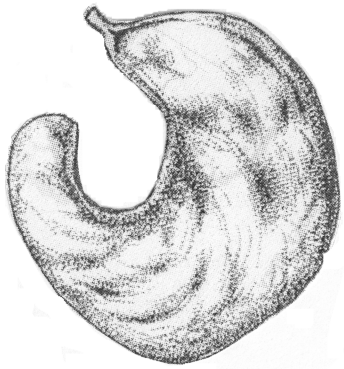

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A place of eclectic remembrance. The former German concentration camp on Namibia's Shark Island

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Abstract

Shark Island is a tranquil peninsula on the outskirts of the harbour town of Luderitz in Namibia's south. It hosts a campsite that is popular with international tourists. It is also the location of the central memorial site of Luderitz and features an eclectic collection of memorials representing various times in the history of Namibia. By contrast, the history of the peninsula itself, which was used as a German concentration and extermination camp during the German Namibian War between 1904 and 1907, is all but ignored. In this paper, I first present an overview of the historical concentration camp, then analyse its current appearance focusing on the monuments on the central memorial site and discussing the extent to which the peninsula's cruel history is represented there. Subsequently, I will introduce two works by Namibian artist Nicola Brandt, who confronts popular images of the Namibian landscape presented as empty and ahistorical with gloomy pictures that lead the viewer to histories rarely acknowledged. Her work demonstrates that the images produced by the Namibian tourism industry are hardly compatible with the urge to address a past with which one has not yet come to terms. In the end, I determine if Shark Island can, indeed, be understood as a lieu de mémoire in the sense of Pierre Nora.

Introduction

The German-Namibian War raged from 1904 to 1907 in the then German colony of German South West Africa, which existed from 1884 to 1915.[1] To control and punish their enemies and also to make use of their labour, the Germans established concentration camps throughout the colony for the insurgent OvaHerero and Nama populations and interned men, women and children. The location of the largest and most deadly concentration camp was Shark Island, formerly known as *Haifischinsel*, an island off the coast of Namibia's southern harbour town of Luderitz. During the colonial time, Shark

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[1] I am grateful for the critical reading and comments by my colleague Lukas Heger.

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Island was still an island, isolated and separated from the town of Luderitz and only connected to the mainland by a causeway. Today, there is a man-made earth bank connecting it to the mainland and it has become integral part of Luderitz. The question I want to raise in this essay, however, is whether or not the island's cruel history has been integrated into the town's and, indeed, the Namibian nation's remembrance.

Certainly, Shark Island, like no other concentration camp in German South West Africa, today stands for the atrocities committed against the OvaHerero and Nama by the German colonial administration and the colonial troops. But, when it comes to public awareness today, Shark Island cannot be compared to other focal points that represent the German colonial period, such as the Equestrian Monument or *Reiterdenkmal* in Namibia's capital Windhoek. No other monument or building erected by the Germans in South West Africa ignited such enduring public discussion, academic debate or was, in the end, physically banished from its original place, in this case from a central hill in Windhoek to a much less prominent courtyard in the colonial fortress *Alte Feste*. In comparison to the *Reiterdenkmal*, Shark Island definitely lacks the surplus in symbolic meaning that the monument in Windhoek had accumulated over the years since its erection in 1912. While the *Reiterdenkmal* has become part of the collective memory of the Namibian nation, Shark Island has not gained nearly as much public attention. For its national relevance, the *Reiterdenkmal* can be called a *lieu de mémoire* as defined by French historian Pierre Nora. But what about Shark Island? Is it remembered in a way that does justice to its historical meaning?

At the beginning of this essay, I briefly introduce Nora's concept of the *lieux de mémoire*. I then present the current appearance of the central memorial site on Shark Island and discuss the relationship between the history of the place and how it is remembered or not remembered today. With this in mind, I contrast Shark Island as a memorial site to works by Namibian visual artist Nicola Brandt in order to introduce an alternative to the memory practice on Shark Island. In the end, it must be clarified whether today's Shark Island is appropriate for the remembrance of its cruel history and if it can be called a *lieu de mémoire*.

Lieux de mémoire: focal points of collective memory

Nora conceptualised the idea of the *lieux de mémoire*, places of collective memory, in the 1980s and '90s with regard to the French nation. In a comprehensive edition of seven books, he, in cooperation with various authors, collected and described a vast number of such places in France. His commitment to the localisation of the *lieux de mémoire* that form an extensive memorial topography can be seen as a reaction to the declining significance of a societally sustained memory, as Nora postulated. For him, where the modern institutions of formal history like museums and archives become more important than remembrance as a public practice in customs and tradition, people

establish places of national relevance, where abstract history becomes concrete and comprehensible.[2]

Lieux de mémoire describe places – in part physical, in part metaphoric – that act as a focal point for memory.[3] These places are highly diverse; they can be 'real' topographic places, but also buildings, everyday objects, important texts and songs, like the French national anthem *La Marseillaise*, or historic persons like the French national hero Joan of Arc. According to Nora, *lieux de mémoire* have three characteristics: physical manifestation, functional and symbolic meaning. According Nora, even a minute's silence is a place of memory. Its symbolic meaning is obvious, but it is also functional as it initiates a collective remembrance and mourning. In addition, it is of an almost material substance, since it defines a precisely determined entity within a temporal sequence.[4]

Lieux de mémoire have their origins in memory but also in history; they can be perceived with the senses but at the same time they point to abstract historical relations.[5] Through their symbolic meaning, they convey a group identity and support the formation of a national identity.[6] However, it is not the objects or events themselves that have any meaning. Only through retrospective interpretation do such events and objects gain value in terms of national significance.[7] Thus *lieux de mémoire* are not products of chance but are always the result of an intention to pass down an historic event, object or person. They are always integrated into superior contexts that give meaning to past events.

