

# This is Not an Epic

*Mercia Kandukira*

After the war, nothing stayed linear, not even the passed-down memories. Our story was fractured, and because it was fractured, nobody believed it, but I swear, we live in its aftermath. There's no place safer than inside the skull for us. We are always waiting, shifting like shadows through life, invisible to a great extent, yet not invisible enough. We want to be seen and heard, yet we do not want to be observed, studied, and interviewed. To be asked who we are is perhaps the hardest question to answer, because we do not even know which part of the tree we fell from. We are the scattered twigs of the scattered branches which were trampled on during the struggle for our land and home. We ask ourselves, staring at mirror reflections, the question we cannot answer to save our lives. Who are we? This is the question Mbukamuna and I ask ourselves over long international phonecalls.

I am not sure about Mbukamuna, but I have trouble answering the question: who are you? I was raised by my father who is a Damara, and I didn't know much about my mother's side of things. For Ovaherero people, this question of who one is, demands more than just the blurting out of a name. The asker expects to hear a thorough genealogy starting from your parents down to the last ancestor who fell at Ohamakari. To answer the question is to perform an epic rooted in your birthplace, remembering the fallen valiant— and the refugee ancestors who carry in them the aftermath of the Ovaherero Genocide. This is not an epic.

After the cannon ball hit the tree between 1904-1908, dismembered branches were scattered everywhere. Some dried up in the desert's arms and under scantily shaded trees. The scent of their lives leaving summoned picky vultures, and scavengers who had grown a taste for dainty bits of human flesh, but not all were devoured, and that's why I'm here. I'm turning rocks, running four fingers through the pebbly soil of my memories, searching for fragmented truths my mother told to complete the puzzle of our family history. Only a complete picture will put my bewilderment to rest.

It is the year 2022 I am 33 until October. I call my younger sister, Mbukamuna from Binghamton, New York where I study writing. We talk about our mother who died two years before on a hot January in a rural hospital, in Namibia's Outjo district. My mother knew pieces of our history, likely as large as the pacific plate itself. I only have the bits I remember from inattentive listening. I call Mbukamuna wishing I'd asked Mom more questions, listened more, been more present, but at least I have my sister, who's spend a little more time with our mother since I've been away. I want her to tell me every single word she remembers our mother saying. I want to hear about every sigh and every tear. I want to know about how our lineage got scattered after the resistance, because our mother told her.

In our conversation, the name Karorineh comes up and we establish it's a corruption of the name "Caroline." According to what Mbukamuna remembers our mother telling her, Caroline was our great, great grandmother who survived the Ovaherero Genocide in 1904, and would eventually beget our great grandmother Kaetekara, in the town of Usakos. We do not know Caroline's original name, let alone her roots. Mbukamuna

tells me Caroline “fled the gun” and lost her son in the pandemonium. We know this son as Kenaendo, the name means: he has no grave.

After the talk with my sister, I lie down on my narrow bed as though on a stretcher, searching and searching my mind for more clues. I want to see Caroline’s face, but the name is so confusing, that a face is hard to picture. I want to know what happened to Kenaendo, I want to know under what circumstances Kaetekara was born, and how she ended up in the village of Otjivero with a light skinned grandpa named Skepie. Could gunshots be heard when my great grandmother was born? If so, I want to feel the wetness of water breaking, and the pang of a baby diving headfirst into the earth’s man-made turmoil. This is how hard I imagine, because maybe if I squeeze enough, I’ll see the truth.

After these conversations with my sister, I start having vivid dreams. One night I dream I am digging up the land behind a small house on what looks like a ranch I’d just acquired in Namibia. My aim is to make a garden and I unearth a corpse in the plowing process. The dream world tells me the corpse is a foremother and I fall into a trance whereupon the spirit released from this corpse possesses me. My body trembles as the spirit settles in. In this dream I am receptive of this mother spirit I have unearthed. Hours after I am awake, I still see her smoky figure hovering above me in the night. It’s usually the dreams I remember that trouble me for analysis, and I only have guesses for who that foremother might be.

