II Einzelanalysen/Individual Analyses

Katrin Sieg

“Theater of Ir/reconciliation: Empathy and Anger in Decolonial Theater”

Abstract: This article examines the play *Hereroland* (2019–2023), in which German and Namibian performers jointly wrestled with German colonial violence and tackled questions of postcolonial reconciliation, reparations, and repair. *Hereroland* demonstrates that theater can function as both the agent and the site of decolonization, revealing the ways in which the colonial past is negotiated and the decolonial future imagined collectively. The play’s two iterations illuminate distinctive approaches to inviting audiences into political allyship in Germany and Namibia. Immersive techniques serve to emotionally involve spectators in both versions, but the tone shifts from empathy with Ovaherero demands for reparations in the Hamburg production, to anger about stalled decolonization in the Namibian version. I ask about the reasons and the consequences of that shift and argue that the play’s insistence on holding open a space of irreconciliation is a rare, yet all the more important and instructive instance in decolonial theater.

The Joint Declaration by the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of Namibia of 2021, which had been negotiated over six years by representatives of the German and Namibian governments, specifies the terms of a public apology and compensation payments for the killing of an estimated 80% of Ovahereros and 50% of Namas between 1904 and 1908 in what was then the colony of German-Southwest Africa. In 2015, the German government had first recognized this event as a genocide. Once published, the Declaration was immediately criticized by stakeholders in both countries. Behind the mask of shared dialogue and mutual agreement, observers critical of Germany detected not only arrogance but also “a soft version of denialism” (Melber 169), which admitted to genocide but separated an apology from reparations, precluding true reconciliation. Purportedly including all affected parties, the negotiations excluded traditional Ovaherero and Nama leaders, foregoing the opportunity to foster public reckoning and

Note: I wish to express my gratitude to Gernot Grünewald, Jörg Pohl, Lizette Kavari, and Gift Uzera, who spoke to me about both iterations of *Hereroland*. Thank you to the Thalia Theater for making recordings and other materials available. I deeply appreciate Barbara Mennel and Lauren van der Rede for reading and commenting on early versions of this article, as well as the two anonymous reviewers. I also wish to express my regret that due to the vagaries of international financial transactions, I was unable to obtain permission to publish photos of the Namibian production.

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community healing, while prioritizing German interests and perpetuating asymmetric power relations. Those intergovernmental negotiations were denounced for their lack of transparency and the exclusion of civil society groups in both countries (van Wyck 2021; Zimmerer 2024a). The secretive, exclusionary procedure aimed at a settlement of damages that limits future obligations. Due to civil society pressure the Namibian government reopened negotiations and a modified draft of the Joint Declaration was published in July 2024. While it made some improvements, the lack of inclusion and transparency was not rectified (Zimmerer 2024a).[1] The Joint Declaration contradicts the colonial memory culture that has tentatively emerged in both countries in recent years.

Things appear to be afoot in Germany as far as recognizing colonial wrongdoing is concerned.[2] Over the past decade, the efforts of museums to repatriate human remains and colonial artifacts have generated much scholarly and public attention. They have started to challenge postcolonial scholars' earlier accusation of "colonial amnesia" (El-Tayeb; Kößler). However, museums are not the only cultural institutions now keen to facilitate a critical reckoning with Germany's colonial past. In particular, plays and performances offer new opportunities for Germans and people from the former colonies to jointly confront a painful history. This article examines the play *Hereroland*, a coproduction of Thalia Theater, Hamburg, and the National Theater of Namibia, Windhoek, which premiered in Hamburg in January 2020, as an alternative forum for negotiating postcolonial relations. It is, to my knowledge, one of the first critical, full-length theatrical representations of the colonial genocide presented on the German stage, and the first to be performed in both Germany and Namibia.[3]

1 For instance, the offending phrase "from today's perspective" was removed from the affirmation that a genocide had taken place. Payments are now couched as "atonement" rather than development funds and increased by an unspecified amount, with a portion to be paid upfront.

2 In particular, the decade-long controversy surrounding the monumental Humboldt Forum in central Berlin, which opened in 2021 and houses part of the Ethnology Museum's collection of non-European material culture, put questions of colonial-era hoarding, the Berlin Republic's relations to the Global South in an era of increasing inequality and mass migration, and what Germany owes those it has plundered front and center. For a short survey of the evolving colonial memory culture in Germany, see Rogers.

3 In 2019, the documentary play *Herero_Nama*, whose cast included a Herero and Nama activist, premiered at Schauspiel Köln, under the direction of Turkish-German artist Nuran David Calis. Outside Germany, there are several significant artworks created by a South African artist, a South African director, and an African American playwright, respectively, that tackle the subject: William Kentridge's installation *Black Box/Chambre Noire* (2005) and the controversial performance installation *Exhibit_B* by white South African artist Brett Bailey (2010) were both shown in Germany. U.S. playwright Jackie Sibblies Drury's *We are Proud to Present a Presentation of the Herero of Namibia, formerly German Southwestafrica, Between the Years 1884–1915* (2012) was not.

My contention is that *Hereroland* is a tremendously rich and thought-provoking experiment in rehearsing decolonial justice. I draw on Doris Kolesch's reflections on immersive theater to illuminate how the joint ensemble's use of immersive techniques facilitated encounters with geographically or socially distant others imaginatively and corporeally, and how it allowed spectators to grasp decolonial relations as messily multiperspectival and multidirectional. Immersive techniques are key to addressing German audiences as "implicated" (Michael Rothberg) in colonial and neocolonial relations, while allowing them to realize decolonial agency and allyship. And I discern a specifically decolonial form of the "theater of anger" conceptualized by Olivia Landry in another context. It impresses on spectators the urgency of transforming entrenched injustices, while it also emphatically resists too-quick solutions that promise reconciliation in the sense of settling damages and achieving closure. This theater of *irreconciliation* furiously insists on holding open space for feminist, cross-racial, and intergenerational critiques of deferred decolonization. It centers Ovaherero perspectives but aspires to broad civic debate about what genuine decolonization might mean as a collective project. While the two strategies of immersive theater and the decolonial "theater of anger" complement each other in many ways, I ask whether the power differences shaping international coproductions make them equally viable.

Hereroland's wrestling with decolonial repair has broad implications for European publics. It amplifies civic and cultural endeavors to grapple with the damages wrought by European arrogance and white supremacy, which structure the relations between the Global North and South. Europeans have been shielded from calls for redress, because national histories and national maps long insinuated fictions of sovereignty that denied shared violent histories along with continued economic and political dependencies. The story of one production I tell below is based on attending *Hereroland* in Hamburg, viewing recordings of the Hamburg and Windhoek versions, and conducting interviews with directors and three cast members. It has implications for the many cases in which the victims of colonial violence are geographically distant from their former oppressors, and often struggle against their own postcolonial nations' discrimination of ethnic minorities – another legacy of the colonial era. My research hopes to contribute to wider debates about theater as a site where decolonizing political imaginations are brought to bear on domestic as well as international relations, and where decolonial solidarity can be practiced.

