

Review: Larissa Förster, *Postkoloniale Erinnerungslandschaften. Wie Deutsche und Herero in Namibia des Kriegs von 1904 gedenken*, Frankfurt & New York, Campus, 2010.

Based on conversations she conducted herself with Herero interviewees and Namibian settlers of German descent, and further enriched with historical material such as maps or interpretations of textual sources from prose and poems to secondary literature, Larissa Förster delivers a comprehensive and mostly convincing, if methodically and conceptionally sometimes problematic, ethnological contribution to the 'memento-history' of the Ohamakarri/Waterberg battles of 1904 and the ensuing extermination of large numbers of Herero people.

As far as the use of theories and models is concerned, *Postkoloniale Erinnerungslandschaften* operates with an intelligent mix of memory cultural, historical and postcolonial-theoretical assumptions. The study's subdivision into two major parts with a clear memory-specific interest – a 100-page chapter on "Erinnerungsorte" (sites of memory) followed by almost 150 pages on "Erinnerungsrituale" (commemorative rituals) – is mirrored in Förster's invocation of European classics in the arena of cultural memory discourse such as Pierre Nora and his concept of *lieux de mémoire* (pp. 24f.) or Jan and Aleida Assmann (pp. 23ff.). Together with Astrid Erll, these critics share a notion of remembering and commemorating an event from the remote past as a practice collective(ly tinged) by

necessity: "By using the term 'Erinnerung', I generally refer to socially constructed and mediated memories. It was inherent in the choice of the topic that I would not find interview partners who were themselves eye-witnesses of the war (of 1904)" (p. 23)¹. In addition to the key models borrowed from the contemporary discourses of memory culture, Förster demonstrates her broad grasp of the existing concepts and studies by relating to similarly comparative studies (e.g. Chris Healy on the site-specific memory discourses in postcolonial Australia, pp. 25f.) or George Marcus's 'multi-sited ethnography' approach which includes the various spatial, temporal and social layers that need to be observed when probing the Herero interviewees' memory-stories on the one hand, and those of the German-speaking Namibians on the other (p. 22). Another key ingredient in the *mélange* of reference models is historian Shalina Randeria's concept of 'geteilte Geschichte', or *shared* and *divided* – or separate – history (a participle with two opposed meanings: the concept makes clever use of the German 'geteilt' here). Förster transposes Randeria's notion of 'shared/divided history', understood as *the past events themselves* which *eventually* form a common point of reference for various stakeholders from later generations to academic histo-

¹ All translations by Bruno Arich-Gerz. The original text reads: "Mit dem Begriff 'Erinnerung' meine ich dabei immer sozial konstruierte und vermittelte Erinnerung(en). Durch die Wahl des Themas war von vornherein klar, dass ich nicht mehr auf Gesprächspartner stoßen würde die selbst Zeitzeugen des Krieges waren".

rians, to *the belated acts of memorizing* (in the sense of 'presentifying' or actualizing) the occurrences of 1904 passim. "My own field research does not investigate the war or for that matter the shared-cum-divided history, though, but it focuses on the shared-cum-divided *commemoration* of the war. I will introduce both informant groups as two distinct commemoration collectives each of which has developed specific cultural practices of memorizing the war. I understand these as two memory cultures which cannot possibly be regarded in isolation, but have been in continuous contact with each other: a contact which has ever since been characterized by exchange as well as competition and confrontation" (p. 20, emphasis added by BAG)².

In addition to these preliminary and theory-specific considerations, the introductory chapter presents a lucid sketch of the 'historical dimensions' that form the background to the Herero and German-speaking Namibian narratives and recollections. Taking its cue from a 1904 map produced by a German cartographer (p. 35), the chapter discusses both the sites of interest and their denominations in German and

Otjiherero and the politico-administrative developments from the Herero-German conflicts up to the present day. Thus it was only due to the establishment of the *Waterberg Reserve* in 1924 that large numbers of Otjiherero-speaking families and Herero survivors of the attempted genocide returned to the area (p. 50) and contributed to what Jan-Bart Gewald, Gesine Krüger or Wolfgang Werner, in their respective studies of the late 1990s, describe as a general revival of the Herero society. In the 1960s, the western border of that *Reserve* became the demarcation line of the *Hereroland Wes* territory which the racist government assigned to the Herero. After Namibia's independence, that demarcation line was retained as the borderline between commercial land(s), inhabited and exploited by white – and more often than not German-speaking – Namibian farmers, and the communal land areas in the East that are cultivated and peopled by Herero (p. 51). "The borderline between 'white' and 'black' territories southeast of the Waterberg is now more than one hundred years old." (p. 53)³; it separates two distinct regimes of everyday and community life while allowing for constant mutual exchange or the migration of Herero farm workers who earn their living on the 'white' commercial farms and thus acts as *cultural brokers* (p. 63). In a similar way, the author presents herself and her fieldwork approach as characterized by liminality and deliberate, strategic border-crossings between the two

