Mercia Kandukira

Basters

In: Jürgen Zimmerer/Julian zur Lage (eds): Global Memories of German Colonialism. Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2025, https://doi.org/10.15460/hup.269.2126, S. 125–137

Hamburg University Press
Verlag der Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg
Carl von Ossietzky

IMPRESSUM

Bibliographische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über https://portal.dnb.de abrufbar.

Online-Ausgabe

Die Online-Ausgabe dieses Werkes ist eine Open-Access-Publikation und ist auf den Verlagswebseiten frei verfügbar. Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek hat die Online-Ausgabe archiviert. Diese ist dauerhaft auf dem Archivserver der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek (https://portal.dnb.de) verfügbar.

DOI https://doi.org/10.15460/hup.269.2088

Gedruckte Ausgabe

ISBN 978-3-910391-02-4

Layoutentwicklung

In Zusammenarbeit mit dem Verlag durch Sascha Fronczek, studio +fronczek, Karlsruhe (Deutschland), https://saschafronczek.de.

Cover und Satz

Hamburg University Press

Druck und Bindung

Books on Demand GmbH

In de Tarpen 42, 22848 Norderstedt (Deutschland), info@bod.de, https://www.bod.de

Verlag

Hamburg University Press

Verlag der Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky, Von-Melle-Park 3, 20146 Hamburg (Deutschland), info.hup@sub.uni-hamburg.de, https://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de

2025

INHALT

Basters

Mercia Kandukira

'Just pick a random white dude and have him impregnate you,' my mother said over the phone one evening, 'andarire otjiporoporo – even a nobody.' My gaze turned to my bedroom ceiling as I exhaled, lowering my shoulders.

'I don't mean a bum from under the bridge,' she explained, 'I mean, he doesn't have to be your ideal guy for you to have his child.'

My mother's request was as vain as her desire for a pure cashmere tartan blanket in the color Stewart Royal. The German Boutique in Windhoek that sold tartan blankets in her day didn't stock them anymore and since that specific blanket meant so much to her, my mind was set on finding it, even though it was as elusive to me as conceiving.

'What if I really dislike the guy,' I asked her, 'what if the guy I meet is not white?'

'No,' she retorted with a force in her voice, 'I only want mixed-race grandchildren to run around my yard.'

'Ugh Ripukz,' I reasoned, 'all the guys my age are taken.' 'Don't worry, you are a beautiful, smart girl, you will find one.'

A month after this grandkid conversation I met a gentleman from Kassel at a graduate students get together. In the din of academic jargon, we leaned into each other on a couch, nursing cold beers.

'What do you study?' I asked him. I do not remember the exact words, but he said something to the effect of:

'I'm taking a philosophical approach to the concepts of speechlessness, the unsayable, and the unspeakable.'

'Have you read Spivak's work?' I enquired, finding this a great opportunity to send him material to read.

'No, I haven't,' he shook his head with interest in his grey-green eyes. 'What about you?' he asked, 'what's your study focus?'

'Well, I am an English Major, and I study both literature and creative writing.' I say, taking a swig of my lager. 'My special focus is creative nonfiction.'

We sat close enough to break the touch barrier then glanced as our knees touched before we continued the conversation unfazed.

'What are you writing about?' he asked.

'I am working on a memoir which will use the Ovaherero and Nama Genocide as a backdrop.' I shift around in my seat and place a hand on his knee. This is my turn to look both smart and interested. I continue. 'I specifically want to explore how trauma is intergenerationally transferable. So, I guess, in a way, I'm giving literary voice to a group which has largely been silenced.'

The conversation went on for a while, but I had to go, and we exchanged contact details.

A week after this conversation, the German asked me on a date, which led to another on the campus nature preserve in the winter of 2019. He laid a colorful blanket near a tree by the pond. We took selfies with our tongues sticking out and though I don't quite remember which Nietzsche aphorisms he shared, I laughed out loud. Later that night, I sent my mother some of the selfies from the picnic date.

'Hoooo, he's cute, get pregnant!' my mother exclaimed. My cheeks turned hot, and my palms suddenly moist. I lowered my iPhone and placed my mother on loudspeaker so I could appreciate the pictures again.

