

# German Literary Responses to the 'Migrant Crisis'

## Space and the Colonial Past in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015) and Bodo Kirchhoff's *Widerfahrnis* (2016)

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Jenny Erpenbeck's novel *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015) and Bodo Kirchhoff's novella *Widerfahrnis* (2016) were both published at the height of the so-called European 'migrant crisis' (de Genova, 2017, p. 2), at a time when media coverage was dominated by stories of rising death rates in the Aegean and Mediterranean and the arrival of thousands of people on the shores of Europe and, above all, in Germany. But as postcolonial scholars Koen Leurs and Sandra Ponzanesi (2018) point out, what was being labelled a 'crisis' in the summer of 2015 had already been a normal state of affairs for some time. For years large numbers of migrants had been living outside of their countries of origin, often in substandard refugee camps in Jordan, Turkey, Pakistan, and Lebanon ('Ten countries', 2016). In 2015, as increasingly large numbers of people started to make the perilous journey west and north, Western media and members of the European public started employing a 'desensitizing and rather cynical rhetoric' (de Genova, 2017, p. 2). Instead of acknowledging that this was 'a crisis experienced by individual human beings of all ages and walks of life who [were] forced to flee their homes' only to be met 'with hostility, criticism, and rejection upon arriving', the situation came to be characterized as a 'crisis' for Europe (Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2018, p. 7).

It is this theme – the arrival of non-European Others and their reception, which in Germany ranged from a 'culture of welcome/hospitality' (Karakayalı, 2019, p. 191) to xenophobia and racism, as well as more ambiguous responses – that was taken up by German authors Jenny Erpenbeck and Bodo Kirchhoff.<sup>1</sup> Their prompt liter-

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1 In Germany, the positive attitude towards refugees was labelled *Willkommenskultur*, a 'culture of welcome' or 'hospitality', which, according to sociologist Serhat Karakayalı, was evident as early as 2011 and reached a peak in 2015. That year thousands of citizens donated food and clothing, joined volunteer organizations and demonstrations, accompanied refugees to appointments, helped out with bills, translated forms, and gave German lessons.

ary responses to the ‘long summer of migration’ (Bock and Macdonald, 2019, p. 3) received significant attention from critics: Erpenbeck was shortlisted for the prestigious German Book Prize in 2015, while Kirchhoff took home the award in 2016, which some critics called a ‘mistake’ (Cordsen, 2016, n.p.). Both literary texts received mixed reviews. Erpenbeck’s novel was criticized for its oversimplification of the topic and its characters, particularly the way in which the individual stories of refugee characters seem to blend into one other (Biller, 2015; Magenau, 2015). On the other hand, it was applauded for its critique of German refugee policies and bureaucracies and the ‘political ignorance and endemic chauvinism’ with which German politicians and bureaucrats responded to forced migration (Magenau, 2015). Kirchhoff’s novella, in turn, was criticized for its ‘paternalistic’ approach to the topic of migration and its ‘antiquated machismo’ (Cordsen, 2016) but was admired in other quarters for attending to the pressing political questions of the day (Krekeler, 2016; Platthaus, 2016).

Erpenbeck and Kirchhoff touch upon another issue that has received less literary critical scrutiny. In the wake of the events of 2015, some scholars have begun to theorize migrant mobilities and border crossings in terms of appropriating space (de Genova et al., 2018; de Genova, 2017; Garelli and Tazzioli, 2017). Human geographer Nicholas de Genova (2017), for instance, asserts that migrants and refugees, in leaving their home countries, are ‘exercising their elementary freedom of movement, thereby appropriating mobility, transgressing the border regime and thus making spatial claims’ (p. 17). He understands contemporary forms of migration management – including border policing and asylum policies enforced by the European Union – as responses to such spatial claims, responses that impose geographical restrictions on the right of migrants to move and settle within the EU. As will be explored in this essay, a spatial reading of migration provides a fruitful means to consider Erpenbeck’s novel and Kirchhoff’s novella afresh. Both works carefully attend to geography – the urban topography of Berlin in Erpenbeck, and roads, borders, the city of Catania, Sicily, and the Mediterranean Sea in Kirchhoff. At the same time, the texts thematize the spatial practices associated with migration and the everyday navigation of the city. These practices – walking, pausing, or temporarily residing in particular places – might be considered examples of ordinary people occupying or asserting claims over space. State and social responses to migration – the militarization and policing of borders and other spaces and the distribution of migrants within a city or across the European Union – emerge, in contrast, as forms of spatial control.

As will be shown here, *Gehen, ging, gegangen* and *Widerfahrnis* thematize competition over space, but they also treat colonial history, a topic which has not featured prominently in critical assessments of these two works. Early in Erpenbeck’s novel, Richard, the German white male protagonist, stumbles on the concept of ‘bureaucratic geometry’ while reading about the consequences of German colonialism (p.

