
Remembering Colonialism and Encountering Refugees: Decolonization in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Go, Went, Gone*

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This article reads the German writer Jenny Erpenbeck's influential novel *Go, Went, Gone* (2015) as a significant contribution to connecting the current refugee problematic to the decolonization discourse in the German and European public sphere. Along with the public discussions about looted art objects during German colonialism in existing German museums and the emerging Humboldt Forum, the novel registers a shift in the culture of collective memory from a singular focus on the holocaust toward a more inclusive and more connected memory of multiple pasts of violence and atrocity, including German colonialism. This multilayered memory reveals the refugee problem not as something external and unexpected but as something that is deeply connected to German and European history. The novel's protagonist Richard, an educated former East German, is the novelist's experiment to articulate the urgent need for decolonization as a possible solution toward the refugee problematic. The novel depicts the reality and imagines a decolonized world in which less discrimination, less exclusion, more hospitality, and more acceptance might be possible.

In the German writer Jenny Erpenbeck's novel *Go, Went, Gone* (2015), the protagonist Richard sits one day on a bench at Oranienplatz, Berlin, and observes the protest of African refugees in front of a huge historic building. When his eyes cast upon the building, he remembers that it must have been built when the German empire still had colonies in Africa:

The word *Kolonialwaren*[laden] was still visible in weathered script on some East Berlin facades as recently as twenty years ago, until the West started renovating everything. *Kolonialwaren*[laden] and WWII bullet holes might adorn the very same storefront. (The dusty shop window of such a building—its tenants evicted to prepare for renovation—might also display a Socialist cardboard sign reading *Obst Gemüse Speisekartoffeln* (*OGS*) to advertise the 'fruit, vegetable, and potatoes' that gave

East German greengrocers their acronym.) You can still find ‘German East Africa’ on the globe in his study.¹ (Erpenbeck 2017a, 36–37; 2017b, 49)

Richard’s laconic memory effectively links together four significant epochs in German history of the long twentieth century: German colonialism and the Wilhelmine empire around 1900, the Second World War, the East German history and its socialist economy, and the present moment with refugees from war zones in Africa. The building monumentally exhibits an architectural memory of historical correlations in Berlin’s changing urban environment. Germany’s colonial past and the war memory are not only chronologically registered in time but spatially fused together in the edifice. Time is also space. History is also geography. The building as a multilayered site of memory does not merely function as a memorial to the past that is no longer pertinent. Rather, something more significant emerges. The signs of ‘German East Africa’ and ‘Colonial Products Store’ suggest that German colonial history is still haunting the present. Richard’s old globe is a material object whose outdatedness indicates the lack of decolonization in the consciousness of Richard and his generation more generally. The store selling colonial goods reveals the economic nature of the German colonial enterprise. Richard, a professor emeritus and a representative of the German educated elites (*Bildungselite*), has not fully come to terms with Germany’s colonial past. The building with the historical memory is now silently witnessing the protest of the African refugees in the German capital. Accompanying the public protest of the African refugees, the faintly visible signs and bullet holes in the weathered façade subtly raise the issue of decolonization and its relevance to the current refugee problematic in Germany and Europe.

Indeed, as I will first show in the ensuing pages, Erpenbeck’s novel is a significant contribution to the conjunction between the refugee problem and the decolonization discourse in contemporary German society, an aspect that has not been discussed much in the numerous media reviews and scholarly articles about Erpenbeck’s influential work. I also argue that the novel, along with the public discussions about the looted art objects during German colonialism in existing German museums and the emerging Humboldt Forum, registers a shift in the culture of collective memory from the singular concentration on the holocaust toward a more inclusive and more connected memory of multiple pasts of violence, warfare and atrocity, including German colonialism. This multilayered memory, in turn, renders the refugee problem not as an external problem that comes unexpectedly to Germany and the EU. Rather, this memory unveils the deep connections between the colonial past and contemporary refugees. In Erpenbeck’s novel, the refugee protesters are first brought to a retirement home (*Altersheim*) after their tents are evacuated. A German retirement home, in which one expects that the older generations with their memories of the holocaust

1. ‘*Kolonialwarenladen* stand in verwitterter Schrift an manchen Fassaden im Osten Berlins noch bis vor zwanzig Jahren zu lesen, bevor der Westen anfang zu renovieren. *Kolonialwarenladen* und die Einschüsse vom Zweiten Weltkrieg auf ein und derselben Fassade, und in der verstaubten Vitrine eines solchen für die Renovierung schon leergezogenen Hauses vielleicht obendrein noch ein sozialistisches Pappschild: *Obst Gemüse Speisekartoffeln (OGS)*. Auf dem Globus, der bei ihm in Arbeitszimmer steht, ist noch *Deutsch-Afrika* verzeichnet.’

and the Second World War will spend their last years, now hosts the colonial past with its new face. The Sri-Lankan-born writer Ambalavaner Sivanandan aptly makes clear the colonial ties to postcolonial migration: ‘We are here because you were there’ (Sivanandan 2008).²

