

Between two pasts and two presents: The novels of the Namibian writer Giselher W. Hoffmann*

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Abstract

The literary oeuvre of the Namibian author, Giselher W. Hoffmann, illustrates the way in which literary interpretation and reception are contingent upon the influence of a readership's individual cultural background. Whereas in Germany colonial literature evokes hidden and unconscious stereotypes, Hoffmann's novels – seen in the context of their Namibian literary tradition – break with these very stereotypes. Thus while German readers still tend to see Germanophone literature and German literature as being identical, Hoffmann is at pains to state that he is a writer of Namibian literature in the German language. These contrasting interpretations reveal a lack of definition in the German postcolonial consciousness. This in turn demonstrates the cultural egocentricity of how Hoffmann's novels in Germany are read, and shows further that postcolonial theory does not extend to cover adequately the situation of Namibian, Germanophone literature in all its distinctiveness.

Born in Swakopmund, Giselher Werner Hoffmann is the only contemporary writer in Namibia to have produced a substantial number of novels in the German language. Hoffmann's uniqueness in this respect – he wrote his first published novel *Im Bunde der Dritte* (1983) with his twin brother, Attila Werner Hoffmann – is all the more remarkable for the fact that he addresses his books not only, although primarily, to German readers in Namibia, but also to those in Germany and Europe as a whole.¹ Hoffmann is therefore not merely a Namibian author whose renown in his home country makes him interesting for readers abroad, but an author who also seeks out a readership beyond the borders of Namibia. For literary scholarship, this means that any analysis of his works must take two different literary fields with two different receptive processes into consideration. This complexity is deepened further by the inherent heterogeneity in Namibian literature; any interrelatedness between Anglophone and Germanophone literature and the oratures and literatures of African languages have yet to be properly analysed. A further difficulty exists in the fields of Namibian and German literatures; both do indeed have a common point of intersection not only in the German language, however, these common points are neither uniformly defined nor emphasized. The Germanophone literary tradition, and

* This essay does not only seek to translate, but also to revisit and elaborate on the essay "Zwischen Vergangenheit und Gegenwart. Die Romane des namibischen deutschsprachigen Schriftstellers Giselher W. Hoffmann" from the journal *Mont Cameroun*, 4, 2007: 81-97.

¹ Attila W. Hoffmann and Giselher W. Hoffmann, *Im Bunde der Dritte*, Swakopmund, Hoffmann Twins, 1983.

German literature itself, both tend to receive greater critical attention in Namibia than Namibian literature — including Germanophone Namibian literature — in Germany. Therefore Medardus Brehl, in his study *Vernichtung der Herero* failed to establish a clear enough distinction when he refers, in the same breath, to Hoffmann and several German authors who created literary depictions of the war against the Nama and Herero.² Brehl also refers to Hoffmann merely as an author who was born in Namibia; this formulation does not preclude the assumption that Hoffmann could have been living in Germany all his life. In fact, one must constantly remind oneself that Hoffmann is not a German, but a Namibian, African writer, and is writing within a context different to a German author's one. With this in mind, Brehl's not unambiguous formulation is all the more unfortunate since it is in his introduction that he seeks to stress the importance of the discursive preconditions for working with this subject matter. When one bears in mind the divided history of Germany and Namibia, which, for a time, not only shared one common past but, as stressed by Bruno Arich-Gerz, should rather be seen as two separately identifiable pasts in the plural, it is particularly important to remember that this differentiation cannot be stated frequently and clearly enough.³ Furthermore, Hoffmann is the first, and for a long time was the only Namibian writer of fiction, to be published internationally; it was not until 2001 that Neshani Andreas succeeded in having her novel *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* published overseas and she remains the only internationally published Namibian author next to Hoffmann.⁴

Hoffmann's rationale for embracing a European readership beyond Africa is not political; neither is it based on any sense of exile, whether internal, external, voluntary or enforced. Nor is there any cause to believe that he was motivated by the limited possibilities to have his work published in Namibia. Indeed, it was relatively straightforward for Giselher and Attila Hoffmann to publish their first novel in Namibia, even if it was on their own initiative in the Hoffmann Twins Publishing House, Swakopmund. They made a conscious decision to address readers both in Namibia and in Germany. The duality of this approach — directing their work at Namibia as well as Germany — is not so particularly unusual on the literary field, which consists of publications from both Namibia and Germany, including the English-language market. This observation still holds true even though Giselher Hoffmann is the only Namibian author to actively pursue this dual approach. Hoffmann's relative success led him to seek publishers in Germany in the long term due to the problematic situation with the publishing houses in Namibia.

² Medardus Brehl, *Vernichtung der Herero. Diskurse der Gewalt in der deutschen Kolonialliteratur*, München, Fink, 2007.

³ Bruno Arich-Gerz, *Namibias Postkolonialismen. Texte zu Vergangenheiten in Südwestafrika*, Bielefeld, Aisthesis, 2008: 7; Larissa Förster, Dag Henrichsen, and Michael Bollig, (eds.), *Namibia – Deutschland. Eine geteilte Geschichte. Widerstand, Gewalt, Erinnerung*, Wolfratshausen, Edition Minerva, 2004: 18-22.

⁴ Irmgard Schreiber Schreiber, Irmgard, "Neshani Andreas: 'The Purple Violet of Oshaanti'. Von den Freuden und Leiden der Tradition", *Allgemeine Zeitung*, Windhoek, November 23, 2001; Irmgard Schreiber, "Zwei Autoren, ein Musiker. Neshani Andreas und Jackson Kaujeua präsentieren eine 'Afrikanische Nacht' im Goethe-Zentrum Windhoek", *Allgemeine Zeitung*, Windhoek, March 4, 2005.