Shark Island then: the concentration camp

In comparison to the prospering harbour town of Swakopmund, the smaller town in the south of the colony, Luderitz (formerly called Lüderitzbucht for its founder Adolf Lüderitz) stagnated following its founding in late 19th century. While Swakopmund, lying at the same latitude as Windhoek, was the main harbour and the closest connection between the coast and the capital, the town of Luderitz at this location in the south was not that attractive, and the town's economy was limited to fishing, whale hunting and the mining of guano on islands off the coast. One also has to consider the climatic conditions in Luderitz, which are anything but balmy – especially bearing in mind technology at the beginning of the 20th century. It is a remote place, wedged between the foothills of the Namib Desert and the icy Atlantic Ocean with a steady and strong

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[2] Pierre Nora, *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis,* Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998: 20.

[3] Ibid.: 7.

[4] Ibid.: 32.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.: 7.

[7] Ibid.: 38.

wind throughout most of the year. 100 years ago there was hardly any freshwater because of scarce annual rainfall.

The remote location, the climate and sparse natural resources all hindered the town's development. It was only the German war against the Nama population that spurred its growth. As early as 1905, only one year after the beginning of the war and long before the discovery of the first diamond in 1908, Luderitz had become an important port for the deployment of German troops and supplies. A hospital, a mission station, three hotels and several dwellings were built. From a few European residents, the town grew to 800 German settlers within a few years.[8] It was an unbalanced development as the town was strongly dependent on its strategic value in the war.[9]

The first records of prisoners on Shark Island date back to mid-1904. By the beginning of 1905, a group of 400 to 500 Otjiherero-speaking people brought from the central area of the colony were interned there.[10] Between November 1905 and September 1906, the 139 people under Nama leader Samuel Isaak from the area around Gibeon were brought there ,[11] as were the 422 people who followed Cornelius Fredericks from Bethanie[12] and finally 1,700 Witbooi and Veldshoendragers.[13] Because of the rocky and barren nature of the island, the barbed wire fences and guards the prisoners were kept in complete isolation from the inhabitants of Luderitz.[14] As in the other concentration camps of that time, prisoners made their own shelters, improvised dwellings using military tents and simple blankets.[15]

Shark Island became known as the 'island of death' – an infamous place, feared by Nama as well as by OvaHerero. The death toll on the island was incomparably high. Official numbers only exist for the time from April 1906 onwards, and the death rate among the first few hundred OvaHerero prisoners remains undocumented.[16] The combination of malnutrition and the lack of adequate clothing and shelter from the harsh, cold and windy weather, diseases like scurvy and bowel infections and hard forced labour could sometimes cause the death of more than 20 people a day. In only half a year between September 1906 and April 1907, 1,032 of the 1,795 prisoners had

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[8] David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen, *The Kaiser's Holocaust,* London, Faber and Faber, 2010: 207f.

[9] Casper W. Erichsen, *"The angel of death has descended violently among them": Concentration camps and prisoners-of-war in Namibia, 1904-08*, Leiden, African Studies Centre, 2005: 69.

[10] Ibid.: 73.

[11] Jürgen Zimmerer, "Kriegsgefangene im Kolonialkrieg: Der Krieg gegen die Herero und Nama in Deutsch-Südwestafrika (1904–1907)", in: Rüdiger Overmans, (ed.), *In der Hand des Feindes: Kriegsgefangenschaft von der Antike bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Köln, Böhlau, 1999: 277-294 (290).

[12] Horst Drechsler, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft,* Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 1985: 190.

[13] Erichsen, *"The angel of death"*: 110.

[14] Drechsler, *Südwestafrika* : 191.

[15] Casper W. Erichsen, "Zwangsarbeit im Konzentrationslager auf der Haifischinsel", in: Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, (eds.), *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Der Kolonialkrieg (1904–1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen*, Berlin, Links, 2003: 80-85 (80).

[16] Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust* : 229.

lost their lives, i.e. nearly 60 percent. As missionary Laaf from Luderitz reports, the construction works for the harbour that had started in October 1906 had to be stopped because of the lack of workers.[17] The historian Jürgen Zimmerer calls the treatment of the prisoners a "conscious killing by neglect".[18] For Zimmerer, on Shark Island the "border to genocide was crossed".[19] Referring to the UN Genocide Convention, he finds particular point from the second article of the convention consistent with the treatment of the prisoners in the camp.[20] This point reads: "Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part".[21]

But why let prisoners die in such great numbers on the island if their labour is needed on the mainland? Helmut Bley points to one reason why nothing was done earlier to stop the fatalities on Shark Island. He refers to the historical concepts of "valuable productive elements" and "unproductive natives".[22] According to Bley, it was not only the war itself that was supposed to decimate "unproductive elements"[23] but also the treatment of prisoners in camps like Shark Island. There was protest by some individuals, mostly missionaries, but the overall settlers' reaction to the death toll on Shark Island was one of indifference or even satisfaction. As Nama in particular were seen to be an unproductive and therefore useless people, there was no reason to prevent their extermination.[24] The simple longing for vengeance was another important factor that led to the inhuman treatment of Nama and OvaHerero prisoners.[25]

On the 8th of April 1907, the camp was relocated to the mainland, which immediately lowered the death rate. This however was preceded by a continuous debate between officer von Estorff and deputy governor Hintrager. The latter constantly refused to even bring women and children to the mainland, claiming they could easily escape.[26]

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[17] Zimmerer, "Kriegsgefangene": 292.

[18] "bewussten Ermordung durch Vernachlässigung", Jürgen Zimmerer, "Das Deutsche Reich und der Genozid. Überlegungen zum historischen Ort des Völkermordes an den Herero und Nama", in: idem, *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz? Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust,* Berlin, LIT, 2011: 172-195 (190).

[19] "Grenze zum Völkermord überschritten wurde", Jürgen Zimmerer, "Das Deutsche Reich und der Genozid – Überlegungen zum historischen Ort des Völkermordes an den Herero und Nama", in: Larissa Förster, Dag Henrichsen and Michael Bollig, (eds.), *Namibia – Deutschland: Eine geteilte Geschichte: Widerstand – Gewalt – Erinnerung*, Wolfratshausen, Edition Miverva Hermann Farnung, 2004: 106-121 (115).

[20] Ibid.: 117.

