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Can the archive restore you A study of three works Mpho Khwezis A Piece of Paper 2020 Abri de Swardts Ridder Thirst 2018 and Eva Knopfs Majubs Reise 2013

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Can the archive restore you? A study of three works: Mpho Khwezi's *A Piece of Paper* (2020), Abri de Swardt's *Ridder Thirst* (2018) and Eva Knopf's *Majubs Reise* (2013)

ABSTRACT

The article is intended to contribute to a growing debate about how to approach and interact with problematic archives. The article examines three works made by a photographer and two filmmakers, respectively, based on their artistic interactions with their respective archives. Their works were brought to annual workshops in 2019 and 2020 organized by Reframing Africa, *co-hosted by the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and the Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg. The central objective of* Reframing Africa *continues to be lobbying for the preservation, restoration and repatriation of films made by African filmmakers on the continent and in the diaspora. But there has also been growing interest among participants in the colonial and other racially inflected archives of the moving/still image. The main title of the article, 'Can the archive restore you?', is intended to echo that of Nigerian filmmaker* Onyeka Igwe's *short film* No Archive Can

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Restore You *(2020). The article argues that the engagement by the authors of the three works with deeply problematic visual archives has produced significant insights into their construction and the ways in which they represent 'reality' and 'truth'. Each of the three artistic interventions does suggest how even the bleakest archival materials, however, can be used as the basis for activating the restorative potential of the archive. The works discussed are Mpho Khwezi's* A Piece of Paper, *Abri de Swardt's* Ridder Thirst *and Eva Knopf's* Majubs Reise.

INTRODUCTION

This article analyses three works by emerging artists who engage with visual archives in ways suggestive of productive strategies for undermining harmful master narratives as well as broadening previously exclusionary conversations and foregrounding subjects that were marginalized in the original material. The three works were not made for the *Reframing Africa* project described below, of which I was a founding member, but were brought to conferences held under its auspices because in their own work, many participants were tackling archives of visual material that promoted racist ideologies, and they were attracted to a forum where they could discuss their endeavours. For theoretical inspiration, I have drawn on the work of Onyeka Igwe and the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC) and a collection of essays edited by Leora Farber and Claire Jorgensen (Farber and Jorgensen 2017).

I proceed in Part 1 by introducing *Reframing Africa*, then move to observations about Igwe's work, followed by a very brief note on the BAFC, members of which have been active in establishing and contributing to *Reframing Africa* and, lastly, I gesture to insights yielded from artistic interventions discussed in essays in the Farber-Jorgensen collection (Farber and Jorgensen 2017). Exposure to these sources has helped me clarify what I first felt only instinctively. Despite radical differences, a common purpose and similar outcomes are present in the three works to be discussed.

In Part 2, I analyse each of these works in terms of authorial intentions and artistic strategies employed to reach a greater understanding of the archive with which authors were working. As a conventional historian who has spent her professional life working with archival material and participating in theorizing about the archive as generic institution (Kros et al. 2022b), I regard the three works with some envy. Artists, unlike historians, in response to distortions and absences in archival materials can choose to efface or alter images and sonic material and insert their own images, voices and sometimes themselves. Another enviable power of artistic license – as with Igwe – is the freedom to show oneself shamelessly getting down and dirty with archival materials (Igwe 2017). Historians usually feel obliged to show themselves only after they have already cleaned up and signed out of the archive and are giving a retrospective account from a cool distance. Igwe would, no doubt, respond that that is precisely the problem with historians.

PART 1: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Reframing Africa

Reframing Africa was started in 2016 by academics at Wits for various reasons, principally the desire to respond productively to the demands for decolonizing the curriculum made by students at Wits as well as other universities in

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South Africa during the so-called Fallist movements in the 2015–16 period (essentially protests against racist and other exclusionary features of the university system).[1] One of these academics, my colleague Pervaiz Khan, a curator, theatre maker and artist, had spent a significant part of his life and career in Birmingham in the United Kingdom contributing to Black and Third World cinema and had interacted with many intellectuals and artists in the field, including the famous Jamaican-born cultural theorist Stuart Hall. Khan had long wanted to find a way of bringing former colleagues and associates from several countries – many of them members of the African diaspora – together with current colleagues and students. One of his long-term associates was eminent scholar and film curator Aboubakar Sanogo, originally from Burkina Faso and currently a professor in film studies at Carleton University in Ottowa, Canada, who was to make a substantial contribution to *Reframing Africa*. In conversations with Khan, Sanogo expressed enthusiasm about building more support in southern Africa for the preservation of Africa's film archives. Representing the Pan-African federation of film (FEPACI) as its North American regional secretary, Sanogo was working in partnership with Martin Scorsese's Film Foundation and the United National Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on the task of selecting African films for preservation and restoration according to their cultural, historical and artistic significance (IndieWire 2017). Sanogo, like many other filmmakers and scholars, was appalled by how difficult it was to find films made by the great filmmakers of post-independent Africa in institutions on the continent itself (IndieWire 2017; see also Sanogo 2018; Givanni 2023).