The making of his decision was reinforced by his works receiving no less attention in Germany than they were receiving in Namibia.⁵

Thomas Keil, in his dissertation *Die postkoloniale deutsche Literatur in Namibia (1920-2000)*, suggests that the German-speaking readers in Namibia avail themselves of books imported from Germany which contain references to Namibia.⁶ Indeed, such books are seen as part of their own literature. It should therefore come as no surprise to find, in the person of Hoffmann, that this process can be reversed and that a Namibian author can look to Germany for readers. It goes without saying that financial considerations might well have played a role here, together with the prospect of receiving scholarships or literary prizes from overseas. As a matter of fact, Hoffmann did receive the *Große Romanpreis des Bertelsmann Club* [The Bertelsmann Club Grand Prize for Novels] in 2000, and was awarded the title Author of the Year by the *Afrikanisches Deutschland* in 2001. In 2001 he also received a scholarship for the Künstlerhaus Schloss Wiepersdorf, in 2003 a scholarship for the *Künstlerhaus Worpswede*, in 2004 for the *Stuttgarter Schriftstellerhaus*, and in 2005 for the *Heinrich-Böll-Haus Langenbroich*.

Keil also identifies financial considerations as a possible reason for Hoffmann publishing his works abroad, but he contradicts himself in details.⁷ Keil takes Hoffmann's novel *Die Erstgeborenen* as an example which, according to him, was first published in 1991 in Germany for financial reasons.⁸ However, Keil mentions elsewhere that this novel had already been published in 1989 in Swakopmund under the title *Land der wasserlosen Flüsse*. Accordingly, Hoffmann considers publishing in Germany only after publication in Namibia, a point underscored by his novel *Die verlorenen Jahre* which was published in 1990 in Swakopmund and only in 2003 in Cologne, or his novel *Schattenjäger*, which was published in 1998 in Swakopmund, in 2000 in Gütersloh and in 2003 in Bern.

In the light of Hoffmann's dual approach to Namibia and Germany, it should be stressed that he does not see himself as anything other than a Namibian, as he himself has emphasised during public readings in Germany, and that his decision to write in the German language does not amount to an ideological declaration of intent.⁹ Hoffmann sees himself not as a writer of German literature, but as a writer in the German language. At the same time, Hoffmann does not conform to the German cliché of an African writer which, according to Dörner, the literary agent, increased the difficulty of marketing his work in Germany, as Sylvia Thees explained in the final thesis for her

⁵ Philip Ritter, "Ich lebe wie ein Nomade'. Giselher W. Hoffmann schreibt in Berlin", *Allgemeine Zeitung*, Windhoek, January 11, 2008.

⁶ Thomas Keil, *Die postkoloniale deutsche Literatur in Namibia (1920-2000)*, Stuttgart, Universität Stuttgart, 2003: 11.

⁷ Ibid.: 297.

⁸ Ibid.: 55.

⁹ Klaus Reichold, "Eine endlose Geschichte von Hauen und Stechen", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 24, 1997.

German State Exams, entitled “Die Geschichte der ehemaligen Kolonie Südwestafrika (Namibia) als Thema deutschsprachiger Literatur”.¹⁰

This sheds a characteristic light on the conditions affecting the reception of Namibian German-language literature in Germany, to the degree that this kind of literature is still patently seen as being part of German literature and not as part of an independent literary culture. It seems therefore that the attitude cultivated towards the reception of such literature has remained unchanged since the German-language literature of the former colony of Southwest Africa was subsumed into German literature, for ideological reasons among others, and which was, therefore, accorded no independent consideration in Karl Kurt Klein’s *Literaturgeschichte des Deutschtums im Ausland*.¹¹ This shortcoming was corrected in the new edition of this catalogue, which today is seen as a standard work of intercultural Germanic Studies. It has been expanded to include the first bibliography on the cultural life of German-speaking population groups abroad from 1945 to 1978. With this in mind, it is only right that Stefan Hermes makes no mention of Hoffmann in his book “*Fahrten nach Südwest*” because, although his works are indeed part of Germanophone literature, they cannot strictly be classified as German Literature.¹²

Hoffmann’s biography and novels

Giselher W. Hoffmann was born in Windhoek, together with his twin brother, on January 10, 1958, as the youngest of six siblings. He grew up on a cattle farm in the Okahandja district in Southwest Africa where his father, who had emigrated from Thuringia to Southwest Africa in 1933, showed him how to hunt. His father was interned from 1936 to 1945. Hoffmann’s schooling took place at some distance from his family in a boarding school in the capital city, Windhoek. In 1974, the two brothers together wrote the manuscript for their first novel, consisting of several hundred pages, which was later to become *Im Bunde der Dritte* (1983). In 1975, following the death of their parents, the twins ended their schooling in Windhoek. They then proceeded to complete their military service. In 1978, Giselher W. Hoffmann was employed as a professional hunter by a company specialising in safaris. For three years, between safaris, Giselher and Attila Hoffmann revised *Im Bunde der Dritte* with the assistance of a Himba. The novel became a bestseller in Southwest Africa, resulting in Giselher W. Hoffmann resigning from his job and devoting himself to being a full-time writer. Attila Hoffmann, who was responsible for

¹⁰ Sylvia Thees, *Die Geschichte der ehemaligen Kolonie Südwestafrika (Namibia) als Thema deutschsprachiger Literatur*, unpubl. thesis, Universität Osnabrück, 1999: 76.

¹¹ Karl Kurt Klein, *Literaturgeschichte des Deutschtums im Ausland. Schrifttum und Geistesleben der deutschen Volksgruppen im Ausland vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, Leipzig, Bibliographisches Institut, 1939; Hildesheim/New York, Olms, 1979; cf. Keil, *Literatur*: 36.