In the photo, my smile was too wide. Tufts of curly hair stuck out from my knitted beanie. I felt an unwelcome shame – as if by consorting with this German, I was betraying my ancestors. Even so, I felt like a rebel as I held and felt the warmth of those hands which so starkly contrasted with mine. In the picture, the tall guy by my side had an equally toothy smile and hair he described as 'Straßenköterblond.'

'Where's this guy from?' my mother inquired.

'Omundoishi.'

'Aaae mara Ovandoishi venombangu,' my mother responded. 'Eh, but Germans are unfair. They did us wrong.' She gave room to the static over the WhatsApp call. I didn't know what to say, so I focused on my rapid heartbeat. The moment was saturated, with an uneasy silence. My mother didn't retract the statement about me falling pregnant. I pursed my lips and started trembling. I couldn't say all the things I wanted to say, so we ended the call.

When my mother said Germans were unfair, she referred to Otjitiro Otjindjandja[1] – a dark time in Ovaherero history which involved a lethal clash with German settlers in

1 The Ovaherero and Nama Genocide (In Otjiherero).

1904. Like other Western powers, the Germans sought to expand their empire. This quest for 'Lebenraum' caused the displacement of large communities, as settlers confiscated arable land from the Ovaherero and Nama people. The settlers extensively appropriated livestock, a key means of sustenance and a symbol of Ovaherero wealth.

Ovaherero resistance was thwarted by extermination orders which saw 80 percent of the Ovaherero population killed. The few who survived were enslaved and ousted. Many died in the Omaheke Desert.

In the same week my mother and I had the conversation about the unfairness of German folk, I grabbed a morning coffee from Jazzman's Café and sat at a booth with the gentleman from Kassel. We placed our winter coats on the cushioned seats, wrapped our hands around warm paper cups. With our forearms on the wooden table, we bridged two worlds at odds.

'My mother is so stupid,' I said. The German's face twitched. I stared out the window at the snow falling.

'She wants a grandchild from me, and she doesn't let me breathe!' I said exhaling. 'Tell me, is your mom the same way?'

I didn't tell him it was after seeing our picture together that my mother ordered me to fall pregnant.

'My mother too doesn't have grandkids,' he responded, 'and she also wonders who between my sister and I will be first.'

'You know, what makes me angry, is that she doesn't care that I'm trying to get a PhD, she just wants what she wants.'

The German makes a joke, I don't quite remember but I leave the conversation elated.

*

To get used to one another, the German and I attended more happy hours together, and one night in the back seat of an UberX I proclaimed my love for Portugal.

'Aaah, Portugal is a peasant state,' the German mocked and looked through the front screen.

'Oooh, you didn't just say that!' I said moving my shoulder away from his.

Germans dubbed the Khoisan 'Hottentot,' which is onomatopoeia for the indigenous languages they came to hear in modern-day Namibia. Like the cuckoo is named after

the sounds she makes, native Namibians were named similarly. Being half-Khoisan, I wondered if the German considered me a Hottentot like Saartjie Baartman, the Khoisan woman who was trafficked to Europe in the early nineteenth century by a white man to be displayed on stages across Europe. She was sexually exploited and displayed to freak-show enthusiasts who were fascinated by her large buttocks and small waist. In one version of Baartman's story, she has a baby by a white man who has no love for her or the child. I wanted to try for my mother, but I didn't want to be a Hottentot body carrying a baby for a reason as superficial as meeting European beauty standards. Using a man just for sperm felt unfair and dehumanizing, for both the father and the would-be offspring, who would be more likely to be raised in a single-parent household. Even though my mother thought having a mixed grandchild would give her bragging points, a part of me felt like she was trying to erase or dilute our features. The thought that my mother rejected the idea of an unmixed grandchild made me feel invalid for not being biracial. If I ever have a child, I want that child's life and dignity to be respected regardless of phenotype.

