

## Looking back critically: Representations of the 'Herero War' in novels of the GDR (Ferdinand May, Dietmar Beetz)<sup>1</sup>

Stefan Hermes

### Abstract

*Drawing on elements of postcolonial theory, the article analyses two novels of the GDR dealing with the so-called Herero War, which have been widely ignored by literary criticism so far: Ferdinand May's "Sturm über Südwest-Afrika" (1962) and Dietmar Beetz's "Flucht vom Waterberg" (1989). It points out their references to Lenin's concept of imperialism and explores their authentication strategies as well as the construction of the 'black' and 'white' characters plus the way the relations between them are depicted. Finally, it demonstrates to which extent the authors achieve their aim to present a critical view on the historic events – and how they occasionally fail to do so by unintentionally falling back on patterns dominating traditional colonial Literature.*

### Introduction

Within the discourse on Literature relating to Wilhelmine rule over South West Africa, Uwe Timm's ambitious and highly complex novel *Morenga*, published in 1978 in the FRG, is usually regarded the most impressive attempt by a German author to establish a critical view on the atrocities the 'Schutztruppe' committed (not only) against the uprising Herero and Nama between 1904 and 1908.<sup>2</sup> Although this is more than comprehensible, it should not be overlooked that *Morenga* is neither the only nor the first work of German literature to challenge the affirmative view on the genocide as it is presented in earlier texts such as Gustav Frenssen's *Peter Moors Fahrt nach Südwest* (1906) and Hans Grimm's *Volk ohne Raum* (1926). For instance, there are two writers from the GDR who should gain more attention in this context than they have had until today: Ferdinand

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a chapter from my dissertation '*Fahrten nach Südwest. Die Kolonialkriege gegen die Herero und Nama in der deutschen Literatur (1904–2004)*', Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The most important Anglophone novels dealing with this subject are doubtlessly Thomas Pynchon's *V.*, Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1963 and *Gravity's Rainbow*, New York, Viking, 1973. Among the numerous articles on Timm's *Morenga* cf. especially Gunther Pakendorf, "'Morenga' oder Geschichte als Fiktion", *Acta Germanica* 19, 1988: 144–158; Peter Horn, "Über die Schwierigkeit, einen Standpunkt einzunehmen. Zu Uwe Timms 'Morenga'", in: Manfred Durzak, Hartmut Steinecke, eds., *Die Archäologie der Wünsche. Studien zum Werk von Uwe Timm*, Köln, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1995: 93–118.

May, whose novel *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* appeared in 1962 and is thus the first fictional work on the 'Herero War' after the collapse of the 'Third Reich', and Dietmar Beetz, who published several novels on German colonialism in Namibia, among them *Flucht vom Waterberg* in 1989. To reach an understanding of the textual strategies both authors implement in order to overcome the tradition of colonial literature, it is initially necessary to have a glance at central aspects of socialist political theory they adopt in their novels.

## Lenin's theory of imperialism and historiography in the GDR

### On 'coming to terms with the past' post 1945

It is hardly surprising that the colonial era was barely touched upon in discourses on German history in the aftermath of World War II, indeed even the treatment of the immediate past was characterised by an overriding willingness to look away. Thus a far reaching public discussion of the Shoa was never happened in the western zone of occupation or the soon-to-be founded Federal Republic, not least because it was considered detrimental in the pursuit of economic consolidation.

In order to achieve this consolidation and to avoid endangering the peace in society the Adenauer-era legislature not only approved of high ranking officials from the Nazi regime occupying influential positions in politics, justice and industry, it actively encouraged this development over an extended period.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to this the young GDR claimed to be a thoroughly anti-fascist state and therefore the ideal home for victims of National Socialism – and thus there was no reason whatsoever to assume any responsibility for the deeds of that regime *post festum*.<sup>4</sup>

As, in addition, the recourse to the official communist doctrine for history was deemed the only option, it was thus a matter of course that controversies surrounding the interpretation of 'Third Reich' rarely surfaced. National Socialism was to be seen as a form of fascism, i.e. as the last stage of capitalism – and nothing else. Thus it could be regarded on the one hand as closed matter while on the other as completely and irreversibly defeated on home soil. However, the materialistic perspective of GDR historiography also made it possible to record the colonial period by means of a totalising description and to interpret it as being closely linked to National Socialism. In recourse to the concept of imperialism both phenomena had to be understood as unavoidable consequences of worldwide capitalism.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik. Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit*, München, Beck, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. David Herf, *Divided Memory. The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*, Cambridge/Mass., Harvard University Press, 1997.

## Lenin's theory of imperialism

In this context particular attention was paid to Lenin's canon *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917), which takes up a number of aspects only touched upon by Marx. While the latter was of the opinion that the development of capitalism was a centrally driven process and that those on the margins played only a minor role, Lenin was forced to integrate the rapid territorial expansion of European states towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into his theory. Thus he developed the thesis that capitalism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was no longer characterised by free competition but rather dominated by monopolies, was dependent on colonialism to delay its inevitable decline and fall. As the cartels, which were controlled by the major banks in the industrialised countries, were no longer capable of operating profitably in Europe or North America, they felt it necessary to exploit new markets, sources of raw materials and investment opportunities overseas.<sup>5</sup> By using the profits generated in this way the financial oligarchy could bribe the opportunistic leaders of social democracy and thus temporarily check the revolutionary aspirations of the proletariat. Ultimately, however, monopolistic capitalism led to a lack of investment in the factors of production. Besides this the world was almost fully divided up between the imperialist powers so that further expansion would, according to Lenin, soon be impossible.<sup>6</sup> "[T]he exploitation of an increasing number of small or weak nations by an extremely small group of the richest or most powerful nations" must constitute an unmistakeable sign of the imminent downfall of monopolistic capitalism.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence the proletarian revolution advances irresistibly.

## On the operationalisation of Lenin's theses

Although Lenin hugely overestimated the importance of the annexed territories for the economies of the 'motherlands' his exposition had considerable influence on subsequent generations of communist intellectuals, who due to the continuing existence of capitalism, had no choice other than to see National Socialism as a form of imperialism. They could not, however, regard this era as finished as that would have entailed daring to deem Lenin's prognosis that socialism would follow the collapse of the imperial system, as flawed.<sup>8</sup>

Appropriate examples of a Lenin-oriented association of colonialism and National Socialism are offered in the works of Horst Drechsler as well as in a miscellany published by Helmuth Stoecker and others called *Die koloniale Expansionspolitik und Herrschaft des deutschen Imperialismus in Afrika von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des zweiten*

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism. A Popular Outline*, Introduction by Norman Lewis and James Malone, London, Chicago, Junius, 1996: 61-75.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 101-111.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*: 128.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Mommsen, *Imperialismustheorien. Ein Überblick über die neueren Imperialismustheorien*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977: 46.

*Weltkriegs* which appeared in 1977 in East Berlin.<sup>9</sup> Instead of emphasising the differences between Wilhelmine and National Socialist conquests, the focus is on what they supposedly have in common, and so the “continuity” in German foreign policy postulated a good two decades earlier by Hannah Arendt,<sup>10</sup> is supported in a contribution by Richard Lakowski.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile it is no less significant that the recourse to Lenin allows the interpretation of the Herero and Nama wars as part of a general, international class struggle and also as a precursor of the ‘struggle for independence’ which the SWAPO conducted, supported by the GDR, against the South African apartheid regime in Namibia from the 1960s onwards.<sup>12</sup> Thus Drechsler describes the Herero of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century explicitly as “proletarians”; he draws a parallel between their resistance to German hegemony and