¹² Stefan Hermes, “*Fahrten nach Südwest*”. *Die Kolonialkriege gegen die Herero und Nama in der deutschen Literatur (1904 – 2004)*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2009.

undertaking the research, went on to other things.¹³ Giselher W. Hoffmann lives with his wife and son in Swakopmund, where he runs a safari business.

Let us now turn to his works. *Im Bunde der Dritte* (1983) is set in Damaraland; its plot is centred on the topic of poaching. Three men, two of whom are government officials, are dealing in ivory and rhinoceros horn. They force a Damara to assist them. When he is attacked by an elephant, the Damara starts a fire in an attempt to escape. This causes a bush fire which in turn drives herds of elephants towards the veterinary fence in the Northeast of Namibia beyond which lies farmland. As the farmers attempt to extinguish the fire, a gamekeeper, the son of one of the farmers, tries to drive the elephants back. Unperturbed, the three men continue their poaching, assisted by a receptionist who passes on to them details of telephone conversations between the farmers. Because the elephants continue their stampede, the Namibian Conservation Agency decides to shoot them. Finally, the gamekeeper manages to save at least the young elephants.

Hunting and poaching are also central themes in the subsequent novel, *Irgendwo in Afrika* (1986). Garry Ossman, a professional hunter, is on safari in Damaraland together with Mario Guiseppino who hunts as a hobby. At the same time, Linda Busch, the daughter of a government official in the Conservation Agency who is opposed to hunting, is also in the area. Following an unsuccessful lion-hunt, Ossman and Guiseppino are in danger of dehydrating, but they are rescued by Linda Busch. Garry and Linda fall in love, but then a band of poachers enters the region. Ossman, in a chance meeting with the leader of the poachers, discovers that he, Garry, is the victim of an intrigue, according to which he is actually the leader of the poachers and that he has allegedly kidnapped Linda Busch. Linda Busch's father begins a desperate search for his daughter but is led in the wrong direction by the real poachers, while the poachers flee towards the coast. Ossman, Guiseppino and Linda begin a lonely hunt for the poachers which ends happily and culminates in a declaration of love between Ossman and Linda.

Das Land der wasserlosen Flüsse (1989) was published in Germany under the title *Die Erstgeborenen* (1991). In 1992, it was serialised in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* and the *Saarbrücker Zeitung* and in 1993 it was published as a paperback with a second edition in 2002. It is set in the Kalahari, begins in the 1950s and deals primarily with the Gwi tribe. At the centre of the story is a settler, called Ecksteen, who is searching for a legendary, aquiferous mountain which is rich in diamonds. Having been consumed by his plan, he sells his grocery shop and moves into the countryside with his wife and child. The aged Ecksteen terrorises the local Gwi population and neglects his farm until he is finally killed by one of the Gwi. While this is going on, his son Johan befriends a Gwi named Katuma who is living on the farm and slowly learns the actual whereabouts of the fabled mountain. Johan travels there alone and finds a lake as well as diamonds, but dies of asphyxiation in the depths of the mountain. Katuma, given the choice between returning to his people, from whose way of life he has long been separated, and remaining on the farm, chooses the latter option.

¹³ Manfred Loimeier, *Wortwechsel. Gespräche mit afrikanischen Autorinnen und Autoren*, Bad Honnef, Horlemann, 2002: 101.

Land der wasserlosen Flüsse / Die Erstgeborenen is the first of Hoffmann's novels in which he puts a central Namibian-German character on the same level as a protagonist from an autochthon African ethnic group. Simultaneously, Hoffmann uses a novel for the first time to present ethnological knowledge about an ethnic group from southern Africa. Whilst the first two were popular 'entertainment' novels, which were too far from the concerns of the German readership to strike any responsive chord with them and which have received no attention from literary scholars to date, this novel attracted more interest in Germany due to the ethnological aspect of the Gwi culture as well as the indirect criticism of the western way of life. *Land der wasserlosen Flüsse* was exclusively read in Germany under the title *Die Erstgeborenen*, with rarely any reference to its earlier first-edition title. It was unclear from the start whether the novel would be able to attract a readership in Germany, and so its content and title had to be adapted to the expectations of the German reading public. Neither Thees nor Keil discussed, for reasons of systematic limitations, this aspect of varying the approaches to different readerships and the different literary fields which the novel addresses.

Although Hoffmann continues to include non Namibian-German figures in the novel *Die verlorenen Jahre* (1990; 2003), he tends to keep them in the background. That Hoffmann's priorities lie elsewhere is shown in the novel *Die verlorenen Jahre*, published one year after Namibia was granted its independence, which delves further back into the country's past than *Land der wasserlosen Flüsse / Die Erstgeborenen*. Whereas the plot of *Land der wasserlosen Flüsse / Die Erstgeborenen* opens in the 1950s, *Die verlorenen Jahre* deals with the internment of Germans and Namibians of German origin in Namibia during the Second World War and through to 1946. The book therefore touches upon a sensitive theme and triggered strong reactions in Namibia.¹⁴

In Germany, however, it was hardly discussed at all, something which serves to underline how Hoffmann's novels can be seen as spanning two different literary fields and are consequently subject to different receptive processes: Hoffmann's novels are perceived differently in Namibia and in Germany. In recent years the German colonial past has been attracting increasing interest in Germany. This has been noticeable in German literary scholarship especially through contributions from scholars of Germanic Studies abroad; similarly there were many contributions from history scholars to commemorations marking the centenary of the 1904 to 1907 war against the Herero and Nama. Nevertheless, the situation of German expatriates or foreigners of German extraction, especially during the Second World War, remains a relatively unexplored and partially taboo historical theme – critical attention has been focussed rather on the fate of those in exile.