The Urgency of Decolonization

A controversial book of the hour (*Buch der Stunde*), Erpenbeck’s novel was published on 31 August 2015, only four days before German Chancellor Angela Merkel decided to keep the border to Austria open and not to refuse entry to the refugees coming from Hungary (Ludewig 2017a).³ Nearly one million refugees entered Germany in 2015 and have drastically shaped and dominated the political discussion in the country until today. However, *Go, Went, Gone* narrates a story based on an earlier refugee protest, the Oranienplatz movement, from October 2012 to April 2014 in Berlin. Some refugees from Africa primarily protested against the *Residenzpflicht* (mandatory residence), a German law that restricts asylum seekers from traveling outside a certain area defined by local authorities. They also opposed the lengthy asylum process and demanded ‘rights to work and study, free German-language instruction, medical care, and the termination of the Dublin regulation’ (Bhimji 2016, 432). Radically breaking the *Residenzpflicht* by taking a bus tour from Bavaria to Berlin, 550 refugees occupied several places, with Oranienplatz as the main site of their protest. Despite various activities including hunger strikes in front of Brandenburger Tor, the protesters’ tents were finally evacuated by police. Many protesters were denied asylum in Germany. It was a prominent event of civil disobedience. The protest powerfully disrupted the dominant political sovereignty and criticized the refugee policies (Bhimji 2016, 448).⁴

In Erpenbeck’s novel, the protagonist, Richard, a former East German citizen and a professor emeritus of Classics at Humboldt University, proves to be a controversial figure among the novel’s critics. In probably the very first scholarly article on Erpenbeck’s novel, published in early 2016, mere months after the publication of the novel itself, Stefan Hermes criticizes the lack of the refugees’ perspectives and Richard’s Eurocentrism in the context of contemporary German-language African novels (Hermes 2016). Hermes admits that it is a thorny issue to represent the perspective of the colonized and the subaltern, which no German-language

2. I am grateful to Elisa White (UC Davis) for mentioning this phrase and to Priscilla Layne for pointing out the context of the British postcolonial movement in which this phrase emerged.

3. Ludewig’s article stresses the fact that Merkel did not open the border, as has been claimed by her political opponents, in particular the AfD. Merkel followed the Schengen Agreement and ‘simply upheld one of the principles guiding internal EU practices: the free movement of peoples, goods and services.’

4. Fazila Bhimji argues that the refugees’ occupation of urban space in Berlin ‘gained much visibility even though the occupations were short-lived. The question of visibility in public spaces such as squares and public buildings is important, since it is through continued visibility that refugees can make their own political demands and shift the ‘Othering’ present within the larger society.’

literary work has so far excelled or met the criterion of being acceptable in the area of the ‘aesthetics of empathy’ (*Einfühlungsästhetik*). Hermes, citing Dirk Göttsche, encourages contemporary literature to at least try to raise the voice of the Africans and contribute to building a postcolonial consciousness (see Göttsche 2010). Hermes criticizes Erpenbeck’s novel by claiming that it does not make a sufficient effort in representing the perspectives of the refugees whom Erpenbeck has extensively interviewed for her novel project and whom she expressly thanks on the last page of her book. Hermes further renders visible that Richard exhibits his Eurocentrism in giving the refugees Greek, Roman, and Germanic names, and in his own sexist thoughts about the female teacher from Ethiopia.

Agreeing with Hermes’s critique of Richard’s Eurocentrism, Christiane Steckenbiller argues that it has become visible through the figure of Richard that the very notion of *Bildung* is entrenched with Eurocentrism (Steckenbiller 2019). Steckenbiller observes: ‘Richard is highly educated, but *Bildung*, in its traditional design, does not prepare him or the average middle-class German to deal with the current challenges presented by war, death at sea, and mass migration’ (Steckenbiller 2019, 71). Citing Stuart Hall, Steckenbiller describes Richard’s first ignorance of the refugees as ‘Europe’s tendency to look inward . . . a focus that excludes the experiences of colonialism, imperialism, decolonization, and migration’ (Steckenbiller 2019, 72). While Hermes is critical of Richard’s learning the basics of German colonial history, Steckenbiller is more positive about Richard’s re-education. Hermes criticizes Erpenbeck’s exaggeration of Richard’s ignorance when he is incredibly surprised in learning the basics of African colonial history. Thus, Erpenbeck must consider her readers naïve as if they rarely paid attention to the widespread media coverage about German colonialism (Hermes 2016, 184). Although Steckenbiller recognizes the learning effect on Richard who transforms from an ignorant citizen to a political activist and protests together with the refugees later in the novel, she notes that this effect remains rather ‘without any repercussions in the public domain’ (Steckenbiller 2019, 75).

It is indeed difficult to assess the novel’s social impact, especially an educational impact, without conducting a sociological study. At least, the popularity of the novel tells us about its broad reception. Already landing at number 5 on the bestseller list of the German weekly *Der Spiegel* on 28 September 2015 and shortlisted for the prestigious *Deutscher Buchpreis* (German Book Prize) of 2015, *Go, Went, Gone* certainly sustains its impact when its English translation made the longlist of the Man Booker International Prize in 2018. The novel’s impact, both inland and abroad, raises the question of whether German colonial history is too trivial and quotidian for Richard and contemporary readers to learn in the context of the refugee crisis; in other words, whether the memory of colonialism is already so familiar to and so much discussed in the German public sphere that it does not need to be brought into the connection with the African refugees, as Hermes argues.

