
INTERNATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMME



ITP Research Support Grant Report: *Umbembe's Border War and the search for home*

Fadzai Muchemwa (Zimbabwe, ITP 2017)

Johannesburg and Pretoria, South Africa, 15 March - 30 April 2021

Supported by the Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Charitable Trust

The British
Museum

Overview

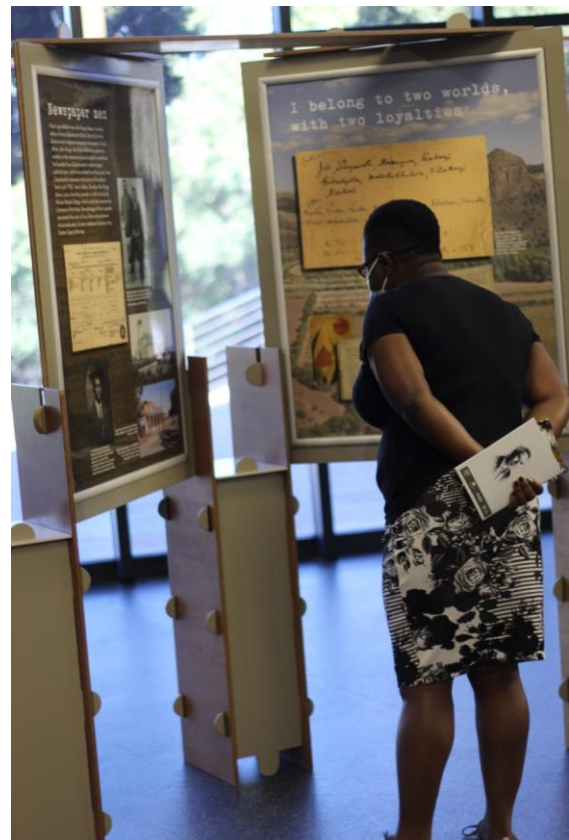
In response to International Training Programme fellows seeking support to attend conferences and carry out research, the ITP is offering financial assistance to attend and participate in conferences and to conduct research which will help develop professional skills and networks in the museum and heritage sector.

Fadzai Muchemwa successfully applied for the first ITP Research Support Grant, to assist research related to her MA studies. As a second year Master's student in the Arts of Africa and the Global Souths research programme in the Fine Arts department at Rhodes University in South Africa, Fadzai's project focused on interdisciplinary artist Helena Uambembe's practice.

**Final report by Fadzai Veronica Muchemwa,
Freelance Curator and Researcher (Zimbabwe, ITP
2017)**

Summary of the research

Uambembe's Border War and the Search for Home is research into artist Helena Uambembe's practice, positionality and context and how she uses these to recreate, invade and reposition the history of the 32 Battalion - the infantry Battalion of the South African Army Founded in 1975. Uambembe draws on her own history rooted in the small town of Pomfret, where she was born of Angolan parents and where her father was recruited into the 32 Battalion. In an attempt to understand her family history within the bigger context of the country's history, Uambembe wrestles with painful memories, absences and erasures. This project will look at how her practice has been influenced by this history and how



At Amazwi South African Museum of Literature

she is influencing this history as well. This is continuation of research into creatives on the move which started with Fadzai's project, [Curating Johannesburg: rest.less/under siege/in transition.](#)

Introduction

I am currently an independent curator and Master's candidate in Art History at [Rhodes University.](#) I feel that the impact of communities in cultural production is important and hence such connections should be explored to engage with the community and to better understand the artist and the influences that shape their work. There is a recurring story of the artist as a lone maniacally focused individual alone in their studio trudging ahead on their own, that discounts the impact of people and places that influence the production of the work.

I have for a long time had a problem writing about artists I had not met. One of the reasons why, as an art historian researching contemporary artists, I have always liked to work with living artists, is their availability to answer questions such as why they did what they did, or how, or what it meant to them at the time. Artists are human beings just like the rest of us, and sometimes they remember things differently, and other times they forget. While quirky and unpredictable, I certainly find working with artists more interesting than thumbing through dusty and yellowing hardcover from library shelves. In the end, it is the human dimension that adds a unique and inimitable layer to one's research. Helena Uambembe's work shines the light onto South Africa's role in wars and destabilising of the region - effects that are still felt today and which account in part to the resurgences of unrest that keep happening. But more than that I discovered that the memories relating to the border war are complex, layered and that practice can be personal and particular. Military historian accounts of the Border War glorify the exploits of the 32 battalion¹.