During one Northern Hemisphere winter, I sent my mother pictures of my Otjiherero name printed in the snow. She was proud that I had finally embraced the name 'Kenouho' and shared this memory:

My mother was nineteen years old and eight months pregnant, in a long-back bakkie[2] with bleating goats around her stacked like sardines in a can. Her hand shielded her round belly from a goat's horn. Her circular pupils met a pair of rectangular pupils whose owner – a goat – wondered how weird my mother looked standing on two legs. Dung pellets were at my mother's feet, the stench of goat urine was thick in the air, and her eyes teared up the way eyes do with ammonia. She wore a tattered dress, yet smiled because she was leaving the reservation. My mother was escaping her mother's fury. My grandmother's words replayed in my mother's mind: something to the effect of 'I sent you to school and you couldn't even stay a year without men?' My mother looked saddened by the plural, 'men.'

After I was born, my mother went back where she shared a room with my father. She heard someone call her name, 'Ripuree,' in the street. She had her hand over her mouth, a gesture of surprise since nobody in Uis called her by her Otjiherero name. The voice, faint at first, got louder as it approached the room where my mother and I were. In this voice she recognized her grandmother. My mother ran to meet her. I imagine that at this

2 Pickup truck.

point the women embraced and shed a tear before entering the house where the swaddled newborn lay. This is where my great grandmother named me 'Kenouho.' My mother repeated my great-grandmother's words as she recalled them: 'Muatje, omuatje uaeta okandu, tara kenouho nu maketara' – 'Child, the child has brought forth a little one, look she has little eyes and is looking.' She told me to carry my name with pride. My name holds in its very essence the history of my existence. I was the taboo baby conceived in a polarized society which frowned upon tribal intermingling as much as it frowned upon interracial mixing. For my great-grandmother, my eyes were my humanizing factor. More than anything, this memory of my mother's plight strengthened the love I had for her.

*

When I went back to Namibia at the end of 2019, I was unaware that my mother had become immobile on account of her weight. Soon, as I gained intelligence that she'd been rushed to Outjo District Hospital, I stuffed my roller with a few items; among them, a tartan blanket I'd gotten for 20 USD at T. J. Maxx. On the road from Windhoek to Otjiwarongo, I sat shotgun in a Volkswagen Polo hatchback opposite a chatty man with a c-shaped scar on his forehead. He said a whole bunch of things, but the following conversation stuck with me:

'I want to own a farm one day,' the man said envying the fenced-off, undeveloped land by the roadside. The man spoke of rising from poverty, like I've heard my mother speak about so many times. Instead of responding, I swallowed saliva, on the verge of tears, wondering why my mother hadn't told me she'd been sick the entire time I was away. Most of my conversation with the driver was silenced by the friction on the road, and the wind that seeped in from the wide-open windows. The man showed me a video of a communal plot in Khorixas. There was a brown puddle, and new growth in an otherwise arid- looking wilderness. He looked at my face, bright-eyed yet quizzical, waiting for a reaction. I nodded.

'Nice,' I said, trying hard for my voice not to break and stared out the window. The air smelled like wet soil. Tufts of greenery drew warthogs to the roadside. I hadn't seen that much wildlife on a single trip.

'It's been raining really well these sides now that the drought is gone,' the driver said poking his hand out to point. 'Did you see all that water?' he said referring to the video he'd shown me on his phone.

'Yup, it's a lot of water,' I pretended to be impressed. 'Who owns all that land behind the fence?' I asked him and he dropped a Germanic name, a few kilometers later he dropped another. 'Some landowners,' he said, 'they don't even live here.'

*

The number '1' was written on a carton box taped to the wall adjacent to where my mother slept. Her neck folds glistened as rivulets of sweat made their way down to the threadbare hospital bedsheets. A few grey stands lined her soaked hairline. She opened her eyes and forced a smile when she saw me standing by her bedside. My sixteen-year-old male cousin sat on the vacant bed in the room, his eyes were droopy from the forty-two hours he'd been awake tending to my mother. I pouted my lips as soon as I saw his sinewy arms, then I looked at my mother's body. Her tummy was wide, and wobbly yet free of stretchmarks despite the four children she'd mothered. I kissed her lips and hugged her horizontal body, which felt cold and clammy. The window was wide open, and so I pulled a blue polka dot sheet over her chest, but she ripped it off revealing a set of black nipples contrasted against brown skin.