Building on the insights of Hermes and Steckenbiller about Richard’s Eurocentrism, I would rather turn the critical gesture toward the German public sphere and argue that Erpenbeck’s novel exerts an outcry for the urgent

decolonization in German society as a necessity and prerequisite for an adequate understanding of, and a possible solution to, the refugee problem. I propose that we read Erpenbeck's novel not merely from a critical perspective looking for Orientalist and imperialist misrepresentations but also with an awareness of the colonial past in order to see what could be done in our current time and in the future toward decolonization. Richard may reveal Erpenbeck's lack of awareness to show the African refugees' perspectives. Yet Richard may not function as much as a model citizen for the novel's readers to imitate but rather a representative of educated Germans in urgent need of decolonizing their racist and colonialist mindsets.

Indeed, the recent rising effort in German postcolonial memory studies provides the intellectual context for the novel's quest for decolonization (see more details in Dirk *et al.* 2017, 114–121). For example, Jürgen Zimmerer's (2013) comprehensive book *Kein Platz an der Sonne. Erinnerungsorte der deutschen Kolonialgeschichte* addresses the German colonial amnesia and maps out the places, policies, institutions, actors, and memorials associated with German colonial history to demonstrate and critique the continuity of racism and colonial thinking from the late nineteenth century to the present. More specifically, Dirk Göttsche (2017) discusses the typologies of remembering German and European colonialism in Africa in German-language literature in his book *Remembering Africa: The Rediscovery of Colonialism in Contemporary German Literature*. Göttsche points out an *Afrika-Boom* around 2000. German, Austrian, and Swiss writers such as Rolf Ackermann, Hans Christoph Buch, Alex Capus, Christof Hamann, Christian Kracht, Patricia Mennen, Thomas Stangl, Thomas von Steinaecker, Uwe Timm, Ilija Trojanow, Urs Widmer and Karen Winter have all used colonialism, postcolonial theory, interculturality, and globalization as the subject matters of their works (Göttsche 2017, 297–298). These literary works mainly focus on two former colonies: Namibia and the former German East Africa (including areas in today's Burundi, Rwanda, and Tanzania). In some of these novels, the conjuncture between German colonial history and the memory of the holocaust is addressed (Göttsche 2017, 117, 308). Erpenbeck's novel is thus not the start of this stream of memorization and decolonization. Yet it is a significant enrichment to this effort by adding the refugee and migration problematic to the agenda. The triangulation of colonial history, refugee crisis, and memory studies is the novel's unique contribution.⁵

Richard's change could be read as a utopian imagination of the author toward the potential for a better future, a literary experiment with a good and reformable citizen of the current republic of Germany. Richard presents Erpenbeck's imagination of how a German citizen of an older generation could change, especially one of the former East Germans, many of whom have supported populist politics and blamed the refugees and Islam for security and violence problems. It is not an apology for

5. Dirk Göttsche points out that contemporary German-language literature on immigrants and cultural hybridity has rarely to do with German colonial history. Such literary works could not really be called 'postcolonial', which is different in Britain and France, because the migration from former German colonies to contemporary Germany is relatively insignificant (Göttsche 2017, p. 324).

Richard's shortcomings; rather it shows how a German citizen with such colonialist flaws could become decolonized and help the refugees with more historical conscience and ethical responsibility. The option of decolonization as a meaningful angle to understand the refugee crisis with more historical depth is, I argue, a crucial message in Erpenbeck's novel that has not been sufficiently addressed.

Learning the Memory of Colonialism: Relearning the Present of Entanglement

At the beginning of the novel, the professor emeritus, well versed in Dostoyevsky, Proust and Seneca, knows astonishingly little about the real world in which he lives. 'We become visible' is one of the slogans that the refugee protesters use (Erpenbeck 2017b, 23). Yet Richard at first does not see the refugees' protest when he is running errands near Oranienplatz. When he learns about the protest on TV, he becomes ashamed of his ignorance. Through a life-writing project, Richard interviews the refugees and gradually develops friendships with them. More importantly, Richard starts to learn about colonial history in Africa. As the outdated globe with 'German East Africa' in Richard's study shows, Richard cared and knew little about German colonial history in Africa before. One day, Richard reads about the easy appropriation of lands in the southwest coast of Africa by the German trader Adolf Lüderitz. Bismarck personally ordered the military protection of the German colony because the British imitated Lüderitz and occupied a few harbours (Erpenbeck 2017b, 53).⁶ Richard shakes his head about the colonial and competitive behaviour of the German empire. He also realizes that the borders in Africa were arbitrarily drawn by European colonizers. 'For the first time in his life, the thought occurs to him that the borders drawn by Europeans may have no relevance at all for Africans. Recently, opening the atlas to look up the capital cities, he was struck by all the perfectly straight lines, but only now does he grasp the arbitrariness made visible by such lines' (Erpenbeck 2017a, 51; 2017b, 66).⁷ Richard's amazement not only reveals his ignorance of colonial history but also points toward his decolonization.