In *Die verlorenen Jahre*, Hoffmann uses the example of seven married couples – including San Nyandi and Tomaha – to take the reader through variants of storyline ranging from collaboration to resistance. He does not do this in a two-dimensional manner, but characterises his figures in such a way as to illustrate how they are trapped

¹⁴ Keil, *Literatur*: 104-106.

in a quandary between their own feelings and beliefs. The boundaries between the antagonists are blurred – the South African sergeant is ultimately revealed as an enthusiastic supporter of the National Party. Hoffmann's attention is primarily directed at the fate of the women who, at the time, were emancipating themselves. Hoffmann depicts the achievements of these war-scarred women with remarkable psychological sensitivity – women whose efforts frequently came to nothing and whose early naivety was often exploited. Additionally, Hoffmann depicts the growing estrangement between the married couples and the loss of their hopes and ideals. It is possible that this was made easier for Hoffmann by him keeping his father's life story, including his internment, in mind. That Hoffmann makes use of his own personal experiences can be seen in the boarding-school scenes, which are similar to those which Hoffmann experienced in his own younger years. The reason why Hoffmann did not broach the issue of Namibia's independence, which it attained in 1990, in his novel *Die verlorenen Jahre*, can be explained by the fact that he only started to write it at the end of the 1980s. At the same time, in 1991, his novel *Die Erstgeborenen* was published in Germany, marking his German debut as an author.¹⁵

Double career

It was not until 1991 that literary scholarship in Germany began to examine Hoffmann's works. Literary studies have revealed that we cannot only speak of two different receptive processes, but also two different literary careers, which are, of course, intertwined. *Die Erstgeborenen* was reviewed at least 13 times, mostly in small circulation magazines, but also in the Munich *Abendzeitung* and, on the occasion of its release in paperback in Zurich, in the Hamburg-based *Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt*.¹⁶ Bearing in mind the relative success of *Die Erstgeborenen* in the German-speaking regions of Europe, it is interesting to examine what Hoffmann intended with his next novel *Die schweigenden Feuer* (1994). This novel, the first of his to be released in Germany before being published in Namibia, is directed at a German readership in a way that was so obviously not the case in Hoffmann's novels before then, it being set in the (pre-) history of the Herero and Nama war between the years of 1904 and 1907.

With a German readership in mind, Hoffmann decided to write a historical novel. In this novel Hoffmann overlooked developments in Namibia in the early 1990s and took a step further back into the past of Southwest Africa, thereby moving noticeably closer to the German readership which he had recently won over. Moreover, in his novel *Die schweigenden Feuer* he concentrates exclusively on indigenous protagonists, presenting the occurrences from the perspective of the Herero, Himeezembi. The name

¹⁵ I shall not go into Hoffmann's unpublished novella *Schwanger!* which he completed in 1991, and which deals with an unwanted pregnancy, since Hoffmann did not even publish this title in his own publishing company.

¹⁶ Christine Schulz, "Das Scheitern am 'Weißen Riesen'", *Abendzeitung*, München, June 15, 1991; Carsten Voigt, "Jäger und Haremsdame", *Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt*, Hamburg, September 2, 1994.

Himeezembi, it should be noted, means “I shall not forget”, which clarifies Hoffmann’s intentions. This observation suggests a parallel to other works by African authors, such as the writers Chenjerai Hove and Yvonne Vera from Zimbabwe, whose intention it was with their novels *Bones* (1988), *Shadows* (1991) and *Nehanda* (1993) to tear themselves away from a certain history of forgetfulness and to give a voice to people who had not previously been heard.

In *Die schweigenden Feuer* Hoffmann tries to give literary form to the German colonial wars against the Herero and the Nama, both axiomatically and primarily from the African perspective. Although, in Germany, Uwe Timm’s novel *Morenga* (1978) was already available as the most recent fictionalisation of that war at that time and which had been made into a TV film, the perspectives of the German and African protagonists alternate in Timm’s story. But *Morenga* was and remains a unique work by a German author, something which was underscored by Gerhard Seyfried’s novel *Herero* (2003) which, to a remarkable degree, confined itself to a mere reproduction of the colonialist perspective, a method generally considered to have become obsolete long ago.

Hoffmann engaged in a process of intensive research primarily because, prior to 1994, historical material had not been fictionalised from this African perspective before. As a result the novel *Die schweigenden Feuer* is impressive in its coverage and handling of archive material, but as a work of fiction it is abstruse and convoluted. It is essential to have a timeline to hand in order to understand this work; as a simple sequence of historical facts in a fictional setting, it possesses little literary merit. Hoffmann’s targeted the German book market with this novel and it was published in Germany first. However, he failed to adhere to his own rules of writing for the German literary environment and, as he conceded in an interview in 2008, he wrote for a public whose interests and knowledge-base were unfamiliar to him.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the book did contribute to Hoffmann’s becoming relatively well-known in Germany, and the first edition of *Die schweigenden Feuer* sold out over the following decades. But it did not represent a big literary breakthrough for the author in Germany. This might also be explained by the fact that the German literary market in the middle of the 1990s was largely focussed on German unification and that the German colonial past only became of public interest in 2004 at the earliest, when the commemorations to mark the centenary of the war against the Herero and Nama began. Nevertheless, *Die schweigenden Feuer* was released as a paperback in Swakopmund in 1999.