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. especially Horst Drechsler, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft. Der Kampf der Herero und Nama gegen den deutschen Imperialismus (1884–1915)*, Berlin (GDR), Akademie Verlag, 1966; Helmuth Stoecker et al., eds., *Drang nach Afrika. Die koloniale Expansionspolitik und Herrschaft des deutschen Imperialismus in Afrika von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des zweiten Weltkriegs*, Berlin (GDR), Akademie Verlag, 1977.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1958. Under other circumstances this attempt – which must be given credit for raising interest in German colonial history – is becoming popular again of late; compare to it at a glance Pascal Grosse, “What does German Colonialism have to do with National Socialism? A Conceptual Framework”, in: Eric Ames, Marcia Klotz, Lora Wildenthal, eds., *Germany’s Colonial Pasts*, Lincoln, London, University of Nebraska Press, 2005: 115–134; Birthe Kundrus, “Kontinuitäten, Parallelen, Rezeptionen. Überlegungen zur ‚Kolonialisierung des Nationalsozialismus’” *Werkstattsgeschichte* 43, 2006: 45–62 and Birthe Kundrus, “Continuities, parallels, receptions. Reflections on the ‘colonization’ of National Socialism”, *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 4 (2008): 25–46. This point of view becomes questionable where the differences between colonial and national socialist forms of rule are passed over without due consideration; cf. Rosa Amelia Plumelle-Urbe, *Weiße Barbarei. Vom Kolonialrassismus zur Rassenpolitik der Nazis*, Zürich, Rotpunkt, 2004. More carefully weighed up and thus more plausibly expressed is Jürgen Zimmerer’s view, when argues on the ‘question of mixed marriages’, that German rule over ‘Südwest’ created a “racist society of privilege”. Jürgen Zimmerer, “Von Windhuk nach Warschau. Die rassistische Privilegiengesellschaft in Deutsch-Südwestafrika, ein Modell mit Zukunft?”, in: Frank Becker, ed., *Rassenmischehen – Mischlinge – Rassentrennung. Zur Politik der Rasse im deutschen Kolonialreich*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 2004: 97–123 (97). Despite some dramatic differences its characteristics give an indication of National Socialist law – particularly in the occupied areas of Eastern Europe; yet Zimmerer’s conclusion is quite restrained: “There is no one-way street from Südwest to the occupied Eastern territories, when seen from Windhoek, the Third Reich was in no way a necessary consequence, [...] but from all numerous the filter roads from which the criminal politics of National Socialism was fed, one began in the colonies and that wasn’t the least important.” (Ibid.: 122). (“Es gab keine Einbahnstraße von Südwest in die besetzten Ostgebiete, von Windhuk aus betrachtet, war das Dritte Reich keineswegs die notwendige Folge, aber um im Bild zu bleiben, von den zahlreichen Zubringerstraßen, aus denen die verbrecherische Politik des Nationalsozialismus gespeist wurde, begann eine in den Kolonien, und das war nicht die unwichtigste.”).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Lakowski, “Der zweite Weltkrieg”, in: Helmuth Stoecker et al., eds., *Drang nach Afrika. Die koloniale Expansionspolitik und Herrschaft des deutschen Imperialismus in Afrika von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des zweiten Weltkriegs*, Berlin (GDR), Akademie Verlag, 1977: 315–351 (315).

<sup>12</sup> On the GDR’s support for SWAPO cf. Papers by Max Schmidt, Heinrich Toeplitz, eds., *Gegen Rassismus, Apartheid und Kolonialismus. Dokumente der DDR 1977–1982*, Berlin (GDR), Staatsverlag, 1983.

that of the European labour movement against exploitation by *Großkapital* ('big business').<sup>13</sup>

## Colonial war and class struggle: Ferdinand May's *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* (1962)

### Plot

Although historians in the GDR turned their attention to Germany's colonial past somewhat earlier than their counterparts in the Federal Republic they were by no means the first ones to publish material on the theme after 1945 — this was done rather by individual East German writers of light fiction. Thus Maximilian Scheer presented his depiction *Schwarz und Weiß am Waterberg* in terms accessible to the general public and couched in a novel-like narrative form as early as 1952, a decade before a genuinely literary treatment of the 'Herero War' was published, *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* by Ferdinand May (1896–1977), who was chief playwright at Leipzig theatre from 1951 to 1956 and who received the patriotic order of merit of the GDR in 1972.<sup>14</sup>

In his novel May applies the principles in the GDR for historical research into colonialism in various ways; in addition his construction of 'black' and 'white' characters demonstratively keeps its distance from the cultural essentialism and, indeed, emphatically from the racially coded binarism of early colonial literature. However, it is possible to recognise in *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* a certain narrative monopolisation of the characters, a politically motivated instrumentalisation of those of a different culture.

May's novel starts off telling of the life and times of Kamazandu's clan, the family of a Herero chieftain in the third person and in the present. Primarily it is the reflections of his wife, Kukura, which reveal to the reader the problems with which the Herero are confronted as a result of the advance of German settlers into their territory: In particular the deceitful 'white' traders cause Kukura much anxiety. Thereupon follows the introduction of the former German officer von Flotow, who fled to 'Südwest' after being discharged from the army and now farms near where Kukura and Kamuzandu live. An alcoholic and financially ruined, he mistreats his workers sadistically; moreover von Flotow considers himself "Lord over [the] bodies" of the 'black' girls, who he regularly rapes.<sup>15</sup>

At the centre of the ensuing episode are the cousins Egon and Otto von Alvensleben who have both signed up voluntarily to serve in the 'Schutztruppe' and are now on board a steamer bound for Swakopmund. There they encounter Jutta von Eschenbach,

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<sup>13</sup> Horst Drechsler, "Südwestafrika 1907-1914", in: Stoecker et al., *Drang*: 113-123 (113).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Maximilian Scheer, *Schwarz und Weiß am Waterberg. Ein Stück Afrika heute und gestern*, Schwerin, Petermännken-Verlag, 1952. Scheer's book appeared in an updated and extended version in 1961; Ferdinand May, *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika. Eine Erzählung aus den Tagen des Hereroaufstandes*, Berlin (GDR), Volk und Welt, 1962.

<sup>15</sup> May, *Sturm*: 27 ("Herr über ihre Leiber").

“an elegant lady” who is visiting her brother Bodo, who lives in the colony.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile Kamuzandu decides to join the struggle against the Germans – a struggle which May’s narrator unequivocally deems “just”.<sup>17</sup> During an attack on Flotow’s farm Kamuzandu kills the hated ‘white’.

Following this the Herero score a series of military successes under the command of Samuel Maharero. However the district doctor Eberhard Grünheide, who is sympathetic to their cause, foresees the tables turning: “I know the effects of modern machine and field guns: engineered and organised mass murder against the heroic courage of individuals.”<sup>18</sup> Grünheide goes to Maharero, to convince him of the pointlessness of the uprising, but his appeals fall on deaf ears and he is then forced to act as the rebel leader’s personal physician. But the German is proven right: As the Witbooi-Nama reject an alliance with Maharero and instead side with the colonisers the Herero find themselves increasingly on the defensive. While they are retreating en masse to the Waterberg, Theodor Leutwein, commanding officer of the German troops is replaced by Lothar von Trotha. He is determined to drive the enemy into the Omaheke, where every last one of them, women and children included, should die of thirst. And, indeed the Germans achieve this objective: Kamuzandu and a great number of other rebels are killed, the overwhelming majority of the Herero however flee in desperation into the desert, and those who escape are pursued mercilessly by the imperial army. In the course of this pursuit the battalion under the command of Otto von Alvensleben suffers so severely as a result of the lack of water that they begin to drink their own urine and the blood of dead horses. Alvensleben eventually loses his mind and shoots himself; his cousin Egon had already fallen in battle. Without regard for the losses on the German side Trotha’s genocidal strategy leads to the intended result: the “annihilation of the unhappy nation” of Herero is almost absolute, according to May’s narrator, who puts the number of survivors at 14,000 from originally 80,000 people.<sup>19</sup>

### May’s authentication strategies

Like the majority of the earlier ‘Südwest’ novels *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* is characterised by the author’s efforts to generate lifelike effects. Thus in May’s text we are dealing with a historical novel, in which alongside purely fictional characters, numerous characters based on real persons and yet only to some degree historical, are featured:

Even if the author of a historical novel sticks rigidly to historically documented facts [...], all his heroes will be unavoidably fictional, no matter how closely they resemble historical figures. The very fact that the apparently historical

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.: 50 (“elegante Dame”).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.: 159 (“gerecht”).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.: 181 (“Ich kenne die Wirkung moderner Maschinengewehre und Feldgeschütze: technisierter, organisierter Massenmord gegen Heldenmut von Individuen.”).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.: 295 (“Ausrottung des unglücklichen Volkes”).

characters inhabit the same world as those he has invented makes them fictional.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore May integrates various authentic documents into his text, by which it is suggested that the narrator's commentary can claim to be valid beyond the confines of the diegesis.

The large number of characters which appear in the novel is also remarkable; of these only a handful has been mentioned here. However this fact becomes less surprising if one considers the intentions, which form the basis of May's novel: It is supposed to reflect as accurately as possible the historical class structure in the 'Schutzgebiet', thus depicting the social reality in an objective manner – even if this happens through an intermediary in a fragmented form.<sup>21</sup> Therefore it is necessary to present a broad spectrum of figures each of whom embodies a certain aspect of the society of the colonisers or of the colonised. May's episodic narrative style seems to derive from this: It would have taken a colossal effort and would have hardly been plausible from the point of view of the plot, had he drawn up a coherent narrative in which all the figures are directly connected with each other. Thus it is obvious that in *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* several threads of the story, at whose centre there are differing figures or groups, run more or less parallel to each other.