[21] United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibilty to Protect,"Genocide", <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml> [accessed 2 December, 2019].

[22] Helmut Bley, *Namibia under German Rule,* Hamburg, LIT, 1996: 198.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.: 207.

[25] Zimmerer, "Kriegsgefangene": 279.

[26] Drechsler, *Südwestafrika* : 212.

According to official numbers from the *Schutztruppe*, in less than three years between 1904 and 1907, 7,682 people had lost their lives on the island.[27]

Shark Island did not remain the only camp in the Luderitz area. Two others existed, among them a camp on the mainland run by the private railway company Lenz, on behalf of the German government.[28] Here, OvaHerero prisoners worked and died between January 1906 and June 1907.[29] In a telegram to Windhoek from April 1906, the authorities in Luderitz requested 100 prisoners per month to be sent to work on the construction of the railway. This was the estimated minimum of labourers needed to secure the construction works and replenish the labour force, decimated by the high mortality rate. According to numbers from the colonial administration, between January 1906 and June 1907, 2,014 prisoners from Shark Island were used for constructing the railway tracks. 1,359 of them died during the work.[30] Dr Bofinger, who was a medic on Shark Island, claimed from the start that the camp was intended to supply Luderitz with the cheap labour increasingly needed for the town's development.[31] In October 1906, the railway line between Luderitz and Kubub was finally opened. This section was then extended to Keetmanshoop, which went into operation in June 1908.[32] Apart from the railway, Luderitz harbour was the main working area, where a new pier and a wave breaker were constructed to allow larger ships to anchor.[33]

Shark Island today: a place of eclectic remembrance

Shark Island today comprises three main sections. The man-made part, which connects the peninsula to the mainland, enlarges the harbour and is part of the industrial area. The central part of the peninsula, along the main road, has become an upmarket residential area. The peninsula's tip is a campground for visitors of Luderitz who want to spend more than a trip at the coastal town. The campsite is well maintained, equipped with sanitation blocks and barbecue pits.

Camping is a major form of tourist accommodation in Namibia as it promises the spirit of an independent journey through an untouched wilderness. Typically European tourists rent a 4x4 off-roader called *Bakkie*, equipped with a tent to be mounted on the car's roof, for touring the country. Starting out from Windhoek, tourists may choose to visit the country's attractions in the south, like the diamond area, Fish River Canyon or the desert ghost town of Kolmanskop. Only a few kilometres from Kolmanskop, Luderitz offers the comforts of a town in the scarcely populated south. Many tourists only visit

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[27] Zimmerer, "Kriegsgefangene": 293.

[28] Erichsen, *"The angel of death"*: 112.

[29] Marion Wallace und John Kinahan, *Geschichte Namibias*. Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2015: 273.

[30] Erichsen, "Zwangsarbeit": 82f.

[31] Erichsen, *"The angel of death"*: 113.

[32] Ibid.: xii.

[33] Ibid.: 113f.

Luderitz on a day trip or to buy supplies. But those wishing to stay overnight can use the campground on the peninsula. While it is only a few hundred metres from the city centre it still feels remote and tranquil as it is at the city's western-most point and surrounded by the sea.

Fig. 1: View onto the camping area

Source: Photo by the author

Whoever takes the time to walk round the peninsula will find a memorial site, situated in the centre of the camping area. Here, there are six individual memorials of various appearance: A central memorial stone for Adolf Lüderitz; a semicircular wall of plaques in honour of dead soldiers from the *Schutztruppe;* a symbolic grave for Cornelius Fredericks and his people; a tomb for the remains transferred from the former colonial cemetery at Nautilus; a plaque for Heinrich Vogelsang, the delegate of Adolf Lüderitz; and finally another plaque for Amyr Klink, a Brazilian adventurer. A place like this would generally meet the preconditions to become a *lieu de mémoire*. However, it is necessary to take a closer look at the site with its various memorials, since the list of names and groups honoured and commemorated here is striking in its diversity. In the following section, I present the place as it appears to the visitor, which means I use mainly the information provided to the visitors on location and only add background information where it is needed to understand the role of the historic persons and events.

The area's centre is marked by a memorial stone with the copper depiction of Adolf Lüderitz in a desert outfit. As smaller lettering under the relief indicates, the memorial was donated by the authorities in the city of Lüderitz's birth, the *Senat der Freien Hansestadt Bremen*, in 1953. There are three dates on the relief: Lüderitz's date of birth, the date of his arrival at the bay of Angra Pequena in 1883 and the date of his death.

Fig. 2: Lüderitz stone in the centre of the memorial site

Source: Photo by the author

The Adolf Lüderitz memorial stone is framed in a semicircular wall of about forty smaller marble plaques, listing the names of members of the *Schutztruppe* who died while serving the German Empire. This wall seems to protect the namesake of the town from the sea. Each one is presented as an individual: family name, military rank and date of death are given. Thematically connected to that wall is a cross and a plaque on the ground with German lettering, stating that the remains of the dead, once buried in the old cemetery at the Nautilus quarter now rest at this location. The old cemetery consisted of 41 military and 33 civilian graves and was relocated to Shark Island in 1977.[34] According to a layout plan from the Luderitz Museum, the dead soldiers once buried at the old cemetery are the ones that are now commemorated on the plaques on the wall.[35]

Situated behind the Lüderitz stone are two other plaques. One is dedicated to Heinrich Vogelsang, the "first pioneer of 1883", as one reads, who travelled to the Namibian coast by order of Adolf Lüderitz to conclude contracts with the local authorities such as Joseph Fredericks. The other plaque honours the 1955-born Brazilian adventurer Amyr Khan Klink. When he was 28-years-old, Klink undertook the world's "first solo South Atlantic rowing sea crossing", rowing and drifting from the coast of southern Africa to

[34] Andreas Vogt, *Nationale Denkmäler in Namibia,* Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2006: 62.