Let's pause here for a moment and reflect that it is by no means a matter of course that Richard morally disapproves Lüderitz's unfair appropriation of land and the

6. 'Herr von Lüderitz hatte sich nach seinem ersten Bankrott in Mexiko günstig verheiratet, sich sodann mit dem Sohn eines Mannes, der an der Westküste Afrikas missionierte, ins Benehmen gesetzt und auf dessen Hinweise hin zwei Stücke Land gekauft. Eines zu 100 Pfund in Gold und 200 Gewehren, das zweite zu 500 Pfund und 60 Gewehren. Im Quadrat gerechnet die deutschen Meilen, die länger sind als die englischen, nach denen der eingeborene Häuptling maß. Schön wäre es doch, einen Gürtel zu schaffen bis hinüber zum Indischen Ozean. Das Deutsche Reich will den Gartenzaun dessen von Lüderitz zunächst nicht schützen, erst als die Briten, weil sie sehen, dass es so einfach geht, auch ein paar Häfen besetzen, schickt Bismarck zwei schlachttaugliche Schiffe. Von da an heißen die Ländereien des Kaufmanns Lüderitz Kolonie und werden von Staats wegen verteidigt.'

7. 'Zum ersten Mal kommt ihm der Gedanke, dass die von den Europäern gezogenen Grenzen die Afrikaner eigentlich gar nichts angehen. Kürzlich hat er, als er die Hauptstädte gesucht hat, wieder die schnurgeraden Linien im Atlas gesehen, aber erst jetzt wird ihm klar, welche Willkür da sichtbar wird an so einer Linie.'

German military protection against British colonialism. It is also not necessary for Richard to recognize the arbitrariness of the straight borders and the arrogance of the European colonizers imposed on Africa. In fact, Richard could choose to react differently, such as being proud of such ‘achievements’ or justifying the colonial deeds with racial thinking. The configuration of Richard as a liberal figure is Erpenbeck’s experiment of a good conscience project that calls for more historical awareness and the sense of justice that could lead to a greater degree of decolonization in Germany and Europe.

Richard’s research does not remain in the past. It takes him to the present neo-colonialism in Africa. He tells his friends about a French state company, Areva, which holds a monopoly over the uranium mines in the Republic of Niger in Africa. Areva disposes of nuclear waste into the area where the local Tuareg people live and pasture their camels. While electricity flows to France and Germany, the drinking water in Niger is contaminated, and the camels and the Tuareg keep getting cancer without knowing why. Richard’s friend Thomas adds that the annual profit of Areva is ten times higher than the total revenues of the Republic of Niger (Erpenbeck 2017a, 146; 2017b, 182). Africa is once again darkly connected to Germany and France. The tragic fate of African refugees is now deeply connected to European neocolonial exploitation. The refugees are not complete outsiders or strangers to Europe. Rather they are connected to Europe through historical and economic exploitations.

Richard, again, functions as Erpenbeck’s experiment to imagine a way of compensation. Later in the novel, Richard buys a piece of land in Ghana to help the family of his refugee friend Karon. Richard’s purchase of land differs from Lüderitz’s colonial possession and shows a reconciliatory gesture toward the historical wound of colonialism. ‘Say, Richard asks Karon, how large would a property in Ghana have to be for your family to feed themselves? Karon thinks for a moment and says: About one-third the size of Oranienplatz. And how much would that cost? Karon thinks some more and says: I think between two and three thousand euros’ (Erpenbeck 2017a, 204–205; 2017b, 253).⁸ Richard remembers that he once wanted to buy a surfboard for €1495, or a robotic vacuum cleaner for €799, or a projector for €1167 to watch videos with friends. A similar amount of money could enable a family to support itself on a sizeable piece of land, whereas, in Germany, it is merely good for some things that could be easily forgone. The contrast between the basic needs in Ghana and the luxury in Germany makes Richard decide to buy land in Ghana for Karon’s family.

After a complicated and strenuous process, the purchase is successful. Karon’s mother calls Richard and speaks the only sentence she can in English: ‘How are you?’ Karon sends a text message to Richard the next morning: ‘Hi richard. i just want to see how are you doing, richard. I don’t no how to thanks you. only God

8. ‘Sag einmal, sagt Richard Karon, wie groß müsste ein Grundstück in Ghana sein, von dem sich deine Familie dort selbständig ernähren könnte? Karon überlegte einen Moment und sagt dann: Ein Drittel vom Oranienplatz etwa. Und wieviel würde das kosten? Karon überlegt wieder und sagt: ich denke, zwischen 2000 und 3000 Euro.’

