen was willing to exert public pressure against the colonial offices and to speak out publicly about the lack of support that she experienced – but her letter remains vague about her exact criticism. The compensation commission did eventually reimburse both women for the 'damages' of the war.¹⁴⁹ Lisbeth received a payment in 1906 but, one year prior, her economic insecurity and her father-in-law's coercion pushed her to return to Frauenstein, as we learn from Otto Pilet's statement archived in the NAN estate files:¹⁵⁰

I have a determined hope and intend to persuade my son's widow by all means that, as soon as her state of health is satisfactory again, she will return to the Schutzgebiet in order to take charge of the reconstruction of everything that has been destroyed there.¹⁵¹

Through the perspective of a German man by the name of DM Quaas, we find out more about the pressure that Otto Pilet exerted onto his daughter-in-law:

I also know that you are not on good terms with your husband's relatives; that your father-in-law almost literally forced you to go back to Südwest to save some of the capital. I also know that some of your husband's debts from the past have been added to your load. You are expected to get out what is possible from the farm and in doing so you poor woman will accomplish nothing. You will never get out

147 My translation, StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_013.

148 My translation, StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_014.

149 According to Kleinau and Gippert, von Falkenhausen used a part of her compensation money, which she received after the war, to build the teaching farm Brakwater. See: Gippert and Kleinau, *Bildungsreisende und Arbeitsmigrantinnen*, 233.

150 StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_058.

151 My translation, NAN, NLA 100, P.11.

the money that had once been invested. Even more so as a single woman, without support.¹⁵²

The letter by Quaas deserves closer attention. It is revealing with regards to Lisbeth's economic situation as well as the paternalism and patriarchal pressure to which she was subjected. Quaas chummed up to her upon learning about Pilet's return to the colony. In response to her rejection, he writes in an aggressive and offended tone on 2 September 1905:

My dear Mrs Pilet,

I hurry to answer your letter. Your lines have simply left me gobsmacked. First of all, that I can obey, you can see from the way you express yourself – poor little woman, do you think that I beg for your friendship? I am neither used to running after women nor to molest women. The best instincts motivated me to offer my friendship and support to the little madame that I simply liked since I saw her for the first time. I know which sorrow you have! Everywhere I asked about you because I was interested in you [...] – These were my impulses that encouraged me to ask for your friendship, then came your [indecipherable] perhaps beautiful [indecipherable] qualities. But as I said before, I don't beg for it, have unfortunately been spoiled far too much. So you are pushing me back. – Very well, you little foolish woman; you will have to regret it, I promise you! So I will not torment you any longer. [...]

So you deceived me and played with me. Women love to play. Dear little woman, I will give you one more piece of advice. Be careful at the game. If you meet a man who does not have my character, you could lose your game thoroughly.¹⁵³

While we have no access to Pilet's initial letter, we learn from Quaas' reply that she resolutely rejected him, to which he responded aggressively. In the letters of the estate, we find further instances in which women had to push back against obtrusive men. There were others who reached out to Pilet shortly after her return, expressing their interest in the widow and, additionally, in Pilet's female friends and family members report in letters how they were struggling to reject unwanted suitors.¹⁵⁴

152 My translation, StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_072_01-03.

153 Ibid.

154 See, for example, the letter by a certain Mr. Ohmstede who expresses his wish to meet Pilet (StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_064). We then learn from von Falkenhausen about Helene Dömski who rejected her suitor G. Paarschen which seemingly left her future uncertain; other examples are letters by Ms. Brandenburg who asks Ms. Pilet directly to help her fend off a wooer by the name of Pogel/Pagel (StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_006) or by Liese Töpfer who writes about her discomfort being under pressure to be with a rich man by the name of Werder whom she decides to leave. See: StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_411.

In *The Other Side of Silence*, the theme of encroaching men, threatening the physical and mental integrity of women, emerges as a central trope.¹⁵⁵

*And so to Frauenstein, colossal against the shimmering black sky (arrival always seemed to occur at night). [...] Into which, at long intervals, bedraggled individuals or bands of marauding soldiers, hunters, smouse or remittance men from distant mines would stumble in search of shelter or refreshment. And under cover of darkness the most intrepid, or drunk, or desperate of these would find among the inmates some not too utterly irredeemable with whom to disport themselves; and if even then a face would appear too repulsive the act could be performed from behind, as must be the wont of men more used to quadrupeds anyway.*¹⁵⁶

*He pushes out his chair, takes a moment to steady himself with his hands on the high back, and begins to move in slow measured strides towards the nearest cluster of women against the wall. He stops to wipe his perspiring forehead with a large kerchief drawn, not without effort, from his pocket. Beaming the goodwill of the conqueror, he raises the chin of the first woman, briefly studies her face, moves on to the next. [...] By the time he reaches the fifth or sixth woman his comportment has become more brazen. He no longer merely lifts a head or a hand or pinches an earlobe but palpates a breast, tweaks a nipple, forces a knuckle between the lips of the woman in front of him. The tweaks become fiercer as he moves on. One woman moans lightly in pain. He raises his other hand to pinch both nipples. This time she makes no sound, but her face grows very white. When he comes to the twelfth woman he orders her to turn round and fondles her buttocks, grunts, moves on. At the next he grips with both hands the high collar of her dark dress and rips it open, exposing her breasts. In a reflex movement the woman tries to cover them with her hands. Von Blixen slaps her very hard across the face.*¹⁵⁷

The numerous sexual assaults that Brink imagines in his novel are appalling. Frauenstein, the asylum for the most destitute of the colonial society is also their prison in which no protection is given when, on frequent visits, soldiers rape the inhabitants.¹⁵⁸

Studying Pilet's estate with a view to passages such as the one above illuminates the most sinister – albeit elusive – resonances between Brink's fiction and the archival documents on Frauenstein. In various notes and letters, we find clues about (groups of) men residing at Frauenstein. Possible reasons for this could be the long

155 This refers to Black and 'white' women alike. While this passage here speaks more directly to the danger of men for German women at Frauenstein, *The Other Side of Silence* also attends to the abuse and violence that African women endured during colonial rule (cf. the fate of Kahapa's wife or Himba's wife and children).

156 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 12, emphasis in original.

157 *Ibid.*, 31.

158 *Ibid.*

distances between settlements with little infrastructure in the arid landscape, where stops and overnight stays on settler farms were common. Additionally, there was a police station in Neudamm, close to Frauenstein, which might have been an important destination for travelling soldiers. However, many clues are suggestive with regards to the nature of the visits on the farm. One example is a letter by First Lieutenant and Adjutant of the Commandery Hans Richter, written in 1905:

Dear Mrs Pilet,

In reply to your very kind letter, I take the liberty of informing you of the following: I have just 'flashed' to Ongeama that on 10 August 9 men have to go to Frauenstein as a crew. If you later wish to have all 16 men as a crew, please let me know. For the time being, I have not transferred all the people to Frauenstein, because I believe it would cause you too much inconvenience with the space.

At the next opportunity I will send you another beautiful woman, please let me know when a wagon is coming to Windhoek. I am delighted with Bertha's behaviour.¹⁵⁹

Richter's writing raises a plethora of questions: how and why did Pilet attend to this number of men lodging at Frauenstein? Were other women there with her and, if yes, why? What is the story of the "beautiful woman" that was being sent to Frauenstein and why does a man judge another woman's behaviour (Bertha) in his letter to Pilet? Further clues in the estate prompt similar questions. A woman by the name of Anna Schlitzing recurrently enquired about women who were sent to Frauenstein – one being Vera von Werthern (born von Cleve) who apparently grew up in difficult circumstances and to whom Frauenstein became a temporary parental home.¹⁶⁰ In another letter, Schlitzing speaks about Pilet's role in offering refuge for German women while they were searching for stable workplaces. One example is the case of Fräulein Gerdes who is said to have had a bad experience (the "affair Voigts"), did not get any help by the Women's League and eventually found asylum at Frauenstein.¹⁶¹ We also encounter the writing of a man by the name of Rüttekrüger who seeks accommodation for his bride:

As far as my bride's apprenticeship is concerned, [...] it is very important to me that my bride is well accommodated for a few months and therefore I would be very grateful to you if Fräulein could be in your house [...] In my opinion, it is precisely this, the simple and practical running of a household, that is important for a housewife.¹⁶²

159 My translation, StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_075.

160 StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_080.

161 StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_081.

162 My translation, StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_078.

My attempts to clarify the nature of the women's visit at Frauenstein have remained largely unsuccessful. The present owner, Stöck, was not able to shed light on the significance of their stays either, but she recalled a rumour that the neighbours on farm Ongeama were running an "Elevenschule" (teaching farm) where new, young settlers were taught how to farm and how to run the household in the colony. This information cannot be ascertained and the connection between this farm school and Frauenstein remains opaque. We are left with these suggestive clues in the estate; the traces of nebulous residencies (of both men and women) on Frauenstein reoccur in a time span of about 20 years.

How did Pilet re-establish her life at the farm after the traumatic death of her husband? From the social structures and the conditions of farm life in the colony, we can deduce that the return to the isolated farm would have hardly been possible for her alone. In 1906, she was engaged again, and her future husband was the previous farm owner of Oruhungu and the temporary farm manager of Frauenstein, Arthur Otto, born in Pirna an der Elbe.¹⁶³ While I was unable to trace photographs of Lisbeth and her first husband Moritz, Allan Williams was in possession of two pictures that showed Lisbeth and her new partner – the only two images, apart from the newspaper article we saw previously, that showed her face and gave her name.



Figure 7: Scan of photograph, courtesy of Allan Williams.

163 NAN, BWI 175 L5DA65; Stöck, pers. comm. 17 August 2019. We can deduce that the couple had already been engaged in 1906 from Schultze-Moderow's caption for the images taken at Frauenstein, in which he writes: "Frau Lisbeth Pilet [jetzt Frau Otto] Herr Otto und ich. August 1906."



Figure 8: Scan of photograph, courtesy of Allan Williams.

The scans of these two photographs (figure 7 and figure 8) came to me via de-tours. I have spent months studying the 200 photographs from Pilet's estate, trying to identify which one of the faces is hers until I learnt from Williams that, while he was moving homes, two images had escaped his attention and did not make it into the package that he had shipped to Germany. On the back of one of these pictures (figure 8), we see an inscription written in pencil, "Herr u. Frau Otto." It shows the couple on a coach, seemingly leaving farm Frauenstein. With the saluting men in the background in figure 7 and their neat clothing, I am inclined to speculate that this might have been their wedding day, which was held in March 1910.¹⁶⁴ Lisbeth appears rather young and, in the estate, photographs of younger women in the early 1900s are rare. The wedding could have been a special moment worth capturing with the camera. However, the images do not provide any context or additional information.

164 This we can glean from greeting cards and other letters that had been sent to congratulate the newly married couple. See: StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040.

In the BAB, I encountered two further photographs that also offer a glimpse into the lives of Lisbeth and Arthur Otto. Yet again, the lighting and quality of the photographs do not allow me to recognise them fully.



Figure 9: BAB, AO3.

Figure 9 is part of the photo album AO3, positioned a couple of pages before the image of 'white' soldiers posing with the three African women (figure 6). We see a group of men and Lisbeth as the only woman at a dining table in front of the farmhouse. However, being overexposed and without a caption, it is only through comparative reading that we can discern the place as Frauenstein, possibly with its inhabitants. The BAB offers another reference point for this. In album MO2 by Kurt Schultze-Moderow, a military officer in the 4th Battalion, we find another blurry photograph shot from a distance. It shows the farmhouse and the album owner posing on the veranda with Lisbeth and Arthur Otto. The captions read "August 1906. 1. Reise mit Papa," "Farm Frauenstein" and "Frau Lisbeth Pilet [jetzt Otto] Arthur Otto und ich! August 1906" (figure 10).

Schultze-Moderow was a military officer in GSWA from 1904 to 1910.¹⁶⁵ The BAB is in possession of 8 photo albums with around 310 photographs, postcards and additional printed and handwritten documents, both on and about GSWA, as well as photographs and postcards on German East-Africa, Aden, the Suez Canal and life

165 BAB, PA.52.

in Germany.¹⁶⁶ What strikes the eye when studying the albums is their careful compilation: the neatly pasted and arranged photographs are often accompanied with captions, names, comments and dates, all of them underlined in altering colours. The album assembles single portrait photographs of Africans, German soldiers (including Schultze-Moderow and his father) posing with lined-up Africans, settlers and soldiers on farms or in front of colonial houses and, again, many photographs with what appears to be pornographic or ethnographic aesthetics. What does the meticulous fabrication of this private album tell us about the significance and function of archived photography from the colonial era?



Figure 10: BAB, MO2.

We have explored how the practice of designing a photo album is traditionally a gendered undertaking in earlier chapters. It is often the mother who is intuitively identified as the compiler of family photo albums.¹⁶⁷ The act of crafting a family photo album is a way for mothers to construct a family identity, a sense of belonging and togetherness that is expected to prevail. However, Martha Langford indicates

166 Ibid., inventory description.

167 Langford, *Suspended Conversations*, 26–27.

that the act of photographing is usually “assigned to the head of the nuclear family” – the father – whom Pierre Bourdieu identifies as “the children’s historian.”¹⁶⁸ This aspect warrants further attention with regards to Schultze-Moderow.