49).<sup>2</sup> He was prompted to pick up a volume on the subject by an interaction he had with a heterogeneous group of African asylum seekers. This book on the imposition of colonial order provides Richard with a much-needed vocabulary for making sense of what he observes around him. Specifically, it gives him tools for reflecting on current refugee policies and what he comes to think of as hegemonic spatial practices, or the ways in which power is wielded through controlling access to and use of space. Richard's new awareness about the organization and control of space – in this case Berlin – allows the reader, by extension, to understand spatial management as a direct continuation of colonialist thought and practice. In Kirchhoff's novella, the allusions to colonial history are not immediately obvious. Like *Gehen, ging, gegangen*, *Widerfahrnis* draws attention to the ways in which space – here the city of Catania and the Mediterranean border zone – is navigated, organized, and controlled. There are no direct references to colonial history, but the colonial past emerges in the form of repressed fears and anxieties that are triggered by the white male protagonist's encounter with a young female refugee. Postcolonial critics have recently argued that refugees and migrants 'whose mobilities may be productively understood to appropriate the space of Europe ... most commonly originate from places across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia that were formerly the outright or de facto colonies of European masters' (de Genova, 2017, p. 18). As such, many individuals are not fleeing from a place that is positioned outside of or completely unconnected to Europe. This suggests an analytic perspective that considers mass displacement to be directly related to historical or continuing practices of colonialism. In Kirchhoff's novella, the young female refugee remains nameless and readers learn nothing about the country she left behind. This allows for a symbolic reading of the encounter between her and the protagonist as emblematic of Europe's confrontation with its own 'undigested colonial history' (Gilroy, 2016, p. xi).<sup>3</sup>

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2 The quotes from Erpenbeck's novel are taken from the English translation *Go, Went, Gone* (2017). The translations from Kirchhoff's novella and all other translations are the author's, unless otherwise indicated.

3 According to the UN Refugee Agency, 'refugees' are 'persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution' ('UNHCR viewpoint: "Refugee" or "migrant" – Which is right?'). Migrants, on the other hand, 'choose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons' ('UNHCR viewpoint: "Refugee" or "migrant" – Which is right?'). 'Asylum seeker' describes someone who intends to seek sanctuary in another country. According to the UN, asylum is 'the right to be recognized as a refugee and receive legal protection and material assistance' ('What is a refugee'). As political scientists Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis maintain, however, none of these terms can fully capture individual experiences. Such categories risk homogenizing and simplifying the day-to-day realities of those on the move or newly arrived. Often, people are 'trapped in the space between "refugee" and "migrant"' (p. 51), or their status changes. This essay uses 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' when the context

Erpenbeck's novel and Kirchhoff's novella thus invite a reading that spatializes and historicizes current developments and situates the contemporary experience of refugeeism and forced migration within the historical context of colonialism. In the respective works, Berlin and the Mediterranean emerge as richly imagined sites of forgotten histories, repressed desires, and contested inclusion. This calls attention to what has been referred to as the 'after-effects' (Hall, 1996, p. 248) of colonialism and the 'lingering colonial past' (Gilroy, 2016, p. xvi). The two literary texts call attention to the ways in which such after-effects inform attitudes and policies in the 'postcolonial present' (Bhambra, 2016, p. 188), which includes intricate mechanisms of marginalization, obstruction, amnesia, and erasure. In Erpenbeck's novel, Richard's friendship with young male refugees from various African countries enables him to recognize the shortcomings of German integration policies, the contemporary German state's refusal to come to terms with its colonial past (and by extension, the similar refusal by its two predecessor states) and the ways in which current policies must be seen as a continuation of colonial as well as National Socialist and post-unification policies related to space. Kirchhoff's novella, on the other hand, positions its protagonist as a more problematic character, suspicious, evasive, and self-centred. The fact that the encounter with the female refugee in Catania is depicted as a deeply unsettling experience and as a threat to the protagonist's male identity invites a wide variety of critical readings of the novella. This encounter may be viewed as symbolic of Europe's confrontation with colonial history, and the protagonist's hostile and chauvinist attitudes may prompt readers to critique exclusionary practices of border policing and migration management. Building on scholarship in postcolonial studies and cultural geography, this essay focuses specifically on the way the texts imagine and represent space in the form of cities, squares, streets, monuments, and border zones and examines how Erpenbeck and Kirchhoff grapple with the twin challenges of mass displacement and colonial history. In their thematization of power relations and oppression, the texts also pose the question of how literature might intervene in current political discussions.

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and individual circumstances clearly warrant their use. In Erpenbeck's novel, the African men are referred to as 'Flüchtlinge' ('refugees'). It is also specified that the men are seeking asylum, even if, according to the Dublin Regulation (see 'What is the Dublin Regulation'), they are ineligible to apply for asylum in Germany but need to do so in the EU member state in which they first registered, which is Italy in their cases. Kirchhoff, on the other hand, avoids using the terms 'migrant' or 'refugee' yet it can be assumed that the individuals encountered in the text are 'refugees'. Accordingly, this essay uses the term 'refugee' in the discussion of Kirchhoff's novella. The term 'migrant' is used when the context is unclear and to describe people on the move more generally.

