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THE MBWITI ON THE GRIEF MATTRESS
AN AUTOHISTORIA-TEORÍA VOICING THE GRIEF OF IDENTITIES FRAGMENTED BY WHITENESS

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Sarah Taati Nghidinwa
25 February 2024
Abstract

In this research, I aim to explore my experiences of grief and racial trauma in a post-apartheid Namibia from the place of a mbwiti. In Oshiwambo (the language of the Ovambo tribe in Namibia), a mbwiti is a person who is immersed in the ways and experiences of the traditional Oshiwambo people but is also influenced and has integrated other - often - western ideas of life. I am a mbwiti because my parents were both Oshiwambo, but I was born and grew up with a Kavango tribe and I was – and still am - educated in a western setting. The positioning of being a constant “other” to these cultures has had an impact on how I engaged with the practices and rituals, particularly grief rituals.

In the Oshiwambo culture, when a relative passes away, a female member of the bereaved family must sit on a grief mattress to receive the mourning community for a period before the burial. When my father passed, my mother sat on the mattress and when she passed, I had to sit on the mattress. Having grown up at the edges of my culture meant that I struggled to engage with the ritual of being on the mattress and what I experienced to be a dismissal of individual grief. I did not understand the cultural significance of being the one to hold the grief of the community. And so, using that as a starting point of focus, I will explore grief and trauma from a decolonial stance by critically engaging with the impact of colonisation and western psychological theories on my way of creating and understanding knowledge and experience. I draw on the work of Frantz Fanon to analyse how I acted into whiteness as a way of surviving the social annihilation of my blackness, a remnant of the apartheid regime.
The aim of this thesis is to recognise the knowledge that exists around the *olupale* - the heart of the house where stories are shared- and to highlight the importance of allowing the cultural and spiritual personal to be storied as knowledge instead of dismissing it as is often done within western psychological theories. I use Autohistoria-teoría, a methodology created by Gloria Anzaldúa that argues for spiritual and personal narratives to be amalgamated into theoretical and political text and honour the knowledge that exists within these narratives. I follow the footsteps of the women of colour that have written into the dismissed, but not forgotten, knowledge that exists within our cultural beings and allow these to give voice to my silenced identities.

Through Autohistoria-teoría, I allow my different languages, cultures and experiences to intertwine with decolonial theories and examine where psychodynamic theories belong within this union. I use both the Oshiwambo and Rukwangali (a language of the Kavango tribe in Namibia) languages to demonstrate my existence on the borders of these cultures as well as limit the intrusion of the white gaze by knowing when to withhold translations and explanations of rituals. I tap into the Oshiwambo-Kavango beliefs of sharing our trauma at the olupale to allow for the healing and calling back of identities that were fragmented as a way of surviving racial trauma. Through this engagement with theory and experience I show the complexity of being positioned as a mbwiti, and how that leads to a constant negotiation of personal experiences to allow for my survival of the violence of whiteness and finding belonging in culture.
Lay Summary

In my thesis, I use what Gloria Anzaldúa calls autohistoria-teoría, a form of autobiographical writing that intertwines personal experiences with historical, cultural and theoretical analysis, to explore my experience of being the mbwiti (a societal “other”) to Oshiwambo and Kavango cultures, navigating the intersections of race, gender and cultural identity. Growing up in a multicultural society with a history of racial trauma, I grapple with personal and cultural grief as I try and find a space of belonging. I go on a journey of decolonisation as I explore the impact that grief, culture and whiteness has had on my personal and cultural identities.

Using personal vignettes, I reflect on the influence of western psychological theories, apartheid and my family and cultural history, in shaping my construction and understanding of knowledge and experiences. I begin by exploring the legacy of colonialism in Namibia, and its impact on culture and identity, and start to locate myself in the broader social and historical contexts that have shaped my experiences. By situating my personal story within larger historical narratives, I highlight the interconnectedness of individual lives and collective histories.

I use the metaphor of gathering at the olupale (heart of the Oshiwambo home) to centre my personal, social and cultural experiences. It is from this space where knowledge is gathered and shared in the form of stories, that I look at the impact that whiteness as a structure has had on the theories that I use to make sense of my experiences. I grapple with
the use of western psychological theories in understanding black people’s experiences when these same theories have dismissed the impact of racial violence on said experiences.

This grappling leads me to the words of people of colour, particularly women of colour, as their voices have often been ignored in academic spaces. Their words highlight the violence of whiteness and our own complacency when we do not examine this violence. I use their words to aid in my analysis of the forces that have shaped the cultural landscapes of my upbringing. By weaving together my personal experiences, historical and cultural insights, and theoretical analysis, I aim to create a narrative that resonates with readers and sparks conversations about the intersections of identity, culture, and society and our use of theory in understanding the complexity of these concepts.

Through this exploration, I hope to contribute to a deeper therapeutic understanding of the complexities of identity formation and cultural dynamics by including other ways of understanding knowledge by bring the Oshiwambo-Kavango ways of sharing knowledge. In sharing my own journey of self-discovery and cultural exploration, I invite readers to reflect on their own experiences and engage in dialogue about the rich tapestry of human diversity and spark conversations about the intersections of racial and gender identity, historical trauma, culture, and society and how we hold these experiences in the therapy rooms.

In summary, my thesis reflects a personal journey and through the use of autohistoria-teoría, I explore the intricacies of grief, historical trauma, identity and whiteness. By blending
personal narrative with historical and cultural analysis, I aim to illuminate the complexities of the human experience and inspire conversations about the power of storytelling in understanding ourselves and our world.
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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents who loved me radically. May their souls continue to rest in peace.
Table of Contents

Declaration ........................................................................................................................................... 2
Abstract ................................................................................................................................................ 3
Lay Summary ....................................................................................................................................... 5
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................... 8
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................. 9

1 Chapter One: Introduction: History and Grief ............................................................................. 11
   1.1 Welcome to the olupale ........................................................................................................... 11
   1.2 What do we find at the olupale? ............................................................................................. 20
       1.2.1 The Mbwiti formed in oppression. ................................................................................. 28
       1.2.2 The Mbwiti as an identity .............................................................................................. 33
       1.2.3 The Mbwiti aspiring for whiteness ............................................................................... 37

2 Chapter Two: My journey to here .............................................................................................. 43
   2.1 The Mbwiti in grief .................................................................................................................. 43
   2.2 Epistemic Violence by the Mbwiti. ......................................................................................... 51
   2.3 Tearing through the veil of epistemic violence ...................................................................... 56
   2.4 Moving away from epistemic violence to the olupale ......................................................... 60

3 Chapter Three: Methodology - Autohistoria-teoría ............................................................... 64
   3.1 A journey to the olupale ......................................................................................................... 64
       3.1.1 Whose footprints are we following? ............................................................................... 68
       3.1.2 Welcoming you meumbo ............................................................................................... 72
   3.2 Autohistoria-teoría .................................................................................................................. 75
       3.2.1 Language in my Autohistoria-teoría ............................................................................. 81
       3.2.2 Meeting you at the olupale ............................................................................................ 85
       3.2.3 Whose ngano is told at the olupale .............................................................................. 88
       3.2.4 The magic of existing within unknown knowledges .................................................... 91

4 Chapter Four: Fragmented Post-Apartheid Identities ............................................................. 99
   The fragmentation of voices ........................................................................................................ 99
   4.1 The lost One - Oshiwambo vs Kavango ............................................................................. 105
       4.1.1 What tribe are you? .......................................................................................................... 106
       4.1.2 Am I divided or is it them? .............................................................................................. 108
       4.1.3 Fragmented into Oshiwambo and Kavango ................................................................. 110
   4.2 The born free and hauntings. ................................................................................................. 113
4.2.1 The silence that protects the born free ................................................................. 116
4.2.2 Intergenerational hauntings ................................................................................. 119
4.2.3 Fragmented born free .......................................................................................... 122
4.3 The black child and racial trauma ........................................................................... 125
4.3.1 Separating the black body .................................................................................... 128
4.3.2 Learning to hate the black body ............................................................................ 131
4.3.3 The fragmented black girl ..................................................................................... 134
4.4 The coconut and racial identity ............................................................................... 137
4.4.1 Putting on a cloak of whiteness ............................................................................. 140
4.4.2 The coconut is not actually white .......................................................................... 143
4.4.3 The fragmented coconut ........................................................................................ 146
4.5 The woman and her grief mattress .......................................................................... 151
4.5.1 Belonging to a black mother .................................................................................. 154
4.5.2 The Mbwiti is a woman ........................................................................................ 158
4.5.3 The fragmented woman ........................................................................................ 161
5 Chapter Five: Conclusion: The Mbwiti and her Fragments ...................................... 165
5.1 Eewa, na toto ngano zange... And so, I have told my story... ................................. 168
5.1.1 The Mbwiti in stories ............................................................................................ 170
5.1.2 The Mbwiti in grief .............................................................................................. 174
5.1.3 The Mbwiti in theory ........................................................................................... 177
5.2 Radical Love ............................................................................................................ 182
References ..................................................................................................................... 189
1 Chapter One: Introduction: History and Grief

1.1 Welcome to the olupale.

Tambureni nge.... (Receive me)

I am 5 years old, seated around the fire at the olupale ... The fire crackles as I feel the heat on my legs .... the cold of the night against my back... I need to make sure I constantly move my legs because I might get nombata (scales) from the heat... The log I am sitting on is not comfortable, but it is too late to find a different seat.... I do not care because I am excited... I cannot wait for the tales the elders will bring tonight. “Tambureni nge” my grandmother says with a warm smile. “Tambu” (Received!) we all shout... I cannot wait until I am grown, grown enough to tell tales, to ask people to receive me and hear them shout their acceptance of my stories... Tambureni nge....... 

I grew up listening to stories around a fireplace at the heart of our olupale (the heart of the home). Some of my most cherished memories are sitting in the pitch dark with only the fire and moon casting a light on the bodies seated in a circle, stars twinkling above. The heat of the fire providing warmth against the cold darkness of the night. This is where stories were told, knowledge passed on from generation to generation through fables, and at times the narrators own lived experiences (Scheub 1985). These stories represent the knowledge of previous generations, holding important teachings of morality and the importance of integrity (Chinyowa 2001). This is where young people were taught to honour and respect the cultural practices of their tribes by discerning the obscured moral lesson in the fable (Scheub 1985).

The stories began with the eldest member at the olupale, usually my grandmother, opening with rusewe (a proverb) and then a ngano (story), and when her time for sharing
ended, the other elders around the olupale would come in with their versions of stories, their tales and in extension, my tales. This is where I encountered my family’s history, my history. Where I encountered their joys and their trauma and where I encountered pieces of me that I had never lived. African storytelling of folktales had previously been dismissed as primitive and outdated (Ogude 1999). However recent research has affirmed its importance in communicating memories, history and culture and shaping the voices of the children eagerly waiting to hear them (Chinyowa 2001). I developed a voice under those stars, shaped by the tales of simbungu na mbanze (jackal and hyena). Learning from wisdom of ndimba (rabbit), before we moved into the brick walls called a classroom.

As I grew older and western education was introduced, we moved from sitting around the fire to sitting on sofas in living rooms. I went from hearing stories told in my father’s warm deep voice to watching stories on television, hearing voices in accents that were so different from mine. Slowly the adventures of ndimba were forgotten, replaced by Harry Potter and his adventures at Hogwarts. In “Black Skin White Masks”, Fanon (1986) described the black man who leaves for Paris and is instantly changed as he reaches the metropole. There is a vanishing of his being as he forgets his home and embraces the authority of the white man, as he disappears into the world of the white man, away from the fire.

This research is my attempt to go back to the outside, to the fire, whilst acknowledging all that I have lost and gained in my absence. It is an attempt to speak into the shift I experienced when I moved from the openness of the olupale into brick walls. The trees I blindly bumped into, as I stumbled in the dark, from the warmth and light of the fire to the
enclosed brick walls of the western house with its electric lights. How even though I found warmth in the living rooms, it did not feel like home because the heat of the fire outside is different, and I missed the stars. This is my attempt to go back to the olupale, carrying the awareness of the shift that happened within me on my journey away and back.

But I have been gone so long I forgot how to ask to be received. I forgot the lessons that ndimba was trying to teach. I missed the chance to learn how to bare the weight of the eyes on me, waiting for me to tell a story. Reading silently taught me to forget the sound of my voice, I am hoping that through this writing I can learn to reclaim it. Nonetheless, writing, learning to claim that voice is scary when I do not know how it sounds. I come into this space with a deep fear. A fear of myself and what might be uncovered and a fear of you, the reader. I fear you because I am not sitting across from you with a fire between us as I tell my story, as I ask you to receive me. Benjamin (2017) explores the concept of recognition as not being one-sided, but a mutual source of intentional agency to affect and be affected by the other. I want to recognise you; I want to trust that you are as affected by me as I am by your presence here in my writing corner.

And yet, I constantly keep stopping as I write, deleting paragraphs because I do not recognise you and I am scared you will not recognise me. By choosing to write an account of my experience, speaking into my experiences of loss, oppression and at times isolation, I am choosing to reveal myself to you. Is that not terrifying? Revealing yourself to someone without having met them even as their presence is felt in every written word? There is an unfamiliarity that exists between us, a distance. I am not able to look you in the eyes and
gauge your reaction to my narrative. And because of how my narrative, and narrative like mine have been received before, I enter this space tentatively, curious but fearful.

So yes, there is fear and I dare to admit, anger. Anger that my words have to be written down and not spoken over a cosy fire under the stars. When indigenous people attempted to share their knowledge in a way that made sense to them, they were discredited as “the irrelevant rumblings of the uncivilised mind” (Marker 2003, 362). I feel anger that the knowledge I gained as an Oshiwambo-Kavango girl needs to be validated by the sound of fingers typing on a keyboard and not a voice spoken over a fire. This is anger I was taught to fear and not express. Anger in a black body is often seen as threatening, it speaks into the violence it has endured. A violence that I was taught to not acknowledge because the black body is a strong one, capable of enduring years of oppression and violation.

I was told to not acknowledge it, because I was born after independence and thus do not know anything about colonisation or how it can dismember the body from the mind (Thiong’o 2009). Ngugi wa Thiong’o describes colonisation as a dismembering of African heads from their bodies. A planting of colonial ideas into the African head, planting roots so deeply that we do not recognise ourselves in relation to our culture, our rituals. This dismemberment exists deep within my soul and has created fragments. It has rooted itself in the depth of my soul, creating an anger that terrifies me for it might burn an ocean. And there it is again, the anger in my black body.
An anger that exists in my bones, that precedes me, passed on through the marrow of intergenerational trauma. There is a strong fear of this anger and its destructive power, so overwhelmingly terrifying that it was split off and buried into my psyche (Gomez 1997). And like all forms of splitting, I have only been able to experience parts of myself as a result. I have since learned that it is not my anger that will burn the ocean, but my refusal to listen to it, to give the space it deserves and acknowledge the trauma and grief that it holds.

This is the space then, to feel this anger. To speak into my experience of loss and grief. The grieving of my parents and in a way the bridge that carried me to my culture. I want to speak into how the loss of my parents further fragmented pieces that had been falling apart, after years of carrying and enduring racial trauma. To speak into the gendering of my grief. How when I was asked to sit on a mattress as a woman and meet the community in our shared grief, my fragments would not allow it. These fragments seemed to have broken and buried themselves so deep within this skin – my black skin - that they seem to almost have disappeared and, in a way, almost erasing me. And yet, they exist within that dreamlike state that feels elusive, untouchable. I want to touch it, share it, show it to the world, however grief makes it hard.

Loss and trauma create a wall that makes it hard for me to reach these fragments, fragments created by racial trauma and patriarchy, and other woundings that were present before I was given my name. I seem to be struggling to bring these fragments together. I want to speak into this elusive space, speak into my experience of existing in a post-apartheid Namibia, of being a “born-free” as they call those born after the independence of Namibia.
To voice that I too am hurt by colonisation even if it was not in the physically violent way that my parents experienced. I want to speak into the pain of being a black woman, how I am expected to submit to traditions while also demonstrating my strength by standing in defiance. The complexity of all that I carry being dismissed for a singular way of looking at me.

But I am aware that by speaking I am making my appearance into the human world. I am no longer a child seated by the fire waiting for the elders to tell me tales, I now have a voice. A voice that I can use to explore the dismembering that happened when I moved from the fire into the house (Thiong’o 2009). I am mindful of the fact that, as stated by Cavarero (2005), there are consequences to growing up, to having a voice. These consequences for me seemed to exist in all the spaces I inhabited. In black culture, as a child, talking when you have not been spoken to is a brave act, that often resulted in punishment (hooks 2015). “Ogu akupura – (who asked you)?” would be the gentle silencing query. Speaking about how my teachers at the white school treated me was dismissed by the experiences of those who lived in “true” racial violence before independence. My voice, when speaking of racism in these spaces was smaller compared to their screams of pain, screams of their physical dismemberment, their trauma.

Whilst in other spaces, as a black woman, the violence of racism was not seen as a significant theoretical problem (Kilomba 2020), enabling more silence. Speaking as a black woman is encouraged when you have a space of belonging, a space to be listened to. For me, these spaces were limited as I mostly occupied white spaces and thus speaking into racism would mean poking at white fragility (DiAngelo 2018), for how dare I remind white people of
the pain they have inflicted. The emergence of my voice was further crushed by my multilayered oppressed identity, of being black and female. So then, talking invites violence, violence as a repercussion of daring to scream “ouch!” But also, the very act of speaking is a violent one, because it would mean prying open lips that have been sown shut, not only by colonisation and its impact but also by culture, a culture fragmented by whiteness and patriarchy.

Nonetheless, by speaking, I must confront the fact that I actively participated in my own silencing to escape the violence. Acknowledging that the silence that I had used as a form of protection and at times protest, had caused some of my dismemberment. Due to fear, I found safety in sitting in silence as the fear continued to trap my vocal cords, numbing my fingers, making it difficult to write. I have relentlessly envied writers whose words seem to flow so freely across pages, marvelling at the creativity, their ability to tell a story and make me feel it with them. That ability to make the personal accessible to the public has always terrified me. I pondered where the roots of this fear lay and I realised that it was grounded in the fear of being used, as seems to be the narrative of the black body. My value is placed in what I can produce for the other and not valued for my ability to create within myself.

I have feared being a bridge between cultures, a crossroads that explains one culture to the next because I inhabit so many (Anzaldúa and Moraga 2015). I did not want to be a bridge, I wanted to belong. I did not want my knowledge to be used as a way to make sense of the other, knowing that the very process recreates the concept of “other”. I did not choose to inhabit this in-between space and so given the opportunity to speak into it, I chose silence.
But this silence began to burn my throat as I realised the reason I envy writers like Anzaldúa, is because I know that I too have a story to tell, an unfolding of selves to explore in pages. However, this was made impossible by the fact that I had learned to uncomfortably sit in silence as a way to survive, hoping, as Lorde (2017) challenges, that my silence will protect me.

Speaking would then mean acknowledging my place on the margin and not as the chameleon that can never fully blend in. It would mean acknowledging that my silence, instead of protecting me, has caused harm. Anzaldúa implores women of colour to stop being “modern medusas – throats cut, silenced into mere hissing” (Keating 2009, 47), and to speak into these in between spaces. I was a modern medusa, my head cut from my throat to silence my screams. I would feel angry at the injustice of it all but took a deep breath and silently hissed, to avoid saying something that would disrupt this false harmony of existing in the in between. By writing this thesis I am choosing to have a voice from this in-between space. I am not speaking to be a bridge from this western institution to the Oshiwambo-Kavango culture, I am speaking from my tense position between the two. I am speaking into the screaming silence caused by soundless racism, the kind that leaves only psychological harm in its wake.

There is a deep silence around the psychological impact of moving from the openness of sitting around fire into the encampment of brick walls. Often, when we think of colonial trauma, we think of the physical violence of heads being dismembered from their bodies (Thiong’o 2009), but rarely do we speak into the quiet whispers of words that dismember
people from their culture. Nietzsche posits that we only become aware of ourselves consciously after we have experienced a number of injuries (Nietzsche 2006). So, in realising the injuries I have endured, in gaining this awareness of myself in a post-apartheid Namibia, I bring you here. Back to the olupale (heart of the house) where stories are told. To acknowledge the injuries done upon me when my head was slowly removed from my body. The trauma of a body stumbling through the dark as the head is gently and yet violently shaken before placed back onto a body.

I am bringing you here to engage with what (Anzaldúa 2015, 1) refers to as the “Coyolwauhqui imperative: the act of calling back those pieces of the self/soul that have been dispersed or lost, the act of mourning the losses that haunt us”. For too long I have existed silently in between worlds, carrying the trauma of one world while trying desperately to fit into another. Haines (2019) defines trauma as a series of impactful experiences from social conditions that betrays or breaks our inherent need for safety and belonging. My sense of safety and belonging was impacted not just by the traumatic stories of oppression passed on in the olupale, but also by my removal from the people who understood the magnitude of it. It is time to go back, time to engage with what Bryant-Davis (2022) calls a homecoming where I tell my head to tell my heart and body to come home to my soul. This homecoming requires us to go on a journey of exploration that is reflected below.
1.2 What do we find at the olupale?

Kamdar (2021, 11) begins her dissertation by asking the question “what brings me here”. In asking this question, she created a space for her research process to encompass the compassionate inquiry that one encounters when engaging in therapy. This alignment of research and therapy permits what is revealed in the research to depart from more conventional ways of producing research and embraces a more dynamic and open-ended approach to her inquiry. Thus, allowing for a more creative and reflexive meaning making process. Given the personal nature of this thesis, it deems pertinent for me to follow her footsteps and ask myself what brought me here.

What brought me here was grief, and wanting to explore the psychology of the rituals that are performed in the Oshiwambo-Kavango cultures when processing grief. One of these rituals, which I will explore later [see Chapter 2.1], is the placing of the bereaved woman onto a mattress and asking her to be the centre of communal grief. Having lived, what I perceived to be the traumatic experience of being placed on a mattress to be the centre of communal grief, I wanted to explore the meaning of the grief mattress using western psychological theories. I was determined to find ways for psychological knowledge to fit my cultural narrative. However, as Weller and Lerner (2015) state, grief and loss have the capacity to touch all of us as they spill into our lives continuously. This continuous spilling into our lives is where we are remade as we are broken apart and reassembled.
Connecting to my personal grief of losing my parents allowed the other types of losses and fragmentations to emerge. As I opened myself up to the compassionate inquiry and allowed for a more generative analysis to emerge, I discovered the complexity of my identity as an Oshiwambo-Kavango woman in a post-apartheid Namibia. This discovery facilitated the emergence of more questions, some clear and some not so clear. I became curious about the interplay between identity and grief and how grief impacted the creation of my identity as a mbwiti. And as the processes continued, the questions changed and adapted to what was being revealed. Nonetheless, the core questions kept reemerging even as others shifted and adjusted, and these are what guided my exploration and engagement within this research:

1. In what ways have history and colonisation impacted the fragmentation of my identities?
2. How is the loss that I experienced as a mbwiti connected to the cultural loss and racial trauma of the Oshiwambo-Kavango people?
3. How have I used psychological theories to mask the violence that whiteness inflicted within my identities?
4. How can I embody the experiences of these identities, identities that are embedded within wider social and political narratives, and use that to examine and understand the nuanced experience of existing within the cracks of different personal and social selves?

These questions emerged as I recognised that the theories that I upheld and that guided my endeavour to understand the human experience in and outside of the therapy
rooms, have omitted my experience of being a black female in their development. I encountered how violent this omission can be when I attempt to use the same theories to make sense of my experience of grief. This violent omission of me, erased my experience of being human and allowed for my blackness to be seen through the lens of the other (Fanon 1986), in turn, acting into the colonial past that my parents had risked their lives to overcome. This encounter with violent western psychological theories connected me to the grief that lay within my fragmented parts, a fragmentation that was caused by the traumatic embedding of whiteness in history, society, theory, and knowledge.

This thesis then argues for a decolonial approach to understanding the human experience, particularly when using psychological theories to explain personal and cultural experiences such as grief. Smith (2021) explores how the perpetuation of colonisation as a system continues in research when western understanding of knowledge production is seen as the only valid approach. Exploring and validating other ways of knowing thus becomes the call for the decolonising authors. This starts by acknowledging how western psychological theories perpetuates colonisation, especially when used to explore experiences of black people without considering the societal reality that existed during the formulation of these theories. This then invites me to answer the call for decolonisation and find alternative ways of knowing that can more fully capture my lived experiences of being black in a racially constructed world.

The need to answer this call arose when I noticed how my nuanced experience as a born free Namibian was missing from the texts I was reading. My experience of growing up
around the olupale with a eumbo (home) filled with oothermothers [see Chapter 4.2] and children was not fully captured by the psychological texts I was reading. The lived experience of growing up within a community that had survived a violent and racially oppressive regime felt intricate, urgent, and yet still silenced. Whereas decolonial explored the impact of colonialism on identity formation and psychotherapy focused on early life experiences and interpersonal relationships as influencers of identity, I became frustrated with how the two seemed to miss the impact that colonialism had on my experiences as a black woman caught between two tribes, both fragmented by colonialism. The need arose to go on a journey to explore this nuanced experience and speak in to a silenced space.

I began this process by first going back to history to explore my historical, political and social context and how this impacted my fragmentation. Smith (2021) sees revisiting the past as a critical learning process for the decolonisation endeavour. Understanding my historical context is vital for identifying the colonial violence that aided in the destruction of my being and the construction of my identities, particularly my identity as a mbwiti. As I will explain further down this chapter [see Chapter 1.2.1], a mbwiti is a person who is born within the Oshiwambo culture but is then impacted by other, specifically white or western, cultures. This exploration of my identity as a mbwiti traces the ambivalence that I hold as I exist between the fractures of the Oshiwambo and Kavango cultures and how these intersect with my racial and gendered identities. I explore the impact that whiteness as a social construct has on the construction this identity, and how I covered my blackness with a white coat to survive the debilitating effect that whiteness has on the construction of black identities [see Chapter 1.2.3].
However, the decolonial process is not as clear as I had imagined it to be and is instead, as Fanon (2001) suggests, a disruptive process. In this thesis I experience this disruption as I wrestle with how to unlearn colonial ways of being and understanding without completely throwing away the knowledge that I have acquired, knowledge that still ensures my survival in a western society. In Chapter Two I trace my journey into decolonial methodologies by first exploring a psychodynamic conceptualising of Oshiwambo grief rituals before recognising the dissonance that this creates when I force theory onto experience, when I do not put myself and the rituals into a wider context. As I start unlearning colonialising ways of looking at knowledges, I confront my own violent nature and begin a deeper engagement with decolonial literature in turn, reconceptualising my research approach.

In my effort to temper the violence of western knowledges, I begin to engage in what Taylor (2023, 10) sees as a “refusal of normative terms”. I participate in this refusal by not colluding with the erasure of black experiences and instead I centre my experience as a black Oshiwambo-Kavango woman this research. I create space for the complexity of this identity to be explored. In alignment with this refusal, I step away from conventional research methodologies and engage with a methodology that was created by a woman of colour and that encompasses not just my experience as a black woman, but the magical complexity of what that lived experience evokes in me [see Chapter 3.2]. I choose to use Gloria Anzaldúa’s Autohistoria-teoría to explore my fragmented identities and engage with the spiritual element of the methodology to get in touch with the Oshiwambo-Kavango ways of knowledge creation.
Research has not always been kind to the colonised (Smith 2021), and this why I choose to engage this research with tools given to me by those that understand the impact of that unkindness. By choosing to use autohistoria-teoría, I am both honouring the work of women of colour in research and validating not just my experiences, but also the experiences of my community and people. In her writings, Anzaldúa demonstrates that self-knowledge practices need affirmation and acceptance as they are, like all other knowledge practices, social and relational (Anzaldúa 2015). By using autohistoria-teoría to speak into my fragmentation, I am cementing the argument that the self–knowledge of women of colour plays a significant role in how knowledge should be understood and interpreted in the research world.

Guided by the questions mentioned above, I attend to the call from women of colour who ask us to bear witness to the words that carry their painful experiences even whilst I acknowledge the western institution that determines the fate of this thesis. I wrestle with the impact that you as the reader (you that is surrounded and is embedded in a white western institution) has on the construction and experience of this thesis. This struggle is evident in the ways I choose to include you at times, when we observe my fragmented parts, and keep you at a distance, to mitigate the impact of your gaze. I acknowledge how me being surrounded by the same institution removes me from the cultural practices that I fight to bring alive in this thesis.

Nonetheless, I still bring elements of these practices through the medium of words. I echo the words of wisdom spoken at the olupale, words that cannot be fully translated into
English. And by refusing to translate some of the Oshiwambo-Kavango phrases, I engage in the collective limit that Simpson (2007) encountered and deemed an important point to reach in the process of doing research on indigenous cultures [See Chapter 3.2.1]. I recognise the violence I would be committing onto these culture and language were I to go beyond this limit.

Throughout this thesis, I use the metaphor of meeting and speaking at the olupale, a sacred place in the Oshiwambo culture where knowledge is passed down from generation to generation through the use of stories. I do this to honour the importance of storytelling in knowledge production. I bring stories to this fire and allow myself to be embodied by the voices previously ignored, in an attempt to bring healing to the forgotten parts. I invoke the gentle patience displayed by the elders around that sacred fire, to bear witness to moments of trauma and grief as I allow the fragmented parts to speak into their stories. In Chapter Four, I explore the experiences of these fragmented parts and I allow them to have a voice after spending years sitting in silence for the sake of ensuring my survival as a being. I bring into this writing my personal vignettes, and use these to explore the different elements of my cultures, gender and racial identities and speak into what Fanon (1986) illustrated to be the despair that encompasses blackness. I conclude this thesis by acknowledging the fragmentation of my parts caused by the violence of theory, whiteness and culture. I then reestablish my place within the bridge of different cultures and identities and find a home in that space of nepantla.
Through this work, this journey to the olupale, I begin the process of questioning psychodynamic theories in their conceptualisation of the black woman’s experience of identity, grief and culture. I aim to question what is missed when we separate psychotherapy theories from their cultural and historical context. By bringing my experiences of grief within the context of being a black Oshiwambo-Kavango woman, I hope to meet the tension that arises when I carry decolonial thinking into psychodynamic and to a large extent psychotherapy theories. My hope is to show how negotiating and sitting with this tension allows for the full experiences of people like me, people with a history of colonial trauma and grief that has been silenced to allow for survival, can be allowed to fully exist in therapy rooms. And in doing so, add to the growing field of psychotherapy as it continues to attempt to decolonise its theories.