The captions in figure 10 indicate that major Friedrich Schultze-Moderow was with his son during the journey to Frauenstein, prompting the assumption that he might have been the photographer. Kurt Schultze-Moderow continued the visual documentation of the father-son journey and his further travels as a soldier in the colony. Developing the images afterwards, assembling, pasting and inscribing them appears to be a practice to both craft and safeguard his personal adventure narrative. Langford perceives of the act of composing a photo album as memory work, with the album functioning as the “mnemonic framework” that keeps memories alive and accessible.¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, it preserves the structures of oral tradition: compilers curate and select photographs to “use them figuratively to emblemize the stories of their lives.”¹⁷⁰ In this vein, Schultze-Moderow’s photographic practice and memory work allow him to claim author- and ownership over his service in the colonies. It might function as a tool to pass on these narratives to viewers and listeners, to produce knowledge of the past and construct a sense of identity as a soldier. However, the sexually suggestive photos raise the question of how *private* the private album was intended to be. Who were these albums for? Family members and friends? The public eye? Or was it a purely private mnemonic book for self-affirmation, pleasure and entertainment?

While the original significances of Schultze-Moderow’s photographs and his album cannot be retrieved, they can bear new meaning for viewers today. In this study, figure 10 allows for contemplation on the life of Lisbeth Otto. From the frequent visits of soldiers such as Schultze-Moderow,¹⁷¹ we can glean that Otto regularly socialised and was closely entangled with the colonial settler society. Her home Frauenstein emerges as a place of heightened mobility for various members of this community.

From the early days of German settlement, over a period of several decades, that much we know, it was extensively rebuilt into its present shape; but its purpose has remained obscure. A country residence for some fabulously rich retired dignitary or general from Bismarck’s army (or even the Iron Chancellor himself!)? A grandiose fortress against enemies real or imaginary? A vast prison for Hereros, Ovambos, Damars or Namas captured in the colony’s neverending wars and raids, or even for invaders from elsewhere in Africa or abroad? A hunting lodge for huge parties disembarking from the Reich to decimate the

168 Ibid., 26.

169 Ibid., 21.

170 Ibid., 20–21.

171 Or the many other colonial officials who left their *carte-de-visite* or thanked Otto for her hospitality in their letters.

*fauna of the interior on a scale not even the British could match? A religious retreat and sanctuary? A house of sexual extravagance? Or did whoever embarked upon it simply lose himself (it could only have been a 'he') in the crazy excess of the act of building it for its own sake?*¹⁷²

In Brink's imagination, "Frauenstein was too vast for its inhabitants" – the huge "ship stranded in the desert" from his novel differs starkly from the rather simple farmhouse that it was during Otto's days.¹⁷³ We learn from the estate that it had 6 rooms: a kitchen, a store, a farm building, a cattle barn and additional farm facilities.¹⁷⁴ After the wedding in 1910, according to a family friend, Major General Beukes, "Mr. Otto has brilliantly restored the farm that was devastated by the Herero uprising; the domesticity there is exemplary."¹⁷⁵ In addition to the regular visits from soldiers and settlers, Lisbeth's siblings Max and Helene Dömski repeatedly resided on Frauenstein for lengthier stays. From comments in letters and shadowy presences on a number of photographs, we learn about farm workers, whose perspectives remain largely obscured and undocumented. However, we will see how the archive can be activated and made to speak to their experiences later.

There is another kind of void in the life of Otto that matters in terms of preserving her legacy: a recommendation letter in support of the couple's aspirations to adopt a child from Germany reveals that they had no children of their own.¹⁷⁶ However, for reasons that remain unclear, the adoption did not materialise, and with no direct heir, both the Frauenstein house and the private family archive could not be passed on to the next generation. In 1926, Arthur and Lisbeth Otto sold Frauenstein to their neighbours Lossen/Stöck. The couple, in their 40s and 50s, moved to Windhoek where they would make a living from gardening in their backyard, according to oral sources.¹⁷⁷ The resonances between Brink's fiction and Otto's life do not end, even in spite of their leaving Frauenstein.

4.6: Living Archives

Both, Brink's novel and the estate incline us to think about the power dynamics to which Black and 'white' women were subjected – questions which remain relevant beyond the official end of German colonial rule in Namibia. Moreover, *The Other Side*

172 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 11.

173 *Ibid.*, 283.

174 NAN, NLA 100. P:11.

175 StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_004.

176 *Ibid.*

177 Stöck, pers. comm., 17 August 2019; Rooi, pers. comm., 7 February 2020.

of *Silences* opens up avenues for the reflection on the moral responsibilities of archival and biographical work:

*All those documents, the old copies of Afrika Post, the correspondence, the registers from Frauenstein, the police records; and yet armed with no more than a name only half released by history – Hanna X – what is there to conclude? [...] all my enquiries – begun in Windhoek, pursued in Bremen and Hamburg, afterwards resumed in Namibia – could only end in conjecture. But having come so far, I cannot now turn back or abandon the quest. [...] I have little choice but to imagine the rest. A narrative accumulates its own weight and demands its own conclusion. [...] Before Hanna X is restored to the silence from which she emerged, there has to be a final chapter.*¹⁷⁸

As is the case in this paragraph, Brink's narrator recurrently interrupts his recount on Hanna X's life with parentheses in which he reflects upon his role as researcher and storyteller. Exploring the archives, following her traces across continents and recounting her narrative for her – all of these engagements come with an emotional charge. They generate an urge to know the end, to complete the story and to provide closure for both narrator and protagonist. As a scholar working on the Dömski family archive, the narrator's thoughts resonate with me, prompting me to reconsider my own position as a researcher studying a life: what are the ethical duties entailed in this kind of work?

Similar to Brink's narrator, we have been following Lisbeth Dömski/Pilet/Otto's traces for many years of her life and this calls for a completion of the biographical circle. While many voids remain, it is death that figures most prominently in archival sources, and it is death that changes the lives of those who prevail. Such is the case when Lisbeth's sister Helene took her own life in 1936. Her state files indicate that she died by gunshot and, in a correspondence between her brothers, Max and Friedrich Dömski, we learn that it was suicide.¹⁷⁹ Records in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia in Windhoek reveal that she was depressed (*Trübsinn*) and the NAN's archival files indicate that she died without many assets, a family or even home of her own (she was living and travelling between Germany, SWA, the US and South Africa).¹⁸⁰ These factors offer food for thought with regards to the situation that brought her to end her life; again, though, the archival fragments do not provide many answers.

There are a number of portrait and studio photographs of Helene from the early 1900s, such as figure 11, which is inscribed with her name and the date 1904. Study-

178 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 301.

179 Letters from Evan Dembskey's family estate.

180 Church records, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia, Windhoek, Sterberg. 22 January 1896–19 May 1940; SWAA 0614, A68.5.1.557; EST 824, 1928.

ing her face closely helps to identify Helene again in another photo from later years, as seen in figure 12.



Figure 11 (left): StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_176.

Figure 12 (right): StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_261.

Helene's death put unexpected forces in motion for those she left behind. As colonial bureaucracy mandated, all siblings had to be contacted to settle inheritance matters. Her modest remaining assets had to be distributed. In the estate files, Lisbeth notes that her brother, Friedrich Dömski, had disappeared in 1903 and was considered dead.¹⁸¹ However, after being contacted by the magistrate office, Friedrich Dömski responds, accepting his part of the inheritance and informing the office about his place of residence, Johannesburg.¹⁸² While the public archive allows us to retrace this point of reconnection, it is the private archive that illuminates the emotional significance of the siblings' reunion after many years of separation. In their letters to Friedrich Dömski, Lisbeth and Max write:

'With mighty fate supernal Man can weave no bond eternal!' The old word says so, and yet a strange twist of fate has made it so that, even though it was a very sad event, the suicide of our good Lene, we were able to seal our brotherly bond anew.¹⁸³

181 NAN, EST 824_1928.

182 NAN, EST 824.

183 Max Dömski's letter from Evan Dembskey's family estate, my translation (and translation of a quote by W.H. Furness 1882).

"The experience with you was certainly the greatest and most beautiful in all these years. I thought you were in Australia, when I used to rave or [indecipherable] not to think that the thought never came to you to give us a sign of life. [...]

You can't believe how happy Max was when he finally found you. He of all people wailed for you, while I was reassured, as I was accustomed to how you always went your own way and after all, our family circumstances were not least to blame for our being torn apart."¹⁸⁴

The latter text is important because it is one of only two sources from the estate that make it possible to access Lisbeth Otto's perspective. Most of the letters are addressed *to* her; hence, her view or her own words remain largely inaccessible. To counteract this, it is vital to explore alternative sources. Through platforms for genealogical research, I learnt that Evan Dembskey, a descendant of Lisbeth's brother Friedrich Dömski, has been studying his family history for many years. While he was able to reconstruct the ancestry for those located in South Africa today, he had almost no information about his great-great-grandfather's siblings. In return for the biographical details on Lisbeth, Helene and Max that I provided, Dembskey forwarded scans of the only relicts in his possession: three photographs of Helene and Max, as well as letters by Lisbeth and Max as shown in the excerpts above.

Our sharing of information, and our joint effort at historical recuperation, prompted me to question the nature of our interest in the past and our impulses for engaging with individual biographies. Facing gaps and silences in transmitted family history, descendants may be tempted to follow the quest for an understanding of one's own identity and positionality. Why am I here, who were *my people*? (And what does this even mean?) How does their story impact on my own identity and where I am today? Eelco Runia writes about our lack of knowledge about the past and the transgenerational memory that calls out to be filled: "Commemoration from scarcity" is the prime symptom of a 'desire for reality,' of an ontological homesickness (*Heimweh*), of a wish to commune with the numinosity of history."¹⁸⁵ Perhaps this "wish to commune with the numinosity of history," this fascination with the past, is not only a personal response in the face of unknown family history; perhaps it says something about our human condition. Being "moved by the past," as Runia terms it, may be a human desire for an understanding of what has shaped our entangled worlds and the lives of individuals who are implicated in the politics of these worlds.¹⁸⁶ Archives seem to remain prevalent as ever-emerging repositories of knowledge in this active engagement with the past to reckon with history. Stuart Hall's concept of "living archives" is once again helpful here. He understands living

184 Lisbeth Otto's letter from Evan Dembskey's family estate, my translation.

185 Runia, *Moved by the Past*, 13, emphasis in original.

186 Reference to Runia's title: *Moved by the Past*.

archives as unfinished and open-ended and argues that their meanings are in constant transition, depending on their usability in the future.¹⁸⁷

In joining our forces in biographical research, Dembskey and I also actively engaged and expanded the archives to which we had access. Sending notes, information and scans across continents, we extended the itineraries of the archival material. We contemplated the potential 'facts' and fictions that it hosted, speculating on what separated the siblings, what their ideological stances were and how they renegotiated their different realities and positionalities as a dispersed family.¹⁸⁸ In many regards, our work resonates with Brink's practice of narrative production based on archival research. As descendants, authors and academics, we are lured by the archive's promise to harbour hidden stories waiting to be unearthed (and told).

The clues brought forth by our recuperative projects elucidate once again how death figures prominently in archival documents. Arthur Otto's estate files indicate that he died in 1956 in Swakopmund as a result of colon cancer.¹⁸⁹ The executor of his will, guardian of the estate and trustee Toussaint states how the couple lived in a two-room flat with a kitchen. Apart from a few pieces of furniture, Arthur Otto bequeathed his wife with barely any remaining assets.¹⁹⁰ At the age of 78, Lisbeth Otto became a widow for the second time, staying alone in the coastal town, far away from friends and contacts in Windhoek or her few family members in South Africa and Germany. The occasional letter kept them in contact. Amongst these is a rather outstanding correspondence which is rare to find in private archives of German settlers – and rare to find in any archive really. In my hands, I held a small stack of letters, cramped into one envelope (figure 13). A correspondence between Lisbeth and the "Damara woman Rosa and Rosine Xoagus," dating back to the period between 1958 and 1959.¹⁹¹

In the envelope, I found the only letter in the estate written by Lisbeth Otto herself. From the correspondence in Afrikaans and German, we can glean that Rosa had been employed by the Otto family as a domestic worker and worked for the couple for many years. With exuberant affectation and loving words, Rosa as well as her daughter Rosine, report on their jobs in Windhoek (nursing), their health, their family and how much they miss the "nete vrou" in their lives. This term recurrently appears throughout the letters, appearing either to be a nickname or a kind of mixed translation from the German "nett" (nice) and Afrikaans "vrou" (woman). Seemingly,

187 Stuart Hall, "Constituting an Archive," 89–91

188 Friedrich Dömski's descendants speculate that, because Friedrich had helped the British during the Boer War, he was disowned by the German side of the family. Dembskey, pers. comm. via email, 7 December 2019.