## Spatial Logics of Exclusion, Erasure, and Control in Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen*

In *Gehen, ging, gegangen*, the protagonist Richard, professor emeritus of classics at Humboldt University in the former East Berlin, tries to come to terms, first, with his retirement and, then, with the opaque asylum policies of the European Union, the German government, and, at the local level, the Berlin Senate. The novel is set in 2014, one year before the so-called migration 'crisis' of 2015, at a time in which increased migration to Europe was already evident and public mobilization in the form of protest marches and a protest camp on Oranienplatz, a square in Berlin, had already begun. Given the prominence of the topic in the media, it is striking that Richard is at first completely unaware of contemporary developments. The novel traces Richard's learning process (Janzen, 2018) as he befriends a group of asylum seekers, young men from Chad, Ghana, Libya, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, and learns about their individual stories and places of origin while simultaneously reading up on colonial history and contemporary politics. Literary critic Brangwen Stone (2017) notes that Richard's own life is marked by experiences of violence, loss, and escape. He fled with his parents from Silesia to Berlin at the close of the Second World War and, as an adult, has watched his familiar world disappear with the fall of the Berlin Wall. According to Stone, these personal experiences of loss and exile help both Richard and the reader to empathize with and better understand the experiences of recent newcomers. Richard is also acutely aware of the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis. Critics have applauded the novel precisely for this interweaving of personal stories and historical references (Janzen, 2018). Richard redefines his own worldview even if he remains fundamentally prone to racist, chauvinist, Eurocentric, and Germano-centric attitudes (Ludewig, 2016; Steckenbiller, 2018). Monika Shafi (2017), also interpreting the novel to be about social transformation, highlights its thematization of citizenship, borders, and nationhood. These critics argue that the novel may offer an ethical response to the events of 2015. Stefan Hermes (2016), in contrast, remains sceptical about the text's pedagogical focus and tone, which, according to him, precludes critical engagement with the consequences of colonialism and the everyday realities of the African men, who remain stereotypically cast as victims. Critics have highlighted the novel's concern with spatiality, in particular places of learning like schools and classrooms (Janzen, 2018) and sites of hospitality, like Richard's own home (Shafi, 2017). Existing critical assessments of the novel have not sufficiently connected these two concerns, namely the way in which colonial, National Socialist, and post-war histories and contemporary experiences are woven into the spatial fabric of Berlin and how they relate to larger German and EU institutional frameworks.

The novel's concern with spatiality and processes of erasure and marginalization are evident from its first pages, which are set by the lake next to Richard's

house. He cannot 'avoid seeing the lake when he sits at his desk' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 5), and although it is 'placid' (p. 4) on its surface, the lake harbours a tragic history. 'They still haven't found the man at the bottom', Richard says, adding that '[he] died in a swimming accident' (p. 5). The lake's ability to hide or erase what has happened recalls anthropologist and historian Ann Stoler's (2016) reminder that the 'imperial effects' (p. 3) of colonialism in the present are not always 'self-evident' or 'in easy reach' for contemporary observers. By addressing right from the novel's beginning the ways in which appearances can be misleading, the text draws attention to that which is hidden, invisible, erased, absent, or, quite literally, submerged under water or buried underground. The drowned swimmer in the lake foreshadows another topic that Richard will confront soon enough, the deaths of thousands of migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean. But above all, the image of the lake calls attention to the ways in which past events keep resurfacing in the present.

## Complex Locations of Power

Richard's first encounter with the male refugees occurs in a context that reveals, so to speak, those things that are hidden beneath the surface. The reader first encounters the refugees as Richard crosses Alexanderplatz, a prominent square in the part of the city that was East Berlin, where he walks right past a group of protesters. The narrator describes Richard as being preoccupied with other things, specifically, the fate of Polish Jewry during the Holocaust. From imagining the catacombs beneath the square that, as his archaeologist friend told him, were used to store and sell goods during the Middle Ages, his thoughts drift to similar tunnels in Rzeszów, Poland, where he and his wife once spent a holiday. During the war, Richard recalls, residents would seek shelter underground. 'Later, in the time of fascism, Jews took refuge here until the Nazis hit on the idea of filling the subterranean passageway with smoke' (p. 12). Richard, distracted by the memory of the Holocaust, overlooks the men protesting at the square because he is in no position to perceive them. The square is a space he knows well and that he navigates with ease as part of his daily routines (Shafi, 2017). Places are imbued with social, cultural, political, and historical meanings that are organized along axes of power, including race, ethnicity, class, and gender (Ahmed, 2007; Mahler and Pessar, 2001; Massey, 2005) that determine who does or does not belong. Individuals may be rendered hyper-visible if they are metaphorically out of place. But visibility depends on who is looking, and despite the cardboard signs that read 'We become visible' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 18), Richard will not take notice of the group of refugee activists until later that night when he turns on the evening news and the protest is catapulted right into his living room.