So here we are, and I am inviting you as a guest meumbo (within the homestead) where you will meet my lived stories as I gently write the unlived ones. I ask you to listen gently to the confusion of a child finding the uniqueness of her voice. To listen to the trauma experienced by my ancestors whispering, re-emerging as I reexperienced some of their dislocation while being dislocated from my self. I invite you here at the olupale to sit with me in tension as I grapple with the issue of my belonging in different spaces. And just as my grandmother and my father called to us, I will call on you to tambura, word by word, chapter by chapter, to hear and feel and - I can only hope- recognise my story. As it is done in my Oshiwambo culture, when you meet people for the first time around the olupale, I start by introducing myself through my history.
1.2.1 The Mbwiti formed in oppression.

I was born in Namibia, a country on the Southwest coast of Africa. For the context of this thesis, I feel it is important to give a brief history of the colonial occupation in Namibia and our road to independence. There are over 20 different ethnic groups in Namibia, all having their own unique dialect, cultural practices and history (Wallace and Kinahan 2011). This diversity is largely due to the migration before as well as after colonial rule, into different parts of the country. This wide cultural diversity makes giving a full account of the history impossible for this thesis. As this is not a historical thesis on how Namibia was colonised, I will give a very brief overview of the Namibian history as a country, before focusing on the Oshiwambo and Okavango cultural practices of grief and my place within that.

Namibia’s written colonial history is a long and violent one that begins with the arrival of the Christian missionaries in the late 1700s to the early 1800s. Dangarembga (2023) emphasises that in Southern Africa the wounds of colonisation, unlike the brutality of the slave trade in the north, came in the form of “gifts”. Black people were given “gifts” such as modesty in the form of clothing to cover up our inappropriate bodies, knowledge and education to replace what was seen as a barbaric way of being. Before colonisation, women in the Oshiwambo and Okavango tribe in northern Namibia had land ownership rights and more independence and autonomy as well as formal authority in the local politics, all these rights disappeared with the arrival of colonial knowledge and powers (Wallace 2011). Each “gift” took away an important part of our way of knowing, our way of being (Dangarembga 2023).
These “gifts” came in the form of religion, turning Oshiwambo people from their ancestral ways of worshipping to Christianity and in extension Christian ways of being. They came in the “gift” of education, where the child was taken from her home and put in boarding schools to be educated far away from her “heathen” cultural practices (Amulungu 2016). And they came in the form of jobs, where men were required to leave their homes and become subjects under colonial and segregation rule. Where before men and woman worked together in the fields, now the men had to leave their families to work in mining towns, creating a split in the family unit and a vacuum in the home.

When the Germans started occupying Namibia, the “gifts” came in the form of guns given to one ethnic tribe to use against another, divide them from the other. When that did not work, the true nature of the “gifts” was revealed as violence ensued. Concentration camps were built to house black people who were in defiant of their new colonial rulers (Wallace and Kinahan 2011). And when that did not work, in 1904, an order was issued to exterminate the Herero tribe from existence. By 1911 two thirds of the Herero and Nama population had been ruthlessly killed off by the Germans. When Germany was defeated in the first world war, Namibia was passed onto the Union of South African by the League of Nations to ‘administer’ the country on behalf of the league (Wallace and Kinahan 2011), almost like a “gift”.

Soon after, the South African Apartheid government, having already established their authority in Namibia while fighting the Germans, refused to recognise Namibia as an independent country and instead chose to annex it into one of their territories. This caused a lot of distress for the Namibian people, as they had hoped with the defeat of the Germans,
colonial rule would end in Namibia. After the second world war, various leaders from different tribes gathered and pleaded to the newly formed United Nations to help drive the racially oppressive South African government out of Namibia. However, despite the disapproval by the United Nations, the South African apartheid government continued their rule over Namibia and her people, extending their racist and oppressive laws into Namibia.

After several failed attempts at peaceful negotiations for South Africa to leave Namibia, in 1959 the Ovamboland People's Organization (OPO) was established. The name was changed in 1960 to SWAPO (South West Africa People’s Organisation) to show that the party stood for all people. This was a liberation organisation, fighting against the racially oppressive forces of the white (apartheid) South African government (Wallace and Kinahan 2011). Majority of the soldiers were of the Oshiwambo tribe in the north; however, they were joined by the Kavangos, Zambezis, Tswanas, Damaras, Namas, and Hereros – who were still recovering from the genocide they suffered at the hands of the Germans. The South African government, having established a strong foothold in the central and southern parts of the country, turned to the north where most of the Oshiwambo and Kavango tribes resided. This is where most of the battles took place. The Namibian war of independence started in 1968 and lasted until 1988 when peaceful negotiations began, leading to Namibia finally having its independence on the 21st of March 1990. It was a long and violent war that caused physical and emotional dismemberment amongst the Namibian population.

My parents, when sitting around the fire would tell us stories of their involvement in the fight against apartheid, earning a level of notoriety amongst the boere - a term that means
farmer but was used to refer to the South African Defence Force (SADF). The SADF would occasionally release a kill list with one of my parents’ names on it and they would have to go into hiding until the list changed and they could briefly return home to wait for another list to be released. This meant their lives were constantly in danger. This constant negotiation of safety created a dismemberment that was present when they shared the stories. Their stories told in a way that honoured their bravery while simultaneously sharing the trauma and hoping it floated into the sky with the smoke from the fire.

This dismemberment was present both in a physical and a cultural form. Traditional Oshiwambo men became mbwitis. In the Oshiwambo language, a “mbwiti” is a person who is born into the traditional Oshiwambo culture but has integrated and been influenced by other—often more western—cultures. Other Namibian languages have their own word for this phenomenon, however, for the sake of this thesis, I will be using mbwiti. The word was first used during the colonial rule when men from the northern part of Namibia (Oshiwambo men) left their villages to work in the south as bonded labours, working for colonial rulers (Madejski, Amboto, and Shangheta 2017). The system of bonded labours was used by the colonial rulers, to take capable men from their homes, their culture and placed them into a labour system of oppression.

Their loss of this culture was in turn used to describe them—“mbwiti”, separate from people they have left behind. When exploring theories on subjection, Butler (1997) postulates that the external power that is pressed upon the subject helps to create the very subject that it is oppressing. The mbwiti comes into being as an oppressed subject, one who through being
impacted by other cultures is fragmented into different identities to cope with the very subjection that forms her. We will explore more on this in the chapters to come.

In South Africa, after the apartheid government was voted out, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up where the violent acts inflicted onto people of colour during the apartheid reign was nationally acknowledged. The process of exploring the traumatic experiences of apartheid was initiated to attempt reconciliation of the people who before were divided by racial lines. People came forth saying “this is how you hurt me” and the violation of human rights was formally written into the South African history (Eng, Kazanjian, and Butler 2003).

I am aware that the commission has often been criticised as not fully achieving its aim of holding the perpetrators accountable, however it allowed the naming of hurt that had been inflicted. According to Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (2007) people whose loved ones disappeared under suspicious circumstances could come forward to try and seek answers from the people responsible. This process allowed for the experiences of apartheid and post-apartheid people in South Africa to be explored and written into the history of the country. Although these experiences have mostly been from white male and female voices, more black female voices have started writing into their experiences (Spencer 2009).

This was not a process that was explored in Namibia after the war. There was a transfer of government and the new legislation meant that everyone could be afforded the same privileges across the board. The social and psychological implication of the war and the
emotional weight brought on by the changes to structures was not considered as having a significant impact on the people. The new government was more focused on making sure that equality was afforded to all its citizens. The grief created by the losses of not only physical bodies, but the psychical shattering caused but generational war and betrayal and the traumatising racial disparagement was neglected. Grief is overwhelming and if not allowed to be processed, stops one from moving on with their lives (Anzaldúa 2015). Fragmentation becomes imminent as the soul seeks ways to protect itself against the constant instability, identities formed to ensure survival.

1.2.2 The Mbwiti as an identity

Identity is a complex term to define as it holds within it different meanings that are implicated both in the ordinary sense and within academic discourse (Hua 2014). It is complex because the concept it attempts to define is layered and compound. Identity can be obvious and visible as it is marked on the body (Alcoff 2006), it can also be invisible as it is socially and personally constructed and biologically and culturally visible and invisible. Hua (2014) referred to culturally constructed identities as a collection of multiple identities consisting predominantly of ethnic identities along with other intersecting identities such as nationality, class, gender, and religious affiliations.

According to Anzaldúa (2015), having an identity is about learning to reposition ourselves and learning to be moved from the social positions that frame our sense of selves. The construction of one’s identity is a lifelong process as one continues to navigate and relate to different aspects of oneself and society (Spreckels and Kotthoff 2007). And because the
past is constantly being reconstructed in the present, my identities have been impacted both by the past experiences of apartheid and the current encounters of whiteness and lingering effect of colonialism.

As a black woman born after the end of a racially oppressive regime, I have been plagued by issues of identity and belonging that echo the lingering impacts of said regime. My racial and gender identity being visible, have guided or determined the way in which people judged and or perceived me. However, I also carried culturally constructed and assumed identities that were not as visible, such as being a born free. Being born after independence meant that I was born into a country where I could engage in spaces (white spaces) that were previously denied to my family. I occupy spaces that had been desired by my parents, that they were alienated from and in a way alienating me from them. They attempted to claim these spaces for me and through me. The negotiation of this claiming, of seeking for the belonging to and from spaces has impacted the construction of my identity.

When locating myself in terms of identity, I always start with my tribal identity as is the custom in the tribes that I consider myself belonging to – Oshiwambo and Kavango. Ethnic and tribal boundaries are patterns of social interaction that reinforce in-group members self-identification and at the same time confirm outsiders’ identification of these groups (Sanders 2002). But as Anzaldúa (2015) states; when our geographical and social positions shift, we enable new identities to grow roots and spring into being. We learn to take shapes and morph into different identities depending on where and when we are in time.
In Namibia, I would be considered an Oshiwambo person culturally. My parents both carried Oshiwambo surnames, however I was born in Kavango region and thus creating a tribal conundrum as I am expected to identify with one. It begs the question of what constitute as tribe and what factors need to be present to allow one to identify as one or the other. When asked by my fellow Namibians – as they often like to do: “What tribe are you?”, I always feel inclined to respond, “Biologically I am Oshiwambo but spiritually I am a Kavango”. If you were to ask me what that meant, I do not know. There seems to be an internal resistance to choose between these two tribes and to want to exist along the borders instead. I notice how I locate the Oshiwambo in my physical being while the Kavango I carry spiritually even though most of the times it feels like the other way around.

This existence on the borders has always been cast with suspicion by those who lived in colonised states. The separation of tribes although present throughout the tribal history of Namibia was exploited and exacerbated. First by the Germans and then continued by the South Africans during apartheid rule (Wallace and Kinahan 2011). Tribes were divided and conquered; kingdoms turned against each other to make the process of conquering easier. The division caused by colonisation has had lasting effects on Namibians, as the country is divided tribally (Amulungu 2016). This suspicion was further enhanced when these individuals’ incorporated whiteness and colonial ideology into their ways of being. The identity of the mbwiti was then established to distinguish them from the “pure” tribal people who abided to their tribal and cultural rituals.
I exist within the cracks of this division, carrying different tribes, different languages, and different selves with me. This crack was widened further by a western education from the age of seven where I was taught to speak and write in English and Afrikaans, eventually forbidden to speak any other language, both at primary and high school. My mother’s political career meant that we occupied a certain status in the community that allowed me the opportunity of attending a formal and western education system. This education also placed me on the outskirts of my culture because like the mbwiti during apartheid, I had left my culture behind (Madejski, Amboto, and Shangheta 2017). Through this education I was forced to confront my racial identity and how that identity differed from my classmates. This racial identity intersected with my tribal identity in a way that caused another split as I attempted to hold these both identities as well my gendered one.

As my western education was cemented when I studied psychology and I learned to apply western psychological methods to understanding the human condition, I found myself drifting further away from my tribal identity. Formal education gives access to certain kinds of knowledge (Anzaldúa 2015). And here is where we find the black person that Fanon (1986) spoke off, for when she enters the metropole, having left her home, she finds her doctors and departmental superiors. And this is where we find the mbwiti when she encounters the grief mattress. So here, in this piece of writing is where we explore these different identities and their different voices. We trace how they seemed to have sophisticatedly formed and how they maintain my survival in a world that is plagued by whiteness, whiteness that is expressed through racism. Racism that causes trauma in the body and creating further fragments
1.2.3 The Mbwiti aspiring for whiteness.

Racial trauma can be defined as the physical and emotional response that can follow exposure to racism (Kinouani 2022). It is a protective response that aims to shield the body against the racial harm experienced in the past and present. As a descendant of colonized tribes, I carry that response within me, the sudden intrusive thought that tells me I am somewhere I do not belong, the shrinking of my body to avoid being noticed and fear of my unbelonging blackness being pointed out. It is a visceral response that seems out of my control, that leaves me feeling powerless and urges me to act into it for my survival. Ensuring this survival has meant turning against my own blackness.

Kleinian theory of object relations is often used to explain the internalisation of colonisation (Timimi 2007). The inability to sit with difference that causes the baby to split from mother (or split mother) in order to better control the intolerable feeling of being separate from her is used to describe the hatred that white people feel towards black people (Tan 1993). The white person unable to tolerate how different the black person is, develops severe anxiety that causes a splitting of good and hateful feelings. These hateful feelings of intolerance are then projected into the black person and the black person becomes the container of these hateful feelings and over time identifies with them, and starts acting into them (Timimi 2007). Psychoanalysis looks at projective identification as the point where the object takes in the projected aspects of the other and is then transformed in accordance to the model that they have assimilated (Scharff 1992).
There was a time when I used this same conceptualisation to describe the experience of my hatred towards my own blackness; I felt I had identified with a projection of me and acted into it. However, this conceptualisation of racism leaves me holding someone else’s hatred without looking into mine. I am not seen as an object capable of projecting, only introjecting. Scharff (1992) using various object relations theories explored the importance of introjection as it represents how the object takes in and carries parts of the outer world within their internal structure. And thus, having introjected the world’s hatred of me, I am left feeling helpless almost as if I have no choice but to be the container for the white person’s inability to tolerate difference. Fanon (1986) states that hatred as an emotion cries out to exist and those who hate must prove it through the appropriate action. Hatred towards the black body has been acted on throughout history. If I were to use Kleinian theory of projective identification to describe the hatred I experience towards myself, I would be describing how I seem to be acting into my experience of being hated by the other.

What I find problematic with this analysis is that it infantilises the white person whilst establishing the black person as having - to some extend - integrated both difference and similarities. The violence of racism experienced by the psyche of the black person is not looked at as it becomes lost in the infantilised acts of the white person. Where is my inability to tolerate difference and how does it not show up in the same type of hatred, who contains my hatred and why is my expression of this hatred pathologised while the white man’s is infantilised? With this conceptualisation I feel confined to an existence of tolerance that leaves me anxious and depressed. There is very little curiosity into how I as a black person
might have introjected this projection, what was my internal structure that allowed such an introjection?

Fanon (1986, 2) maintained how ontology does not allow for black people to be fully understood as our lived experiences are always ignored. “For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to a white man” (Fanon (1986, 2). The black person has always been seen as the object that is seen through the lens of the white person. The black person becomes a subject that is defined by the white man (Kilomba 2020). My blackness cannot exist on its own, it is always in relation to whiteness, only then can I be allowed to almost exist. This brings me to how Fanon (1986) determined that the black man’s inferiority was theoretically established by the other. Using projective identification as a theory to explain internalised racism works if I, as a black person, have been established as having an inferiority complex before meeting the white man.

This inferiority complex thus allows me to introject the projected hatred and act into it. It does not look at the personal and structural violence inflicted on black people that forces us to believe in this so called inferiority as Fanon (1986) called it. This explanation does not look at the misery in the internal world of the black person who is confronted with a white person both existing within the context of a colonised and - dare I say it - racist world, a world that is inherently structured according to racist ideals. In his book “Black Skin White Masks”, Fanon explores the experience of the black man that desires to be white. He determines that this desire comes from a need for survival as the black man must “whiten or perish” (Fanon
To survive the violence that is enacted onto the black body, it must put on a white mask and along with this an identity that capitulates to white ideals.

As discussed previously, the mbwiti as an identity was established during the colonial period to distinguish between the men who left their tribal homes to work for white farmers’ or mining companies and as a result experienced cultural changes (Madejski, Amboto, and Shangheta 2017). The identification of people as mbwiti continued in the post-apartheid era and referred to people that lived in the white constructed cities and who encountered and were influenced by whiteness. Keating (2000, 431) defined “whiteness as a system of unearthed privileges that relies on and reinforced a hierarchal social system and a dominant/subordinate worldview”.

Whiteness here is seen not just in the racialised biology of human beings, but in the privileged systems that are afforded to those who are deemed worthy of being at the top of the hierarchy. So whiteness goes beyond the racial identity of an individual to the economic mobility and specific cultural capital that are considered to be aspirational (Spencer 2009). As a black child, the privileges afforded to the white children at my school made me envious and long for the whiteness that allowed them to enjoy pleasures that I was denied. Whiteness here is something that can be superficially attained when we act into our perception of who and what a white person is, but it does not have lasting effects because the subject is at the core black.
According to (Fanon 1986) there is a rage that the black man carries at being diminished that leaves him feeling insular. And so, as a way out of being dismissed, he spends his time preoccupied with attaining the white world. Thiongo (2006) referred to this longing as whiteache. The ache that is associated with wanting the privileges and experiences that encompasses whiteness. Becoming physically white is impossible, however, the possibility of being treated as close to whiteness thus becomes attainable (e.g., the house slave versus the field slave).

Although aspiring for whiteness by the black subject had been present during the apartheid, the new legislative laws after apartheid meant that black people could have access to these privileges that had previously only been afforded to white people (Scott 2012). I imagine this desire for whiteness, not the physicality of it but how it can manifest in a society, is what drove my parents to put me into a white school, an attempt to expunge the feeling of abasement that accompanied their blackness as Fanon (1986) would call it. The desire for my survival in a white world because they had experienced the consequences of their blackness in the same world.

Taylor (2023) urges us to look at survival as more than the performance of endurance as we try and endure tough terrain or the ability to dominate the other, but instead shift our understanding to include the ability to socially camouflage, to dodge, deflect and at times defy as we encounter life. I learned to survive a colonised world by turning against my blackness, however this way of survival is always overlooked when it is summed up as internalised racism. I did not internalise something external into myself, it was not that that I simply introjected
an inferiority that existed outside of me into me, but I needed to ensure my continued existence by believing a perceived version of me. There is a violence that exists within the socially constructed phenomenon of whiteness that is dismissed when we sum up internalised racism. I needed to deflect the violence that would inevitably be inflicted on me if I did not attempt to hide my blackness beneath a white coat. I had to develop an ability to socially camouflage my blackness to reflect whiteness. I had to put on the white mask that Fanon (1986) states covered the black man, because the world I encountered could not tolerate the existence of my blackness.

And so here at the olupale we look at the wounding that drove my internal system into survival. We touch into how I learned to be the obedient black girl, the one with nothing to say as I conformed to preconceived norms of me, in the promise of attaining whiteness. I look at my folding into whiteness as my attempts to survive the annihilation of me instead of as my attempts to tolerate the other’s hatred of me. I speak into my experience as a racialised subject and the terror that leads me to act into whiteness from within instead of observing it from the outside as I have learned to do. Here at the olupale we look at my experience as a mbwiti. In the flames, we listen to the voices screaming out of a need for survival and the identities that are formed when the fire dies down.
2 Chapter Two: My journey to here

Tambureninge...
 .......... (Tambu!)
Kuduni Kamukweni Koge sa
 .......... Walye oruganesa sininke samukweni ngwendi soge (Do not use someone else’s things like they belong to you)

2.1 The Mbwiti in grief

Before we go meumbo to the olupale, it feels pertinent for me to show you, my journey. How I dove head first in with psychological knowledge and then realised that my experience of being black, of being Oshiwambo and being a black woman has yet to be written about. Before we sit down at the olupale to meet these selves it seems pertinent to talk about my journey from the grief mattress to here.

I come from a culture where family and community are the most important part of everyday relations. Ubuntu. We feel everything as a family and community. The individual takes a backseat to the community. This way of being is reflected in everyday life. It is present in our language, meme -onane meaning mother is the same word for aunt or any older woman in the community. The same goes for the terms for father, brother and sister. There is no distinction because we belong to one another. This way of being translates into different rituals and experiences. This sharing of experiences is beautifully reflected in cultural practices, specifically grieving rituals.
Mourning the death of a loved one in an African context is a collective phenomenon (Baloyi 2014). The rituals may differ from tribe to tribe, but there is a similarity in the ways in which Africans mourn (Khosa-Nkatini 2022). In the Oshiwambo culture, when someone dies, a mattress is taken from one of the rooms and placed in the middle of the lounge or living room. A death within the community is likened to the arrival of an elephant in a small village (Amulungu 2016). Elephants cause great havoc to the structures and fields built by the villagers. Although elephants may target one house (or family) initially, the whole community is impacted by their arrival. It then becomes a communal responsibility to stop their daily activities and assist in chasing away the elephant (Amulungu 2016).

The same applies when a loved one passes on, the community puts aside their occupations and gather at the bereaved family’s homestead to help chase away the pain of loss. Similar to most African grief rituals, a female member of the bereaved family is placed on this mattress and the community as a whole gather around to try and comfort the bereaved family member while making funeral arrangements (Khosa-Nkatini 2022). The bereaved woman is given a status of omufiya kadi – mufisa yendi (the one (feminine) left behind – the one who lost hers), for her loss is the one recognised by the community and thus she is surrounded by the community on the mattress in support of her grief. The man never sits on the mattress but is met in the olupale (heart of the house) where men gather and receive one another.

The mattress is placed in the middle of the room where family and community members surround the grieving woman for one or two weeks (depending on how long it takes
to have the burial). This is where she receives the community and their grief, she becomes a symbol of the loss they experienced as a community and through her they pay their respects to the family. They arrive loudly and throw themselves at her feet in an expression of their overwhelming pain. She sits with them, holding their hands and she nods in acknowledgement. They collect themselves before enquiring on her experience of the loss. Through her there is a shared sense of grief, the woman on the mattress recognises the grief of the community and is able to offer this back to them.

Trigg (2020) denotes that for emotions to be shared, they have to meet two requirements of which the first is mutual self-other awareness, and the second a sense of integrative togetherness. Mutual self-other awareness requires a recognition that the emotion communicated between the self and the other is experienced as shared, this goes beyond valuing the emotion as similar to and accepting that it is experienced together. There is an important distinction that is made where shared loss does not negate individual experiences of the loss but upholds it (Trigg 2020). I feel this distinction is important as it demonstrate that sharing does not imply enmeshment. Enmeshment is understood to be patterns that facilitate the psychological and emotion fusion of family members, inhibiting their ability to experience individual differences (Barber and Buehler 1996).

In the Oshiwambo and Kavango cultures, there is an awareness of the communal experience of losing an individual who when alive, was seen as a mother, not just to her children but the community at large and then the individual loss of the children of their mother. The individual experience of loss is upheld in the cultural rituals by having the
bereaved woman in the middle of the room surrounded by community, in a way acknowledging the individual loss as being at the centre of the community’s loss. The community looks to the individual to receive and recognise their grief just as the individual looks to the community to recognise hers.

As I noted in the introduction, Benjamin (2017, 2) stated that recognition can be viewed in two ways “first as a psychic position in which we know the other’s mind as an equal source of intention and agency, affecting and being affected and second as a process or action, the essence of responsiveness in interaction”. When there is recognition of loss in the other, there is an awareness that the other is as affected by the loss as we are. We affectively experience the other not just as an object to be controlled or pushed away when grieving but as an individual we can connect with in our grief. When the community recognises the individual grief, they act into this process by responding with their own experience of loss. There is a mirroring of expressions and emotions that is felt by both the indvivial and the community.

By engaging with mirroring, I refer to Winnicott’s use of the term where mirroring is not just a reflection of an image in a mirror, but where there is a relational engagement between the image observed and the individual observing. Winnicott having employed Lacan’s theory on the mirror stage as the formative of the I function, explored how the baby looked to the mother to find themselves reflected in her (Winnicott 1971). Through mirroring the baby learns to distinguish her face from that of the mother and thus individualisation begins where the baby is able to separate her emotions from what the emotions of her
mother are. The community looks to the woman to find their grief reflected back to them and then slowly start to distinguish how they individually experienced the person when she was alive.

In the ritual, the community first greets the woman on the mattress and holds her hands. After a few minutes of crying together, they express their grief of the deceased. “Ogh akwetu O Rosalia wange!”- “oh my friends, my Rosalia”. Their grief is mirrored through their shared crying, this then allows them to express their individual grief, through wailing and claiming the individual as their own. The bereaved woman on the mattress holds their hand through this, crying with them and for them as well as for herself. It is important for her to nod and cry with them as a way to enact the mirroring. If the woman’s face is blank, the community feels discombobulated when there is a lack of attunement between them and the woman on the mattress. It then becomes the job of the woman on the mattress to “fix her face” and realign herself to accommodate and connect with the community in their grief.

The woman on the mattress provides what Winnicott described as the holding environment (Ogden 2004). This is evoked by the image of the bereaved woman holding the hands of the community, the same way that a mother holds a baby to comfort them in times of distress. Winnicott (1971) maintains how the mother must feel herself in the infant’s place, allowing the infant to risk experiencing its own self. The woman must experience her loss within the place of the community to allow them the freedom to express their own grief. This is how she becomes the containing function according to Bion (1988). He saw containing as
the mother receiving the painful and unbearable experiences and feelings of the infant into herself and returns them in palatable manner. The bereaved woman waits for the community members to express their grief before gently echoing their cries back.

The emotions of grief are then shared between the woman and her community. Shared emotions are not just mutual awareness of self-other in experiencing emotions but also an experience of belonging that is experienced by having a shared concern. "Without a sense of integrative togetherness between each member of a group, the diachronic stability that both fosters and reinforces shared emotion is unlikely to be sustained" (Trigg 2020, 2). The woman on the mattress has to experience a sense of belonging with the community so she can experience their emotions as aligned and shared with hers. Without this sense of belonging there is a conflict of whose emotions take precedence over the other.

But what happens when the community has suffered an intense fracturing caused by colonisation and a traumatising racial war? What happens when the woman on the mattress is not aware of her role for the community because of this fracturing. As a mbwiti, born after apartheid, I had never learned to be such a deep part of the community. Instead, I was gently placed at the edges of it, and I learned to come in and out without really grounding myself in it. When experiencing grief with the community after I lost my parents, my emotions felt separate from “them” and this created a conflict within me. I experienced the people on the mattress as intrusive and at times traumatising, almost hindering my ability to grieve my losses. Having lost both my parents, I had experiences of the grief mattress that felt as wounding as the losses I had suffered.
My experience of the Oshiwambo cultural practices did not align with the theory I had learned in my psychology classes. My curiosity around the potential of this space between me and my community then grew as I continued to align myself with theorists that viewed African culture as primitive and savage. And just like Fanon (1986)'s black man the mbwiti had adapted the language of the white man and was using that to communicate to the people that she had in left the bush. And this is how I entered this research space. Not with the curiosity of a child seated at a fire waiting for a story, or an adult with cultural knowledge to impart. But from the mbwiti who was standing on the veranda laughing at the people seated at fire.

It is the day after my father’s funeral... we are seated in the olupale according to birth order.... Being the last born, I am at the end of the line.... Sitting in front of my mother... I have no idea what is happening, no one has explained it to me, they just told me sit quietly and wait.... I look up at my mother and she has tears rolling down her face... I want to hold her hand, but I do not know if that was allowed culturally.... The elders are seated in front us ... They are talking but I am too disconnected to listen....

What is happening... I watch as one of the memes stitch a piece of black cloth on to my oldest brothers’ shirts and slowly moves down the line... stitching my siblings in the order of birth... I look down at my shirt with frustration... If someone had told me, I would have worn a different shirt, I do not want this one ruined...I wait in trepidation as they come down the line... and then to my surprise they tie a fresh yivare (palm tree leaf) around my neck instead. I sigh in relief as I touch it... I do not know what it is for. They ask us to hold out our hands with our palms facing up... they place grilled ehuli (liver) in my hands... I look at my brothers and watch in horror as they start eating it... I start panicking and look at my mother... She sees my panic and softly says “its cow liver” ... I sigh in relief .... for a minute, I thought these people were feeding me my father’s liver.
As a psychotherapist, I can go off on tangent about the allegory that lies in the fear of being fed my dead father. However, that would be continuing to do what western psychological theory has done for decades, locate the problem in the individual without looking at where they are situated in their society. I want to draw your attention to the fear I had of “these people”. When encountering Oshiwambo-Kavango cultural rituals, I was always in a state of anger, confusion. Confusion because no one took the time to explain... “she is a mbwiti, she does not understand” are words that I grew up with, but they were not followed by explanation. And so, as a mbwiti I was angry, no one explained but they seemed to be okay with imposing their archaic traditions on me, traumatising me.

Freud, when speaking of non-Europeans in his writings, often referred to us as savages (Greedharry 2008). In Totem and Taboo (1913), he expresses his interest in the studies of the savages and half savages as they embody early stages of civilisation. Sitting on the ground, looking at the liver in my hands, Oshiwambo people were the savages that Freud had spoken about, and I was the educated civilised human. I was standing in the doorway of a concrete building judging the people sitting in the cold, telling stories around the fire. The smoke from the olupale seems to have travelled across the eumbo (home) carrying the stories of colonial trauma, instead of floating up, it clouded my vision of the people. I saw my culture, not through the brave acts of a people fighting for freedom, but through the silenced trauma of oppressed savages. This view of culture was not something that I was explicitly taught but through engagement with white spaces, slowly seeped into my unconscious. It is with this frame of mind that I wanted to study my culture.
2.2 Epistemic Violence by the Mbwiti.