### Heroes of the resistance? The 'black' characters

Although May's novel leaves absolutely no room for doubting that the Herero war against the Germans was an act of legitimate resistance, he refuses to construct African characters of exclusively moral integrity, and to play them off against criminal 'whites'. The Herero Kamuzandu can only be regarded as in no way one-dimensional but rather as highly ambiguous: on the one hand he is presented as debt-ridden, illiterate drinker, on the other however as a shrewd strategist, who proves his humane nature by strictly forbidding any acts of violence against German women and children.<sup>22</sup>

The character of his wife Kukura is no less ambivalent: First of all she is depicted as "long-legged, narrow-hipped with steep breasts", as a "proud, beautiful woman" wherein the stereotypical reduction of 'black' women to their physical being in the sexually charged colonial discourse is recognisable.<sup>23</sup> Kukura however does not appear

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<sup>20</sup> Wolf Schmid, *Elemente der Narratologie*, Berlin, New York, de Gruyter, 2005: 44 ("Aber selbst wenn sich der Autor eines historischen Romans streng an die belegten historischen Fakten hielte [...], wären alle seine Helden, wie sehr sie auch historischen Figuren ähnelten, unausweichlich fiktive Figuren. Allein die Tatsache, dass die quasi-historischen in derselben Welt wie die offen ausgedachten leben, macht sie fiktiv.")

<sup>21</sup> With regard to the reflection theorem, which is central to Marxist aesthetics cf. Dieter Schlenstedt, ed., *Literarische Widerspiegelung. Geschichtliche und theoretische Dimensionen eines Problems*, Berlin (GDR), Weimar, Aufbau, 1981. On Lenin's recognition theory and the deduction of the terms of literary reflection from this, as undertaken in particular by Georg Lukács, cf. Joachim Lehmann, *Die blinde Wissenschaft. Realismus und Realität in der Literaturtheorie der DDR*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 1995: 87-97.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. May, *Sturm*: 152, 172.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.: 10 ("hochbeinig, schmalhüftig mit steilen Brüsten", "stolze, schöne Frau").

in May's novel merely as an intellectually unsophisticated object of male desire, thus representing a break with the conventions of writing on colonial topics: occasionally she reflects in great detail on the legality of capitalism and traditions handed down from generation to generation in Herero society, whereby she recognises the need for female emancipation in male dominated social structures.<sup>24</sup>

The tension evoked in the relationship between the traditional and the modern must be looked upon as one of the central problems with which the Herero characters in May's work are confronted. In contrast to the traditions of colonial literature they are not presented as members of an archaic primitive tribe; indeed it is often the 'blacks' who "laugh about the whites superstitions".<sup>25</sup> However beliefs, which could be considered unenlightened and mystic are attributed to individual Herero characters in the *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika*: at various times the rebels long for a pre-modern way-of-life, and some of them indulge in heathen religious practices — which must be considered as negative and of irrational character, according to the narrator's perspective, which is defined by socialist principles.<sup>26</sup>

With a similar function but constructed differently is the way in which some Africans perceive modern machinery: they see the machine guns used by the 'Schutztruppe' as "magic pipes" that only the Germans can master, and when they capture of these weapons they destroy them immediately.<sup>27</sup> Astonishingly it is the rather naïve Kamuzandu of all people, who points out the importance of adopting technical skills for the resistance of the colonised. Other Herero know all about the way German heliography works;<sup>28</sup> additionally it is common knowledge among them how important the railway is to the imperial army for the conduct of war.<sup>29</sup>

As most of the Nama who appear in *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* also have a solid education it should be noted that May's novel differs in many ways from the colonial narrative tradition. The population of 'Südwest' is not portrayed as an amorphous mass but rather as a distinctly heterogenous social structure: May shows a society in transition, whose "process of differentiating is so far advanced [...], that the contours of a class society are beginning to show"<sup>30</sup>, thereby draws on the teleological and holistic social model which assumes the unavoidable, progressive advancement of all human communities.<sup>31</sup> Thus the absolutisation of fundamental European ways of

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 12, 63-65.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*: 89 ("über den Aberglauben der Weißen lächeln").

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 228, 274-275, 286.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*: 173, 219, 228 ("Zauberrohre").

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 238.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 213, 272.

<sup>30</sup> Drechsler, "Südwestafrika": 29 ("Der soziale Differenzierungsprozeß war so weit fortgeschritten, daß sich die Konturen der Klassengesellschaft bereits abzuzeichnen begannen").

<sup>31</sup> Such evolutionism is also indicative of Martin Selber's historical novel *Hendrik Witbooi. Freiheitskampf in Südwestafrika*, which was first published in 1974 in Weimar and shortly afterwards appeared in the Federal Republic. In his postscript Selber says that the African population of 'Südwest' around 1900 "was still living



thinking, when transferred onto alien societies – even if it serves as criticism of colonialism – must be regarded as extremely difficult. However May does not offer in any form a ‘Manichean Allegory’, an essentialist polarity between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’ as it was typical for the discussion on colonialism before 1945.<sup>32</sup>

Of course reading *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* also shows that overcoming hardened traditions is not only a problem at content level that the African characters have to confront. Indeed it becomes obvious that the author’s narrative strategy is beset by similar difficulties: for although May demonstratively deconstructs the stereotypes which originate in the archive of colonial literature, one can be forgiven for thinking that he is perpetuating them although intending the opposite. Thus the speech of the Herero or Nama is often characterised by many grammatical errors, by which a certain intellectual inferiority of the ‘blacks’ is suggested. This is illustrated by a report that Flotow receives from his servant:

Leopard broke many cattle and sheep in Captain Kamuzandu’s kraal. The women leopard made dead by Hereros. Male in bush with boy called Samuel. Rip him up. Herero find much blood. All Herero go hunting, beat leopard to death, shoot him broken.<sup>33</sup>

It is hardly possible to ignore the fact that the limited language competence of the ‘natives’ here signifies deficient cognitive ability, and as a result, a convention of earlier colonial literature is served up.<sup>34</sup> However it should also be noted that such stammering is only presented in *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika*, when the colonised peoples have to talk to the colonisers in a language that is not their own: The conversations between Africans – for example in Otjiherero – which are presented in German in the book, demonstrate correct use of the language. This is also true of the occasional inner monologues and sequences, conveyed as speech, by which the thoughts and feelings of the ‘black’

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at an earlier level of development. The individual peoples and tribes were constantly at war with each other and hadn’t yet become a single nation. Their methods of production were largely very simple, they lived from cattle-raising, hunting and handcrafts; their weapons were technically inferior to those of the conquerors. Despite this they didn’t simply submit to the fate that was allotted to them but took up arms and rose energetically against slavery and foreign laws.” Martin Selber, *Hendrik Witbooi. Freiheitskampf in Südwestafrika*, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1979: 125-126 (“noch auf einer früheren Stufe gesellschaftlicher Entwicklung [lebte]. Die einzelnen Völker und Stämme befehdeten einander und hatten noch nicht zu Nationen zusammengefunden. Ihre Produktionsverhältnisse waren zum großen Teil einfach, sie lebten von Viehzucht, Jagd und Handwerksarbeit; waffentechnisch waren sie den Eroberern zumeist unterlegen. Trotzdem ergaben sie sich nicht in das ihnen zuge dachte Schicksal, sondern wehrten sich in machtvollen Aufständen gegen Sklaverei und fremdes Recht.”).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Abdul R. JanMohamed, “The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature”, *Critical Inquiry*, 1985 (12): 59-87 (73-74).