I

The wealthy northern port city of Hamburg is home to a sizable Black community, and local decolonial and antiracist activist organizations had long thematized the involvement of Hamburg's wealthy merchants and ship owners in colonial trade, conducted decolonial city walks and harbor tours, and promoted a critical approach to colonial monuments. In 2014, the Hamburg senate announced its intent to study and commemorate the city's colonial involvement and critically contextualize urban manifestations of the colonial past.[4] It funded a research center at the University of Hamburg, which was tasked to examine Hamburg's "(post-) colonial legacy."[5] In addition, the senate inaugurated a series of public roundtables (2017–2024). In 2018, senator of culture Carsten Brosda met with a delegation of Ovahereros and Namas and apologized for the city's colonial involvement and the suffering of their ancestors. The artistic director of the Thalia Theater, Joachim Lux, sought to contribute to these broad civic efforts and hired independent director Gernot Grünewald to create a play on the topic of Hamburg's colonial history. The project was co-financed by the TURN fund, a German cultural program that from 2012 to 2021 supported German-African cultural cooperations.[6]

Grünewald was not only known for his productions of devised documentary plays,[7] but for his familiarity with the Namibian theater scene.[8] Ndjavera had long been involved in political theater. Before Namibian independence in 1990, he had been active in the Black groups that toured the country and were described variously as popular, agitprop, and community theater drawing on the ideas of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal. This political theater was aligned with

4 Transcripts of the roundtables and a strategy paper are archived by the *Projektstelle für die Dekolonisierung Hamburgs*.

5 Led by Jürgen Zimmerer, the research center examines the connections and aftereffects of colonialism in Hamburg, Germany and the former colonies, resulting in the publication of an app as well as the book *Hamburg: Tor zur kolonialen Welt* (*Hamburg: Gateway to the Colonial World*, 2021). For more information see geschichte.uni-hamburg.de/arbeitsbereiche/globalgeschichte/forschung/forschungsstelle-hamburgs-postkoloniales-erbe.html.

6 Under the terms of the fund, German institutions or organizations could apply for matching funding to cooperate with an African partner who was not required to contribute financially.

7 Theater scholar Rosemary Parsons defines devised theater as "the process of creative collaboration by a group of performers to generate and assemble a performance through improvisation, discussion and rehearsal, inclusive of the resultant production" (Parsons 8).

8 In *Oshi-Deutsch* (2016), a coproduction of the Theater Osnabrück with the National Theater of Namibia, Grünewald and his Namibian co-director Sandy Rudd traced the lives of some of the 430 Namibian children who were raised in the German Democratic Republic and abruptly returned to Namibia after the country became independent and the GDR ceased to exist in the same year.

the South West African National Union and South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) liberation movements and sought to inform and mobilize rural and disenfranchised populations about topical issues (Olivier-Sampson 172–174). In 2016, Ndjavera had devised a play that linked the Ovaherero genocide with contemporary problems, which had been produced by the National Theater of Namibia. Ndjavera decided to incorporate parts of that project into the play about the presence of the colonial past he would co-direct with Grünewald. While the two divided up responsibilities – Ndjavera directed a new iteration of his play set in the center of the stage, Grünewald devised a number of documentary "stations" that were dispersed throughout the immersive theater space – all ensemble members collaborated on both components of *Hereroland*.

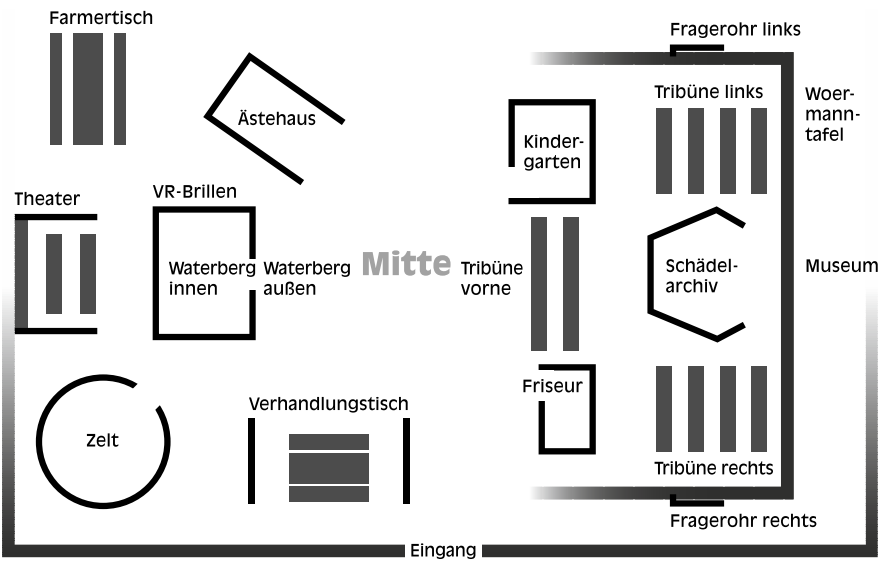

Fig. 1: map of stage. Farmertisch=Farmer's Table. Verhandlungstisch=Negotiation Table. Waterberg Innen/Aussen=Waterberg Interior/Exterior. VR-Brillen=VR glasses. Friseur=Hairdresser. Tribüne links/rechts=Risers left/right. Fragerohr links/rechts=Question Tube left/right. Zelt=Tent. Ästehaus=Twig house. Mitte=Center. With permission by Thalia Theater.

The play's two components – the play-within-the-play and the stations – employ distinct methods to inform and emotionally involve Hamburg spectators, in order to foster empathy with the Ovaherero cause of demanding recognition and reparations. The former, which takes the form of a trial to ascertain German historical guilt and legal liability, traces the failure of Ovahereros to obtain justice either within a system of international law, or within an apparatus of theatrical repre-

sentation wedded to Enlightenment conceptions of knowledge and reasoning. Its Boalian dramaturgy, in which performers reflect on the political conditions of social action, serves to question why both the law and the theater actively prevent the Ovaherero from establishing their full humanity. By inviting Germans to witness and empathize with Ovaherero suffering, the play-within-the-play urges them towards political allyship, and towards exerting pressure on their own government while it negotiated decolonial repair. The stations complement that endeavor by proffering evidence of the historical crime. Techniques typical of immersive theater not only promote corporeal proximity and emotional openness to the plight of Ovahereros but also push audience members to resist (neo-) colonial white supremacy.

Hereroland brought together an ensemble of six white German and five Ovaherero actors, dancers, and musicians. The costumes were designed by well-known Namibian artist and fashion designer Cynthia Schimming. Set designer Michael Köpke created an immersive installation that occupied the entire stage. The installation, designed in a minimalist, modular style, offered space for nineteen different stations, and each ticketholder was sent on her own, individual path to fifteen of them. No itinerary was the same, and no audience member saw all stations during a given evening. Stations were arranged around an open space at the center marked by a pole that symbolized an ancestral tree. It was in this central space (marked *Mitte [center]* on the map, see Fig. 1) that a rehearsal for a play was set. That play-within-the-play, which drew all actors and spectators together before they would again disperse towards the different stations, provided the framing action and throughline of *Hereroland*. Every five minutes the sound of a cow horn summoned spectators to move towards different stations or return to the center of the stage.

The first five-minute segment offers a condensed summary of the historical subject matter that would be explored over the course of the ninety-minute performance. Delivered in a matter-of-fact tone by the company standing in a circle facing outwards towards audience members, the actors chronicle the uprising against German settlers' appropriation of land and physical abuse of Ovahereros (*Hereroland* Videorecording of Hamburg performance). They relate the battle at Waterberg, which concluded with German troops chasing Herero men, women, and children into the arid Omaheke desert, where many perished. They narrate the internment of survivors in concentration camps, where more died of hard labor. And they sum up the lasting consequences of the genocide by naming the confiscation of "nearly all of Herero land," which was sold to German settlers, as the cause of extreme inequality in today's Namibia, where "wealth, land and privilege [are] concentrated among white German-speaking descendants of settlers" (*Hereroland* Videorecording of Hamburg performance). Subsequent segments set

up the situation of a trial, which investigates the genocide to determine German guilt, and pits witnesses for the prosecution against the statements of the defense counsel representing the German government. The opening indictments echo those made in a lawsuit in the United States that[9] was dismissed in 2019 because the judge found no grounds for jurisdiction. The stage trial ends with an invitation to audience members to reflect on just solutions in small group discussions with performers.