'I will not finish this year,' she said. My heart pounded faster.

'Don't say that,' I rebuked her while holding her hand. Her fingers were plump, as if fluids wanted to burst out.

'This is dying,' she said.

'Look,' I said as I pulled the tartan blanket out of my roller holding it up. 'I brought you the blanket you wanted. Is this the right one?' She smiled and gave me a weak nod before her pain erased her joy.

'Where's my Bible?' she asked.

I remembered the Bible with gold-trimmed pages on my Amazon wish list, picked according to her specifications:

'The words of Christ must be in red, large print so I can read better and a zipper, ooh and the pages must be cut so that I can easily find the books. I want everyone to ask me where I got such a fancy Bible,' she'd said.

'I'll bring it next time,' I noted, given the disappointment on her face.

'I'm tired of laying on my side,' my mother complained, 'turn me to the other side.' I looked at her legs, spotted with black, thumb-print sized bruises from all the times my cousin handled them turning her.

As I stared into my mother's moist, sun-stained eyes, I recalled the chronically few moments I'd spent with her. I had once asked her to narrate her childhood, hoping that somehow by knowing my mother I'd come to know myself.

'Baie sleg – very bad,' she had offered as I sat by her side in her social-grant house. The details my mother shared were scanty.

'We suffered a lot; I don't want to talk about it,' her response echoed my dad's on the same subject. 'Why peal the scab off an old wound?' I was half-filled, with only the experiences she wished to share. She'd told me about Waldfrieden, where she went to school as a young girl.

'The name 'Waldfrieden' means 'Forest of Peace,' but we call it 'Otjozongejama'; the Germans came to rename it,' she'd said. The Ovaherero had named that area after the lions who roamed in the vicinity of Omaruru, but now there's a boarding school.

'How was Wald Frieden in your time?' I'd asked her.

'Very bad, we were always hungry, and they only fed us dun pap,'[3] she'd rued staring into the distance. 'Our clothes were torn, and we had no shoes.'

When she mentioned shoes, I remembered the holes in mine when I was in high school. I recalled walking barefoot in my early teens, and told her how I stood against the walls, during interval at my high school, ashamed people would see my underwear through the threadbare uniform I wore in Grade 11. Long tears flowed down my mother's chubby cheeks.

'It's okay Ripukz, I survived, we survived, see?' I tapped her shoulders.

My mother was born in 1969, during German Southwest Africa's struggle for independence from South Africa's Apartheid regime, resisting erasure of her very existence. She grew up in Omutiuanduko – one of many colonial reservations which had their inception during German occupation. On school holidays, like generations of Ovaherero people before her, my mother sat around the evening fire with her siblings and mother sharing 'ovihambarere' – allegorical fairytales featuring the gullible Hyena and the cunning Jackal. These stories are how my mother learned history. Some stories stick and others don't, yet I remember this one:

> After an unsuccessful search for food, Jackal finds an angled rock along an elephant trail and decides to rest there. Then comes along Hyena, a bounce in his step and a small

3 Thin porridge made from maize meal.

carcass in his mouth. The hungry Jackal sees Hyena coming, he pretends to be holding the rock up, straining his breath as one who's weighed down.

"Heya, whatcha doing holding that rock like that?" Hyena asked.

"Man, I'm so glad you came around, I've been in this position for hours now," Jackal responded, "see this rock right here, looks secure, but it'll crush me at any moment."

"What do you mean?"

"I was resting beneath the rock and then it started falling, and since I was under it, I decided to hold it up, but now I'm stuck see..."

"Hmm," Hyena said observing the rock. He's skeptical of Jackal, who always cons him.

"Man, you gotta help me. Just help me rest my arms, and I can find a thick log to secure it. I swear it's heavy." Jackal squirms.

Hyena shrugs, places his meat beneath one of the trees, and switches positions with Jackal.

"You should push up on the rock," Jackal advises, "it's heavy though it seems light."

"Well, hurry up, I don't have all day, I need to take that meat to my children," Hyena says.

"Yeah, man, I'll be back, make sure not to move an inch from here, that rock will crush you!" Jackal says this, steals Hyena's meat and scurries off, never to return.