Reception in Germany

A comparison with the novel *Herero*, which received widespread attention, not least due to Seyfried’s high public profile, showed that the German readership was not interested in a non-German perspective which Hoffmann had used in his novel *Die schweigenden Feuer* and, moreover, preferred the old, established colonial clichés. At the same time, however, *Die schweigenden Feuer* is the Hoffmann novel which has received the most

¹⁷ Ritter, “Nomade”.

attention in the fields of literary and historical scholarship in Germany. Indeed it is almost unique among his novels in this respect. This shows that the subject-matter and the content are of primary interest to the respective receptive contexts, while the author's works as a whole and his narrative techniques remain largely ignored. This in turn explains why the concentration on the novel *Die schweigenden Feuer* is largely based on its content and allows only fragmentary conclusions to be drawn about Hoffmann's oeuvre, thereby stressing the importance of a comprehensive representation of his works.

In any case, the novels which broach the issue of the war against the Herero and Nama do tend to tempt the reader into concentrating more on content rather than style, as noted by Sabine Wilke, among others, in her collective review *Zwanzig Jahre Germanistik postkolonial* on the publication of Stefan Hermes' book *Fahrten nach Südwest*.¹⁸ This still holds true even for the reader's perception of Hoffmann's novel *Die verlorenen Jahre*, as Bruno Arich-Gerz briefly mentions with reference to the correct fictional handling of the historical material regarding the internment of Namibians of German origin during the Second World War.¹⁹

Nevertheless, from the perspective of postcolonial theory, two questions were raised about Hoffmann's *Die schweigenden Feuer*: firstly whether Hoffmann's adoption of a Herero perspective in the novel *Die schweigenden Feuer* was appropriate or not, and secondly – in comparison with Timm's *Morenga* – whether Hoffmann would have been wiser to dispense with the empathic aesthetic which he uses. Both approaches soon reveal themselves to have a Eurocentric viewpoint through the thought-processes which underlie them. On the one hand, Brehl, for example, praises the way in which Timm's *Morenga* integrates documentary materials from "chronicles, military dispatches and travel reports" and commends the "form of the documentary novel", but does not mention that Hoffmann's *Die schweigenden Feuer* is based on precisely the same type of research.²⁰ In an interview, Hoffmann reiterated how important research had been for his literary work.²¹ Hoffmann only uses the Herero perspective, the inclusion of which therefore, from a subconscious German point of view, remains unappreciated and unacknowledged.

Nevertheless, in contrast, it is Bruno Arich-Gerz who fails to rise above the prescribed mono-dimensional perspective of postcolonial theory in his essay "Postcolonial prose between the aesthetics of empathy and reception", in which he takes a position which is increasingly orientated towards the aesthetics of reception.²² Such eurocentricity

¹⁸ Sabine Wilke, "Zwanzig Jahre Germanistik postkolonial", *Monatshefte*, 103 (3), 2011: 425-439 (430).

¹⁹ Arich-Gerz, *Postkolonialismen*: 88.

²⁰ Brehl, *Vernichtung*: 140.

²¹ Loimeier, *Wortwechsel*: 102.

²² Bruno Arich-Gerz, "Postkoloniale Prosaliteratur zwischen Einfühlungs- und Rezeptionsästhetik. Zur (Erzähl-)Perspektive 'der Anderen' bei Gerhard Seyfried, Dietmar Beetz und in Giselher W. Hoffmanns *Die schweigenden Feuer* (1994)", *Acta Germanica*, 37, 2009: 33-44.

becomes visible when Timm's standpoint, that the aesthetic of empathy represents a renewed act of colonialism, is presented as a dictum in the debate on Hoffmann and the aesthetics of empathy.²³ If this argument is true for Timm as a German author, it might explain why Timm did not presume to be able to speak for a Herero;²⁴ Hoffmann, however, as a Namibian, African author is able to give voice to his characters. Hoffmann is aware of this position, which „periodically lends his novel the character of a foreign language text” and explains his “insider's view of Africa”²⁵ as follows:

I owe my ability to see things through the eyes of an outsider to my well-honed sense of empathy. Besides, I grew up among Herero on the farm, went hunting with a Gwi and spent several months in the remoteness of Kaokoland.²⁶

Any attempt to deprive Hoffmann of his right to speak for the Herero by citing his membership of the white Namibian middle class would be akin to muzzling him for racist reasons or, indeed, imposing a particular format of discourse on him.

Indeed, as mentioned by Arich-Gerz, what does become visible is that postcolonial theory is not sufficiently developed to grasp the phenomenon of Namibia's multiple postcolonialities, in which there is no classic anticolonial ‘writing back’ – something which is not an absolute imperative. Indeed, the motif of ‘writing back’ only constitutes a fraction of the so-called new literatures.²⁷

Timm's wish that “at some point we could just have a Nama [...] narrating the colonial war between 1904 and 1907 from the other perspective” obscures the fact that there is already at least one active Namibian voice: Hoffmann.²⁸ This in turn shows the European expectation that there should be an element of the exotic, that a Nama, a black author, should be the one to write about the war in the way we would wish. It is one thing to find such a statement desirable – and Hoffmann stated something similar even before Timm²⁹ – but it is another matter entirely to make a person's membership of a particular tribal grouping into some kind of quality standard for literature or the reason for selecting a certain theme. If this dictum were to be narrowed down to the degree that only a (later born) Nama would be capable of relating the Nama perspective of the war against the Nama and Herero – possibly only in his extremely marginalised language which would seldom be used to compose literature – then the proviso of the empathic aesthetic would also apply to an Ovambo if he was writing about the war against the Nama and Herero. This would of course make the role of power in an authoritarian-

²³ Christof Hamann and Uwe Timm, “‘Einfühlungsästhetik wäre ein kolonialer Akt’”, *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter*, 168, 2003: 450–462.

²⁴ Arich-Gerz, *Postkolonialismen*: 135.