A later scene in the novel reverses the roles played by Richard and the asylum seekers. The scene highlights the way in which context determines whether or not individuals can assert control over space and therefore experience a sense of belonging, as opposed to being controlled and restricted in their mobility and actions. With Karon from Ghana, Richard visits a small shop in a neighbourhood, perhaps Kreuzberg or Neukölln, that he does not normally frequent. By now, Richard has gotten to know the men and is more than familiar with the legal obstacles they face and the general precariousness of their situation. Overcome by a sense of helplessness with regard to the fact that Karon and the other men are ineligible to apply for asylum in Germany, Richard has decided that he wants to support Karon financially by buying a piece of property in Ghana for the family Karon left behind. This, the reader learns, is only the second time in his life that he considers buying real estate. On the previous occasion, right after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), he had felt overwhelmed by the process of acquiring property 'in this strange land his country had suddenly become' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 224). Now Richard needs to venture into even stranger territory. Passing a kebab shop and a place selling mobile phones, he and Karon enter a shop that seems to transport them into a different world:

They cross the threshold, but what counts here as inside and outside? It's foggy in the room, or smoky, so Richard is only gradually able to make out his surroundings. On stakes all around the room, braids have been tied, and he sees strange fruit piled up high in wooden bowls, some with thorns, some with transparent skin, some look like eggs, others like meat. The fruit is arranged as if around an altar, and in the middle of the room an African woman, her hair in wild disarray, sits on a three-legged stool, before her in the linoleum floor is a crevice from which vapors are rising. (p. 225)

Richard is puzzled by the fact that he has to toss the money necessary for the transaction – three thousand euros in cash – into the crevice in the floor. After this, another man hands Karon a piece of paper with numbers that Karon must convey to his mother in Ghana. Richard observes: 'Here in this place, Karon knows his way around, and for a moment he's no longer a refugee, he's a man like any other' (p. 226). It is suddenly Richard who feels out of place. But he also feels strangely out of time, imagining that the doorbells 'no doubt tinkled during the first postwar years every time a German housewife left the shop with her purchases' (p. 226). The bells remind Richard of an earlier time in the GDR, possibly his childhood. But the sound would also be familiar to other Germans his age who grew up in West Germany. The bells thus represent something shared by residents of the former East and West. But whatever the sounds shared through time, this particular neighbourhood itself, located in the Western part of the city, remains startlingly unfamiliar to him. He clearly is an outsider in this space where East and West strangely overlap and

which today is filled with curious objects and marked by Ghanaian customs and rituals that Richard has difficulties comprehending.

## Hegemonic Spatial Practices

Like the lake outside Richard's house and the central square of Alexanderplatz, the shop illustrates the mechanisms by which the novel continuously interweaves the past with the present. What is striking is the way geographical places are brought together in this space too. Richard imagines the shop being located above a passageway that links Germany with Africa. He envisions the woman passing the money 'directly to Ghana by the shortest possible path, through the Earth's curved crust' (p. 227). Richard's fantasy, which includes exoticized descriptions of the shop interior, is suggestive of an orientalist or colonialist mode of thinking that reduces other cultural contexts to stereotypes. This is not the only time the novel calls attention to such ways of thinking. While collecting information about the countries the asylum seekers left behind, Richard not only learns more about colonial history and its repercussions in the present, but he is also forced to reassess aspects of his own life, in which he can now discern the imprint of colonial thought and practice. There is, for example, a book Richard refers to as '*Negerliteratur*' (p. 23, italics in original) from 1951 that he pulls off his bookshelf without further elaboration, leaving it to the reader to wonder whether it is a scholarly volume, a textbook, a work of literature, or something else entirely. And there is a copy of *Hatschi Bratschi's Hot Air Balloon*, a popular children's book from the early 1900s. Richard can no longer simply pass over the books' mentions of 'bush spirits' and a 'cannibal boy' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 24), respectively, or ignore the colonialist thinking that shaped them. Both books explicitly juxtapose a perceived European superiority with an assumed African backwardness. In the former, Richard reads that the 'land of the bush spirits' is empty, vacant, and devoid of history and '[u]nder the earth there is only more earth. What comes after that, no one knows' (p. 24). Richard can no longer ignore the assumption that other regions are empty and primitive, assumptions that legitimized the colonial enterprise. This calls to mind the distinction between a static and a progressive approach to space theorized by the feminist geographer Doreen Massey (2005). According to Massey, a static approach refuses 'to acknowledge [a space's] multiplicities, its fractures and its dynamism' (p. 65); it simplifies space just as Africa is in the book Richard revisits. A progressive approach, in contrast, recognizes space to be always in flux, always becoming and dynamic, as multi-layered and rich in constantly shifting realities, narratives, memories, and cultural, historical, and political meanings – as is reflected in the novel's depiction of Berlin. It is only later, as he learns more about colonial history and the cultural, political, and historical contexts the asylum seekers have left behind, that Richard will shift

to a progressive approach, recognizing the regions, countries, cities, and villages whence his acquaintances came as comparably complex and multifarious.