<sup>33</sup> May, *Sturm*: 30 (“Leopard hat in Viehkral von Kapitän Kamuzandu Rind und Schaf kaputtgemacht. Leopardenweibchen von Hereros totgemacht. Männchen mit Junge, der sich Samuel nennt, in Busch, ihn zerreißen. Herero viel Blut finden. Alle Herero gehen auf Jagd, schlagen Leopard tot, schießen kaputt.”).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Konstanze Streese, “Writing the Other’s Language: Modes of Linguistic Representation in German Colonial and Anti-Colonial Literature”, in: Gisela Brinker-Gabler, ed., *Encountering the Other(s). Studies in Literature, History, and Culture*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1995: 285-294 (288).

figures are communicated.<sup>35</sup> Such passages however show that May's portrait of African life is not thwarted by scruples about his literary appropriation of foreign peoples. Thus, in phases, *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* represents that variety of postcolonial literature which Jochen Dubiel describes with some justification as "particularly sobering": It's true that the author seeks "to write against the colonial discourse", but because he considers it his vocation to portray the conquest and its inhuman results from the point of view of the oppressed, it turns out that he actually perpetuates and in addition obscures "the illegal seizure of property which he criticises."<sup>36</sup> The narrative strategy employed by Uwe Timm roughly 15 years later in his collage novel *Morenga* is more suitable: In contrast to May he does without any sequences in which perceptions of the colonised peoples are supposed to be conveyed, but sees in any "empathetic aesthetics" a further "act of colonialism", this time of a literary nature.<sup>37</sup> However Timm's effort does not succeed wholly, because – as Timm himself admits – it ultimately leads to a "repeat of the constellation from the colonial era, during which the Africans did not have their own voice."<sup>38</sup> Thus an ongoing dilemma can be seen clearly here which Dubiel describes in the following way:

On the one hand it is impossible to speak about a stranger and not to deny him because [this speaking] means taking possession, which should be avoided as a matter of principle in the discourse on colonialism, on the other hand it is of the utmost importance to speak about the 'others' because whoever remains silent for fear of harming them, harms them through neglect.<sup>39</sup>

As this dilemma is still considered unsolved, if not indeed insoluble, it does not seem plausible to reject on principle the idea of a German author assuming the point of view of a subaltern. Instead it should be made clear under which conditions this assumption can be deemed practicable – and which results it can deliver. With regard to *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* the decisive condition is to be seen May's holistic (*de facto* Eurocentric) worldview mentioned earlier: whoever believes he has understood the universal legality

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. May, *Sturm*: 128-129, 215, 283.

<sup>36</sup> Jochen Dubiel, *Dialektik der postkolonialen Hybridität. Die intrakulturelle Überwindung des kolonialen Blicks in der Literatur*, Bielefeld, Aisthesis, 2007: 81-82 ("Besonders ernüchternd für den postkolonialen Forscher ist die Vereinnahmung dort, wo sich ein europäischer Autor in bester Absicht, gegen den kolonialen Diskurs anzuschreiben, berufen fühlt, die Eroberung und deren inhumane Folgen aus der Perspektive der Unterdrückten zu schildern, da er auf diese Weise die widerrechtliche Inbesitznahme, die er kritisiert, faktisch fortsetzt und zusätzlich verschleiert."). Cf. also Bruno Arich-Gerz, "'Silence' und Stimme verleihen bei André Brink und Siegfried Groth", in: Bruno Arich-Gerz, *Namibias Postkolonialismen. Texte zu Gegenwart und Vergangenheiten in Südwestafrika*, Bielefeld, Aisthesis, 2008: 45-73.

<sup>37</sup> Christof Hamann, Uwe Timm, "'Einfühlungsästhetik wäre ein kolonialer Akt'. Ein Gespräch", *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter* 41, 2003: 450-462 (452). Christof Hamann himself produced a remarkable novel *Fester* (2003) about the German colonial past in Namibia.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Dubiel, *Dialektik*: 147-148 ("Einerseits ist die Unmöglichkeit, über das Fremde zu sprechen, nicht zu leugnen, denn [dieses Sprechen] bedeutet immer eine Form der Aneignung, die es als eines der Grundprinzipien des kolonialen Diskurses zu vermeiden gilt, andererseits besteht die dringende Notwendigkeit, über das Andere zu reden, denn wer aus Angst, dem Fremden Gewalt anzutun, schweigt, der übt Gewalt aus durch Mißachtung.").

of history has no scruples about communicating it via literary figures that have been equipped with a foreign cultural socialisation. In view of the results achieved by May it must nevertheless be remembered the undoubtedly precarious consequences of the process of writing he chose, can hardly disavow the decidedly anti-colonial direction of his novel. This is even true of the regular use of the words 'Hottentotte' and 'Neger' by the narrator: For while reverting to such vocabulary today points undoubtedly to the racist disposition of the speaker, at the time *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* was being written this was not yet the case. Indeed "the recognition of the derogatory character on the 'n-word'" only became widespread in the Federal Republic in the 1970s and after a further delay of 10 years in the GDR.<sup>40</sup>

### The colonial class society: On the 'white' characters

As is the case with the Herero (and Nama) May doesn't forge a homogenous collective of the 'whites'. Thus on the one hand prototypical representatives of imperial malevolence appear, who insist on the "Herrenrecht" of the 'white race', among them Bodo von Eschenbach, his sister Jutta, the Alvensleben cousins and the rapist Flotow.<sup>41</sup> The majority of these figures die in the end, giving expression to the occasionally obtrusive educational aspect of *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika*. On the other hand the reader of May's novel encounters characters such as Grünheide, a man who moves between the worlds of the colonisers and colonised. Not only does the doctor rebuke the 'white' traders for their deceitful practices and the farmers for land seizures,<sup>42</sup> he is also aware that the war as conducted by the 'Schutztruppe' involves far more cruelty than that of the rebels.<sup>43</sup> As a result he almost inevitably clashes with Egon von Alversleben who accuses him of being "completely niggered".<sup>44</sup>

Besides Grünheide the botanist Johannes Palmer who is serving as a senior lieutenant in the imperial army repeatedly attacks the brutal practices of the usurpers. Palmer's social ostracism is mainly a result of his insistence that the German presence in 'Südwest' should serve the "wellbeing of the Blacks";<sup>45</sup> the botanist thus adopts a position as a cultural missionary which corresponds to that of his old friend from their student days Grünheide: It's true that he doesn't condemn colonialism a priori as a crime, but rather transforms it into a 'project of civilisation', yet he still drives forward the cause of overcoming the unbearable status quo. In his endeavour to create a "land free of

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<sup>40</sup> Susan Arndt, "Neger / Negerin", in: Susan Arndt, Antje Hornscheid, eds., *Afrika und die deutsche Sprache. Ein kritisches Nachschlagewerk*, Münster, Unrast, 2004: 164-167 (167) ("die Erkenntnis vom abwertenden Charakter des 'N-Wortes'").

<sup>41</sup> May, *Sturm*: 257.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 88, 102, 106.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 230.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*: 102 ("völlig verniggert").

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*: 45 ("Wohl der Schwarzen").

injustice”<sup>46</sup> he embodies the type of “coloniser who denies what he is” and seeks to be a tireless ‘enlightener’ and ‘development worker’.<sup>47</sup>

While today Palmer’s project is more likely to be regarded as a further colonial attempt at paternalistic spoon-feeding of the Africans earlier receptions of *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* may well have come to a different conclusion: because it is through this character that the novel is imbued with its Marxist-Leninist view of history.<sup>48</sup> The idea of a gradual transition from a feudal to capitalist and eventually to a socialist society is not seen in this context as a programme that can be forced on a nation but rather as an unavoidable historical process, that can of course be accelerated by revolutionary activity.<sup>49</sup> If Palmer is dreaming in the secular tradition of cultural missions of “reconciliation between the Europeans and natives”, which “should raise the black man up to a higher level of learning and civilisation” it should not be overlooked despite the patriarchal and paternalistic formulation, that he does not put the cause of the inequality between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’ down to nature but sees it in an educational imbalance.<sup>50</sup> This in turn has social causes and is similar in structure to the gap between the communist party elite and the proletariat.

In accordance with this diagnosis cultural missionary convictions are always kept clearly separated from Christian missionary ones in the novel, as when the doctor Grünheide repeatedly accuses the clergy in ‘Südwest’ of being the accomplices of the dishonest merchants and the murdering soldiers.<sup>51</sup> By unmasking the supposedly altruistic intentions of the churches a topos is created once again which is fundamental to communist doctrine on history.<sup>52</sup>

### **Economic and sexual exploitation: On the relations between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’**

As already pointed out the contours of ‘class boundary’ are of the same importance in May’s novel as the ‘racial boundaries’ of the earlier colonial literature. Thus the Herero and Nama societies are marked by deep inner divisions, with the distribution of

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.: 123 (“Land ohne Ungerechtigkeit”).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Albert Memmi, *Der Kolonisator und der Kolonisierte. Zwei Portraits*, Frankfurt am Main, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1994: 35 (“Kolonisator, der sich verneint”).

<sup>48</sup> The socialist leaning in *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* is further underlined by the inclusion of criticism of militarism and imperialism by prominent representatives of the German left around 1900 – such as Rosa Luxemburg or August Bebel. Cf. May, *Sturm*: 44, 49, 115, 244, 270, 298.