189 NAN, EST 1388 357/1956.

190 Ibid.

191 StA Freiburg, T1 Zugang 2019/0040_408, my translation.

there is a strong sense of devotion in the women's writing, which emerges not only from the language, but also from the letters' content: Rosa and Rosine express their desire to see Lisbeth again; they describe having approached other German speakers to inquire about her whereabouts in the endeavour to reach out to her. ("What do I have to do to see you [...] Dear nete vrou, do not think that I have forgotten you. Your words and deeds still shine in my heart like the sun. I cannot forget this. I went to Mr. Srader to get your address."¹⁹²). However, I felt wary about taking the words at face value, mindful of the power relations between domestic workers and their employers. The sense of devotion might as well be enacted as a means to an end: we learn in the letters that Rosa and Rosine are trying to locate a "posboek" (postbook, most likely a savings account) of which they cannot get hold, as it is kept by another German-Namibian by the name of Schrader.¹⁹³



Figure 13: SA, Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_408.

While the letters initially conjured up more questions than they provided answers, this unlikely archival fragment allowed for a crucial opening in my study on Lisbeth Otto's family estate, as well as for broader issues relating to practices of knowledge production based on archival research. In an autobiographical essay interrogating his own settler family's past as reflected in archival formations, Namibian historian Dag Henrichsen asks: "Where are the full names or memories, perhaps even some of the letters of the African domestic workers societies that surrounded each of my Namibian family generations and by which they were very ob-

192 My translation, StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_407_06.

193 StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_407_01; StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_408_03.

viously shaped?”¹⁹⁴ Drawing attention to such voids in the private archives of settler societies, Henrichsen laments the lack of comprehensive studies with regards to the lives and biographies of domestic workers in Namibia.¹⁹⁵ His critique resonates with a point raised in chapter 1 in reference to Ena Jansen’s observation of the “textual silence” around the lives and experiences of Black domestic workers, which she considers “proof of the silence and violence of *all* archives.”¹⁹⁶ However, Henrichsen stresses that it is precisely the critical interrogation of structural silences that activates the archive’s dynamics, as it uncovers alternative histories and counter-narratives.¹⁹⁷

Postus 346
Windhoek.
18. 11. 59.

Lieve meke vrou.
Dit gaan goed met ons.
En ek hoop om die selfde gesondheid
van u te hoor. Dit is regtig lank laas
dat ek van u gehoor het. En ek ver-
lang na u, om weer te gesels en
iets nuets te hoor. Ons het nog nie
goeie reën gehoor nie. En dit is baie
swaam by ons. Ek is ook nog siek
my heet is nog nie heeltemal gesond
nie. En Remus se kind is ook siek
en met hom is ek in die Hospitaal.
En ek wonder self maar weet nie, wat
om te doen nie. Hoe moet ek maak om
met u mekaar gesig te sien. Om dat
ek nie met sich kind kan gaan
luise nie. Houwe meke vrou maek nie
denk ek het u vergeet nie. U worde
en doen dinge blink nog alltyd en
my hart sees die son. Ek kan dat nie
vergeet nie. Ek was by Protrader gewes om
gans van u adres te verneem. Maar toe
het chulle gesê meke vrou antwoord nie

Figure 14: StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_407_06.

194 Dag Henrichsen, “Ovandoitji – Geteilte Und Gespaltene Archive,” in *Koloniale Vergangenheit- Postkoloniale Zukunft? Die Deutsch-Namibischen Beziehungen Neu Denken*, eds. Henning Melber and Kerstin Platt (Frankfurt a.M.: Brandes & Apsel, 2022), 188, my translation.

195 *Ibid.*, 189.

196 Jansen, *Like Family*, 5, emphasis in original.

197 Henrichsen, “Ovandoitji – Geteilte Und Gespaltene Archive,” 188.

Together with the Namibian historian Henrichsen, I embarked on a mission to fill these silences and find the descendants of Rosa and Rosine Xoagus. Our point of entry was the NBC radio station in Windhoek. With the help of a journalist at the Damara broadcast section, we were able to send out a call summarising what little information we had gleaned from the letters as well as our motivation for this search. Miraculously, we received several phone calls within a few hours. One of the very early responses came from Immanuel Rooi, who indeed turned out to be the son of Rosine Rooi, born Xoagus. To my great surprise, Immanuel told me that his mother was still alive, and they invited us to their home in Katutura. With copies and translations of the old letters in our hands, we arrived the following weekend and were welcomed warmly by Rosine and her son, his wife and their two children on 7 February 2020.

At the time of our encounter, Rosine Rooi was 85 years old and was seated in a wheelchair. Suffering from heavy diabetes, she lost her legs and much of her eyesight, but she spoke in a lively manner with us about the past and was curious to hear what we could report about Lisbeth Otto. For a large part of our conversation, Rooi addressed me in German, which she had learnt from the Otto family. As a group, we switched between English, German and Afrikaans, while the family conversed mainly in Damara which was then translated for us into English.

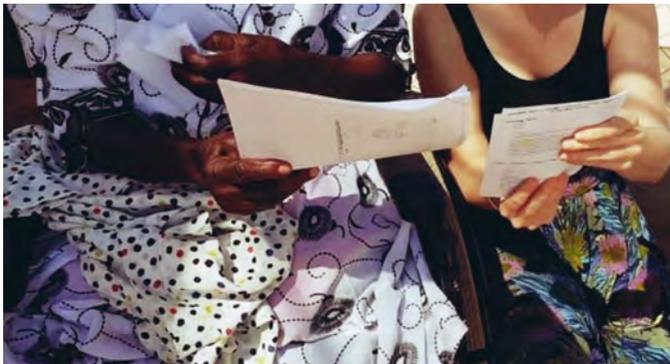


Figure 15: Rosine Rooi and Julia Rensing, February 2020 in Windhoek. Photograph by Dag Henrichsen.¹⁹⁸

198 After carefully considering the ethics of reproducing images of deceased individuals, I decided not to print the photograph of the encounter between Rosine Rooi and me described above. Taking into account the moral issue of 'consent' discussed in chapter 2, I felt it was more appropriate to focus on our joint handling and reading of the scanned letters instead.

The conversation became emotional when I unpacked the copies of the letters from the late 1950s. More than 60 years after the letters were written, Rosine Rooi saw her mother's and her own texts again – and, for the first time, she would read Lisbeth Otto's response letter, which never reached her (figure 15).

Reasons for this can be found in the text: in Afrikaans, Rooi writes: "Our location is about to move. And we get written how much our house is worth. But nothing more is said."¹⁹⁹ In the late 1950s, the 'white' apartheid regime forcibly removed Black people from the urban spaces as part of their measures to reinforce residential segregation and to "seal off" the 'white' population.²⁰⁰ Residents of the 'Old Location' in the capital Windhoek were moved to an area further to the north of the town – Katutura, which translates to "a place where we do not belong."²⁰¹

At the sight of the texts, Rosine Rooi was reminded of the old days, reminiscing with heavy sighs how she wrote the letter at the *old locasie*, with her pens at their table in their former house.²⁰² As triggers of memory, the letters seem to have taken her back to a home lost, a place that is no more.²⁰³ She sighed and laughed at the sight of Lisbeth's response, which Henrichsen translated into Afrikaans. Rosine Rooi learned about Otto's sadness and her fatigue with life at the prospect of staying alone as a widow in a small house in Swakopmund. Otto complained about her deteriorating health and her desire to find her peace, buried next to her late husband. Hearing this, Rooi nodded in apprehension and hummed with compassion. A similar notion of sympathy emanated from her letters to Mrs. Otto. Rooi's affectionate way of addressing Otto in the letters and speaking about her during my visit suggested a sense of intimacy between the women. However, lines of division run through these narratives, disclosing what was introduced in chapter 1 as a "tension between proximity and distance" that defines the relation between domestic workers and employers in Namibia.²⁰⁴ In reference to Ena Jansen, we have explored previously how, in Southern Africa, the system of paid domestic work has impacted on all lives – albeit in different ways.²⁰⁵ This figures either by "the *presence* of an often motherly carer and cleaner, or by the *absence* of a mother who does paid housework for others," as Jansen notes.²⁰⁶ In the context of Namibia, Hildegard Titus similarly claims that "thousands of black women were responsible for raising white children while their own were left

199 StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_407_08, my translation.

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

201 Ibid.; Mushaandja, "Ons Dala Die Ding by Odalate Naiteke: The Curative, Performance and Publicness in Katutura," 68.

202 Rosine Rooi, pers. comm. 7 February 2020.

203 De Sas Kropiwnicki, *Exile Identity, Agency and Belonging*, 60.

204 Schmidt-Lauber, 'Die Ehemaligen Kolonialherren,' 232, my translation.

205 Jansen, *Like Family*, 2.

206 Ibid.

in the care of someone else.”²⁰⁷ Rosa and Rosine Xoagus had to juggle such a situation. After school, Rosine would go to the Ottos' house in Klein Windhoek and help her mother in the kitchen or with the laundry until both could go home together.²⁰⁸ In our conversation, she stated how Mrs. Otto was not working, while her husband had a big garden to farm and sell vegetables and fruits – which he often shared with Rosine.²⁰⁹

With reference to Mary Louise Pratt, Jansen explores the importance of “contact zones” in the lives of domestic workers and their employers.²¹⁰ The notions of proximity and distance co-existed at the same time in such zones – in the kitchen or in the garden, for example.²¹¹ The employer's home is an intimate space, in which conversations and negotiations can take place in close proximity, while hierarchies remain largely intact, as it seems to have been the case in Klein Windhoek. Rosine Rooi recounts how Lisbeth Otto “always made jokes,” one example being that Lisbeth would point to Rosa's hands and remind her to take more toilet paper – a recurring situation that they apparently had all been laughing about, according to Rooi.²¹² She would further stress that the women talked about everything, even the war in Germany, whereby Lisbeth told Rosa that she would have certainly died if she had been in the country at that time.²¹³ While these stories appeared as harmless memories for Rosine – judging from her laughter and joy – I could not help but wonder about the racist undertones in the statements. The stories reminded me of Schmidt-Lauber's observations that daily condescension and complaints by the employers were common, especially about their employee's cleanliness.²¹⁴

While Rosine Rooi repeatedly stressed that both Lisbeth Otto and her husband were friendly people, we find various clues indicating the persistence of dividing lines in their relations. Shifting the view to the estate's sources elucidates how the language used in the letters perpetuates a distinct power hierarchy. In their letters, Rosa and Rosine Xoagus addressed Lisbeth Otto formally (the Afrikaans “U”), and they alternate between the seemingly devote markers “Dear Missies” or “liewe vrou.” In comparison, it is noticeable that Lisbeth Otto addresses both women informally

207 Mukaiwa, “Titus' 'Without Question' Explores Intricacies of Black Servitude.”

208 Rooi, pers. comm. 7 February 2020.

209 Rosine Rooi remembered – as well as Jutta Stöck did – that the garden and the Otto's house was close to the site of St. Paul's College today. I had shown the photograph to some interlocutors living in the area in Klein Windhoek today, who confirmed that the house stood close to the Am Weinberg restaurant, but that it had been torn down.

210 Jansen, *Like Family*, 269.

211 Schmidt-Lauber, “Die Ehemaligen Kolonialherren,” 230, my translation.

212 Rooi, pers. comm., 7 February 2020.

213 Ibid.

214 Schmidt-Lauber, “Die Ehemaligen Kolonialherren,” 230.

(the German “du”/“ihr”) while repeating the prevalent conceptions of ethnic differences of the time (whether voluntarily or on the basis of the policies in force is unclear). By referring to them as “Damara-woman,” she assigns them distinct positions: as representatives of a specific group, and as ‘others’ in comparison – and in distinction – to her ‘whiteness.’²¹⁵

The same can be observed with other fragments from the archive. In the letter to Rosa Xoagus, Otto speaks of a “young girl,” a mother of two who was working for her, but who had to stop after her second pregnancy. We are given a first name – Franziska – but this remains the exception. Franziska’s successor is simply referred to as “an other [girl]” with an emphasis on the fact that this employee did not work to Otto’s satisfaction.²¹⁶ We encounter more clues for the presence of workers who remain anonymous when shifting the attention to the collection of photographs of the estate. We see women in aprons posing for the camera, or groups of workers with animal furs on the farm Frauenstein. At their Windhoek residency, men are constructing the roads and a pavement. Sometimes the camera captures them during the act of working; in other instances, they pause their activities for the photo.²¹⁷ In Klein Windhoek, we see a young man with a large suit standing in front of a house, next to freshly dug up fields in a garden. He faces the camera, one arm placed on his hip. As confirmed by Rosine Rooi, this was the garden of the Otto’s nursery; hence, we may speculate that the man was a gardener in the family business.²¹⁸ The archive’s structural silence on the employees’ identities or Otto’s attribution ‘girl’ to her former domestic worker are in line with common behaviour of ‘white’ employers to infantilise their employees.²¹⁹

Another instance in which the tensions between intimacy and distance come to light is in the frictions between the memories that Rosine shared during our meeting and the content of her letters. In the texts, Rosa and Rosine Xoagus repeatedly stress that they had visited Arthur Otto’s grave to decorate it with flowers, describing it as a beautiful place where Mrs. Otto would soon find eternal rest next to her late husband.²²⁰ In one of these letters, Rosine mentioned the grave numbers – N^o 1941 & 1942, which would be “mooi donker om gebou,” which likely means it is bordered in a nice dark colour. She also visited grave N^o 1104 – the grave of Mr. Otto’s nephew, which had a nice white border.²²¹ In her subsequent letter a couple of weeks later,

215 Ibid., 231.

216 StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_407_03.

217 StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_114 & _115.

218 As confirmed by Rosine Rooi, pers. comm., 7 February 2020.

219 Schmidt-Lauber, “Die Ehemaligen Kolonialherren,” 231; Baderoon, “The Ghost in the House,” 175.

220 StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_407_01-407_08.

221 StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_407_03.

Rosine seemingly wanted to repeat the grave numbers, but only left blank spaces after indicating “dit is N^o ___ en ek het ook no ___ besoek.”²²² Based on the numbers given in the earlier letter, I was able to retrace the graves on the Gammams Cemetery in Windhoek, where Arthur and Lisbeth Otto's graves are still located today. Lisbeth Otto died in 1963, about 4 years after writing her letter to Rosine and Rosa Xoagus. Interestingly, however, in our conversations, Rosine vehemently stressed that she had never been to Arthur Otto's grave, which she repeated when her son approached her later again to confirm this. According to Henrichsen, this seems likely, as access to the cemeteries had been strictly regulated at the time the letters were written. It would have stood out if Black people visited the graveyard, which was conceived for 'whites' only.²²³ When 'non-white' family members went to see the graves of their 'white' relatives in the 50s, they would only do so secretly and with high risks.²²⁴ In light of this, we may assume that Rosa and Rosine Xoagus were rather careful and might have obtained the information from Black gardeners who worked on the cemetery.²²⁵ If the latter is the case, then Henrichsen proposes understanding the discrepancies in Rosine's narratives as a leeway for actions and manoeuvres, instead of memory gaps.²²⁶ Hence, we may speculate that Rosine and Rosa Xoagus mentioned the details about the graves to update Lisbeth Otto, showing that she cared for her and her family, and to confirm their bonds with her. Alternatively, mother and daughter used the acquired details as a reason to reach out to and reconnect with their former employer.

