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 Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez, "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings," *Social Text Journal*, 15 July 2013, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-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-facetted 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 interventionalist 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 sidenote 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 condition[10] – an assumption of other perspectives seems not to be a prior-

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 anarchive" – "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 Ndjiharine'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 photographical relict).[12] Furthermore, the artists trigger a reconsideration of both archival and exhibition practices. This became most apparent in Ndjiharine'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 absolution 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 a both a possibility and a contradiction, since healing, like woundedness, 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.