no my heart but anyway wat I can say is may God protect you. always Good morning. karon' (Erpenbeck 2017b, 282). The simple sentence of Karon's mother and the text message full of grammatical mistakes are heartfelt and touching. Karon's invocation of a deity indicates his deep feelings, even though the form of writing in Karon's message breaks with the linguistic convention in formal English. The capitalization of 'God' and 'Good' and the lowercase letters of the names 'richard' and 'karon' may indicate that moral and metaphysical principles are larger than individual human beings. The conflation of 'know' with 'no' interestingly reveals the failure of logos or the inability of knowledge to express human emotion. This small pun wittily discloses that Karon's gratefulness is not expressed through the faculty of his mind, but through his heart. The condemnable land appropriation by Lüderitz is now turned into an altruistic act of humanitarian aid, something good and beneficial for the locals in Africa. At the same time, Richard is not completely free of prejudices toward Africa. When he learns that the king of Ghana approves his purchase of land for Karon's family, Richard imagines the king as a chief with a spear in his hand and rattling foot laces or, if he is really powerful, he must wear a shirt of the soccer league of Barcelona (Erpenbeck 2017b, 278). Richard's somewhat contemptuous and ridiculing imagination betrays his romanticizing and exoticizing Eurocentrism toward Africa. It shows that Richard's mind cannot be immediately and completely decolonized despite his good conscience. Decolonization, another *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) like denazification, is a long-term project. As Elizabeth Buettner (2010, 91) observes: 'Colonial mind-sets remained powerful within ex-colonizing nations well beyond formal transfers of power overseas. As it emerged, decolonizing the colonizer proved an extremely protracted process.' Richard's empathy is not enough for decolonization as it needs a new culture of inclusive memory.

Beyond Empathy and Toward a New Culture of Memory

During the peaceful advent season, Richard listens to the refugee Raschid talking about his traumatic experience over the Mediterranean Sea: 'I can't swim, but somehow I caught a cable. Sometimes I was above the water, sometimes below. Under the water I saw all the corpses Approximately 550 out of the 800 people drowned' (Erpenbeck 2017a, 193; 2017b, 240).⁹ The contrast between the quiet holiday season and the traumatic turbulence instils sorrow and compassion in the reader. Richard relates their traumatic experiences to those of his parents during the Second World War. Richard's mother always narrates her exile from Silesia at the end of the war, when Richard, then an infant, could have been separated from her if a Russian soldier had not handed him to her in a leaving train. His mother tells this story so often that Richard almost considers this memory his own (Erpenbeck 2017b, 25). Richard's father is a Nazi soldier at the front in Norway and Russia. Each time

9. 'Ich kann nicht schwimmen, aber ich habe irgendwie ein Kabel zu fassen bekommen. Manchmal war ich über, manchmal unter Wasser. Unter Wasser habe ich all die Leichen gesehen Ungefähr 550 von den 800 Leuten sind ertrunken.'

Richard asks him about the war, he is always silent (Erpenbeck 2017b, 25–26). Relating to the war experiences in his family, Richard wonders about the right-wing hostility toward the refugees because, ‘not so long ago . . . this story of going abroad to find one’s fortune was a German one’ (Erpenbeck 2017a 179; 2017b, 222).¹⁰ He asks himself: ‘But what war have people now just been through?’ Erpenbeck 2017a 167; 2017b, 207).¹¹ Furthermore, the homelessness of the refugees is comparable to the experience of numerous East Germans who have become homeless after the downfall of the GDR and still struggle to arrive in the new social reality in West Germany even a quarter century after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Ludewig 2017b, 270). Brangwen Stone (2017) argues that Erpenbeck’s novel aims to evoke empathy among its readership. Stone applies Marianne Hirsch’s (2012) notion of post-memory, which is not memory itself but contains the power of the actual memory, to interpret Richard’s remembering the war as his parents’ traumatic experience.

Yet the memory of the holocaust, the war, and the downfall of the GDR does not suffice to motivate Richard to participate in the refugees’ protest, offer his house as their residence, and provide them with financial help. I argue that it is also Richard’s learning of the colonial history that enables him to see the refugees in a different light and urges him toward action. In the debate about the refugee crisis, a strong pro-refugee argument is often made about the similarities between the contemporary refugees and the German–Jewish and German–German experience of refuge and exile. This is also the argument of the German chancellor Angela Merkel, a former East German like Richard. Yet Merkel’s policy, which contains a strong empathy, has met severe critique and distrust in the German society. Her slogan ‘Wir schaffen das’ (we can do it or we can manage this), referring to a solution of the refugee problematic, is often countered with irony and bitterness that ‘wir schaffen das nicht’ (we can’t manage this).

If the parallel memory of the holocaust is too abstract to convince European citizens of their responsibilities for the refugees, then the colonial past and neocolonial present could coerce them to see the entanglements between the past and present and the necessity to change the current European refugee policies. Erpenbeck’s novel calls for a *multidirectional memory*, a notion coined by Michael Rothberg. Understanding memory as ‘the past made present’, Rothberg contends that similar memories of Nazi and colonial atrocities should become co-commemoration instead of being kept separate and competing with each other over the degree of victimization (Rothberg 2009, 3). Rothberg challenges a purified and straight equation between collective memory and group identity that excludes ‘elements of alterity and forms of commonality with others’ (Rothberg 2009, 5). He proposes that, ‘when the productive, intercultural dynamic of multidirectional memory is explicitly claimed, . . . it has the potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice’ (Rothberg 2009, 5). Rothberg posits that collective memories are resources

10. ‘Es ist noch gar nicht so lange her, denkt Richard, da war die Geschichte der Auswanderung und der Suche nach Glück eine deutsche Geschichte.’