Richard soon comes across another example of a static approach to ordering and organizing space, this time in Berlin. After attending a community meeting in Kreuzberg, Richard finally visits Oranienplatz, the site of a large protest encampment (Bhimji, 2015; Landry, 2016). Here he reflects on the Huguenots, refugees from France who in the late 1600s were the first settlers in the area (Göktürk et al., 2007, p. 5), before his thoughts turn to events from his own life. He recalls, for instance, how he and his late wife used to take long walks here, engrossed in conversations about Peter Joseph Lenné, the Prussian landscape architect who made considerable changes to the neighbourhood. Richard realizes that Germany probably still had colonies when Lenné was engaged in his work here. This prompts him to recall that the German word for 'colonial goods', *Kolonialwaren*, 'was still visible in weathered script on some East Berlin facades as recently as twenty years ago' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 36). Oftentimes '*Kolonialwaren* and WWII bullet holes might adorn the very same storefront', and he further reflects on the fact that many of those buildings used to display cardboard signs advertising fruit and vegetables with an acronym familiar to multiple generations of East Germans: 'OGS', *Obst Gemüse Speisekartoffeln*, or 'fruit, vegetables, and potatoes'. All of those diverse layers of meaning disappeared after German reunification when 'the West', as Richard emphasizes, 'started renovating everything' (p. 37). As is evident from Richard's observations, the West, which here is a metonym for the unified German nation-state, incorporated the GDR by partially erasing physical reminders of the former East.

The city is revealed to be multi-layered, a palimpsest of successive historical and political configurations, in which Richard not only uncovers or rediscovers memories of German colonialism and East German socialism but also recognizes the mechanisms by which such memories have been repressed or deliberately erased. Cultural theorist Fatima El-Tayeb (2016) has argued that the conceptualization of contemporary Germany as postcolonial, post-fascist, and post-socialist makes visible the intricate ways in which German society, and north-western Europe more generally, has systematically been constructed as the 'neutral norm' (p. 39). This 'norm' defines diverse Others, including 'the socialist East and the colonial subject' (p. 39), through contrast with itself. She argues that defining certain subjects and their histories as 'Other' authorized the unified German nation-state to incorporate the former GDR and willfully erase its history and reconstruct the city. The Nazis, too, reshaped Berlin by erecting buildings in the typical National Socialist style and renaming prominent streets and squares, thus inscribing a vision of racial superiority into the cityscape. In her study, El-Tayeb asks how such practices live on in contemporary Germany and continue to legitimize the exclusion of Europe's racialized Others in the present (pp. 39-40). Erpenbeck's novel, too, seems to sug-

gest that previous forms of control have a lasting effect in determining oppressive and exclusionary practices today.

These practices are also informed by more recent developments. In response to the Berlin Senate's decision to close the Oranienplatz protest camp and move its residents to refugee centres dispersed across the city, Richard notes: 'For a year and a half, anyone who wanted to could speak with the refugees ... But the moment they signed an *agreement*, it became necessary to administer them' (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 49, italics in original). Marxist geographer David Harvey (2012) finds cities at the centre of a twenty-first-century neoliberal politics that, in attempting to regulate and exercise power over space, 'often seeks to reorganise urban infrastructure and urban life with an eye to the control of restive populations' (p. 117). This regulating impulse is evident in the policies enacted by the Berlin Senate and the agreement it reached with the refugees. But Richard wonders whether the decision to move the refugees, supposedly in order to 'preserve the Africans' safety', is not in fact a cover-up:

The colonized are smothered in bureaucracy, which is a pretty clever way to keep them from 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 dubbed the Land of Killers once more? (Erpenbeck, 2017, p. 49)

Juxtaposing the 'Land of Poets' and the 'Land of Killers', the narrator traces a lineage not just from German intellectual traditions to National Socialism but also from colonial practices to Nazi ideology and, finally, to present-day policies. Subordinating and managing populations through the control of space – the occupation, expropriation, or legal acquisition of space and the subsequent authority to organize its use – is not a method only employed by contemporary neoliberal states, but by colonial powers, the National Socialists, and the unified German nation-state, too, first in incorporating the former East Germany and now in relation to recently arrived refugees. The novel may be read as a warning about contemporary German refugee policies and EU law, particularly the Dublin Regulation, which requires asylum applications be processed in the first EU member state through which applicants enter ('What is the Dublin Regulation'). Richard will later recognize this regulation to be the key obstacle to the refugees' successful integration in Germany. The institutions described in the novel, particularly the Berlin Senate and the government of the Federal Republic of Germany, are revealed to be heirs to the colonial and National Socialist regimes, continuing, in some measure, their violent and dehumanizing legacies by exercising neo-colonial practices in the present.