<sup>49</sup> On the ‘progressive role’ of colonialism as described in GDR historiography, cf. Horst Gründer, “Kolonialismus und Marxismus: Der deutsche Kolonialismus in der Geschichtsschreibung der DDR”, in: Alexander Fischer, Günther Heydemann, eds., *Geschichtswissenschaft in der DDR*, Vol. 2, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 1990: 671-709 (675-677).

<sup>50</sup> May, *Sturm*: 166 (“von einer Versöhnung zwischen Europäern und Eingeborenen [...] die den schwarzen Mann zur Bildung und Zivilisation emporführen soll”).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. ibid.: 89-90.

<sup>52</sup> On the harsh criticism in GDR historiography of the roles of the missionary societies in the colonies cf. Gründer, “Kolonialismus”: 688-693.

economic power being the root cause. For it isn't just the 'whites' who are responsible for the exploitation of Africans in May's work: All in all the colonised people in May's book are just as ruthless in seeking wealth and luxury as the Germans. Therefore it is entirely consistent that the Herero and Nama feel no solidarity with each other and thus do not form a 'national front' but instead concentrate on their own often conflicting interests.

In the end however it is mainly the 'whites' who are guilty of exploiting the Herero and Nama: The exploitation of the 'Schutzgebiet's' diamond, gold and copper resources is described in detail, although it is – in keeping with Lenin's writings on imperialism – international capitalism which proves to be the driving force behind these activities.<sup>53</sup> Thus May places the Swede Christiansen alongside the German engineer Bergmann and thereby highlights that colonialism in 'Südwest' is not just a Wilhelmine crime but must be regarded as a global phenomenon.

Opposite them we have Palmer who constantly calls the injustice perpetrated against the 'natives' by name and who unlike the other "men of business" characters does not pursue any capitalist interests, but does in fact contribute to the oppression of the Herero and Nama.<sup>54</sup> Because the botanist's solidarity with the colonised people is not absolute May's sketch of the character illustrates as it were Memmi's thesis that it is simply impossible to act as a socialist or democrat within the framework of a colonial power, as long as one is profiting from these power structures.<sup>55</sup> As a result Palmer returns to Germany without having contributed to ending the reign of violence in 'Südwest': only by overcoming imperialism through class struggle even on the edges of capitalism – so concludes May under the influence of Lenin – can the aporetic situations, such as the one Palmer finds himself in, be avoided.

Another characteristic of *Sturm über Afrika* is that the portrayal of economic oppression is regularly underscored by descriptions of sexual brutality. In this context May uses a process of deconstruction: Whereas sexual intercourse between 'blacks' and 'whites' was almost always shown as a problem affecting the purity of the 'white race' in the older colonial literature, May presents African women as victims of German men. The feelings of the sadist Flotow are expressed thus:

It's not that they're not beautiful, the young kaffer women, beautiful and full-blooded. But only after a good bath! One or other of the native women even spent the night next to him. He doesn't know them though, knows nothing about them, they are as alien to him as the star Sirius. He is completely indifferent to whatever is going on behind the women's high foreheads, what they think, these – negroes.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. May, *Sturm*: 57, 81, 83, 135.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.: 206.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Memmi: *Kolonisator*: 41.

<sup>56</sup> May, *Sturm*: 29 ("Schön sind sie ja, die jungen Kaffernfrauen, schön und rassig. Aber wenn schon, dann nach gründlichem Bad! Gar manche Nacht hat die [sic!] oder jene Eingeborenenfrau neben ihm gelegen. Er kennt sie dennoch nicht, weiß nichts von ihnen, sie sind ihm so fremd wie der Stern Sirius. Es ist ihm völlig gleichgültig, was hinter den hohen Stirnen der Frauen [...] vorgeht, was sie so denken, diese – Neger.").

According to May's novel the degradation of African women to sex objects without rights is standard procedure of the colonisers, as a result of which the whole country was rife with sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>57</sup> The close proximity of economic and sexual brutality serves primarily to highlight particularly drastically (and partly in the manner of propaganda) the vileness of the capitalist social order. However, the complex concept of May's novel proves itself once again in the fact that it shows that it is not just 'black' women that face the threat of sexual violence but 'white' women also: Among them is Palmer's future spouse Nora Kleinschmidt, who arrives in 'Südwest' with a group of underprivileged women, who are due to be married to men they don't know.<sup>58</sup> When her intended proves to be brutal and repulsive Kleinschmidt attempts to commit suicide and is saved by Grünheide.<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, it is of significance in *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* that African men are also guilty of the sexual repression of the female population. It is the 'magician' Ombinda who provides Flotow "with beautiful, slim Ovambo girls";<sup>60</sup> a Nama man also attempts to rape a 14 year old Herero girl. However, in May's work the 'blacks' pose no threat to the German women, as the repeated reference of the narrator to their humane conduct of war makes clear.

### The war as a war of extermination

It must be asked at this point to what extent the socialist subtexts on which May's novel is built affect the portrayal of the course of the war. At a glance it appears unlikely that a materialistically slanted explanation of colonialism could integrate the liquidation of a potential workforce. It is therefore of note that the conclusion of the 'Herero War' is quite clearly labelled as genocide in *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika*. Thus it is emphasised that the few Africans who end up as captives of the Germans do not escape extermination; the use of the term "concentration camp" unavoidably creates the impression that the genocide against the Herero is to be seen as a portent of the Shoa.<sup>61</sup> May's literary interpretation of history thus corresponds largely with the Marxist-Leninist historiography of the GDR.

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 24, 300. In Scheer's *Schwarz und Weiß am Waterberg* the reference to widespread infection with syphilis among African women and girls is an important part of his case against German colonialism; cf. Scheer, *Schwarz*: 61-62.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. May, *Sturm*: 39-40. For the real stories of such transportations of women cf. in particular Anette Dietrich, *Weißes Weiblichkeit. Konstruktionen von "Rasse" und Geschlecht im deutschen Kolonialismus*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2007: 205-261. Also worth mentioning is the novel *The Other Side of Silence* by South African author André Brink which was published by Secker & Warburg in 2002: This tells the story in uncompromising language of the German settler Hanna, who is raped and disfigured on numerous occasions in 'Südwest' at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century before she joins the African resistance in order to take revenge on her persecutors. Cf. Arich-Gerz, "Silence".

<sup>59</sup> Cf. May, *Sturm*: 94.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*: 153 ("mit schlanken, schönen Ovambomädchen").

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*: 303 ("Konzentrationslager").

But in what way does *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* attempt to deal with the contradiction between the pursuit of economic profit on the one hand and racist doctrine of elimination on the other? How successful is May in rescuing the basic assumption of the narrative that it was the desire for profit that drove colonialism? In this context the decisive passage comes at the end of the novel, when a representative of the German colonial bureaucracy declares “that the Herero are half gypsies, nomads who can hardly be taught to do farm work. The Ovambo are the best farm workers.”<sup>62</sup> Because the Germans believe they have enough slave labour at their disposal, labour superior to that provided by the Herero, the ‘destruction’ of the Herero is indeed not a problem. Therefore it is only a matter of course that “the extermination of that unhappy nation” has a positive effect on the stock markets: “The prices of German colonial shares are climbing.”<sup>63</sup>

Similarly there are other elements of May’s novel that correspond exactly to the basic assumptions of GDR historiography. For instance the way the narrator and some of the characters repeatedly explain the military inferiority of the rebels by the backwardness of their weapons compared to those of the Germans, gives the level of technical development of a society a pre-eminent position in defining their role in the historical process.<sup>64</sup> However, even if (as in this case technical) ‘progress’ claims a huge number of innocent victims, it remains a category which is, according to the worldview carried over in May’s novel, to be seen in a positive light, it being an essential part of Marxist teleology: the overthrow of feudal society by capitalism will be followed by capitalism’s downfall, which will be succeeded by the era of socialism and in the end the classless communist society will be created – this is a historical prognosis which May’s novel definitely supports.

## The hybrid subject and the problem of national solidarity: Dietmar Beetz’s *Flucht vom Waterberg* (1989)

### Plot

27 years after the appearance of May’s novel and 11 years after Uwe Timm’s *Morenga* another book was published which dealt in detail with the German genocide in ‘Südwest’:

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.: 277 (“daß die Hereros halbe Zigeuner seien, Nomaden, die kaum zur stetigen Landarbeit erzogen werden könnten. Die Ovambos seien die besten Landarbeiter”).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.: 295 (“Ausrottung des unglücklichen Volkes“, “An der Berliner und der Frankfurter Börse klettern die Kurse für deutsche Kolonialwerte”).

