

Review: Dirk Göttsche, *Remembering Africa. The Rediscovery of Colonialism in Contemporary German Literature*, Rochester, NY, Camden House, 2013.

In recent years the field of German Studies has seen a surge in the number of analyses of narrative texts about Germany's colonial period on the African continent. Somewhat surprisingly, academic research has actually been following the lead of novelists here, as it is these authors who have been shaping the literary rediscovery of German colonial history since the mid-1990s. The literary analyses of texts set in Namibia include noteworthy contributions by Stefan Hermes and Medardus Brehl, who wrote an intriguing analysis of the literary repercussions of the Herero uprising/genocide in colonial and contemporary German literature.¹ While such analysts can indeed claim to present a comprehensive view in terms of the understanding and scope of their analytic subject, Dirk Göttsche moves it onto a new level, enriching and complementing it with material from other postcolonial literary sources on other scenes and arenas of colonial encounters – and oppression – in Africa.

The monograph by Göttsche, who openly admits that it overlaps with “my previous publications” and “textual analyses” (p. vii) and lists a remarkable two dozen articles of his own in the

bibliography, includes extensive discussions of “roughly fifty historical novels” (p. 15) and thus justifiably claims to be “the first comprehensive study of contemporary German literature's intense engagement with German colonialism and Germany's wider involvement in European colonialism”. As far as the choice of analytic weapons – or methods and approaches – is concerned, it “draws on international postcolonial theory [that is, Saïd, Bhabha, Spivak and others] as well as the German tradition of cross-cultural studies – ‘Interkulturelle Literaturwissenschaft’ [...] – and on memory studies” (p. 14).

The methodological framework – or mix of frameworks – helps the reader through half a dozen parts, all of which focus on separate aspects and facets of the book's general theme. The subdivision of the chapters is persuasive and the choice of the instruments and tools, reflecting the current boom in postcolonial theory in the humanities or the equally widely acknowledged theory of cultural memory, is well-argued. A critical mind might claim, though, that not all of these concepts seem to tie in well with each other, or result in a well-chosen matrix for analysis. The issue of remembering, for example, plays a key role in narrative texts that focus on family memories such as, in “SWA”/ Namibia context, Gebert's *Weltwitschia Mirabilis* (2008) or Stephan Wackwitz's *Ein unsichtbares Land* (2003). The preponderance of (family) memories also proves to be seductive enough, however, to exclude – or at least leave unmentioned – the rival conceptualization of understanding the past:

¹ Stefan Hermes, „Fahrten nach Südwest“. *Die Kolonialkriege gegen die Herero und Nama in der deutschen Literatur (1904–2004)*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2009; Medardus Brehl, *Vernichtung der Herero. Diskurse der Gewalt in der deutschen Kolonialliteratur*, Paderborn, Fink, 2007.

historiography or, for that matter, metafictional historiography. Yet such a concept would have been more suitable in many of the “Spurensuche” cases when the respective postcolonial writer, deprived of the living memory of his (grand)parents’ generation, sketches and muses on the colonial past by way of reading, like a historian, his grandfather’s memoirs and subsequently speculating and fantasizing about it (p. 345).

This small issue does not diminish the general impression of *Remembering Africa* as a remarkable and, in its comprehension of the subject matter, outstanding contribution to literary criticism on German-language postcolonial prose. Notably, the analysis of popular and pot-boiler fiction – best-selling novels brimming with exoticism and in many cases infested with a blatantly revisionist attitude – is included as are interpretations of long-since canonized, high culture books such as those by Ilija Trojanow set in Eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean area (*Weltensammler*) or Thomas Stangl’s postmodernist recounting of the historical race to discover Timbuctoo in the 1820s (*Der einzige Ort*). Götsche rightly dedicates extensive chapters to the analysis of these works, reading them against the background of contemporary classics such as Uwe Timm’s *Morenga* of 1978.