[35] Onlineprojekt Gefallenendenkmäler, "Lüderitz, Region Karas, Namibia", <http://www.denkmalprojekt.org/2017/luederitzbucht-schutztruppenfriedhof-nautilus_region-karas_namibia.html> [accessed 7 October, 2019].

the coast of Brazil in a small boat without engine or sails. It was the beginning of a career which saw him sail 642 days solo in the South Atlantic, found the Museu do Mar on the southern Brazilian coast and design several boats.[36]

The level of detail of the Klink plaque stands out among the surrounding memorials. Even though it is hard to read, it still contrasts with the much simpler plaque for Adolf Lüderitz that only gives basic information. While the memorial stone for Lüderitz shows the face of an eager and sober man of business, the Klink plaque provides details of the hundred-day journey of a solitary adventurer. It counts on the phantasy of the reader, imagining the lone man, facing the vagaries of the sea and fighting its dangers. To avoid simply glorifying an adventurer and daredevil, the text speaks of a "research project on survival at sea". The Lüderitzbucht Foundation as the initiator has dedicated the plaque to "those in peril on the sea". Thus, the plaque becomes a potential cenotaph for any seafarer who ever faced the dangers of the open ocean.

Historically, Klink's adventure is entirely unrelated to the founding history of Luderitz. It was the conditions cause by the southeast trade wind that led Klink to choose the southern coast of Namibia for his crossing to Brazil. Interesting, however, is how the *remembrance* of Klink's journey relates to the establishment of German South West Africa. The commemoration of the sailor Klink is strikingly similar to that of the historic figures of Vogelsang and Lüderitz. They all emphasise the Luderitz coastline as a starting point for the exploration of a new territory, be it the adventure of establishing a new world record in maritime history or the founding of Germany's first colony. And – certainly a coincidence but still of symbolic relevance – Klink started his journey exactly 100 years after the establishment of the colony. In a way, the plaques for Vogelsang, Lüderitz and Klink form a context of 100 years in the settlement of Luderitz and its connection with the world. In fact, this association is not intended and only comes to mind in rational analysis of the site's structure. A *lieu de mémoire*, on the contrary, requires more obvious symbols that are easy to read and can be understood immediately.

The one memorial that comes close to the Lüderitz memorial in terms of size and positioning is dedicated to Cornelius Fredericks and his people from Bethanie. Fredericks was a leader of the Bethanians who fought with the people of Hendrik Witbooi against the Germans.[37] After the death of Witbooi, Fredericks kept on fighting and became a successful military leader, using refined guerrilla tactics. His mobility and the swiftness of his attacks were as feared by the German troops as they were appreciated by military strategists. Nonetheless, in March 1906 hopelessly outnumbered by the German troops, Fredericks and his 400 followers had to surrender after a defeat at Gochas.[38] 246 men and 176 women and children were arrested and brought to central

[36] amyrklink.com, "Biography", <http://www.amyrklink.com.br/en/biography> [accessed 7 October, 2019].

[37] Wallace und Kinahan, *Geschichte Namibias* : 260.

[38] Ibid.: 265.

Namibia, to Karibib, where they were forced to work on the railway line to the north.[39] They were later deported back to the south and imprisoned on Shark Island.[40] Here, Fredericks finally died on February 26 in 1907.[41] His remains were among those that were later sent to Germany as a specimen in German racial studies.

The Fredericks cenotaph and the Lüderitz memorial are of similar dimensions, but the prominent location of the latter clearly indicates a hierarchy. The question arises, however, as to why only the Bethanie community is remembered and not the people of Samuel Isaak from Gibeon, not to mention the early OvaHerero prisoners or the late Witbooi and Veldshoendragers. Why is there not recognition of and mourning for all the victims of Shark Island? Of course, memorial sites are always places of competing representations of historical events. But here, the visitor is confronted with a particularly one-sided presentation that does not represent the diverse origins of the former prisoners. To understand Shark Island as a *lieu de mémoire* would require it to be relevant for the Namibian nation as a whole, not just for one particular group.

One also notices that the six memorials are not laid out coherently. Only the memorials for Adolf Lüderitz and the *Schutztruppe* soldiers create and form a space with a centre (the Lüderitz stone) and its periphery (the *Schutztruppe* plaques). But what does this framing of the Lüderitz stone indicate? The first 20 German soldiers under Curt von François arrived in 1889 – three years after the death of Adolf Lüderitz.[42] Many of the soldiers commemorated on the plaques on the wall died during the time of the German-Nama War in 1905 – nearly 20 years after Adolf Lüderitz's passing. Thus, the arrangement does not represent a temporal relationship, but rather suggests the reading of a causal relationship, casting the businessman Adolf Lüderitz retrospectively as the focal point for the soldiers who later died on the ground that he had bought somewhat deviously from local communities.

In other words, the memorial site on Shark Island is a place of eclectic remembrance, i.e. a loosely connected arrangement of individual memorials, commemorative plaques and cenotaphs. The memorials not only differ in their outward appearance and in the persons they commemorate but also in the way they remember certain persons and events. Some mourn the dead, like the Bethanie community memorial, others commemorate a historical figure like Adolf Lüderitz or, as in the case of the Klink plaque, celebrate a remarkable human accomplishment.

These memorials were erected at different times by different organisations with varying motives and backgrounds. Although brought together within a limited space, the memorial stones, plaques and cenotaphs do not create a coherent memorial site. Strikingly,

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[39] Drechsler, *Südwestafrika* : 190.

[40] Wallace und Kinahan, *Geschichte Namibias* : 270.

[41] Werner Hillebrecht, "Die Nama und der Krieg im Süden", in: Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, (eds.), *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika: Der Kolonialkrieg (1904–1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen*, Berlin, Links, 2003: 121-133 (130).

[42] Wallace und Kinahan, *Geschichte Namibias* : 192.

the symbolic tombstone for Cornelius Fredericks is the only memorial that is directly connected to the place where it stands. None of the other memorials are directly related to Shark Island's history.

This collection of memorials might work as a representation of the breaks and contradictions in the history of South West Africa and Namibia, but this place certainly does not convey the dreadful history of Shark Island, nor does it mourn all the victims who starved, suffered and worked themselves to death. Moreover, the appropriateness of commemorating Adolf Lüderitz and the members of the *Schutztruppe* at this particular place is highly questionable.