Filmmaker and scholar Reece Auguiste, currently a professor in critical media studies at the University of Boulder, Colorado, also played a key role in helping to establish *Reframing Africa*, and valuable support was forthcoming from Auguiste's co-founder of the BAFC (1982–98), Ghanaian-British filmmaker and scholar John Akomfrah. The BAFC was a group of diaspora artists and filmmakers in Britain who came together in the early 1980s hailing from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. Their manifesto declared their intention of making a considered and innovative contribution to independent Black filmmaking (Akomfrah 2021). Starting with tape-slide performances and film programmes, the collective went on to make its own films, videos, photographs and installations in which its ambition to challenge dominant modes of representation and common assumptions about British society, articulated by Akomfrah in 1983, was realized (Akomfrah 2021). As Nina Power has emphasized, the archive was central to much of the BAFC's work (Power 2011). In its first film, *Handsworth Songs* (Akomfrah 1986), the BAFC intended, as Akomfrah had suggested (2021), to break down the barrier between film producer and passive consumer by encouraging and providing opportunities for viewers to interrogate dominant media representations of social unrest in the wake of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's cuts on public expenditure, particularly on housing and education (Mercer 2015; Petley 2020; Power 2011). Khan, who had contributed to some of the BAFC's works, knew Auguiste and Akomfrah well and was excited about creating opportunities for them to participate in dialogues with continentally based African artists and filmmakers.

The half dozen or so founders of *Reframing Africa* were academics but, in several cases, were also seasoned filmmakers or visual arts practitioners. An invitation extended to Lekgetho Makola, the director of the Market Photo Workshop, was well received and the project benefitted substantially from

1. The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect the approaches or perspectives of other members of the organizing group responsible for *Reframing Africa*. *Reframing Africa* was made possible by an NRF research grant facilitated by the Heads of the History Workshop at Wits and the Wits School of Arts, Professors Noor Nieftagodien and Brett Pyper, respectively. We are also very grateful for a publishing subsidy awarded by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences to support publication of our book, *Reframing Africa? Reflections on Modernity and the Moving Image* (2022).

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bringing the workshop on board. Thus far, the main function of *Reframing Africa* has been to plan, conceptualize and organize annual conferences and to edit and collate publications arising from papers that were presented by practitioners and scholars responding to thematically focused calls for papers. To date, *Reframing Africa* has hosted four public annual conferences based in Johannesburg. The first book emanating from the project was published at the end of 2022 (Kros et al. 2022a).

There was considerable local interest in Johannesburg and elsewhere in South Africa as well as abroad in setting up a project to raise awareness of African filmmakers and to talk about how to restructure film studies and other university curricula to make their works more central; to join forces with others concerned about the state of the archives in Africa; and to share ideas and materials about innovative filmmaking. Conference participants also sometimes brought presentations or papers that focused on visual materials produced under colonial regimes – that is in the period when most of Africa was under colonial control from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries – rather than only the post-independent works the organizers had at first envisaged. Some conference presentations, like those to be discussed here, also examined archival materials that owed their origin to other systems that had explicitly promoted and legitimized racial inequality and oppression, which did not fall in a strict sense into the colonial period, apartheid South Africa for one.

The most recent *Reframing Africa* conference was held virtually in 2020. In the next year, the urgency for creating a concerted movement to salvage and protect African film archives was heightened. On 18 April 2021, a bushfire came sweeping down from the mountain against whose lower flanks the University of Cape Town (UCT) is built, releasing sparks that a gusting wind carried onto the campus, randomly igniting materials it touched. The Jagger Library on the upper campus was the greatest casualty. Its beautiful old reading room was totally gutted, and the African Studies Film Collection stored mostly on DVDs, characterized by curator Clive Kirkwood as one of the most extensive in Africa, was virtually destroyed (Kirkwood 2021).

Onyeka Igwe's No Archive Can Restore You

I first became aware of Onyeka Igwe's *No Archive Can Restore You* (Igwe 2020b) when it was mentioned at a webinar on 7 February 2023 convened by the Pan-Africa Cinema Archive, founded by June Givanni (Givanni 2023). The webinar featured a panel of eminent African filmmakers comprising Jihan El-Tahri, Ali Essafi, Nii Kwate Owoo and Jean-Marie Téno who discussed the difficulties they had experienced in gaining access to film archives in Africa and the terrible state of deterioration that had frequently greeted them when they finally succeeded. Once I had watched Igwe's short film and started to read her reflections on the archive, I realized that her insights and observations would help me round up my rather diffuse ideas on the three works I am going to discuss shortly and to make some general deductions from my separate analysis of each of them. I want to stress that I am not about to embark on a survey of Igwe's oeuvre here. I seek to draw attention to some of her observations about working with a very problematic film archive and to highlight approaches she has adopted, as she says, to try to detach images that were generated by the machinery of colonialism from their original contexts and to see if it is possible for the emancipated images to suggest things to her

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audiences that are very different from those that were intended (Igwe and Stokely 2019; Igwe 2020a).