¹ Piet Nortje. 2004. *32 Battalion: The Inside Story of South Africa's Elite Fighting Unit*. Penguin Random House South Africa

Jack McCain. 2016. *Buffalo Soldiers in Angola: 32 Battalion Operation in the South African Border War*. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/buffalo-soldiers-in-angola-32-battalion-operations-in-the-south-african-border-war>

Jan Breytenbach. 1990. *They Live by the Sword*. Lemur

LJ Bothma and I Drennan. 2008. *Buffalo Battalion: South Africa's 32 Battalion: A Tale of Sacrifice*. Bloemfontein, L J Bothma

There are some stories of the impact of the war on the ordinary people in Angola and Namibia but none that approach this from a creative intervention that attempts to disrupt the narrative that is the mainstream.

My home country offers no research funding support for students studying in other countries. Alongside this ITP grant, my university offers research funding that is directly linked to the research currently being undertaken as part of your final thesis. I also used my personal reserves.

The research

I read up journal articles about the border war and spent quite a bit of time on the following website: <https://sofrep.com/specialoperations/terrible-ones-south-africas-32-battalion/> which actually had more information than the military museum, as I was to discover during my research trip. I listened to podcasts and read up on another artist, Liam Lynch, whose history is related to that of Helena but in a different context.

I became interested in Helena's practice after meeting her during my [Art Connection Africa residency at Bag Factory Artists' studios](#). Initially I was interested in her performance work but soon realised that there were other layers to her practice that I had not even begun to understand. I invited her to take part in the writing workshops I facilitated during the course of my residency, not as an interviewee but as a writer. What I knew about the South African Border War was what I had read in newspapers. Post workshops, we kept in touch and I have stayed at her house when she stayed in Johannesburg and I had a layover. I have followed her work in my effort to 'write alongside' her.

Implementing the project

I met Mthabisi Sithole and Roxy Kaczmarek from David Krut Studios during my research. Roxy talked to me about her collaboration with Helena on the project *Commander Nel's Archive*, and she told me how that collaboration worked. I met with artists at the Bag Factory Artists' Studios

where she was in residency. I met Philiswa Lila, Helena's friend and an artist whom I had only known about virtually and is a former student of my university. We spoke about making a home in strange cities and being a woman in unwelcoming places. I met Motsane Seabala (South Africa, ITP Fellow 2016) from the [Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History](#) and spoke about interrupted, disrupted and erased histories. I met Mariana Zdara, a curator of the art collection at this same institution, and we spoke about the missing voices in the collection. I met Paul Sika, a Master's student in Interactive Game Design at the University of the Witwatersrand, and we spoke about the importance of storytelling. I met with Tariro Mushonga and we spoke about making a temporary home in a foreign country.



With Wezile Mgibe and Tariro Mushonga in Braamfontein

I met with Wezile Mgibe and we spoke about finding joy and peace in uncomfortable spaces. I met with Robert Machiri, Percy Zvomuya and Tinofireyi Zhou and we spoke about sonic interventions in research and art practice. I met with Ohdette Graskie and Els van Nuys and we spoke about the effect of the pandemic on art production and presentation. I met with Dineke van Der Walt and we spoke about curating in a pandemic and emotions. I met with Tinashe Mushakavanhu and we spoke about working with the archive and how the archive can provide a reading of a nation. I met with Tila Litunzi and Thebe Phetogo and we spoke generally about temporary habitation of foreign lands. I met Nadine Siegart who collects Helena's work and spoke in general about art practices. I met Richard Henry who put up the 32 battalion display at the [National Museum of Military History](#) and we spoke about the Border War, the display and the 32 battalion.



With Tiina Liebenberg, Dineke van Der Walt and Ame Bell at David Krut Projects in Rosebank

I visited [David Krut Studios](#) (Helena did a collaborative project here), [Bag Factory Artists' Studios](#) (Helena did a residency here), [Maboneng Precinct](#) (Helena used to stay here) National Museum of Military History (to research on the 32 Battalion), [National Archives of South Africa](#) (to research on the 32 Battalion), [The Commune and the Forge](#) (for the launch of the Indaba Is LP and Fan Zine), [Javett UP](#), an Art Center at the University of Pretoria. All these places gave me an understanding of Helena's work and the context that she works in.