In another dream, more a scenario, that comes to my half sleeping mind at 9 in the morning, I hold an exam script in my hand. I have a good grade despite getting the basics wrong. I couldn’t define the word “migration.” Everything in this dream is monochromatic like distance, like pastness, and for some reason my aunt Ndjese is here, and she has a massive dictionary tucked under one armpit, and what seems to be an open history book in the other. She’s reading a part about a slave-owning black man named Scenário. The ‘a’ has an accent and we attempt to pronounce this name, hardening the soft [c].

Our perspective changes as we realize that we are behind a hedge plant, behind a chain-link metal fence and are looking at a plantation house through a spot where the leaves are sparse. Scenário pops out of the plantation house with his cropped hair. Black and white people spill out of the house behind him and onto the lawn before us. As if coming towards us but then making a sharp left turn a white man carrying, a suitcase-shaped polythene bag with a black man’s torso enclosed in it, comes into view. I notice the pectoral and abdominal muscles of the disembodied torsos look defined like a tortoise’s shell; the black skin bled out. Then another white man comes out with the exact same bag, and another and another, until they’re all headed up a hill, leaving the plantation house, followed by marching black legs — all men, bought from Scenário. I ask my aunt why they have torsos in the bags. “Are they samples?”

I don’t get an answer from her. Perhaps I’m the inquisitive child who doesn’t get the answers. Who’s been taught basic things and not the deep things.

When my partner texts me “Good morning sweetie!” that morning, I tell him thank goodness you texted. I tell him the dream about torsos, and he says:

“Wild dream, Yikes”

“I know, it was kind of disturbing.” I respond. “Me and others were reading from books and witnessing these events simultaneously... for me it’s a commentary on witnessing history through reading about it... if it makes any sense.”

“It makes sense—interesting CNF paper playing with the concept of memory and sight.”

“Maybe I should write it yes. The complexity here is that the memory isn’t mine since I haven’t witnessed it first-hand but extant memorabilia aka archived photos and human remains have a similar effect on the brain as witnessing an atrocity in real life.”

“True, but that’s exactly the problem you take up: you witness the event but it’s not your memory.”

“Right,”

“This is also, of course, the basic problem with historical interpretation.”

“Elaborate a little please.”

“Well, history is always contested. A historian is almost always writing about something they didn’t see but was only described, and they are tasked with turning it into a narrative that, likely, no one at the time would have offered.”

“Aaah, yeah. Thanks for telling me this. I had this thought briefly as I read Olusoga’s description in *The Kaiser’s Holocaust*, of the day the new German Governor arrived in Walvis Bay. He has a vivid scene, complete with sensory details that I credit to his imagination.”

Godless, motherless, and alone with a future I’m not sure what it contains, I sit on my reading chair. I’m nine pages into *How to Be Animal* by Melanie Challenger. I’m crying for more reasons than I can articulate. When I feel my throat tired from the bulk of my emotions, I think of people to call. My mother comes to mind, but she’s a different kind of asleep. She’s the one I’d have loved to talk to. She often had sleepless nights, and I was able to call and find her despite the six-hour time difference, we would just talk. I don’t remember a time I called her because I was sad and wanted to vent, except maybe now. Her existence made me want to do so much more than I could do. Knowing I could return to Namibia, and she’d be there in Outjo, full of stories old and new to tell gave me so much to look forward to. As I age, I see my mother’s likeness in myself. At least half my face looks like hers and perhaps half my sadness is hers too.

I think of Uongasane, my youngest brother whose name means collect one another and it makes me think of picking up sticks, like in that nursery rhyme I learned in an Omaruru boarding school: One, two, buckle my shoes; three, four knock on the door; five, six, pick up sticks; seven eight, lay them straight; nine ten, a big fat hen. In Uongasane’s name I see a scattering of valuables; we each must collect and pile up together. His name feels like the only lingering message my mother had for the four children she’d brought into the world: “Gather

one another.” Kenouho, Mbukamuna, Katuta and Uongasane, these are our names in the order of our births. I’m the lookout for I’m the little one with eyes as my name, Kenouho dictates. Mukamuna’s name is rooted in the afterlife — “your breath is what sees the ancestors in the end.” Katutua is the shepherd for that’s what his name means, a guide, a protector. I think of my little brothers and sister all the time. Every single day, they occupy my mind even more than my need to be held together when I feel like a mountain crumbling down because the things which should be solid are now molten.