While the ensemble is initially united by a friendly camaraderie and the shared purpose to give the Ovaherero cause a public hearing, subtle differences between German and Namibian cast members become increasingly evident. These differences are attached to divergent theatrical styles and methods of truth seeking. At the same time, the technique of stepping in and out of theatrical roles, drawn from Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal, serves to brake the mounting momentum driving towards failure and investigate its structural causes. The divergence of Ovahereros and Germans becomes evident when the prosecutor calls as the main witness a character introduced as Fluksman Vleermuis, a trickster figure who compares himself to Till Eulenspiegel, Nasruddin, and Harlequin from European popular cultural history. He speaks in sly, punning rhymes and wears a Harlequin costume. When forced into a dream state induced by being bound with ropes to the pole/ancestral tree (see Fig. 2),

Fig. 2: Fluksman Vleermuis aka Tree Spirit (Otja Henock Kambaekua), *Hereroland*. Thalia Theater (January 2020). Coproduction with National Theatre Namibia. Photograph by Armin Smailovic.

9 The lawsuit objected to the exclusion of Herero and Nama representatives from the intergovernmental negotiations and asked for direct reparations to descendants. The suit was brought under the Alien Tort Statute, a 1789 law that is often invoked in human rights cases.

Vleermuis is able to connect to previous generations of ancestors and "see" racist acts in German-Southwest Africa as well as in Berlin.

The company's action of binding the trickster, with a certain sadistic glee and against his protests, prompts his clairvoyant witnessing of an Ovaherero *sangoma* (witch doctor) being strung up on the tree, having his skull sawn open, brain measured, and body dismembered and castrated by gabbing, beer-guzzling German doctors. In the second testimony, Vleermuis takes off his harlequin costume and reveals himself as a Tree Spirit, wearing precolonial Herero attire (leather apron, necklace, and skull cap). In that second testimony, the Tree Spirit describes a similar scene, now located in Berlin. He sees German doctors dissect the bodies of Ovaherero participants in a *Völkerschau* who are taken to a concentration camp near Berlin, where their skulls are measured and their brains weighed. The play underscores scientific racism as a felt experience shared by colonized subjects and those targeted by the Nazi state. The testimony scenes impress on viewers the horrific sensation of finding oneself violated, dehumanized, and declared inferior by an ostensibly rational, scientific apparatus, and allowed to be tortured and killed with impunity. The witness testimony conveys that this nightmarish feeling was experienced by Ovahereros both in the colony and the metropole, where a group of them participated in an exhibition of people from the German colonies in 1896. The two scenes follow a dream logic by amalgamating settler aggression and racial science in the colonies with metropolitan entertainment, Nazi punitive practices, and Nazi medical experiments. The testimony scenes home in on the discourse of scientific racism as the underlying crime that made the colonial genocide possible and later climaxed in the Holocaust.

The production's focus on racial science exposes discrepancies between the moral and material conclusions Germans have drawn from the racialization of Jews in the Nazi racial state, and their lack of response to the racist treatment of colonized Africans. Whereas the extermination of European Jews has been recognized as central to modern German identity and cosmopolitan ethics (Levy and Sznaider), the genocide of Ovahereros and Namas has not catalyzed a comparable reckoning or obligation to make reparations. This discrepancy has struck many Ovahereros as a sign of ongoing racial discrimination. After the publication of the Joint Agreement, Ovaherero Paramount chief Vekuii Rukoro accused Germany of being willing to negotiate with the Jewish Claims Conference on behalf of Jews everywhere, agreeing to pay $90 billion in compensation for the Holocaust, but not with Hereros and Namas, "because they were white Europeans, and we are Black Africans" (Rukoro quoted in Rogers). To wit, the Federal Republic of Germany in its response to the 2017 Herero lawsuit invoked the legal principle of "intertemporality," which bars the retroactive application of the term *genocide* (coined in 1948 by the jurist Rafael Lemkin), in order to limit liability for the geno-

cide perpetrated by German colonial troops in 1904 (Melber 169; Hackmack 4). In effect, this principle bars contemporary Ovahereros from holding Germans responsible for the genocide. It leaves intact colonial-era views of colonial subjects as savage insurgents, rather than scrutinize these views through human rights norms codified after World War II, which purport to be universal. In the play-within-the-play, the German defense counsel and trial observers, too, regard the methods by which Ovahereros seek to establish historical truth as confirmation of their irrationality. In response to the Tree Spirit's testimony, the German defense counsel and some German trial observers scoff at and cast doubt on its veracity. The rational language of the law cannot accommodate the time-and-space-bending powers of the ancient being of which the Tree Spirit is an avatar. According to the defense counsel, it's all "hocus-pocus" (*Hereroland* Textbuch 17), not admissible in court.

The production frames its opposition to the law's narrow rules of truth-finding in theatrical terms. By taking the appearance of a trickster and invoking the names of clown, Nasruddin, and Harlequin, the Tree Spirit calls on European theatrical traditions that put greater stock on the sly wisdom and bodily agility of sassy subalterns than Enlightenment drama and its rational, bourgeois protagonists. Ndjavera and his Ovaherero cast members thus appeal to sidelined forms of knowledge archived in forms of physical comedy. However, the play exposes the risks of such an appeal, as the occult forces invoked by the Tree Spirit cannot unsettle the rationalism marshalled by the trial format. Finding himself laughed at, he entirely loses his composure and hurls accusations against Germans who have done nothing but "kill, and kill, and kill" (*Hereroland* Textbuch 17). An Ovaherero woman tries to intervene on his behalf: "Listen Germans, listen good: to the language inside of dreaming, of seeing, when he starts unfolding our myths!" (*Hereroland* Textbuch 17), but she too is yelled down in the tumult. Like the comic *Hanswurst* who was chased off the stage in the eighteenth century, allowing German national theater to constitute itself as enlightened, so the outraged Tree Spirit is ridiculed and shut up as the rationalist stage cannot tolerate his dire revelations (see Fig. 3).[10] He does not go without a fight, though (Fig. 3), asking questions in turn, and demanding explanations for the ideological precepts of German colonial rule:

> Like some explanation of 'the master race must rule?', like 'the Kaffirs caused the war?' – like, 'we the Germans came to protect, to preach the gospel, to hand out bibles in exchange for Lebensraum' [. . .] like, we too stupid to survive; like hang them high, like send them into the desert, like they stupid; they lazy; they don't deserve to live; I saw you! In the dark – what you did; everything – I saw. (*Hereroland* Textbuch 17)

10 This scene also resonates with highly emotional moments during the Truth and Reconciliation hearings in South Africa, when the public performance of abject suffering, thought to bring about social healing, reenacted a powerlessness that was not relieved by the justice system (Cole).

"We brought light to a dark continent," the defense counsel retorts (*Hereroland* Textbuch 17), insinuating that past events should be judged by their historical rationale, not by contemporary ethical or legal norms.

Fig. 3: Confrontation Tree Spirit (Otja Henock Kambaekua) vs. German defense counsel (Jörg Pohl). In background: Herero spectator (Glenn-nora Tjipura, left), and Prosecutor (Lizette Kavera, right). *Hereroland*, Thalia Theater (January 2020). Coproduction with National Theatre Namibia. Photograph by Armin Smailovic.

