

Haunted by Denial

On a sweltering August afternoon in 2018, my uncle and I walked into a Namibian national museum mandated to narrate the long durée of the country's history from the prehistoric to the modern present. The previous week, I had watched a handover ceremony on television in which Germany returned the skulls of genocide victims to Ovaherero community representatives for burial. I wanted to know how the museum was stewarding those sacred remains.

Shortly after entering, we encountered a white man who we quickly identified as a member of the museum's staff—one we later learned had held that post since before Namibia's independence in 1990. My uncle introduced us, telling the staffer I was writing a dissertation about German colonization and the 1904 Ovaherero and Nama genocide. The man quickly retorted, "Don't you know the entire genocide is a hoax!" He proceeded to candidly share with us, a pair of Black African strangers, his grand theory of how the British fabricated the "so-called genocide" as a way of discrediting Germany. He even recommended German-speaking farmer and amateur historian Hinrich R. Schneider-Waterberg's mammoth denialist text *Der Wahrheit eine Gasse: Zur Geschichte des Hererokrieges in Deutsche-Südwestafrika 1904–1907* (roughly translated to *The Gap in the Truth: The Story of the Herero War in German Southwest Africa 1904–1907*) as a much-needed historical correction to my work.

When his denialism of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide turned into Nazi apologia—Frantz Fanon aptly articulated the intimacies between antisemitism and negrophobia—the stiff upper lip of my already flimsy scholarly resolve began to waver. My need to perform an *objective* sociological documentation of

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this staffer's denialism crumbled as I held the implications of his words for the country and institution in which he wielded no small power over collective memory. Fighting back tears, I tersely thanked him for his time. I walked quickly out of the museum, and began to sob in the unforgiving Windhoek sun. Like Fanon, "at the crossroads between Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep."¹

This curator was neither my first brush with institutionalized genocide denialism nor with denialism(s) in the Namibian context. But I was struck by his frankness. It forced me to realize that denialism is not simply a falsehood or an incorrect knowing: it is its own epistemic condition with its own rationale and empiricisms. In the years that followed, as I became more familiar with the affected communities' struggle for recognition by the German state, I have come to recognize the constellation of *registers* of denialism: Germany making reference to the "alleged genocide" and "alleged concentration camps" in court while confining genocidal responsibility solely to contemporary definitions is, unequivocally, denialism.²

Marc Nichanian wrote that "genocide is not a fact" because it is "the very destruction of the fact."³ This is not to give credence to denials (they would persevere regardless), but to emphasize how denialism represents a matrix of competing geopolitical, ethno-racial, cultural, religious, and other regimes of facticity and memory that comprise the event-process-structure of genocide. As a recurrent feature of genocide, denialism is an epistemicidal form, a recursive murder of knowledge and destructible evidential truth that supplements and reiterates the physical act of killing.

1. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 119.

2. At a joint Ovaherero Traditional Authority and Nama Traditional Leaders Association press conference on August 5, 2020, the now-late Ovaherero Paramount Chief Vekuii Rukoro challenged the oft-repeated qualification that the atrocities enacted upon Ovaherero and Nama peoples would, *today*, qualify as genocide. As he reminded us, there were pre-1948 Genocide Convention prohibitions on mass violence: "Our lawyers argue that the court should apply international law of the era, including the 19th century prohibition on genocide, recognized by the restatement of international law of 1868 . . . Section 535 of the restatement . . . states clearly: 'Wars of extermination and annihilation against peoples and tribes capable of life and culture are violations of international law' . . . [Don't] the Hereros and Namas of the time fall within this definition? . . . Unless you want to argue that, . . . we were not humans, we did not have life, and we did not have culture, we were objects. Which is exactly what the Germans are arguing in court" (my emphasis).

3. Marc Nichanian, *The Historiographic Perversion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 1.

I am haunted by denialism, and denialism itself is a haunting. After my run-in with the denier in the museum, and after visiting Armenia and learning about genocide denial at the level of the nation-state, my archival engagement hovers somewhere between *séance* and exorcism.⁴ Investigating these spectral traces, whether the arrogant noise of imperial might or the indigenous African metaphysics that erupt normative space-time and scientific empirics, means following a sociogenic path that “lead[s] to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life.”⁵

Competition between recognition and denial is necessarily zero-sum, and the stakes of remembering are the stakes of Black life itself. Jackie Sibblies Drury wrote that “the most tragic death is the death that is elided over as history is canonized”; this elision is “if not a fate worse than death, perhaps a death worse than death.”⁶ Denialist confabulations haunts victim-survivor communities as a trauma that re-kills the dead and re-wounds the living who are engaged in a perpetual struggle for recognition and reparations. Against this, insurgent haunting by various ancestor-ghosts offers “its own form of resolving.”⁷ It is toward this resolution with those ancestors that my own historical engagement is aimed.

4. The official position of the Turkish government (and the material-ideological foundation of Turkish nationalism) is to deny its responsibility for the genocide of Armenians (and Assyrians and Pontic Greeks) or otherwise to assert that the mass deportations were legitimate and necessary military-state policy. See Fatma Müge Göçek, *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present and Collective Violence against the Armenians 1789–2009* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

5. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

6. Jackie Sibblies Drury, *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, from the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884–1915* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

7. Eve Tuck and C. Ree, “A Glossary of Haunting,” in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, eds. Stacey Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013), 639–58, on 642.