Hyena waits till the sky shifts from blue to orange to mauve, but Jackal doesn't return. Suddenly he hears the monkeys gibber, they come closer. One Monkey sees him and asks:

"Why are you holding that rock? Are you crazy?"

Hyena repeats the story and soon as he's done, Monkey falls on his back laughing so hard he holds his stomach.

"Why you laughing man?"

"You're so stupid, this rock is not falling! We play on this rock all the time! Come on now, let go of it!"

Hyena lets go, his arms are sore, and he's growls when he notices his meat is gone.

My mother and I didn't get enough time to talk of her childhood. But in many ways, I saw how my mother held up a rock she wasn't sure which way it would fall, if it fell. Two years before her final illness, my mother told me about a 'Baster'[4] who lived in the same town as my dad and her. This man often placed me on his shoulders and bragged in the

4 "Coloured/Kleurling," an ethnic group comprised of mixed-race people—usually being the descendants of European settlers and indigenous Africans. Mostly found in Southern Africa.

streets to everyone that I was his kid because my complexion had yellow undertones and my hair lay flat on my scalp. I looked exactly like a Baster she'd said, even now when I recall this conversation, my mother had a large smile on her face.

Like my mother, I didn't escape the mentality that valued white or lighter-complexioned people, after all my skin tone was the subject of mockery at play and at school.

I went to Dawid Bezuidenhout High School where the majority were 'Basters.' Many had long flowing hair with light-brown skin. If you looked around the school hall during merit award ceremonies, you'd not only see the turquoise and white school-uniformed students with high ponytails; you could count the unmixed students among the thousands.

Our principal, also a Baster man, stood on the stage one morning, holding a microphone in one hand and a paper in the other. Germanic names like 'Wasserfall,' 'Van Wyk,' and 'Schultz' would glide off his tongue, but he'd stumble on the occasional Bantu name hard to pronounce. Laughter would erupt in the school hall as everyone looked around for who the owner of *that* name was. Within moments, a dark- skinned student would make their way to the stage to a mixture of applause and laughter. If it were up to me then, my last name wouldn't be Kandukira; it would be Dixon and my mother would be white.

In the spring of 2021, a year after my mom's passing and still perplexed by her mixed-race grandchild request, I came across a story about Jahohora, a kinswoman who worked for German settler colonists as a teenage slave in 1904. To repel German soldiers, Jahohora rubbed her skin with stinging nettles, which caused her to breakout in blisters. Later when asked why she would maim herself in that way, Jahohora said she'd never wanted to have German-blooded children. However, my mother yielded to the possibility of a half-German grandchild despite saying 'Germans are fair.' She was ambivalent about the possibility of a German-blooded grandchild; in her silence, I read an unwanted permissiveness. Perhaps my mother wanted a mixed child when she picked my dad, whose father was biracial. From the times before my grandpa was born to a while after I was conceived, it was illegal for whites and blacks to be married. Placing dispossessed people on arid reservations was one way of ensuring this racial separation.

On the reservation where I lived as a toddler, my grandmother would cut all the children's hair but mine, maintaining that I'd blunt her scissors.

'Your hair is too slippery, like a white person's,' she would say to me. An aunt would shampoo and curl my hair. Keeping my hair long was a sign of higher status, like owning a cashmere tartan blanket in the color Stewart Royal, like having a daughter in the United

States, like that daughter having a mixed- race child. To be likened to white people brought pride to toddler me and perhaps to my mother, which is why at times I wonder if my mother would press me on the grandkid issue if I were biracial like my grandfather. Am I now supposed to sit on a bench historically meant for only white buttocks? How do I undo the thoughts of inferiority instilled in me from when I was a child by parents who were taught time and again that they weren't nearly as good as white people?

*

By the time I get back to the US, the flame that had flickered between the German and I had fizzled out. A while after the breakup, I lay on my bed and stared at the tiled ceiling blasting Yo-Yo Ma's rendition of Bach's *Cello Suite No. 1* in G major. I tried to enjoy the music but couldn't, and so I texted the German:

'I'm really curious, what does your mother think of biracial grandchildren?'

'Race is not a topic my family discusses,' he responds.