Namibian landscape through the tourist's eyes

I am aware that my reading of the memorial site on Shark Island is European and certainly quite German. Being German, I understand that the remembrance of Germany's history with all its ambiguities is highly relevant. Thus, the colonial history of the German Empire, to date widely neglected, must reach a much higher level of public awareness in Germany. This leads me to the question as to which groups the memorials on Shark Island address? Who is to be reminded of the past, who is to be informed about the past? The European tourists including the German visitors constitute one, admittedly large, group among many. But it is fair to assume that the majority of the German tourists who enjoy the roughness and directness of the natural surroundings at the tip of the peninsula are unaware of the history of that place. The eclectic memorials do not help to mediate anything relating to the former concentration camp. The former camp has become a campsite and for the visitor who is unaware of the history of the place there is nothing to disturb the peace and freedom the location today seems to convey. The only building harking back to its earlier use is the lighthouse which existed in different form during the time of the concentration camp.[43] The visitor who knows of the peninsula's history can easily imagine the building as a prison watchtower. This adds to the uncomfortable atmosphere of the place, but only for the visitor who knows its history.

Shalini Randeria argues that shared histories such as the colonial one cannot be appropriately addressed if seen from the perspective of a *national* history. Colonial histories are interrelated histories by definition. Only if we accept that modern history is a history of not only supranational but of supra-continental intertwining will we pay colonialism the attention it deserves.[44] What follows from that observation, for me, is a demand for a historical sensitivity and a mediation of historical developments that addresses all groups historically connected to these developments. Against this

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[43] Erichsen, *"The angel of death"*: 72.

[44] Shalini Randeria, "Geteilte Geschichte und verwobene Moderne", in: Jörn Rüsen, Hanna Leitgeb und Norbert Jegelka, (eds.), *Zukunftsentwürfe: Ideen für eine Kultur der Veränderung*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 2000: 87-96 (93).

background, the question remains, why there is nothing to inform tourists about Shark Island's history.

The guidebook I used while visiting Luderitz boasts of 'probably one of the most beautiful campsites close to a town'; at least it adds the information that it used to be a prison where many died. Tourism in Luderitz and the acknowledgement of particular parts of its history seem to be incompatible. This is true for many of Namibia's landscape attractions. As Luregn Lenggenhager has described regarding advertising posters from Namibia's tourism industry, there is a long tradition and striking continuity in presenting the Namibian landscape as empty and unspoiled.[45] The imagination of a primeval landscape where only wild animals and sometimes native people are living was and still is among the most valuable economic resources Namibia has at its disposal.[46] Namibia here appears as a paradise lost, far from Europe not only in terms of geographical dimensions but of temporal dimensions as well – a country that seemingly offers a glimpse into a prehistoric harmony.[47] Without question, touristic depictions of a pristine Namibian landscape are a strategic answer to a competitive market and connected to concrete economic expectancies. This becomes clear if one considers that tourism, after mining and fishing, is Namibia's third most important industry.[48]

The cruelties of German colonial history apparently do not fit in with the dominant presentation of an untouched landscape without any history worth mentioning. Thus, the memorials on Shark Island are the manifestation of an inevitably selective presentation of history that only presents what is considered to be worth remembering and fitting to the recent interests of their erectors. Historical events and developments that do not meet these criteria are consequently edged out.[49]

As Lorena Rizzo writes, in all visual media showing Namibian landscape, be it photography, painting or films (not to mention literary landscape descriptions in travel journals or adventure novels), Namibia is represented as a country of extraordinary beauty. The tourism industry is one of the main generators of these images and sells an image of the country that makes people eager to experience the landscape themselves.[50] According to Noel B. Salazar and Nelson H. H. Graburn, such images and

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[45] Luregn Lenggenhager, "Empty landscapes, wild animals and unspoiled people. Motifs in Namibian tourism advertising", in: Giorgio Miescher, Lorena Rizzo and Jeremy Silvester, (eds.), *Posters in Action: Visuality in the Making of an African Nation*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2009: 31-44 (34).

[46] Ibid.: 39.

[47] Noel B. Salazar and Nelson H. H. Graburn, "Introduction. Toward an anthropology of tourism imaginaries", in: Noel B. Salazar and Nelson H. H. Graburn, (eds.), *Tourism Imaginaries: Anthropological Approaches*, New York, Oxford, Berghahn, 2014: 1-28 (10).

[48] Henning Melber, *Namibia: Gesellschaftspolitische Erkundungen seit der Unabhängigkeit,* Frankfurt am Main, Brandes & Apsel, 2015: 135.

[49] Joachim Zeller, *Kolonialdenkmäler und Geschichtsbewußtsein: Eine Untersuchung der kolonialdeutschen Erinnerungskultur*, Frankfurt am Main, IKO – Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation, 2000: 20, 29.

[50] Lorena Rizzo, "Faszination Landschaft – Landschaftsphotographie in Namibia", BAB Working Paper, 1, 2014: 2.

resulting imaginaries are the "motor setting tourism in motion".[51] But the tourism industry is only the most recent producer of this imagery. As early as the end of the 18th century, travel journals were equipped with images, emphasising the landscape as picturesque and pretty. It shows that recent images of Namibia are strongly connected to colonial and essentialist anthropological depictions of people and places. To ascribe the touristic depictions solely to recent economic interests would be to neglect the image's historical depth.[52]

But interestingly, in the beginning, European aesthetic conventions could not easily be applied to the monotone scenery of Namibia. Only during the 19th century do the dry savannah and the desert perceived as open and empty regions become associated with ideas of freedom and tranquillity, eventually becoming the dominant European representation of Namibia. As Rizzo goes on, these associations are connected to the idea of the desert as a place of self-awareness and contemplation as it is found in Jewish and Christian narrations. This reinterpretation of a barren, rough and inhospitable environment was accompanied by imagery referring to familiar visual vocabulary. So the presentation of the Namibian landscape in drawings, paintings and graphics was adapted to European conventions of taste and the images' subjects, colours and compositions were chosen for a European audience.[53] As Rizzo concludes, the beauty of Namibian landscape is neither natural nor ahistorical, but rather the product of a tradition of visual landscape representations.[54]

The next section of this paper introduces works by Nicola Brandt who chose Shark Island and its surrounding area as a location to address remembrance and oblivion of the German colonial period – a strategy that is diametrically opposed to the popular imagery of Namibian landscape as empty and ahistorical.