I sit in my writing corner, nervous about showing you all my disconnected parts. Feeling shame for the way in which I helped dismember myself. I want to tell you that I came into this research from a postcolonial stance, that I was intentional in my need to decolonise myself. That would be a lie. I came in through the eyes of a colonised mbwiti. I came in wanting to produce conventional research. As part of calling back all the lost parts of me, it feels important to honour the process of being lost because it led me to Anzaldúa.

It was a search for a certain type of truth that has led me to this space where I discovered a deep transformative grey space that holds all my different truths. My aim for this research is strongly aligned with Anzaldúa (2015), and that is an attempt to show how transformation happens, to make you feel this transformation with me. So, bear with me as we learn to readjust our eyes from extreme electrical brightness to the darkness that will lead us to the fire of the olupale. It takes a couple of blinks for the eyes to adjust, to move from wanting to produce more traditional research to speaking into the space of the marginalised self.

Traditional research implored researchers to observe and explore objects or phenomena empirically limiting subjectivity towards the object or phenomenon being studied (Méndez 2014). I came into this doctorate with the intention of producing more traditional research. When I first encountered autoethnography as a research methodology, as a possibility for producing thesis-worth knowledge, I was resistant. Partly because of how I had
conceptualised knowledge production to be. But also, because the thought of putting myself at the centre of my research and my study felt too unfamiliar and, in a sense, not good enough.

I wanted to study the impact of Oshiwambo cultural rituals on the individual with the assumption that the cultural rituals added another layer of trauma that had an impact on how grief was processed. I was curious about how the culture acted as a barrier between the individual and their ability to fully experience loss. I viewed the cultural rituals as the hindering factor that turned the process of mourning into melancholia (Freud 1917). Freud spoke of melancholia as a mourning without end, where the person is unable to resolve their grief of their beloved object. I was curious about how anyone could experience the rituals in the olupale healing when encountering grief. I came into the research with an external knowledge of psychological theories that I assumed to be correct and was attempting to use that to reconstruct my knowledge of Oshiwambo-Kavango culture.

When exploring different research approaches in the research classes, I realised I was attempting to produce a more positivist approach that was attempting to prove or disprove a hypothesis i.e., Oshiwambo-Kavango cultural practices can be traumatic when encountering grief. I came with “psychological knowledge about the folk” (Held 2020, 353) and because I have the privilege of having being born in Namibia where I received a western education, pitting my existence on the fringes of multiple cultures, I had inadvertently appointed myself their representative. I had placed myself in the position of knower of the culture. I became the very bridge that I feared becoming, but instead of allowing traffic to flow both ways, I was
a one-way bridge. I had the power to control which cars could pass to the other side. Confronting the powerful position that I had placed myself in was an uncomfortable process and one that caused an internal struggle on who I was in relation to my culture and what I wanted to research.

As I continued to grapple with the question of my study, here in the UK, my aunt passed away in Namibia. As I was not able to attend the burial, my way of being present was spending many hours on the phone with my cousin as she prepared for the burial rituals. We spoke about how she had to get 2 black dresses, one black scarf and one white scarf. When I asked her why she replied: “You know mos, Wamboes and their traditions”. This statement stayed with me; it is a statement I have made many times. I never realised how I seem to claim my cultural identity as an Oshiwambo-Kavango woman but locate the associated cultural practices as outside of me. I sat quietly on the ground during my parents etamo – (burial process), participating physically but internally keeping myself separate but also being kept separate culturally.

How did I get here? What is this this reality I had created where I appeared to exist on the edges of culture but never seem to fully immerse myself in it. Culture was something that seemed to happen to me and not something I constructed and experienced. When had I disowned something that seems to be such an integral part of constructing my identity and how do I go about finding it again?
Gonzalez (2003) states that the relationship we have with what we know is influenced by the assumptions that we hold about the nature of our reality. Reality is constructed by the events, experiences and the meaning that we take from these. Meaning making is the most fundamental aspect of human social setting (Krauss 2004). After apartheid, my parents who had lived through the violence of apartheid, placed us in schools that previously would not have taken in black students. The trauma of apartheid meant that they naturally attempted to find a distance from those experiences. They constructed a new premise for their reality: apartheid was over and thus colonialism was over. And since “meanings are the cognitive categories that make up one’s view of reality and with which actions are defined” (Krauss 2004, 762), they acted based on this new reality. However, apartheid ideologies were still present in day-to-day engagements. These included colonial ways of viewing black cultures, Oshiwambo and Kavango cultures. This way of knowing culture was present in the schooling that I received.

The relationship between the apartheid ideologies and traditional Oshiwambo-Kavango practices was not something that I feel was explored or thought about. The psychological impact of apartheid, while acknowledged, was not openly explored. This meant that I learned to not think about them. Thinking according to Bion is more than a mental process and involves an attempt to understand reality and gaining an insight into human nature (Bion 1988). To actively think about the relationships between these two would be to bring back the apartheid condition in those that had experienced it, and this was too traumatising to suffer, after all we won the war against colonisation, the suffering had ended. The coloniser returned to South Africa where apartheid continued for 4 more years. And so,
a form of repression happened, where the psychological violence of apartheid was repressed because the physical had been traumatic enough. A forgetting of the internal processes was enabled, and new meanings were made, constructing a reality that aligned with these new meanings.

Ghandi (2019, 7) described the concept of postcoloniality “a condition troubled by the consequences of a self-willed historical amnesia”. Namibians, having endured violence during apartheid, had slowly started to wilfully disengage from the impact it could have on a post-apartheid society. I realised that I too suffered from this condition, I had inherited it unconsciously as I moved from the olupale to the classroom. I was looking at the cultural rituals without putting them in their historical, political, social and psychological context. Ghandi (2019) implores us to then go back to the wound of colonisation and use that to demystify colonialism and its impact.

Going back to the wound of colonisation in Namibia allows us to see it, not as the gift it was so treacherously presented to be, but for the theft that it was. We were robbed of the chance to fully encounter ourselves without using the white man as a lens to see ourselves through. The black person has always been formed in relation to the white and deemed as the other and not as a self (Kilomba 2020). By using only psychological theories as a framework to study Oshiwambo-Kavango culture without considering the impact of colonisation, I was inadvertently comparing the culture to western culture and deeming it not good enough. I was not allowing the Oshiwanbo – Kavango cultures to exist but looking at
them through the lens of white ideologies and what they constitute as a proper grieving process. I was robbing the cultures, silencing their ways of knowing.

### 2.3 Tearing through the veil of epistemic violence

When Gayatri Spivak, in her text, asked if the Subaltern could speak, she was enquiring into the violating silence experienced by people who exist on the margins of western knowledge (Dotson 2011). Epistemology, from the Greek word epistémé, meaning the philosophy of knowledge (Krauss 2004), has always been viewed through the lens of the west. Spivak developed the term “epistemic violence” in relation to colonisation and the ways in which meaning is drawn and knowledge intersects with power (Pérez 2019). Knowledge is power, or so the saying goes, however what constitutes as knowledge is determined by one group of people and excludes others, and in extension power is located only in one group. And thus, an oppressive power is exerted onto the lesser “other”.

Epistemic violence is committed when one group is established as the “other” that is deemed to be lesser than, or not knowing. People along the margins have always been situated as the lesser other, their voices stripped away as their knowledge is silenced by the violence of fingers hitting a keyboard. Epistemic violence towards marginalised people is habitually expressed through either omitting their narratives in research or presenting their narratives and knowledge as inferior to that of mainstreamed knowledge and in this case, western ways of viewing indigenous culture (Townsend and Lupin 2021).
Though, it is not that they are less than, but that this fantasy of a lesser-than subject is one created through colonisation, a fantasy that is epistemically violent. And, in my grief, and anger at being the mbwiti on the mattress, I was lashing out at Oshiwambo-Kavango culture and attempting to silence them using their cultural practices as the gag. I was attempting to commit the same epistemic violence that Spivak had begun to question (Maggio). I had positioned the Oshiwambo-Kavango people as the other to my psychological truth.

I became curious about my relationship with the Oshiwambo-Kavango cultural practices and where I was situated within that dialogue as my research interests continued to evolve. My curiosity became centred around me and where I was situated in relation to Oshiwambo-Kavango cultural practices, and how that impacted my mbwitiness on the mattress. As I was slowly developing a decolonial voice that attempted to deconstruct knowledge presented to me as truth by colonial structures, I was no longer inhabiting the pre-colonial awareness that Gonzalez (2003) describes to be the state where one “buys into” colonial systems. I was consciously aware of how I had bought into these systems and used them as the shade that coloured my experiences of myself. Somewhere along the way I had buried the pieces of me that were Oshiwambo-Kavango. Whilst I refused to choose between the two cultures, I had inadvertently chosen whiteness as a culture.

This was a harrowing recognition in myself that almost felt violent to the core of my being. According to Fanon (2001) decolonisation is a programme of complete disorder. I felt this disorder, this psychic split that materialises when you encounter deep anxiety (Gomez
the anxiety of realising my own destructive nature. For people who have had to endure racial trauma, there is a disorientation that pierces the fabric of reality and creates a new one to allow for survival (Anzaldúa 2015). The idea that, to ensure my survival in white spaces, I had learned to be hurtful to my culture was the knife that I needed to rip open the fabric of postcolonial amnesia. I was then able to see the multiple ways in which I had reenacted colonialism in my day-to-day engagements.

A gentle knock wakes me in the early morning. ngo... ngo... I look up, trying to find out why it is so loud. I am staying in my brother’s flat, meumbo (homestead) and his entrance door is in the other room.... The knock should not be so loud... I lift the curtain in confusion and find my grandmothers face looking back at me through the window..... Alarmed and confused, I hurry out to open the door... “Mama iyisi”.. (Grandma what’s wrong)? I ask her as I open the door...... She looks up and tells me about how she did not sleep because I told her I had period cramps last night... She woke up early to go in the field, looking for nondandani (roots) to boil that will take the pain away... I laugh and say no thank you grandma. “Na nu pera” (I took a pill) I tell her... “Onu pera?” (you drank a pill?) she asks puzzled, and I nod in amusement... grandma and her roots... “Ewa”.. (okay) she shrugs, and I watch her walk away.

I was flooded by memories like these, memories that reminded me of my own violent nature. Memories that filled me with a deep shame, guilt and grief. Grief for the gift that she had offered me, and I rejected because of a researched way of healing. I note how I instinctually use the word research to refer to western ways of knowing. How many indigenous ways of knowing, of healing have been rejected by western ways of looking at research. Scientific knowledge seems to possess a universal framework that dismisses any other knowledge. “When they speak it is scientific, and when we do it is unscientific” (Kilomba 2020, 26). My grandmother’s medicinal roots are not scientific because the knowledge of
what makes them medicinal is located in her and has not undergone tests in a laboratory and therefore, I found it easy to dismiss.

Mason (2002) implores qualitative researchers to internally confront themselves about their research interests and the personal motivation behind it. My interest in this type of research stemmed from my curiosity after experiencing grief publicly in that cultural context and finding it intrusive and a barrier to my own grieving process. My intentions when I started this research were from an angry punitive coloniser. Through engagement with postcolonial literature, curiosity of how an individual, born into the culture could come and experience their way of healing as traumatic was evoked. The realisation that by doing this research in the way that I had first imagined, I was enacting epistemic violence onto my culture created an important mental restructuring that had an impact on how I wanted to continue my inquiry for this thesis.

I started to rethink what I wanted to research and how would I go about doing it. How do I do what was required of me to attain the status of a doctorate without repeating what has already been done to people considered to be on the margin? I fell into a space of questions and doubts. I felt anger at the epistemic violence that I had experienced, that led me into reenacting violence upon my Oshiwambo-Kavango people. I wanted to scratch the whole thesis and research something different, far removed from my experience.

Speaking into race and colonialism, my experiences of racism from a young age in a country that had supposedly rid itself of their racial oppressors felt too complicated. It felt
too raw and too personal to be considered research. I grappled with questions of what could be deemed as research and who had the honour of making that distinction. I was not sure what to hold on to as the ground that I previously thought was solid had become a sticky clay as if I stood at the edges of riverbed. The Kavango river, whose riverbed I grew up exploring, it’s slippery clay slowly edging me into the depths of scary dark waters where I might drown, to be eaten by crocodiles that I had spent my life avoiding.

2.4 Moving away from epistemic violence to the olupale.

After a few weeks of wallowing, of refusing to write and pretending that I was not on a doctoral programme, I gently dipped my toes back into the river of research. I slowly started engaging with decolonial spaces within my research through workshops and webinars, reading books and having in depth conversations with friends and my supervisors. I started to question my previous way of perceiving and creating knowledge as I started seeing it as a form of violence. This left me with a question of finding a different way into creating knowing. What would I be looking at now and what was my research paradigm? Ponterotto (2005) defines a research paradigm as the context for the researcher’s study. Previously, my research interest was wanting to study the effects of Oshiwambo-Kavango culture on the individuals experience of grief. I had positioned myself as an outsider viewing in and as the holder of a certain knowledge that would be used to measure cultural knowledge. That changed to being the individual at the centre of the culture, the centre of the olupale looking outward at the faces with curiosity.
Chang (2008) argues that the concept of culture addresses people as interactive agents, but this interaction is depended on where they locate the culture. She further defined culture as a group-oriented experience rather than individual one, as it is a result of human interactions with one another. Having been born on the borders of Oshiwambo and Kavango culture I had found a comfortability in pretending to being separate (and in being placed as separate) from the Oshiwambo-Kavango cultures and denying the fact that they impacted my personhood as I engaged in different spaces. I was an individual pretending to not be part of the group and it was time to let the pretence go and be curious about where my interaction with the group had taken me. Now I was curious about how to locate myself at the centre and allowing myself to being in relation with Oshiwambo-Kavango culture.

According to Krauss (2004) the goal of qualitative research is to understand the intricate world of human existence and their experiences and behaviour within that. This intimate investigation means that the researcher’s subjectivity helps with the construction of knowledge that is uncovered. As I slowly moved from wanting evidence of how Oshiwambo-Kavango cultural practices can be harmful to the process of individual grief, I became curious about me, me as an Oshiwambo-Kavango woman and my existence within the fringes of these two tribes, and the different cultures that I have inhabited before this moment.

How did that impact my knowledge construction and ways of making sense of reality? How did I come to be as a post-apartheid subject? When did my identity as mbwiti come to be? What happens when the apartheid condition (Hook 2013), re-emerges in the lives of “born-frees”? How is the mbwiti constructed in a post-apartheid country? What identities did
I take on to ensure my existence in a post-apartheid Namibia. How does my experience of grief factor into my experience of being a mbwiti? And more importantly could I write into these experiences and call it research? How could I use research to be curious about the grief that I experienced on the mattress and how the trauma from apartheid impacts my experience of grief. All these questions seemed to emerge as I continued to delve deeper into the bottomless river of decolonial literature. I gained a deeper understanding of the importance of stories. I became fascinated with the concept of writing as a way to produce and not as a tool to interpret what has already been produced (Jackson and Mazzei 2022).

As a practitioner and a researcher, I am drawn to theory, theory tells a story (Jones 2016), and stories around the olupale is how I was introduced to the world of meaning making. There is wisdom in retelling stories for they serve as insight into conditions and offer guidance through the nooks and crevices of human existence. When I watched my grandmother tell stories around the olupale, I could see her mind working as she looked for a story that might fit the theme of the day. I did not just want to tell a story that reflected the trauma of the post-apartheid condition, but one that was a force, that did things to the reader (Bhattacharya and Keating 2017), that transformed the way in which the mbwiti was thought about in post-apartheid Namibia.

This change in the aim of my research means that I am no longer standing on the veranda looking at the olupale laughing at the people but edging closer to the fire. But from where do I invite you into this circle. Having left the olupale to discover and be enlightened by electricity, do I still have the right to invite you to the fire? How do I offer you an invitation
when sometimes I feel I need one myself. In Grayshield and Castillo (2020)’s book on indigenous ways of knowing, she warns researchers against the notion of coming into research with a knowing that covers indigenous culture. We are asked to be both host and guest of the culture. It is important to acknowledge both these positions because the very fact that I can type this on my keyboard troubles the narrative of my being a subaltern. By coming in using the coloniser’s language, I must acknowledge that I have power over what aspects of the Oshiwambo-Kavango culture are revealed and how it is revealed. Smith (2021, 158) cautions against the assumption that because “she or he lives in therefore they know”.

So, perhaps the way to offer an invitation is by acknowledging that it is I, who is doing the inviting and so it is through my eyes that this culture is seen. I have to reposition myself, so I do not become the speaker of the culture, a precarious position to be in. My question to myself then becomes, what methodology can I use that allow me to tentatively invite you at the olupale with me? Where I allow my writing to write me (Anzaldúa 2015). Where I can gently critique these identities that have been presented to me at birth, that I have inhabited as I shifted from one cultural perspective to another, one language to another. A methodology that would shift from the hierarchal empirical demands of social science knowledge (Jackson and Mazzei 2022), to one where I can write as I think, as I speak and that allows me to do it in my own writing (Harvey-Torres and Degollado 2021). Asking these questions led me to autoethnography which eventually led me into autohistoria-teoría and Gloria Anzaldúa.
3 Chapter Three: Methodology - Autohistoria-teoría

Tambureninge
............ Tambu
Ekero nampili esupi lina kara, li diva
............. Muntu diva ekoro lyoge, nampili ehepwe (Even in their struggles, know your family)

3.1 A journey to the olupale

Ahh.. and so here we are kevero lye mbo (at the gate of the house). As I write this, I think of the path that I take to get to the olupale membo lyetu. We tend to have big yards with a lot of different nondunda (huts) that house different family members. The path to the olupale is not straight forward and that is why guests always announce themselves at the gate. A family member then peeks to see if it is welcomed guest or if they need tell them that that there is no one home. If it is a welcomed guest, the family member goes to meet them and invite them meumbo. They guide the guest through the twists and turns of the rugumbo (there is no English word for this) until you reach the olupale where you are met by the elders.

It is usually a child that brings the guests in, that greets them at the door so forgive me, I am learning how to bring people into the house as well as having to meet them at the olupale. So, this will be disorienting for the both of us. When I first met you kevero, I thought it would be a simple path. At first, I did not think I would have to speak with you at the olupale. I did not think it was me whom you came to meet so I was prepared for this to be a straight forward path to the olupale. I was prepared to lead you to meet other stories at the olupale without disclosing anything of myself before we get there. Alas, now we know differently.
When I realised that I actually wanted to reveal myself to you, I had to think of the different ways that I could do this.

I am aware that in academic research, particularly in fields of social sciences, discussions about ontology and epistemology often precede the methodology section. Ponterotto (2005) described methodology as the process or procedure that determined the outcome of the research. He noted how the ontology (the nature of reality and its existence) along with the epistemology (the scope of knowledge and the factors that influence it) form the foundational framework for which the research is built on. They help guide the researcher to a suitable methodology. However, when engaging in this research, I found my methodology first and in doing so I allowed the method to be the bridge to my different selves and in extension my different realities. The awareness of epistemic violence uncovered a different type of reality that I explored after I had engaged with the methodology. By engaging with the methodology first, I allowed my ontology and epistemology to develop through the method, through the writing. I permitted my “methodological stance to merge with my writing process, as they do in stories” (Anzaldúa 2015, 4). And so, to honour my path to the olupale, I will start by revealing to you my methodology first, and then continue engaging in the discussions of the nature of the reality that exists within this research and the knowledge that encapsulates it.

Having established the fact that I wanted to be both the observer and participant of my research, it became apparent at the time that autoethnography would be the most suitable research methodology. Autoethnography emerged as a new way of looking at
research by acknowledging the limits of scientific knowledge and gaining a new appreciation for personal narratives. Adams, Jones, and Ellis (2015) described autoethnography as the systematic analysis of a personal experience to gain understanding of a cultural experience. I am curious about my emergence into different cultures and how having the identity of a mbwiti helped or hindered this emergence. I am curious about how whiteness as an ideology became embedded in me and aided in curating my experience on the grief mattress. And thus I needed a methodology where my story, my experiences of these cultures was not accompanying the methodology but was imbedded in the design of the methodology (Cavarero 2000). The narration of a personal story is seen by Cavarero as revealing the meaning of one’s story without committing the mistake of defining it.

Autoethnography allows us to work our way inside-out, intertwining our self in larger social, cultural and social processes (Kamdar 2021). Through autoethnography I am attempting to limit my ability to inflict epistemic violence. I halt my attempts at placing myself as the all-knowing external knowledge that is defining Oshiwambo-Kavango knowledges and instead locating them within myself and using that as the starting point of inquiry. I am enquiring into myself and my ways of being and extending this curiosity to the wider societal process. Instead of locating the “other” in Oshiwambo-Kavango cultural practices, I write from within the space of the other (Bhattacharya and Keating 2017), as an Oshiwambo Kavango female. I find freedom in acknowledging my limitations with regard to an omnipotent knowledge and allow myself the autonomy to create myself even within my own experiences, a concept that Kamdar (2021) manages to do beautifully in her work.
Autoethnography has often been criticised for being too aesthetic and literal and not scientific enough (Ellis 2009). Coming into this thesis, I held the same reservations about autoethnography, thinking that my experience was not good enough to constitute as research. I felt that focusing on my story felt almost narcissistic, self-absorbed, asking someone to sit with you as you tell a narrative of yourself. This way of thinking often comes up, halts my writing and I go weeks without writing, feeling not enough. According to Anzaldúa (2015) this happens when we try to write like a writer and to produce knowledge instead of letting the self to be immediate as we incorporate our pain in the text.

It is an uncomfortable process, confronting the ways in which I dismiss my own knowledge as not enough. There is a numbness that enters my fingers and stops them from writing, an uncomfortable shifting of emotions within my chest that makes me want to throw my laptop away. I read and reread my writings, scoffing at the words, the way I imagine you would when you read them. In these moments, I feel dissociated from myself, unable to connect to the Oshiwambo-Kavango woman who is demanding a space to be heard. Then something happens, a black female client tells me she hates how people look at her when she wears braids instead of straightened hair and I remember the importance of stories by woman of colour. I slowly I start engaging with writers like Kakali Bhattacharya, AnaLouise Keating, Audre Lorde and Grada Kilomba. I find inspiration in the need to write when Anzaldúa describes how writing helps her make sense of the world, how it allows an intimacy with herself and allows her to meet herself fully (Keating 2009).
However, as I continued on the autoethnography path I found myself disconnecting and connecting. Slowly dissociating from my work and then coming back to it. At first, I thought it was because it is too personal, and this level of exposure was not something that I was used to. And then I realised that the writing I was reading, although touching on the personal strand of my work, did not take root in my soul. I was uncomfortable because I was not connected to the authors who shared their autoethnography. When I first looked into autoethnography, I tried to find myself reflected in the writing that I was reading. But as I read the autoethnographic writing on trauma and identity, it was not my trauma that was reflected back to me but instead one that created a tighter tension in my body. And so here I stopped, because for a minute I was lost and was not sure of the way to the olupale. I needed to find a path with footprints that I recognised.

3.1.1 Whose footprints are we following?

When I was a child, I could tell which of my family members’ footprints lay on the path in front of me. It was how I stubbornly followed them moyihwa (the bush) to collect nompundu (berries) after they sneakily left me behind. Sometimes I would have to stop and lean down to look, to be really sure that it was not a stranger that I was following. And this is where autoethnography brings me, where I need to sit on the ground and look at the shape of the footprint in the path because although it has the shape of a foot, it does make the same indentation, it is not the one that I am called to follow.
Chawla and Rodriguez (2008) explore wanting to find a home in autoethnographic writing as it is a shift from the conventional scientific writing that had removed the personal from being accepted as container of knowledge. It is one that allowed writing to be done by the participants rather than letting them be written about. However, as women of colour, they also struggled to find a home in these writings because of how it did not house the writing of other women of colour. These writings that seemed to have been present before autoethnography was formally declared as a methodology, have been dismissed from academia. The transformational writing of women of colour that embodies their experiences in what I can only describe as a spiritual way, feels lacking in the autoethnographic writing that I have been reading.

Audre Lorde implores us to seek out words written by women of colour as they are crying to be heard. “It is our responsibility to read them, share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives” (Lorde 2017, 5). And these are the women whose voices I do not find in autoethnographic literature that I was reading. Their way of writing sits differently within my soul, their writing plants seeds that could grow because my soil recognises their seed. Autoethnography does not capture the way in which my different languages, culture and spirituality make and remake me in the writing. I discover the personal yes, but like Chawla and Rodriguez (2008) it passes through me without invading my senses, without coursing through my veins.

It then becomes my responsibility to call into this space the writing of women whose spirituality embraces mine. It becomes my responsibility to show them to you as we walk to
the olupale. In her writing, Taylor (2023) attends to Sara Ahmed’s call for citational practices that establish pathways for woman of colour to be seen and heard, to be followed. By using their literature to guide the path to the olupale I am also illuminating their footprints. Footprints that keep getting erased as they are stepped over and lost in the footprints of writers who use western theories to speak into black experiences. The footprints of white authors that I was taught to recognise brought us here, but they are not the ones that I trust to lead us back to the olupale.

It becomes pertinent for me to work with the writings from people who speak into my black experiences. If I follow these footprints, I know I will find myself at the olupale because they hold the same groves that mine do. They make deeper indentations in the soil from the weight that they have had to carry. I heard Audre Lorde as she questioned what happens when the tools created by racist patriarch systems are used to examine the very same system that created them.

“For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support” (Lorde 2017, 91-92).

The masters’ tools had provided me temporary relief from the anguish that can inhabit my black body. It gave me a distance that felt safe at the time, but I realised how it also imprisoned my personhood. The master does not have tools that can open me up enough to show you my true experiences. If I am to go on a journey of uncovering my fragmented
identities, identities that had formed as a way to survive the debilitating nature of whiteness as a structure, then I could not use tools created by whiteness to discover these identities. If I am the point of inquiry, as a black Oshiwambo-Kavango female, then I cannot possibly be removed from the stories, images, and language that were passed onto me by these cultures. Which means the tools that I use for this inquiry cannot come from spaces that have ignored my Kavango-Oshiwambo female existence.

Morrison (1992) notes how literature has had the assumption that knowledge has not been impacted by the 400 years of slavery, how it has been complicit in erasing the experience of the black American from its libraries through having an imagined version of the African and not the real experience of that very African. So, if I am to examine my experiences of racism how authentic is this examination if I am using the glasses of the racist to look at myself? The glasses that only see an imagined versioned of me because they are unable to bring into focus the hurt being that their hands have violated. I have to attend to the call of reading women of colour, whose lives echo the call from my soul. Their writing brings the focus onto me and my experiences without dismissing the violence that I endured.

Pitts (2020) argues that the efforts to exploring ourselves and constructing self-knowledge is collaborative and needs to happen by theorising with other persons of colour as Anzaldúa did in her work. If I am to bring you to the heart of the home, I need to do it using the people that have lived in the home and know the secrets it protects. These are the women whose footprints datema oshela (have lit the candle) to allow us a clear path to the olupale. Following the path to the olupale cannot be done by asking a stranger who has not lived in

71
the house as they too will get lost. Only when I know whose footprints I need to follow to the olupale, can we continue. For the knowledge at the olupale requires a gentle and familiar type of sharing.

3.1.2 Welcoming you meumbo

Identifying my methodology as autoethnography did not feel enough to capture the experience that is this thesis. It felt imperative to invoke the Anzaldúa ontoepistemic calling to use creative processes to heal and restructure the images that helped formed my personal conscious processes (Anzaldúa 2015). Although Autohistoria-teoría could be considered a critical autoethnography, Anzaldúa’s use of self-reflections, blending of her life stories with cultural and political narratives that touch into history, spirituality and mythology distinguishes it from autoethnography (Bhattacharya and Keating 2017). There is a blend of ingredients that was brought forth by Anzaldúa that I had not experienced in writing before but that was familiar to me. It felt familiar because it was similar to how I was initially introduced to knowledge, around the fire and in collaboration with the people and elements around me. Without cognitively knowing the exact imprint of her footprints, I recognised them as the ones to follow because I instinctually knew where they would lead me.

However, my initial entrance in Gloria Anzaldúa’s footprints was not as gentle as I experience her writing to be. It was disruptive, frustrating and world bending, because by entering her world, I was continuing the process of decolonising myself. According to Fanon (2001, 26) “decolonisation never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and
modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history floodlights upon them”. I came into Light in the Darkness – Luz en lo Oscuro by Gloria Anzaldúa as a spectator. I was caught up in my own inessentiality, wanting to only write in English, to draw on the psychological knowledge I had attained, so that I could be understood and validated by the privileged white academic system that I inhabit. I had buried my history and used the privileged white positions to hide my body.

I did not read Anzaldúa wanting to be changed but more as a way to dip my toes in “other” types of writing. That small touch rocked what I had presumed to be the foundation of my knowledge. What I understood from Fanon (2001)’s declaration, is how when we engage with the work of decolonial authors, we are rocked from our safe spaces of complacency into action. It challenges us to act by not continuing epistemic violence but bringing forth writing that would continue to speak into what was before seen as unspeakable. By dipping my toes in Anzaldúa’s footprints, I was modified fundamentally, and this is reflected in my work here. It is not a silent transformation because it uprooted me from places of privilege into spaces that are uncomfortable and risky.

I was disturbed and excited to find a methodology that does not use the language that researchers use (Bhattacharya 2020a). I had not been aware of what the psychological literature obscured about women like me and our experiences. I discovered a methodology that agitated my complacency with whiteness as the ultimate knower of truth and thrust me into the action of decolonisation. One that forced me to take sacred breath and clutch my
chest because I am deeply moved. I became delighted along with Morrison (1992) in how writers have the capacity to take their social grounding and transform them into a language that tells different stories. I had to put down the writing that wrote about me, that used my blackness as decoration without true curiosity of my experience of it and pick up this one. This one that moves the marrow in my bones.