There were further instances in our conversation that complicate an easy understanding of the women's relationship. Rosine Rooi recounts how she visited Lisbeth Otto in Swakopmund for a month and stayed with her at the house: “I lived with her, on the stoep (veranda), she made a place for me,” she explained in Afrikaans.²²⁷ I was puzzled by the fact that Rooi spoke so fondly about this visit in Swakopmund while she was made to sleep on the veranda. Reflecting on her memories, she emphasised the good time both had, sitting in the sun, talking, having tea.²²⁸ It was the Christmas season, and they had spent the festive days together with food and beer. Rosine Rooi remembers how she also used her time in Swakopmund to go to church and visit friends in the location.²²⁹ Reflecting on what I had learnt from my visit, I later approached her son, again with new questions, which he addressed to his mother. Interestingly, in their conversation, Rosine Rooi stressed that she had

222 StA Freiburg, T1 2019/0040_04.

223 Dag Henrichsen, pers. comm. via email, 31 March 2020.

224 Ibid.

225 Ibid.

226 Ibid.

227 Rooi, pers. comm. 7 February 2020, translation Dag Henrichsen.

228 Ibid.

229 Ibid.

never stayed with Mrs. Otto at all. Apparently, the place had been very small, so after spending the day together, Rooi would head to the location where she slept at her friend's house.²³⁰ By 'location,' Rooi most likely refers to the suburb Mondesa, which had been established for Black workers in the 1950s. In light of South African housing policies at the time, it seems rather unlikely that Rosine's friends had a bigger home than Mrs. Otto.

These notions are reflected in Gabeba Baderoon's claims regarding domestic work in South Africa, where she conceived of houses as "places of juncture" that were regulated to the extent that "black domestic workers lived within but at the margins of white private life."²³¹ In this vein, Rosine Rooi's conflicting indications about her sleeping place speak to an insurmountable barrier in inter-racial relations. During the day, spaces were shared by both Black and 'white' as part of their employment relationship. Rosine's and Lisbeth's teatime and leisure conversations on the 'stoep' appear as an exception, one that also confirms the rules that the most private realms (the sleeping room) remained strictly separate, though.

Two considerations resonated particularly strongly with me when revisiting my notes, transcriptions and follow-up conversations with the Rooi family. Firstly, both women used the leeway within the power hierarchies that defined their relations to establish (or to create) a sense of connection. Secondly, I reflected on the nuances that were lost in translation in the meeting in February 2020, which particularly manifested in the ways in which various actors claimed assertively how Rosine and Lisbeth had a friendly relationship. This aspect requires elaboration. As noted previously, we alternated between English, German, Afrikaans and Damara in our conversation. In many instances, Immanuel Rooi and his wife repeated and explained again what Rosine had said, often stressing how Rosine felt affectionately for Lisbeth Otto. However, before my visit, they knew little about the women's relationship or Rosine's connection to the Otto family. Thus, they relied mainly on Rosine's letters as a basis for their interpretation, leading me to wonder: what if Rooi's tone was suggestive? With a view to the hierarchies in place between employer and employee, both sides were likely to adapt certain registers to confirm their distinct positions. The affective tone in Rooi's letters might have been used to suggest compliance with identity politics – a sign that she "understood her place" within their hierarchies – which does not imply that this affection was genuinely felt to the same extent, though.²³² She might have done so to achieve a certain goal, for instance: to get hold of her *posboek* that was in the hold of Mr. Schrader, as explained in her letter.

I was reminded again of how power and language are entangled when Rosine Rooi addressed me. She mainly spoke in my mother tongue, German, and only re-

230 Immanuel Rooi, pers. comm. via WhatsApp, 3 April 2020.

231 Baderoon, "The Ghost in the House," 178.

232 Ibid., 175.

sorted to English or Damara when she lacked vocabulary, prompting me to consider: what narratives and memories would never be shared with me as a 'white' (German) researcher? Which aspects of the women's relationship would not be spoken about to a stranger? My status was clearly puzzling to the family. Recurrently, they suggested that the Otto family must have been my relatives, which would be the reason I was in possession of their private letters and photographs. When I clarified my intentions and the background as to how and why the estate came into my hands, they nodded, but would yet again bring up the same question a little later. These issues certainly impacted on how freely Rosine Rooi and her family would speak about a former employer.

The encounter with the Rooi family made me rethink the politics of 'possession' and 'access,' particularly in relation to an aspect that Immanuel Rooi shared about his own family archive. Together, we had studied a selection of photographs from the estate that lacked contextual information, in the hopes of identifying Rosa. Immanuel did not recognise her in any of the images and regretted not being able to show me the slim possession of photographs that Rosa and Rosine had kept. These remainders from the past had been stolen or were lost, with the result that their family archive was largely inexistent.²³³ Immanuel did not have any photographs of himself or his siblings from when they were children – not to mention the generation preceding his or Rosine's. This condition again underlines the privileges connected with safeguarding, storing and possessing family photo albums and private archives in general. There are broader implications connected to this, relating to questions such as: who can tell which stories? What kind of biographical or genealogical research can be conducted on the basis of archives – or the lack thereof?

I have addressed the structural silence of both private and public archives on the lives of domestic workers previously, and I outlined how this archival silence also shrouds the biographies of Black people in Southern Africa more generally in previous chapters. With regards to Rosa and Rosine Xoagus's experiences with the Otto family, many questions also remain unanswered and this indicates some of the limits of reading archival surfacings as 'counterrecords.'²³⁴ While stepping out of the archive and searching for other openings to attend to the past was crucial, the "status quo" largely remains intact – that is, as Hamilton writes, "the prevailing situation of a myriad of archival restrictions of various kinds."²³⁵ This shows in the fact that, at the end of my stay, I left copies of letters and photos with the Rooi family and would later send better quality images to Rosine's son Immanuel Rooi via WhatsApp so that they could both reread and revisit the material. At that time, the original letters – as part of the whole Wöhler estate – had already been given to the State Archive in

233 Immanuel Rooi, pers. comm., via WhatsApp, 23 July 2022.

234 Loose reference to Arondekar, "Without a Trace," 12.

235 Hamilton, "Archive and Public Life," 127.

Freiburg, which stores the material as part of their repositories today, thereby regulating the access and officially 'owning' it. This situation could not be reversed and the global Coronavirus pandemic broke out shortly after our meeting in February 2020, thereby making it impossible for me to revisit Rosine Rooi. She would never get to hold the original letters in her hand, let alone keep them in her possession or her private archive. Unfortunately, she passed on in July 2021 due to her old age and her long suffering from diabetes.

4.7: The Trouble with the Archive

What struck me as particularly troubling during the process of writing about my archival research and my conversations with the Rooi family was the realisation that the visibility of Black women in the Wöhler/Dömski private archive was only granted through servitude. The ways in which we encounter and read Rosine and Rosa Xoa-gus's letters are framed by the hierarchies of domestic work relations. Similar hierarchies and assigned subject positions constitute the framework through which we encounter the other, often singular and always uncontextualised photographs of Black gardeners, labourers and domestic workers who remain anonymous in the family archive.

Facing this impasse made me confront and acknowledge both the malaise and frustration of the archive. Despite efforts to contest its logic or to escape and undo certain narratives constructed as alleged truths, it seemed impossible to transcend the limits imposed by it as well as by those set by my own perspective. Reflecting on issues of knowledge production, archival access, restitution and justice made me think more deeply about the labour that I was undertaking – engaging and interpreting the archival findings as a scholar of African Studies in Europe. I am producing knowledge on the past that also comes with suggestive truth claims by curating and narrativising the clues that I gleaned from my research and my conversations with Namibian interlocutors. The issue at the heart of this is connected to the politics of voice and representation. The question of perspective impacts my writing about women connected to Frauenstein in general and Rosine Rooi's relationship to Lisbeth Otto in particular.

The question of who writes and speaks about whom has been – and continues to be – a heated and important topic of debate in public, cultural and academic spheres. In this respect, Tracey L. Walters laments how the intersectional oppressions of race, class and gender make it difficult for Black women to "control their own narratives."²³⁶ This statement holds true for many Black women around the globe, across different professions and statuses. Domestic workers' claims to a

236 Walters, *Not Your Mother's Mammy*, 2.

voice and to a broader debate on their experiences remain subdued. Where these were brought to public attention, documented and narrated, it was commonly by 'white' sociologists and anthropologists who assumed the right to represent and to speak about the lives of Black domestic workers.²³⁷ In this respect, Walters' book is a crucial addition to the study of domestic work as represented in the cultural realm because she focuses on how Black artists "reconstruct the subjectivities of domestics" through creative practices.²³⁸ In the context of Namibia, the performances by Hildegard Titus *Without Question?* (2019) and Tuli Mekondjo *O'tee* (2021) or *Ousie Martha* (2023) are important public interventions that attempt to disrupt the ways in which domestic work as Black woman's labour is normalised.²³⁹ Titus and Mekondjo dismantle the colonial and apartheid legacy of domestic work that continues to be racialised and exploitative to this day.

Shifting the view to the ways in which authors and artists draw on the archive is crucial to reflect on different forms of making sense of the past, and it functions as an important bridge for the subsequent analysis of Brink's strategies to 'refigure the archive' as a way to recuperate the voices of those who were marginalised.²⁴⁰ At this point, however, this provokes a question that will be relevant throughout my subsequent analysis: is Brink, by resorting to fiction, able to move beyond the limits imposed by his own perspective as a 'white' writer and by the archives from which he draws? Can the potential of literature (that I was unable to exploit for my own research and writing) challenge the archive's malaise?

4.8: André Brink and The Production of Narrative

In this subchapter, we will shift our focus to André Brink's writing practice in order to explore the politics of crafting a narrative based on archival research and the impulses that drive such creative archival engagements. The questions that guide my analysis are: why excavate a subject from archival depths? Why and how might we construct a story of life from fragments? Why imagine a biography instead of writing an historical account? This latter aspect speaks to a controversy that has been fiercely debated in the humanities for many years: the divide between narrative/lit-

237 Jansen, *Like Family*, 118.

238 For this, she analyses works such as Mary Sibande's *Sophie-Ntombikayise* (2009), or Muholi's *Massa and Mina(h)* (2008). See: Walters, *Not Your Mother's Mammy*, 2.

239 Gabeba Baderoon indicates that this normalisation goes so far that the Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles shows how in South African English the word *maid* denotes both "black woman" and "servant." See: Baderoon, "The Ghost in the House," 173.