Götsche patiently and minutely elaborates on the qualities and shortcomings of the primary literature he examines, be these the above-mentioned airport novels by, for those on or set in Namibia, Patricia Mennen (pp. 101-12) or Karen Winter (pp. 379-

89) – Barbara Seelk’s *Stunde der Löwin* (2009) would have been another rich source for analysis and criticism –, or the more ambitious (and more widely discussed) prose by Wackwitz, Gerhard Seyfried (*Herero*, 2003), Giselher W. Hoffmann (especially *Die schweigenden Feuer* of 1994) or Andrea Paluch and Robert Habeck (*Der Schrei der Hyänen*, 2004). These, along with two remarkably early testimonies of critical postcolonial stances by the GDR authors Ferdinand May and Dietmar Beetz, are comprehensively interpreted and with careful reference to all preceding critics.

In particular, Götsche’s overwhelming modernity compared to previous criticisms of the texts comes to the fore. A case in point is his balanced discussion of Seyfried’s controversial novel: “Even if criticism of the novel as a ‘vindication of colonialism’ goes too far”, he states with reference to Stefan Hermes’ interpretation provided in the above-mentioned precursor study, “*Herero* clearly fails to advance postcolonial inquiry into German colonial rule in Africa” and as such “seems to indicate a move toward a memory of colonialism beyond postcolonial debate” (p. 99): a symptom which he labels as “normalization” in the subsequent chapter on Mennen’s *Der Ruf der Kalahari* (2010). Later Stefan Hermes again figures as a kind of interpretative sparring partner in the discussion of Paluch and Habeck’s novel (pp. 370-5): while Hermes concedes that the authors’ “engagement with German colonial history” is “quite satisfactory” in *Der Schrei der Hyänen* (cf. p. 371, footnote 76), Götsche insists that the narrative is “in many ways a modernized ‘colonial

novel” and may thus be regarded as (further) proof “that German notions of Africa and Africans had remained essentially unchanged” (p. 375) since the end of the nation’s colonial rule in 1918.

In his survey of the state of the art in postcolonial writing, Göttsche concludes that the increase in “postcolonial awareness”, diagnosed in the narratives examined and patiently outlined on more than four hundred densely printed pages, “has not produced a unified postcolonial aesthetic” (p. 414).

The immensely broad scope of the study is however not “all-encompassing” in the literal sense. Some authors of true literary quality whose works are significant both in terms of publishing and the theme-specific Namibian context appear to have escaped Göttsche’s attention, among them the former GDR activist, liberation struggle supporter, family saga novelist and post-1989 compiler of German Namibians’ recollections Jürgen Leskien.

Indeed the omission of Leskien’s prose is an anomaly in more than just one respect. If Göttsche refers to Manfred Gebert’s *Welwitschia Mirabilis* as “not a literary masterpiece” (p. 338), although it is exemplarily as “a critical inquiry into German colonial history through family history and in situ *Spurensuche* in Namibia” (p. 343) by a writer whose prose “clearly resonates with *ostalgie*, the popular East German nostalgia for the idealized conditions of life in the former German Democratic Republic” (p. 339), it can be argued that Leskien is superior to Gebert in terms of aesthetic quality, efficiency in literary

Spurensuche efforts and reflection on the GDR’s achievements and shortcomings in *Einsam in Südwest* (1991) or his fictionalized interview series with native German Namibians entitled *Dunkler Schatten Waterberg* (2004).²

Göttsche’s lengthy analysis of Gebert’s work as well as his failure to mention other writers who share Gebert’s GDR background may be regarded as an imbalance in his otherwise well-researched study. As such his conclusions about German postcolonial prose writing – that West German novelist Uwe Timm still figures as the non-plus-ultra while contemporary East German approaches (at least those discussed) lack literary quality – are biased by a perspective that favours, consciously or not, the mainstream position of both the pre-1989 and the current reunified Federal Republic of Germany.

Yet regardless of these flaws, *Remembering Africa* is more than just another attempt to chart postcolonial prose writing in German. It is, and will for the future remain, a cornerstone achievement as well as an inspiring source and profound repository for any critic who enters the terrain of Namibian colonial past and postcolonial present and their repercussions in literature.

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² Olaf Müller’s *Tintenpalast* (Berlin, Berlin-Verlag, 2000) figures as another case in point for Göttsche’s somewhat one-sided and not altogether well-informed analysis of that part of German postcolonial literature which from a post-1989 standpoint deals with GDR perspectives on supra-generational efforts to trace – or are triggered in their plot by – a family past in the colony of SWA.