<sup>64</sup> Cf. ibid.: 226, 270-271, similarly also Scheer, *Schwarz*: 81: “On the German side stand militarily modern troops, with the newest rifles, machine guns, canons and heliographs [...]. On the other side stands the badly armed Herero people, possessing no modern offensive or defensive equipment, [...] having reached the decision in their desperation to shake off the destructive foreign rule.” (“Auf deutscher Seite steht eine militärisch moderne Truppe mit neuesten Gewehren, Maschinengewehren, Geschützen, mit Heliographen [...]. Auf der anderen Seite steht das schlecht bewaffnete, keine modernen Angriffs- und Abwehrmittel besitzende [...] Volk der Herero mit dem aus Verzweiflung gefaßten Entschluß zur Abschüttelung der zerstörenden Fremdherrschaft.”).

Dietmar Beetz's *Flucht vom Waterberg*.<sup>65</sup> The author, born in 1939, had worked as a doctor at first in Guinea-Bissau among other places, before coming to prominence as a writer of numerous children's books, thrillers and historical novels.<sup>66</sup> Among these were *Späher der Witbooi-Krieger* (1978), a book that went into a fourth edition, and *Oberhäuptling der Herero* (1983, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 1989).

While the works mentioned both deal with the early phase of the German presence in 'Südwest' *Flucht vom Waterberg* thematises the genocide against the Herero in 1904. The most striking feature of the novel is the conception of the hero: he is of 'mixed race' and cannot be defined as belonging to any one ethnic group in the colony. Using this main character the novel criticises sharply social structures organised around 'racism' and clearly tries to portray fairly an 'African perspective' – and as a result encounters problems. At the same time the text comes close to a historic materialistic worldview without corresponding completely to the orthodox socialist interpretation of history.

The story in *Flucht vom Waterberg* is told in the present, in the third person and predominantly in conventional linear narrative by Pieter Willem Hendrik Koopgard, a 'native' who fights for the 'Schutztruppe' in the 'Herero War'. Koopgard comes from Rehoboth, the city of 'bastards', to whom only his mother really belonged; his father was a Witbooi-Nama. Because of the constant ill-treatment due to his origins he moved to the Nama in Gibeon in 1893. After a short time he was sent from there to Windhoek, where he is supposed to join the imperial army and learn of their plans.<sup>67</sup> Koopgard has already been serving the 'whites' for 11 years and it is a long time since he carried out any of his spying duties for Hendrik Witbooi, who has made peace with the Germans in the meantime and even provides them with troops after the outbreak of the 'Herero War'.

The novel starts as Koopgard advances with a vanguard of the 'Schutztruppe' towards Waterberg, to where the rebels with their women and children have fled. He is accompanied by his friend Daniel Kok, a Nama, who also wears the imperial uniform, but who tries to persuade Koopgard to desert: on the one hand they have been constantly discriminated against by the Germans, Kok says, on the other hand they cannot take any further part in the crimes of the colonisers as they both are in love with Herero women. At first Koopgard thinks the idea of fleeing to be wrong and thus his disappointed companion tries to defect alone to the rebels. Only after Kok is captured by the Germans and executed as a traitor does Koopgard decide to join the uprising.

A short time later an intense battle breaks out and Koopgard takes advantage of the chaos to defect to the enemy. At first the Herero think the 'bastard' is a spy but he eventually gains the trust of their 'chief' Assa Riarua who allows him to spend a day with

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<sup>65</sup> Dietmar Beetz, *Flucht vom Waterberg*, Berlin (GDR), Das neue Berlin, 1989.

<sup>66</sup> On Beetz's biography cf. Gina Weinkauff, *Fremdwahrnehmung. Zur Thematisierung kultureller Alterität in der deutschsprachigen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur seit 1945*, München, Iudicium, 2006: 137-138.

<sup>67</sup> This period of Koopgard's life is described in more detail in Dietmar Beetz's *Späher der Witbooi-Krieger*, Berlin (GDR), Neues Leben, 1978. The narrative processes, which can be seen there, correspond almost completely to those in *Flucht vom Waterberg*.



Omutima, the woman he has been missing for so long. In return he demands that Koopgard pretends to have been captured by the Herero and allows himself be freed by the Germans and thus goes back to join them. Then he is to talk Hendrik Witbooi's grandson Moses, who is also in the 'Schutztruppe', into convincing his grandfather of the necessity of a unified struggle against the colonial power. But the plan does not work. When the Germans find Koopgard tied up and abandoned they become suspicious, and while they go off to drive the defeated Herero into the waterless Omaheke, the 'bastard' is sent to a prison camp where he meets Moses, who is also now regarded as unreliable by the usurpers. Shortly thereafter, however, the young Witbooi does manage to flee and Koopgard also escapes the Germans once again. At the end of the novel he joins the Nama uprising and fights with Hendrik Witbooi and, after Witbooi's death, with Jakob Morenga against the colonisers.

### Beetz's authentication strategies

Although in *Flucht vom Waterberg* events are mostly seen through the eyes of the hero the narrator repeatedly anticipates future events, which none of the characters could possibly have knowledge about.<sup>68</sup> In order to underline his authority and geographical competence various processes are used: individual phrases and sometimes whole sentences of Otjiherero appear;<sup>69</sup> moreover many characters, which are based on real persons, are woven into the narrative. In a postscript which is signed with the author's initials it says: "Most of the figures are fictional but the persons they are based upon really existed." In addition many of the elements of the plot are historically documented so that, according to Beetz, the work must be considered a "factual novel".<sup>70</sup>

*Flucht vom Waterberg* is also among those narratives about the colonial wars in 'Südwest' which claim to be more than mere fictional literature, but also to be both a contribution to historiography and a commentary on political events at the time of writing.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless on only one occasion does Beetz mark a source of authentic material in his work;<sup>72</sup> references to works on history can be identified very often but are

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<sup>68</sup> Cf. Beetz, *Flucht*: 137, 217, 227.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 17, 35, 45, 50, 52, 60, 64, 124, 143, 162, 175, 183, 184, 191, 235, 258.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*: 267 ("Die handelnden Personen sind zumeist erfunden, aber ihre Vorbilder haben nachweislich gelebt", "Tatsachenroman").

<sup>71</sup> This last point comes up even more clearly in the postscript of Martin Selber's youth novel mentioned earlier when he writes that men like Hendrik Witbooi are "role models and motivators for the Namibians struggling for the freedom today. The African people need our solidarity and help. This story is supposed to be a contribution to that and to helping us to look critically at our own history." Selber, *Hendrik Witbooi*: 126 ("heute noch den um ihre Freiheit ringenden Namibiern Vorbild und Ansporn. Die afrikanischen Menschen brauchen unsere solidarische Hilfe. Diese Erzählung soll ein Beitrag dazu sein und will helfen, uns mit unserer Geschichte kritisch auseinanderzusetzen."). Such a pedagogic, almost indoctrinating air is not to be found in Beetz's work.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Beetz, *Flucht*: 227-228. Complete bibliographical verification is not presented here either.

not specifically shown to be such.<sup>73</sup> In contrast to May, who even uses footnotes, Beetz refrains from adhering too closely to the conventions of scientific writing, which of course does not mean that *Flucht vom Waterberg's* orientation to history-writing as programmed by socialism can be denied. On a content level it proves itself by the number of times Bebel's and his entourage's protests against the 'Herero War' are mentioned, even if they are less frequent than in *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika*.<sup>74</sup> Moreover Beetz consistently joins in May's attempts to reflect the perceptions of the 'natives' and thus to present his criticism of the German reign of violence,<sup>75</sup> whereby he does his best to reach beyond May, who for the most part focuses on 'white' characters: The method of telling the story almost exclusively from the point of view of a 'bastard' is apparently based on the poetological assumption that the views of those of a different cultural background can be presented in literary form without imposing a second, narrative colonialism on them. This in turn assumes that universally valid descriptions and interpretation of historical processes is possible, as is the case with May it is a materialistically based holism which is supposed to guarantee this.

### On the depiction of the characters and the personal hybridity of the protagonist

As far as Beetz's depiction of the characters goes it is mainly the Germans who are to a certain extent one-dimensional or behave typically: thus Trotha, who the narrator condemns as "butcher and hangman", is contrasted with the "not unlikeable German" Hoffmann, the simple non-commissioned officer whose resistance to the violent excesses of his 'comrades' is as determined as it is fruitless.<sup>76</sup> But also among the Africans there are a few figures, which are particularly stereotypical such as the Nama Daniel Kok, who turns his back on the colonisers relatively early. In sharp contrast to him we find Jonathan Pyp, also a Nama serving in the 'Schutztruppe', who is the typical collaborator without honour. This constellation can be seen as a template, yet it does not concur with the typical perception as found in the older 'Südwest' novels, that the individual's being is determined by his 'völkische' origins.