In Igwe's *No Archive Can Restore You* (2020b), the camera pans almost tenderly over the detritus left in the abandoned building of the former Nigerian Film Unit (NFU) in Lagos, replete with images of microphones festooned with cobwebs, rolls of celluloid film lying abandoned on the floor, scattered papers, rusted film reels and a clock that gives the impression of having stopped long before. The camera's lingering – almost visceral – attachment to what is lost or what is on the point of being lost calls to mind another of Igwe's works in which the camera is set up to record her activities while she studies a colonial report in the British National Archives in London (Igwe 2017, 2020a). At one point, her hand and fingers are shown quite vigorously seeking out the tactile sensation of old Dutch wax prints from which 'traditional' African clothing worn across West Africa was made and then also touching the pages of the report itself in a similarly exploratory way. Igwe explains that she intentionally opens herself to what can be a messy physical encounter with the archive, visualizing it as an exchange because when 'you touch the archive […] the archive touches you back' (Van Biema 2020: 50).

Igwe has worked in a range of archives and museums (Budd 2020), including the Colonial Film Unit, the NFU's predecessor, which she describes as having carried out the ideological work of colonialism (Igwe and Stokely 2019). Tom Rice argues that the NFU, established in 1949, which showed instructional health and education films to audiences across the country through its mobile cinema apparatus as well as producing newsreels and documentaries for international and domestic consumption, largely failed in its express intention to shake off its colonial legacies (Rice 2010). It may seem strange that Igwe, who grew up in London but is the child of Nigerian parents (Budd 2020), seeks out intimacy with colonial archives, and why does her 2020 film conjure feelings of melancholy and nostalgia rather than revulsion?

Igwe's declaration that 'no archive can restore you' adds to the conundrum. Her assertion is not quite the same, however, as that of scholar Julietta Singh from whom she borrowed the title (more or less) of her film. Singh's book is titled *No Archive Will Restore You* (2018).

Singh's is a more straightforward rejection of institutional archives. She relates how she turns instead to inventorying her own body. Igwe experiments with forms of embodied knowledge but without turning her back on institutional archives. In fact, as has been suggested above, with reference to *Her Name in My Mouth* (Igwe 2017) in which the camera documents Igwe's perusal of archival material related to the Aba Women's War – a protest against colonial taxation in Nigeria – she shows herself running the risk of making herself open to the archive's invasive touch. Igwe, as she herself acknowledges, has deeply ambivalent feelings towards the archive (Igwe and Stokely 2019).

Igwe explains that initially she went looking for her ancestors and herself in the archive, and here she is referring in particular to her preparation for what became *We Need New Names* (Igwe 2015; Igwe and Stokely 2019). What she found was often predictably odious, and yet, she did also find something of what she was looking for in terms of histories that seemed only partially to have been remembered by her expatriate family. Some of what Igwe says about her experiences with the archive sound familiar to those of us who know the work of South African archivist and scholar Verne Harris and his elaborations on Jacques Derrida's descriptions of multiple ghosts that haunt both the archive and cinema, proclaiming their presence and often engaging

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with or even directing the actions of the living (Harris 2015, 2020). Indeed, in a conversation between Igwe and performance artist J. D. Stokely about their work, they mention Derrida's concept of 'hauntology' as a theoretical approach they have considered. Igwe later emphatically embraces the idea of 'haunting' (Igwe and Stokely 2019).

Notably, Igwe describes having felt, while watching a British Pathé film, a sudden instinctual connection with an unnamed woman participating in a 'tribal' dance as part of an entertainment programme for Queen Elizabeth II on the Royal Tour of Nigeria in 1956, not far from the place where Igwe's mother was shortly to be born (Igwe and Stokely 2019; Igwe 2018). Significantly, the dancing woman never looks up and her face is never revealed, yet Igwe on seeing her spontaneously adopted the woman's posture and, through the intense connection she experienced, felt it was possible to know both her and the histories she carries – this for Igwe represents 'embodied memory'. Igwe explained to Stokely that the connection established her place in a still living ancestral line and afforded her the feeling of the ever-elusive home (*'hiraeth'* in its more complicated Welsh rendition) that she and Stokely as members of the diaspora both long for. Embodied memory as an alternative way of knowing about the past allows Igwe to get past the colonial intermediary (Igwe and Stokely 2019). So powerful is the gaze mandated by this intermediary, Igwe implies, that even when she watched the family video of her grandmother's funeral, which was to prompt the making of *We Need New Names* (Igwe 2015), she felt as if she were watching an ethnographic film by Jean Rouch (Igwe and Stokely 2019), the influential French filmmaker and anthropologist who Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembéne once famously accused of treating his African subjects as insects (Adesokan 2008). In her works, Igwe experiments with de-objectifying dancing African subjects by crossing the divide established between ethnographer/newsreel cinematographer and subject through her tactic of what she calls, drawing on a term used by philosopher Bruno Latour, 'critical proximity'. She means a way of knowing that requires drawing close instead of standing back like the European scientist – trying to discover how to speak 'with' colonial subjects instead of 'for' them (Budd 2020; Igwe 2020a).