At this moment, two antagonistic lineages of performance confront each other, a dominant one wedded to the upholding of social order (and proper comportment in the court), and a marginalized one based on arcane rites that grant access to higher truths.[11] Contrite, the Ovaherero prosecutor promises to uphold "emotional discipline" (*Hereroland* Textbuch 17) and submits evidence in the eminently neoliberal genre of the PowerPoint presentation replete with a bullet point list of perpetrators and their deeds, whereupon the judge thanks them for their "reconciliatory conclusion" (*Hereroland* Textbuch 19). Cementing this shift in power between the opposing parties, the defense counsel's presentation confirms that a genocide took place but raises so many practical hurdles to implementing a fair process of repair – how to console the living for the loss of their loved ones? How to return all the human remains that are unidentifiable? How to redistribute land

11 See theater scholar Sue-Ellen Case's tracing of the gradual and incomplete ostracization of esoteric and occult performance practices and traditions from European theater, which as an institution put itself in the service of modern governmentality and a specific notion of science.

without creating economic chaos and racial strife? – that it seems futile to even attempt it. Why not just extend an apology but defer reparations indefinitely? The Tree Spirit's outburst and the defense counsel's equivocating ultimately collapse the power constellation on stage with that in the political sphere. The play-within-the-play thereby brilliantly illuminates the alignment of theatrical forms with hegemonic notions of epistemology and law. What started out as a shared endeavor between Germans and Ovahereros to devise an alternative to intergovernmental negotiations ends up with an ensemble split along national and racial lines, and German cast members parroting the political discourse. This dramaturgy powerfully articulates the actually existing predicament and urges spectators to become involved in contemplating just solutions in the concluding discussion.

Even as conciliation is framed as submission to the dominant order in the above scene, the play-within-the-play holds out hope for the eventual redemption of Ovaherero suffering and for a reconciliation between the German people, the German minority in Namibia, and Ovahereros that centers on repairing the latter's enduring dispossession. It ends with Ovahereros plaintively laying claim to the land now owned by German-speaking descendants of settlers, before the play concludes with inviting spectators into group discussions about decolonial justice. The poetic image of the bound Tree Spirit in agony undeniably resonates with the Christian image of crucifixion. Christian tropes of suffering endow both Ovaherero anguish, and performers' willingness to subject themselves to cruelty and ridicule on stage, with deeper spiritual meaning. Christian iconography heroizes the group's suffering and urges spectators to honor its protracted battle against science and the law. Jurist Judith Hackmack, an expert in transitional justice and critic of the Joint Declaration, secularizes this conviction when she writes that "it is well known that truth-telling from the perspective of the survivors, as well as commemoration, can have a reparative and healing effect. They can also contribute toward (re)establishing the agency of survivors that was lost as a result of the international crimes" (Hackmack 5). Whether understood through the lens of Christian or secular understandings of testifying, the dramatization of Ovahereros' pain predicates reconciliation on repair.

The play-within-the-play brings into view larger questions about the legal system's capacity to accommodate radically divergent ways of knowing and methods for establishing truth. Science is both thematized as a discourse of racist terror deployed against a colonized population and revealed as the discursive foundation on which the trial, with its rules of verifiable evidence, is based. To challenge science's alliance with the state, Ovaherero plaintiffs draw on arcane, subaltern traditions within the European cultural archive. However, these are incapable of unsettling the framework of international law, which had historically categorized Ovahereros as primitive subjects to be disciplined by force rather than German

citizens and rights-bearers. By drawing attention to the disparity between Jews, whose racialization by the Nazis post-war Germans recognized as an act of barbarism and agreed to repair, and Ovahereros, who, German lawyers argue, should be treated according to colonial-era legal doctrines, the play-within-the-play calls for a comparative understanding of racial science, and for the decolonization of official antiracism in Germany.

The stations, in turn, offer the evidence of an unmastered colonial past that the witness's testimony fails to furnish. They were based on material that Grünewald and the Thalia cast members had collected in Hamburg and during their research trip through Namibia. Distributed throughout the theater space, the stations were devised in a documentary style that was no less emotionally affecting than the central drama. They immerse spectators in intimate settings that foster physical closeness to descendants of genocide survivors and put them in one-on-one encounters with performers. Multimedia screens and virtual reality glasses transport spectators to the sites of genocide, and scenes that require them to interact with performers break down the traditional division between actor and spectator. On the one hand, these techniques typical of immersive theater promote corporeal and emotional openness to the Ovaherero cause and push spectators towards an actively supportive stance. On the other hand, these techniques bring them uncomfortably close to blatantly racist situations and figures, provoking active resistance to white supremacy. Immersion heightens audience members' awareness of their own social positioning vis-à-vis scenes of suffering and chauvinism. It thereby leaves room for agency, for the possibility of changing neocolonial relations rather than being determined by them.

German theater scholar Doris Kolesch argues that immersion does not equal complete absorption, but is characterized by the interruption of, and reflection on, theatrical or mediatized illusion, and by the tension between merging with and emerging from a theatrical or mediatized situation. Seeking to elaborate the critical potential of immersive formats, she identifies specifically their capacity to "raise awareness of the specificity of a given point of view, to inaugurate a critical relation to representation" (Kolesch 65). She attributes these to the deconstruction of the kind of elevated vantage point and a/the rationalist, ostensibly neutral gaze at the world that had been dominant since the Enlightenment and was expressed in key cultural technologies that historically constructed what Mary Louise Pratt punningly called "imperial eyes" in the title of her eponymous book. The troubling partiality of such a relationship between subject and world has been problematized from various perspectives, including feminist and postcolonial ones, over the last decades. As the stark binaries of self and other gave way to multiperspectivity, situated knowledge, and affective, empathic relations, so our current immersive technologies promise to grasp the contemporary condition of feel-

ing both planetary linkages and profoundly emotional enmeshments to unprecedented degrees. Kolesch's contentions illuminate why immersive theater techniques can lend themselves to decolonizing projects.

In *Hereroland*'s immersive stations spectators hear about colonial rape in the intimate spaces of a woman's bedroom and a hairdresser's tiny salon; physical proximity to the woman and interaction with the hairdresser potentially heighten spectators' receptivity to sensitive, painful stories and allow them to grasp kinesthetically and emotionally how the genocide reshaped social relations into the present. Only a single audience member at a time squeezes into the tiny hairdresser's stall and takes a seat on the chair, while the hairdresser draws her into a conversation about hair, identity, and family genealogy. One spectator, a grandmother, told me that she was profoundly shaken by a performer's revelation, while he gently touched her shoulders and hair, that his grandfather was the result of his great-grandmother's rape by a German colonial soldier.

At other times, closeness to performers provokes disidentification with colonial whiteness. In the cramped space of a private museum, where a tour guide narrates the history of Namibia from a settler perspective (see Fig. 4), one of the Hamburg actors portrays a contemporary German-speaking Namibian guide who holds forth about the local swimming pool going to seed after the end of Apartheid. The close quarters make his aggressive tapping of photos on the museum walls more intimidating and repulsive. And at the station "Colonial Theater," a bourgeois woman on the colonial lecture circuit, dressed in a Victorian-era white lace dress, tries to recruit German women to join the settlement project as farmers' wives and thus prevent racial mixing. Two female audience members played along with the lecturer's rousing call that women are needed for the colony, and let the performer grab and lift their hands. While one smiled, perhaps trying to please the performer, the other cringed. Did she dislike becoming a co-performer, or did she object to being conscripted into colonial white femininity? These performances of white supremacy and colonial nostalgia offer object lessons in how *not* to relate to the past and to people of color in a multiracial democracy. They provoke repulsion against these figures and sentiments. By encouraging audience members to become co-performers in such scenes, the stations allow them to experience themselves as "implicated subjects" in postcolonial relations, to cite Michael Rothberg's term for "positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes" (Rothberg 1). That position allows them not only to actively witness postcolonial suffering, but also reflect on ways in which patterns of perception, behavior, and feeling may potentially be transformed.