Furthermore most of the 'coloured' characters in *Flucht vom Waterberg* are clearly distinct from Kok and Pyp, because they are created as 'mixed characters'. This is true of Moses Witbooi and his grandfather Hendrik who at first are depicted as dithering characters being drained of their strength by the reputation associated with their name, but who in the end take a stand against German hegemony. Beetz's hero however embodies that "personal hybridity" which Jochen Dubiel describes in his study *Dialektik der postkolonialen Hybridität*: As the son of a Rehobother mother and a Nama father,

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 217, where regarding the number of Herero who died in the Omaheke Drechsler's figures are used, without saying this explicitly. Cf. Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 139.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Beetz, *Flucht*: 108, 127, 136.

<sup>75</sup> The title of the novel already suggests this, as it would have had to have been called something like "Schlacht am Waterberg" oder "Verfolgung der Herero" had it been written from the colonisers' viewpoint.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*: 228, 110 ("Schlächter und Henker", "nicht unsympathische Deutsche").

who is serving the Germans, from the start it is impossible to classify Koopgard in any one collective group.<sup>77</sup> In his case we are dealing with a liminal character — also as a result of his repeated changes of role — with whom it is possible to present the various mechanisms of social exclusion and the construction of a collective identity.

### **An existence on the edge: Koopgard's situation with the 'Bastards' and with the Germans**

Koopgard is to come to terms with discrimination on a daily basis from an early age: Although the term 'bastards' the people of Rehoboth use to describe themselves points clearly to the fact that they are the descendants of 'cross-breeds' they still see themselves in *Flucht vom Waterberg* as a separate "nation", which has been ennobled by their "boer blood", in which one can see a thoroughly consistent reaction to their precarious status at the outset.<sup>78</sup> But as they traded in the consciousness of their biological hybridity in favour of a concept of ethnic homogeneity, the only place left open to Beetz's protagonist is "the lowest rung on Rehoboth's scale of moral and racial arrogance".<sup>79</sup> His efforts to break out of this situation and to try to be integrated into another social collective seems therefore to be the only strategy open to him for survival.

While very little is told of Koopgard's short sojourn with the Nama in Gibeon, his efforts to gain access to German and later Herero society is of extreme importance to the plot of the novel. Through the depiction of his relations with the 'whites' Beetz shows drastically that communications on equal terms and reciprocal acceptance are impossible under the conditions of the colonial rule: "As a native" Koopgard is not permitted "to live in the same room as pure bred whites" and thus he is "assigned to the Witbooi auxiliary troops as a half Hottentot".<sup>80</sup> Later when he is arrested by soldiers from the 'Schutztruppe' they further degrade the 'bastard' to the level of an animal; one German soldier tells his 'comrade' that he should "water" the captive and give him a little "fodder".<sup>81</sup>

Meanwhile there are many passages in *Flucht vom Waterberg* in which such 'white' superiority thinking is undermined demonstrably. This is the case for example when Beetz turns his attention to the broadly accepted topos in the older 'Südwest' novels that Africans are incapable of understanding the modern technical phenomena, for in his novel the Germans' knowledge is in no way greater than Koopgard's. Hoffmann can only

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<sup>77</sup> Cf. Dubiel, *Dialektik*: 203.

<sup>78</sup> Beetz, *Flucht*: 15 ("Nation", "Burenblut").

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. ("Pieter war also eine Schattierung 'hottentottischer' als die meisten Angehörigen der 'Nation', war als Kind einer Ledigen ein Bastard im ursprünglichen Sinne des Wortes und stand somit auf der untersten Sprosse des Rehobother Moral- und Rassendünkels.").

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.: 19 ("als Eingeborener", "nicht mit reinrassigen Weißen in einer Stube wohnen", "als 'Halbhottentotte' [...] der Witbooi-Hilfstruppe zugeteilt.").

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.: 70 ("tränken", "Futter").

answer helplessly that German radios function “with power, with electricity” and when further questioned by the ‘bastard’ merely responds: “Even the likes of us have problems with that.”<sup>82</sup> In this way the common claim in colonial literature that Europeans are far more competent in technical matters is adamantly rejected and thus it is also questioned whether they really are in a position to show the ‘backward’ Africans the way into a ‘progressive’ society.

### Rejected integration? Koopgard and the Herero

Of considerable importance in *Flucht vom Waterberg* is the hero’s desire for recognition from the Herero, which goes back to his relationship with Omutima. In an analeptically presented conversation with his love Koopgard reacts at first sullenly to her demand that he undergoes the traditional “initiation”, which the ‘bastards’ consider “heathen”, before their wedding;<sup>83</sup> but in the end he agrees to submit to the “inauguration ceremony” during which the symbolic changing of clothes has a particular relevance: Koopgard takes off “jacket, shirt and trousers” and puts on a “loincloth”, which signifies his temporary retreat from ‘civilisation’.<sup>84</sup> However, even though Koopgard passes all the tests put to him as part of the rite of passage with flying colours, at the end he feels he is still not getting the deserved recognition from them.<sup>85</sup> It is true that he is treated like a Herero thereafter but not as a Herero; he isn’t “granted [...] to become one of them completely”.<sup>86</sup> The cause of this is the aporetic situation in which he sees himself caught: Although he is now their “pale skinned brother” Beetz’s hero sees no possibility to avoid fighting against the rebels in the war.<sup>87</sup> The narrator describes the resulting psychological state of the ‘crossbreed’ thus:

As long as Koopgard could remember he had felt like a bastard and not just in the Rehobother sense of the word. Being an outsider, caught in-between, longing to belong to a community – that was what moulded him, determined what he was, and he became bitterly conscious of it as rarely before.<sup>88</sup>

Koopgard fears that he will have to remain “amongst strangers till the end of his life”, and so one gets the overall impression that the existence of an individual in the space between cultures is the cause of severe spiritual destruction in Beetz’s work.<sup>89</sup> In this way *Flucht vom Waterberg* seems to contrast starkly with all those newer cultural

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.: 66 (“Mit Strom halt, mit Elektrizität”, “Da hat ja sogar unsereins seine Schwierigkeiten”).

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.: 35 (“Initiation”, “heidnisch”).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.: 38 (“Einweihungszeremonie”, “Jackett, Hemd und Hose”, “Fellschurz”).

<sup>85</sup> Cf. the principal work of Arnold van Gennep which was first published in French in 1909, *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1960.

<sup>86</sup> Beetz, *Flucht*: 37 (“vergönnt sein würde, ganz zu ihresgleichen zu werden”).

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.: 40.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.: 225-226 (“Soweit Koopgaard zurückdenken kann, hat er sich als Bastard gefühlt, und das nicht nur im Sinne der Rehobother. Fremd sein, dazwischen stehen, sich nach einer Gemeinschaft sehnen – das hat ihn geprägt, das bestimmt ihn, und das wird ihm in dieser Nacht bitter wie selten zuvor bewußt.”).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.: 167.

theories which see a worthwhile alternative to ethnic and thus essentialising concepts of identity in forms of belonging which are constantly being reinvented according to the situation and therefore are never complete. In the end, however, this assessment proves to be untenable: Because while Koopgard's hybrid existence is a highly painful one in the narrative present, it could – as the novel makes clear – be completely different in the future. Thus overcoming of the “gulf between the tribes” is essential not only in Koopgard's eyes, but the Herero Riarua makes the case for a “federation of all the sons and daughters of the country”.<sup>90</sup> According to this view there is a common interest, i.e. the unified conduct of the struggle for freedom, from which a new, inclusive form of socialisation should and will grow up. Being part of a community that establishes itself in this way and which is more broadly based, would be independent of biologicistic discourse and thus from ethnic origin of the individual, so that the individual could easily be ‘mixed’. This evokes the ‘Rainbow Nation’ which was elevated to state doctrine in South Africa and Namibia about one and a half decades ago.