By introducing Autohistoria-teoría, Gloria Anzaldúa introduced a methodology that fused spirituality, personal narratives, autobiographical vignettes with theoretical prose (Anzaldúa 2015). I wanted to not just speak into my experiences but bring them alive in my writing the same way they seem to live in my body. I wanted to bring in elements of Oshiwanbo-Kavango cultures that have been ignored and not seen as an important part of knowledge. Anzaldúa asks us to risk the personal by blurring it with the public (Arfuso 2021). The risk is in the way that we share the personal, for it is not using the tools of a language that is known and readily available but done from our embodied space and allowing our hidden parts to make themselves known in our body. The risk is making ourselves public and known in ways that we had not done before, in speaking into spaces that used to carry our silence.

My personal experience of growing up in the after of apartheid feels extremely personal to me and yet by making my personal experience public in a way that feels authentic to my experiences and captures the cultural and political nuances that I grew up in, I situate myself firmly within society and make my self social and political. This in turn pushes me to plug my personal narrative it into theory, permitting me to work from within my narrative instead of interpreting my narrative. I am not just telling a story, but hopefully producing a
new meaning within the story that is being told. I am not just telling narratives but creating them through the use of language and images (Anzaldúa 2015). Images and metaphors allow me to cross the bridge between theory and the autobiographical vignettes that water my writing.

In her autobiography Taming My Elephant, Amulungu (2016) recounts how due to the apartheid war, she had to learn to grieve alone without the support of her community. She had to tame her elephant because the community was not around to help her chase it away as was the custom in Oshiwambo. I long to call on all the different parts of me that have been dispersed throughout history, my personal one, my cultural one and all the other silenced parts, to help me tame the elephant that I cannot chase away alone. I want to trace my journey to the grief mattress as a mbwiti, to disturb the ghost of apartheid as it continues to haunt me after it’s supposed death. Invoking autohistoria-teoría means writing into the different parts of me, both present and past, the visible ones and the ones that lay tremulous in my unconscious. And so, with the knowledge of what it is that we are looking for meumbo, we reach the olupale.

3.2 Autohistoria-teoría

In most Bantu cultures, stories around the fire were told by the sarungano. The Oshiwambo and Kavango tribes in Namibia, being part of the Bantu tribes of southern Africa, share in the ritual of having a sarungano. A sarungano (translated into English means the owner of the tale) was traditionally a woman who occupied the moral consciousness of her
time. Chinyowa (2001) when speaking from the perspective of the Shona tribe in Zimbabwe, described the sarungano as a woman who was seen as holding old-age wisdom. She was able to gently instil knowledge into the heads of the children, sitting facing her around the fire, by performing to her audience. They were moved by way she transformed the experience of storytelling and used her aesthetic skills to bring the story to life. These were embodied skills as she changed the tone and volume of her voice, the movement of her hands and the flickering emotions on her face to guide her listeners into feeling with her. These skills meant that her audience would feel every pause, tension, joy, anger, sadness and at times song that she weaves into the story. Although Chinyowa (2001) explores storytelling from the Shona tribe’s perspective, the images he evokes and the tale that he uses in his paper are familiar to me as they were similar to the ones around our olupale.

These aesthetic skills are also present in Anzaldúa’s work. She saw herself as a shaman, a spiritual folk healer that journeys to different word to call back the different parts of the selves that have been dismembered (Anzaldúa 2015). She was able to instil knowledge by gently telling her tale, forcing us to examine our own lives by listening to her tale, just like the sarungano shared her ngano. She communicates herself creatively by embedding herself within personal and theoretical texts allowing her to shift positions and speak different languages, emotions and thoughts.

These are the aesthetics that I found in her methodology of Autohistoria-teoría which allowed me to engage with the metaphor of the olupale as a space for creating and reflecting on knowledge. In using Autohistoria-teoría, I allow my personal narrative to connect to
broader theoretical frameworks. I achieve this by bringing in my autobiographical vignettes and fusing them with cultural and theoretical context, thus following in Anzaldúa (2015)’s creation of a hybrid genre that carries both personal narratives and theoretical discourse. This enables me to use theory to construct my narrative and reflect on how my identities have been impacted by cultural and historical factors. And as I employ psychological theory to analyse the cultural contexts that influenced my identity, I am also able to use my personal experiences to challenge the same theories. Thus, making this a process of creation and pulling apart as I use personal narratives, theory and language to create a new mestiza which Anzaldúa (1987) described to be a space of resistance and transformation. Through Autohistoria-teoría I am able to connect to the magic that exists at the olupale.

Autohistoria-teoría engages magical thinking that transports me back to the olupale where I am able to encounter ndimba and simbugu again. The magical that Anzaldúa refers to in her work is different from the literal translation that implies the supernatural. Instead, it refers to magic in a metaphorical sense, that speaks into the powerful and transformative aspects of the personal and cultural identities as they weave together to form a new space of nepantla (Arfuso 2021). She speaks into the magic that goes into transformation, which transports me to how my grandmother was able to transform through stories. By taking the perspective of ndimba whilst using her own knowledge and experiences, she created a ngano that taught me valuable lessons about human existence. This was a spiritual endeavour and by invoking autohistoria-teoría, I invoke my ancestral culture of embodying the spiritual.
Anzaldúa made a distinction between the spiritual and religion (Pitts 2020). She described the spiritual as a different way of knowing that opens up our perceptions as we become more aware of our different selves and their interconnectedness to the world around us (Anzaldúa 2015). Sitting around the fire, I was able to inhabit the magical world with my family aligning with Anzaldúa’s understanding of imagination not being an altered state of mind but another type of reality. The harsh reality of the outside world where apartheid had left ruins of trauma and dismemberment was made bearable by the warmth of the fire. We found a bridge between the worlds we inhabited when my grandmother spoke in her broken Oshiwambo that was laced with Kavango words, creating a language that only my family understood. Here we were able to put to use the languages of the external worlds and magically transform them into the world of animals and their kingdom. It felt transformative to be sitting around the fire and this magic is alive in Anzaldúa’s writing.

It is through this use of the spiritual and staying in touch with the metaphors and images that I bring Anzaldúa’s work to the olupale. Although I hold the awareness of her Chicana identity and my Oshiwambo-Kavango one, we meet in our use of the personal and spiritual to draw you to the olupale. Anzaldúa (2015)’s process of following images and metaphors to speak into personal stories of trauma and fragmentation connects me to the Oshiwambo-Kavango rituals and experiences of sharing trauma around the fireplace. Trauma shared in this way allows for spiritual knowledge to resurface, thus enabling the process of healing to begin.
I bring her here not to appropriate her work and her use of spirituality but to borrow, because as she states when speaking into the search for spiritual knowledge, “some things are worth ‘borrowing’” (Keating 2009, 289). In her interviews with AnaLouise Keating (2009), Anzaldúa expressed how nepantleras, those who seek spiritual and inner knowledges, are able to cross borders and work from different locations. As a nepantleras herself, she never intended for her work to be limited to one location, to be kept within certain borders but allowed her readers to expand on her work, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. She gave permission for her work to aid in the quest for our own spiritual and inner knowledges.

Although I do not bring the stories of ndimba and simbungu here, there is still a spirituality to my work because of how I choose to enter this space. By using the storytelling techniques from the olupale to construct my narrative, I open myself to the possibilities of there being more to the selves that I bring here, and I allow them to interconnect to the world around me. I slowly shed the shame put on spiritual vocabulary and storytelling and lean into the spiritual need to participate in life through the process of sharing experiences. By looking at this thesis as my attempts at going back to the olupale, I bring forth the magical thinking into this thesis through my use of metaphors. Anzaldúa (2015) referred to metaphors as allies, spiritual and transformational aspects of the unconscious that are seeking entrance into our conscious realm. The process of coyolxauhqui requires me to search for new metaphors that would tell me what I need to know.

Arfuso (2021) in her paper, stated that translating the magical whispering into academic writing is a difficult task. I experience this difficulty when I am unable to write at
times, when my body closes up and I cannot seem to call on one voice to be present with me in my writing. In this moment I feel disempowered and disconnected from the internal resources that could mobilise me, a stage in Anzaldúa (2015)’s understanding of shifting, of attaining conocimiento (knowledge) that guides your path. And so, I choose to look at this silent voice as part of the process, I allow the silent voice to speak as it warns me of the turmoil it hid for my protection.

When describing defence mechanisms to clients, I always refer to them as protectors, protectors that were unconsciously built in the face of harm. They require a gentle coaxing to the side to allow us to see the wounded self and not a forceful shove to get them to step aside. That is how I am choosing to look at the silent voice that seems to appear in my body and numbs me. It is a natural response that I need to connect with so it can allow me passage to the other voices that want to speak but are afraid. In this silence I attend to the all the symbols in the story and allow them to speak through me (Anzaldúa 2015). There is a risk to speaking, for sure, but there is also a freedom that is enacted by the voice when it speaks (Cavarero 2005) and I need to learn to embrace this freedom. I need to honour the process that my body has taken, so that I can eventually experience this freedom.

Similar to Kamdar (2021), I choose to construct this thesis as I would therapy by not coming in with a certain knowledge but listening to what is revealed as I go along. I go into this blindly as I stumble my way through theory and experience. Because when we remember trauma, it is never done clear but fragmented and we have to piece these together as we go (Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 2007). The revealing of these fragmented identities
is not done chronologically but more keeping in touch with what is present within me and what voice is asking to be revealed in the moment. Nonetheless, there is still an intentionality in what is revealed. According to (Anzaldúa 2015) healing not only requires recognition and acknowledgement of la herida (wounding) but also requires us to be intentional. This would allow us to fall into the wound as we allow the rupture and fragmentation to lead the dialogue. I am intentional in how I enter this journey of coyolxauhqui and allow each voice to reveal it’s wounding.

### 3.2.1 Language in my Autohistoria-teoría

“Your English is good!” says the white woman after I explain my thesis to her, and I feel my heart sink. For years, I thought this was a compliment and my chest would puff out in pride and my face light up in a smile. Forgetting the stroke that I suffer every time I have to fully converse in Rukwangali and the fact that I barely speak Oshiwambo. Even though I spent the first twenty years of my life in Namibia. But this day, after reading Anzaldúa, I feel angry and guilty at the same time. I do not feel the same pride that follows being praised for speaking a language that seem to elevate my status amongst people. I had spent 5 minutes explaining the concept of my decolonial thesis to her and all she seems fascinated by is that me, a black African woman, can speak “good” English. “Yeah well, colonisation” I reply angrily, and she immediately sits up and gives me that white woman smile, the one that doesn’t show teeth. I frown and look down as we sit there uncomfortably, her with her white guilt and me struggling to not make things okay by attempting dissipate her guilt by dismissing the moment and changing the topic. My usual response to white guilt……..

As discussed before, according to the Oshiwambo understanding of mbwiti, a mbwiti is someone whose family is culturally Oshiwambo but has, through engagement with other cultures, incorporated other (new) cultural ways of being into their day-to-day engagement, this includes language (Madejski, Amboto, and Shangheta 2017). I have never been formally
educated in Oshiwambo or Rukwangali, my education has always been in English and Afrikaans. And just as I devoured the stories my grandmother told me around the fire, I soon learned to devour the written word as I slowly stopped hearing her voice and in the process mine. When we read, we bring the words into our body, allowing them to change us (Keating 2015). I eventually learned to reject Afrikaans as the language of my oppressors but retained my English, because English is good and is a demonstration of how smart I can be as a mbwiti.

In her book Coconut, Kapona Matlwa cleverly interrogates the ways in which language is used as capital in post-apartheid South Africa (Scott 2012). Because it is not just that you can speak English but how well you speak it, your accent determines how seriously you are taken. Speaking English like the white man became the standard for how close you were to whiteness (Spencer 2009). So, when a white woman tells me that I speak English well, the expectation is that I beam with pride because I have accomplished an assimilation into whiteness. I am aware that this is the lingering effects of the British empire filtering down from South Africa into Namibia. Language is what was used to induce spiritual subjugation (Thiong’o 1981). I learned to silence my Oshiwambo-Kavango voices, their stories and their trauma. I carried hints of it in my accent, enough to discern that English was not my first language but not enough to indicate what was.

Language has always been tied to the voices that I have carried with me. Language determined my belonging to tribe and race and made it easier to integrate into the different roles I occupied within my myriad cultural communities. Keating (2015) states how language lives and exists only partially within our control as it exceeds us. Language was determined
before my existence however how I engaged with it defined me in ways I was not aware it would. Since it is a huge contributor to the meaning making process and helps to shape our reality (Keating 2015), it shaped the voices that I developed both vocally and culturally. My cultural voice has always been in question because of the languages that I speak or do not speak. In this thesis I explore the ways in which language became entangled deeply with my identities and how at times, it was used to exclude me from social rituals.

“The man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence, the world expressed and implied by this language” (Fanon 1986, 2). Different languages offer access to different spaces and some of these are privileged spaces. And so here I explore the ways in which I learned to silent certain identities due to the languages they spoke and how I learned to revere others as I attempted to find a sense of belonging. What I found most fascinating about Anzaldúa’s work, is her ability to write in the language that was present as she wrote. I reflect on the times when I knew a word or phrase in Oshiwambo or Kavango but struggled to find the equivalent in English or vice-versa. In her work, Anzaldúa writes in whatever language corresponds to what she is in touch with in her work, often introducing concepts in different languages. Finding this writing allowed me a freedom to be present within my work and not stand on the outside looking for an accurate interpretation. I am able to work from the different social languages that I have acquired as I incorporate them into this academic writing.

Nahwilire (I am inside) and I feel at home within this work. Moments like the one above, experiences with white women, water my thirst for more Autohistoria-teoría
literature, as I continue to find ways to express myself in the language that is present for me. I slowly start to participate in the process of recognising myself as someone who is part of a dialogue, (Kamdar 2021) instead of feeling exiled from it as I often have. I slowly start to celebrate my difference by exploring language as part of my decolonial work. I learn to write in ways that have been missing from most of literal history, I learn to “write books I want to read” (Kamdar 2021, 26). I bracket English the same way I learned to bracket Rukwangali and Oshiwambo, I add my tribal language’s phrases to my Word dictionary, as I continue to write into my fragmentation.

I am aware that language has its limits where understanding is lost in translation. I toy with this limit as I engage in what Simpson (2007) referred to as the “collective limit” that is often present in research on indigenous people. In her research with indigenous tribes in Canada she explored what they considered alternate logics, logics that are omitted in the archives of the country. Through the process she discovered a refusal in the ethnographic spaces where the people researched felt they had reached a limit on what they could share. This limit is present in what is shared but also most importantly, what is not shared (King 2017). There is an intrinsic understanding of what it would mean to voice something that might be known by some and is elusive to others. I choose to reach this limit linguistically with the awareness that my Oshiwambo and Kavango voices should only take me so far, any further might cause harm to the same spaces I am attempting to speak from. There is a lot in what I share linguistically by bringing different cultural voices here, but also what I refuse to translate as it speaks into rituals that can only be experienced physically around the olupale.
You will notice me writing more in English in most parts, these are the parts that seem to struggle to bring in my Oshiwambo-Kavango voices, as they take a back seat to the more pervasive English language that has entrenched me in this educational institution. They speak into the fragmentation of my cultural memory. I learn to examine these oppressed parts of me that I repressed to ensure my survival in a colonised western world. This examination allows new narratives to emerge individually and collectively as I find myself sitting in the uncomfortable nepantla. This sharing of knowledge is also present in how and where I choose to include you in my ngano as well as keep you separate. And even though you are a welcomed guest standing kevero lyo sinyanga, I am still wary of you and what your presence brings to this sacred space. I welcome you into this piece of writing, but I am aware of where we are and how much you can truly feel with me.

### 3.2.2 Meeting you at the olupale

Payife otwafika kolupale (we have arrived at the olupale). The olupale is a magical place, it is where the homeland accepts you. In the Oshiwambo traditions, if you are visiting a new land, you must first eat the soil at the olupale to ensure that the land accepts you and prevents you from getting ill. So, to prevent you from getting ill I must give you a bit of the soil before I tell you my ngano. I am aware that you are not from this land and there is a high chance that your body might reject this soil, this ngano (tale). Morrison (1992) asks that writers think of their readers, think of the ways in which our words impact them, causes them to draw breath and settle into their bodies. I am thinking of you as I offer you a bit of soil to prepare your body to spend some time at the olupale.
However, I am aware of my wariness of you as my reader. For I know that while I am giving an account of myself to you, while I am establishing a relationship with myself and my research, I carry an awareness of your existence as I write. Because you have not existed around the olupale before. Instead, the “you” exists within the scene of a western institution that is in direct conflict with the Oshiwambo-Kavango in me and the ways in which we make sense of knowing. I note how I have placed the “you” within an academic institution with roots in colonialism and the impact that has on how I address this thesis.

“What is produced in discourse often confounds the intentional aims of speaking. The “you” is variable and imaginary at the same time as it is bounded, recalcitrant and stubbornly there” (Butler 2005, 51). What comes out when I speak is not what initially thought it would be and that is because of the nature of thesis as well as the “you” that is present in this moment with me. The you may be imaginary, but it is still implicated in the ways in which I speak, write, question, and explore because I am cognisant of the place where this writing is taking place.

The you disturbs my soul for you have never been this curious about me before. I am aware of the doubts that creep into my head as I reveal myself to you. Taylor (2023) sees the self-doubt and self-criticism that we experience when we bring in a different way of relating to knowledge as the norm in this world, given that knowledge has been authorised to look a certain way. This awareness of you is present in my need to try and bring a certain type of theory and knowing into this writing. “What makes this a counselling and psychotherapy
thesis?” is the question that I think you would ask. Without realising, without waiting for you to utter the words, I answer as I try to force Melanie Klein into a postcolonial space. I speak of projective identification and internalised projections. Thus, placing counselling and psychotherapy in existing western literature and discounting the knowing that I desperately want to discover in this research. The writing that welcomed you to the olupale is lost in my attempts to cater to you.

I fall into the trap of wanting to relate to the white scholar’s very personal, existential and ethical questions as an attempt at demonstrating my theoretical knowledge (King 2017). For a moment I forget Anzaldúa as I once again turn to whiteness to make sense of me. “Where is Anzaldúa here?” asked my supervisor, gently drawing me back to the olupale. I had drifted away once again and was lost meumbo trying to find a way to the brick house with electricity, I needed to find my way back to the olupale. I realise that I do not know how to speak at the olupale, I have only ever listened and now as I speak, I find myself drifting away, hoping my voice is not heard.

So how do I prepare you for what is to come when I find myself afraid of you at times? Lorde (2017) then urges us to reach deep within and confront the terror and loathing that live within us, so that we can allow the personal to become our political and illuminate the path forward. The fact that I recognised you as welcomed guest means that I am ready to show you the heart of the home, but that does not mean I do not fear you as an outsider. I have to honestly face my feelings of who I am as well as who you are as we arrive at the olupale.
I have to learn to partake in what King (2017) referred to as decolonial refusal and refuse to play by the rules. She asks us to consider how theory can hide its own violence when circulated as the norm without considering its development. Theory and its development often dismiss indigenous epistemological thinking. The fragmentation endured by those who bring their stories to the olupale is psychological and needs to be named as such without having to find an existing theoretical justification. I was trying to make myself fit into existing theory instead of wondering how or if it fit me.

And so even as I sit here in fear of what you might say in response to my ngano, I once again am called to answer Lorde (2017)’ when she urges me to reach inside myself and touch the terror and loathing that exists within me, that was fostered by experiences of being perceived as different. Because only then would I allow my choices (the choice of what I reveal here) to be illuminated by the personal that I am willingly attempting to make political.

3.2.3  

\textit{Whose ngano is told at the olupale.}

However, even as I recognise the you in this research, I am also aware that it is I who speaks, and the weight of my voice is different from the ones who first sat at the olupale. As my voice merges my ngano with those who have touched and been touched by me, it reveals how we are all impacted by what I choose to reveal here at the olupale. I am aware of the ways in which the how and where that I speak from has an impact on the type of knowledge that is created here. I recognise what it means to speak at the olupale and being careful about who I am speaking for.
Telling stories at the olupale was always a communal endeavour where we call and are called upon by the sarungano. She is not alone in her telling and retelling of stories. Around the fire, my grandmother would look to the other elders to corroborate her ngano. My parents who had heard the tales of ndimba na kavange or lived through the apartheid experiences with her, would nod and, at times when she stumbled, add a word or two. This way it became a communal story and not one told from the outside. I recognise that I am alone in my writing corner and do not have someone to call to, to validate the ngano I bring. Smith (2021)'s book on decolonising methodologies touches on the concept of the insider vs outsider researcher. And although the insider researcher may be part of the community, they are still expected to be as humble, respective and reflexive in their research as the outsider researcher (Smith 2021).

Lumsden, Bradford, and Goode (2019) described reflexivity as an uncomfortable process that forces us into the awareness of how we are affected and affect our society and everything around us. Engaging in this research has profoundly affected me and in extension affected my relationship with my community and family. I am aware I am bringing not just my tale but moments that passed between my mother and I, and she is not here to corroborate or bring her version of it. I feel the weight of that as I grapple with issues of ethics and I what I can and cannot reveal. Ellis (2007) speaks into relational ethics and the impact of writing about loved ones who are not around to give their consent. She grapples with the same questions in her writing of her deceased partner, that I do as sit and write about my parents and our history. I am plagued by questions of how my mother would feel knowing that I
invited people into our home, that I guided them into the rugumbo and made space for them at our olupale.

And here I lean into Smith (2021)’s indigenous projects when engaging in research in indigenous communities. I will not be exploring all 25 of these projects in this section but instead draw on some of them to guide me as I go about revealing intimate moments and experiences. I draw on her use of testimony as I claim this thesis to be my testimonial, a claiming of my story. Smith (2021) declares that there is a formality that is present in testimonials as there is an implication of truth being told. And truth here is not seen as a universal truth that exists out there but a subjective and personal one that allows my fragmented identities to be given a space to speak. And even though my ngano touches on moments with family and community, it is still my ngano that I bring here and that is what is declared in my testimonial.

According to Van Der Kolk (2014), speaking into trauma is not always welcomed by the family or communities. Families and communities can often reject members who speak into the trauma endured. When I had established what my thesis would be exploring, I decided to have an honest conversation with my siblings about my thesis and what I would be “digging up”. The ones that did respond did so with the same spirit of sitting around the olupale. We reminisced on moments experienced meumbo and how we each had subjective experiences of our parents and community. What was mutually acknowledged was the different ways in which we learned to survive.
Smith (2021) explores celebrating survival as one of the projects. Even though this thesis is an exploration of the ways in which I learned to survive post-apartheid Namibia and the impact whiteness has had on my experiences, there is still a celebration of my survival and in extension my parents’ survival. Tying this into the projects of connecting and love, I acknowledge the love that my parents had for me and all that they did to ensure their survival to extend it to mine. It is from a place of love that I connect their past and how they survived it to acknowledging the impact of that way of survival has had on me and my way of being.

However, I still hold a mental space for the ones that did not consent to my ngano, the ones who will be impacted by my ngano as it brings up painful moments of survival they did not choose to relive. I hold space for my parents, siblings and community as I continue practising the “collective limit” in what I chose to explore here. It is my ngano being told, but the telling of this ngano is being told from an academic institution that exposes stories, ways of knowing and being, to the outside world in a way that the olupale never did. This makes the way I go about understanding this knowledge important as I stay curious with what will be revealed.

3.2.4 The magic of existing within unknown knowledges

As briefly discussed before, Ponterotto (2005) described how epistemology in research explores the relationship between the researcher and their research and how they go about their research while ontology has to do with the nature of being within the research. More specifically “What is the form and nature of reality, and what can be known about that
reality?” (Ponterotto 2005, 130), and what is the relationship between that reality and me. I wanted to leave this as open as possible, in a way acting into my mbwitness of not feeling grounded but floating from one ideology to the next to ensure my continued existence.

Having spent majority of my life sitting on the edges of different cultures, unable to fully claim one as my own, I find it hard to have a voice and say this is where I am. I stand at the olupale not knowing what my voice sounds like and how to project it loud it enough for you to hear me. I desperately want to write from a position, but I find myself feeling like an observer even in my own narrative. I find myself wanting to choose silence once again because it is familiar and safe. I do not want to confront the hurt cause by whiteness and instead find myself wanting to use the masters’ tools once again to speak to you.

I struggled to declare this as a decolonial thesis as I did not know where I would weave the psychodynamic theories that I loved within the thesis. I did not want to confront the colonising knowledge that lays within the theories that I had used to make sense of myself. I did not want to confront the impact that whiteness had on what I considered to be knowledge. I am aware this was my attempt to protect what DiAngelo (2018) refers to as white fragility. She defined white fragility as the inability to sit comfortability with confronting whiteness. In her book, she speaks into how the advantages afforded those who had acquired whiteness either inherently or through social and economic means, makes it hard for them to acknowledge the oppressive nature of whiteness. Menakem (2021) explores this further as he spoke into the ways in which he, as a black man, had learned to protect white fragility. The ways in which black people have learned to shrink their voices to avoid disrupting the status
quo. I learned to maintain the fragility of whiteness by keeping quiet and taking on someone else’s knowledge as mine, to ensure my survival. Acknowledging this thesis as decolonial felt threatening to my survival in academia.

However, having started the journey of unearthing whiteness within my way of relating, I had to follow the footsteps of Kakali Bhattacharya and find new ways to unlearned privileged knowledge (Bhattacharya 2019). Because as Anzaldúa states, the very knowledge that exposes our fears can also help to heal them (Keating 2009). Through this autohistoria I am attempting to go back to the moments where colonial oppression felt too psychically violent, causing me to give in to whiteness as a way to survive. I embodied this whiteness to a point where when I encountered the grief mattress, the people and rituals around me felt strange and uncivilised. Anzaldúa refers to this as adopting a white frame of reference to a point where there is no “other” but the other is in me and exists in my head (Keating 2009). The white other lives inside of me and constantly influencing my engagement with day-to-day experiences, influences the ways in which I wanted to define knowledge in this thesis.

I am cognisant of the tension that exists as I start the process of refusing to place myself within academically approved labels. This tension is expected as I start challenging myself and shifting from what Anzaldúa (2015) referred to as the ignorance that kept me from holding myself accountable, to choosing to confer with decolonial writers in attempt to confront the production of colonial knowledge. In her paper, Bhattacharya (2020b) rejects labels and instead positions herself within de/colonial and critical frameworks to “delineate the pervasiveness and entanglement of whiteness, colonialism and western superiority..”. As
I speak into whiteness and the destructive nature that it had on my understanding of knowledge, I use Autohistoria-teoría and the metaphor of sitting at the olupale. This locates knowledge outside of privileged spaces in academia and engages in King (2017)’s urge to refuse colonial ways of knowledge making. Bhattacharya (2019) acknowledged how this type of refusal is within itself a position and thus places me firmly within decolonial ways of understanding and relating to knowledge.

Taylor (2023) referred to this type of process as unruly. She defines being unruly as different ways of seeing, sensing, knowing and being. I do not want to present to you, knowledge in a manner that you are accustomed to. I do not want to have a debate about different western theories and how they apply here, because thinking of doing it puts me back into that box where I am trapped in my own personhood (Chawla and Rodriguez 2008). A place where I feel forced to talk about myself and not able to show you the transformation is me. Through this thesis, I start coming into awareness of the ways in which colonial violence has been committed onto me and the ways in which I have perpetuated this violence, and this can only be done by exploring unruly knowledges that do not cater to that violence.

Utilising Autohistoria-teoría as a methodology for this research allows me to explore this violence in a way that speaks to all the fragmented parts of me and not just the accepted ones, the ones that formed to survive whiteness. I am going beyond acknowledging and exploring my quietened voices to speaking from the voices of the identities that coexist within me as a post-apartheid subject. What I know about my formation, identities, experience and voices as a mbwiti, a subject within the apartheid and post-apartheid condition is being
revealed through this thesis, through my engagement with it. This way of relating within knowledge creation is the magical that is present in Anzaldúa’s Autohistoria-teoría. By allowing myself to converse with my stories and languages, the metaphors and images invoked as I engage with the work, I participate in Anzaldúa’s interpretation of magic. And as she invites me to open an epistemological-ontological dialogues between myself and my words (Anzaldúa 2015), I allow myself to consider the process of getting to know myself as a valid way of generating knowledge.

Cavarero (2000) in exploring how we narrate ourselves insists that knowing comes after a story is told, not before or during because stories, like life, are unpredictable and uncontrollable. The story changes not just based on our current experience but depending on who was there when the events unfolded and who it is being told to. The story is changed by what is revealed and what is hidden. The story changes according to who and how it was lived. I am cognisant that I am not looking for a singular truth, a single knowing of reality, a unified voice to emerge or to be revealed at the end. As Anzaldúa (2015) argues it is not the product that is important, but the process that we go through. Through autohistoria, I am invited to think of myself as an artist that is painting knowledge, sculpting stories that allow the voyeur a glimpse into my soul.

According to Bhattacharya (2019) when we enter decolonial research spaces, we must surrender our will to know and instead give into the sacred nature of allowing ourselves to be connected to what we are enquiring into. What I want is to allow the process of making sense of the identified voices that are fragmented within me be revealed through this research and
thus knowing is not something that can happen before. “Knowing is not an activity that we make to represent a world as if the researcher and the researched were already defined and then would just interact. Instead, we can only know through being from within a world and our practices of knowing are also producing this very world— including our subjectivities.” (Serra Undurraga 2020, 41). We will not know what is talked about at the olupale until we sit down and start speaking.

Anzaldúa described humans as having different modes of consciousness, the rational and reasoning mode that is connected to the external world and then the other modes that are connected to fantastical, imaginary worlds (Keating 2009). The rational reasoning mode takes me away from the olupale as I think of ways to navigate through meumbo. I have noticed my tendency to engage the first when I try and bring forth theory into my writing, but I am aware of the deep need in me to invoke the later, to relate more to myself than the cognitive theory. The latter is what keeps me at the olupale but the first is what enables me to communicate it to you.