I traced back our race conversation to a moment in the past. In this memory of one occasion with the German, we're standing by my study table in my old Binghamton apartment. The room is dimly lit, I'm in my nightie. Curious I ask:

'Have you ever been with a black woman?' I look straight at him, and he fidgets, evades eye contact till he finds a spot on the wall to stare at before blurting out:

'Yes,' followed by a frown which left me scratching my scalp. He asked, still not looking at me: 'What kind of question is that?' Even though I tried to proceed with this conversation, it reached and an untimely end as the tension in the room thickened.

*

While studying in my carrel in January of 2020, my eyes froze on an image from *The Kaiser's Holocaust* which depicted dozens of white, human domes half-buried in desert sand. Clenching my teeth, I slapped my face with both hands. I'd just buried my mother two weeks ago; now I was in the US, reading our people's history from a textbook. My spectacles were on the desk next to the Contigo coffee mug which I twisted open. Steam rose from the black coffee. I grabbed a lime from my backpack, squeezed it into the black liquid with my teeth, and took a sour sip. In *The Kaiser's Holocaust*, I read a scene where a German soldier flogged an Omuherero woman walking down a sand dune with

a baby on her back. The baby cried but the mother didn't. I exhaled, sat back, and eyed the pencil in my hand shaking. My core churned as I held my mouth with both hands. I took a few deep breaths, staring through the window into the dark night.

Since I started reading *The Kaiser's Holocaust* and watching documentaries on the first Genocide of the twentieth century, my mind remains filled with memories that aren't mine but still feel real. I sometimes dream of bodies dangling off trees, snapped necks exfoliated by rough rope, and inertia; at times I see my own body, swaying in the breeze alongside my ancestors'. A heaviness I cannot trace back to a starting point sometimes wakes me with tears.

*

Later, I dream of my mom's dying words. 'Mepama omuinjo,' she'd said – meaning 'my breath is tightening' or 'my life is shrinking.' I told her: 'You are loved.' In my memories, my mother's smile is ever-fleeting, and her eyes hold a perpetual heaviness. Memories of my mom are coupled with those of the bones I saw on the roadside driving from Omatjete to Windhoek after her funeral, but also the images from the history book I was reading – the heart shape in the cranial bone where a nose used to be, imperfect, gnawed. I imagined my heart's contents spill into my gut. *Don't die yet, I had said, I still must give you your ourumbona,*[5] *remember?* But she died.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, I processed my fifty-year-old mother's death. My suicidal ideation coincided with an actual suicide by a fellow graduate student who drowned himself in one of the upstate New York rivers. I sat in my bedroom, staring at the carpet and contemplating walking to the bridge minutes from my apartment, knowing I couldn't swim, knowing the water was filthy, knowing we were in the middle of a Northern Hemisphere winter. I remembered scenes from movies where people stood on tall buildings' edges threatening to jump, but really wanting people who cared enough to stop them. I stood at by my bedroom window staring at hills lined by trees I concluded were hard to climb, let alone hang a noose on. I stared at sharp knives in my kitchen and at my wrists, I stared at my bathtub, and stared at the painkillers on my bathroom shelf. I thought of my little brothers' sad faces, my dad, and all those in Namibia waiting to see me again, eventually crying myself to sleep.

5 Biracial grandchildren.

I woke up, put on some coffee, took a shower, wrapped myself with the tartan blanket, and sat at my desk and wrote till dark. I'd go to bed and hug my pillow tight, wishing my life away. All I wanted was to bring my mother joy; with her gone, I felt a loss in purpose. I knew though that my time to die hadn't arrived yet, and that for the bigger fight ahead I had to keep going, even if that meant finding a new purpose.