A historian might seek to raise the African people shown in colonial documents from anonymous subjects to conscious agents through contextual, close and comparative readings (see, e.g., Hamilton and Leibhammer 2016; Stoler 2009). Igwe, however, uncompromisingly rejects a distanced and supposedly rational scrutiny of sources, choosing instead, for example, to dance with African subjects in a calculated 'queering' of time, achieved through techniques some of which she explains in 'Being close to, with or amongst' (Igwe 2020a). Her critique of the archive as institution is based on Foucauldian and post-structuralist theory, drawing attention to the selective protection of items afforded by the archive (Igwe and Stokely 2019). Archives are sites where knowledge is produced through working with materials that have been saved on the basis of decisions made about why they are valuable. Knowledge production based in archives, thus, reinforces ideas of what qualifies as knowledge, as well as dominant ideas of how knowledge should be produced to meet the required standard – that is of history in its western European sense. The discipline of history uses positivist criteria to establish 'truth' and to demonstrate development over time, which means essentially from primitive to 'civilized'. Igwe and like-minded scholars and practitioners maintain it is necessary to 'queer' the 'western' notion of time because its one-way trajectory of 'development' discriminates against 'pre-modern' societies

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as well as non-linear conceptions of time associated with them (Igwe and Stokely 2019).

The concept of queering time – meaning primarily disrupting the expectation that time takes a linear form – and of queering more generally will appear again in the discussion of the three works below. Queering will mean something like upsetting the notion that knowledge is simply there for the taking. What is presented as the truth is very often the product of only one kind of worldview and is challenged through complications, entanglements, presentations of alternative views and, very importantly, the destabilization of fixed images established by the ethnographic gaze (Igwe and Stokely 2019).

Igwe uses many techniques to address the absences she discerns in the colonial archives and to allow subjects to appear as individuals rather than specimens; to queer time that favours a European conception of development; and to challenge assumptions about what is true and invariable. Brilliantly illustrated in her *The Names Have Changed, Including My Own and Truths Have Been Altered* (Igwe 2019) is her use of collage, which brings together pieces from different kinds of archive and sometimes even from a fictive archive she herself has created (Budd 2020; Van Biema 2020).

Note on the BAFC

Members of the BAFC, particularly John Akomfrah, have similarly described going into the archive to find themselves, at first to no avail because of the absence of categories that appeared to accommodate materials about people of diasporic origin (Mercer 2015; Power 2011). Akomfrah has written and talked in interviews quite extensively about the origins of the BAFC's first film *Handsworth Songs* (Akomfrah 1986), commissioned by free-to-air public television broadcaster Channel Four, to investigate the violent confrontations with police and sometimes other residents in inner-city neighbourhoods of English cities like Handsworth in Birmingham in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Power 2011). The BAFC extended its research into what it held to be the multiple origins of the 'riots' to the arrival of substantial numbers of immigrants in the decades before. The BAFC understood that without the presence of histories of profound dislocation and knowledge of the British government's promises of assimilation and equality made to Black immigrants that were subsequently broken, it was too easy for members of the British ruling class to dismiss those they labelled as 'rioters' as badly behaved youths with a barely hidden subtext about the 'uncivilized' proclivities of Black people. Like Igwe later, Akomfrah and his colleagues refashioned or recontextualized archival materials (in their case, newsreels, interviews, eavesdropped conversations, photographs) and inserted their own materials to suggest forgotten histories and silenced voices. It is very important to note – because this is true of Igwe and the three works to be discussed – that the BAFC did not seek to create a counternarrative (Power 2011). It was most concerned to challenge the whole system of representation that appeared to authenticate the official position on the 'rioters' and to encourage audiences to become suspicious of what were presented as truths, acquiring the habit of critical interrogation (Akomfrah 2021; Debuysere 2015; Power 2011).

Informing my analysis

Studying the work of Igwe and the BAFC has helped to give me a better sense of what it is that I want to draw out from my study of the three works shortly.

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First, there is the extraordinary and superficially inexplicable compulsion that similarly drew the makers of the three works to unpalatable archives. Each creator sought to find themselves in these apparently inhospitable archives, even if it was not explicitly stated in the way Igwe and the BAFC have done and, like them, proceeded to wrestle with its representations and foundational principles. Secondly, each creator discovered and found ways of exposing the mechanisms that drive and sustain a dominant narrative. Thirdly, each, again not unlike Igwe and the BAFC, believe they are creating conditions conducive to the destruction of stereotypes or fixed images and affirmations of previously degraded or unseen subjects, including in some cases themselves. Each desires in this way to contribute to the making of a better world and therefore, I argue, attempts to demonstrate that the archive does after all have restorative potential.

Another important contribution to sharpening my sense of how the creators' interventions reveal deep structures of the material with which they are working is the collection of essays edited by Leora Farber and Claire Jorgensen (2017). Contributors describe how, through artistic interventions in visual archives, they have been prompted to interrogate their own relationship with oppressive ideologies and systemic violence (Greslé 2017) to see how marginalized subjects claim their right to be seen on their own terms (Van der Wal 2017) and to become aware of how tampering with a problematic archive reveals the mechanisms by which the dominant narrative obfuscated other versions (Grunebaum 2017).

PART 2: THE THREE WORKS

My analysis of the works is informed by secondary literature where it exists, by conversations with the creators as well as by observations I have made in Part 1.

Case 1: Mpho Kwhezi, A Piece of Paper *(*Reframing Africa 2020*)*

Photographer Mpho Khwezi, a Market Photo Workshop alumnus, has worked for the *Mail* and *Guardian* newspaper, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and the International Organization for Migration in Zambia. His exhibition, *A Piece of Paper*, opened in October 2020 at the Market Photo Workshop. The website describes it as questioning 'the written and unwritten rules of ownership, particularly of land but also of culture and identity' (Khwezi 2020b: n.pag.).