Fig. 4: Guide (Jörg Pohl) at Station Museum. *Hereroland*, Thalia Theater (January 2020). Coproduction with National Theatre Namibia. Photograph by Armin Smailovic.

While in 2020, many Germans knew little if anything about colonial history, the stations drive home the point that historically, Hamburg citizens had been colonial enthusiasts who avidly followed events in the colony, including the Herero genocide. For instance, one station reenacts the graveside eulogy for Hamburg merchant Adolph Woermann, the owner of a shipping line, politician, and colonial profiteer for whom two streets and a square in Hamburg were then still named (the streets have been renamed in the meantime). The eulogy thus underscores the veneration of Woermann, whose ships transported the troops that carried out the Herero genocide, among Hamburg's elite. Being addressed as fellow mourners, audience members become co-performers in this scene and are encouraged to reflect on their implication as beneficiaries of Hamburg's international trade.

The stations also point towards active decolonial struggles. At the station "Postcolonial Hamburg," a young woman presents a slide show that documents activists' efforts to topple or recontextualize colonial monuments and rename streets and buildings honoring colonial merchants and military men in the city. Her presentation conveys the frustrations of activists at the difficulty of decolonizing endeavors and the indifference of politicians and ordinary people alike. At the station "Schädelarchiv" (Skulls Archive), a professor of medicine recounts his efforts to research the provenance of Ovaherero skulls in his institute's holdings, and chronicles the many bureaucratic obstacles to restituting these human remains. Together, these stations alert Hamburg audiences to a range of individuals and initiatives that have tried to make a difference but have, so far, failed to do so in any significant way. The collaboration of Ovaherero and German cast members in *Hereroland* acknowledges racialized power differences between them. At the same time, the Boalian dramaturgy and immersive format of the stations offer opportunities for actively "unlearning imperialism" (Ariella Azoulay). They promote an emotional, embodied engagement that urged audiences to take up the critique of white supremacy and practice decolonial allyship beyond the theater.

The Ovaherero cast under David Ndjavera was highly motivated to tell their side of the story, alert Germans to their government's bad faith negotiations, and urge them to consider what postcolonial justice and international solidarity might mean as a broad social project. While *Hereroland* aimed to open the secret negotiations to public scrutiny and advocated for wide civil engagement, it remained wedded to the idea of reconciliation, and even framed Ovaherero suffering through Christian tropes of redemption and forgiveness. The deaths of Ndjavera in 2021 and Schimming in 2022 would open a path to a much different telling of the story of genocide, and a different conception of allyship.

II

When the coronavirus pandemic shuttered theaters and drastically cut down international travel soon after *Hereroland's* successful run in Hamburg, the cast and crew had to defer their plans to take the show to Namibia. With every new wave of infection, touring plans had to be postponed, and tragically, Ndjavera died of Covid in 2021. Later that year, Joachim Lux, the artistic director of the Thalia Theater decided to scrap the set and cancel the show in Namibia for good. Ovaherero ensemble members took to social media to protest his unilateral decision and Lux reconsidered. Under the direction of Ovaherero cast member Lizette Kavari, the ensemble decided to recreate the play from scratch, which several par-

ticipants described as a welcome opportunity to recreate it under much changed conditions. Whereas all Ovaherero actors continued their participation in this new iteration of the play, which I will call *Hereroland 2*, only two of the German actors did, leading to a centering of Ovaherero experiences in the performance. The stations were reconceived as virtual portals with the help of digital technologies: seventeen different scenes were filmed with a 360-degree-camera in Hamburg and across Namibia. Audience members could scan QR codes displayed on the perimeter of the respective performance space with their cell phones and insert them in cheap cardboard viewers the company had brought from Germany. The sponsorship of a large Namibian phone service provider made it possible to bring extra cell phones and portable wifi stations even to small towns and villages. The lack of a bulky, intricate set freed the production to tour even to remote locations in Namibia with only a few props and costumes that fit on the back of a truck. The new version was performed in the capital of Windhoek, Swakopmund (a predominantly German town), and Okakarara and Otjinene (where many Ovaherero live) in June 2023. One of the Windhoek performances was livestreamed to audiences in the Thalia Theater, creating a unique opportunity for Namibians and Germans to debate reparative justice across a large geographical distance.

Lux's willingness to listen to Ovaherero protests might have been due to the heightened sensitivity to anti-racist critiques at that particular historical moment. The killing of African American George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in 2020 had rekindled the Black Lives Matter movement, which focused public attention to police violence and structural racist discrimination worldwide. In Namibia, Black Lives Matter added fuel to the Rhodes Must Fall movement that had spread out from South African universities in 2015 and sought to decolonize not just cityscapes, but an education system that reproduced racial and class inequalities. It also intersected with land reform efforts aiming to rectify colonial land theft. Ovaherero are keen to assume stewardship of land and are frustrated that descendants of German settlers make up 2% of the Namibian population but own 70% of arable land. In addition, calls for racial justice buoyed social protests directed against the extraordinarily high rates of sexual and gender-based violence in Namibia, which scholars and activists attribute to high degrees of militarized violence during colonialism, Apartheid, and the liberation struggle. Young Namibians regard the fight for sexual rights and freedom, and for the decriminalization of LGBTQ identities in the 2020s, as efforts to remove misogynist, homophobic, and transphobic structures and ideologies that had been imposed under colonialism. In short, public protests and social media campaigns bundled widespread discontents with the stalled decolonization for which young Namibians held the aging SWAPO leadership responsible that had been in power for over a

generation. It is against this backdrop that the Ovaherero performers, most of them in their mid-to-late twenties, created *Hereroland 2*.

As this younger generation stepped up to tell the story of the colonial genocide and stalled decolonization, they did so with unmistakable anger. The Ovaherero performers decided to dispense with Ndjavera's play and instead created a series of thematically linked scenes, some of which are set during German colonialism, others in contemporary times. Performers remain present as themselves to different degrees even when they depict historical characters, mythical figures, and social types. The scenes, which do not follow a conventional plot, show colonial invasion, destruction, and the interruption of traditions, as well as the yearning for cultural renewal and social justice today. In the last scene, ensemble members discuss how to envision the future and invite audience members into the conversation.

As the political critique of the play became sharper, the production replaced Ndjavera's conciliatory intercultural universalism with an Ovaherero-centric aesthetic. A considerable part of the dialogue is in Otjiherero, although code switching to English, Namibia's official language, allows non-Otjiherero speakers to follow the gist of a given scene. The playing space is anchored by an actual tree and demarcated by a simple chalk circle drawn on the floor, around which spectators are seated. The minimalist set and costumes bolster the indigenization of the world of the play. From the tree's leafy crown dangle ritual implements, a furry water flask, and a human skull. Blankets, cooking implements, and a large calabash set out around the tree evoke a traditional Ovaherero home.[12] The Tree Spirit is now freed from the Harlequin costume. The costumes of male and female performers, too, index traditional precolonial and postcolonial Ovaherero attire. Two of the men and one woman appear in leather aprons, chunky necklaces, and headdresses, while Kavari wears a red dress with voluminous skirt and tight bodice along with the emblematic "cow-horned" headdress, the kind of dress worn by older or married Ovaherero women on festive occasions today, recalling the historic centrality of cattle to Ovaherero culture. Ovaherero praise poems and rituals like the spitting of water on the earth are performed several times during the play. The resulting performance is not only visibly and audibly indigenized, but also more confrontational than the first version. This greater assertiveness is especially palpable in scenes that use graphic imagery to convey the story of the genocide.