Nicola Brandt's *Indifference* (2014): countering images of an 'unspoiled landscape'

Nicola Brandt, born in 1983, is a Namibian visual artist who mainly works in photography and film. Remembrance of German colonialism in Namibia is at the very centre of her work. In August 2014, her solo exhibition at the National Art Gallery in Windhoek, entitled 'The Earth Inside', brought the topic of colonialism and genocide to the gallery. It constituted the practical component of her PhD and was her first solo show. The exhibition indeed raised public awareness, but unfortunately not so to such a great extent among German-speaking Namibians.

The centrepiece of the show at the National Art Gallery was a video installation called 'Indifference'. The work is a three-channel-installation combining three individual

[51] Salazar and Graburn, "Introduction": 1.

[52] Ibid.: 6f.

[53] Rizzo, "Faszination Landschaft": 4-6.

[54] Ibid.: 15.

screens to a triptych. It presents three women: an Otjiherero-speaking woman, a German-speaking woman and a younger white woman who remains anonymous. While the OvaHerero woman as well as the woman of German descent explain their personal attitude to an understanding of the German colonial period and its legacy, the third woman functions as a silent commentator. For my analysis, however, I focus on the work's depiction of landscape to show how this counters the popular imagery of an untouched and ahistorical Namibian landscape. For practical reasons, I focus on still images, although the work is a video piece and therefore involves moving images and sound.

In the second minute of the 14-minute video, the viewer sees three images that blend into a coherent panoramic view over a landscape in the evening just before sunset. An Otjiherero song is playing in the background. The image on the left shows a railway track that has not yet been completed. On the horizon, one sees buildings that belong to Luderitz. This allows viewers to identify the scene a few hundred metres from the town at the First Lagoon. While the railroad tracks remain in the shadow of the setting sun, the centre and the right image show a landscape bathed in sunlight. On these images, the low evening sun makes visible small mounds that are outlined by the contrasting shadows. It is conspicuous that these mounds are arranged in lines that form an even pattern. In addition, the still unfinished railroad line works as a reminder for the original construction of the railroad between Luderitz and Aus during the time of the German-Nama War. All this subtly but precisely points to the fact that what the viewer sees in the centre and right image is an unmarked burial ground. These mounds are graves that contain the remains of forced labourers from the Luderitz concentration camps, who were buried hastily and anonymously on the spot. As signposted in the title, the video asks who is indifferent about what? Is it the landscape that is cold towards the fate of its human inhabitants? Or is it posterity that does not care anymore about the loss of the people 100 years ago?

Fig. 3: Still from the video work 'Indifference' showing a landscape near Luderitz

Source: Screenshot by Nicola Brandt

There is another picture that impressively captures Shark Island. Two joined photos show a cloudy sky and the sea that would blur at the horizon into a grey melange if not for the black headland that separates them. This dark peninsula in the background is

Shark Island as viewed from the mainland in the late evening. The perspective on the peninsula, as a relatively near but at the same time remote and unfamiliar place, could match the perspective that the white inhabitants of Luderitz would have had 110 years ago, back when the island was under military control and they were not allowed to enter.

One's attention is immediately drawn to the two illuminated ships, perhaps searching for or mining diamonds off the coast, rather than to the peninsula itself. If the viewers follow the course the vessels take, they detect a subtle break. This divides the two joined photos that only roughly merge. The vertical break describing the margins of the photos runs through the peninsula's tip where the main concentration camp used to be situated. It is a fracture that stands for the separation of the peninsula's history from the recent perception of the location. The industrial vessels heading toward the peninsula symbolise the economic development of the Luderitz area, a development initially based on the forced labourers who were once held on the windswept island. There is no beauty in this image, only the creepy atmosphere of a cold and deserted place.

Fig. 4: Photographic work depicting Shark Island from the mainland

Source: Photo by Nicola Brandt

Landscape was *the* dominant genre in pre-Independence painting in South West Africa. As mentioned earlier, the region lives off in the imagery produced by the Namibian tourism industry. Landscape is a central character in the works of Nicola Brandt, as well. But here, the scenery is not staged as appealing and delightful – quite the opposite. Using the means and techniques of romanticist landscape depiction, Brandt's images present mysterious and sinister scenery in muted colours where the sun sets, the sky is draped in dark clouds and details are veiled through insufficient light. Figures that appear often their backs turned or remain in the distant background where they cannot be identified by the viewer. Just like in 19th century romanticist painting, fog and gloom evoke quietness and contemplation and also feelings such as melancholy, fear or even shame. As a screen for one's own subjective projections, Brandt's images allow the viewers to approach their inner landscapes.

In the 1970s, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, discussing television productions of their time, wrote that cultural products can only be refuted by counter-products.[55] To me, this is the merit of Brandt's work – it creates counter-images that rebel against the Namibian tourism industry's advertising posters for general consumption and also against the tradition of *Südwester* landscape painting that dominated Namibian visual arts up to independence and brushed over all human history. Brandt, in contrast, restores the history of the depicted places in creating images that allow for emotional access to the historical events.

Even if the landscape is the main subject in Brandt's works, they do not speak about an anonymous *space*. The works are rather about concrete and historically relevant *places* and the past incidents connected to them. Such places are part of a landscape but at the same time stand out within their spatial contextualisation. Aleida Assmann defines *space* as a geographical dimension with the potential of being formed. *Places* on the contrary have already been formed, have witnessed historical events and developments. In this way, places accumulate and retain traces of human intervention from the past and allow the physical experience of these elements in the present.[56]

In highlighting such historically loaded places with aesthetic means such as the evening light and gloomy colours, Brandt's works create a dark atmosphere. Thus the works counterpose the enchanting landscape presented as natural and empty. Instead of emphasising Namibia's overall beauty, they mark places and events of the colonial past and present rarely known and largely forgotten histories. However, to release its full potential, Brandt's works need to be contextualised. The images alone do not inform the viewer. They work, rather, as a commentary that can have a lasting impact.