And here the you becomes explicit again as it demands that I follow certain rules so that I can attain my degree. The you becomes implicated in my use of words and language as I follow western ways of validating knowledge. The you adds structures to my unruly knowledge and even as I attempt to rebel, the you demands my surrender to ensure my academic survival. The you reminds me that we are not around the olupale and that I must attend to academic conventions to use written words, mostly English words, instead of speaking around the fire. I have to grapple with holding space for the you whilst allowing
myself to be unruly. I have to acknowledge how the you exist within me as I once again fold into whiteness, hopefully this time, in a way that does not erase my blackness. This existence of you within me allows me to engage with psychodynamic theory, not to define my experience, but to help me expand on the metaphors that are revealed within me.

“Your goal is to cultivate an acute awareness of processes at work in your own psyche, and to create symbols and patterns of its operations. The problem is that a process is arrested when you stop to watch it. Another problem is that not only do you want to make the fleeting process known; you want to create a virtual reality of the experience so that the reader goes through it as well. And you have only words to do it.” (Anzaldúa 2015, 95)

As I write this, I wish we were literally seated around the olupale because only then can you fully experience the ways in which Oshiwambo-Kavango knowledge is created and how it permeates into our being. You cannot see the smile or frown on my face, hear me shout in anger or joy as my emotions go up and down with the ngano. All I have are words, words that are erased and rewritten, that change and remain the same. Words that are limited by what I can express and cannot always fully capture what I feel. Words that at time seem to pierce my soul with chaos and others that hold the logic that is reflected in my external world, words that are capable of holding the theory I fear and embrace. And so just like with Anzaldúa (2015), language becomes an important part of my onto-epistemology as I carefully choose words, phrases and metaphors to shift reality.

For Anzaldúa, knowing and being are intertwined and considered to be two sides of the same coin (Anzaldúa 2015). By invoking autohistoria in this research, my knowledge is
interwined with my way of being. I embody and intertwine the knowledge that exists within my body and my mind. I honour the knowledge that existed in my parents, my grandparents and was silently passed through bodies and minds at the olupale. I defy the rules by refusing to separate my literature from my story and instead interweave the two and allow them to story me. And borrowing from Kamdar (2021), I story myself into my research. This weaving of body and mind incites a spirituality into my work that is often overlooked in western theory. Through this work, I attempt to bring spirituality back in my being by attempting to connect to all the fragmented voices and allowing them to connect to you.

And now that I have prepared you for what is to come, now that I have given you a bit of soil so that you can adapt to our ways of being around the fire, I ask you to join me in the calling back of my fragmented selves. With the spirit of my ancestors entering your mind, I ask you to tambura as I begin the process of revealing to you my different identities. I ask to you bear witness as I attend to the different places where the spirit of whiteness, culture and gender ideology have entered my body and influenced my mind. I ask you to be patient and curious with me as I look at the woundings these spirits have left ... I ask you to tambura.
Chapter Four: Fragmented Post-Apartheid Identities.

Tambureninge......
................ Tambu
Yisinke natu hambwira memanya alyo ereva lyeli
................ Yisinke natu rorokera kupura vantu azo mbangi zezi (Why do we ask random people when we have a witness here)

The fragmentation of voices

I look at the waves in shock and watch as the water comes closer and closer. I can feel the hard and cold sand on my back. I lay there, shocked and confused. I do not know how I got here.... I look back to where I was playing earlier, half of the house I built with the little boy has been washed away by the waves. Somehow, I went from playing with him to laying on my back, slowly being dragged towards kefuta (ocean). ...I look up to where he is, on his mother’s shoulder as she walks away shouting. He waves at me, and I wave back.... I look to where my family is. I had wandered off ... away from where they were. I do not know how or why I had wandered off, only that a few moments ago I was silently building houses with the little boy. .... And now I am laying soaked in the cold water, waiting for the efuta (ocean) to swallow me, carry me further away. I flinch as I hear another crash of water against sand and look back kefuta (ocean). The water rushes towards me and hits my body, slowly encompassing all of me in as it works to drag me in to the depth of mefuta.... I am paralysed with fear, the efuta is slowly trying to take me away.... And then... I am up in the air and on my brother’s shoulders. He carries me back to my family and away from the terrifyingly angry efuta, he saved me.

Dangarembga (2023, 3) starts her book on being black and female by stating: “I am an existential refugee. I have been in flight since I left the womb, and probably before, given the circumstances I was born into and the effect of these circumstance on my prenatal environment”. This is a statement that resonates deeply with my experience of being born in post-apartheid Namibia. Being an existential refugee has meant that due to the circumstances
that I was born into (a country that was dismembered by a deeply traumatising war), I had to learn to speak differently to and from each dismembered identity. I had to embody different voices that would allow me to speak and be heard. Speaking into and from this refugee status, allowing these voices to emerge naturally in this work has been taxing.

I seem to be very good at writing about what I want to write about and how to go about writing it but struggle to get into the processes of calling back the lost pieces of me. I write and rewrite paragraphs as I struggle to find a way into this part of the thesis. How do I call back those pieces when their very existence is terrifying to me? How do I write into the different fragmentations that exist as a result of wounding. Perhaps the question is more what will they reveal? Is that what I fear, what will be revealed and how they sound? Anzaldúa (2015) states that struggling with a story is a bodily experience. I feel my whole body going numb when I ask this question. What will be revealed that has been hidden? Is that the purpose of this, to reveal what has been hidden? Was it purposefully hidden, buried and if so, what is more terrifying? The revealing of it or the process of the reveal?

The oldest known religious practice is where the nagual (shaman) travels to the underworld and calls upon the lost spirits to bring them back up into the communities (Anzaldúa 2015). I want to be able to travel into my inner world and call back those pieces. And yet as I attempt to call them back, I am flooded by memories, woundings of me as a black child, teenager, woman in this world and they stop me, numb me. Is this the revealing then? Is this what calling them back feels like? I do not know how to do this, to call these parts of me back here. I am not a shaman, but I do have a rungano (story) that must be shared.
Memories like the one above numbs me as I think about the rage that drove a woman, a white woman, a mother to push a black child for playing with her white child and storming off not caring if she drowned.

The hatred for me because I am black creates a deep sadness and anger within me that I dared not think about it. However, that lack of thinking sits uncomfortably within me as I am constantly challenged by the different ways in which as Lorde (2017) put it, my silence has not protected me. It feels imperative to then bring these parts to the fore, to explore the different ways I have learned to be loud or to be silent in the world. The different voices that have been silenced and the ones that have been allowed to speak. This silencing speaks into the identity of the born free that I will exploring later, however, the silencing allowed for the other voices to emerge. All of these different identities, speaking into different voices created a lack of “true belonging” for me, something which I always seem to crave.

My identity as a Namibian had to take on different voices that reflected the social dismemberment of the war. They speak into norms that have been in existence before my emergence into the world. As much as I wish otherwise, I am not separate from these and as Butler so aptly put it “I do not arrive in the world separate from a set of norms that are lying in wait for me, already orchestrating my gender, race, and status, working on me, even as a pure potential, prior to my first wail”. (Butler 2015, 6). I came into the world unaware of the norms that were pressed upon me, that preceded me as I was thrust into their vortex, allowing them to define who I needed to be.
These norms have required different identities, a different voice each time, as I learn to be heard or accept being silenced. The development of these voices seemed to at times appear naturally while other times they were forged through painful experiences that leave a huge hole that I work to patch up. Nonetheless, they seem to have sophistically learned to function together to maintain an equilibrium that ensures survival. The silencing of some voices enables others to speak making it look effortlessly while hiding the true dismemberment present within each voice.

When I think back to that moment at the beach, a lot of the different fragmentations that I hope to explore in this thesis already begin to emerge. Although I do not remember a lot of what happened before that moment, something drew me to that white boy. Whether we were playing together as a family or seated quietly observing the roaring ocean, I wandered off from my family to play with a strange little white boy. I remember playing silently with the boy as we did not have a mutual language at that point. This silence exists when I encounter language as a way to relate to someone. The silence speaks into the numbing that is caused by my oscillation between Oshiwambo and Kavango identities.

Then there is the aspiration for whiteness. Here I find myself pausing and hesitant to mention the desire for whiteness even at such an early age. At that point, I did not have any white friends however, the impact of whiteness was already embedded in my body. Whiteness as being better was deeply rooted in me as I finally got to engage with some aspects of the past that my family had lived without me. I tried to find out if years before that moment that beach had been inaccessible to black people, however, I was not able to find
any information on it. This was an attempt to justify the woman’s actions, perhaps if her hatred of me was located in the law and not in her, it would be tolerable. I am aware how I seem to want to separate and protect her humanity even as she ignored mine.

The white woman pushing me speaks into my physical belonging that had been questioned before my birth. My black body was deemed not fit to occupy the same space as white bodies. The whole premise of apartheid was separation of white and black bodies because black bodies were considered to be less than, almost dirty, negating their humanness (Fanon 1986). This negating brings forth a new voice that attempts to cover itself in whiteness to ensure its existence. I feel this strongly when I think about what happened on that beach.

She pushed me towards the bellowing ocean not caring if I would drown and yet as I laid at the edges of the ocean, my body cold, numb and confused I still looked back and waved at the little white boy. In that moment I seemed to negate the experiences of suffering I was going through, that my body was being subjected to and looked once again to whiteness, seeking comfort. My body knew of being silenced, I speculate, long before this moment. I learned to quieten in the presence of whiteness because I knew the consequences of speaking up, my parents had suffered it.

And so, when my brother picked me up and returned me back to the family, I did not speak about what the white woman had done. Whereas I was not able to process it consciously, I had experienced an element of what my family had lived through before the end of apartheid and perhaps even after. I had experienced hatred because of the colour of
my skin. What remained with me of that event was the fact that my brother rescued me, because the normalisation of being hated for my skin was still present within my bones even if it was outside of my conscious awareness.

Instead of being angry with the white woman, I worshiped my brother, I worshiped him the same way we honour the freedom fighters whose blood is said to water our freedom. The traumatic experience, the actual lived experience is repressed as we cling to the experience of being saved. The dismembering of a black child when their skin colour determines their ability to play with other children is not spoken of. This describes the phenomena of amnesia that Ghandi (2019) described to happen after a colonising event. We repress the trauma as we hope for a “better” future.

The struggle with trauma is that it fragments the memories of its victims in turn creating separate identities to allow the victim a chance to function as a whole (Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 2007). I returned to my family wet, dismembered having lost something of myself at the edges of the water. However, I also learned to lean into the silencing as my body experienced a numbing that made it difficult for me to move from the ocean. That moment at the edges of the ocean revealed something that was overshadowed by Namibia’s independence. So here we call upon the forgotten but still alive identities that emerged after apartheid. The ones that silently speak into my body and guide my being in different spaces.
4.1 The lost One - Oshiwambo vs Kavango

“Moro nane” (Good morning mom) I say to a friend of my mom’s as I come to stand next to her in the supermarket. I came back from getting whatever it is my mom sent me to get in another isle to find my mom standing with her.

“Moro Taati” she replies.

“Mwararapo?” (How did you sleep). I start the usual greeting ritual.

“Nan, nyame okukunda Taati” (Is it me you are greeting Taati). She asks puzzled, almost horrified.

“Nan, mbili nane” (oh gosh, Sorry mom) I apologise immediately and look down waiting for her to greet me instead.

“Ogu gazumbana” (This one is lost). My mother jokingly explains away my mishap.

Vail (1989) explores the origins of tribalism in Southern Africa by first looking at the existing interpretation of what makes tribalism so prominent in African Nations. The most popular reasoning for the segregation amongst tribes explored into colonisation and the unequal distribution of resources during the colonialism era. The distrust created by pitting one tribe against the other created division that also created deeper in-group identification amongst the tribal groups. Vail (1989) states that to gain a deeper understanding of this, it is important to look at history of the formed tribe and how they interacted before and after colonialism. That feels too tasking for this thesis as going into a historical exploration of the Oshiwambo and Kavango tribes would make this a different thesis.

What I am interested in exploring here is my lived experience of living between these two tribes and my fragmented Oshiwambo-Kavango voice. I want to share my experience of being the “lost one” when I struggled to switch from one tribal ritual to the next. My multitribalism was not something that was given space as it showed the crack that was
created by the apartheid system of division. There is a constant negotiation of my belonging between tribes, and this has implications when I encounter whiteness.

4.1.1 What tribe are you?

As I stated before, I was born into a family that historically would be identified as Oshiwambo but was geographically located in the Kavango area. I grew up in the northern part of Namibia, the first town in Kavango when leaving Owamboland. My parents were both culturally Oshiwambo although my mother’s family had migrated to the borders of Kavango and Owamboland. This meant that I grew up speaking Rukwangali (a Kavango language) with a mix of Oshiwambo words. Because my family spoke the same way and there were some Oshiwambo-Kavango people in the town, I was not aware of my mixed language until I went to a boarding school with Okavango people. However, I was aware of my cultural difference from most of the people in town.

My childhood was spent negotiating between these two cultures. The division between tribes had been present before the missionaries arrived in Namibia, but this was exacerbated during the German and later Apartheid South Africa’s occupation of Namibia (Wallace and Kinahan 2011). Whereas before the separation was based on kingdoms, now there were (are) physical regional borders between tribes that made (makes) the division explicit. This division encouraged tribalism within the country that continued the colonial categorising of difference and placing value on one group of people over the others. Whereas before colonisation the difference between tribes was not as noticeable as different tribes
had limited access to each other, the evolution of societies and invention of roads and cars meant that tribes could easily interact.

I was able to clearly see the differences when we visited family in Owamboland, and I noticed how differently I was treated because I did not speak the language well as I struggled to communicate. They would laugh at my broken Oshiwambo. “Keshishi Oshiwambo” (She does not know Oshiwambo!), they would tell anyone attempting to converse with me in Oshiwambo, stopping them from further communicating with me. Although I assume this was done in kindness, to prevent me from struggling, I soon stopped learning the language. In the Kavango town where we lived, we were known as one of the Oshiwambo families who lived there, which meant we did not fully belong. “Owo vawambo” (They are Oshiwambo).

My difference from the people in town was evidenced through my family name and the language that my parents spoke. It was not a visible difference that was defined by my skin colour, but still seemed to define who I was against the people that I encountered in the town. Here I use against because a tension seemed to exist when I attempted to hold both these identities. It did not feel as if I was different from, like my difference was just a fact that did not hold any value. But that I was different against, my difference was in direct conflict with theirs and therefore I had to choose. There were concessions made when someone had parents from each tribe however ultimately, they had to choose. It is hard to belong to both. Identifying with one tribe meant rebuking the other, while holding onto both meant I did not belong to either.
4.1.2 Am I divided or is it them?

Ethnic distinctions can at times overlap with territorial segregation in the social construction of tribal identity (Sanders 2002). These ethnic distinctions often include cultural rituals and beliefs, dressing and appearance as well as language. As a Namibian it is relatively easier to identify which part of the country someone is from based on the way they sound. According to Hua (2014), you are how you sound. Audible cues are another way that we use to assign identity to people. This distinction of tribe from another was used as a point of division during apartheid. And after apartheid this division continued as different tribes mock each other’s physical attributes and language skills. The psychological devastation of this division caused by South African apartheid regime as a result is not spoken about. The physically boundaries created during that period have only recently been questioned. They continued to function even after the end of apartheid.

The exchange in the supermarket is a glimpse into how deep the division exists within the structures of society and how it shows up in our daily interaction. Fanon (1986) stresses that “normally”, a family structure is closely related to that of the national structure. This symbiosis between family and nation is often seen in European countries and according to western psychology is what contributes to the normal development of the individual (Fanon 1986). This way of being was adapted by a lot of African nations as a result of colonisation.

As a Namibian child, growing up in a bi-tribal family at the tail end of apartheid conflicted with the tribally divided society. My home life was not reflected in the society. The
intertwining of the two tribes that my family attempted to accomplish at home was not often reflected outside of the home. We still existed in a country that designated tribal boundaries for its people based on an oppressive system. And when the characteristics of the family are not projected into society, the child has to learn to defend herself from the anxiety instituted by the contradiction (Fanon 1986).

The lack of symbiosis between society and family was clearly demonstrated when I attempted to engage in simple cultural rituals such as greeting. I existed in the borderlands - “a vague and undetermined place created by the residues of an unnatural boundary (Anzaldua 1987, 6) and it wrecked me because it was not in my control. I did not choose to exist in the wastelands of the border, it was determined before my birth and seemed to naturally exist within me. Greeting older people that are Oshiwambo or Kavango is one of the rituals that raised a lot of the internal anxiety that I harbour about existing at the borderlands.

There are rituals that co-exist in both tribes because we are all of the Bantu. However, there are separate rituals that each individual tribe has that can create a lot of confusion because they are so closely related. “Nyame okukunda Taati” (Are you greeting me first Taati) is what the Kavango elders would ask me when I greeted them. Because in the Kavango tradition, the younger person awaits to be greeted whereas in the Oshiwambo culture the younger person greeted the elders first. Doing the opposite was considered disrespectful and as a black child, the worst sin you could commit was disrespecting your elders. Lines were drawn in the sand, and I did not know which side I stood and as a result which culture to follow.
According to Hua (2014) fluency in heritage language demonstrates one’s strength of orientation or belonging towards the ethnicity of the community. This helps to inform one’s social identity as part of a social group. Not only was I not fluent in any of the two languages because both were spoke in my home, but I was also not singular in my understanding of the rituals. At an early age, I attempted to bring the synthesis of the two tribal rituals and languages I experienced in my home to the wider society and had an expectation to be met in that. However, the encounter with my mother’s friend made me feel wrong about my attempts and that I had to choose one tribal identity at a time.

Anzaldúa (2015) states that to be in conocimiento (knowledge) with another person or group is to share knowledge and meet each other in our historical social movements and liberation struggles. This friend of my mother’s knew my family history, knew that my parents were of Oshiwambo origin, and I am sure she knew the greeting rituals of the Oshiwambo people. But in a moment where she could have met me in that shared knowledge, she explicitly noticed my difference from hers and used that as a tool to shame me into conforming to her rituals. This seems to have been my experience when encountering tribe in Namibia, I had to choose one tribal voice. This choice felt forced on me and I in turn met it with anger.

4.1.3 **Fragmented into Oshiwambo and Kavango**

Living in a multicultural society means that we are constantly crossing in each other’s worlds (Anzaldúa 2015). Crossing in different worlds meant I took on different languages and cultural rituals, however in a society that could be binary in their thinking this was intolerable.
The clash in culture is often reenacted in our psyche as we struggle to find stability. I felt intense pressure to identify with one and felt the shame of not being able to choose. I became uncertain in my own identity and my own social position. The line that was drawn between the two tribes existed within me as I attempted to navigate the post-apartheid society.

When my mom said I was lost I felt a sense of pride and shame. Being lost meant I had drifted away from the Kavango tribes which being one of the minority tribes in Namibia did not give me a higher social standing. There was a sense of pride in having accomplished something that seems impossible, to escape one’s socially constructed identity. I had been ashamed of my Kavango identity, but she confirmed that I did not carry it anymore because I had “lost” it. According to (Madejski, Amboto, and Shangheta 2017), people often referred to as mbwiti are often described as being lost. Some wear this identity with pride as it means they have left behind their “uncivilised cultural identities”.

However, as proud as I felt to be “lost”, there was also shame and guilt as I smiled the smile without teeth. My mother had used an apologetic tone, almost explaining me away. When we sat around the olupale, this state of in-between cultures was accepted, my parents nodded as I spoke to them because they also mixed the languages when speaking. However, as soon as we stepped away from the fire and met the people, I was left drifting as my mother found her belonging easily, depending on where she was. I watched in amazement as she met everyone in their language, going so far as to speak Nyemba on an Angolan national television when she was an Oshiwambo woman from Namibia. Whereas she used language as a way to meet people where they were, I realised I used the language to confirm my identity.
An identity formed from that space of negotiation of two tribes, an identity that I was terrified of claiming. I did not even notice when this had formed until I asked to borrow socks from a friend in high school and I used “yikaisino” to refer to socks instead of the kwangali word (which still I do not remember right now). The confusion on her face stumped me until we realised that I had “kwangalised” an Oshiwambo word. Without my consent this identity of being in-between Oshiwambo and Kavango lived within my black skin. I hated it, I longed to belong even as I resisted the need to learn to speak each language fluently. This identity did not have a space to belong to.

Drifting off meant I had cut off a part of me so I could exist somewhere else. This cutting was silently violent and had left deep scars that did not know how to heal. The instability of not belonging had created such a deep wounding in me that I hid by trying to identify with the other. The need to distinguish myself either way did not seem to take into account that I existed in both. According to Anzaldúa (2015) this tension is because culture inducts into its stream ordinary consciousness, forcing us to have to agree with people around it. It is extremely difficult to shed this and speak from the space that inhabits both as I am constantly forced to choose one or the other.
4.2 The born free and hauntings.

I sit in the back of the car with my mother and watch as the driver pulls into a parking space.....I am lost in thought.....daydreaming as usual, much to my mother’s annoyance ....... I can hear her talking and laughing with the bodyguard and the driver, but I am not listening.... I am anxious because we are about to go shopping for my food and toiletries before I head back to boarding school. I can feel the anxiety and sadness of having to go back but I push it away as I try to enjoy the warmth of the sun on my face through the car window... it’s a cold June morning and yet it feels warm and peaceful.

Until I hear my mother scream. Suddenly, when I look over to her, the woman who I have always experienced to be larger than life, is hunched down at the back of the car. I watch in horror as she pulls me down with her to hide, trying to protect me from something. I immediately slide down to where she is at the same time try to look around for the danger, the monster that had caused such terror in my mother’s eyes. I watch as her bodyguard pulls out his weapon and points it at something, someone. My heart beats so fast as I try to hold back tears. Who would dare to attack us in broad daylight?

“Jammer – (sorry)” I hear a deep voice say. “I was just coming to say hi to the minister”: the man continues in a deep Afrikaans accent. I watch in fear as my mother slowly sits up in her seat and looks out the window. There stands a tall white man wearing shorts, with his hands up, a gun pointed at his face. I look at my mother. She takes a deep breath to calm herself before opening the door. My hand stretches out to stop her. I do not understand what made her react in terror, but I know the threat is still there. She gives me a reassuring smile and climbs out of the car, heading towards where her bodyguard and the white man stand “Sorry” she says. “I saw a boer and for a minute I thought I was back in apartheid”. They all laugh as the bodyguard puts his gun back. I am still confused and scared, sitting the car. “It’s okay Kanghelo” my mother says with a smile that does not quite reach her eyes. “I overreacted, its over”.

I feel myself drifting off away from this moment, from the olupale as my unconscious defences attempt to yank this memory back to where it belongs so that it does not disturb the equilibrium that my fragile ego has established. But even as I frantically try to hide, I gently
look for ways I can stay with the pain. I want to put my hands in the sand and play with it, ground myself in the land as my heart races. There is something here, something painful something unnamed but feels too terrifying to speak into. It feels like I am getting a glimpse behind the curtain of the sarungano to the monsters that she hides so well when she tells her ngano. I do not like it; it is not something I was taught to bare. Whatever is hidden in the sarungano is also hidden in me. That realisation is what makes this experience so unbearable because I know this thing, this monster lives in me too. I had longed to be the sarungano, but I never wanted the burden of bearing her secrets.

According to (Van Der Kolk 1998), people who had PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder) usually have fairly good psychosocial adjustment. They are able to adapt to their social environment in what appears to be a normally functioning way, however once confronted with a stressor, they act as if they are traumatised all over again. It was terrifying watching my mother reexperience her trauma, it feels even more terrifying to think that she had PTSD, that she lived half of her life physically terrorised by white colonial rule and the other half constantly terrorised by the memories of that. It feels helpless to imagine her feeling powerless.

Anzaldúa (2015) describes healing as the restoration of power, life force or soul. Watching my mother scream in terror, I felt her power being removed from her and in extension from me. In what felt like a split second, I viscerally experienced what had been haunting her and it was passed onto me. For this power to be restored we have to journey to the point of entry, where the spirit that causes the person to lose touch with their reality
entered (Anzaldúa 2015). For my mother, this point of entry might have happened when her life was threatened, and she had to hide to save herself. One of these moments for me was witnessing the fear on her face however because trauma was never associated with the survival of apartheid, we both lacked the language to express it as such.

Trauma speaks into the wounding done to the mind, it is not an event but the body’s way of responding to a life threatening event, the body’s way of trying to survive that event (Menakem 2021). This body’s way of responding, of protecting is not something that is often brought up when stories of the apartheid war are brought up. Caruth (1996) described it as the story of a wound that is crying out to be heard. I wonder now, how many Namibians have to walk past places where their rights were violated, how many have to live in constant alert because of the trauma that lay in their bodies. How many wounds have been crying out because they did not have the language to express their pain. I never paid attention to how my father seemed to stand taller around white men and my mother seemed to be on alert as if something would snatch away her peace. Their experiences seemed to have been silenced by the weight of freedom, of attempting to let go of the past to ensure that I had good future.

Trauma can be so overwhelming in nature that it renders it’s victims incapable of accessing it and without a language to describe it (Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 2007). My mother did not have the language to describe the impact of what the war had left in her, and I did not have the language to describe the trauma of seeing her unspoken trauma. We existed together, created languages together but none of these seem to touch into the experiences that lay trapped in our bodies. The experiences from my great-grandmother, the
first woman to be baptised into the Christian religion in her village were passed onto my grandmother who had lost 2 children in the chaos of the apartheid war. These experiences grew in my mother as she bravely put her life in danger to ensure that me her last born would be born free. Can you imagine the weight of it on me as we sit here at the olupale?

I am aware of a mother’s need to protect the child from the ghosts that haunt her. To try and lay them to rest so that their ghostly hands do not touch the child’s life, however according to Gordon (2008) “haunting is a constituent element of modern social life”. She describes hauntings as something that appears to not be there but has a seething presence that is felt, and if we are to study social life, we have to confront the hauntings that are present. I felt the presence of apartheid as my mother kept reassuring me that it was over. It was a hot suffocating presence even on a cold winter day. In a moment something that had happened years before, became visible for both us and yet I still felt excluded from it, silenced from it. My experiences of racism and racial trauma was silenced by the screams of the physical pain experienced by my parent’s generation. Screams that were as loud as they were silent.

4.2.1 The silence that protects the born free

“When people are overwhelmed by a traumatic experience, there is a silencing of the senses, a state of being frozen. The silencing is more than a lack of words; it is also a lack of understanding of what has happened to them. Trauma overwhelms the psyche; it contains no reference point in terms of one’s former experience” (Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 2007, 37)
As humans we have a tendency to romanticise our past and present and turn it into stories of adventure and triumph (Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 2007). This was evidenced by how the traumatic racial experiences of my parents had always been shared as stories of adventure and bravery. How my dad escaped the SADF police and went into hiding, how my mother stood expressionless as they threw a dead body at her feet, the body of a soldier she had healed days prior. Every year, on Cassinga day (A national holiday in Namibia that marks the killing of over 3000 Namibians by the South African police), the broadcasting outlets play videos of the day and recount what happened. They tell the stories of the dead and how it evoked an outcry in people, driving them into the fight for freedom. No one speaks about the fear of those missiles and guns. No one speaks into the immense grief experienced by the families of the fallen.

We speak into the stories of bravery in the face of unimaginable cruelty, the David vs Goliath stories. When we were seated around the olupale, and these stories were shared, my assumption was that their bravery and strength is what remained with me. I thought the pain and trauma would float up in the sky with the smoke. What I did not realise is how it was passed on to me. Instead of going up, it settled into my body and locked into my bones. It lay there almost forgotten until it comes out at inopportune moments to disrupt my fragile peace and numbly scream its presence to me. But this scream was always met with silence because of my position, my identity as a born free. And according to Van Der Kolk (2014) this is because as a society we want to believe that the world is safe, and no one should want to listen to stories of trauma, except this leaves the haunted ones voiceless.
In Namibia, us, the people born after independence are referred to as “born frees” (Kambunga et al. 2023). We were born in a land that is free of war, free of apartheid and free to be black. We were born in the after. It almost feels like a split, being born in the after. Almost as if what happened before does not have a direct impact on me and how I came to be today. Being born in the after came with the responsibility of freedom. The responsibility of freedom for me meant holding on to these stories of pain and triumph, not knowing how they would settle in my body and change the DNA of what lay in my unconscious. Often, I felt the responsibility of freedom demanded that I try to forget the impact of the past.

Born frees have always been excluded from the conversations of the past and instead are expected to be grateful for the actions that ensured our freedom (Kambunga et al. 2023). Stories of the war were told to us as we listened carefully and respectfully without adding to the experiences that were being shared. When we do attempt to bring up the impact of that war, we are told we do not know anything about war because we were born free. As someone who was “born free”, I always felt I did not have a right to speak into experiences of colonisation even though I lived with the impacts of it in my day-to-day experiences. Just like the grief elephant that Amulungu (2016) referred to in her book, colonialism and apartheid had wreaked their havoc on my village. But I was expected to pretend I could not see the damage because I was not there when they chased it away.

The stories shared at the olupale spoke about the monster of apartheid in the same breath that they hid it. And so, when in an unexpected moment when the colonial scene came
into play whilst I was seated in a car with my mother, my shock was more about how she reacted instead of what it meant for her to live in the same country as the people who looked like her tormentors. The fear that she carried in her bones came alive in her and out of her as she pulled me down to the floor. The monster that silently haunted her came to the fore showing me just how on alert she is in her own country. I felt forced to see the complexity of her as a person and all that she had lived and still lived with. This was not what I was told of the impact of apartheid.

But the monster was dismissed as fast as it showed up. She apologised and laughed almost as if her response was silly, and she should have known better. In an instant dismissing the monumental tear of reality that had happened for me. I wondered what moment she went to as she dragged me down with her. I wondered what brought her back. I wondered if she had nightmares about it before and after that. But I was too scared to ask her that because I was born free. I wondered how the white man felt to have a gun pulled on him, to realise it was because the minister he was coming to greet had experienced terror at his white skin. I wonder what would have happened had they stayed with what it meant it to feel like “you are back in apartheid”, instead of laughing it off as a silly response. I wondered about how she felt apologising to him and how she would have felt had he apologised back.