²⁵ Steffen Richter, “‘Hic sunt leones’. Die Kolonialkriege in Deutsch-Südwestafrika und die deutschsprachige Gegenwartsliteratur”, *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter*, 168, 2003: 428–443 (431).

²⁶ Loimeier, *Wortwechsel*: 102.

²⁷ Arich-Gerz, “Prosaliteratur”: 37.

²⁸ Hamann, Timm, “Einfühlungsästhetik”: 454.

²⁹ Loimeier, *Wortwechsel*: 101: “Ich wünsche mir, dass zumindest eine Person aus jedem Volk seine eigene Geschichte niederschreibt.”

normative, European-German discourse regarding the literature of Namibia unmistakably apparent.

Shortcomings of this kind can be traced back to a lack of truly incisive comparative components even in intercultural Germanic Studies; greater consideration of African Cultural Studies is desirable here. After all, authors such as Hove and Vera have shown convincingly in their above-mentioned novels, not least on a formal level, how a discourse can function as the archaeology of a counter-historiography in the form of a novel. Furthermore, a study has yet to be undertaken in Germany into the receptive patterns associated with novels by African authors, such as exist in the Francophone space as in Jean-Marc Moura's *Lire l'exotisme*.³⁰ In Germany the reception of the literary works of authors from South Africa, for example, shows the ongoing existence and effects of clichés borne of racism or exoticism at a level of expectation which, accordingly, engrosses white authors at the same time as it dictates to black authors how they should write.

Arich-Gerz makes precisely this patronising error. On the one hand and in reference to Hoffmann's *Die schweigenden Feuer*, he stresses the "irritation as a stimulus to engage in a process of reflection on our own (European-German) body of expectations as readers"³¹ whereas, on the other hand, he emphasises that the "literature which is written in, about, or in any other way regarding Namibia" still lacks narrators who can "present postcolonial life [...] as it is reflected in postcolonial theory."³² It is precisely this indirectly formulated dictate and postulation about a postcolonial novel from Namibia that does fulfil European-German standards, which can be seen as patronising and which actually prevents the literature of Namibia from revealing its true self as something quite different, quite distinct, and something which is under no obligation to fulfil the expectations of postcolonial theory. Arich-Gerz's flawed argumentation is all the more regrettable because, due to his fixation with theory, he makes exactly the same mistake as the person he explicitly and correctly criticises in reference to the essay "Hic sunt leones"³³ by Steffen Richter, according to whom "it is here that the repertoire of the critical observer who has been trained in the same European way, who has been conditioned into thinking in interpretive paradigms and preconceptions and with certain implicit expectations is clearly visible."³⁴

It is remarkable, in this context, that Hoffmann also used the theme of poaching in his next entertainment novel *Schattenjäger* (1998) and that he was rewarded with successful sales and two literary awards and that these, in turn, earned him several residential scholarships. However, these were only forthcoming after the book had been published in Germany, in 2000, two years after its publication in Namibia – a first edition

³⁰ Jean-Marc Moura, *Lire l'exotisme*, Paris, Dunod, 1992.

³¹ Arich-Gerz, "Prosaliteratur": 40.

³² Arich-Gerz, *Postkolonialismen*: 147.

³³ Richter, "leones".

³⁴ Arich-Gerz, "Prosaliteratur": 39.

in Germany had not been possible as had been the case with *Die schweigenden Feuer*. A Swiss publisher even released it in paperback in 2003. It cannot be discounted that Hoffmann's return to the motif of poaching was influenced by the "German predilection for 'exotic' African themes".³⁵

Patterns of exoticism

The Himba, as an indigenous tribe, feature as central characters in *Schattenjäger* and although the Namibian-German characters are placed at the forefront of the story, the Himba retain an important place in the novel. Here, Hoffmann has departed from the exclusive use of indigenous protagonists as was the case in *Die schweigenden Feuer*. Hoffmann followed up his first two novels *Im Bunde der Dritte* and *Irgendwo in Afrika* by returning to the motifs of poaching and the smuggling of ivory and rhinoceros horn, as well as the struggle to find love. However, Hoffmann expands his thematic spectrum in *Schattenjäger* to include an ecological motif, namely that the Himba territory on the banks of the river Kunene is being threatened by the proposed construction of a dam.

This book's success, which was partly due to the topicality of the ecological theme as well as the ethnologically exotic aspect of the Himba, enabled the prompt publication of his next novel in Germany. But the cover design of *Schattenjäger* still reveals the different expectations of the readerships in Germany and Namibia. While the cover of the Namibian edition of *Schattenjäger* (1998) was printed in colour, showing a bare-breasted Himba girl with her traditional hairstyle and jewellery, the covers of the two European editions in Germany (2000) and Switzerland (2003) depict only desert and sand dune formations which are completely devoid of people. Hence, the aspect of the exotic in the book, in which the customs of the Himba are presented, is not the sole reason for the book's success in Germany.

Hoffmann's next attempt to achieve authorial success and to find literary recognition in Germany led him, once again, to base his novel *Diamantenfieber* (2006) on historical material. The plot stretches back to 1880, in a reverse chronology. He takes up the topic of the German colonial past once again, not exclusively from the perspective of the autochthon population, but from the viewpoint of German settlers. *Diamantenfieber* is set in Lüderitzbucht, today Lüderitz, with the central characters descending from two families in Lüneberg. The first diamonds have been discovered in Southwest Africa and the two young men from the families in Lüneberg embark on a hunt for treasure. Against the backdrop of the war against the Herero and the Nama, the story unfolds around treasure which is discovered, then hidden, and finally rediscovered, and in which greed and jealousy lead to suffering and death, and where only the power of love remains a constant. The only pleasant characters in this novel are the women. *Diamantenfieber* is, to date, Hoffmann's most mature literary work. He is confident in his thematic use of the historical material; he credibly plumbs the psychological depths of the characters' ability to deal with desire, ill-will, and the forbidden, and the figures are well-balanced in

³⁵ Ritter, "Nomade".

relation to each other. On a formal level, the mosaic of his interwoven retrospectives is a success.