A place of collective memory?

While, as Helvi Inotila Elago states, "[c]olonial monuments litter the Namibian landscape",[57] the remains of the Africans who died while fighting against the German *Schutztruppe* or because of emaciation and disease in the concentration camps "are scattered in unmarked graves".[58] It is this discrepancy that continues the colonial structures of power and that characterises Shark Island in particular.

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[55] Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung. Zur Organisationsanalyse von Bürgerlicher und Proletarischer Öffentlichkeit*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1976: 181.

[56] Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, München, Beck, 1999: 299, 311.

[57] Helvi Inotila Elago, "Colonial monuments in a post-colonial era. A case study of the equestrian monument", in: Jeremy Silvester, (ed.), *Re-Viewing Resistance in Namibian History*, Windhoek, University of Namibia Press, 2015: 276-297 (278).

[58] Ndumba J. Kamwanyah, "Silence of the Namib Graves", *The Namibian*, 21 April, 2017, <https://www.namibian.com.na/163813/archive-read/Silence-of-the-Namib-Graves> [accessed 7 October, 2019].

There are a variety of memorials, plaques and cenotaphs on the peninsula's memorial site, but there is only the one for Cornelius Fredericks and the Bethanians that is directly connected to the place's cruel history. The multitude and the diversity of the memorials direct the visitors towards various periods in the history of what eventually would become Namibia: the foundation of the colony, the German-Namibian War and the late years of the Apartheid era, when Amyr Khan Klink undertook his voyage. Because of the memorial's eclectic composition, the peninsula is covered with monuments that distract from what actually happened on Shark Island between 1904 and 1907 and therefore the former concentration camp with its diverse groups of internees remains unseen.

In the Namibian parliament in1993, SWAPO-member Michaela Hübschle pointed to the single-sided and falsifying collection of monuments on Shark Island. Hübschle criticised the fact that Adolf Lüderitz, a businessman from Bremen, is commemorated but that there is nothing to recall the former prisoners.[59] Even today, after the installation of the Fredericks cenotaph, the question remains, how the commemoration of one group of victims of the concentration camp on the one hand, can be reconciled with the glorification of Adolf Lüderitz, Heinrich Vogelsang, the *Schutztruppe* soldiers and Amyr Klink on the other. The memorials for the historical victims and perpetrators, as well as for an adventurer who is not connected to Namibia's colonial history, are all placed symbolically on the central memorial site without any narrational contextualisation.

Furthermore, it is unfortunate that all indexical signs such as physical traces and remnants, that would have allowed direct access to the history of the peninsula, have been lost. For Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka, when writing about the centuries of enslavement of Africans, it is the material remains as historical witnesses that can be a gateway to coming to terms with the past:

> They [the slave forts from Ghana to Zanzibar] are indices of Truth, an essence and a reality that offer any peoples, however impoverished, a value in itself, a value that, especially when rooted in anguish and sacrifice, may dictate a resolve for redemption and strategies for social regeneration.[60]

In contrast the area of Shark Island has been straightened and levelled to allow tourist caravans to enter. The signs and symbols that could potentially transform the location into a place of collective remembrance are wholly inadequate as a reference to the peninsula's history. Andreas Degen writes: "The appropriation of space and the verification of histories are two universal driving forces in the development of collective and individual places of memory".[61] But without a distinct symbolic marker pointing to

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[59] Joachim Zeller, "Symbolische Politik: Anmerkungen zur kolonialdeutschen Erinnerungskultur", in: Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, (eds.), *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika: Der Kolonialkrieg (1904–1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen*, Berlin, Links, 2003: 192-214 (203).

[60] Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness,* New York, Oxford University Press, 1999: 59f.

[61] "Die Aneignung von Raum und die Beglaubigung von Geschichten sind zwei universale Triebkräfte bei der Entstehung kollektiver und individueller Erinnerungsorte", Andreas Degen, "Was ist ein Erinnerungsort? Zu Begriff und Theorie topographischen Erinnerns in politischer und phänomenlogischer Hinischt", in: Bernd

the former concentration camp, it is the profane and functional elements of the campsite that dominate the location.[62]

There are indications that awareness and recognition of the colonial relationship in both Germany and Namibia is rising – at least among certain groups. One is found in Luderitz, where in October 2016 another cenotaph has been erected at the unmarked burial ground next to the railway tracks presented in *Indifference*. This memorial mourns the OvaHerero and Nama victims of 1904 and 1905 and was initiated by Nama activist Ida Hoffmann and the Nama Genocide Technical Committee.

Shark Island itself has been receiving more attention than in the past. As Memory Biwa describes, in 2007 local church authorities as well as OvaHerero and Nama groups organised a two-day commemoration for the victims of the island's concentration camp that included a church service, a re-enactment of what had happened to the Bethanie community and a commemorative march to the unmarked burial site at First Lagoon.[63] As Bishop Frederick, who attended, stated, the aim of the commemoration was to establish Shark Island as a memorial site of national relevance. This, however, has not yet happened as an important but one-off commemoration does not suffice to promote the long-term awareness necessary to make Shark Island known to a public beyond the afflicted groups.

A prominent example of continuous remembrance however is the Waterberg. As Larissa Förster has shown, the mountain and its surrounding area work as a spatial reference for the annual commemoration practices of Otjiherero- and German-speaking Namibians. The Waterberg and Ohamakari, a site nearby, act as stages for the regularly recurring activation of collective memories relating to the colonial war.[64] It is this temporal dimension, the permanence of the annual ritual, that differentiates it from the once-off ceremony on Shark Island.