I met some interesting people whom I would want to collaborate with on research in archives and other areas of interest.



In the anthropology storage with Helena Uambembe and Motsane Seabala at the National Cultural History Museum

I got to 'spend' time with Helena in five different ways. The first was in the Johannesburg and Pretoria archives in her absence, the second was in the company of a few friends in Johannesburg and Pretoria, the third was in Johannesburg in her absence when I met people who have interacted and worked with her, the fourth was in her studio and her home. And the fifth and last was at the National Museum of Cultural History where she came along to meet Motsane Seabala and we were given access to the art collection storage and a tour of the anthropology collection.

Outputs

I managed to write a short review of Helena's work <https://artthrob.co.za/2021/05/03/a-history-of-disruption-helena-uambembes-commander-nels-archive/>.

I wrote text for her exhibition Pim Pam Pum <https://creativefeel.co.za/2021/05/looking-at-the-past-to-heal-the-future-helena-uambembes-pi-pam-pum/> based on my interaction with her as well as text for her showing at [Arco, Madrid](#).

I am in the process of writing a longer essay on what it means to write alongside an artist and Helena's search for 'home'.

Findings

I discovered that sometimes what you seek to find might not necessarily be what you will find. I spent many days with Helena Uambembe, with complete and unlimited access to the subject of my research. We talked a lot and not always about her artwork. She agreed to answer questions on video and on an audio recorder whilst she worked on handprints for her upcoming show in Potchefstroom, as well as when she was sewing. We kept stopping the recording because she needed to go into the house to do something or she was watching the pot that was our lunch, or to give directions to the delivery service delivering sustenance.

I learnt a lot about her during our interactions; her work, the issues that influence her practice and about the Border War itself.

For example, at the National Military Museum when I went back for the third time to look at their archives and displays, I met Richard who was responsible for the 32 display. He went on to talk about how Jan Breytenbach and Gert Nel had saved the FNLA (National Liberation Front of Angola) soldiers who had then been integrated into the unit that we now know as the 32 Battalion. He spoke fondly of the glory of the Border War and how efficient the battalion had been and what a shame it was that it was disbanded. I found it telling how this disparate account of the impact of the war was so different from that of Helena. I then encountered a similar experience of photographer Liam Lynch whose father fought in the Border War but had a different experience because his father was a white South African.



The Hinde Memorial at the National Museum of Military History

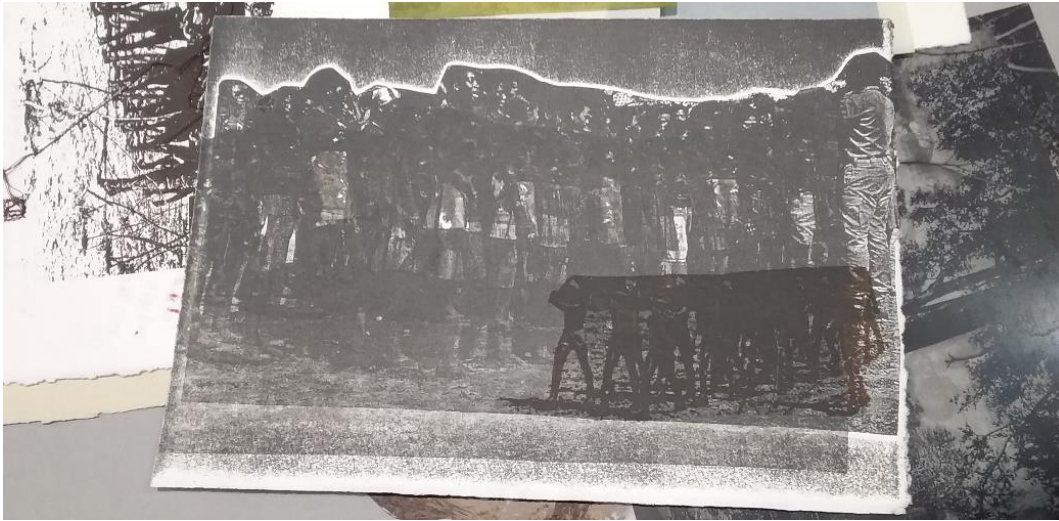
The display in the National Military Museum referring to the border war was almost a footnote, spare and almost swallowed by the other displays in the same gallery. Quite contrary to the impact it had in shaping regional politics and on ordinary people.