Hoffmann's choice of perspective is surprising and significant. Based on previous experience of the reception of his novels in Namibia and in Germany, he limits himself to only including the historical figure of August Stauch as the pretended first man to find diamonds in South Africa, and airbrushes out the real discoverer, Zacharias Lewala, an indigenous man and one of Stauch's assistants. Knowing that too much historical accuracy was not necessarily helpful in Hoffmann's efforts to appeal to a German readership – as in *Die schweigenden Feuer* – and that the topical interests of the German readership were more likely to be accessed by using a German perspective – as in the story of the settlers in *Die Erstgeborenen* – and, furthermore, knowing that the receptive model of the German public indicated that they preferred non-autochthon figures, Hoffmann presented a suitably sophisticated novel which managed to reach an ever-growing number of readers, even if it received little recognition among German reviewers.

The history of the reaction to Hoffmann's works provides us with illuminating and instructive insights into Hoffmann's position towards the various exigencies of the German and Namibian literary market, and the emancipation of Namibian-German literature. On the one hand, there is no doubt that Hoffmann's novels are part of the literature of Namibia. Although they are written in German, they certainly cannot be subsumed into German literature in the sense of Central European German Literature. Keil traced the development of colonial literature (German Southwest Africa) through the literature of the colonies (Southwest Africa) to postcolonial literature (independent Namibia), as clearly distinct from German emigrant literature. He proceeded chronologically, and, by systematically using the model of gradual postcolonialism, his results show the progression with great clarity.³⁶

Elements of colonial literature

However, the themes, motifs, settings and character constellations in Hoffmann's novels reveal how little latitude the author has between the stubbornly durable colonial stereotypes, topical issues and the various interests of the respective readerships in Namibia and Germany. Thus, Hoffmann's novels continue to contain stock elements of literary forms which were present in colonial literature or in the literature of the colonies and which survive in contemporary German exotic literature as clichés. For example, elements of colonial literature can be found in Hoffmann's novels in the form of travel literature, the main purpose of which is to depict faraway places and foreign peoples. Depictions of nature, including the struggle against the forces of nature, together with scenes from the animal kingdom and hunting adventures, are all integral elements of

³⁶ Keil, *Literatur*:16-71.

colonial literature.³⁷ It is precisely these elements that form the core of Hoffmann's novels *Im Bunde der Dritte*, *Irgendwo in Afrika* and *Schattenjäger*.

A further core element of colonial literature is the myth of the pioneer and the settler, as manifested in US-American literature about the settlement of the Wild West, in the Voortrekker novels by South African authors and finally in German novels about Southwest Africa. The "settler ideology" as an element of German colonial literature can also be found in Hoffmann's novels, for instance in *Land der wasserlosen Flüsse*, *Die Erstgeborenen* or *Diamantenfieber*, although Hoffmann, when characterising his settlers, breaks with traditional colonial literature, and depicts his figures not as heroes but as failures or disruptive influences.³⁸ However, Hoffmann's re-evaluation of the (failed) settlers is also a cliché in colonial literature, in which most of the heroic figures of German colonial novels about Southwest Africa fail in their undertakings and must abandon their activities or face death. Since this cliché appears in Hoffmann's novels *Land der wasserlosen Flüsse*, *Die Erstgeborenen* and *Diamantenfieber*, it is frequently difficult to classify the settlers' failure as unambiguously negative, since it calls to mind the cliché of the 'doomed hero'. In this vein, *Land der wasserlosen Flüsse*, *Die Erstgeborenen* revives the theme of the masculine coming of age in the character of Johan Ecksteen; the myth of masculinity is strongly championed in colonial literature. As the story proceeds, however, Ecksteen becomes an understanding, sensitive young man, thus showing how Hoffmann takes the myth of masculinity to an absurd extreme.

There is a similarly ambivalent situation in Hoffmann's novel *Die verlorenen Jahre*. Here, Hoffmann does not limit himself to the Southwest Africans' view of themselves as victims, which is a predominant characteristic of colonial literature and apologist colonial literature.³⁹ He also depicts the women's struggle for emancipation as a difficult but positive experience. On the one hand, such a depiction breaks with the stereotype of the loyal, caring housewife, but on the other hand it calls to mind such female figures as appeared not so much in colonial literature itself, but rather in revisionist colonial literature, especially that produced by female authors of so-called Southwest literature while Southwest Africa was under the German mandate.

Complex interplay

These examples show the complex interplay of conflicting influences within which Hoffmann finds himself. On the one hand, Hoffmann picks up on traditional formats of Namibian literary history, a tradition in which he simply exists. On the other hand, he remodels these clichéd formats and challenges them. As a result, two opposing ways of reading his works become possible, these being contingent upon the receptive expectations of his readership: either his books can be seen as clichéd novels which are

³⁷ Ibid.: 76f.

³⁸ Ibid.: 76.