² "Jedoch diene meine Feldforschung nicht der Untersuchung des Krieges selbst, also nicht der geteilten Geschichte, sondern der geteilten Erinnerung an den Krieg. Ich stelle die beiden untersuchten Gruppen dabei als zwei Erinnerungsgemeinschaften vor, die spezielle kulturelle Praktiken des Erinnerns an den Krieg entwickelt haben. Diese Praktiken verstehe ich als zwei Erinnerungskulturen, die jedoch nicht isoliert voneinander bestehen, sondern sich in stetem Kontakt befinden, der von Austausch genauso wie von Konkurrenz und Konfrontation geprägt ist".

³ "Die Grenze zwischen 'weißem' und 'schwarzem' Territorium südöstlich des Waterberg ist heute mehr als hundert Jahre alt".

communities, or milieus, of the Otjiherero-speaking and the German-speaking Namibian interviewees (p. 74). After an initial nine-month period of stationary research (two months on a German-Namibian farm followed by seven months in the communal area in 2000), she began to commute between the two groups, going native all the while and experiencing the effect of the centennial anniversary of the Waterberg/Ohamakari battles on her frame of mind as an ethnographer: "While at the beginning of my field research, the insight into the German community was much broader [than that of the Herero community], this ratio was finally turned upside down during my last stay: My participation at the moving commemoration festivities in August 2004, as they were, effected that I registered the restrained activities of the German Namibians only from afar – and moreover very critically. [...] The initial disequilibrium was reversed at this point, and I could often grasp the discourse of the Otjiherero-speaking Namibians in the commemorative year more profoundly than that on the part of the German-speaking Namibians" (p. 69)⁴. The candid admission of her

⁴ "Schien über weite Strecken der Feldforschung der Einblick in die deutsche Gemeinschaft viel umfassender gegeben, so kehrte sich dies bei meinem letzten Aufenthalt um: Die bewegende Teilnahme an den Gedenkfeiern der Herero im August 2004 ließ mich die zurückhaltenden Aktivitäten der deutschen Namibier nur aus der Ferne – und zudem sehr kritisch – verfolgen. [...] Das anfängliche Ungleichgewicht kehrte sich an dieser Stelle um, und ich konnte den Diskurs hererosprachiger Namibier im Gedenkjahr oft vielschichtiger erfassen als auf Seiten der deutschsprachigen Namibier".

own involvement and, in tendency, one-sidedness with regard to the divided and oftentimes irreconcilably split subject of her research is undoubtedly a noteworthy feature: and a laudable one at that, given the lack of openness which characterizes the conflict-laden, not to say poisoned, atmosphere of academic and amateur discourses on the issue of the German-Herero war and the Waterberg/Ohamakari events. Another frank admission of Förster's cannot quite as easily be interpreted in her favour, though: the interviewer's "deficits in the command of the Otjiherero language" and her irksome explanation that "at a very early stage I rid myself of the ordeals of language learning by engaging an interpreter" (p. 67)⁵. The reliability and validity of the data gathered throughout the interviews – all in all thirty Herero informants (p. 113), along with ten German-speaking Namibian interviewees (p. 78) – will necessarily (have) suffer(ed) from the inaccuracies resulting from these circumstances: a criticism which ill-disposed readers might expand to the author's mode of saving large parts of the elicited data in the form of protocols instead of taped recordings (pp. 79, 114).

Whatever the drawbacks of the decision to rely on translated and not fully recorded sources, the first analytic chapter, "Erinnerungsorte", unfolds a rich pastiche of interview fragments which the author ultimately bundles in a persuasive conclusion as far as the

⁵ "Defizit der mangelnden Sprachbeherrschung des Herero", "ich mich der Mühen des Spracherwerbs bereits sehr früh durch das Engagement eines Übersetzers entledigte".

Herero informants' utterances are concerned. Conspicuously often, the interviewees relate collective memories passed on to them: reason enough, for Förster, to refer to some of the informants, the *omutjiwe womakuruhungi* and *onongo jomakuruhungi*, as "oral historians" (p. 112). All interviewees frequently invoke the practice of reciting *omitandu* (praise songs) such as that of the Ohamakari water hole (p. 126). Located southeast of the Waterberg table mountain and thus at a remarkable distance from the places where many German-speaking interview partners situate the key events of the war, Ohamakari figures as that site where the course of the conflict finally tipped over. By consequence it is endowed with an unusually great importance for the Herero past and present: informants report their predecessors to have retreated to the watering hole as sovereign warriors still capable of deciding what would be a suitable next move (p. 131) before the ensuing skirmishes robbed them of this autonomy, leaving them as refugees whose fate was determined from without (p. 134). Förster demonstrates how the Herero-specific modes and cultural manners of commemorating the war actually transform the landscape, or territory, of the past battles and the places where ancestors died into an (oral or written) text that re-presents these events and deaths today, in the present. In fact, the Herero memory practice turns out to be an ideal example of 'topo-graphy' in the sense of combining a place (topos) with the articulation and writing (graphéin) of war recollections and even genealogies.