Khwezi brought extracts from *A Piece of Paper* to *Reframing Africa 2020*, titling his presentation 'The future of the text/paper/photographic archive' (Khwezi 2020a). The work is a series of images that emerged when he superimposed his own photographs on unseen images he developed from negatives discarded by a certain Mrs van Tonder whom he had met while a student in the 'Vaal', a reference to the Vaal Triangle formed by the towns of Vereeniging, Vanderbijlpark and Heidelberg, 60 kilometres south of Johannesburg (Khwezi 2021). She was a woman of about his mother's age, and they had conversed about photography, a hobby for her, but for him a career he had chosen in preference to the one in IT for which he had qualified. Taking up his multivalent theme, Khwezi maintained that the IT qualification was just a 'piece of paper' without value for his life and would, he said, almost certainly have made him 'miserable' had he chosen to pursue it (Khwezi 2021).

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Images developed from Mrs van Tonder's negatives appeared like ghosts to join Khwezi's. In an interview on the SABC's *Morning Live* (SABC 2020), he said it initiated an imaginary dialogue about attachments to land and the nature and source of power – discovering the 'unwritten rules'. When the interviewer asked for elaboration, Khwezi responded that title deeds or other pieces of paper affect everybody. What he has learned, however, is that power and truth do not necessarily reside in documents (Khwezi 2021). Khwezi's title *A Piece of Paper* was intended to provoke viewers to think in several directions (Khwezi 2021). After alluding to the well-known phenomenon of people in South Africa with fake qualifications being appointed to top jobs, he emphatically posed the question of how much truth a piece of paper can tell. Is it just a piece of paper? (Khwezi 2021).

Khwezi (2021) started the project after members of his family drove him out of his grandmother's house, which he had legally inherited. He turned to photography to give vent to and explore the dimensions of his pain and anger. 'Thank God for photography', he said, 'when things are complicated in life […] you cry there'. The exercise proved 'therapeutic' for him. 'I think I have accepted who I am' (Khwezi 2021: n.pag.).

Mrs van Tonder was 'a woman alone' with children and 'no husband' (Khwezi 2021: n.pag.) and felt vulnerable when a group of people arrived to claim her farm after Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) leader Julius Malema encouraged his supporters to stop waiting for the African National Congress (ANC) to give them back their land and to take it themselves (Anon. 2017). The negatives she binned were among the casualties of Mrs van Tonder's decision to leave immediately. It struck Khwezi that he and Mrs van Tonder, despite coming from different worlds, had undergone a similar experience of dispossession and dislocation. He had an idea, he said, without knowing how to approach it. The images that appeared on his 'piece of paper' seemed to be his ideas coming 'into reality'. 'I had no idea the images were going to turn out like that', he stressed (Khwezi 2021: n.pag.). However, he also indicated that they were set in motion by his research and knowledge of photography. He later told visitors to his exhibition: 'There's no Mrs van Tonder's picture, these are my pictures'. She had been about to destroy the negatives, and he had 'reclaimed' them and 'brought them back to life' (Khwezi 2021: n.pag.).

Khwezi's images show ghostly, elderly White people seeming to haunt township landscapes (Khwezi 2020b). In one, old eyes seem to be rising over a low-lying ridge in the background (probably the Houtkop Hills), while in the foreground clothes have been hung out to dry, suggestive of another occupant. The photographs were taken near Sebokeng, a township south of Johannesburg, in the vicinity of which Mrs van Tonder lived and where Khwezi had met her.

Khwezi wrestled with how to bring apparently disparate or antithetical things together to make meaning and to allow for the emergence of idiosyncratic stories like his and Mrs van Tonder's. He puzzled about bringing together Mrs van Tonder's analogue world and his digital one, as well as the history of apartheid South Africa and people in the present who Khwezi believes are largely ignorant of it. He pondered on the relationship between spaces and identity and what it means to be ejected from a space one has imagined to be one's own (Khwezi 2021). The issue of identity, he mused, is 'very complicated' and he stressed the importance of active identity-making (Khwezi 2021: n.pag.).

In preparation for the exhibition, Khwezi and his mentor went to Newtown Junction shopping mall in Johannesburg, close to the famous Market Theatre

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and the Market Photo Workshop, and they had laid out images on the floor to discuss them, also hoping passers-by would stop and make enquiries (Khwezi 2021). However, 'surprisingly', Khwezi said, 'people just walked over my pictures. They just stepped on them and walked away'.(Khwezi 2021: n.pag.). He concluded that 'even when you put informative things on a piece of paper, people disregard them' (Khwezi 2021: n.pag.). This, he believes, has serious implications for the archive (Khwezi 2021). He speculates that apartheid gave 'our people' a 'phobia for paper' and therefore a reluctance to engage with the conventional archive (Khwezi 2021: n.pag.). Yet, for him, it is important they do. 'I think we need to change how we're archiving, where we are writing or where we are putting information on useful things' (Khwezi 2021: n.pag.).