240 Reference to Hamilton et al., *Refiguring the Archive*.

erature and historiography.²⁴¹ In the introduction to this book, I have sketched this controversy with reference to Hayden White and his argument that any kind of historical narration contains elements of fiction and different degrees of fictionalisation. In this subchapter, we will once again reflect on the relationship between history writing, narration and the archive to better understand Brink's strategies of fictionalisation. For this, I will explore the sources and archival material from which he draws. To begin our examination, we must return to those moments in *The Other Side of Silence* that speak directly to Hanna X's genesis as an 'archival figure':²⁴²

*Even in well-documented accounts of the men who dominated the turn of the twentieth century in South-West Africa [...] Curt von François (1891–1894), Theodor Leutwein (1894–1904), the infamous Lothar von Trotha (November 1904–November 1905), his less bloody-minded successor Friedrich von Lindequist (1905–1907) – the individuals tend to remain shadowy figures in the background of their own story, obscured by historical facts. [...] Which means that in all these cases documented history still has to be reconstructed, reimagined for a grasp of the identities caught up in it. How much more so the life of someone like Hanna X.*²⁴³

The voice of Brink's narrator echoes what scholars, artists and writers like Brink and his contemporaries lament in their critique of how the histories of colonialism and slavery are written and told. One example being J.M. Coetzee, who states that "orthodox history" is incapable "to give the kind of dense realisation of the texture of life that the novel, or certain kinds of novel, do well," arguing further that history looks at life from the outside, thereby lacking the means to attend to individual experiences, particularly experiences in times of historical crisis.²⁴⁴ In a similar vein, Brink calls for "imagined rewriting of history," to reach beyond facts and to speak to the complexity of the past and the present.²⁴⁵ In the passage above, his narrator specifically emphasises the need for historical reconstruction to attend to the lives of 'someone like Hanna X,' which resonates strongly with frustrations expressed by authors introduced previously – such as Saidiya Hartman and Yvette Christiansë – who search for ways to rediscover 'shadow figures' in the archive and to "represent the lives of the nameless and the forgotten."²⁴⁶ Reflecting on the malaise of the archive that Chris-

241 See, for example: Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); or *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

242 Christiansë, "Heartsore."

243 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 153.

244 J. M. Coetzee, "The Novel Today," *Upstream* 6, no. 1 (1988): 2.

245 Brink, "Stories of History," 30, 37.

246 Christiansë, "Heartsore"; Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 4.

tiansë and Hartmann address, literary scholar Kuisma Korhonen concludes that, since “not all pasts have been documented [...] artistic imagination is an essential supplement to historical discourse when the intention is to give voice to those who are marginalized from the centralized production of knowledge, or to those who are silenced forever.”²⁴⁷ Resorting to narration is necessary to transcend archival limits and silences for these scholars (or scholar-writers). In *The Other Side of Silence*, the narrator similarly works both with and against the archive.²⁴⁸ We encounter him as the agent retracing Hanna X's life in the archive while, at the same time, problematising this work. The narrator lists his sources to signal the scientific depth of his work but, despite these efforts, it remains impossible to attend fully to Hanna X's life within the confinements of the archive. Hanna's biography remains ungraspable as the records and files mainly echo the voices of those in power, following colonial logics and imperial bureaucratic procedures. Stalled in this cul-de-sac, the narrator concludes, there remains “little choice but to imagine the rest” – the imperative of imagination in the face of archival voids.²⁴⁹ Margaret Lenta calls this a “corrective impulse” that novels follow, meaning “the impulse imaginatively to recreate what current histories have left unrecorded.”²⁵⁰

Reflecting on the scholarly discourse on literary narration, it struck me how Brink's narrator seems to fulfil this function as the voice of reflection, contemplating literature's potential to navigate archival silences and questioning the impulses that narrative production follow. The narrator emerges as Brink's alter ego, allowing the author to bring a meta-level that scrutinises practices of knowledge production into his narrative. The narrator flags Brink's awareness of the stakes and ethics of imagining a life and perhaps, in this way, offers a kind of absolution to fully break free from historical accuracies. In various passages, the narrator deviates from the main story about Hanna X's experiences in Germany and GSWA and either intersperses information about his research in Bremen, Hamburg and Windhoek, or he muses about archival gaps. While it has long been recognised that Brink's “tradition” is to mix “history and invention” and following archival traces by means of revitalising individual biographies, readers and critics nevertheless repeatedly mistake his novels for historical accounts, thereby confusing the voices of author and narrator.²⁵¹ In *The Other Side of Silence*, this proximity seems intentional, as we will see.

247 Korhonen, *Tropes for the Past*, 17–18.

248 Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 12.

249 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 301.

250 Margaret Lenta, “Fiction and History: Unity Dow's *Juggling Truths* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*,” *English Academy Review* 22, no. 1 (December 2005): 53.

251 Michael Schmitt, “Gewalt und Individuum,” *Deutschlandfunk*, 9 November 2008, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/gewalt-und-individuum-100.html>, my translation; Brink, pers. comm., 7 August 2019.

Reviewers state that Brink, just like his narrator, visited various cities, institutions and places in Germany and Namibia as part of his background research for the novel about Hanna X.²⁵² Accessing the diverse sources that Brink gathered and engaged with brings to light an extensive archive of research material, which he handed over to Amazwi, the South African Museum of Literature in Makhanda, in 2006.²⁵³ As noted previously, these repositories contain correspondences between Charlotte Sprandel and Johann Albrecht Herzog zu Mecklenburg, as well as copies of newspaper articles and numerous other archival files about the history of settler women in GSWA. Studying the documents shows that Brink's strategies are twofold: in many instances, the author sticks closely – almost meticulously – to the clues that he encountered during his research while, in others, he adds distortions, inventions and additional layers to the details gleaned from the historical documents.²⁵⁴ An example of the former is the narrator's reflection on the women's dispatches to the colony:

*The name was what first intrigued me. Hanna X. Again and again I worked through the documents in newspaper offices, contemporary reports, archives, all those dreary lists, all the names, each as tentative as the title of a poem, promises withheld. In typescript, shorthand, Gothic print, copperplate, italics, blotted scrawls. Crista Backmann – Rosa Fricke – Anna Köchel – Elly Freulich – Paula Plath – Johanna Koch – Olga Gessner – Elsa Maier – Dora Deutscher – Helena Hirner – Charlotte Böckmann – Marie Reissmann – Clara Gebhardt – Martha Hainbach – Christa Hofstätter – Gertrud Müller – and on and on and on, without any sense of alphabet or rhyme or reason, in that interminable shuttle of correspondence between Europe and Africa.*²⁵⁵

From the 16 names mentioned in the account, I was able to retrace 12 that figured in the vast archival files that Brink consulted, many of which he received from the National Archives of Namibia (NAN).²⁵⁶ Weaving the women's names into a narrative appears as a gesture to pay tribute to their lives while, in the larger scheme of historiography, the "einfache Mädchen" (simple girls) like Hanna X appeared as lit-

252 Ulrich Lölke, "'Deutsch-Südwest' in André Brink's Roman 'The Other Side of Silence,'" in *Weltengarten: Deutsch-Afrikanisches Jahrbuch für interkulturelles Denken*, eds. Leo Kreutzer and David Simo (Hannover: Revonnah, 2005), 206.

253 Lynne Grant, pers. comm. via email, 17 December 2021.

254 One example being Brink's reference to the *Afrika Post* as the source in which Hanna's name surfaces in connection to a trial. After studying the magazines from that time frame, this seems rather unlikely, as the *Afrika Post* mainly published general articles on life abroad. Trials were mentioned nowhere. Hence, this reference appears as an example of appropriating artistic freedom to give a sense of historical depth to the story.

255 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 5.

256 See, for example, Amazwi South African Museum of Literature, mss_2006_1_2_12.

tle more than items on lists.²⁵⁷ In an unpublished manuscript that Brink wrote for his memoir *A Fork in the Road*, the author refers to his encounter with the historical material and how it prompted him to create his main protagonist:

There were, among many other papers, lists of the names of the unfortunate women [...] Some names were obscured by blots or rewritings. Which gave me licence for some invention, among other things by recording Hanna's surname as 'X.' This, I believe, was necessary, not only for the sake of her anonymity, but for her representativity.

There was no 'Hanna X' on the list of transported women. But she 'stands for' innumerable near-anonymous women who were dispatched to the colonies for the basest of reasons, and came to represent a shameful chapter in German colonial history.²⁵⁸

According to Brink, the omissions and uncertainties in the archive entitle him to fictionalise, bestowing him with a "licence for some invention."²⁵⁹ But what does it imply to craft Hanna X as *representative* of the doomed 'white' women in Germany and the colony? How symbolic can a character be when she was conceived of historical elements, and yet remains fictional?

I was able to establish contact with some of Brink's interlocutors who assisted with the background research on Bremen in the 1900s, the cities' orphanages and the women's dispatch to GSWA. Interestingly, Günter Garbrecht, a researcher who has been studying the history of Bremen, vividly remembers how Brink approached him with quite specific inquiries. According to Garbrecht, Brink explained that he was working on a book based on the diary entries of a woman emigrating from Bremen to Southern Africa. While Brink did not give a name, he stressed that this woman grew up in a Catholic orphanage in Bremen and described how the children always went to a 'beach' in her diary. Approaching Garbrecht, Brink was hoping to find clues about where this beach could have been.²⁶⁰ The specificity of his requests suggested that Brink was researching autobiographical details of a specific historical figure. However, despite my efforts of studying the files at the Amazwi Museum of Literature and other archives, I could not retrace the aforementioned orphan's diary – an

257 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 6.

258 André Brink, "Stories Behind Stories: The Other Side of Silence," unpublished essay, emphasis in original.

259 Ibid.

260 This points to the accuracy with which Brink followed certain historical traces. For example, Garbrecht recalls sending him maps for Brink to reconstruct the distances in Bremen and the possible location of the orphanage or the beach, which served as settings in the book. Günter Garbrecht, pers. comm., 8 December 2021.

absence that gestures to Brink's 'anarchive:' that which remains opaque and inaccessible, but which might exist somewhere, somehow.²⁶¹ However, if the latter is *not* the case, and Hanna X remains *purely* fictitious, then it is puzzling how Brink usurps a sense of 'realness' for his protagonist in his correspondences with interlocutors.²⁶² In this respect, his research strategies and narrative practices may be appropriations of artistic freedom. If we consult his personal notebook, which accompanied his writing process, then we gain further insights into the ways in which the author plays with various cultural and personal references. Stored in the Amazwi archive, it attests to Hanna X's genesis and to the development of her story.

As we can glean from figure 16, for Brink, Hanna X's story also began with a list of names that he considered apt for his characters. From there, her role would be construed further to stand in for "those women transported to the colony for the support or delectation of its menfolk, and then turned down," as it reads in the book.²⁶³ The notion of "representativity" addressed once again here prompts the question: who has the power to represent whom, and what are the politics of representation at play here? In *The Other Side of Silence*, we find clues for Brink's reflection on this, when his narrator claims:

*She was there, that much I know. And having reached this turning point in her story I have no choice but to continue. I believe more and more that as a man I owe it to her at least to try to understand what makes her a person, an individual, what defines her as a woman.*²⁶⁴

The imperative of imagination in the face of archival constraints is here justified with a feminist sensitivity; however, ambivalences remain: While the book critically investigates the patriarchal violence exerted against women, as readers, we encounter a narrative in which men are mainly speaking – Brink and his alter ego – whereas the women who figure in the novel are silenced to the most violent degree; in Hanna's case, her tongue is cut off.

261 By 'anarchive' I am referring here to Carine Zaayman ("Anarchive (Picturing Absence)."). However, the term 'anarchive' refigures in different forms in cultural theories. See, for example, Erin Manning's conceptualisation of an anarchive as quoted in Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You*, 113. It has also been theorised by Christoph Brunner and Michael Hiltbrunner, "Anarchive künstlerischer Forschung: Vom Umgang mit Archiven experimenteller und forschender Kunst," *Archivalische Zeitschrift* 95, no. 1 (1 May 2017): 175–190.

262 Garbrecht is not the only one to whom Brink indicated that Hanna X was a real person. See, for example: Beverley Roos-Muller who interviewed Brink and introduces her article with the words: "Based on true and terrible tale." Roos-Muller, "Brink Shows His Feminine Side," *The Cape Argus*, 11 October 2002.

263 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 11.

264 *Ibid.*, 153, emphasis in original.

and more deeply with feminist discourses and with gender studies, as his wife Karina Brink told me.²⁶⁷ To shy away from telling stories of women's experiences of violence, as a gesture of political correctness, would have left colonial and patriarchal hegemony untouched.²⁶⁸ Brink believed in an author's duty to both imagine and assume different perspectives that are not his own and he also saw it as his own duty – as an established writer – to promote such perspectives, especially at a time when he had a voice and others did not.²⁶⁹

However, the task of writing against sexism (and racism) remains an intricate one, as Brink expressed in an interview with the *Cape Argus*, in which he admits to the “horror of ‘appropriating’ the voice of women, of imposing himself.”²⁷⁰ For the journalist, Brink's move to focus on the life of those oppressed and violated is an act of solidarity and compassion, which is most evident in a description of the painting *Feierabend* by Max Slevogt (figure 17) to which the narrator in *The Other Silence* refers.