"The result was a topography of death and grave locations resembling that of the Herero orature, viz. the *omitandu*"⁶, Förster exemplifies and at the same time shows "how the memory of the *ovirongo vyovita*, the sites of war, was at the same time a memory of the family location and events"(p. 140).⁷

The fusion of sites and (textual) signifiers in the Herero practices of commemorating the war lacks its equivalent on the side of the German-language informants and their modes of remembering these events. Apart from the fact that they focus more on military cemeteries where the deceased combatants lie buried (and less on the actual sites of struggle where they died) and irrespective of the considerable differences that exist with regard to the renown and standing they are ready to attribute to the former enemy – their version continues to stress the struggle of "heroes versus beasts" (pp. 156ff.), the author claims, whereas the Herero narratives emphasize the struggle of "hero versus hero" (pp. 164ff.) – there seems to be no practice, or tradition, of praise songs or similar textual expressions that denote and at the same time demarcate the geographical *topoi* of the graveyards as rhetorical *topoi* of their commemorative representation. Accordingly, the genre (re)produced by German-language white informants or drawn from the additional material

⁶ "Es ergab sich eine Topographie der Todes- und Grabesorte wie sie ähnlich auch in der Oratur von Herero, respektive in den *omitandu* existiert".

⁷ "wie das Gedächtnis der '*ovirongo vyovita*', der Kriegsschauplätze, gleichzeitig ein Gedächtnis der Familienorte und Familienerlebnisse war".

Förster consults (novels such as Gustav Frenssen's colonial classic *Peter Moors Fahrt nach Südwest* or contemporary texts by leading military or missionary protagonists) is rather historiographical in nature: its characteristics seem to be detachment and objective observation, possibly even a (questionable because revisionist) scientific exactitude instead of personal engagement and genealogical involvement. As a consequence, the connection between a site ("Ort"), its past and the memorizing articulation of that site-specific past in the present cannot be upheld as easily as in the case of the Herero interviews. Therefore, Larissa Förster conclusively invokes palpably more non-discursive paradigms than in the case of the Herero interviews to pinpoint the special features of the German descendants' modes of recollecting the past: for instance, she relates to Brigitta Schmidt-Lauber's concept of "begehbare Geschichte", or walk-in history (p. 97). By the same token, those utterances which are of a discursive nature do not seem to be emphatic efforts to bring past events to present awareness, but come across as expressions and sometimes pseudo-scientific 'stances' of lay scholars who insist on their superiority as far as territory expertise is concerned. German-speaking informants "derived from their knowledge of the places a general as well as a specific ability to judge the course of the battle; on this basis, they moreover felt capable of correcting, where necessary, the official colonial reports" (p. 101)⁸ without questioning

⁸ "leiteten aus ihrer Ortskenntnis ein allgemeines wie spezielles Urteilsvermögen hinsichtlich des

the objectives, achievements and general mission of the German *Schutztruppe*.

The distinctions and differences between the two modes of invoking the past are not as clear-cut as they may appear, however, and at first sight seem to reinstate the thesis of an entanglement that also connects the collective memories of white and Herero Namibians in their manners of expression. Hence the author demonstrates at one point that the Herero, too, have a notion of significant sites and occurrences which can be measured in the paradigm of walk-in history. Schmidt-Lauber's concept, Förster argues, "equally refers to the communal area as a landscape of memory for Herero-speaking Namibians" (p. 141)⁹; the author explains this with reference to three other battle locations east of the Waterberg table mountain which demarcate the Herero escape route to Betschuanaland. Interestingly at this point, the line of argumentation drifts away from the original concern of the study and turns into an interview-supported and as yet largely unnoticed (if not unwritten: see for instance Gewalt's *Herero Heroes*)¹⁰ history of the Herero escape.

Kriegsverlaufs ab, aufgrund dessen sie sich zutrauten, auch die offizielle Kolonialberichterstattung in einigen Punkten zu korrigieren".

⁹ "trifft daher auch auf das Kommunalgebiet als Erinnerungslandschaft hererosprachiger Namibier zu".

¹⁰ Jan-Bart Gewalt, *Herero Heroes. A socio-political history of the Herero of Namibia 1890-1923*, Athens OH, University Press 1999: 170-181.