Khwezi's project tackles an incomplete archive of post-1994 South Africa. All archives are incomplete, but this work tackles the incompleteness per se. It is incomplete in the literal sense, comprising only a handful of images destined for the dump, and in a larger sense referencing a partial narrative about dispossession and restitution in South Africa, which rests on racial categories established by the apartheid state and maintained by its post-apartheid successor. I would argue that Khwezi is suggesting that these categories create artificial barriers, mislocate the real source of power and inhibit dialogue and the ability of South Africans in the present to forge self-affirming identities. His conclusions are reminiscent of Verne Harris's lament that certain discourses through their dogged 'framing' and 'positioning' can begin to feel like a 'strait-jacket […] closing down my thinking rather than opening it' (Harris 2020: 73).

Case 2: Abri de Swardt, Stop Bath, Stop River *(*Reframing Africa 2019*)*

The #RhodesMustFall movement, which mobilized to demand the removal of a statue of Cecil John Rhodes on UCT's campus as a conspicuous symbol of ongoing colonialism, started in April 2015. Abri de Swardt's alma mater, the University of Stellenbosch about 46 kilometres east of UCT, was forced to confront its own legacy not long afterwards in *Luister* ('Listen'), a 35-minute documentary that went viral in which Black students related their experiences of racism (Nicolson 2015). However, De Swardt's pivotal encounter with the archive had happened about a year before while he was investigating sites from a photobook made by Alice Mertens, a visual arts lecturer at the university in the mid-1960s (Mertens 1966). De Swardt noticed a graffito on a bridge over the river that flows through the town of Stellenbosch and had provided the picturesque setting for some of Mertens's photographs, *Real Eyes, Realize, Real Lies* (De Swardt 2021). When the #MustFall movements at UCT and, later, Wits unfolded, De Swardt felt encouraged to continue his exploration (De Swardt 2021).

De Swardt's video *Ridder Thirst* ('Knight Thirst') was presented at *Reframing Africa 2019* (De Swardt 2018). Part of a larger work first exhibited at POOL, Johannesburg, in 2018 (Hart 2018), *Ridder Thirst* engages with Mertens's photobook *Stellenbosch* as archive (Mertens 1966). He positions Mertens (1915–2001), a German-Namibian photographer, as playing a leading role in formulating aesthetic and technical principles adopted in visual arts at Stellenbosch University. He feels it is significant that she was an ethnographic photographer, referencing other books of hers, such as *The Xhosa* with Fergus Gray (1973) and *The Zulu* with Hilgard Schoeman (Mertens 1975). *Stellenbosch* is, for De Swardt, an ethnography of a White group/tribe, idealized, as is

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typical of the genre through the production of 'stock' images (Lion-Cachet 2018). Scholars have attributed a central role to Stellenbosch University in generating apartheid ideology, resting on the putative concept of ineluctable distinctions between ethnic groups (see, e.g., Gordon 1988; Kros 2010).

De Swardt did his undergraduate and honours degrees in visual arts at Stellenbosch before travelling overseas for his master of fine arts at Goldsmiths, University of London. He also taught at Stellenbosch between 2011 and 2012 and in 2019. However, he prefers not to tie his sense of identity to Stellenbosch, pointing out that he was educated elsewhere too (Lion-Cachet 2018). While De Swardt acknowledges the specificity of Stellenbosch, he also intends his video to be read as an 'allegory' for other communities of White hegemony elsewhere and their 'myth making' (De Swardt 2021). The Stellenbosch of Mertens's book is, he argues, a 'no place', after American artist Robert Smithson's 'non site' in the sense that since it is a fantasy, it has never existed and is, therefore, an 'allegory' (De Swardt 2021; Lion-Cachet 2018; Smithson 1968). Mertens's idyll includes images of White heterosexual couples who the captions tell us wander along the bank of the portentously named Eerste (First) River dreaming about a future together (Lion-Cachet 2018).

The Eerste River was named by Simon van der Stel, commander and then governor of the Dutch Cape Colony in the late seventeenth century, because it was the first river he encountered when he left Cape Town. The land he granted to White farmers marked the beginning of White settlement in the interior (Lion-Cachet 2018). De Swardt argues that Mertens's young White subjects are shown at ease in an apparently pristine natural environment, which reveals their untroubled sense of ownership over land that their ancestors usurped (Lion-Cachet 2018). In his *Reframing Africa* abstract, De Swardt explained that Mertens's photobook contributed to the production of a landscape that naturalized and, consequently, disguised the dishonesty of White claims to the land and promoted the false impression of 'congruent cohabitation' – meaning that people in the Stellenbosch vicinity live in harmony (De Swardt 2019). De Swardt considers that Mertens's legacy, embodied in her *onuitgesproke* ('unspoken') images, still '*kom spook in die hede*' ('come[s] to haunt the present') (Lion-Cachet 2018) and he intends to do battle with these phantoms.

It is impossible to capture the multitude of allusions made in *Ridder Thirst* (the last word is an onomatopoeic play on 'first' and 'thirst') and only a few are offered here. In the opening scene, in a darkroom suffused with the red safelight, photographs are lifted out of the fixer (the 'stop bath' of De Swardt's *Reframing Africa* title). But the figure in the darkroom shines a torch onto the developing photographs – they are Mertens's photographs of White heterosexual couples – overexposing them and causing *'verdonker tot negatiewe ruimtes'* ('huge negative spaces to open up') (literally 'darken to negative spaces') (Lion-Cachet 2018). De Swardt identifies the darkroom figure as Hentie van der Merwe, a successor of Mertens's in Stellenbosch's visual arts department, like her, originally from Namibia, but otherwise very different (De Swardt 2021; Lion-Cachet 2018). Van der Merwe identifies as queer and, in work such as *Trappings* referenced by De Swardt, critically explores the relationship between Whiteness and ideals of masculinity in which violence is inherent (De Swardt 2021; Van der Merwe 2012).