## Mechanisms of Power and Control in Kirchhoff

While Richard recognizes and re-evaluates the violent nature of past and present institutions in *Gehen, ging, gegangen*, the characters in Kirchhoff's novella fail to reach comparable insights. In contrast to the rich historical references in Erpenbeck's novel, *Widerfahrnis* is distinguished by its striking lack of historical detail, its methodically constructed ambiguity, and narrative restraint. Although allusions to colonial histories are woven into the text, it takes an observant reader to recognize them and incorporate them into a reading of the novella as a critique of colonial and neo-colonial practices. The protagonist, Reither, a white German man and a former publisher, betrays no interest in learning about the past or about the migrants or refugees he encounters. Both he and his travel companion, Leonie Palm, with whom he has only recently become acquainted, set out on what appears to be a rejuvenating and liberating journey south to Italy but which is in fact an attempt to cope with their own problems – aging, disease, regret, loneliness, and death. The novella pairs these personal anxieties with contemporary politics as the two holidaymakers encounter migrant travellers throughout their trip. Critics have read the novella as juxtaposing Western affluence with the deprivations experienced by refugees (Kämmerlings, 2016) or the 'bliss of love' with 'refugee suffering' (Moritz, 2016). They have pointed to the novella's 'didactic potential' given its emphasis on 'fundamental human experiences' and 'the confrontation with humans in need of help' (Theele, 2018, p. 64), while others note the characters' shocking disinterestedness with regard to the refugees (von Sternburg, 2016). This essay's analysis also finds that Kirchhoff treats contemporary politics in, as one critic has written, a 'painfully paternalistic way' (Cordsen, 2016). Reither's approach to current events and his relationships with other characters – most importantly with women of varying backgrounds – are shaped by a mix of chauvinism, entitlement, and sense of European superiority. From the start, the novella frequently refers to the fact that Reither is a former publisher who decided which books would be published and which authors included and who dictated the title and cover design of individual works. In addition, the novella highlights mechanisms of control and regulation by emphasizing its own constructedness. Reither's reflections on his former profession are paired with contemplations on processes of writing and storytelling, which oftentimes seem to relate to the novella itself. From the beginning, the text cements an image of Reither as someone who is used to being in control of not only his own narrative, but those of others too. Accordingly, he serves to focus readers' attention on power hierarchies and mechanisms of control, regulation, and exclusion. After the two travellers arrive in Sicily, their final destination, they meet a young female refugee, who emerges as a proxy for the non-European Other. Her mere presence at Europe's outer border makes visible the imbalance of power between Europe and its Others and the fears and anxieties prompted by the presence

of refugees. Postcolonial scholar Paul Gilroy (2016) has recently attributed the emergence of such fears in contemporary Europe to the rise of nativism, populism, and the far right.

As Erpenbeck did in her novel, *Widerfahrnis* emphasizes how individuals negotiate the spaces of their everyday lives differently depending, for instance, on social status and access to resources. The novella juxtaposes the seemingly unrestricted movement of the two main characters, who hold EU passports, with the restricted, policed, clandestine, and often deadly paths taken by refugees. Huddled together as an anonymous mass by the side of the road, the nameless migrants in this novella are presented in a manner that is in stark contrast to the way the male refugees are described individually in Erpenbeck's novel. Massey (2005), Harvey (2012), and Gilroy (2016) have stressed that the experience of space is shaped by race, class, gender, and other social structures as well as by free-market capitalism and exclusionary policies. Refugees' mobility is restricted by spatial control, containment, and segregation, both before and after they have applied for asylum, whereas tourists are able to travel freely and openly and easily traverse national borders. In the novella, too, the protagonists travel unimpeded past refugee characters 'at the margins' (Platthaus, 2016), on the side of the road and on an Italian island at the southern edge of Europe. The novella reduces the refugee crisis, including its causes and effects, to a topic of marginal significance, which reflects how the topic is first introduced in Erpenbeck's novel. Stoler (2016) notes how 'unruly' colonial histories are sometimes 'safely sequestered on the distant fringes of national narratives' while at other times they 'trample manicured gardens' (p. 122). In Erpenbeck's novel it is Richard's own garden, the lake outside his house, and, by extension, the city of Berlin that prompt him to begin to recognize the pressing challenges posed by mass displacement as they relate to space and colonial history. This realization is missing in Kirchhoff's novella, in which the topic of refugeeism is deliberately suppressed and relegated to the margins even as it reappears in the lives of the protagonists, until they are eventually forced to confront this political issue, albeit in Italy instead of in their home country, Germany.