Figure 17: Max Slevogt, *Feierabend*, 1900. Oil on canvas; source: Wikimedia commons

267 Karina Brink, pers. comm., 7 August 2019.

268 Ibid.

269 Karina Brink, pers. comm., 5 April 2022.

270 Roos-Muller, “Brink Shows His Feminine Side.”

The narrator encounters the painting after his “wild-goose chase” for clues in Bremen, where the painting resonated strongly with him.²⁷¹ His interpretation of the relation between the man and woman would come to epitomise the story of Hanna X and her encounters with men throughout the course of her life. The narrator describes the man as “a mean-spirited, violent, hard-drinking, abusive loser,” while the young girl, “evidently poor [...] can barely contain the rage and resentment that seethe in her” when he touches her.²⁷² Brink weaves this imagery into Hanna X’s narrative at a later point, when she arrives in Swakopmund and, for the first time on GSWA soil, is being harassed by an encroaching suitor:

The man sits with his back to her. A middle-aged peasant, is her first impression. His whole body, his ill-fitting jacket, the back of his narrow head, everything defines him as a loser – a mean-spirited, vicious, hard-drinking, abusive loser. He gets up to face her. She goes past him to the empty chair next to him, and sits down. He clears his throat and turns his dirty hat in his hands, then he sits down again [...] Several of his teeth are missing, the rest are tobacco-stained. He has a bristly moustache. His face is a dark reddish brown; but there is a white rim around his narrow forehead where the hat has kept out the sun. He puts one large blunt paw on her thigh. He smells of beer and chicken shit. ‘Well, Hanna. You are to be my wife then,’ he announces.²⁷³

Restaging the woman and man’s constellation in the painting, the scene depicted in the book is one of looming danger. The physical proximity between Hanna and her suitor, Grossvogel, would soon evolve into an attempted sexual assault from which Hanna succeeds to escape. In line with the narrator’s associations with *Feierabend*, Hanna’s and Grossvogel’s relation is similarly marked by disparate desires, repulsion, sexual tension and a threat to the woman’s bodily integrity. Interestingly, however, the original painting depicts a married janitor couple, as Slevogt described in letters to his wife.²⁷⁴ While he intentionally left room for “dark sensations,” the depicted moment or their relationship is not eminently or straightforwardly menacing.²⁷⁵ Other interpretations of the woman’s tender gaze and mimics, for instance, are possible. Brink’s refiguration of the painting, thus, is an example of the ways in which art evokes diverse subjective interpretations. Following Julie Beth Napolin, this is “the fact of resonance,” which she understands as the deeply subjective nature

271 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 7.

272 Ibid.

273 Ibid., 138–139.

274 Mechtild König and Sylvia Riedmaier, *Bilderbuch Neue Pinakothek München* (München: Langemann u. Langemann, 1999), 114.

275 Ibid.

of resonance.²⁷⁶ Resonances, as something that strikes and pricks us, seem factual because of the immediacy with which we perceive them; however, they are not objective ‘facts’ in the conventional sense. In *The Other Side of Silence*, the resonances of *Feierabend* are deployed to craft an imagery of destitute women at men’s mercy. With a view to his larger oeuvre, it becomes visible that in most of Brink’s books, gender and race-based violence, domination, injustice, sex and political power emerge as recurring concerns and these are pushed to the extreme in the story of Hanna X. Reflecting on a workshop held in 2007 (or 2008) in Windhoek, and in which scholars discussed the book, sociologist Reinhart Kößler states how participants felt that the novel was replete with Brink’s “obsessions.”²⁷⁷ Are these obsessions simply morbid fascinations with violence, sex and death? What does the (re-)crafting of such a brutal story with the help of archival fragments do in terms of knowledge production on the colonial past?

Shifting the view to reader responses is insightful in this regard. Throughout the course of my research, I increasingly noted how these seemed to be divided into either straightforward rejections of the book as distortion of history or as empathetic readings that take Hanna X’s experiences seriously, prompted to find out what ‘really’ happened to women in GSWA. My own grappling with the resonances of Lisbeth Dömski/Pilet/Otto’s story and Hanna X’s experiences is emblematic of the latter response. For readers like me, Brink’s zooming in at a woman’s individual experience of gender-based violence during colonial times is effectful because he introduces the discourse on colonialism on an emotive level, making us sympathise with a specific person (imagined or not). The detailed and graphic depictions of the brutal assaults that Hanna X had to endure speak to the readers’ sentiments, drawing them into the story by evoking not only shock, but also empathy. Brink’s play with fact and fiction and his suggestive claims to a sense of ‘truthfulness’ recurrently draw the reader in, prompting the question: are these narratives of horror and brutality ‘real’? Is it possible that violence played out like this in both the metropole and in the colony?

I was not the only one who was preoccupied with these thoughts. A couple of years into my research, I was contacted by a woman based in New Zealand (named here T.W.), who originally was from Namibia and who found out about my work online. She had read Brink’s book and was shaken and angry about it, as it touched on her own family history. Her great-grandmother’s sister was said to have worked as a prostitute in Swakopmund where she also allegedly established (or ran) two brothels. Few details are known about this relative, as her business was considered a disgrace to the family. Reading Brink’s narrative was upsetting for T.W., seeing how he, as a man with his sexual fantasies, claims prerogative over something that is not

276 Julie Beth Napolin, *A Sinister Resonance* (guest talk: University of Basel, English Seminar, 24 November 2021).

277 Reinhart Kößler, pers. comm. via email, 23 May 2022.

his story to tell.²⁷⁸ Yet, the reconsideration of women's roles, fates and reputations that Brink's book promotes were important for her own endeavour to find an understanding of her relatives' lives. This kind of reflexive and critical re-reading of the book and Namibia's colonial history did not seem possible for many 'white' readers in Namibia, however.



Figure 18: photograph by André Bink, 2008. Courtesy of Karina Brink.²⁷⁹

During my research in the country, it was interesting to note that the great majority of my social contacts and interlocutors did not know about the novel. This impression changed drastically, however, when approaching members of the 'white' settler society with questions about Frauenstein – particularly Namibians of German descent working in public institutions such as archives and libraries. In quite a number of responses, these interlocutors strongly condemned the ethics of Brink's writing, arguing that *The Other Side of Silence* distorts history or what were their versions of 'reality.' Additionally, many expressed how Brink was doing wrong to the people whose names he appropriated for his narrative, arguing that their biographies had little to do with the lives of their namesake in the book. The reactions of those with closer relations to farm Frauenstein were similarly sharp. Today's owner,

278 T.W., pers. comm., via Zoom, 10 August 2022.

279 Reflecting on the ethical implications of photographic representation, as outlined in various instances in this book, I decided to blur and render Heinz Stöck (on the left in the image) unrecognisable. Since he passed away before I was able to visit Frauenstein, I could not obtain his consent to reproduce his image and felt this was the appropriate response.

Jutta Stöck, shared that she was shocked when reading the book after Brink's visit to the farm in 2008 (figure 18). She explained that she and her husband had spoken in detail about the farm's history with Brink and, even though the book was published before Brink's visit to the farm, she considered his twist of what they had shared with him to be "outrageous."²⁸⁰ A sense of betrayal was recurrently expressed in the conversations with those who feel implicated in Brink's historical refiguration.

For a long time, the German reading public was reluctant to confront the brutality of German colonialism depicted by Brink. Even years after the book's release, not a single German publishing house was willing to print its German translation, all for the same reason, as Brink explained: "'The book is too cruel.' Even apart from the fact that the entire factual dimension of the book is historically true, it did seem mind-boggling that in post-war Germany any text should be branded as 'too cruel.'"²⁸¹ In an interview, the author again affirms: "Everything that happens in this book actually happened, in one form or another, to some historical figure back then."²⁸² The German publishing market's responses speak to the country's flaws when properly confront the colonial past, acknowledging their own role in the colonial enterprise and reckoning with the horrors committed, including the Herero and Nama genocide. Later, however, when the novel was finally translated and published in Germany in 2008, critics celebrated it as "[a] moving, an angry, a breath-taking novel, a fantastic story that springs from reality but rises far above it."²⁸³ These developments correspond with a heightening attention in public and political discourse to the atrocities of German colonialism over the last 20 years. While individual research studies began to explore the interconnected themes of violence, sexual encounters and abusive relations in GSWA, many chapters in history remain unexplored, even today.²⁸⁴ Thus, it is up to fiction to bring the gravitas of colonial history to public awareness – as Saidiya Hartman writes: it remains the task of narrative "to imagine what cannot be verified."²⁸⁵

280 Stöck, pers. comm., 17 August 2019.

281 Brink, "Stories Behind Stories."

282 Lölke, "'Deutsch-Südwest,'" 208, my translation.

283 Johannes Kaiser, "Rachefeldzug der Unterdrückten," *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, 20 November 2008, my translation, <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/rachefeldzug-der-unterdrueckten-100.html>.

284 As examples for important contributions see: Wolfram Hartmann, *Sexual Encounters and Their Implication on An Open and Closing Frontier: Central Namibia From the 1840s to 1950s* (PhD diss., Colombia University, 2002); Wolfram Hartmann, "Urges in the Colony: Men and Women in Colonial Windhoek, 1890–1905," *Journal of Namibian Studies* 1 (2007): 39–71; Charles Van Onselen, *The Fox and the Flies: The Criminal Empire of the Whitechapel Murderer* (London: Vintage, 2008); Mattia Fumanti, "A German Whore and No Money at That': Insanity and the Moral and Political Economies of German South West Africa," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 44, no. 3 (September 2020): 382–403.

285 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 12.

Brink shared this conviction, arguing that writers “should engage creatively with the ‘archive’ in order to produce a patchwork of stories that might not claim final authority, but that would be greater in the sum of their parts than any attempt at encompassing historical narrative.”²⁸⁶ A view to Brink’s other publications mirrors his faithfulness to this claim: a large number of his works bear the signature technique of fusing archival fragments and fiction.²⁸⁷ In the notes at the end of his novel *Praying Mantis*, for instance, Brink speaks about his impulses for fictionalising the biography of the first Khoi missionary ordained at the Cape of Good Hope, Kupido Kakkerlak: “Although the novel as it stands is fiction, the outline is based on a true history” – a story that he encountered in the “numerous documents of and on the London Missionary Society in South Africa” as well as in other accounts and sources.²⁸⁸ Here, Brink reflects: “It is precisely the reading of such a well-documented account that makes one realise the extent to which the enigma of another’s life can only be grasped through the imagination.”²⁸⁹

I share grounds with Brink’s conclusion. Coming to an end with my own research on Lisbeth Dömski’s life, I had to realise that research can only retrieve the course of one’s life so far. As a scholar, though, I lack the vocabulary or perhaps the absolutism to resort to the imagination – as Brink did – and to imagine what cannot be retrieved. My exploration of the resonances between Hanna X’s life and Lisbet Dömski’s experiences helped, however, to contemplate how ‘white’ women were implicated in colonial structures and how their lives were impacted by patriarchal and colonial violence. Moreover, the cross-examination uncovered once again the predicament of the archive – while it remains an indispensable source to access the stories of those who passed on, its limits, colonial logics and blind spots are frustrating. My own conclusion was to step out of the archive, when openings presented themselves – which is how I met Rosine Rooi. However, Brink as a writer, fills archival gaps by entangling a plethora of cultural, personal and historical references, as a view to his own archive shows. Elements that resonated with him in rela-

286 Quoted in: Andrew van der Vlies, “The Archive, the Spectral, and Narrative Responsibility,” 583.

287 See, for example: *An Instant in the Wind* (1976), which centres the lives of Adam Mantoor and Elisabeth Larsson, a ‘run-away slave’ and a White woman who trek through the South African interior together. Again, the narrator engages deeply with archival records and written accounts that grant access to their impossible love story. Here, the relation between existing accounts on these individuals and the narrator’s re-narration also seems intentionally opaque. (London: Secker & Warburg, 2005). We find similar patterns in the novel *Philida* (2012), in which Brink notes: “In using historical sources it is of course necessary always to remain conscious not only of what is narrated, but also of what has been left unsaid.” (London: Harvill Secker, 2012, 307).

288 André P. Brink, *Praying Mantis* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2005), 277.

289 Ibid.

tion to Hanna X and Frauenstein span from the story of Jeanne d'Arc and the Indian "Bandit Queen" to Nama and Herero myths and folk tales.²⁹⁰ He further relied on the diaries of Hendrik Witbooi and the pro-colonial propaganda written by Clara Brockmann *Die Deutsche Frau in Südwestafrika: Ein Beitrag Zur Frauenfrage in Unseren Kolonien* and various other historical books that informed his studies on GSWA.²⁹¹ Particularly interesting here are the multi-faceted cultural references that he incorporated into his narrative. We have already learnt about the painting *Feierabend*; additionally, the narrator mentions Paula Modersohn-Becker's works when contemplating humanity, femininity and melancholy.²⁹² Other high-culture references are Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, Walter Benjamin, Gustave Flaubert and Emily Dickinson.²⁹³ In relation to the title of the book, Brink draws on a quote from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (figure 19).²⁹⁴

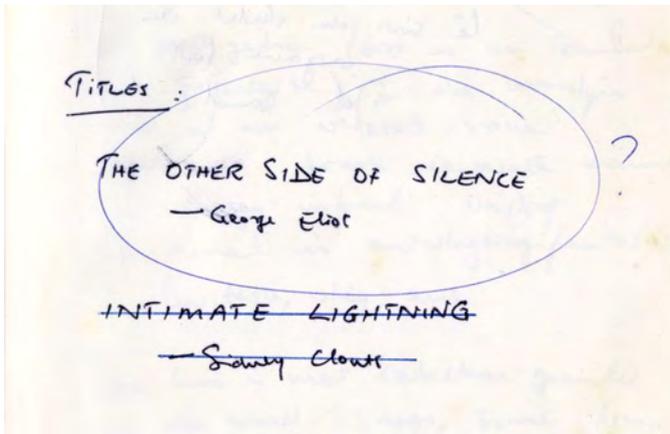


Figure 19: Notebook, mss_2006_21_2_1, page 1. Courtesy of Amazwi South African Museum of Literature and Karina Brink.