4.2.2 Intergenerational hauntings

Intergenerational trauma is a theme that has been vastly explored to try and understand the impact that traumatic societal events have on the next generation (Doornbos
and Dragojlovic 2021). This is because we, humans, seem to keep finding new ways to hurt one another, to cause trauma and disruption that is felt over generations. We seem to find new ways to create ghosts to haunt the next generation. Intergenerational trauma is thus a complex phenomenon in how it invites curiosity into the ways in which trauma extends its reach across generations, impacting individuals and communities in profound ways. It speaks into the inheritance of emotional, psychological, and cultural wounds from one generation to the next, often stemming from historical events or systemic injustices (Kinouani 2022).

The trauma caused by apartheid is not one that died when apartheid ceased to exist. It is one that took a life of its own as it found different ways to survive, to be felt, to be heard. Stories of bravery often neglect to elaborate on the fear and trauma experienced by the fighters as they persevered. The fear and trauma not expressed becomes a silent secret that is passed on without intention. According to Van Der Kolk (2014) as long as we keep secrets of trauma and suppress our experiences of wounding, we are at war with ourselves. But some of the secrets that my body keeps do not feel like mine. They were passed on to me in moments that felt so painfully sacred, instilling in me a sense of shame when I attempt to share them, as I write into them, as if I am betraying the people that unwittingly gave them to me. I feel I am constantly at war with the secrets that are not mine to disclose.

This is an embodied war, that seems to rage within in me as it encounters societal expectations of what it means to be born black, what it means to be born free. As a born free, I often feel as if I am being asked to sit quietly with the corpses of apartheid. I feel I have to
silently inhale the fumes of their rotting flesh and slowly let my senses adapt to the vile stench. I am not allowed curiosity into the spirit that leaves the bodies and slowly starts to possess me. I have to sit and wonder about the wounds on their bodies, admire the adventures that put them there as the body slowly rots around me, as the fumes from a decomposing corpse invades me, leaving me paralysed.

In her dissertation Kamdar (2021) explored how colonial trauma was passed from her grandparents to her parents and silently passed onto her. In my bones lies the death of thousands of people, the ground that I walked on as a child covered by the blood that they shed so I could be free. I did not learn the language to speak into these deaths. Whenever the trauma reared its head from the shadows, I was met with silence and blank expressions, my head tuned away to look somewhere else. When we walked into the supermarket, me dutifully pushing the shopping cart as my mother walked alongside me, I kept stealing glances at her to see if she felt the presence of a hateful spirit the same way I did. Her face was blank, and I was not able to gage anything from it. Except from the way she clutched her handbag close to her chest, it was as if nothing had happened in the parking lot.

Donald Winnicott, when speaking into his theory of mirroring warns that the mother’s response should not be taken for granted. When a baby looks at the mother’s face and the mother does not respond, the baby’s creative capacity to engage starts to slowly wean and she is unable to fully experience her own emotions as she is too busy searching her mother’s face (Winnicott 2016). I looked to my mother to try and understand what had happened however she was busy chasing away the ghost that haunted her, not realising that I was being
haunted by the same ghost. I was too busy looking at her, attempting to understand her experiences and unable to experience the moment as traumatic for me too.

4.2.3 Fragmented born free.

This ghost seems to grow larger the more it remains unacknowledged. The silence around it is a reminder of all that I have not endured and therefore forbids me from acknowledging that I too am haunted. Its eerie presence thrives on the tension between born free and those born before. It creates a split that feels unbearable to look at and makes it harder to attempt to repair. It leaves me no other choice but to also ignore its presence, to go so far as try and rewrite its history, to make it seem as if there was no body that lived, that died and transformed into a ghost. It leaves me with a longing for a traumatic experience but feeling grateful for my freedom. The tension of these two conflicting states fractures me into another state of nepantla.

Rendering Thion’o (2009) the biggest weapon used by colonialism is cultural bombing. This involves making people forget their own culture and distance themselves from their own history. “It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland” (Thion’o 2009, 17). “I hate Namibian history!” I remember saying as a teenager being forced to study Namibian History in high school, “It is so long!” I was very good in European history, especially drawn to the events of the Second World War. I was horrified by what the Nazis had done to the Jews and empathised strongly with the pain of the Jews. However, I found myself disconnected from
Namibian history. The history books contained names of people who I had met and spoken to and yet I found it incredibly hard to connect to their struggle when I opened those pages. My own history was a wasteland to me.

I learned to be silent in the face of racial trauma, a need to turn away. I feel this need as I read “Narrating our Healing Perspectives on Working through Trauma”, as Chris Van der Merwe and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela narrate the stories of black South Africans who lost their children in the apartheid war. I do not want to be confronted with the truth of the damage of the elephant. I do not want to sit with a ghost that does not feel like mine, a haunting that feels so distant and yet very present in my bones. But my body remembers these stories even as they fight to stay illusive from my mind. Even as these stories feel alien to mine, far away from me. We are wounded and connected through the same wounds that have alienated us (Anzaldúa 2015).

These wounds have made an unpeaceful home inside of me, a fragmented home that grapples with the privilege of not experiencing physical racial trauma against the silence of the psychological trauma endured. It seemed almost unfair that my family had lived this life without my existence, that they all seem to have an understanding of the “true” apartheid whereas my brother and I, him born right before independence and me being born after, seeming to have been born with the privilege of freedom. Their experiences were secrets passed onto me that seem to recognise the shape of my body but could never really settle into it the same way they settled into the generation before me. These secrets are exposed
when uncanny experiences show up to reveal what has been hidden in me, what lives within me.

Frosh (2013) explored on Freud’s concept of uncanny experiences that can arouse people and illicit both anxiety and excitement at the same time. These are experiences that show up from what feels like out of the blue and awakens us to a different reality. They are uncanny because even though they seem alien, there is a familiarity about them that seems almost too familiar and reminds us of what we had been taking for granted. I took for granted the trauma of the war, the pain of living in its wake and was rudely reminded in a parking lot. It was exciting to be drawn to the ground with my mother, to connect with her pain, pain I had previously not been privy to because I was born free but also frightening because I realised how that pain was all around me, how it lived inside of me.

According to Herman (1992) to speak into one’s knowledge of trauma would risk being assigned the same level of victimhood as those who had experienced it. So perhaps by insisting that we are born free, our parents were attempting to distance us from the atrocities they faced. They sacrificed a lot to ensure that we would not experience the same pain. Dismissing it as a silly response was my mother’s way of belittling the monster to ensure it did not touch me the same way it touched her, protecting me from the terror that she had lived through.

However, this distance from the atrocities also distances me from my history and my culture. It leaves me fragmented as I encounter the past and while not being allowed to make
sense of it. Not wanting to acknowledge the experienced pain has created a fragmented born free identity, one that exists on the fringes of history, haunted by its perpetrators. To try and eliminate the ghost that haunted me, I turned to the pain of others. I realise now that accessing the pain experienced by the Jews was a way to touch on my own wounding without drowning in it because as Fanon (1986, 101) recounted “When someone insult’s the Jew, pay attention, he is talking about you.” Both were woundings based on race and racial identity.

4.3 The black child and racial trauma

I remember the fear and confusion…. “Saara! Het jy n krekenaar gebruik? (Sarah! Did you use a calculator)”, the teacher yells at me while holding my test book…… She had been rearranging the class according to our test results….. I missed the first test, so for the first month of the trimester, I had opted to sit next to my cousin who was seated in the third row….. The teacher never really addressed those of us seated in the third row (bronze she called it - and the first was gold and the middle silver) .... That is why I liked sitting here…. although she would look at us with obvious disdain, she hardly ever spoke to us…. And now we had to move.

I looked up at her and immediately sank lower in my seat…..She seemed angry at something I had done… “Askies Jeffrou?” (Pardon me miss?), I responded softly, not really sure what she was referring to… She huffed in frustration. “ N krekenaar! Het jy n krekenaar gebruik!” (A calculator! Did you use a calculator!) She shouts at me.. I looked back at her unsure…. I did not know what a krekenaar was… She rolled her eyes and tried again. “A calculator!”. I nodded hesitantly. “Waar is dit?” (Where is it?) … I held my hand out hesitantly… She looked at me confused. “Wat?” (She asks). “Kan ek my boek kry aseblief (Can I please have my book) “.. I asked softly, still terrified. She walked towards me, confusion on her face and handed me my book. I showed her my calculations on the test. “(Nee jou dom ding! Nie calculations nie! Calculator!” (No, you stupid thing, not calculations! Calculator! )... I flinched and sank lower in my seat.

My cousin leaned over to look at my test, then looked at me before looking up at the teacher. “Sy het nie n calculator gebruik nie, Jeffrou was mos hier toe ons die toets geskreef het, Jeffrou saal
die calculator gesien het. Sy het nie n calculator nie! (She did not use a calculator, miss was here when we wrote the test, you would have seen it. She does not have a calculator)”. My cousin told the teacher... she stared him down in anger before huffing in frustration and grabbing my book from me. “Nou hoe het sy die merk gekry?” (Then how did she get this mark?) she asked puzzled...

And so she dragged me to the principal’s office for cheating... the principal looked at my test book, the math calculations that showed my work and declared that I had not cheated... that according to her system I now had to move to the gold row... right in front of her desk .....I had gotten away with not being noticed for a month, with being one of the students that sat in the third row to suddenly being the black girl in the gold row .... And when I moved to the front of the row.... when students in the row had to stand up and take the seat behind me.... The students who before ignored me but now looked at me with the same disdain as the teacher... I realised the rows were not really organised according to grades...

Once again, I pause writing as the hurt of what was inflicted upon me takes over my body and pauses my thoughts. I recognise that in my quest to call back this hurt part, I must experience its pain and yet I am still surprised by the amount of wounding that my body carries. In line with Anzaldúa (2015), the process of Coyolxauhqui (falling apart) is a spiritual one that speaks into a soulful dismemberment. In order for me to call back these pieces that have fallen apart, to engage in Coyolxauhqui imperative, I must experience the feeling of being torn apart, before I can reconstruct. It feels visceral this tearing apart, I feel my body sink lower as it did that day in class. I feel the need to hide from something, from her. The teacher? Even though it has been years since that moment, I still feel the same feeling of not belonging today as I did in that gold row.

It is a painful process this Coyolxauhqui imperative, it requires me to feel, to call into my body the feelings that have been repressed to ensure survival. It seems to go against my nature, as my nature is to survive. I have to take a sacred to breath on my journey home to
myself (Bryant-Davis 2022). When I think back to that moment, it seems almost silly to think that it threatened my survival. The teacher was worried about me cheating and when that was disproven, I was seated in the gold row. Seems simple enough does it not? And yet that scene carried so much more within it, spoke into so much more than just grades and sitting arrangements.

Up until that point, I had not given much thought to my belonging in the classroom. I chose to sit next to my cousin out of a sense of familiarity, so perhaps I did unconsciously sense a threat. However, it had never been so explicit as it was in the moment. When I sat in that chair at the front of the gold row, I felt displaced. I felt I did not belong physically let alone intellectually. Before that moment I had not noticed how divided the class was, I had not seen apartheid before my very eyes. I grew up knowing the horror of apartheid but not fully understanding the racism behind it. Racism was a term that I associated with slavery and the Civil Rights movement in the United States of America, but not apartheid. Apartheid was about the colonisers who came into my country, committed unimaginable cruel acts, and eventually were kicked out by the brave SWAPO soldiers.

People who have experienced the trauma of racism have to learn to manage losses experienced by the soul, as well as that of other colonial abuses (Anzaldúa 2015). This managing has an impact on our identity, fragmenting us into states of nepantlas. I would get rightfully offended if someone called me a nigger and physically numb when I got called a kaffir and yet both speak into the perceived lack of humanity in a black person. Kaffir, for me,
invokes a rage and sadness that numbs me with silence, it reminds me of the other side of
the brave stories that I heard around the olupale.

When we experience racial woundings we lose parts of ourselves in an attempt to
minimise the pain, we bury the part of the soul most affected in an act of self-preservation
(Anzaldúa 2015). In an act of sheer desperation, I dissociate from the pain and cling to the
stories of bravery. And yet in that moment when I sat in front of that teacher, without the
word having been uttered, I experienced the suffocating rage and sorrow of what it means to
be a kaffir. It was a harrowing feeling to be confronted with my blackness, to realise how far
from human it was. I did not realise that this is what apartheid was about, the hatred of me
because of my skin. The dismissal of my being and found not worthy, not good enough. I did
not realise how I carried this dismissal deeply within my soul.

4.3.1 Separating the black body

The need to regulate the physical separation of black people from white is an
important dimension of racism (Kilomba 2020) and this is what apartheid was founded on.
Blackness cannot transgress into white spaces for it risks contaminating it all that blackness
encompasses. Blackness had been determined to be ugly and dirty and did not warrant the
humanness that whiteness encompassed. In that classroom, blackness meant not smart
enough to sit in the gold row. This was of course not obviously stated but implied when her
first assumption was that I cheated. The physical boundaries that had separated black from
white during apartheid had been dismantled but the mental boundaries remained. Although
apartheid was over, white dominance was still being assured in the arrangements of classroom and neighbourhoods and even towns.

When I spoke to my cousin about my thesis and this moment, we spoke of how terrified I was to move to the gold row, to move away from him and sit with the white kids. And he remembered how once I was there, I felt so paralysed by that fear that I was too scared to speak or raise my hand. One day I actually urinated on myself rather than ask to go to the bathroom because my voice was trapped by the scorn on her face, the dismissal of me in her classroom. I can still feel her look of disgust as I felt the warn urine rundown my pants, contaminating the row with more of my blackness.

I am reminded of Gandhi (2021)’s paper where she described an incident with one of her white flatmates when they were taking out their trash, the white flatmate did want their trash to mix because Gandhi’s trash was “dirtier”. She notes how she heard the words describing her as dirty so clearly and almost identified with being dirtier. In a world were colonialism has existed, the black person has to experience projections like these and these experience becomes part of their internal structure (Davids 2011). Something that appears to have been external now lives within. And perhaps here is where object relations theorist would bring in Kleinian theory of projective identification.

As explored before, Melanie Klein described splitting as the ego’s way of bearing both good and bad within the psyche when holding both in one object is too uncomfortable (Tan 1993). These uncomfortable feelings grew into hatred that she actively had to express
towards black people. The class performance was a way of continuing the racial segregation that she grew up with, because she believed it to be true. Arguably, we can say that she had split before letting me sit in the gold row; black was bad and incapable and white was good and capable. Performing above what she believed a black child was capable of confronted her with her hateful nature, which was too uncomfortable, so she lashed out and onto me.

I had to be the bad black child that cheated. She moved me because she did not have a choice, however she acted into the hateful feelings she had of black people. In turn I internalised those projections and perceived myself as bad, and not belonging. I intentionally failed the next test so I could go back to sitting in the bronze row where I felt I belonged, both because of her hate but there must have been a part of me that believed that my presence in that row contaminated the space. And thus, acting into her projection of her hateful feelings.

As I explained earlier [See Chapter 1.2.2], I do not agree with the use this theory to explore internal racial structures because it places me in a helpless and inferior position of taking in a white woman’s projection whilst dismissing the violence inflicted onto me. It reinforces the badness that is often painted onto blackness by placing me as the bad object to her good. It dismissed the structures put in place to allow for this inferiority to exist, structures that forced me to believe I was the dirty trash that was not allowed to mix with the clean white children. It removes us (the teacher and I) from the wider social context and does not consider that, even though apartheid had ended, there were still physical and mental barriers that reminded me of my lack of belonging. It does not give us a chance to explore how even though I had missed the first classroom arrangements, I did not question moving
to bronze row when I first arrived in the classroom. I was uncomfortable with the gold row because by moving from the bronze row, I was somehow crossing the barrier that had separated us from them and thus making my blackness even more obvious.

We do not consider the power a white teacher has over a black student and their ability to survive school when we use this theory. If we are to think with Butler (1997), power vacillates between the power acted onto the subject before and the power enacted by the subject after, and both form, inform and affect the subject. To survive how she used her power, I had to enact it toward myself. I found myself feeling angry at myself for having to move to the front row, wishing I had written some answers wrong so I could remain seated with my cousin. I strongly felt that I did not belong there, and that I had to find a way to leave. This anger towards myself allowed me to maintain an element of control and ensured my survival in the gold row. After a month of fear and anger, we finally wrote another test, and I failed it intentionally so I could move back, back to my rightful place. I realised that whiteness could not be attained suddenly; it took years of slowly erasing my blackness.

4.3.2 Learning to hate the black body.

According to Fanon (1986) when the black man stays in his homeland, he does not realise the moment that his inferiority is determined by the other. I was in my homeland when I saw how my inferiority existed by observing it in others like me. I was not there when it was determined but I saw how it was enacted. I thought the end of apartheid meant that I would not feel that inferiority, but here we are, once again, only differently. In my small town, where
white people did not live, I watched as the black women used skin bleaching chemicals, the “denigrating serum” that Fanon (1986, 91) spoke of that would allow the “wretched” black woman to rid herself of her blackness and turn it into the desired and acceptable white skin. Their hatred of the melanin in their skin seeped into me as I learned to compare my skin to that of white people and find it lacking. I was left feeling inferior in my hometown and I never questioned how they came to believe it.

When I left my home this inferiority complex continued to be fostered. It was fostered by the teachers, by the white students who were angry that they had to give up their seat for me, as if I had not earned it. Whiteness is what was acceptable, and this was reinforced by the fact that all the teachers were white. Our parents sent us to be educated by white teachers. They separated us from the safety of our homes and put us into spaces that they were not allowed to inhabit before we were born, white spaces that were inaccessible to them before because of their blackness. When writing into the separation of races within towns Grada Kilomba explores how the geographical division can be seen as the membrane separating the white “superiors” from the black “inferiors”, separating the acceptable from the unacceptable (Kilomba 2020).

In primary school my blackness although accepted into the school was still found to be unacceptable in the classroom as it was coerced into existing only in the bronze row. I watched as the white girls in my class were allowed to wear their hair as they pleased while mine had to be chemically altered and tucked away into braids because it was unruly. And even though my mother encouraged me to keep my hair as natural as possible, we both
relented when we were told by the white woman that all the black girls had to relax their hair at school. I watched as the teachers spent more time explaining concepts and theories to white students while I spent more time learning them from books on my own. I read books about little white girls and boys going on adventure to save world and black girls trading their bodies for N$10 and a yellow dress (Ngwenya 1995). I was forbidden from speaking Rukwangali or Oshiwambo on school premises as Afrikaans and English is what united us. I disappeared into books about little white children as the way I spoke changed.

I started to have this dream (or was it a fantasy) where I would slip into a coma and my dark skin would evaporate from my body and leave me with clean white skin and my hair would turn from kinky and coily to smooth silky hair. I would emerge miraculously white. It was a secret dream that I dared not speak into because of what it implied, the hatred of me, the hatred of my lineage, my people. It was a slow hatred of my body, one that showed up in the way that I treated myself. I would not dare use the chemicals to brighten my skin because I had seen what would happen, it created a chemical burn that turned the skin even darker than it had been before. Instead, I used the relaxer that would turn my unruly hair straight. Instead, I learned to speak English and correct those who spoke it wrong.

A few years after the incident of the math test, the racist incident, we were seated in a different classroom at the beginning of the school year, when the teacher told us to stand up and go outside. They started dividing us and told some to go to a different classroom while others remained. I was excited to discover I was being moved to the same classroom as my best friend. I quickly moved to sit next to her amazed at how she managed to move me into
her classroom. She told me, proudly, how they noticed that there were only black students in
her class and all the white students had been in another class - my class – and so they went
to complain to the principal about the racial segregation. “Is onse tyd die.. Daar is nie
apartheid goede hierso nie.” (This is our time... There are no apartheid things here): she said
angrily in Afrikaans, and I nodded with her vehemently. It was then that I realised I had been
placed in a class with one other black girl, everyone else was white. I did not tell her about
the pride I felt to have been put with the white students and the shame that pride brought.
By then I had become a school prefect, who punished the other black children when they
failed to use English or Afrikaans to communicate.

4.3.3 The fragmented black girl

“Shame – as is its habit- wants my self-annihilation” (Taylor 2023, 72). After the first
world war, in an attempt to use propaganda against the stationing of French colonial troops
in the Rhineland, the Germans started displaying images of black people committing acts of
what they called sexual debauchery and how it was a threat of German womanhood, the
campaign was called “The Black Shame” (Wigger 2010). The world quickly caught onto
shaming all that blackness represented. Years later, a version of this was present in post-
apartheid Namibia. Black people were portrayed as perverse characters that were unable to
control their savage instincts. Books like “Ten Dollars and a Yellow Dress”, although meant to
educate on the dangers of unprotected sex with men, oversexualised young black girls and
created a deep shame of their existence.
Kinouani (2022) contends that black people have to learn to live not just with the current racial injustices and systems but also with the racial injustices experienced by our forebears as well as the shame they experienced. When we experience racism, our body responds not just to the current racial act but also to years of trauma and shame that has been passed onto us. Haines (2019) describes shame as the hidden feeling that something is wrong with us. It is a feeling that usually follows traumatic experiences and becomes present when something that was whole within us becomes torn and shattered. Racism can cause the type of wounding that created holes within us. We become holly (full of holes) instead of whole (Taylor 2023).

And since racism is not an act that is usually considered to be traumatic, the racial acts committed onto black bodies is so normalised that we ourselves start to believe in its normality and accept it as part of our existence (Kinouani 2022). This normality leaves shame in its wake as we experience the shame of being perceived as less than. I felt that shame when I stood up to go sit in the gold row, the shame of leaving my black cousin behind to go with the white students who did not want me to sit with them. The shame gets directed inward because when it is not, our memories, whether they be our direct memories or the ones we inherited, remind us of the physical consequences of expressing it outward.

In Matlwa (2007)’s book Coconut she writes into how the two characters Ofwile and Fikele each struggle with their blackness. Ofwile’s struggle comes from being born into privilege, privilege that was not afforded to her parents before apartheid, whilst Fikile’s struggle was yearning for white spaces as the spaces that she inhabited were full of despair,
the despair that lives within blackness. Both experience shame in their blackness. Whilst reading the books I saw my very own shameful thoughts reflected back to me and I was devasted to be confronted with my own shame. I stopped reading to take sacred breaths as I encountered once again my own self-destruction. My identity as a black girl had been fragmented and patched together with shame.

As a black girl in a white school, I encountered the shame of my blackness, the shame of being less than. When I passed tests, I was shamed into thinking I had cheated, and scorned until I cheated myself by failing. I was shamed into having straight hair as mine was deemed unruly and unkempt. I was taught to be ashamed of my skin as I saw the shame that the black women in my town had of their skin, when they tried to chemically burn it off, purify it into white skin. So, I understand what Taylor (2023) means when she says shame wants me to annihilate myself. I have worked hard to try and erase my blackness as much I could, I learned to speak English and Afrikaans as my Oshiwambo and Rukwangali slowly dwindled away. I have slowly annihilated myself to rid myself of the shame of being black.

I felt caught between the power struggle of the before and the after, both still somehow revering whiteness. My only defence was removing myself from my black body and looking at whiteness as intellectual feat that I could acquire. I found myself existing in these cracks of shame that have patched me up, hoping that existing in that bridge would uphold me enough to shed the shame. I was not ready to face my shadow beast, the one that carried the parts of me that I had disowned to exist here (Anzaldúa 2015).
4.4 The coconut and racial identity

It was the black doll that paused me…… I just arrived home from university for a brief holiday and was looking forward to taking a nap in my childhood bedroom when I stopped in the doorway……. Pombete (on the bed), surrounded by teddy bears - some old and some new - was a creepy looking black sipopisa (doll). I do not think I had ever seen sipopisa sosisovagani (black doll) outside of a shop up until that point…… “What the fuck” was the first thought….. My mother was clearly going through something because why did my bedroom look like it belonged to a little girl and what was up with the black popisa?....

I felt rather than saw my mother coming to stand next to me...... “Amesi sipopisa soge wahere pounona. todiworoka” (“It was your favourite doll as a child, do you remember?”) she asked with a smile...... “Nan Ma, kapi nasi mona rumwe ame (Oh my gosh mom, I have never seen that doll in my life). “Aha, sipopisa soge oso” (No that is your doll). She insists. “Meme, I have never seen that doll in my life” I try again. “Ove mukwetu, sipopisa soge oso!” (That is your doll!) She says in a tone that meant I was not to argue with her... “Nan, ewa”.. I gave up and moved to remove the doll from my bed and place it on my bedside table. We looked at each other for a minute... My mother and I.... I feel uncomfortable and confused and she seems resigned... she silently walked back to her room.... Leaving me with that black doll... I shoved it in the drawer and gently laid the teddy bears on the other side of the bed so I could take my nap...

Here we pause again to take sacred breath as we encounter silence in trauma. I feel a tightness in my chest thinking that my mother recognised something in me, saw something on me that she did not have the words to confront. I am reminded of the corpse that the SADF soldiers threw at her feet and how she described her blank face. This is the face I encountered whenever racial issues reared their ugly heads into our shared space. It separated us as I stood looking at her unable to see beyond the blankness on her face but feeling the tension that was present in both our bodies.
I hated that fucking doll; it was creepy with its white features and black skin. It always seemed to be mocking me about something with its eerily seeing and yet stagnant brown eyes, seemed to stir something for both me and my mother, something unspoken between us. It shouted of my blackness, confronted me with it, right there on its face, it showed up in a way that made it difficult for me to deny it. My mother would often take it out of my room, and I would find it on the counter in the kitchen, or on the sofa seated as if it had a place in my home. It is as if she knew how uncomfortable I felt and intentionally went out of her way to mock me with the damn doll. It became a family joke “Sipopisa sa Taati (Taati’s doll”), my family would laugh, and I would laugh with them even as I shoved it away from me. I was being haunted by a black sipopisa that silently screamed at me an identity that I did not want to see.

Whereas Morrison (1970) character’s Pecola wanted to destroy the white doll given to her because it looked nothing like her and it reminded her of all that she could not be, I wanted to destroy this black doll because it reminded me of who I was. It pursued me the same way that blackness plagued me even after I had mastered elements of whiteness. I falsely proclaimed my solidarity with blackness while I clung to whiteness like a branch at the edge of a deep scary river. I love being black I said, even as I continued to read only books written by white authors. I loved my black skin I said even as I was grateful that I had not inherited my mother’s darker complexion and my father’s big nose. I had filled the spaces between my fragments with a whiteness that felt chalky and suffocating.
I have been called a coconut - white on the inside and black (or brown) on the outside-by friends and family. The concept of the coconut as an identity has often been explored in the historical context of colonialism. An example of this is explored by Bhabha (1984) through the concept of a the “mimic man” who during the British Imperial rule over India, was the Indian subject who acted as interpreter for the British and the subjects that they ruled. It is explored as someone who takes on an external coat of whiteness to better assimilate into white culture often resulting in a renouncing of their blackness. This is not a visible identity but one that is determined by my ability to put on a cloak of whiteness.

In the context of Kapono Matlwa’s book, Njabulo X Ndebele defines coconuts as black people, who come from black communities who, as a result of exposure to whiteness, have betrayed their roots by acting “white” (West 2010). This feels harsh for me, to think I betrayed my roots when I was put in these white spaces by the communities that had previously been denied access to it. It feels dismissive of the experiences that brought me into this identity. The creation of an identity is a process - whether it was consciously or unconsciously created - whereby the self-interacts with different communities and the outer world (Anzaldúa 2015).

We could argue that that creating of this identity began long before I set foot in a white classroom. It may have started when my parents bought me white-looking dolls to play with for Christmas. The something unspoken between my mother and I was this identity, an identity that spoke of my folding into whiteness. Just like the silent ghost of apartheid, my cloak of whiteness was not something that my mother knew how to confront. I wonder if confronting it together would have forced us to acknowledge the hand, we played to create
it together. And now this identity that I had created, that we had created was being challenged through the existence of the black sipopisa.

4.4.1 Putting on a cloak of whiteness.

As a black child in an Afrikaans school, being black meant learning to fit into white spaces. Lorde (2017) states how in order to ensure our survival, those of us who have been oppressed have to become watchers, we have to become familiar with the language and customs of our oppressors. Often this has meant adopting an identity that fit the illusion that ensured our survival. For me, this meant changing the way I pronounced words so that my teachers could understand me and not dismiss my answers as nonsensical. It meant keeping my hair relaxed and neatly tucked into braids so that I would not be punished for its unruly nature. It meant acting white so that the white students and teachers were not confronted with my blackness. It meant betraying my roots so I could be acceptable to white people and even though they might not want to admit it, to black people. It meant putting on a cloak of whiteness.

The cloak of whiteness is not one that can penetrate the melanin in my skin and settle into my being. It is a superficial one that felt acidic against the blackness of my skin. I felt the pain of it in my hair. When I would sit for hours and have my hair pulled from my scalp only for the hairdresser to cover it with a layer of silky hair that was more acceptable than my unruly bush. It felt as chemically peeling as the relaxer that burned the curls out of kinky
strands, at the same time that it seared my scalp. It was there in the way I let “them” touch my hair without my permission because I did not want to be like those “difficult” blacks.

It was adorned in the language that I spoke, as I learned to twist my tongue to slowly lose the way that Oshiwambo people pronounce their Rs and Ls. How I sent students to be punished for daring to speak Rukwangali, Oshiwambo, Otjiherero, Damara, Nama. In the way that I scoff when my niece calls me “Imma we” (mom) and tell her that I am “Aunty Sarah”. It was in the way I pulled a plastic chair to the olupale instead of sitting on the wooden logs that were built around it. In the way I looked to my mom to explain rituals to me so I could understand what “they” were doing to me instead of from the curiosity of a child who is interested in understanding her existence. In my use of psychological theory to look at the psychotic black man who was prone to drink and violence as a psychologist in the hospital instead of seeing the trauma that clearly lay in the bones of the black man. So, in a sense I can see how Ndebele would see it as a betrayal, because it was turning my back against the molecules that created my being and covering them up with an idea of something, covering it with the remnants of a hateful ghost.