11. ‘Aber welchen Krieg hatten die Menschen jetzt hinter sich?’

to be shared for creative and empathetic transcultural and transethnic understanding and borrowing beyond group identity.¹² In Rothberg's account, the holocaust and the colonial memory of violence and atrocity are not merely parallel experiences of separate sufferings, but, rather, they are deeply connected to each other. Rothberg discovers

not only that memory of the holocaust has served as a vehicle through which other histories of suffering have been articulated, but also something even more surprising: the emergence of holocaust memory itself was from the start inflected by histories that at first glance might seem to have little to do with it. (Rothberg 2011)

Hence, Rothberg proposes 'a more inclusive renarration of the history of memory and a harnessing of the legacies of violence in the interests of a more egalitarian future' (Rothberg 2009, 21). Building on his concept of multidirectional memory, Rothberg develops the notion of the implicated subject that moves beyond the perpetrators, victims, and bystanders and further demands responsibilities of us all, not only for the past colonial and anti-Semitic atrocities but also for the present inequality and injustice. We are somehow all beneficiaries of inequality and injustice and are implicated subjects in the ever increasingly interconnected world (Rothberg 2019).

While Richard qualifies to be such an implicated subject as an indirect beneficiary of colonialism, the building with multiple historical signs, which I discussed at the beginning, is a spatial 'renarration' of the history of memory. Moreover, it relates the multidirectional memory to the contemporary refugees and makes the past present and the present past. The contemporary refugee problem in Europe not only shows the inflections of one memory by another but it also challenges the politics of remembering as an introverted vision toward the past. In the title of the novel, the conjugation of the German verb 'gehen' makes clear that we go from the present tense to the past tense then to the present perfect: *gehen, ging, gegangen*. Its multiple repetition in the narrative of the novel forces us to see the various pasts moving from its present infinitive normality. If multidirectional memory is more concerned with the action of remembering, a verb with different inflections ranging from 'remembered', 'have remembered', 'to be remembered' to 'remembering', then the refugee problematic is a noun that is inscribed in a different context with a different historical declension from a 'colonized in Africa' to a 'refugee from Africa'. It is so true that 'without changing the way we think about the past it will be difficult to imagine an alternative future' (Rothberg 2011, 541).

Richard's acquisition of multidirectional memory leads him to compare colonialism, Nazi Germany, and European refugee policy. Richard remembers that a historian once called the effects of colonialism 'bureaucratic geometry' (*bürokratische Geometrie*):

The colonized are smothered in bureaucracy, which is a pretty clever way to keep them from taking political action. Or was it just a matter of protecting the good Germans from the bad Germans, sparing the Land of Poets the indignity of being

12. Rothberg also points to the study of Alison Landsberg (2004) about memory's transformation and adaptation in different contexts with different groups of people.

dubbed the Land of Killers once more? ... So had the Berlin Senate acted to preserve the Africans' safety or its own? In the latter case, the action that had been taken—installing the refugees in better quarters—was just a mask. And what lay behind it? What actual action lay behind this action you could see? Who was putting on a show for whom? ... The Africans probably had no idea who Hitler was, but even so: only if they survived Germany now would Hitler truly have lost the war. (Erpenbeck 2017a, 49–50; 2017b, 64)¹³

The refugee problematic is directly connected to both the memory of colonialism and the holocaust. Berlin Senate's refugee politics is first compared to the colonial bureaucracy in its hypocritical rhetoric and unfair treatment of the colonized. Then, with scathing irony, the refugee policy is compared to the state racism of the Nazi period. The 'land of poets', a propaganda slogan of the Nazis, is equalized with the land of killers, an indictment of the holocaust. The decision to re-house the refugees from the city centre to a remote building at the periphery of Berlin and then further to a building in the woods discloses the political intention to marginalize the refugee problem and gradually render it to oblivion. The narrator's harsh critique of the masquerade of this political action suggests that the Nazi past is still alive in this action. The powerful statement that only if the refugees received an appropriate treatment, then Hitler would 'have truly lost the war' demands further denazification through decolonization.

After Richard accompanies Ithemba to an immigration attorney's office and learns about the complicated procedures and definitions of asylum law, he ironically comments that the refugees survived the dangerous trip over the Mediterranean Sea, but they are now drowned in the rivers and oceans of German bureaucracy (Erpenbeck 2017b, 310). Bureaucracy is no longer a geometry of lines and dots but has become an ocean, a dangerous medium devouring human lives. In the novel, the law does not allow the refugee protesters to stay together. The narrator comments: 'Today for dinner the law will devour hand, knee, nose, mouth, feet, eyes, brain, ribs, heart, or teeth' (Erpenbeck 2017a, 184; 2017b, 228).¹⁴ As Alexandra Ludewig (2017a) points out, Erpenbeck's novel critically demonstrates the failures and inefficiencies of EU laws and policies concerning border and migration. The refugees, Ludewig argues, could change 'the strong, stable, conservative, white (and still largely male-dominated) middle-class' in Germany 'for the better by re-activating their dormant yet still strong humanitarian values over self-interest and hedonism' (Ludewig 2017a, 32, 33).

