

PhD project by Naomie Gramlich M.A. (University of Potsdam)

Decolonial Media Geologies of Copper. Material-Semiotic Intersections of «Raw Materials» in the Fragmented Past and Present of the Tsumeb Mine

I am a media scholar from the University of Potsdam (Germany), trained in visual art history and feminist and postcolonial epistemologies, speaking from a *white*, queer, and working-class position. I am writing my PhD about decolonial epistemologies of the copper mine in Tsumeb, which the Germans expropriated from the Damara, Ovaherero, and Khoisan population during the colonization of Namibia. **My main question is** how the allegedly neutral term **«raw material» has to be understood as a colonial concept**, which is not just naturally given, but is rather a historical idea **tied to whiteness, coloniality, and epistemicides**. Since I understand «raw material» as an imaginative concept rather than just a term from economics, I analyze its material-semiotic production through an interdisciplinary set of decolonial and intersectional approaches (Cardena, Tsing, Haraway), as well as through archival, visual, and artistic methods. Since the history of the Tsumeb region is fragmented and dispersed – as is common for the post-colonial past and present – the subject of my research is therefore at least threefold.

In the **first chapter**, where I lay the theoretical and methodological groundwork, I outline the **unthinkable ecoloniality of copper-based media infrastructures** by referring to approaches from media geology (Gabrys, Starosielski, Parikka) and postcolonial theories of the unthinkable (Mills, Stoler, Trouillot). Special consideration is given to the **decolonial time scales of the toxic sedimentations of Namibian land** nowadays, to comprehend the materiality of copper beyond its western framing.

In the **second chapter**, I focus on the **racializing epistemology of perceiving African land and black people as extractable matter**, which, by following on Macarena Gómez-Barris' considerations, I call an **extractivist gaze**. I elaborate on this using mining photographs from Tsumeb, which will be brought into dialogue with visual and artistic methods (Nkanga, Ndjiharine, Azoulay).

The **third chapter** is dedicated to **colonial collections**, looking at the example of the geological collection held by the Technical University of Berlin in comparison to Berlin's anthropological collection. Whereas the first contains **hundreds of minerals from Tsumeb** used for scientific research, the latter **hoards dozens of artifacts from the Kwanyama coppersmiths**, the first metallurgists of northern Namibia, whose history is hardly told. Besides understanding the **collections as tools of epistemic violence** that perpetuate colonial violence up to this day, I propose understanding **the «objects» as material witnesses of decolonial narratives**, which should be repatriated along with the specimens.

Working on a post-colonial history during the Covid-19 pandemic and thus under conditions of travel bans, closed archives, the deadly third wave in Namibia, and unpredictable developments in general, I was challenged once again to think about the hidden and privileged terms of western knowledge production. Rather than «discover» and «extract» «new» knowledge, I re-tell fragments of the past and present of Tsumeb's copper mine by foregrounding their intersections with media studies, in order to propose an approach making use of situated decolonial media geologies of copper.