Brink's notebook, which documents his writing process, is instructive for retracing the various inspirations that inform his novel. Here, we also encounter elements

290 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 308–309; Brink, "In Search of Frauenstein," 14–15.

291 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 308–309. See also: Amazwi South African Museum of Literature, mss_2006_21_1_2_9; part 1.

292 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 7.

293 *Ibid.*, 309; Amazwi South African Museum of Literature, mss_2006_21_1_2_1, 25, 37, 69, 123.

294 Brink, "Stories Behind Stories." See also: Amazwi South African Museum of Literature, mss_2006_21_1_2_1, 1.

from popular and mass culture that also played into his creation of Hanna X's story and Frauenstein, such as an advertisement of Liqui Fruit, in which a blonde bikini model is tanning in the bright sun, thereafter rising and walking towards a house in the desert to escape the heat.²⁹⁵ This house is in a state of severe decay: windows are broken, cracks and fractures run through the walls and sand covers the floors and fills the rooms. She would approach an old, rusty fridge on top of a large sand pile, where she'd find an ice-cold can of Liqui Fruit juice to refresh her.²⁹⁶ The setting for this clip is the popular 'ghost town' of Kolmanskuppe, which was once a small German settlement in the south of GSWA with imposing stone houses according to the German model. The village was built after the discovery of diamonds in the early 1900s, but when the diamond fields were largely mined, all of the settlers left their houses – often including furniture and household items – in the late 1950s, abandoning them to time and sand. Whether Brink recognised the scenery as Kolmanskuppe or not cannot be verified; however, we find a similar aesthetic to those in the advertisement reflected in his imagination of Frauenstein:

"By the time Hanna X was dumped there parts of the ground floor had already been invaded by desert sand, blown in through broken shutters and shattered windows and gaping holes where doors had been hacked up for firewood; sand accumulating in corners and against walls, as very slowly the desert began to reclaim the space that once was part of it. Even the inhabited rooms were subjected to the long inexorable process of decay: erstwhile ballrooms and refectories, kitchens with gaping furnaces, cavernous halls and lobbies with ornate ceilings."²⁹⁷

Interestingly, Brink's fascination with colonial ruins did not end after his novel was published and Frauenstein was constructed as one example of a deserted colonial mansion. His story resonates with audiences and the author alike. Reflecting on a trip that he undertook to Namibia in 2008 ("to search for the story behind the story"), Brink marvels at the imposing old buildings from colonial times that still exist as ghost houses, such as the Liebig-House, about 40 kilometres west of Windhoek.²⁹⁸ The colossal former residential building impressed him particularly due to its state of ruination, which struck him as an apt setting for his story about Hanna X: "If *The Other Side of Silence* ever was filmed, I would move heaven and earth to see Frau von Knesebeck and her group of dismissed and abused women take root exactly

295 Michelle van Schalkwyk, "Liqui-Fruit Bikini ad," *YouTube*, 15 October 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYCrDdadsRU>; Amazwi South African Museum of Literature, [mss_2006_21_1_2_1_3](https://www.southafricanmuseumofliterature.org/2006/21/1_2_1_3).

296 van Schalkwyk, "Liqui-Fruit Bikini ad."

297 Brink, *The Other Side of Silence*, 15.

298 Brink, "In Search of Frauenstein," 14–15.

there.”²⁹⁹ A large-scale photograph that Brink took during his visit to the Liebig-House still hangs in one of the rooms in his house in Rosebank, Cape Town. The print is one of the various clues that hint at the ways in which the narratives and resonances around Hanna X and Frauenstein still figure in the present, beyond both the author’s death as well as the deaths of the many individuals who were connected to the places and names found in the novel. These sinister resonances, however, remind us of the fact that, somehow, somewhere, they once existed and we are reminded about their pertinence – as ghostly presences.

4.9: Conclusion

“Any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences. It is an exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others. In this fabricated narrative, not all silences are equal. Our job as filmmakers, writers, historians, image-makers is to deconstruct these silences.”

— *Raoul Peck*³⁰⁰

Circling back to how this chapter began – with Raoul Peck’s gesture to the relation between narrative and history – emphasises how both narrative and history are constructions of knowledge about the past that privilege and silence. Peck elucidates that creative practices have the potential to both deconstruct and to subvert hegemonial historiography, or one-dimensional ways, in which history is being recounted. We have found a similar line of thought in André Brink’s argument for the imaginative rewriting of history.³⁰¹ With his novel *The Other Side of Silence*, the author creates a narrative that blends fact and fiction and is suggestive of certain truth claims. Replete with historical references, Brink appropriates archival fragments for his narrative that centres on the tragic figure Hanna X. In this vein, the book prompts us to reconsider what constitutes the ‘truth’ about the past, what “may [...] have happened,” in Brink’s words, and what it is that we conceive as ‘too cruel’ to be real.³⁰²

My intent in bringing Brink’s narrative and my own research on the private estate of Lisbeth Otto into conversation with one another was to contemplate what it means to reconstruct a person’s life and to explore the intersections of archival research and narrative production. While a lot has been said about the stakes and gains of both, questions still remain, questions which Saidiya Hartman has put forth so powerfully:

299 Ibid., emphasis in original.

300 *Exterminate All the Brutes*. season 1, episode 2.

301 Brink, “Stories of History,” 37.

302 Brink, “Stories Behind Stories”; Brink, “Stories of History,” 42.

How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know? [...] Is it possible to construct a story from 'the locus of impossible speech' or resurrect lives from the ruins? [...] Or is narration its own gift and its own end, that is, all that is realizable when overcoming the past and redeeming the dead are not? And what do stories afford anyway? A way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation? A home in the world for the mutilated and violated self? For whom – for us or for them?³⁰³

In light of Brink's engagement with the archive to craft his narrative and regarding my own biographical reconstruction of Lisbeth Otto's life, let us ask, like Hartman does: what is it that narrative affords? For creative writers as well as researchers, it might provide avenues to explore how discourses play out in the worlds of individuals whose biographies can only be found in the cracks and silences of archival records. As is the case with Brink (and other scholars/writers referenced in this book, like Hartman, Carine Zaayman and Yvette Christiansë), resorting to narrative becomes imperative in the attempt to recuperate the lives of "the nameless and the forgotten" from archival depths.³⁰⁴ More crucially, Hartman prompts us to inquire about exactly *who* stands to gain from this. There are further implications to this question: can narrative production make amends for historical injustices or for the violence that the archival order perpetuates? Is it possible to fill the gaps of un- or partially recorded biographies as a potential act of restorative justice?

Reflecting on these concerns, this chapter aimed at conducting archival research with a mindfulness of the constructed character of biographical recuperation based on what the archive offers. In a similar vein, Zaayman proposes attuning one's readings of the past to that which lies outside of the archive and to approach history in the same way that we approach narrative: with "openness and uncertainty."³⁰⁵ In following this method, maybe interpretations of history become less imposing and prompts us to remain conscious of the fallibility of historical reconstruction and of what is ungraspable.

While unsettling the grip and power of the archive is important, this chapter has also shown how archival repositories function as windows into the lives of individuals who have passed on. My avenue to interrogate the alluring *and* the troubling character of archives was by directing attention to the sinister resonance of the "archival figures" Hanna X and Lisbeth Otto.³⁰⁶ Drawing on Julie Beth Napolin's theory on resonance helped unpack how the past lingers on, how certain historical fragments strike us and how history maintains a "hold on us."³⁰⁷ The view on the res-

303 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 3.

304 Ibid., 4.

305 Zaayman, "Anarchive (Picturing Absence)," 321.

306 Christiansë, "Heartcore"; Napolin, "A Sinister Resonance."

307 Napolin, *The Fact of Resonance*, 7.

onances between Lisbeth Otto's and Hanna X's biographies helped with untangling and entangling two stories of (fictional and 'real') lives that teach us something about the experiences of women who, to different degrees, fell victim to and were implicated in the patriarchal, classist and racial structures of GSWA's settler society. Their stories offer insights into the journeys of young women who travelled to the colony in search of a better life in the late 1890s and early 1900s, instead finding a country at war and their lives at risk.

Moreover, my comparative study contemplates how Brink's and my labour, as narrative authors and as archival researchers, bear certain resemblances. In our distinct but similar practices, we are responsive to subjective resonances that archival findings conjure. The sensations that we can glean from studying the archive have guided the course of our writing. This implied intruding in private worlds in my engagement with Lisbeth Otto's family estate, delving deep into personal material and into the life of a stranger. During my research, I followed the clues from Hanna X's story to reflect on Lisbeth Otto's life challenges as an orphan, a settler wife and as a widow in GSWA. By contrast, the practice of fiction writing bestows Brink with the artistic freedom to incorporate a plethora of historical and cultural references. The format of the novel provides an endless openness to encompassing writers' fantasies and resonances. However, we may also understand Brink's appropriations of archival sources and the myriad references in *The Other Side of Silence* as ruses to violate the historical and archival order. Brink's alter ego, his narrator, is crucial in this undertaking. The narrator/researcher functions as the voice that directs the readers' attention to the flaws in historiography and the gaps in the archives that inhibit a 'proper' reconstruction of the past.

While the novel raises intricate questions about the tensions between history and fiction, the issues of voice, legitimacy and representation remain troubling. Following a gender-sensitive agenda, Brink aspires to encompass various perspectives of women suffering from the German colonial regime in GSWA – Black and 'white'. However, his core themes pivot around 'white' sensitivities and experiences, which remain unproblematized in the novel. However, when it comes to Brink's own subject position, it appears that he uses the reflective voice of his narrator to flag an awareness of the limits of a male 'white' writer's perspective. As a 'white' writer/researcher myself, I share this experience of grappling with the limits imposed by one's own perspective and by the archive, which, in many instances, seem impossible to transcend. While authors of fiction can complement, stretch and imagine a narrative, my response to the archive's confinements had to take a different form. In my cross-examination of the estate and of the novel, it became increasingly important to challenge the archive's logic. Stepping out of the archive helped me to understand how the content of Otto's estate speaks to the present and the future, instead of merely being a product of the past. My meeting with Rosine Rooi and with her family was a powerful reminder that the surfacings that we find in archival repositories are

not necessarily "orphaned," as Paul Ricœur suggests, but that they might continue to carry emotional and nostalgic value for people today.³⁰⁸ The relations of Rosa and Rosine Xoagus to their former employer remain impossible for me to grasp fully, much like how I will never be able to access the letters' content fully.

However, in many ways, the encounter with Rosine Rooi and her family was an eye-opening point of disruption in my research – not necessarily on the level of content, but through the ways in which it powerfully evoked and visualised the malaise of the archive. The material from the Wöhler/Dömski estate does not really allow one to break free from and to move beyond 'white' settler narratives on the history of a place. Clues that attest to the colonial framework of the material and that hint at the presence of Black Namibians are there, but the frustration of an impossible recuperation of their perspectives remains. However, seeing Rosine's affective response at the sight of the documents from the Wöhler/Dömski estate elucidates how private archives resonate in the present – and with whom. The case of the letters' momentary return to their original author prompted me to reconsider questions of archival access, belonging and claims made about the material. Encounters like these and an openness to archival resonances may provide new impetus for thinking about possible future (and more than just?) itineraries and the uses of archival material.

308 Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 169.

Epilogue

Against the backdrop of radical actions taken around the world to eradicate racist or colonial signifiers from public sight (e.g., the toppling of colonial statues) or burgeoning, pressing demands from the Global South for restorative justice (e.g., claims for restitution of colonial goods and land redistribution, Herero and Nama's campaigns for reparation for the Genocide), we might ask: why hold on to archives with colonial ties at all? Taking calls for societal transformation seriously, should we not either discard them altogether or leave them to decay and ruination? Why intervene, if we may as well destroy the old and build new repositories of knowledge for the future?

The works of the artists and authors analysed in this book show how, for creative practitioners, engagement with a diversity of archival sources is crucial in the efforts to reckon with a painful past. This impulse remains strong in a moment where “colonial wounds” have not yet healed, and colonialism constitutes the “living history that informs and shapes the present,” as Ann Stoler writes.¹ As a framework to approach the meaning of such ‘wounds,’ as well as the haunting presence of the colonial past, I used the concept of *troubling archives* to guide my analyses. The notion of ‘troubling’ captures how the experiences of violence during German and South African colonialism, the genocide, apartheid and the protracted struggle for independence in Namibia remain urgent and painful matters with which members of the post-colonial society still grapple. The works of Tshiwa Trudie Amulungu, Ulla Dentlinger, Imke Rust, Tuli Mekondjo, Vitjitua Ndjiharine, Nicola Brandt and André Brink show how artists and authors, who engage with a diversity of archival sources, bring unresolved and unfinished histories back onto the public agenda.² By critically interrogating and manipulating (*troubling*) material artefacts, such as photographs, they act as interventionists and archivists who respond to the inadequacies of public historiographies, thereby documenting their own experiences and

1 This is a loose reference to Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez, “Decolonial Aesthetics: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings,” *Social Text Journal*, 15 July 2013, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthetics-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/. See also: Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” 89.