³⁹ Ibid.: 96f.

written purely for entertainment, or they can be seen as criticising precisely those clichés. This risk is well illustrated in Hoffmann's recently published novel *Diamantenfieber*, not only due to the book's central theme. The title alone reveals how the book reflects a long tradition in German colonial literature; indeed, it bears the same title as Marianne Westerlind's novel *Diamantenfieber* (1937) which is just one of at least 33 books dealing with this topic.⁴⁰ This tradition is reflected through the role played by representatives of African tribal groups in his novels. While the portrayal of such groups can be seen on the one hand as a realistic depiction of palpable multi-ethnic everyday life in Namibia, the fact that Hoffmann continually switches between using protagonists from the Dama, San, Herero and Himba tribes might be understood as him serving his readership's demand for the exotic. Against the backdrop of German literary experience, this appeals to the 'illustrative principle' which was common in the literature of the colonies. We should bear in mind here that Germany has yet to deal with its colonial past in its literature, or, at least, that such a process is still in its infancy.⁴¹ In Germany, the broad literary reception of African literature still occupies the position it held in the pre-war years – the war against the Herero and Nama, or World War I at the latest.⁴² By examining the presence of African ethnic groups in Hoffmann's novels, we can observe that these literary figures still potentially evoke the clichés of colonial literature in Germany – not all of which have been resolved – and that they can therefore be classified as 'exotic'. At the same time, however, it is precisely these character constellations in Hoffmann's novels which create the essential difference between his work, on the one hand, and German colonial literature as well as the German-language literature of the colonies, on the other. This is because, in the latter, the indigenous people are only ever given a subordinate, marginal role, if they are given any role at all, and are given attributes from the animal kingdom, thereby stripping them of their own history. Hoffmann's great achievement is to depart from a method of characterisation which focuses on animal traits and the body with its natural urges, instead showing the San, Herero and Himba in the full context of their culture and civilisation. Occasionally, Hoffmann even seems to be idealising them.

Ultimately, the differences in the way these matters are perceived can be traced back to the phenomenon of the varying patterns of reception in the different literary fields. It should not be forgotten that Hans Grimm's *Volk ohne Raum* (1926) was unmasked as an irredentist novel following Germany's experience of National Socialism and the Second World War, while in the context of Namibian-German literature, which did not go through such experiences, the novel was still held in high regard for its not inconsiderable aesthetic characteristics until at least 1951.⁴³

⁴⁰ Cf. Keil, *Literatur*: 83f.

⁴¹ Manfred Loimeier, "Ein Bild von Afrika. In Deutschland steht die öffentliche Debatte über seine Kolonialvergangenheit an", *epd entwicklungspolitik*, 18, 2003: 27f.

⁴² János Riesz, "Die unterbrochene Lektion"; in: Susan Arndt, (ed.), *AfrikaBilder*, Münster, Unrast, 2001: 271-308.

⁴³ Keil, *Literatur*: 67; 254-260.

While Hoffmann's novels can be read, in the context of Namibian literature, as a criticism of the two-dimensionality of German colonial literature, in the meaning context of German literature they can, under certain circumstances, reactivate old stereotypes and thereby have the opposite effect to what Hoffmann intended. The danger of this happening increased when Hoffmann's novel *Die schweigenden Feuer*, which was decidedly critical of colonialism, failed to achieve success in Germany, whereupon the author stopped writing explicitly about urban Namibia or about Namibia as it is today – although this last point is symptomatic of contemporary Namibian-German literature.⁴⁴ Instead, Hoffmann's use of reverse chronology revived the retrospective form in colonial literature, which, by stressing the level of cultivation that has been attained, served to legitimise and give a sense to colonialism.⁴⁵ With this in mind, Keil's claim that Hoffmann was no longer dependent on the literary precedents of the colonial period does not hold up.⁴⁶ Although he clearly distances himself from them, he is unavoidably bound to them. They can be adjudged to exert an ongoing influence on him as pretexts or subtexts and, however indirectly or negatively, Hoffmann is still clearly subject to them.

German literary scholarship should not escape criticism here for so far concentrating exclusively on Hoffmann's two novels *Die Erstgeborenen* and *Die schweigenden Feuer*. To some degree, *Die Erstgeborenen* represents something of an exception in Hoffmann's work because Hoffmann never reused the form of narrative perspective that he utilised in that book. Moreover, the scholarly reception of the novel *Die Erstgeborenen* in Germany can be seen as one-sided, as only the German title was acknowledged, with the story of its publication and the differing reception in two fields of German-language literature being ignored. This goes to show that it is imperative for the development of Namibian-German literature to have also a much more differentiated reception of this literature in the German-speaking countries of Central Europe to which Namibian-German literature has maintained a meaningful and distinct connection and which continues to exert no small influence on Namibian-German literature.⁴⁷ Namibian-German literary life has long been surprisingly buoyant and its historical development highly interesting.⁴⁸ It also includes several more dedicated novels, such as Helmut Sydow's *Treibholz* and Christoph A. Richter's *Ebony: Ein Tatsachenroman aus Namibia*. Furthermore, since 2000 an annual writers' workshop has taken place in Windhoek and an authorial team, called *doppelpunkt*, has been in existence. Since December 2005, the literary magazine *Felsgraffiti* has been published every six months.⁴⁹ One might be tempted to say, however, that Namibian-German literature will only completely arrive in the present once the German readership in Central Europe has fully appreciated all of

⁴⁴ Ibid.: 96f.

⁴⁵ Thees, *Geschichte* : 9f.

⁴⁶ Keil, *Literatur* : 329.

⁴⁷ Keil, *Literatur* : 40.

⁴⁸ Ibid.: 126-144.

⁴⁹ Dieter Esslinger, "Literatur: Schreibwerkstatt, Doppelpunkt und Felsgraffiti", *Allgemeine Zeitung*, Windhoek, July 8, 2007.

Namibia's various facets and its independence.⁵⁰ This is further proof that whoever deals with African culture becomes aware of their own conception of Africa – looking at Africa is almost like looking at oneself in a mirror.

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