The ensemble draws on long-established and more recently emerging tropes to underscore the depth of German cruelty and Ovaherero suffering. Early in the

12 Mukaiwa includes one production photo that provides a glimpse of the production aesthetic.

play, an Ovaherero poet composes a song about the arrival of German colonial troops, when a *Schutztruppen* soldier tosses a severed head into the lap of an Ovaherero woman played by Glenn-nora Tjipura, which she proceeds to scrape, retching and keening. She is forced to clean the skull of flesh before it is shipped to German institutes of racial science. While she scrapes, an Ovaherero man in jeans and a suit jacket, both torn and bloody, stumbles onto the stage. His anguished, then angry monologue combines a report on the genocide with reflections on how cultural loss, effected by Christianization, compounded literal killing and material dispossession. The characters' poem and monologues loop and layer temporally disjointed moments, from the German military invasion, the plight of survivors in the Shark Island concentration camp, and a present characterized by coerced assimilation, into a grievous montage. In a later scene, an Ovaherero man, his legs shackled, shuffles across the stage, led by German soldiers. Both scenes activate iconic depictions of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide circulating in Germany and Namibia.[13]

The two scenes compress the colonial genocide into iconographies of extreme brutality that are a far cry from the narrative descriptions of torture in the prior version. They also reinterpret the Christian mission (a source of succor in the original *Hereroland*) as part of cultural genocide. It was as if the ensemble had decided to dispense with mollification and insisted that audiences face the cruel extent of colonial and postcolonial violence. Importantly, the depiction of victimization is yoked to expressions of deep anger. As she scrapes, the Ovaherero woman speaks of the "murderous rage in [her] eyes" even as she is forced to "continue with the task at hand" (*Hereroland 2* Videorecording of Windhoek performance). She finishes her narrative of being raped by German soldiers by cursing the "Bloody bastards!!" The Tree Spirit witnesses Germans "trying to wipe my people off the face of the earth as they killed, [. . .] and killed more and killed and killed, and killed, and killed, and killed" (*Hereroland 2* Videorecording of Windhoek performance). As he punctuates his exclamation with clenched fists and jaws, he vows "never to forget the injustice, the killing, the grabbing of land and

13 The image of nine emaciated and shackled Herero men who had surrendered to German troops, first published in a coffee table book in 1907 (Arthur Koppel Aktiengesellschaft), initially functioned as a visual trophy of Germans' military victory over "insolent barbarians" (Zeller 319), but Hereros began appropriating this depiction of their suffering in the 1990s, when Ovaherero organizations began calling for an apology and reparations (Förster 306). By contrast, the iconicity of the Herero woman holding a skull is more recent and constituted the first time that Hereros appropriated a trope from the critical discourse on German colonialism that has circulated across a range of popular media internationally. It draws its power from the debates surrounding human remains and their restitution from German museums and research institutes, which have captured public attention since the first repatriation of skulls to Namibia in 2011.

voices of women and children crying for mercy" (*Hereroland 2* Videorecording of Windhoek performance). In the last scene before the concluding discussion, an Ovaherero woman played by Lizette Kavari excoriates Germans for grabbing Ovahereros' land, for conscripting them to back-breaking labor in the effort to turn land into plantations, for squeezing them onto communal land (the equivalent of reservations), and for forcing genocide survivors into exile. Leaning forward and spitting out her final indictment, she accuses them of committing mass rape and turning women into little more than pets for breeding. Performers respond with unmistakable physical anger to specific injustices, set out the oppressive long-term effects of colonial violence, and channel rage into protest and revolutionary fervor. Their monologues confront the audience in physically aggressive direct address. They aim to rouse spectators with verbal provocations and kinetic energy. These scenes communicate the debilitating experience of being persistently denied justice. By asking spectators to endure and take up performers' wrath, these performances of anger put spectators under duress, and thereby open up the possibility of imagining different futures. These are all hallmarks of what Olivia Landry calls the "Theatre of Anger," a type of theater whose description she grounds in the postmigrant theater she observed in Berlin during the first two decades of this century. Just as the postmigrant theater of anger in Germany refuses integration into an unjust, racist system, its decolonial manifestation in *Hereroland 2* refuses reconciliation to the postcolonial status quo. The decolonial theater of anger calls out both enduring white supremacy and the accommodations to it that national and tribal leaders have made. Accordingly, I call it a theater of "irreconciliation." It taps into the radical decolonial movements that have emerged in Namibia over the last decade and amplifies them.

Landry notes that anger has been viewed as a negative, unproductive, even destructive affect within philosophical traditions from the Stoics to contemporary thinkers like Martha Nussbaum and Carolin Emcke (Landry 24), and in European theatrical traditions that, since the Enlightenment, have advocated for the stage as a moral institution dedicated to a pedagogy of tempering passions (Landry 29). However, anger has also been recognized as an important impulse to social justice movements. Aristotle thought of anger as a justified and necessary response to patent injustice, ennobled by being felt and acted upon in defense of others. It is a key impulse for bringing into being a just society. In more recent times, Landry points to Black feminists from Audre Lorde and bell hooks to Sarah Ahmed, who have found anger to be a source of clarity, power, and creativity. Drawing on their ideas, Landry sets out to "recuperate anger as a powerful tool against social injustice, a source of strength, and a catalyst for change" (Landry 25). Against a dominant culture that negates self-worth and that reads angry Black people as irascible and their anger as unattributed, she praises anger for its

refusal of victimhood and finds it revelatory of grievances that have not been listened to or redressed (Landry 32). Anger, Landry posits, is relational, requiring attentive listening, and it is performative in that, as Marilyn Frye contends, intense emotions are speech acts that can only succeed if they are taken up and carried forward by those who witness them (Frye 88). Landry underscores that the theater of anger is political theater, which shares with Brecht's epic theater the refusal of catharsis and insistence on confronting audiences with the causes of oppression, pressing them to become involved in removing those causes and changing society (Landry 38). At the same time, the body's corporeal presence, affects, and emotions, inherited from performance art since the 1960s, provide a vital charge whose importance Brecht only recognized in his late work (Landry 38).

The "raging monologues" presented in *Hereroland 2* are key to the theater of anger: they pierce the fourth wall and open up channels of kinesthetic transmission that demand to be taken up by spectators. The arrangement of spectators around the circular playing space, where they can watch both the performers and audience members on the other side of the circle, fosters the audience's confrontation with the causes of trauma and enduring oppression. In one scene, performers even invite spectators to enter the circle to closely observe a dance that reenacts an Ovaherero prophet's surrender to German colonial troops, who then shoot him. When the company performed *Hereroland 2* in Otjinene, several men from the community even joined the dance spontaneously, overcoming the separation of stage and auditorium.

Hereroland 2's emphasis on anger demonstrates how profoundly the conditions for decolonial work had changed since the elder generation of Namibian artists first conceived the play a mere three years prior. Whereas Ndjavera (born in 1969) and Schimming (born 1953) were socialized under Apartheid, five of the six Namibian performers were born after independence and were trained in majority-Black institutions that promoted pride in Black struggles against racist colonial and Apartheid systems; only musician Ben Kandukira was born before 1990. Bell hooks's thoughts about the anger of Black people in the United States are also pertinent to postcolonial, post-Apartheid Namibia: "To perpetuate and maintain white supremacy, white folks have colonized Black Americans, and a part of that colonizing process has been teaching us to repress our rage, to never make them the targets of any anger we feel about racism" (hooks 14). She adds that "[m]ost black people internalize this message well" (hooks 14). Similarly, performers highlight how parents and grandparents had to keep their anger bottled up, evoked so devastatingly by Tjipura's speech as she scrapes the skull. Now the younger generation refuses to hide their rage any longer.