13. 'Die Kolonisierten wurden durch Bürokratie erstickt. Gar nicht der ungeschickteste Weg, sie am politischen Handeln zu hindern. Oder wurden hier nur die guten Deutschen vor den bösen Deutschen beschützt? Das *Volk der Dichter* beschützt vor der Gefahr, noch einmal das *Volk der Mörder* zu heißen? ... Hatte der Senat also die Afrikaner in Sicherheit gebracht oder vielmehr sich selbst? Im letzten Fall wäre das, was getan wurde—die wirkliche Unterbringung der Flüchtlinge in einem besseren Quartier—also nur eine Maske. Und was dann dahinter? Welches eigentliche Handeln hinter dem, was man sah? Wer spielte hier wem was vor? ... Die Afrikaner wussten bestimmt überhaupt nicht, wer Hitler war, aber dennoch: Nur wenn sie Deutschland jetzt überlebt, hatte Hitler den Krieg wirklich verloren.'

14. 'Das Gesetz frisst heute zum Abendbrot Hand, Knie, Nase, Mund, Füße, Augen, Gehirn, Rippen, Herz oder Zähne. Egal.'

Comparing the *Zong* tragedy in the transatlantic slave trade in the eighteenth century and the contemporary drowning of refugees in the Mediterranean Sea, Yogita Goyal argues that ‘while the logic of analogy might suggest a simple and ethically clear framing of the current plight of the refugees, it conjures up a far more complicated past and present, a hegemonic global north and a perpetually marginalized global south’ (Goyal 2017, 644). Hence Goyal proposes that we need ‘new frames, concepts, vocabularies, and imaginaries’ or a ‘new comparative literacy across past and present, then and now’ (Goyal 2017, 644). Recounting the multidirectional memories of the holocaust and the colonial history with their relations to the refugees, Erpenbeck’s novel articulates its unveiled critique of the European legality and politics of asylum as its political message and its future-oriented civil disobedience. The configuration of the citizen of Richard, along with his possible decolonization, is Erpenbeck’s experiment with a comparative literacy across memories, temporalities, cultures, and borders to create a more inclusive culture of memory in German public sphere. Indeed, Erpenbeck’s novel emerges in a larger context of a changing culture of memory in Germany.

Thomas Thiemeyer delineates a growing wave of decolonial activities in the German society. Social groups or websites, including *Kolonialismus im Kasten?*, Berlin Postkolonial, Freiburg-postkolonial.de, Decolonize-mitte.de, NoHumboldt21, and Decolonization in Action, have been founded in recent years to raise the public awareness about German colonial history and its negative impact. ‘For Germany, this means that topics are suddenly being placed on the national agenda that until recently were comfortably ignored’ (Thiemeyer 2019, 979). In particular, Thiemeyer discusses the heated debate about Germany’s prestigious museum project, Humboldt Forum in the centre of Berlin, and its intention to exhibit objects from the collection of Berlin’s Ethnologisches Museum, which were unfairly acquired or looted through colonialism, like Lüderitz’s land. Thiemeyer observes that ‘the call for comprehensive provenance research, which has barely been applied to Berlin’s ethnological collections until recently, has thrown the entire Humboldt Forum project into crisis’ (Thiemeyer 2019, 975). For Thiemeyer, this wave of decolonialization in the German public sphere ‘became possible only after the perspective on the Holocaust changed’ (Thiemeyer 2019, 980). The Humboldt Forum provides a place at which new views of history are being negotiated and practised. As Thiemeyer reports, not only the Humboldt Forum but also other ethnological museums in Leipzig, Bremen, and Stuttgart have to examine their collections and return looted objects. Thiemeyer cites a report by the French art historian Bénédicte Savoy and the Senegalese publicist Felwine Sarr, who have been commissioned by the French president to offer guidelines about handling colonial museum objects: ‘The return of collections is merely the first and highly symbolic act of a ‘new relational ethic’: ‘Compensation here consists in offering to repair the relation’ (Thiemeyer 2019, 986). Thiemeyer comments that the return of the objects gestures toward better communications, more fair interactions, less prejudices, and less economic exploitations. Thiemeyer reports that German ministers of state for culture have promptly reacted to the French report, and ‘Germany is thus the first country in Europe to commit itself to return colonial objects (how many remains to be seen)’ (Thiemeyer 2019, 987).