The characteristic style of historical writing can also be observed in the second analytic chapter, “Erinnerungs-rituale”. The emphasis of this chapter lies on rituals understood as collective or social practices rather than on individually recollected and/or recited accounts, memoirs and narratives. Whenever necessary or advisable for the analysis, the author has consulted archives such as that of the *Allgemeine Zeitung* in Windhoek to substantiate her “Rekonstruktion” (p. 187) of these rituals – the result is an insightful and unprecedented, minute history of the largely non-discursive commemoration activities such as anniversary festivities, their political implications and inner-Namibian reception and effects as well as, once again, the interdependences between the two groups (and types) of commentators. Not surprisingly, the commemorative activities of the white German-language group have centred ever since 1905 on locations south of the Waterberg on commercial land such as the cemetery near today’s Bernabé de la Bat rest camp whereas Herero commemorations, and most prominently among them the “Ohamakari Day” celebrations established in the late 1960s, take place in or near Okakarara, i.e. in the border region between commercial and communal land. The history, or story, Förster unfolds is another instance of entanglement and divided/shared reference-taking to the utterly violent, not to say genocidal, past events. Last but not least, this depiction reflects the cultural-political changes and adjustments inside and outside Namibia. As if seen through a magnifying glass, the implications and

underpinnings of the respective ritual events from 1905 to the present day stand representative of more general developments inside and outside Namibia. These culminate in the interdiction, issued by the president of the newly independent country, to continue celebrating the revisionist *Waterberg-Gedenken* (pp. 242ff.) and the simultaneous attempts of the same government to ‘namibify’ the Herero-German war and its commemoration by subsuming it without further differentiation under the long list of independence struggles of southwest African ethnic groups against their white colonial oppressors (pp. 253ff.).

The study ends with a useful synopsis of how the two commemorative modes – that of the Herero and the one proposed and propagated by the German-language Namibians – have developed after the symbolically immensely important festivities on occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the Herero-German war (pp. 349ff.). Clearly, the author’s intention here is to make up for the lag of half a decade that lies between the last of her interviews and the publishing date of the monograph, yet the depiction of the developments in the recent past and the prospect she offers neatly wrap up the study as a whole by insisting that the issue cannot possibly have been settled with the centennial festivities of 2004.

Larissa Förster’s *Postkoloniale Erinnerungslandschaften* has in the meantime received positive reviews – even outspoken praise – from (mainly German) critics. One reviewer points out that the study fills academic gaps regarding other collective memory case studies

apart from that of the attempted German genocide of European Jewry;¹¹ a kind of praise which suggests that not only a trans-ethnic or trans-religious, but explicitly also a trans-national – Namibian and German – matrix can be made applicable to Förster’s mnemo-historical research. The selection of informants as well as the comparably narrow focus on Namibian commemorative practices and discourses alone necessarily put such an assessment into perspective, though. Other critics call Förster’s study a methodically persuasive and content-wise important contribution whose only disadvantage is that it has not been written (or published) in English in order to make it intelligible to as many Namibians as possible¹². The present review can subscribe to the latter indeed, but at the same time wishes to remark that *Postkoloniale Erinnerungslandschaften* contains a few methodical weaknesses and conceptual inaccuracies. The decision to elicit, to process and to use the empirical data – in particular, the interviews conducted with Herero informants – without a profound command of the language in which they have been collected might be considered a negligible point of criticism. Another, in the reviewer’s opinion more

serious one, is the somewhat ambiguous (and perhaps sometimes unconscious) self-positioning in the landscape of academic disciplines. Ethnographical or social anthropological by nature and by qualification, Förster’s study all too often drifts off to the disciplinary realms and territories of (mnemo)historiography proper, and thus mixes – and mixes up – (too) many disciplinary norms, rules and discourses. These remarks should not, however, be misunderstood as a blanket critique of Larissa Förster’s book at large. Going beyond the scope of Gesine Krüger’s, Jan-Bart-Gewald’s and other critics’ approaches, and competently dealing with the blatantly revisionist stances articulated by some of her (German) informants, *Postkoloniale Erinnerungslandschaften* figures as the first all-encompassing approach to the textual testimonies and practices of commemorating the Herero-German war of 1904.

Bruno Arich-Gerz
Cologne

¹¹ Dörte Lerp, “Postkoloniale Erinnerungslandschaften”, <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2010/11/17739.html>

¹² Reinhart Köbler, “Review”, in: *Africa Spektrum* 2010 (2): 129-132; Henning Melber, “Rezension zu: Förster, Larissa: Postkoloniale Erinnerungslandschaften. Wie Deutsche und Herero in Namibia des Kriegs von 1904 gedenke. Frankfurt am Main 2010”, in *H-Soz-u-Kult*, 17.02.2011, <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2011-1-115>.