I learnt two major things: Plans should never be set in stone and always keep your phone charged.

Home is not the structure that houses us. According to Ahmed (2004), the home experience may include both 'uprootings' and 'regroundings'². Indeed, when one considers Uambembe's experiences of home in both the places she has left behind and the places she has inhabited, one comes to realise that home can be made and remade on the move. While some may feel a sense of loss of home and only see it as 'there' or 'nowhere,' others may carry home within themselves and experience it as a 'mobile symbolic habitat' or as a 'journey.' The term 'home' then refers not only to a physical space for sheltering and satisfying biological needs, but also to a social, cultural, political, and affective space where people give meaning to their daily lives.

The emphasis on the material or geographical aspects of home not only minimizes its more symbolic and existential dimensions. It also leads to a portrayal of the home as an uncontentious and constant area in which culture and identity are presumed to be rooted. Because of conflict and displacement, the location of one's home is ambiguous. As a result, rather than being located 'here' or 'there', home becomes a contested site that must be renegotiated over time and space.

² In an edited compilation *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, Sara Ahmed raises several questions of what home means and what movement of bodies means to the making of home.



Images from a working folder of Helena Uambembe's collaboration with Roxy at David Krut Projects

Roles of the ITP alumni and further networking

I spoke to people who have worked or collaborated with Helena, artists and curators. I was given the contacts of the people who had worked with her from Helena herself. I also connected with previous ITP fellow, Motsane Getrude Seabala.

These are people who might help me navigate other spaces in future and I see these people as the social and intellectual network that can stimulate and advance my thinking. Important

changes in cultural history are the product of very large numbers of people and circumstances conspiring to make something new. Ideas are built on other ideas.



See below for descriptions

Future plans

In carrying out this research I became more aware of the importance of the grammar of experience and methodologies of care, and why they are important in qualitative research. I became fascinated in the role of storytelling as a practice of care, the ethics of care as a

research paradigm. I became more aware of how as a researcher/body, through contact with all the people I met, I became changed. I became aware of what my positionality allows or takes away from the research experience. I became more interested in the role of the activist scholar although I have no idea what this means for my practice as a researcher now, but it is a road I am interested in taking. I realised that when focusing on trauma, there is always the risk of pathologising pain and that it is vital to make decisions to show only what is necessary, what Temi Odumosu calls ‘making visible without making public’. I have started asking questions, not new questions, but the ones that other researchers who deal with indexical records and archival images have been asking: what do you know about the archival image? Why is this image here? What rights do we have knowing that these people did not give their informed consent? Can a gesture remain in the form of an indexical action that haunts?



With Tila Likunzi, Motsane Seabala, Helena Uambembe, Candice Allison, and Thebe Phetogo in Pretoria

I am writing a research paper on my findings. I am interested in research in archives and dealing with problem archives and this research has opened a new world of research for me. I will keep in touch with people I met during the research. I am interested in writing alongside Helena for the foreseeable future. I am looking towards writing more research papers in future on the creative uses/ interventions in textual archives. I am also interested in cowriting a research paper with Motsane Seabala.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Charitable Trust who made my research trip possible.

Cover images

Documenting Helena's work process.

With Tinashe Mushakavanhu in Braamfontein.

A piece from a working folder of Helena Uambembe's collaboration with Roxy at Dravid Krut Projects.

At the National Museum of Military History.

Collage images (left to right)

With Philiswa Lila.

With Pat Kagiso Mautloa and Phumulani Ntuli in Fordsburg.

With Roxy Kaczmarek.

With Motsane Seabala at the National Cultural History Museum.

With Els van Uys and Ohdette Graskie at Berman Contemporary Randsteam.

With Candice Allison at Oxford Parks.

International Training Programme blog post: Announcement! The First ITP Research Support Grant of 2021 Awarded to Fadzai Muchemwa (Zimbabwe, ITP 2017)

<https://bmitpglobalnetwork.org/2021/03/23/announcement-the-first-itp-research-support-grant-of-2021-awarded-to-fadzai-muchemwa-zimbabwe-itp-2017/>