The targets of anger in *Hereroland 2* are not only the German government for bungling the Joint Declaration, and the German-speaking minority in Namibia,

but also the Namibian government, and even traditional Ovaherero leaders. The blunt enumeration of historical violence challenges the SWAPO government's official national narrative of anticolonial resistance. Embodied at the Independence Museum in Windhoek and at official memorials such as Heroes' Acre (Wilson 68–71), that narrative subsumes Ovaherero suffering and uprising under the story of national resistance and liberation. By contrast, the play aims to have the specificity of Ovaherero suffering during and since the colonial genocide recognized in the Namibian public sphere. Finally, performers satirize traditional Ovaherero leaders' authoritarianism and patriarchal comportment, aligning the production with feminist calls for equality in the Namibian public sphere.

The reconceived virtual stations, some of them newly created for *Hereroland 2* and filmed on location, echo the critique of stalled decolonization. A number of them criticize the continued symbolic domination of Namibian cityscapes by settler colonial perspectives. In addition, they problematize the economic domination of German-speaking farmers in Namibian agriculture and tourism and call for the decolonization of these sectors through land reform. At the same time, they acknowledge that climate change threatens the land's ability to sustain agriculture. However, in contrast to the central live performance, which is characterized by intense corporeal and verbal expressions of anger, the stations provide analyses of the causes of anger that are emotionally understated. They require a high degree of viewers' emotional involvement and completion. For instance, the station "City Walk Swakopmund" (like "Museum" and "Cemetery") features sites and institutions that embody settler history, and virtually places spectators in close aural proximity to an off-screen German-speaking guide who offers nostalgic, revisionist glosses on the town's history, as well as disparaging comments about graffiti applied to a large, centrally located monument to fallen *Schutztruppen* soldiers, which Ovahereros want to see removed. Rather than perform anger, this station and similar ones incite this very rage. The narrators strike an affable, confidential tone, seemingly imagining that they share a story with like-minded white visitors. Listeners are exposed to an unvarnished glimpse of white supremacy; those who refuse interpellation into this presumed camaraderie are all the more jolted into a decolonial critique. While the virtual surrounds appear placid, visiting them may well leave viewers seething.

Finally, the play directs a good part of its anger towards both contemporary Ovaherero culture and its political leadership. In a raging monologue, an Ovaherero woman (Kavari) bitterly deplores the youth's forgetting of their ancestor's sacrifices and abandoning of "the tradition that governs a Herero person, their homestead and identity" (*Hereroland 2* Videorecording of Windhoek performance). Both Tjiipura and Kavari note that mass rape was part of colonial warfare, and Kavari deplores the degradation of women, which persisted through

Apartheid and after independence, as a feature of the "present [Herero] civilization" and its "loss of a compass" (*Hereroland 2* Videorecording of Windhoek performance). The women's wrath resonates with the decades-long struggles against the high rates of sexual and gender-based violence, including femicide, in independent Namibia (Edwards-Jauch).[14] Namibian sociologist Lucy Edwards-Jauch argues that "colonial history and traditional forms of African patriarchy converge to justify women's subordination, gender inequality and different dimensions of violence against women" (Edwards-Jauch 56). A notion of decolonization that seeks to counter these patriarchal, militarized structures by reverting to precolonial African cultural norms does not sufficiently take into account the existence of patriarchal and homophobic traditions that predate colonization. Mushaandja and Edwards-Jauch, among others, thus call for a progressive, feminist, and queer remaking of Africanness.[15] *Hereroland 2*'s centering of women in the troping of historical violence, and of rape as a key dimension of colonial subjugation, amplifies the focus on sexual and gender-based violence within decolonial discourses in Namibia. Moreover, the young women's wearing of traditional Ovaherero dresses in performance, usually reserved for older, married women, signals the ensemble's simultaneous embracing and reimagining of precolonial traditions. By amplifying the feminist critique of coloniality, *Hereroland 2* positions women within longer histories of patriarchal violence, and situates them in proximity to feminist movements that intersect with decolonial struggles for land rights, fair distribution of resources, and racial justice.

The concluding discussion scene skewers Ovaherero traditional leaders for their autocratic and paternalistic ways. In that scene, Kandukira as the only older actor takes on the role of moderator and invites first the performers and then the audience to participate. Dressed in the kind of uniform worn by traditional leaders at official parades and commemorative events, he struts about the stage, proclaims himself "paramount chief," asks to be addressed by that title, and notes that he will shut up anyone who speaks out against him. He scoffs at the notion of a chief listening to his subjects, but sighs that such are the rules of democracy. Several of the Namibian performers buck at his rules of decorum. Their impatience with him frames the production as a challenge to traditional authority and

14 Protests against gender-based violence culminated in the #SlutShameWalk of 2019 and the #ShutItAllDown protests of young feminist and queer activists in 2020, but are situated within a longer history of student anticolonial and civil rights activism in Namibia. See Van Wyk 2022; Becker 2020; Becker 2010.

15 See Mushaandja. By contrast, scholars like Heike Becker (2007) doubt the existence of precolonial patriarchy in Namibia, and artist-activist Hildegard Titus argues that precolonial queer histories were eclipsed by colonialism and the Christian mission.

hierarchical structures and a plea for democratizing access to deliberation and decision-making. One performer comments that neither the SWAPO government nor Ovaherero traditional leaders could be trusted to make responsible decisions about the reparations that might soon flow from Germany. He argues that traditional leaders are fighting amongst themselves, rendering prospects dim that they are capable of making wise choices about the common good. The only half-satirical final scene raises larger questions about how Ovahereros might address and heal historical, intergenerational trauma, and calls for fresh ideas about reparations that go beyond returning land to Ovahereros and Ovahereros to the land: "Should we even have money? Or should we have scholarships? Should we have infrastructure?" asks Otja Kambaekua (*Hereroland 2* Videorecording of Windhoek performance). The concluding discussion clarifies the broadening meanings of decolonization in contemporary Namibia: besides the overcoming of colonial and Apartheid racisms, the production envisions cultural renewal that does not merely revive precolonial African traditions but aims to create a genuinely democratic culture grounded in civic participation and gender equality.

Germans play relatively marginal roles in the angry theater of irreconciliation. The two German actors who participated in *Hereroland 2* took on the parts of a *Schutztruppen* soldier and a composite of missionary and merchant, respectively. Their costumes certify them as belonging to the core personnel of the colonial project; yet on stage they play only supporting roles as silent executioners of the genocide.[16] Actor Jörg Pohl, who had played a number of prominent characters in *Hereroland* and portrayed the colonial soldier in *Hereroland 2*, characterized his work on the latter as an act of solidarity with his Ovaherero colleagues, subordinating his actorly ego to the project of bolstering their historical and political claims. In the discussion at the end of the play, for which he took off his costume and make-up, he stressed that he is here mostly to listen, not to talk, and that Germans must learn more about this shared past and take responsibility for it. He relates a story about the presence of Namibian copper in a famous Hamburg church as an example of becoming more conscious about the city's colonial involvement (Gramlich). Framing listening and learning, theatrical research and collaboration, as allyship, also led the German actors to distinguish themselves more visibly from the theatrical roles they played. Strikingly, the two actors chose to wear white make-up with dark circles around the eyes, lending them the ghostly appearance of skulls. "Whiteface" underlines the deadliness of colonial

16 Mathias Häussler has argued that among the settler population, traveling merchants, known for their treacherous behavior, were among the most hated by indigenous Namibians; he regards settlers as key to the escalation of genocidal violence.

whiteness but also serves to hold it at a distance. On the one hand, the actors expose white masculinity as a social construction whose historically specific cruelty should be held up for inspection. On the other, whiteface underscores the categorical difference of the performers from these toxic social types. Through their striking make up and costumes, the performers marked their own position as supporters of the Ovaherero cause.

