Research Project

Photographs beyond ruins – the old location albums of Usakos, 1920s-1960s

Project funded by own resources

Project title Photographs beyond ruins – the old location albums of Usakos, 1920s-1960s
Principal Investigator(s) Miescher, Giorgio ;
Co-Investigator(s) Rizzo, Lorena ;
Project Members Grendon, Paul ; Smith, Tina ;
Organisation / Research unit
Departement Geschichte / Geschichte Afrikas (Harries)
Departement Gesellschaftswissenschaften / Afrikastudien (Macamo)
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The project is designed around three private photographic collections kept by four women (Cecilie //Geises, Wilhelmine Katjimune, Gisela Pieters and Olga /Garoës) in a central Namibian town called Usakos. Usakos is marked, today, by economic stagnation, infrastructural decay and many social challenges. The town’s history is linked to the development of the South African railway system in Namibia, which brought remarkable prosperity to Usakos in the 1940s and 1950s, but caused a major socio-economic decline in the early 1960s. At this stage, the inhabitants of Usakos were subjected to forced removals based on racial segregation and apartheid urban planning and relocated to the town’s outskirts. The photographic collections are part of a diverse culture of remembering, memory work and community building. These images constitute personal albums, subjective narratives of and aesthetic interventions in a history that left people out of sight/site; a history that denied them visibility and voice as residents, citizens and human beings. The photographs (about 250 in number) cover a wide range of genres, subjects and locations; they include portraits of family members, images of public spaces, of leisure activities, and streetviews. Most of the pictures were taken by African itinerant photographers and residents of the old location, whose work was considered to be part of an inclusive, cosmopolitan notion of community and African cultural production. The social, cultural and aesthetic variety of life in the ‘old location’ (‘ou lokasie’) informs the ways in which people relate to these photographs today: with pride and a deep sense of nostalgia and loss. Forced removals and decades of economic hardship and political tutelage ruined a thriving community, and the photographs have become distant reflections on a landscape meanwhile marked by decay and memories of dislocation.

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