Indeed, another contemporary German writer, Bernhard Jaumann, in his novel *Der lange Schatten* (2015, *The Long Shadow*) tells the story of the return of Herero- and Nama-skulls to Namibia for burial in 2011, which were stored in the museum of Berlin's University School of Medicine, Charité. Approximately 300 skulls were sent to Germany for experimentation during the Namibian genocide starting in 1904. From this perspective, in Erpenbeck's novel, Richard's purchase of land in Ghana resembles the act of returning colonial objects to Africa. Erpenbeck's novel is an attempt at a new relational ethics not only to the colonial past but also to the refugees currently in Germany. Thiemeyer concludes that 'a cosmopolitan culture of remembrance is taking place of a genealogical culture of remembrance' because it moves beyond the national and ethnic unity and incorporates more cultural and religious diversity (Thiemeyer 2019, 989). 'Its goal is not to replace the Holocaust as an important site of memory but rather to support the culture of remembrance that developed after Auschwitz with additional, complex memories and to look at the Nazi era from a new perspective' (Thiemeyer 2019, 989). Erpenbeck's novel emerges in the same context Thiemeyer describes. If 'the self- and world image of German society are contested' within the walls of the museums, then the refugee problematic is the mirror the novel holds up to reflect and haunt the spectres of Germany's Nazi past and colonialism.

Yet the novel does not seem to support Thiemeyer's apotheosis of positively calling the new culture of memory cosmopolitan. Indeed, the incorporation of colonial past shows more responsibility and courage toward the past, but this new culture of memory is not necessarily more cosmopolitan, particularly when we consider the rising power of the populist party AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) in the German parliament. The novel rather joins the force of decolonization and cries for a more inclusive culture of memory and a more accepting culture of diversity in Germany. Similarly, in the European context, the Italian writer Francesca Melandri's novel *Sangue giusto* (2017, *Right Blood*) narrates the story of an unexpected visit of a young African refugee to Ilaria, an Italian woman in Rome. While Ilaria is astonished to hear that he is her nephew, the truth turns out that the father of Ilaria has worked during Italian colonialism in Ethiopia and has fathered her half-brother, the young African's father. Never recognizing his eldest son in Africa, the racist signor Profeti has lived a lifelong lie that egoistically blinds the brutal Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–1937) and its relation to the current refugees. Like Erpenbeck, Melandri also wrestles with the precarious connection between decolonization and contemporary refugees.

Concluding Remarks

Interestingly, Erpenbeck's novel is written in the present tense. At the end of the novel, the writer expresses her gratitude to the refugees she has interviewed. The book also contains the information of a bank account for readers to donate for the refugees. These features are characteristic of a non-fictional report that defies

the past tense of a novel. Yet the decolonizing imagination of Richard's transformation necessitates the form of fiction. Erpenbeck's realistic narrative style bears a certain utopianism. As I have argued, Erpenbeck imagines a new ethics of relations between Germans and the refugees; and the novel imagines the possible decolonization of an educated liberal German citizen (see Lühmann 2015).¹⁵ *Go, Went, Gone*, along with other decolonizing efforts, not only demands more ethical equality and legal and moral justice but also dreams a utopian dream that makes no peace with what is given. According to Ernst Bloch, this is also a utopian surplus, something that

is passed through time and across worlds . . . not merely the ideas themselves as ideas or tradition, but something excessive, something in excess of their mode of production, their imperfect realization, and their incompletion in their own time or later in the time we encounter or receive them. This surplus is 'concrete': it represents the actual better dreams and values held by people and it also produces value. (Gordon 2018, 284)

The figure of Richard first represents an imperfect realization that carries the burden of colonial and Nazi memory; yet he also represents the surplus of the imperfection to become someone ethically and politically more satisfying. The novel's utopian surplus is the quest for decolonization constantly reminding us of the responsibilities toward past and present violence and inequality, and it relentlessly demands for justice and retribution.

Erpenbeck's novel retells the reality and imagines a better world in which less discrimination, less exclusion, more hospitality, and more acceptance might be possible. Hence Richard is neither everyone, because he moves beyond the reality, nor nobody, because he bears the memory of a former East German born during the Second World War. He is realistic and he is also utopian. Similarly, the building with multilayered signs does not exist in reality. It is a literary creation that bears the crucial message of remembering the colonial past and the holocaust to encounter the present refugees. Brushing against the grain of the Dublin Regulation, Erpenbeck's novel carries the utopian surplus of decolonization dreamed in the configuration of Richard and his African refugee friends. Of course, fiction can't change politics overnight. Yet the utopian surplus bears the potential of becoming possible and transgressing the boundaries between margin and centre, between Richard and the refugees, between forgetting and remembering.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Robert Irwin, Kerstin Barndt, Michael Rothberg, Anne Fleig, H el ene B. Ducros, and Giovanni Peri for comments, ideas, and encouragement.

15. Hannah L uhmann, the journalist writing for the daily *Die Welt*, also comments that Erpenbeck's novel is nourished by its total antirealism and that the figure of Richard is neither everyone nor nobody (*kein Jedermann und kein Niemand*). He is created as a lively shadow of an elderly East German man. L uhmann contends that the book is a poetic, melancholic, and suspenseful utopia.

An earlier version of some of the ideas in this article appeared online in my part of ‘A Conversation about Asylum Seekers in Germany and Jenny Erpenbeck’s Novel *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015) [*Go, Went, Gone* (2017)]’ (*EuropeNow* 30 (October 2019), www.europenowjournal.org/2019/10/28/a-conversation-about-asylum-seekers-in-germany-and-jenny-erpenbecks-novel-gehen-ging-gegangen-2015-go-went-gone-2017/).

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