This cloak was also put on me by the community because being a coconut meant being excluded from what Ndebele referred to as a pure black subjectivity (West 2010). Reading Coconut, I notice how Ofilwe’s mother continuously struggles to speak English, but she insists on using the language when speaking to her children (Matlwa 2007). I once attempted to gossip in Rukwangali with my cousins and they quickly switched to English because they did not trust me to not give it away. I remember feeling that mix of pride of shame once again,
they seemed to travel together when they invaded my experiences. I remember how proud my mother was at how I quickly I picked up the English language as a child. She never explained me away when I spoke English.

I was called a coconut when I spent many hours reading books because being educated was for the white man. And so, I became obsessed with books, books written by white authors, and I did not pick up Ngugi wa Thiongo, or even bell hooks, they were too intense, too depressing as I read and reread Harry Potter. “Ogo kugazara ngwendi sirumbu” (she thinks like a white person), they would whisper in awe, and I would smile internally. The erasure of my blackness did not just happen at my hands. As a community that has survived the violence of racism, we had learned to give into whiteness, to value it above our own languages and customs. It is present in how instead of improving our schools in the villages we send our children to white schools. It is present in how we continue to sell products that attempt to burn the melanin in our skin. And according to Fanon (1986) in the way that the community welcomes back the educated black man by giving him a podium to speak as his voice becomes more valued than the elders in the village, for he has learned the ways of the white man.

We are so busy admiring how the black person has become almost white that we almost forget the ways in which she is not. The ways in which whiteness may be comforted by the cloak but is unable to fully accept the blackness that it hides.
4.4.2 The coconut is not actually white.

And so here I take more sacred breaths as I try and orient myself in my seat. Writing into the ways in which I attempted to erase my blackness brings forth an anxiety. I find myself drifting in and out as I struggle kulipukarakena (listen to myself). I seem to be struggling to write into this section more than the rest. I am aware that there is something here that I want to speak into. I pause and do an internal check in as I gently look at the wall that seems to have been raised when I want to write into my blackness. The wall seems be raised as it resists my attempts to look at the cloak of whiteness that I have covered myself in. I find myself feeling uncomfortable at the thought of confronting the blackness that is adorned by the white cloak. I am aware that as much as I tried to wear the cloak and make it fit me, I was still plagued by my blackness. My black identity had already been defined before my birth as I was born into it. It is a visible identity that carries various connotations depending on where I am positioned within the spaces that I occupy, as it is dependent on my history and culture. It is an identity that not only carries me but all those that came before. It is one that I cannot escape.

Frantz Fanon writes into the experiences of black people being plagued by their blackness even as they try and cover themselves in white masks. “My blackness was there, dense and undeniable. And it tormented me, pursued me, made me uneasy and exasperated me” (Fanon 1986, 96). And perhaps that is why that doll haunted me so much. Because it screamed of something that was inherently me, black. I am black. This fact was silently communicated to me by my mother when she placed the doll on my bed, a silent reminder of
who I am perhaps after she realised how comfortable I became wearing that cloak. It is
communicated in the look she gave me as I argued that the doll is not mine. It is
communicated to me by my teachers when they asked me for the African perspective as if my
blackness means that I can speak for a whole continent.

My blackness is present in the rage that I feel, that I hide and like Lorde (2017), it
becomes my most guarded secret. It was present when my friends introduced me as their
black friend but were quick to say how they never saw me as a “black person” before. “Skin
is not that important”, they would say and yet I could feel how important it was to them, to
me and it made me angry that we could not see beyond it. I felt the rage in therapy when my
grief therapist apologised every time, she used the word black but refused to acknowledge
that racial trauma played a role in my grief. “It’s a fucking blackout!! It has nothing to do with
my flippin racial identity!” I wanted to scream but instead silently swallowed my anger
because then I would be the angry black woman. I was plagued by my blackness. I am plagued
by the expectation to perform this blackness.

I look around at the little faces on the screen in frustration, silently pleading for them to
help me…… “I do not know how to take care of your blonde hair!” I say vehemently to the white
woman that is asking if I can do a presentation on how “we” can all take care of our hair……… I am
the only black woman in the group… My hair is different……… This was supposed to be a personal
development venture, and I chose to reflect on my relationship with my hair… my black hair.. And
now she insists that I do a power point presentation to teach everyone about hair care… Why me?
No one else was asked to do one…. “No!” I keep saying but she does not seem to hear me…… The
more she insists the more I keep seeing images of black slaves, forced to take care of little white
girls’ hair……… “No! I am moving on now!” …… I say one more time which she ignores as she touches
her hair talking about how blonde it is and if I knew what would help…. No! I say again......... I refuse
to do a power point presentation teaching white people how to take care of their hair… The whole
group watches uncomfortably... everyone silent except for me and her.......... Her asking and me repeatedly saying no... but she does not seem to hear it, or if she does, it does not seem to matter... Eventually I just change the subject and continue talking until she drops the issue of my hair...

There is a constant struggle of wanting to fit in without being singled out for being different that is not successful when one harbours blackness. I concur with Fanon (1986) when he speculates that when I encounter the “other”, I become responsible for my race and my ancestors. I am singled out as I encounter being one of a few. A problem that Kinouani (2022) states torments many black people that occupy spaces that are usually reserved for white people. Being the only one in a white space usually leads to being asked to represent blackness to white people whilst being expected to fold into whiteness. This is complicated by the fact that even as I try and fold into white spaces, the expectation for me to perform my blackness makes it hard to be seen as belonging. I have to perform my blackness by being the “caring and kind mammy”. The “mammy” is the kind and caring black woman who takes care of little white children but is then expected to transform into the strong independent black woman when she returns to her community (Collins 1987). The essence of what it means to exist in her blackness is erased as it becomes reconceptualised to blend into whiteness.

And yet, the presence of my blackness is emphasised in the way that I am dismissed even as I scream into what feels like a vacuum of whiteness. In the ways that I do not seem to have a voice that is capable of being heard, whilst I shout into these spaces. And when I am asked to speak, it is only to, as (Lorde 2017) states, share my knowledge with the oppressors about how different I am and teach them about their mistakes in how they have harmed us.
I am asked to do what the coloniser has done and not share my subjective knowledge but “speak for my people”, almost as if there is only one way being black, of experiencing blackness. My lack of belonging is present in the way that I am singled out to perform into that perception of blackness.

“And where should I put myself from now on?” (Fanon 1986, 94). And so, in the end what was it all for, where do I belong from now on? The burning of my scalp, the twisting my tongue to pronounce words have left me with an identity that I cannot take back home. But my blackness still makes it impossible to be embraced here. It seems everywhere that I try to exist, there is a strong resistance to letting my blackness stand on its own without fragmenting it with whiteness. I am silenced because speaking from both spaces is made difficult by my lack of belonging to either. I am then forced to fragment into an identity that is expected to hold both, that attempts to hold both even though it leaves me feeling trapped in a crack of silence.

**4.4.3 The fragmented coconut**

“You will find, Ofilwe, that the people you strive so hard to be like will one day reject you because as much as you may pretend you are not one of their own. Then you will turn back but there too you will find no acceptance for those you once rejected will no longer recognise the thing you have become. So far, too far to return. So much, too much you have changed. Stuck between worlds, shunned by both” (Matlwa 2007, 93).
Matiwa (2007)'s characters show us the pervasive nature of whiteness in a black body and how it removes us from our communities and puts us into societies that do not know how to fully welcome us. This leaves us on the fringes of societies, cultures and identities. Existing within the cracks of a black identity and a white society allowed me the unique perspective of looking at the world that I existed in from two different angles. This way of being is seen as a strength but only if we exist in this crack silently. Sitting silently became exhausting as I learned to pretend that I chose to be here instead of being violently shoved here by history, by culture, by racism, by whiteness and by blackness. Ndebele speaking into the multitudinous of blackness that is revealed in Coconut (West 2010), states how he was impressed at the coconut who refuses to apologise for her existence. And it made me wonder what made me apologise for it. It is another identity that I was fragmented into to ensure my survival.

The same privileges that were afforded to my family, that allowed me to be educated are the ones that drew a line between me and my black identity. They demanded that I fold into whiteness, but in turn this folding required a slow erasure of my blackness. However, this erasure was only acceptable until a certain point because I had to be weary of not “going too far”. I had to know when to be one way and when to be the other way. I had learned from an early age that one way of being, being black was considered inferior and therefore to overcome this inferiority, I had to try and attain whiteness in some form, but not too much, as that would mean completely losing my blackness.
R.D. Laing, a psychoanalyst whose ideas were considered controversial, attempted to look at the schizoid position as a divided self, a self that is divided by an inability to integrate the inner private self with the external self that is expected to exist in a fragmented society, a society, I add, that has been fragmented by whiteness. He saw the dysfunction of society as a huge contributing factor to the fragmentation that plagues the schizoid individual (Laing 2010). This understanding of the schizoid presentation speaks into the concept of double consciousness that W.E.B Du Bois had explored in the early 1900s. Du Bois (1903) described double consciousness as the psychological phenomenon experienced by African Americans and other marginalized groups, wherein we have a divided sense of self.

This division is caused by the internal conflict and tension caused from being both a part of their own cultural group and a part of the broader society dominated by the majority culture. Du Bois argued that black people live with a constant awareness of how we are perceived by the dominant white society, leading to a fragmented sense of identity. We must navigate between our own authentic cultural identity and the external perceptions imposed upon us by the dominant culture. This duality creates a sense of "twoness," where as individuals, we must constantly reconcile our sense of self with the expectations and prejudices of the broader society (Du Bois 1903).

This understanding of the divided self explains how easy it becomes to pathologies the black person as neurotic or schizoid. Because as (Fanon 1986) states black people live in a society that draws its strength on consistently telling them that we are inferior and puts one race as superior than us, our attempts to overcome this perceived inferiority is defined as
neurotic and often results in us being pathologised. There is an expectation for the black self to be divided so that it can be seen as acceptable to society, but this division has to be experienced silently to avoid society being confronted with its own dysfunction.

As a coconut, in an effort to survive my own division I had to learn to be self-conscious. Laing (2010, 106) saw the individual’s self-consciousness as “an awareness of oneself as an object of someone else’s observation”. According to Du Bois (1903), awareness in this context involves not only self-awareness but also an acute consciousness of one’s place within society and how others perceive them. There is an awareness of me as a black woman but also an awareness of what that blackness represents in society and how it can or cannot be expressed, of how that blackness is observed, when or where it is expected to show up and only in a way that is recognisable. I have to learn to be recognisable to society whilst attempting to recognise myself.

The one who is almost the same, but not quite, presents another kind of problem as Bhabha (1984) states. And that is what I am as a coconut. I am the same in my biological or corporal identity but hold different social identities that make it challenging for me to be similar to my mother. I am a problem that my mother was trying to gently - although not with subtlety – solve by attempting to remind me of what made me similar to her. I wonder if she had been watching what I was becoming and if it made her uncomfortable or worse fearful. I wonder if that is what made her not speak into it directly.
For even as my mother confronted me with my blackness, she attempted to blend it in the whiteness of teddy bears. I wonder if given her history with whiteness, she feared what I would become. That makes me uncomfortable, to think about how my cloak of whiteness might have disturbed her ghosts. I wonder if she looked at me and did not recognise me and, if we are to bring back Jessica Benjamin’s recognition here, if our misunderstanding at the foot of my bed was caused by her recognising her ghosts when she looked at me, and me not recognising them because they had never been named and thus affected me differently.

And once again I am filled with the shame of what I had to become to ensure my survival. I am left holding conversations that did not take place as I muddle through this identity of being one or the other. The private me that Laing (2010) asked us to consider and how that conflicted with the me that is expected to exist in this fragmented society. A part of me wants to point fingers, to blame someone for this shame, I see how I intellectualise my experience of existing as an object for the other so that I do not have to face the despair of being coconut. I am left feeling shame for being able to see the world from a crack.

Khan (2023) explores the concepts of honour and shame as coexisting with one another and that they act as barriers in the counselling room. She looks at honour as deriving from the cultural, traditional, and relational beliefs and values that are communicated through verbal and non-verbal codes whilst shame is the emotional response when an honour code was broke. I am left holding the shame of honour codes that have been broken to ensure survival. The shame of what it meant to survive had forced me to sit silently in the crack whilst I grieve lost parts of me. As a coconut, I am left holding the grief of identities that had to be
buried to allow for survival. This grief can be so overwhelming that moving on with life becomes hard.

### 4.5 The woman and her grief mattress

I slowly come into conscious awareness as I wake up from a night of surprisingly dreamless sleep........... I do not want to open my eyes for as soon as I know I am awake, I can feel my heart sinking............ She is gone and I have to face it........... I can hear her friends and cousins whispering around me, trying to not wake me as I lay on the mattress, pretending to be asleep. .... I do not want to open my eyes and see them staring at me............. I do not recognise what I see in their eyes, I do not know if it is grief. If it is, Is it my grief? Because I feel I am doing a good job of hiding that? Maybe it is theirs... yes, it is theirs... but what should I do with it?........

I do not know what they want me to do with it.... It feels so suffocating, that expression on their face, suffocating and enraged........... I can feel myself frown and I try to stop and relax my face. “Your facial expressions and tears are not welcoming the mourners, Taati” ........... That is what one of elders had said to me yesterday at the first memorial service... There will be one every night until her burial..... Apparently, I was not allowed to cry too much at those......I did not know it was my job to welcome them, I did not think they needed welcoming. They seem to come in anyway... without my consent ...as they grieve my mother....

I come from a culture where family and community are the most important part of everyday relations. Ubuntu. We feel everything as a family and community. The individual takes a backseat to the community. This way of being is reflected in everyday life. It is present in our language, meme (onane) meaning mother is the same word for aunt or any older woman in the community. The same goes for the terms for father, brother and sister. There is no distinction because we belong to one another. This way of being translates into different rituals and experiences. However, I did not grow up in this culture. Due to the circumstances
of my birth, I was carefully placed on the edges of it where I carefully learned to observed it without having to engage, without finding my belonging in it.

My first encounter with the grief mattress as a member of the bereaved family was when I was 17 and my father had a brain aneurism, resulting in his death. As soon as his death was officially declared the mattress seemed to magically appear in the centre of the room. My mother moved from her seat in the living room, to the mattress in the middle of the room where she was surrounded by adult family members and friends. I was sent away to my room to be comforted by my memes. But I did not recognise them as my memes as I knew them as my aunties, and I wanted to go where my mother was.

Any attempt I made to sit on the mattress with her was thwarted by the mourners surrounding her, by the community that came to be comforted and to comfort her. When I did make it to her, I would sit at the edges of the mattress to be introduced to the mourners before being taken back to my room by a meme. I was sad and frustrated. I felt excluded from grieving my father’s death and instead felt like one of the mourners watching my mother grieve her husband. I was not able to connect with her to grieve our beloved instead I felt I was left alone with strangers. I longed to connect to that space, to her because she was my mother and I had just lost my father. I longed to understand her comfort in culture whilst I felt rejected by it.

After the burial, she became my mother again, when the community left, we could finally mourn together. The importance of the mattress was not explained to me instead it
became almost a mystical place. One that seemed to provide her comfort the same time it left me feeling rejected. It represented my mother’s ability to be part of her community whilst I stood on the edges of it. Unlike the mutual recognition of grief explored earlier [see Chapter 2.1], I did not experience the integrative togetherness that Trigg (2020) states is an important element of shared emotions. Instead, I experienced the fragmentation of a child that could not understand loss, let alone grieve without a parent. I felt dismembered from my mother, I felt a loss of her while I grieved the loss of my father. So, I buried that lost part of me, only for it to be reawakened when my mother died.

When she died, moving to the mattress felt almost instinctual. The part of me that was Oshiwambo-Kavango knew what to do. When Fanon (1986) depicts the black man coming from France to the village, he brings into focus how after having been rejected by whiteness, the black man wants to return home to the villagers. Even though I had experienced it as this frustrating object that kept me from my mother, I seemed eager to experience what she experienced, to belong to the community the same way that she did. The mattress was both familiar and alien to me. I was hopeful that I would find comfort in the community, the way that she had. However, sitting on the mattress as mufisa yendi, encountering the community, I realised how much my mother had shielded me from truly experiencing it.

The individual seated on the mattress was not a child that was given a blanket to help with the transition into the next stage, to help with the loss of their beloved object, instead the person became the mother, holding the grief of the community. Instead of it being my holding environment (Ogden 2004), I realised I had to be part of creating that for the
community. But I did not know how to do that for a whole community. I did not grow up at the epata (traditional kitchen) where women communed and sacred knowledge was passed on from grandmother to mother to daughter. Cultural rituals were explained to me in small but significant moments that made me feel even more alienated from it than before I had asked.

The cultural nuances present in the woman’s ability to be mother to both her children and community is something that I witnessed from a distance but did not fully experience as I did not know how to situate myself firmly within the culture. This ability was further disrupted by my understanding of the role of mother from a more western psychological formulation. I did not blend into the mattress or feel supported by its springs and fabric, instead we were two different entities that did not recognise each other.

4.5.1 Belonging to a black mother.

Psychoanalytic theorists have been fascinated by the relationship between mother and child since Freud published his statement on the female development (Bernstein 2004). In object relations, there is an emphasis on the impact of the early mother on the infant’s ability to internalise the mother and how that aids or hinders their ability to develop and maintain relationships as they grow up. The mother is the sole object for the infant in their early stages as they learn to identify and separate with and from mother. However, psychoanalysis also often neglects to include the experience of a black mother in its conceptualisation of the role (Taylor 2023).
The cultural differences of the role of mother as well as the impact of societal racism and stigma associated with black motherhood is often neglected when conceptualising the role. There is a silence when we theorise about mothers, a silence that does not take into account what it means to be a black mother, what it means to bring a black life into a world coloured by whiteness. According to Taylor (2023) ushering in black life requires a certain type of attention, an attention to what that black life will endure as it starts the process of existing in this world.

Collins (1987) explores how to speak into this silence by looking at the concept of black motherhood and exploring how African communities valued the role. She notes how in various African communities, mothers did not place the responsibility of mothering onto one mother but instead it was shared amongst the mothers within the community. I was never just my mother’s daughter. In my early years, I was raised by all the woman who had nondunda membo lyetu. Our house was always full of caretakers, women who as small child, I called meme and onane, who, whilst later became my aunties, still considered me as their child. These women came in and out of our house from the community and shared in the responsibility of taking care of us. They created a space for us to belong with one another.

Collins (2000) further explored the concept of the “othermother” in African communities. The othermother was a mother who was not biologically linked to her children but still took part in the raising and caring for them. My mother was an othermother, she had never been just my mother. Before my birth she had more children than I could count, and
after my birth they increased even more as they included the orphaned child in the street, the other memes daughter and some woman who worked in Woerman Brock. Conforming with the norm in African traditions (Collins 2006), she took in orphaned children or any other children who needed care. To be a mother in this African context is about creating a space where black lives can be received with all their complexities (Taylor 2023).

However, having been educated in a white setting from an early age, I did not know how to share my mother with her other children. I had drifted away from eumbo, and stopped belonging to them, belonging with them. And the more I read psychological theory and became convinced of the importance of one mother, the less I belonged to them. We did not take into account the experience of growing up in a community of mothers when we explored the relationship of the infant and her mother in existing psychological theories. I did not know how to be a daughter to the othermother, how to accept this culture that she embraced even as it kept me on the edges. As I lay on that mattress mourning, being told to fix my face, when they were asking, demanding that I be Oshiwambo-Kavango again, it became more apparent in my anger, how much I did not belong to them.

There seemed to be something missing between us. A reality that existed for me but did not seem to exist for them even as we lay on the same mattress. Collins (2006) explained how the role of being the othermother was something that young women were carefully groomed into becoming from an early age. This grooming for me was fragmented with my white education. Instead of learning how to be the othermother kepata (traditional kitchen), I was reading books about how Harry Potter had lost his mother and had to live with his evil
aunt. So, by the time we ended up at the mattress, I did not know how to belong to them, I did not have a language to meet the community with in their grief and they did not seem to speak the one that I understood.

Once again, we were at an impasse as we attempted not to acknowledge the ghost that haunted us, the ghost that silently reminded me of my difference against them. In this moment where we grieved our mother, me the one who birthed me and for them the one who raised them, we failed to recognise each other. Whereas in the before they might have wandered into our olupale for us to share a ngano, I have only ever met them in living rooms and on grieving mattresses. Weller and Lerner (2015) in exploring experiences of grief, stressed the importance of attunement from the community in acting as the containing field for the individual. If the containing field is missing, the psyche splits off the overwhelming emotions to spare itself the pain. There was a lack of attunement between the community and me, instead we were separated by a thin membrane that obscured all that we had lost, not just this mother that we grieved but the ones before.

As I sat on the mattress surrounded by the community, I experienced the weight of this grief and how it was placed on me, not just because I was the biological child of my mother, but also because I am a woman. The gendering of grief rituals made my experience on the mattress even more intolerable.
4.5.2 The Mbwiti is a woman.

This fragmented self has been the hardest to call to the fore. I have learned to bury this part of me so deep within the crack that it feels painful to pull myself out and speak. I am more comfortable confronting issues of race and whiteness and allow them to cover the pain I endure as woman within my culture. It has been hard to acknowledge the gendering of grief within our culture, to acknowledge that I felt abandoned by my brothers on that mattress as we all conformed to culture and rituals. However, this identity of being a mbwiti and a woman is one that started growing when my geographical and social positions shifted (Anzaldúa 2015) and I was confronted with the reality of what it means to be a woman in the Oshiwambo-Kavango communities.

I hated that mattress; I would often try and escape it only to be dragged back when new people arrived to pay their respects. I hated my brothers’ male identities that allowed them the choice of hiding in their rooms while I had to encounter and hold the community’s grief. Khosa-Nkatini (2022) stresses on the inhumane weight put on women in African cultures during burial rituals to carry the grief of a whole community whilst then men’s grief is silenced. Women are expected to weep loudly, and men are not to be seen weeping. My brothers had the option of grieving away from prying eyes, whilst I had to hold the grief of a community. There is a normalisation of black women struggle and suffering in black communities as they are expected to carry those communities on their backs.
Taylor (2023) notices the blame put on black women for the underachievement of their communities without considering what colonisation and the removal of black bodies from their families, putting them into slavery, did to the structures of the communities and society. Communities that once knew how to seek comfort in each other now lived fragmented from each other. The awareness of the weight put onto black women became even more apparent to me as I was seated on the mattress. It was present in my awareness of who would be to blame if I did not perform the role of omufiya kadi. In the before, my father was the mbwiti who had left to work for the white man while my siblings remained to be educated by our mother. Thus, it became her duty to educate me on the role. The pain and trauma of the othermother, her strength and creative way of ensuring the survival of her community is dismissed as she is seen as a failure for not educating her children. Her experiences lost in theories that individualise and place more focus on the experience of her offsprings.

In Borderlands, Anzaldua (1987) states that for the woman of colour the world is not a safe place to live in. She is pursued by her own culture and whiteness, men from both races are critical of who is and how she should be. She carries the grief of histories untold, expecting her to fold into traditions and rituals at the same time as she is expected to evolve and be modern. Her racial and gendered identities are experienced as mutually exclusive with very little curiosity into how they intersect. Crenshaw (1989) explored the intersections of these identities by looking at how the court system in the United States of America dealt cases of discrimination brought on by black women. She noted how black women’s cases were harmed when they were looked at through the lens of either women in general (which
predominantly meant white women) or through black people as a race without looking at the nuanced experience of black women.

On the other hand, when speaking into the experiences of black feminists in their own communities, Lorde (2017) notes how in black communities, where racism is an everyday reality, being different from the community is seen as threatening. There is a need for the black community to be seen as unified, that can make it feel impossible to question the rituals that keeps the society functioning especially when these rituals are patriarchal. This expectation for unity causes the dismissal of black woman’s voices when they dare to question cultural rituals. My mbwiti position has allowed me the opportunity to encounter feminist theories and be aware of how oppressive a patriarch society is to women, particularly black women who bear the burden of carrying multiple oppressed identities. But this means that when I question the gendering of grief by the cultural rituals, my pleas fall on deaf ears, because to them I am a mbwiti who has forgotten her culture.

Lorde (2017) shares her experience of having to choose or deny certain aspects of her identity early on in her work so that she could be accepted. I am taught that by being a mbwiti, I cannot possibly belong to the culture, and therefore cannot question when a black man tells me to fix my face so people can feel comfortable to give me their grief. However, I should also be Oshiwambo enough to know how to hold these experiences of grief for the community. In the Oshiwambo culture, I am considered a mbwiti, but their conceptualisation of a mbwiti ceases to exist when ritual is involved, specifically when this ritual requires the involvement
of my gendered identity. I am a mbwiti only up to the point where I am expected to be an Oshiwambo-Kavango woman.

4.5.3 The fragmented woman

According to Collins (2006), in an attempt to replace the negative stereotypes that whiteness created about black women, an image of “the strong black woman” was created that although created out of good intentions, has imprisoned the black woman. This is the image I was expected to perform as I sat on the grief mattress. I had to sit silently with a stoic but open expression on my face and cry but not too much as that would drown out the tears of the community. I felt imprisoned by the grief mattress as it demanded my strength at a time when I had none. I felt forced to fold into performing a version of a mother that they recognised because I knew if I did not, my mother would be blamed for not having educated me on the ways of the culture.

Anzaldua (1987) speaks into how culture gives mixed messages through mothers as the responsibility of educating the child has always been left to the mother. Mothers are expected to teach their daughters to be a strong black woman and still know how to obey when the time comes for her to conform to rituals that oppress and deny her experience of pain. In a moment where I had lost my parents, where I became the orphaned child, I was expected to be a mother to people that I did not recognise. I was expected to be the othermother to a community that had kept me at the edges of their rituals because of the
white coat that covered my black skin. A whiteness that, as I determined earlier, I had put on to ensure my survival, to continue their ways of surviving.

“Not me sold out my people but they me” (Anzaldua 1987, 21). Anzaldúa makes this claim when she speaks into the wounding of women in the name of culture. She makes this claim even as she defends her cultures against those who seek to destroy it. For that is the plight of the woman of colour, to protect the community even as she is forced to defend herself from them. They sold me out by not wanting to acknowledge that I was not the only one who left the olupale. My forefathers who left home to become bonded labours, left women alone in the fields. When I looked at the meme in confusion at the grief mattress, it is because the day before, I had called her “aunty” and she did not correct me. I am not the only one who had experienced the despair of blackness, who sought the electrical light for warmth instead of the roaring fire in the centre of the olupale.

And yet, the weight was still placed on me as I was expected to perform rituals that did not take my lived experience into account, that did not reflect the society that we presently exist in. Fanon (2001) saw colonisation as a system of splitting and organising that would extend to postcolonial countries, including post-apartheid South Africa and in extension Namibia. This organisation of society is present in the way that I am asked to split my identities and conform even as it causes me pain. And so, as a mbwiti, as a woman, I am weighed down not just by the burden placed on my blackness but also my womanhood. I am left alienated not just from the culture but the experience of black motherhood that I had not been given a chance to embrace. I was left grieving my mother, not just as my parent but as
the bridge that had connected me to the culture that succeeded on keeping me on the outside.

However, when I step outside, my experience of being a black woman is forced to conform into whiteness so that it can be seen in singular, the complexity of what it means to be female and black is then denied. I am forced to straighten my hair, to blend my experience of having coily hair into those with blonde hair so that I can be accepted as female, my blackness hidden away for racial debates. There is a demand once again to choose, be black or be feminist, you cannot hold both and how they intersect to create a different experience is not considered. I am left feeling imprisoned by these identities that I had to fragment into to ensure survival.

This form of survival leaves me feeling angry as I scream into what feels like an abyss. Once again, I encounter that anger that lays bubbling under the surfaces of my borderlands. This anger, although feared, shocks me out out of what Anzaldúa (2015) refers to as my habitual stance of complacency. I feel compelled to stand still and listen to its rhythms, to let it roar, just as Lorde (2017) instructed, for it is my silencing of this anger that contributed to my fragmentation. I listen to Audre Lorde as she tells me that as a woman colour, I have been equipped with an arsenal of anger than can potentially be useful against institutional and personal oppression. And so, by allowing myself to I feel this anger here, I give myself permission to use it, not as the tool of destruction that it is feared to be, but a source of empowerment that can be transformed into action, into writing. And through this writing I
come face to face with my fragmentation, I gently stitch them together taking care to allow a
space for a complex existence between each part.
Chapter Five: Conclusion: The Mbwiti and her Fragments

Tambureninge
................ Tambu
Kukatauka kurarera konyima
................... Muntu ogendagura kuhupako koyininke yoyiwa (The one who travels a lot misses out on good things)

I sit at the edge of my bed with my phone in my hand, clinging to it almost desperately as I listen to my grandmother’s voice on the other end of it. I am sitting at the edge of my bed, it felt natural to scoot to the edge of the bed and make space for her on the bed even though she was not physically here. This is where I would sit had we been sitting in the same room, with my hand laying gently on her blanket covered leg as I listened to the stories, she loved telling stories. I flex my hand on the empty bed beside me, almost as if I am touching her. “Madina gange yigo yilye mama” (What are my names grandmother), I ask her. I was named after my great grandmother Sarankuru (Old Sara). I always forget her other names because at my birth, my middle name was changed to honour the doctor who helped my mother deliver me into the world. It was a difficult birth for her. Sometimes when I do remember my mbushe’s (namesake) names, I ask my grandmother anyway so she can talk about Sara.

We have an interesting relationship, my grandmother and me. I call her mama (grandmother) and she calls me meme (mother) because I carry her mother’s name. We oscillate between being a child and her grandmother and a mother and her child. “Meme meme meme” she coos as she is handed the phone, “Kakadona kange” (My little girl), I respond with a huge smile. It feels like a game that we play and yet speaks into a reality that exists between the two of us, exists within both of us.