## Europe's Periphery

From the beginning, the novella makes numerous references to mobility, transit, forced migration, and Southern Europe. Italy, in particular, the protagonists' destination and place of first arrival for many refugees, is construed as a site of romantic longing and new possibilities. Italy has long held a particular fascination for the educated German middle classes (Richter, 2009; Theele, 2018), but it is also a place that harbours repressed desires and uncomfortable pasts. "This story that still breaks his heart ... how would he have started it?" (Kirchhoff, 2016, p. 5), Rei-

ther wonders at the very beginning, highlighting his own agency in crafting and relaying that story whilst also hinting at a lack of agency for those experiencing hardships and heartbreak. Equally cryptic and ambiguous is the mention of 'Spuk' (p. 5), worries, ghosts, or, in Reither's words, 'the world, all its misery' (p. 5), which he tries to block out by opening a bottle of wine from Apulia. It is fitting that the bottle is the last one in his house, given that Italy is the last place where he saw his former lover. Still agonizing over that break-up, Reither is even more troubled by thoughts of the daughter they never had, an uncomfortable past that keeps punctuating the present. The reader soon learns that his neighbour, Leonie Palm, is also dealing with personal challenges, mourning her daughter's suicide and fighting the early stages of cancer. Aster, the Eritrean woman working at the reception desk of their residential complex, has an equally heart-breaking story, which is relayed by Marina, her Bulgarian co-worker. According to her, Aster recently fled from Eritrea in a strenuous journey (p. 40) that included three months in Sudan and a stay in Khartoum, where she worked as a maid to save money for the rest of the trip and where her landlord repeatedly raped her. After fleeing Khartoum and spending eleven days at sea, she arrived in Catania, Sicily's second largest city, located on its eastern coast. The narrator relays this story in passing as Reither and Leonie are getting ready to leave, first to drive south more generally, then expressly to Italy. Reither is strikingly dismissive of the two non-German women, treating them in a patronizing way and making condescending comments about their looks and behaviour. Leonie seems to mention Aster's story only to encourage Reither and herself in their own attempt to set out on their journey. 'Our Aster didn't give up either as she was fleeing' (p. 41), she remarks, vastly understating the differences between a recreational road trip taken by two white Germans and the harrowing experiences of forced migration. Italy, home to 'escape stories' of all sorts (p. 43), occupies a special place in the novella: a place of arrival and new beginnings; a place to come to terms with personal crises or past mistakes; and a place to finish mourning and fall in love.

It is unsurprising then that it is precisely in Catania, a place that the novella has already introduced as fraught with meaning, that the two protagonists encounter a young female refugee. This encounter serves as an uncanny reminder not only of personal experiences of loss, bereavement, and haunting, but also of Europe's repressed colonial heritage and its neo-colonial present. It is also an example of the ways in which migrants' claims to space are viewed in terms of spatial disobedience, especially in the wake of the events of 2015 that saw a rise in polarized political rhetoric. In this episode, Reither and Leonie meet a young girl who travels with them for a few days and who, from the very beginning, is depicted in explicitly hierarchical, racialized, and sexualized terms. When Reither first sees the girl, for instance, he does so from a vantage point of power and privilege. Looking down from a high balcony, he spots her pressed against the facade of a building, where

she would have blended in with the narrow alleyway were it not for her 'torn red dress' (p. 123). Bewildered by the girl's appearance, Reither immediately believes her to be 'loitering' or 'hanging around' (pp. 123-124). His judgement carries criminal, sexual, and racial connotations, in line with the way much contemporary political rhetoric stigmatizes migrants as outsiders, criminals, deviants, or even terrorists (de Genova et al., 2018, p. 247). Reither later even labels the young woman a 'stray' and a 'tramp' (Kirchhoff, 2016, pp. 128-129). He calls her 'die Kleine' in his head ('the little one', p. 128) or uses the personal pronoun 'es', referring to 'das Mädchen' (the girl), which is gendered neuter in German. Such neutering and infantilizing underscores the unequal power relations that mark this interaction. Although he initially tries to brush off the encounter, the young woman will not go away, but keeps reappearing at intimate moments: as Reither and Leonie are strolling through the city, sitting down for dinner in a restaurant, returning to their apartment, and again after they have spent their first night together. In the woman's presence, Reither feels a discomfort that soon gives way to feelings of guilt and paranoia. 'Now we are committing a criminal act' (p. 166), he says, for instance, when the girl climbs into the car with them, voicing his anxieties about the legal consequences for themselves for facilitating her crossing of the border. The girl thus appears as a 'boundary figure', the kind of figure who, according to McClintock (1994), represents 'a crisis in male imperial identity' (p. 26, p. 27). A character who remains nameless, she triggers a whole assortment of fears and anxieties relating to migration and border management. Kirchhoff's work extends this notion of male identity crisis to a crisis in modern European identity. The young woman exercises her right to move around the city. Yet from the beginning, Reither perceives her as an intruder and therefore as someone who is illegitimately appropriating space.