For all these reasons – the diversity of the memorials, the erasure of indexical signs and the lack of a long-term remembrance – the question of whether Shark Island itself could be considered to be a *lieu de mémoire*, following Pierre Nora's notion, has to be answered in the negative. Shark Island has not yet become a focal point in the collective memory of the Namibian nation. The peninsula's history is not integrated into a national narrative of Namibia's colonial past.

Indeed, Shark Island fulfils two of the three characteristics that Nora postulates for every *lieu de mémoire*: it is a concrete, physical place, and it embodies the specific function of a memorial site. But when it comes to the symbolic level, the eclectic memorials do not

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Neumann and Andrzej Talarczyk, (eds.), *Erzählregionen: Regionales Erzählen und Erzählen über eine Region: Ein Polnisch-Deutsch-Norwegischese Symposium*, Aachen, Shaker, 2001: 70-91 (80).

[62] Ibid.: 86.

[63] Memory Biwa, *'Weaving the Past with Threads of Memory': Narratives and Commemorations of the Colonial War in Southern Namibia*, Cape Town, University of the Western Cape, PhD thesis, 2012: 230-233.

[64] Larissa Förster, *Postkoloniale Erinnerungslandschaften: Wie Deutsche und Herero in Namibia des Krieges von 1904 gedenken*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 2010: 345.

adequately represent to the visitor the history of site. The Cornelius Fredericks cenotaph is the sole monument which has this connection. However, the cenotaph is not a memorial of overarching relevance, supporting the formation of a political identity on a national level, as it only mentions the people from Bethanie. It also does not explicitly point out the concentration camp, nor the forced labour, starvation, lack of shelter or spreading diseases under which the prisoners suffered and died. It does not help to make the abstract German-Namibian War more plausible or perceptible to the wider public, as one would expect from a place of collective memory.

The fact that the cenotaph, as the one memorial referring to the peninsula's history, only mentions one group amongst the former prisoners, leads to another, more general problem in the application of Nora's concept in the case of Shark Island. Namibia is a young nation with nearly 30 years of independence and is still in the process of nation-building. Also, the ethnic diversity of its inhabitants and the not yet fully eradicated structures of racist separation stemming from Apartheid times have resulted in a population much more heterogenous than that of France, Nora's home country. Therefore it comes as no surprise that memorials like the one for the Bethanie community reflect the population's particularity.

In addition, the majority of the German-speaking population in Namibia still has no interest in drawing attention to the atrocities committed by the Germans during the colonial war or in raising the question of responsibility. According to Reinhart Kößler, as a societally and economically privileged group, most German-speaking Namibians tend to relativise and repress the colonial past and reject any accusations of wrongdoing.[65] For this reason, the memorials on Shark Island also reflect a societally given inequality.

The remembering and forgetting of Shark Island's history demonstrates the asymmetry of remembrance that characterises genocides and differentiates them from wars. According to Assmann, this is because the roles of perpetrators and victims are perpetuated: the descendants of the victims remain powerless as they develop a commemorative culture that remains unacknowledged by the descendants of the perpetrators who hold a dominant position and insist on rejecting and forgetting.[66]

Shark Island's future

The peninsula of Shark Island is a landscape in Namibia's south that holds the historical depths of a concrete place. It is part of a town but with its peripheral location it evokes associations with Namibia's rural areas. It contains a memorial site that, however, conceals the place's actual history. Because of these ambivalences, Shark Island remains a unique place and must be differentiated from memorial landscapes like

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[65] Reinhart Kößler, "Im Schatten des Genozids: Erinnerungspolitik in einer extrem ungleichen Gesellschaft", in: Henning Melber, (ed.), *Genozid und Gedenken: Namibisch-deutsche Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Frankfurt am Main, Brandes & Apsel, 2005: 49-77 (68f.).

[66] Aleida Assmann, *Formen des Vergessens*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2016: 57.

Waterberg. It exemplifies the potential complexities in the relation between landscape and collective memory.

Shark Island surely is no *lieu de mémoire*, to the contrary, it seems more appropriate to speak of a *lieu de l'oubli*, a 'place of oblivion'. This is because Shark Island stands for a parallelism of remembrance and oblivion, a place that commemorates a few prominent historical individuals and forgets the sheer number of women, men and children that used to be imprisoned there. This leads to the paradoxical situation that *because of* the commemorated individuals the actual history of the place itself remains silent, invisible and forgotten by most. It is the diverse and eclectic composition of the monuments that directs remembrance in all directions but deflects from its actual centre.

Nevertheless, the attractiveness of Luderitz and Shark Island for international tourists does have potential and should be understood as an opportunity to point out and to clarify its historical meaning and its relation to the shared German-Namibian history. It could be used to make international and especially German tourists aware of the atrocities committed by the German military during the German-Namibian War. That does not necessarily mean erecting additional memorials or removing others, but it could mean establishing information points or offering appropriate guided tours.

But most importantly, to establish a permanent acknowledgement of the devastating past requires the repurposing of the peninsula from a campsite to a place dedicated to its particular history. The use of the peninsula as a campsite and the commemoration of its violent history are mutually exclusive. As long as the top of the peninsula is used as a campsite, adequate commemoration remains impossible. Any monument, any explanatory sign or guided tour across the area remains implausible as long as tourists erect their tents there.

Of course, there is not merely one way to deal with a complex place like Shark Island, and there is no solution that will meet all demands. Without question, it is, first and foremost, up to the people of Namibia to find an adequate way. The colonial history of Namibia nevertheless is part of German history as well, and thus addressing this history is essential for future relations between the two nations. I believe that initiatives such as the one by Nicola Brandt are valuable references for the appreciation of a shared history both in Namibia and in Germany, even if her work in its subtle manner requires previous knowledge and is primarily addressed to a Namibian audience. As long as the appraisal and acknowledgement of Shark Island's history is still pending, contemporary artworks – as ephemeral as they might be – are one way of raising public awareness and initiating discussions that might have future consequences in the concrete appearance of Shark Island and its memorial site. Even though it is subjective, art assists in raising awareness of historical themes. As it offers an emotional approach to history it encourages viewers to seek deeper historical understanding.

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