I am sitting on the edge of an empty bed because I am a thousand miles away and I feel desperately alone. These moments on the phone with her feel frail and miniscule. It is not like I can drag her mattress to the edge of the olupale and watch her face through the flames as she tells me stories of my ancestors. Moments like these are fragile as I miss her soft hands in mine, the cackle in her laugh as she makes fun of my Oshiwambo-Rukwangali language skills. I feel the loss of her even as I hear her voice. I ask desperately because I feel the loss of the olupale and her presence along with mine around that fire. There has been too much loss between us. She carries the loss of
her children the same way I carry the loss of my parents. I am afraid of what I will lose when she passes on. “Mama, madina gange?” I insist again.

There is meaning in our names. I carry the history of tribes in my names, they speak into my maternal and paternal history, spoken and unspoken. My first name invokes my maternal great-grandmother’s gentle spirit, and my surname carries my paternal pride. My surname means “I am not to be disrespected” and I am left wondering what type of disrespect was endured to a point we needed to rebuke it in a name, declare it for decades to come. Whilst my maternal middle name means born of the night and I wonder if they meant me or my great-grandmother. They have meaning, our names.

There is a history that exists in our names. The act of naming something was present in colonisation, where when the Europeans came, they renamed places and gave names to their “subjects”. Names that they could pronounce because ours were not of their language, further remaking our places and people into their image (Thiong’o 2009). However, we clung onto our histories and places by giving our children traditional names to accompany the European ones. They are carefully chosen to represent those gone before us as well as define what is expected of us. These histories brought forth in names can carry the joy of families and all they endured at the same time as they reveal the horrors of what they survived. These histories have created a tension that constantly exists within me, a constant negotiation of being, of identities. I carry the weight of the first woman in her village to be converted to Christianity, and the blood of her granddaughter, who often risked her life to fight the unjust treatment cause by the grandchildren of the people who converted her grandmother.
There is loss in our names. The loss of the ancestors that we long to reconnect with by naming them in our children, the losses of the people that gave their lives so we can be free, so we can call our sons Twamanguluka (we are free). There is a calling back that exists within me through my name, a calling back of my ancestors who knew how to sit at the olupale and tell stories, of Sarankuru who was the matriarch of the family, the other mother to her community, who carried the histories of her people in her name. A name that was gently passed on to children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. There is a deep loss of names and cultures and parents that weighs heavily in me.

Being named as a mbwiti speaks into the loss and tension of these histories, these meanings. There is the weight of the past and the pressure of the future that makes my being in the present almost impossible. The present is uncomfortable because it acknowledges the unstable ground that I stand on with all these identities firmly or sometimes loosely embedded in me. There is a tension in the displacement that I experience within myself but also surprisingly a freedom because I get a chance to reinvent and reidentify as go on my path. This uncertain position of a mbwiti is what compels me to find a way to negotiate between the different worlds that I inhabit and to embrace Anzaldúa (2015)’s nepantla.

Negotiating between the black and white borders creates a new hybrid, a new mestiza that lives between two world (Anzaldúa 2015), that is able to draw the best or even the worst of these worlds. Those who have been pushed out by their tribes and community develop what Anzaldúa (1987) referred to as La facultad, a capacity to see beneath the surface, an
instant sensing that is mediated by the part of psyche that does not require speech but communicates through the use symbols and images, it is where our feelings reside. It is this la facultad that keeps us safe in an unstable ground that is the borderlands. It allows us to shift perspectives when we move from different worlds, from black to white, Oshiwambo to Okavango, black and female. It is la faculta that guided my path through this research.

This la facultad allows us to connect to ourselves as we learn to relate to others. Relational psychotherapists insist that people are wired to be powerfully and inevitably drawn together as they crave intense and persistent involvement with one another (Mitchel 1988). When I listen to what my clients bring in the room, I am not just listening to their singular experiences, but how they relate to others outside of the room and how they bring those others into the room with us. They bring in their subjectivities and the subjectivities of the people that they impact and are impacted by, past and present. My nepantla carries multiple subjectivities, multiple people and experiences that then meets the subjectivities and histories of my clients in the therapy room. I am impacted by the people I have met, the places I have lived and the books I have read and the stories I have been told. The same way that I have impacted those people and spaces. I am connected to all the histories and the names and the ghosts that have existed and exist within me.

5.1 Eewa, na toto ngano zange... And so, I have told my story...

And so here we are, at the end of my ngano. I feel reluctant to say we have reached the end of this ngano as I am still processing it. I feel protective of this tale that I brought to
you because I could not see your eyes when I narrated it. And yet, I am still hopeful that you have felt the weight in my words as I attempted to make sense of myself. I came into this thesis wanting to explore grief and culture, with the authority of knowledge from the white world. I came into this hoping to find a psychological theory that fit the Oshiwambo practice of placing a woman on a grief mattress to be the focus grieving rituals. However, that is not where I ended up, it is not what I found. Instead, I found my fragmented selves sitting quietly on shelves, sitting painfully in hiding as they got overlooked for a more sophisticated knowledge, a more civilised self.

Through this thesis I have connected to conocimiento by allowing the opening of my senses, intentionally inhabiting my body and paying attention to metaphors, bodily sensations that emerged as well as my surroundings (Anzaldúa 2015). Conocimiento is seen as the state of acquiring bodily awareness that guides our path to act and create (Pitts 2020). This awareness is important to allow for the inclusion of other ways of knowing, of being. The awareness I gained in this thesis allowed me to start engaging with the stages of conocimiento, of shifting inner works into public acts (Anzaldúa 2015). I had to acknowledge the pain that lay trapped in my body as I covered it with whiteness and erased the history that it carried. I had to make this pain public and name that I too have been hurt.

The process started with the noticing of my fractures, my fragments, as the grief of my parents stopped me in my tracks and forced me to confront what I had refuse to acknowledge. I was forced to see how parts of me had been buried to allow for my survival, however, this way of surviving denied me and in extension society, the full experience of me.
I had to experience a mourning that went beyond the grief of my parents and allow the cultural and racial trauma that had been buried to flood my senses. This realisation left me feeling wounded and exposed as it forced me to realise I existed on, as Anzaldúa (2015, 125) phrased “the edge of a razorblade that has fragmented you”. Through this realisation, I slowly started the decolonial process, a process that Fanon (2001) described as being disruptive but historical in nature.

I had to lean into this disruption and allow myself to be further pulled apart as I looked for the entry wounds where the spirit of grief and whiteness had entered my body. I had to go beyond theorising about me to allow for a full experience of me. And as Anzaldúa (2015) asserts, only through this awareness of our woundings, are we able to allow for other knowledge to emerge. The awareness of my wounds gave me the opportunity to start looking for my story, a story that put the fullness of me into context.

5.1.1 The Mbwiti in stories

Just like Anzaldúa (2015) predicted, I have struggled to understand the world that I live in. There was a hunger in me as I questioned the theories and literature that were given to me. I notice how theory seemed to overlook my experience and attempted to sum it up in a neat little bow to hide its own violence. I recognised the need to speak of this violence, to acknowledge how it took me away from the stories at the olupale. This hunger grew as I realised how the theories did not answer that silent hum in my spirit and that more was needed. A more that had existed within me, but never had been given limited space to exist in literature and written story.
According to Jones (2016) theory is the language that helps us make sense of our stories, the language that we use to think with and question our experiences. However, sitting in the classroom and learning about psychotherapy theory, I did not see a language that reflected my experiences. I did not see a theory that spoke into my story as a black woman brought up in the after of apartheid, reflected in the pages. And so I had to look for it beyond the books I was asked to read. Taylor (2023) states that when we are tired of the way things are, the exhaustion enables us to look for more, for another way of being, of understanding. This thirst for more led to me Gloria Anzaldúa and the use of storytelling as a creative and healing process.

Anzaldúa (2015) believed that storytelling allows individuals to express their lived experiences, challenges dominant narratives, and fosters understanding and empathy among diverse communities. Storytelling offers an alternative to Eurocentric research paradigms, allowing for more inclusive and equitable forms of knowledge production. By sharing stories of struggle, resilience, and survival, writers can challenge dominant power structures and advocate for social justice and equity. As I went along this thesis, I realised how many stories had already been told but were kept hidden because of what they revealed. I noticed how at times the narrative was changed to diminish the violence they revealed. I noticed how I had to go searching for the stories about me, instead of finding them in the university resource lists that I was asked to read.
Although story telling has always been a part of therapeutic literature, we have not looked at which stories are told and who is telling the story. It then became imperative for me to find a methodology that allowed for my story to be told, one that did not hide certain aspects of it but allowed the fullness of my existence to exist outside of me. My story as a mbwiti has always been told in parts, certain aspects of it was always being excluded. When they spoke into my black experience, my womanhood was hidden, when they spoke into my culture, my language was ignored. Through autohistoria-teoría I was able to bring in the complexity of my experience as a black Oshiwambo-Kavango woman and explore the different facets of this identity. There is a complexity that lays within this identity that has often been dismissed in therapy rooms as it not a known part of the storytelling process.

I grew up listening to stories around the olupale and they are how I understood and made sense of the world. By engaging predominantly with western theories, I learned to forget the stories around the olupale, the voices that told them and the magic that encompasses the experience of existing together. Taylor (2023) speaks into the magic of storytelling and how it enables us to develop the emotional landscape that aids in our attempts to make sense of the human condition. However, this ability is diminished when we only allow for certain stories to be told and to make sense of our lived reality. In bringing my story at the centre of the olupale, I demonstrated the healing that we can allow to happen when we include the full story and not just the one that theoretically makes sense. By bringing the rituals of the olupale here, I validate and respect the spiritual element of the knowledge created around that sacred fire. I honour the Oshiwambo rituals of sharing and creating
knowledge around the olupale instead of dismissing them for the electric lights in the brick house.

In telling my story, I learned to approach my selves with a gentle curiosity instead of attempting to fit them in a story that has already been written by someone else. A question I learned to ask when engaging with clients in therapy is “what happened here?”. Asking that question allows me to hear the story that is being narrated to me. It allows me to make sense of the person, to start connecting the different routes the client has taken to get to where they are. I realised that when it comes to black people, western psychological theory only gives us a part of the story. This makes it impossible for us to make sense of ourselves because the story being told is not complete, and it is not ours. As therapists, we need to start paying attention to what part of the story we are hiding and the impact of naming this erasure in literature.

Through this research I challenge the structures that do not allow other voices to speak by either speaking for them or ignoring their voices. Bringing you to the olupale allowed for an intimacy to be present between us, one that is not often permitted when we encounter each other in the outside as the outside keeps me on its margins. Bringing you to the olupale was intentional as it allowed us to sit together, to explore together and heal together. By asking you to tambura, I invoked my cultural roots of receiving stories and allowing them to inhabit our bodies and be changed by them. It allowed us to go on a journey where I could ask my selves “what happened here?” and sit patiently as they told the story of grief, racial
trauma and cultural woundings. This could only happen by going back to the beginning of my story, a beginning that went beyond my birth.

5.1.2 The Mbwiti in grief.

I first had to encounter my history, to try and understand it and how it played a role in the formation of me. I had to allow myself to mourn something that I was never allowed to experience in the first place. So, by attending to the past, we allow it to bear witness to the present (Eng, Kazanjian, and Butler 2003). We use it to explore what was lost and I realised that it was not a part of me split off and thrown away as I had initially assumed, but a buried part of me that exists, that I never knew. Only through this understanding of bodies beheaded and fragments buried throughout history could I let go of the tension that blocked my grief and allow myself to exist firmly within nepantla.

However, as I continued with my story, before I could embrace my nepantla, embrace being a nepantlera, I was plunged into the “ambiguity and transitional space of negotiating a new identity” (Anzaldúa 2015). I had to look into my mbwiti identity, an identity that was handed to me by the Oshiwambo and Kavango cultures and interrogate the role that whiteness played in the construction of this identity. And just like Anzaldúa (2015) predicted, I started to see the construct of race as an experience and not a solid or boundaried identity. I started to notice how I experienced my blackness differently depending on where and when I was. My curiosity into these spaces and times deepened as I was flooded my memories and metaphors of racial woundings.
As the memories of woundings fought to make themselves known in my conscious mind, I was forced to confront the truth of my being at the fringes of culture. I was devasted to discover the truth of my existence as a mbwiti. The mbwiti as an identity, is created and maintained as a way to both wear the white cloak and reject it, to be in a constant state of grieving, acknowledging what is lost whilst being the embodied entity of what remains. David L. End and David Kazanjian postulated that loss holds a counterintuitive quality as what is lost can only be known by what remains (Eng, Kazanjian, and Butler 2003). We can only know something is lost when the loss is recognised by what remains.

And thus, as a mbwiti, I could also never be too white because then I would lose my blackness and thus completely failing the Oshiwambo rebellion against whiteness. And in doing so disallow the losses experienced from being known, as the complete erasure of my blackness would mean nothing remains. But I can never be too black because then I would be demonstrating the Oshiwambo failure to acclimate to whiteness and ensure their attempts at survival, and thus denying that there are loses to experience. So, as a mbwiti, I have to be what remains and exist in between, I have to hold both and be in a constant state of grief and loss, constantly grieving what I never was whilst becoming something new to continue to the life that remained.

The mbwiti’s grief connects with Gordon (2008)’s concept of the complexity of human beings and of life. She describes complex personhood as a concept that accepts that “all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and
forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others” (2008, 5). This understanding of complex personhood allows us to engage in the interconnectedness of the past and present within our social life. And so, as a mbwiti, holding this grief of a culture that once was, a culture that I was never a part of, I am forced to constantly remember and forget at the same time. This convoluted state of remembering and forgetting allows us to see the impact that grief has on the development and fragmentation of identities.

In this thesis I shared how my identity as a mbwiti carries the loss and trauma of the generation before me. This is a trauma that is often ignored because it reminds whiteness of its violent nature. Dangarembga (2023) stresses the importance of black people being able to not just state that I am hurt, but also name that you have hurt me. By sharing a moment where the colonial past made itself known between me and my mother, I bring into focus the trauma that black people carry in their body, that is silently passed on to children. Trauma that is not allowed space in the spoken world because it carries pain that feels unspeakable. And by making it unspeakable we allow for shame to enter our beings, shame that was never ours to carry.

As therapists, how can we possibly want to heal our clients’ wounds when we do not name the root of the wounding. We need to dig up the graves that hold dismembered parts. We need to state clearly how whiteness has hurt us and the impact of this hurt on the formation of our identities. As a mbwiti, I am in a constant state of transformation, because what I acquired before gets renewed into what I gain and lose in the present. My mbwitiness
holds the grief of fathers who had to leave their families to become slaves in an oppressive labour system and mothers who had to chase away the elephant on their own. How can we hope to help the mbwiti heal if we do not acknowledge what she lost? Anzaldúa (2015) teaches us that for new identities to form, we have to let go of the old ones. But, letting go can be difficult when we are not able to confront the ghosts of the past, ghosts that haunt our therapy rooms because of all the stories that have been killed in them.

This silent haunting was made evident to me as I continued my process of Coyolxauhqui. I noticed how the oscillation of past and present created a despair within me. I craved stable grounds instead of the constantly shifting borderlands. Just as Anzaldúa (2015) predicted this new knowledge of the grief that I carry felt like an attack to my identities. I experienced a sense of helpless in the realisation of what felt like an unbearable burden, a burden of perpetual grief. This perceived burden forced my system to shut down and numbed my fingers as I struggled to engage with the writings in this thesis.

5.1.3 The Mbwiti in theory

I stopped working as I once again looked to whiteness and theory to help make sense of my experience. I looked for a middle-aged, white male therapist hoping that perhaps if I could resolve my fear of him, I would once again be able to engage in the work. I turned back to theory as I attempted to use projective identification to make sense of my experience. If I could convince the white man to take back his projected hatred of me then maybe I could be free from the burden of this traumatic history that lives in my bones. I attempted to use the
same theory that had established me as existing inferiorly to the white man, to make sense of myself. And in doing so, I reestablished myself as the inferior object that is forced to tolerate and hold another’s hatred whilst my experience of said hatred is dismissed.

Conspiring with existing psychological theories, I individualised my trauma and pathologised my fear of the white man as a problem to resolve through him without putting myself outside him and into my historical context. I saw myself as the subject that could only be defined and healed through the white man (Kilomba 2020). Turning to theory and in extension whiteness, to help me define myself, I continued the process of my erasure as a black woman. Existing psychological theories did not pay attention to my existence of being black and female when they developed. Instead, they included me into the experience of being human, even whilst my humanity was being erased through violent acts of racism. Racial acts placed me outside of the human experience and theory perpetuated this violence by dismissing these acts and not speaking into what this positioning does to me. I perpetuated this erasure by not centring my experience (Bhattacharya 2020b), and instead attempted to include it within the theories that had marginalised me and my community.

The white male therapist, when I confessed that I wanted to work through my racial trauma, rejected me as a client and asked me to seek a black or ethnic minority therapist. His rejection of me propelled me into a deeper anger towards whiteness as my wounds made themselves painfully known. The rejection of me in that space shed a light on how whiteness is uncomfortable with being confronted with its own violence. Once again, my experiences of racial trauma, trauma caused by colonisation was being excluded from the therapy room and
expelled to margins where therapist of colour are perceived to exist. His rejection forced me to confront how using theory and whiteness as the only source of enlightenment for my experiences was hurtful to my selves and my culture. I was forced to confront that I had an anger towards myself that highlighted my own violent nature. I realised how hurtful I could be when I placed psychological theory at the centre of my experience instead of the other way around.

This anger then allowed a space for other woundings to come to the fore. The wounding of me as an Oshiwambo-Kavango woman from within and outside of my culture demanded to be felt. I became cognisant of how theory missed the complexity of this existence by not exploring how having a community of mothers impacts our psychological development. The concept of the othermother was not considered when psychoanalytic theorists analysed the relationship between mother and daughter as they worked with the false assumption that there was symbiosis between family and society. This assumption did not consider the different types of families that exist within society. As a result, this created a gap in existing theories as they failed to paint the full picture of the complexity of the human experience by excluding some people from the experience of this humanity (Bhattacharya 2019).

The gap in theory perpetuates the constant pathologisation of the experiences of black people because they fail to fit into existing theories. By theoretically establishing the black person as inferior without looking at the violence of colonialism on culture and identity, we perpetuate the traumatising cycle that keeps people of colour in fear of the therapy
rooms. This fear is rooted in a need for survival as our experiences are erased from rooms that are supposedly set up for our healing. It is hypocritical to develop theories from within a system that oppresses a group of people, and then attempt to use those very theories to heal the trauma caused by the oppression. Healing happens when we bring fragmented parts together, whereas western psychology works to keep its violent parts hidden.

Therapy rooms attempt to take us in one individual at a time as they dismiss the community that we live in, that lives within us. Our need for survival is heightened as we continue to be pathologised and theoretically taken out of our communities. It then becomes pertinent for existing psychological theory to be decolonised and disrupted before we consider them in our formulation of the individual. We need to locate the people that come into therapy room in their historical and cultural context and acknowledge how we have all been impacted by the destructive nature that whiteness can carry. We need to critically look at our use of theory and think about when and how it establishes the people that we meet.

The realisation of the trauma that exists outside of me, draws my attention to how my experience of being a black woman is constantly being funnelled into a single existence of either black or woman. In this existence, my black identity seems to be put on a shelf when I encounter feminist theories, whereas my mbwiti identity seems to disappear when I am expected to act into my womanhood, performing rituals. I am puzzled by how whiteness and patriarchy seem to have conspired to keep the full experience of me hidden. Kinouani (2022) noted how where the black body has been consumed and devalued by colonisation and whiteness, the black female body has experienced this even more so. She declares how
whiteness through patriarchy, has vested interests in keeping my identity as a black woman subservient. This is evidence by the weight put on black women to be the backbone of society even whilst they are being stripped of the communities that support them. In psychological theory, othermothers are dismissed as the single mother becomes the sole container for the complex processes of the black infant. And thus, I am left having to defend myself within and outside of my cultures.

The erasure of some of my experience and the funnelling of the others leaves me feeling angry. This was an anger that I had been taught to fear all my life for it touched on the vulnerability hidden beneath the blank expressions. Lorde (2017) defined anger as an incomplete form of human knowledge. There is an incomplete knowledge in my anger that I needed to explore in this thesis, and this exploration could only be done by centring my experiences at the root of the theory that insisted on dismissing it. I had to go back to my own roots and use the tools I learned at the olupale to centre myself within this research. The centring of my experience forced me to confront the mask of whiteness that lay coating my black skin.

I had to face my fear of you in this thesis as I grappled with how to confront you with the violence that you have inflected on me through years of research that has excluded the full experience of me. I had to confront how Oshiwambo-Kavango traditions at times demand that that I denounce whiteness and go back to my roots whilst ignoring the persistent presence of it in our existing reality. Foluke Taylor speaks into the fear of speaking from an in-between space when blackness wants to return to the before and whiteness demands we
forget and move forward (Taylor 2023). I feel this fear at the end of my ngano as I try and make sense of all that I have revealed, all that I have shared. As I sit uncomfortably in the borderlands holding both the past and present whilst facing an unknown future, curious about how it will unfold.

This confrontation with you allowed me to acknowledge that my fear was also of myselfs, and the parts that lay buried. I feared that they would swallow me whole as I engaged in this disordered process of decolonisation, of seeing myself as separate and yet still entangled in my racial and gendered identities. I had to confront this fear by living the story of my blackness. “Without a black past, without a black future, it was impossible for me to live in my blackness” (Fanon 1986, 117). I had to confront how in learning to survive, I had learned to covet what the white man had instead of learning to love myself.

5.2 Radical Love

Kinouani (2022) sees radical love as the cure for the trauma that racism and whiteness has caused. hooks (2012) defined love as an action rather than emotion and insists that acts of love are a transformational force within society. She connects the practice of love to the pursuit of self-acceptance, and in a wider social context, justice. I feel this love in my grandmother’s gentle and strong voice. In acknowledging how her spirit cannot rest when she knows I am in pain. Her connection to me causing her to wake up early to find me plants from our field, a field that we cultivated when I was a child but now lays barren with concrete buildings erected in place of the mahangu blades. She went scavenging around the buildings to find her plants, plants that healed her pain when she was my age. I feel this love in
acknowledging how, in a moment of pure terror, my mother dragged me down with her to shield me from the ghosts that haunted her. In acknowledging that I am able to exist in this moment in my writing corner because of the people that had survived.

And through these acts of love, I realised how connected I am, not just to these identities but the history and trauma of the Oshiwambo and Kavango people. I can take a deep breath and draw strength not from the trauma and pain that floats from the fire into the sky, but from the people sitting around the fire. I gain strength from the sarungano that gently tells her story and in doing so leaves a part her wisdom within me. I can embody each of these identities and sit quietly as I listen to them speak. I can stay curious with the questions that emerged at the beginning of this thesis, answering some while pondering on others.

And so, with the awareness of this love and with arms full of yitare (firewood), as the work of women and men of colour datemenange oshela along my path, I made my way back to the olupale ready to explore the hidden and painful parts. I lit the fire and allowed the stories of bravery and pain to invade my senses and reveal the symbols and metaphors of my ngano. Anzaldúa (2015) encouraged us to push against boundaries that have outlived their usefulness and prevent us from extending beyond ourselves. With this radical love coursing through me I pushed against the theory that sought to establish me as inferior. I examined the ways in which my blackness kept being established as less than and the violence that ensued when I did not act into this inferiority. I spoke into how theory limits my experiences by not including them into the therapy room. The lack of curiosity into my cultural beings, into the othermothers that have raised me, placed me on the edges of the grief mattress,
unable to firmly sit and hold the grief of a community. Thus, demonstrating the limits of theory when it removes us from the communities that nourish us.

By exploring the limits of theory in this thesis, I questioned how psychodynamic theories conceptualises the experiences of black women and motherhood in the therapy room. I brought in Collins (2006)’s concept of othermothers to further develop our understanding of the role and its impact on black children and their identity formation and fragmentation. By bringing this concept into psychotherapy theories, I demonstrated how much is erased and lost when we funnel black women into existing unilaterally instead of allowing space for our multifaceted identities. This loss is further exposed by the constant grief that I hold as a mbwiti and how I was forced to silence it. Exploring this constant grief here allowed me to reconceptualised grief not as a fixed psychological state that can be fully processed but a constant negotiation of loss and survival. Sitting in this continuous oscillation between what was lost and what remains, and experiencing the grief held by my fragmented identities, allowed me to reconnect to Benjamin (2017)’s understanding of recognition. As I learned to recognise the loss and survival that my mother’s blank face was communicating, I demonstrated how when we recognise this grief within ourselves, it enables a mutual recognition between us and “the other” as we meet in the violence of whiteness and the ways in which we survive it.

In meeting my own epistemic violence first, I demonstrated how healing can happen in the therapy room if therapist can meet the violence of existing theories on their own personhood and the impact this has on the space created with the client. When we
acknowledge our own cultural and historical losses first, we create space for the full existence of whoever shows up in the room to enter with them, allowing us to meet them as both hosts and guests at the olupale where we bear witness to what our bodies and minds remember (Anzaldúa 2015). Exploring cultural and historical grief here, enabled me to negotiate between cultures, theories and identities (racialised and gendered), and confirmed the potential that psychotherapy and its theories have when they do not exclude the impact that cultural loss and colonisation have on the individual’s ability to experience grief.

In this autohistoria – teoría, I allowed the blaze from the fire to guide me as I magically translated spiritual whispering into words on my laptop screen. This engagement with the magic of the olupale allowed me to tap into my different selves, the ones that carried theory and the ones that carried culture and experience, amalgamating them into a brew that carries the fragmented and reconnected parts that exist within me. This amalgamation carried my different languages into this piece of work, allowing me to be present as each fragmented part revealed itself. Language has often been used to exclude (Keating 2015), by letting them speak in their own language, using the words that felt present for them, I gave them the space to feel heard. I stayed with the words that could not be spoken out loud, that cannot be translated into English, to allow us to hold space for the unknown and validate it even if it does not translate into our known realities.

I allowed myself to leave the therapy room filled with theory and travel to the olupale to meet the selves sitting there, to hear their story. The olupale holds the gift of intimacy, a gift that allows us to bring the trauma we experience outside and meet in a hallowed space
of sharing and connection. This connection at the olupale allowed me to go on a journey where I met other nepantleras in the books they have written. I engaged with their words and followed into their footsteps, footsteps that have been ignored or erased by more “civilised” ways of being. I found them in conversations held in coffee shops, meadow walks, apartment kitchens, WhatsApp texts and calls, and supervision sessions, as we walked along the bridge between culture and whiteness, with curiosity instead of fear. We attended to ourselves and the other as we allowed the fragmented voices to gently speak into their pain and allowed the bridge to be our home.

As I learned that I am not alone on the bridge, I started to attend to myself with love and compassion. I sat quietly holding the five-year old’s hand as we lay at the edge of the ocean, watching the cold-water rush towards us in fear and hope. I grabbed the ten-year-old as she dragged her feet to the gold row in terror, gently pulled her in for a hug before she sat down. I watched in amazement as mother and daughter kept coming together in moments of fear and pain, kept desperately trying to mutually recognise themselves and each other, in a society that chose to dismiss their struggles as well as the lengths that they had gone to ensure their survival. And I gently laid down next to the woman on the mattress who has lost her parents, safety net, who has been thrust, naked and exposed, into the chaos of culture, whiteness, blackness and womanhood.

And in writing of this thesis, I offer this radical love to you. I ask you to pay attention to the words that are spoken and unspoken and the impact they have on our way of relating. I hope you pay attention to the stories that are told and hear the ones that are not allowed
to be spoken. I hope you see the stories that are carried silently into social and political spaces and the impact of this silence in those spaces. I ask you to consider how language has the capacity to co-create new meaning and how this meaning is limited when we only listen to the languages that we know. I am hoping we both pay attention to how we use language to silence people and what we lose in this silence. I hope we allow ourselves to feel this loss.

When you read theory, I hope you do so cognisant of who is being spoken about and who is being left out. By bringing you to the olupale, I hope you have learned to see the knowledge that lays in rituals and cultures often ignored. I hope you leave the therapy rooms and classrooms and meet these knowledges where they are, around a sacred fire that carries the joys and sorrows of the people around it. I hope you take the soil from the olupale so that you can hear what has been spoken about for centuries before your arrival. I hope you are able to pay close attention to the ways in which people of colour cover their skin with white masks to survive. And that we are able to gently and with radical love peel this mask off to allow ourselves to breathe and to exist.

And as the ngano draws to the end, I sit with the complexity of all that was revealed. Through this autohistoria-teoria, I learned to sit with the multifaceted nature of the grief that lays within my identity as a mbwiti. I unravelled the known psychological theory of my personal grief and discovered the silenced racial trauma and cultural loss that lay forgotten as a way of maintaining whiteness, to allow for my survival. I discovered that in order for theory to heal the mbwiti, it has to allow space for it to meet not just my violence towards culture but its own. And sit with the tension of how a theory meant for healing can wound
our minds in a way that our bodies can feel. By engaging in the process of Coyolxauhqui – of pulling myself apart, I allowed for the different parts to speak into the stories of their woundings. And through Coyolxauhqui, I went to moments of wounding and allowed myself to embody the images and metaphors evoked around the olupale, allow for the spiritual act of sharing stories to be an act of creating healing. I discovered that it is this intricate process of pulling apart and delicately speaking into stories that allows us to acknowledge and stay with grief as a way into our healing.

I am dreaming and, in my dream, I am both the woman and little girl. We are flying in a helicopter and the woman has surrounded the little girl with mazoka (snakes) as she sleeps. Now, the me that exists outside this dream is terrified of mazoka, and I know that the little girl will be too when she wakes up to find herself surrounded by them. But as the woman I am not scared of them, and I find that I am able to communicate with them. I tell them about my worries. “I know she’ll be scared, she does not like snakes.” I tell them, my gentle gaze not leaving the sleeping child. “It will be fine” they reassure me with confidence. But as soon as we land, the little girl jolts awake and seeing the mazoka, I scream, jump off the helicopter and run away. I feel both the little girl’s terror and the peace within the woman. As the woman, I cannot get off the helicopter because I have a journey to complete. And so, I send the mazoka after my little girl. “Protect her!” I scream feeling worry and comfort. “We will!” they answer as they follow me, the little girl... and I wake up with tears on my face.

Opuwo...... mwatambura?
References


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