In Beetz's novel however the ideal of general national solidarity is by no means realised; instead reciprocal aversions determine the relationships between the various colonised peoples. They set up stiff barriers between themselves and those with whom they should – Beetz's narrator leaves no doubt about this – be forming alliances: “The colonial powers have succeeded in stoking up ill-will and disunity among the various tribes in the country. Envy and discord seem to be insurmountable.”<sup>91</sup> To make an example of the effects of these circumstances the confrontation with ‘Rassenschande’ and sexual violence, which is dealt with in nearly all ‘Südwest’ novels, is presented in his own specific way by Beetz: The facts and circumstances in both cases are not primarily themes in the context of the relations between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’ but rather are presented as problems which are a burden in the relations between ‘bastards’, Herero and Nama.

### ‘Rassenschande’ and sexual violence

The strict rejection of ‘mixed’ relationships is seen as a widespread phenomenon in *Flucht vom Waterberg*. For the Rehobother “the Herero and the other dark skinned peoples” are “inferior races” in every way:

They are lower than the Nama and the only race they are above is the San or Bushmen – beings on the very lowest rung. It is inconceivable for a racially-conscious Rehobother to marry a Bush-woman or a black girl.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.: 107, 166 (“Kluft zwischen den Stämmen”, “Bund aller Söhne und Töchter des Landes”).

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.: 106 (“Der Kolonialmacht ist es gelungen, Mißgunst und Uneinigkeit zwischen den Völkern des Landes zu schüren. Neid und Zwietracht scheinen unüberwindbar zu sein.”).

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.: 26 (“Sie stehen noch unter den Nama und überragen eigentlich nur die Saan [sic!] oder Buschmänner – Wesen auf der alleruntersten Stufe. Undenkbar für einen rassebewußten Rehobother, ein Buschmannmädchen oder eine Schwarze zu ehelichen.”).

Strict condemnation of every violation of 'racial boundaries' is not attributed primarily to the Germans in Beetz's work — even if it is implied that they also hold such views — but rather to sections of the colonised populations. It is constantly pointed out that a remarkable level of bigotry characterises the position of the apparently so "racially-conscious" 'bastards'. Because what is said of the Germans in 'Südwest' in historical accounts is also true of the Rehobother community in Beetz's novel: While marriage with a 'black' was seen as impossible, their sexual exploitation was an everyday occurrence. It is described thus:

To mount one, to make a child for her — that's okay; that was after all the Boers favourite sport. It is important however that it is done secretly, that the missionary and the spouse don't get wind of it.<sup>93</sup>

Although Koopgard reacts "indignantly" to this "hypocrisy and condescension" of late, he practised it himself for many years: He too always saw it as a matter of course simply to "take" 'black' women and it is not before the encounter with Omutima, who successfully resisted him, that he stopped committing rape.<sup>94</sup>

But it is not only the 'male fantasy' constructed here, whereby love can grow out of an attempt at forced sexual intercourse that is extremely difficult to accept. In addition Beetz's decision to tell the story predominantly from the point of view of an African seems particularly questionable at this point: It is easy to get the impression that an author, writing in the language of the perpetrators, is projecting the acts of the colonisers onto the 'coloured' character — which leads unavoidably to a certain exoneration of the Germans. Similarly the sexual crimes committed by the 'whites' are only mentioned in passing in *Flucht vom Waterberg* — in contrast to May's work. Therefore Beetz's novel, which claims quite overtly to be, and by and large rightly so, critical of colonialism, runs the danger of perpetuating the cliché of the omnipresent sexual aggression of African men. This scarcely intended proximity to a fatal tradition is even more difficult in 1989 than the occasional literary assimilation of culturally foreign peoples in May's novel two and a half decades earlier: For *Flucht vom Waterberg* doesn't just lag behind Timm's *Morenga* but also behind the international, critical discourse on colonialism since the 1960s in general, the knowledge of which most likely would have led to a more considered approach to this portrayal.

### **On the literary treatment of the war and its causes: The genocide against the Herero as an object of the materialist interpretation of history**

Apart from the aspect mentioned above atrocities committed by the Germans during the 'Herero War' are indeed presented quite directly in *Flucht vom Waterberg*. The criminal character of their military operations is highlighted when Beetz contrasts it with the

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid. ("So eine bespringen, ihr ein Kind machen — das ja; das war schließlich selbst bei den Buren, den kapholländischen Vorfahren der Bastards, der beliebteste Sport. Wichtig nur, daß er heimlich getrieben wird, daß der Missionar und die Angetraute nichts davon erfahren.").

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.: 26, 182 ("empören", "Heuchelei und Überheblichkeit", "packen").

relatively restrained conduct of war exercised by the rebels. In accordance with more recent historical writings he raises the point that the Herero guarantee “all women and children safe conduct” and prisoners are not summarily executed as was the case with the Germans.<sup>95</sup> Against this there are the imperial soldiers who even skin the murder victims in order to enrich Trotha’s “collection of trophies”.<sup>96</sup>

It is significant that such “barbarism” is not characterised as the excesses of a single company of troops but rather as actions ordered by the German high command.<sup>97</sup> The execution of non-combatants happens explicitly “in accordance with directives” because the objective is to liquidate all Herero, women and children included: Thus according to Beetz’s account the ‘Schutztruppe’ undoubtedly commits genocide.<sup>98</sup> This view is supported not only by giving the number of victims, as mentioned earlier, but also by analysing the tactics of the Germans – borrowing from Drechsler’s historiographic portrayal.<sup>99</sup> Thus Koopgard realises that all the Herero’s possible escape routes have been blocked – with the exception of the one into the Omaheke, which however is nothing more than “a zone of death”.<sup>100</sup> Beetz’s narrator presents the sealing off of the Omaheke later by a cordon of German troops as further proof of the genocide theory.<sup>101</sup>

All in all *Flucht vom Waterberg* corresponds for the most part to the reconstructions of the actual historical events by GDR historians, which are today generally seen as widely correct. That Beetz emphasises the Germans’ technical progress and sees the reasons for their military victory in their superior weapons, communications and transport, also contributes to this.<sup>102</sup> Once again the novel has an aspect in common with May’s novel, to which there are additional significant parallels: As is the case in *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* the catalyst for the Africans’ decision to rise up against their oppressors seems to be of a purely economic nature in *Flucht vom Waterberg*: “The loss of water and grazing land, the sell-out to traders charging extortionate prices and to newly arriving settlers – these are the things that drove the Herero to desperation, to uprising.”<sup>103</sup> In accordance with operationalised materialistic doctrine of history it was the business practices of unscrupulous capitalists which took away the livelihoods of the ‘natives’ whose way of life was proto-communist so to speak. As a result of the “greed” of the ‘whites’ they

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.: 189 (“alle Frauen und Kinder [...] freies Geleit”).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.: 135 (“Trophäensammlung”).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.: 211 (“Barbarei”).

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.: 121 (“gemäß der Direktiven”).

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 77.

<sup>100</sup> Beetz, *Flucht*: 103 (“eine Todeszone”).

<sup>101</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 217.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 17, 40 and in particular p. 217.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.: 7-8 (“Der Verlust von Wasser und Weide, ihr Ausverkauf an Händler mit Wucherpreisen und an nachdrängende Siedler – das hat die Herero zur Verzweiflung, zum Aufstand getrieben.”).

became debtors, beggars and alcoholics but, according to the novel, also proletarians who one day in the not-too-distant future would develop their class awareness.<sup>104</sup>

However for the very reason that in many ways *Flucht vom Waterberg* is constructed in accordance with official writings on history in the GDR – which at the time the novel was published was already approaching its demise – it is surprising that the text does not follow them in one important point: While it doesn't explicitly contradict the widespread continuity thesis according to which a linear development from German colonialism to the crimes of National Socialism can be traced, Beetz's novel does not describe the two epochs as unavoidable consequences of the logic of capitalism. This is particularly striking because the continuity thesis is articulated quite clearly on the dust jacket of the novel. There we are reminded "that with the genocide against the Herero that chapter of German perfection and thoroughness began, which decades later reached its dreadful climax."<sup>105</sup> Beetz however does not do this de facto: Despite many borrowings from the official GDR picture of history *Flucht vom Waterberg* depicts the 'Herero War' as an event that doesn't only become relevant within a specific theory on fascism but should be deeply anchored in the cultural memory irrespective of later historical events. Not least for this reason has Beetz earned the right – as indeed his predecessor May did – to be given greater consideration in the lively discussion of German 'Südwest' literature in future.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.: 188 ("Raffgier").

<sup>105</sup> "Er erinnert daran, daß mit dem Völkermord an den Herero, 1904 in Deutsch-Südwestafrika (dem heutigen Namibia), jenes Kapitel deutscher Perfektion und Gründlichkeit begann, das Jahrzehnte später seinen schrecklichen Höhepunkt finden sollte."



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