Following the 'epic' structure of the video, we hear the 'Shadow Prince' summoning a battalion of 'shades' to 'dessicate' the river (De Swardt 2018,

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2021; Lion-Cachet 2018). De Swardt seems to be saying that an entire battalion of phantoms is required to cut off the source of the immortality of Mertens's ghosts. The chivalric plot of *Ridder Thirst* is carried in the voice-over – although he used the word 'chivalric', De Swardt owned to feeling some ambivalence about the 'masculine imperative' of the knightly trope (De Swardt 2021). Actor Wessel Pretorius reads an 'epic poem' comprising a bricolage of extracts from songs, poems, literature and De Swardt's own writing – he also wonders if 'poem' is the most accurate genre description (De Swardt 2021). We never see the prince nor his followers, only hear the advance of the battalion in the heat of the spoken words (De Swardt 2018). Mimicking the flow of the river through its intensity, rhythm and pace, the voice-over has a disquieting effect and is a technique for resisting the fixity of Mertens's ethnographic archive.

To further disrupt the fixity of Mertens's images, De Swardt messes up her tranquil and ordered *mise en scène* on and around the river through inserting scattered fragments of motion-tracked digital images. They come from *Die Matie* (the student newspaper) and advertisements for clothing brand Stellies and interfere with the temporal and genre schema ('queering' both), as well as being intended to highlight the human costs of 'aspirational' branding, associated for De Swardt with often violent male student initiation (orientation) rituals (De Swardt 2021; Lion-Cachet 2018).

Young people who, as De Swardt explained, self-identify as queer or trans and are also artists appear to contribute to the disruption of Mertens's original vision (De Swardt 2018, 2021; Lion-Cachet 2018). One of their iconoclastic antics involves pouring milk from jugs into the river. At its most obvious an erotic gesture, this is also a libation and a gesture of nurture (De Swardt 2021; Lion-Cachet 2018). After listing multiple ways in which these scenes might be read, De Swardt commented that they could also be seen as 'contaminating' what is intended to be pure, thus referencing the Afrikaner nationalist's professed horror of miscegenation (Lion-Cachet 2018). De Swardt also described the artists' actions as 'anti-monumental' (Lion-Cachet 2018). One of the functions of Mertens's idealized and thus 'monumental' stock images is to 'regulate the body' (De Swardt 2021: n.pag.). She prescribed which 'bodies become naturalized', which are 'seen as healthy' and which are seen as 'representing the future' – about which the students are dreaming on the banks of the Eerste River (De Swardt 2021: n.pag.). In opposition, De Swardt explained to me that he wanted to 'speak from [his] own body' (De Swardt 2021: n.pag.). He was experimenting with how to insert *queerwees* ('queerness' – literally 'queerbeing') into an inhospitable archive (Lion-Cachet 2018). Through exposing the lie of Mertens's images and opposing their formulaic representation of carefree student life with the vigour, playfulness and forthright eroticism of *queerwees*, De Swardt's hope is to contribute to broadening the scope for love and sexual attraction as well as of the range of conversations and relationships that become possible (De Swardt 2021). Here he references Cuban American academic José Esteban Muñoz's performance studies and queer theory (De Swardt 2019; Rodelo 2021). De Swardt told me that he was grappling with the 'complicated relationship between queerness and decoloniality', which had been raised by the #Fallist movement, leaving it open for further exploration (De Swardt 2021: n.pag.).

At the end, a Brown prince played by Myles Roberts in medieval theatre costume is seen perched on a rock high up in the Hottentots-Holland mountains looking out over the landscape of Stellenbosch and the Cape Peninsula,

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playing the melody from The Police's *Roxanne* on a flute (De Swardt 2021; Lion-Cachet 2018). The allusion to the red light in the lyrics (not sung in the video) takes us back to the darkroom and to the original singer urging a sex worker to claim their autonomy. I hear it as a call to non-consensual subjects of the ethnographer's lens to liberate themselves and to rise high above the fakery of the no place, its ghostly dreamers and their dreams.

*Case 3. Eva Knopf, 'Majub's journey: Artistic research in the (post-) colonial image archive' (*Reframing Africa 2020*)*