The confrontational directness of *Hereroland 2* thrilled some spectators, affirmed (if not exactly comforted) others, but affronted some who saw their settler ancestors incriminated. A glowing review in the daily newspaper *The Namibian* indicates that the urbane, international audience in the capital Windhoek was gripped by the performance (Mukaiwa), although Grünewald also remembered some German-speaking Namibians walking out during the skull-scraping scene without waiting how this historical experience would be contextualized in the course of the play.[17] In the coastal resort town of Swakopmund, where German speakers predominate, the play was presented in a school auditorium to scant audiences. Three performers remember them as reticent and cold, while Grünewald commended the descendants of German settlers for showing up at all. By contrast, the performances in the small town of Okakarara and the remote village of Otjinene were warmly received. Spectators were highly engaged: they sang along, wept, cajoled and encouraged, and even entered the playing space to join West Uarije in a dance. The varied reception suggests that *Hereroland 2* worked as an affirmation of Ovaherero struggles, fanning their dedication to wrestling with decolonial justice, and of their yearning for unity. It shows that German-speaking Namibians are divided about listening to Ovaherero perspectives; perhaps the anguish and anger they witnessed pushed some of them into recognizing past and present pain and injustice, and taking up the social, economic, and political obligations flowing from that recognition.

III

The two iterations of *Hereroland,* one promoting empathy with Ovahereros, the other anger at incomplete decolonization, offer equally valid strategies of decolonial performance. Both reject the Joint Declaration's attempt to settle damages and draw a line under the past. The Hamburg version co-directed by Ndjavera strove for a notion of reconciliation that emphasized the need for broad social dialogue within and between both countries and underscored the Ovaherero

17 Conversation with Gernot Grünewald, October 1, 2024.

quest for material reparations as crucial for any reconciliation between Ovaherero, German-speaking Namibians, and Germans. The production's use of immersive techniques forged both planetary linkages and emotional enmeshments, to facilitate decolonial allyship and reflect on indebtedness and obligation. The Namibian version echoed the insistence on material reparations. But it also vehemently called out the accommodations that different groups in independent Namibia, including Ovaherero traditional authorities, have made in the postcolonial bargain to secure social peace at the cost of reckoning with colonial injustices and the legacies of Apartheid. The decolonial theater of anger rejects any reconciliation that accepts or takes for granted the postcolonial status quo, instead holding open a space where decolonial justice must first be imagined and debated before any concrete plans for reparations and repair can be implemented. These different accentuations became especially clear with regard to land: whereas the earlier version suggests that justice hinges on restoring ownership of the land to Ovahereros, the later version evinced skepticism at restoring precolonial conditions, and envisioned alternatives to resuming cattle herding. The feminist critique of sexual and gender-based violence historically and in the present, moreover, propelled a simultaneous reclaiming and remaking of Africanness as a source of cultural and spiritual resurgence.

Arguably, the decolonial theater of anger might have impressed on German audiences as well the fury and impatience Ovahereros feel about Germans' century-long denial of the Herero and Nama genocide, waffling about reparations, and one-sided official antiracism. The shift from empathy to anger raises the question whether there's more at stake than simply adapting to different locations and political constellations. Is the emphasis on empathy, reconciliation, and forgiveness in the Hamburg version also a function of international power dynamics? Would an angry stance in Hamburg have affronted audiences, turning them off support for the decolonial cause at a time when that support was already tenuous? A theater of empathy might be merely a euphemism for coddling German audiences. Would a decolonial theater of anger that hinged after all on an invitation, simply have led to being disinvited? Hamburg audiences could witness the decolonial theater of anger only during a single performance, when they were connected via livestream to the stage in Windhoek. The responses of two (very appreciative) German spectators, who stepped up to the microphone during the concluding discussion, are not sufficient to judge how *Hereroland 2* might have fared in Germany. The very unique circumstances under which a theater of anger could burst forth in Namibia also highlights the fact that its emergence in postmigrant Berlin theater rests at least in some part on the security that its angry subjects cannot, as German citizens, be disinvited, evicted, or deported (at least for now), even when they are persistently construed as Others. This is a lux-

ury unavailable to citizens of the Global South whose international mobility is contingent on the goodwill of the Foreign Office, which issues their visas. As the political climate is turning against decolonial confrontations, a decolonial *international* theater of anger might simply not be feasible in the foreseeable future.

What are the prospects for continuing the decolonization of official Namibian memory culture? In recent years, cultural funding for international projects has increasingly supported bringing Namibian artists to Germany to do research, sometimes in colonial archives, take up longer residencies, and to show their work, outside of the constraints of cooperation. Cultural institutes even, on occasion, initiate South-South exchanges among artists from former German colonies on the African continent. These developments are particularly important given that several of the Namibian artists I spoke to have experienced indifference, disrespect, and even physical danger in the theatrical "contact zone" (Pratt; Haakh). *Hereroland* and *Hereroland 2* are highly instructive as examples of ethical international collaboration. In the emergent "colonial cultural industry" described to me by the director of the *Goethe Institut* in Windhoek, in which German artists and organizations cast about for Hereros (sometimes Namas) to authenticate colonial fictions couched as "collaborative" endeavors, international grants have allowed German partners to shape how anticolonial and decolonial critique is performed to German and African publics. As Nora Haakh has argued in another context, only repeated exposures to the German arts infrastructure enables foreign artists to navigate "conditional invitations" and structural inequality in the postcolonial contact zone (Haakh 263). The wrapping up of the TURN fund in 2021 eliminated an important source of support for cultural cooperation between German and African artists just when decolonial projects picked up steam. The funding cuts to the arts enacted in 2024 further limit opportunities for foreign artists to present their work in Germany or collaborate with colleagues there (Philipp). Without German grants, it will be more difficult for Namibian artists to realize decolonial work that could shape debates in the Namibian public sphere.

The collapsing support for international collaboration and cultural diplomacy signals that governmental support for decolonial projects is flagging in Germany. Hopes that the shift towards a decolonial German memory politics would be institutionalized by the coalition government of social democratic, green, and liberal parties that came to power in December 2021,[18] were disappointed. The critical commemoration of colonialism, proposed by then-Minister of Culture Claudia Roth in June 2024, was scuttled and is no longer included in the federal framework for memory politics, which remains focused on Nazi atrocities and the so-

18 The coalition collapsed in November 2024, triggering federal elections in February 2025.

cialist past; historian Jürgen Zimmerer publicly criticized the Minister for demoting victims of colonialism to second class status (Zimmerer 2024b). The network "Decolonial Memory Culture in the City," which ran in Berlin from 2018 to 2024, seeded a plethora of cultural endeavors, and boosted decolonial cultural expertise, has concluded its work. Funding for the postcolonial research center in Hamburg was not renewed. The right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland*, which gained the second largest share of votes in the federal elections of 2025, opposes decolonial memorialization, restitution, and reparations. Despite these structural obstacles, I argue that cultural institutions and projects have an important role to play in negotiating the colonial past even in the absence of official, political support, or indeed because of it.

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