At the time I write this, it's the fall of 2021, I'm taking a GMAP class where the furniture forms a 'U.' My cohorts and I sit together from 5:50 to 8:50 on a Tuesday night. The professor gestures at slides the color of twilight and asks:

'When you hear the word 'genocide,' what comes to mind?' His clear eyes scan the room. I think of carcasses in a ditch, tilted heads hanging from trees in the Omaheke, all in gray scale, like the pictures in *The Kaiser's Holocaust*. In this moment, the Ovaherero and Nama Genocide is an event in the past because nobody is being 'killed' anymore. The class fidgets, open palms shoot up, and I stare at the words on the screen ahead of me: *The Ten Stages of Genocide.*

The ninth stage is 'extermination,' I know this word from those television shows where a homeowner calls the 'exterminator' who comes armed with a deadly gas to get rid of 'the vermin problem.' I think of Von Trotha's 1904/5 extermination orders. I think of the exterminated we remember by the bones sticking out of sand dunes in old photographs.

It is done, it's in the past, get over it already, I've heard people say, you have lost the war fair and square. But you see it wasn't a war and it wasn't fair, and my mother called it out.

It's the next stage that perks me up from a long workday's stupor. When I see the white letters on the slideshow, I cannot calm my viscera from moving in a frenzy. Even though I've been breathing stale air all day from the face mask, there's a newness in my chest. In this moment, I absorb the voice coming from the front of the room. On the slide is the word that keeps popping up in my research on the Ovaherero and Nama Genocide: 'Denial.' 'Denial extends the crime of genocide to future generations of victims. It is a continuation of the intention to destroy the group.'

I bristle at this new knowledge. In the word 'continuation' I learn the genocide is not over if denial continues. 'Genocide is a structure that stays on,' the professor says, 'long after the killing has ended.' I hear the word 'structure,' and I'm reminded of a friend's grandpa's body, a structure where each scar is history nobody will know unless told. 'How could I forget?' the friend asked in response to those who think of atrocities as pasts that need forgetting, 'I still see the scars on my grandfather's back.' My friend's grandpa's back has skin lumps that had grown over wounds that were never stitched.

These wounds are ravines on sweaty days, they are the ripples a loved one feels hugging him. These scars are how we remember. For over a century after the genocide, Germany has denied it ever happened. Ovaherero and Nama people's scars aren't epidermal but epigenetic, which means we've genetically inherited them, and our behavior will remain influenced by those scars. I see these scars in the tears I cry when I read about Shark Island. I see these scars in the nightmares that wake me at night. I see these scars in the sudden panic attacks I get thinking that something bad is about to happen. Usually, I'm in a relatively safe space, which makes my feelings in the moment moot.

When I read literature on affective neuroscience, my psychological state makes sense and so does my mother's. My panic and fear are the scar tissue of my brain. I learn from neuroscientists that trauma changes our brain structure; to me, that means our brains want to ensure our survival if a similar traumatic event comes about. When I consider the psychosomatic substrates which govern our fight, flight, or freeze responses, then trauma is inheritable. If being white or mixed during the Ovaherero and Nama Genocide felt safer than being the hunted black, then my mother's instincts make sense.

Everything my mother said in her last days I thought was stupid; I now understand. I no longer question her desire for a mixed-race grandchild, neither do I question her asking for such a thing as a Bible on her deathbed. I no longer think my mother stupid; instead, acted on by the violence which continues to resonate in all who descend from genocide survivors.

In this current fall, an uncle sends me a song with the lyrics: 'muatje kukuta kapena njoko imba' – 'child, be strong, your mother isn't here.' You're wasting your tears as if tears are diamonds. And I'm drawn to the memory where my mother is in a hole. I cry. A woman in Herero dress glances around as if danger lurks: 'Don't cry in the wilderness like that,' she says; I wonder if this is an adage from 1904, when German soldiers roamed the land looking for Ovaherero to kill.

Pain is blood pooling in my throat, yet I mustn't cry. In my upstate New York apartment, I sit on my loveseat knowing tomorrow I must walk to campus. I sit with things I can only describe as strangling me like a potato I half-way swallow. The past is nothing to go back to; it lives with me as my body moves on a journey, I can only take myself step by step on a concrete-slab sidewalk, treading on cracks, hoping for solid ground. Breath is labor, I attend meetings, speak of random things as pre-research brainstorming exercises and rubrics, churning a lifetime's tears. I'm lucky sadness looks like exhaustion. I walk, it drizzles, my body leaks. I sniffle, convinced passersby will think it's allergies. 'Muatje kukuta' – 'child be strong,' they say, 'don't waste your tears.'