Eva Knopf brought her film *Majubs Reise* ('Majub's journey') to *Reframing Africa 2020* (Knopf 2013). Her presentation was titled 'Majub's journey: Artistic research in the (post)-colonial image archive' (Knopf 2020). Majub bin Adam Mohamed Hussein grew up in German East Africa and served with his father (who lost his life) in the *Schutztruppe* ('Protection Force' – colonial troops in the territories of the German empire) during the First World War. Hussein became a steward with the Deutsche Ost-Afrika-Linie shipping line and, in 1929, made the decision to stay in Germany where he sought compensation from the government for his and his father's military service. Despite failing, he continued to live in the country, changing his name to Mohamed Husen and, in 1933, married Maria Schwandner with whom he had three children (Knopf 2020). Later, he was arrested and sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp where he died. Ironically, at the time Husen was acting the part of servant to the eponymous character in *Carl Peters*, a film based on the life of the explorer and journalist who had played a central role in establishing the German East African Protectorate of Tanganyika (Knopf 2020; Reuss 1981; Selpin 1941). After eluding investigations into orders he had given for executing Africans at his station at Kilimanjaro, some form of justice eventually caught up with Peters and he was disciplined, although more for his misrepresentations of his deeds to the colonial department than for the murderous actions themselves (Reuss 1981). He lost his position in Kaiser Wilhelm II's government, but was rehabilitated posthumously by Adolf Hitler (Reuss 1981). Selpin's film, maintaining that Peters's crimes were exaggerated by his enemies, presented him as a national hero willing to make personal sacrifices for the cause of extending Germany's empire in East Africa, and in one scene local Africans are seen enthusiastically welcoming him (Klotz 1998). The services of Black people to act these parts were required on the Reich's film sets to make Germany's dream of imperial revival seem legitimate and even desired by its (future) subjects.

Knopf found evidence to show that Husen had been determined to inscribe himself both in the paper and film archives – deliberately to leave traces of his life – which had fired her ambition to raise his profile from 'extra to star' (Knopf 2020). She sought to do this by locating old films in which he had appeared and using digital editing software to single him out of crowd scenes, ultimately making him 'visible in a new way' (Knopf 2020). Concomitantly, she drew attention to the representational mechanisms of the 'colonial order' and the silences in the archive (Knopf 2020; for illustrations of this principle, see Farber and Jorgensen 2017).

Knopf was not trying to reconstruct Husen's biography as scholar of colonial literature Joachim Warmbold seems to think she was, which causes him to be rather dismissive of her film. He seems to be arguing in his review that she should have been more generous in her acknowledgement of a biography

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of Husen already in existence, evidently well executed by Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst (Bechhaus-Gerst 2007), who does, nevertheless, appear in the credits (Warmbold 2015). Scholar and writer Sukhdev Sandhu, by contrast, was aware that Knopf's objective was not a conventional biopic, nor did it need to, as Warmbold believed it should, somehow represent the sufferings of thousands of other Africans who lived in Nazi Germany (Warmbold 2015; for sufferings of Africans in Nazi Germany, see Coquery-Vidrovitch 2007). Knopf's achievement, Sandhu seems to recognize, was precisely that she was able to find and make visible a single African who had played an extra in films and was often on screen for only a few minutes (Sandhu 2014). 'When you screen these films, you can make these ghosts appear again', Knopf remarked to Sandhu (Sandhu 2014: n.pag.). But for *Majubs Reise*, she is concerned only with one particularly persistent and ubiquitous ghost.

Knopf told Sandhu, '[Husen] was never meant to appear in Germany. He was just a fantasy, a story they told about themselves and about how faithful the Askari were and how much the Germans honoured them' (Sandhu 2014: n.pag.). Sandhu is reminded of the contemporary situation, writing: 'Husen is a ghost, one who like many immigrants from formerly colonized nations, is barely visible even upon arriving at the imperial centre' (Sandhu 2014: n.pag.).

CONCLUSION

A brief recapitulation of the arguments made about the three works follows, tying up some of the observations with those I made about Ogwe, the BAFC and the Farber-Jorgensen collection at the outset.

Khwezi identifies restrictions on post-apartheid dialogue, derived in part from the rigidity of inherited racial categories. He also reflects on his misplaced sense of faith in paper documents. Through the imagined (ghostly) dialogue he brings into being, he de-individualizes his sense of loss and displacement, ironically also, in the process acquiring a sense of agency and autonomy. His observations lead him to make an appeal for archiving practices that might connect better with South Africans than do traditional paper archives. Here there are parallels with Igwe (and Julietta Singh) who try to close the distance between themselves and an archive that calls out to them insistently but is derelict and alien.

De Swardt exposes the lies hidden beneath Alice Mertens's series of tranquil photographs taken in the Stellenbosch vicinity and points the way to more inclusive dialogues and a more humane society. Like Igwe and the BAFC, he sets out to destroy the illusion created by the ethnographic subject. Also, like Igwe, he seeks to queer time and dominant representations of history, casting doubt on genre classifications as much as on the heteronormative gender categories that helped in literal and metaphorical ways to ensure the reproduction of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid ideology.

Knopf, discerning the effort Husen made to leave traces of his presence in the archive under the extreme circumstances of the Third Reich, experiments with reversing the status of star and extra. Like Igwe, she refuses to accept the way in which directors positioned him – as a fleetingly glimpsed faithful servant – and, taking her cue from Husen, speaks with rather than for her subject by elevating him to protagonist. For Sukhdev Sandhu, time has been queered. Knopf's allusion to Husen as a ghost leads him to think about contemporary migrants who similarly haunt the metropolis, barely visible but impossible to dismiss.

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The creators demonstrate the role of their archive in producing a particular world-view, which is partial, exclusionary and, especially in the case of the last two, serves to conceal profound violence, and here the Farber-Jorgensen collection has been invaluable in helping to sharpen my awareness (Farber and Jorgensen 2017). Nonetheless, through their artistic engagement with the archive, the creators activate restorative potential even in the darkest of material.

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