2 Demos, *Return to the Postcolony*, 8.

subverting problematic modes of representation. The artists and authors draw on old repositories and resources and make them speak in unintentional ways.³ These creative archival interventions attest to those nuances that previously remained unaccounted, unrecorded and unarchived. While Amulungu and Dentlinger resort to the genre of auto/biography and the medium of photography to inscribe themselves into Namibian history, Mekondjo, Rust, Ndjiharine and Brandt turn to art as a creative mode of expression. They refigure visual signifiers that are associated with ‘the colonial gaze’ and evoke multidirectional and postmemories in order to explore how Namibian histories and positionalities are entangled, illuminating how past eras are not sealed containers, but instead reverberate in intersecting ways into the present. The cross-examination of André Brink’s *The Other Side of Silence* (2001) and my own archival research on Lisbeth Dömski’s life showed how, in the (re)writing of history, the archive is not a neutral or objective source that hosts alleged ‘facts’ from the past; rather the archive emerges as a well for the fantastic reimagination of what “may [...] have happened.”⁴

As we have seen, the ambivalences of photography have been crucial in the authors’ and artists’ engagement with Namibian history (as well as in my own research on the Dömski estate). Photographs from public, institutional and private family archives have served as prompts for reflection on the past, as triggers of memory or as a “form of interlocutor” in the attempt to negotiate history.⁵ For multimedia artists, photography’s implications in violent regimes and the gendered and racialised modes of representation that resonate from photographs of the colonial era call for interference. In recasting the material, artists change the photographs’ original aesthetics and in exhibiting their work in diverse global spaces, they push the images’ mobility beyond their conventional trajectories. In this vein, archival art questions the politics of possession and belonging as well as the accessibility of photographs.

Returning to the opening question of this epilogue: why archival refigurations and interventions instead of a radical turn away from the old? Why does an impulse to explore archival repositories persist in literature and art, an impulse which is then coupled with efforts to redesign, extend and to intersect found archival fragments with other signifiers? In light of the forceful reverberations of colonialism and apartheid in Namibia, it is clear that for creative practitioners, the turn to archives may stem less from a sentiment of excitement or fascination but is rather grounded in a predicament: in the face of historical erasure, archives remain indispensable

3 Scholars such as Paul Basu and Ferdinand Jong, call this the “decolonial affordances” of archives. See: “Utopian Archives, Decolonial Affordances: Introduction to Special Issue,” *Social Anthropology* 24, no. 1 (February 2016).

4 Brink, “Stories of History,” 42.

5 Edwards, “Photographs and the Sound of History,” 39.

in revisiting the past. The extreme violence and massive erasure experienced in the framework of the country's history of multiple imperialisms, apartheid and the two wars waged in one century (the genocidal war from 1904–1908 and the liberation war) form a condition that is specific to Namibia. The severe forms of erasure are reflected in the archives in various ways – in the violent acts that can be retraced in the records and documents as well as in archival gaps and silences. The works discussed in this book take on the challenging task of engaging with such violent records and archival omissions. In doing so, the archival interventions presented here powerfully remind us that, in Namibia as well as on a global scale, we have neither figured out how best to deal with our implications in the colonial past, nor have we truly addressed the colonial continuities that shape our present. This rhetorical collective 'we' is a fragmented one – there is no consensus, either in the former colonies or in the imperial centres, on how colonial reverberations are best to be addressed. The artists' and authors' works lament the coloniality of power that prevails in many spheres of life. Their creative expressions articulate discontent with the post-colonial situation, in which liberation from former empires was never truly granted and in which remorse, atonement and adequate reparation for colonial atrocities (including genocide) are far from view. In this way, they address their critique outwards – towards states, institutions, heteronormative societal models or to dominant and one-dimensional forms of commemoration. However, the selected works' appeal is also directed inwards, towards one's own wounds, in an attempt to deploy literature and art as media to further the healing of traumatic experiences and troubling legacies.

In expressing such multi-faceted criticism and promoting fresh perspectives on the past, creative archival interventions are important agitators for change in knowledge practices. In the introduction to this book, I set out that one of my central interests in the case studies was connected to my personal uneasiness about the labour of engaging with history on the basis of archival research. Reflecting on the insights that I gained from studying the selected works of art and literature, I believe that not only I myself as a researcher but also Namibian and Southern African historiography at large have much to learn from the authors' and artist's interventionist strategies. It has long been claimed that archives obtained a somewhat sacred status, safeguarded by strict rules and regulations that monitored and controlled any engagement therewith. The archival turn recalibrated attention to the need for contestation of the archival status, the materialities that it hosts and the stories that it tells. In line with these shifts, historians have detected the fallibility of archives and inconsistencies in metanarratives, but a certain source hierarchy seems to remain. The heightened awareness of the archive's epistemic foundations did not result in a more radical reform of knowledge production practices. Historiography still seems to be obsessed with the quests for alleged, previously undiscovered 'facts' in archival repositories in order to reconstruct forgotten or concealed histories. In a

second step, the findings would be critically assessed and substantiated – perhaps, by consulting ‘other’ archives, if possibilities present themselves. While the discipline of history and other fields have come to acknowledge the importance of ‘alternative’ archives, in many cases the engagement with them barely goes beyond side-note references or enhancement of the narrative already laid out based on ‘evidence’ from the conventional archives.

The creative archival interventions explored in this book’s four case studies do the opposite, thereby subverting western epistemologies in knowledge practices. They centre affect and resonance as well as narratives of love, pain and resilience and thus prioritise emotions over alleged archival ‘facts.’ The works by Amulungu, Dentlinger, Rust, Mekondjo, Ndjiharine, Brandt and Brink all contribute to a diversification of what qualifies as an ‘archive’ and topple the hierarchies of what counts as knowledge. For their historical renegotiations, the authors and artists engage with (post-)memories, oral narratives and knowledges that were passed down to them matrilineally; they turn to their own bodies or to landscapes as archives of trauma. In doing so, the works are expressions of a shared longing. The authors and artists search for alternative knowledges about the past. To push for this, they attest to that which usually falls through the cracks of conventional archives, even generating their own “archive[s] of emotion,” to borrow from Ann Cvetkovich.⁶

A brief consideration on terminology may be in order here: As I set out to show in this book, the auto/biographical accounts and art works are *creative archival interventions* and, thus, draw on diverse archives as *sources* for their alternative knowledge practices. However, in the process, they also produce their own repositories of knowledge for future generations to draw on. What emerges are *affective archives*, *counter-archives*, *living archives*, *matriarchives* or *archives of feelings*, as the individual analyses have shown. In my reflection on Amulungu’s, Dentlinger’s, Rust’s, Mekondjo’s, Ndjiharine’s, Brandt’s and Brink’s works, I increasingly felt that the emotive labour that they conduct is of central significance; this struck me particularly when reading a sentence from Namwali Serpell’s protagonist in *The Furrows* (2022), that resonated strongly with me. She begins narrating her story by saying: “I don’t want to tell you what happened. I want to tell you how it felt.”⁷ In calling on us to listen empathetically, the emergent archives of emotions discussed in this book remind us not only of the pain of the past, but that this past may still hurt and needs to be attended to. This calling is particularly important at a moment in time during which larger discourses on (post-)colonialism, restorative justice and

6 Cvetkovich argues that individual and collective experiences of trauma, for instance, are “difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive,” leading her to propose the concept of “an archive of feelings.” See: *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 10, 241.

7 Namwali Serpell, *The Furrows* (London: Hogarth, 2022), 3.

reparations seem increasingly to be caught up in legal questions (who has the right to express a claim to land, cultural artefacts, 'human remains,' etc?) and political negotiations (what are Germany's – and Europe's – historical obligations to address their colonial past? What are the costs involved in adequately compensating for colonial violence?) losing touch with what such debates imply for those who feel implicated in these histories.

However, emotions are a subjective business that comes with their own limitations. Thus, we should also venture a critical look at the limits and stakes of creative archival interventions and of emergent alternative archives. We have seen how many of the authors and artists discussed share grounds with regards to the subject matters and the concerns raised in their works, but there are also lines of division that separate their creative practices. All of the artists and authors attempt to break down the much-criticised boundedness within ethnic categories that continue to separate Namibians. Beyond this, however, the creative practices seem to be locked in a framework of Black and 'white' compartmentalisation (for now). The problem with essentialist approaches to identity politics is that narrow and constructed identity categories are being reinscribed and perpetuated, which the field of post-colonial theory actually aims to both challenge and undo. Most of the authors and artists in this book largely continue to adhere to this (rather rigid) logic of speaking about the histories and experiences of their own communities only, with slight exceptions by Dentlinger,⁸ Brandt and Brink who integrate the narratives of others (across racial divides) within their works. A reason for this reluctance to break free from essentialist identity politics might be that the engagement of 'white' writers and artists with the experiences and legacies of colonialism and apartheid by the Black population is intricate. It raises questions connected to issues of positionality and perspective and the legitimisation of speaking both *for* and *about* others. Yet, Dentlinger, Brandt and Brink's incorporation of narratives other than their own emerges as an important attempt to decentre 'white' sensibilities and to evoke how multiple experiences and memories co-exist, making up the Namibian social fabric and diverse mnemonic cultures.⁹ At the same time, for Black writers and artists – in light of Namibia's neo-colonial condition¹⁰ – an assumption of other perspectives seems not to be a priori

8 Dentlinger's work is particularly important with a view to the issue of positionality and essentialism because she attempts to deconstruct narrow identity categories.

9 In her own academic work, and in reference to her artistic practice, Brandt addresses this predicament head-on, arguing: "I acknowledge that my artistic practice can only scrape the surface of complex issues of intersectionality and representation or as a form of resisting colonial amnesia. My position will always be partial, and yet without a critical engagement, the risk lies in creating a resolutely parochial frame of reference." See: Brandt, *Landscapes Between Then and Now*, 170.

10 To wit, the fact that the country's economic wealth and land remains disproportionately in 'white' hands.

ity. The distortions and gaps in how private and public archives attest to Black lives may remain too troubling to engage with narratives beyond those of their own Black communities. Once again, we come to face the predicament of the archive: Against the backdrop of histories of loss and erasure, the labour of working against what Carine Zaayman has called “the anarchiver” – “that which is without archive” – is still unfinished.¹¹ Thus, if one’s own archive does not allow access to a lost past, then the devotion to archival figures remains a crucial project of recuperation, and is both a personal *and* political endeavour.

The personal and political dimension features powerfully in Vitjitua Ndji-harine’s, Tuli Mekondjo’s and Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja’s approach to photographed subjects as possible ancestors. Through this approach, they establish a sense of connection to historical figures that the archive renders anonymous. By claiming a belonging to these archival figures and conjuring up their perspectives, the artists attempt to gain an understanding of their ancestors’ experiences, their resilience, their histories. What are the political implications of this? In framing the photographs as a relict of a person – an ancestor! – the artists challenge the ontological status of the photograph as a historical object. Establishing a connection to the photographed subject implies questioning who has the right to ‘own’ and to keep their archival image. With this, the artists not only push for a recirculation of the historical material, but also for a repatriation of what is left from their ancestors (the photographic relict).¹² Furthermore, the artists trigger a reconsideration of both archival and exhibition practices. This became most apparent in Ndji-harine’s and Mekondjo’s artistic ruses to conceal scenes of violence and to cover up naked bodies. Their measures aimed at finding ways to address the past’s violence without showing – and thus perpetuating – it. Another central concern for the artists was the restoration of dignity for the photographed subjects/ancestors and the visualisation of beauty – an approach to archival material that speaks to a painful history with care, sensitivity and affection. However, as we have seen in the discussion of different viewers’ responses to these archival interventions, such measures can be perceived as liberating and empowering for some, while they are distortions of history and maskings of violence for others. Important questions emerge from this ambivalence: In the endeavour to challenge the archival order, are creative practices allowed to do anything? What are the rules of engagement with historical material for art and literature? Are there any at all?

11 Zaayman, “Anarchive (Picturing Absence),” 319.

12 For a more thorough interrogation of the significance of conceiving ethnographic images as ancestors see: Zoé Samudzi, “A Reparative Futurity Beyond Legality: The Case of Renty and Delia Taylor”, *Errant Journal*, ‘Learning from Ancestors: Epistemic Restitution and Rematriation’, 5 (Amsterdam: Framer Framed, 2023): 111–119.

As my case studies have shown, the authors and artists discussed in this book respond to such questions by developing their own ethics of care through which to engage with historical material by following their distinct emancipatory desires. However, the historical figures whose stories surface from archival depth cannot give consent to the authors' and artists' imaginative projects.¹³ For them, an abolition for archival interventions is impossible to attain. Where a full liberation from the archival predicament cannot be achieved, the *trouble* with the past remains. This is evident in the works by Amulungu, Dentlinger, Rust, Mekondjo, Ndjiharine, Brandt and Brink in that they engage with the unresolved nature of *troubling archives*. Their auto/biographical accounts and artworks illuminate how intervening with the archival order is both a possibility and a contradiction, since healing, like wound-ness, is suspended. The act of *troubling archives* is not a cure, but remains a necessity in the endeavour to develop alternative (perhaps less colonial?) ways to both narrate and to make sense of the past.¹⁴

13 I discussed the issue of "ancestral consent" in greater depth in chapters 2 and 3 with reference to Wanelisa Xaba.

14 I would like to once again thank Nomusa Makhubu for her critical feedback on both the potential and limits of archival interventions and for sharing her ideas. I have incorporated and reflected on many of her points and questions in this conclusion.

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