## The Policing of Contemporary Borders

If Reither's attitude reveals a crisis in modern European identity triggered by the threat posed by the non-European Other, the encounter with the female refugee might also be considered to symbolize Europe's confrontation with its colonial past. This notion is reinforced by the references to Sicily's complex history, to former empires and patterns of invasion and forced settlement. When Reither and Leonie see the young woman for the first time together, they are contemplating the symbol of the city of Catania, the black elephant and Egyptian obelisk erected at one of the city's most central squares, a sculpture that dates back to the Roman period but also hints at Muslim control of the city. Marvelling at this symbol, Reither is unusually curious. The 'little black elephant', 'abandoned by its parents' or 'war booty on display' (Kirchhoff, 2016, p. 125), he wonders to himself as the girl reappears right in front of him. Reither's thoughts foreshadow Leonie's decision to take the

girl with them, as if she were a piece of property, an abandoned creature, or an artefact to be looted. But the black elephant, for Reither, also seems to be a symbol of conquest and violence, a notion reinforced by other physical reminders of former ruling powers. Strolling through the narrow streets of the city, for instance, Reither keeps noticing the Arabic script, sometimes painted bright red, that adorns old storefronts. These letters, he says, resemble 'small swords, hooks and splashes of blood' (p. 163). Reither cannot read Arabic and therefore the words have no meaning beyond what he perceives to be their threatening nature, their ability to conjure a history of violence that has no actual referent in the reality of the novella.

The physical traces of a former occupying power, however, call attention to the complex histories of conquest and contact in the Mediterranean and link these earlier instances to contemporary forms of contact. Located at the crossroads of conflicting colonial interests (Norwich, 2015), Sicily sits near the centre of the Mediterranean, which Chambers (2008) characterizes as a complex site 'where the Occident and the Orient, the North and the South, are ... entangled in a cultural and historical net cast over centuries, even millennia' (p. 3). Morocco, Libya, and Albania, all places Reither speculates may be the girl's country of origin (Kirchhoff, 2016, p. 129), are part of this hybrid and transitory space. To the perceptive reader, Reither's reflections invoke French, Spanish, and Italian spheres of interest, in addition to former Arab dynasties and the ancient empires of Rome, Greece, and the Ottomans. These associations attest to the overlapping histories of the region but also highlight the ways in which borders and states are always changing. For Reither, however, the physical remnants of Arab rule in Sicily only intensify the discomfort caused by the presence of the young woman. For him, the alien letters invoke violence in contexts and places foreign to him, whether related to Islam or conflicts in places whence refugees are fleeing.

An 'intricate site of encounters and currents' (Chambers, 2008, p. 32), the Mediterranean is also a border zone characterized by the diffuse violence of migration management and policing authorized by the European Union. The novella illustrates such mechanisms of control, regulation, and exclusion vis-à-vis Reither, who is personally invested in stopping the young woman from crossing the Mediterranean Sea. The presence of the non-European Other is portrayed as physically dangerous and life-threatening when Reither cuts himself in interacting with the girl, first on the can of Coke he opens for her at dinner and then on her pendant as he tries to prevent her from leaving the car when they are on the ferry. Reither's pain makes physical the shock or crisis caused by the presence of the refugee who has arrived at Europe's shores. But it also alludes to a trauma more deeply rooted in the European psyche, which Gilroy (2006) defines as the 'multilayered trauma – economic and cultural as well as political and psychological – involved in accepting the loss of the empire' (p. 99). Rather than working through such crises and accepting such losses and the discomforts associated with them,

which here overlap with Reither's regrets regarding his own past, Reither evades having to deal with such circumstances. 'Not wanting the child was one of the mistakes of his life' (p. 93), Reither acknowledged earlier, referring to the daughter he never had. Now he seems to make a similar mistake by symbolically attempting to prevent the young woman from entering the European mainland. For Reither, the woman's exercise of her freedom of movement is a violation of his own sense of who is allowed to move freely and who belongs in this space. The young woman disappears and readers are left with Reither's failure to recognize the complexity of the situation: the inability to counteract the 'historical amnesia' (de Genova, 2016, p. 78) with regard to colonial history as well as the hostility and rejection refugees frequently face when entering the European border zone.

This cannot be counterbalanced by a later episode in which Reither invites a Nigerian man, who comes to Reither's aid and tends to his wounds, and the man's wife and child to drive back north with him. Reither's generosity and sudden awareness of the precarious circumstances faced by the three individuals from Nigeria does not make up for the hostility with which he treated the young woman earlier. Furthermore, the Nigerian man – the novella even reveals his name, Taylor – serves an altogether different purpose. Reither, whose right hand is injured, needs Taylor to help him drive his car. With Reither in the driver's seat and Taylor in the passenger seat, they manoeuvre the car together through the Italian harbour town. Yet it is still Reither who drives and who refuses to relinquish control. By mere chance they spot Leonie at the train station where Taylor had stored a piece of luggage in a locker. Leonie had abruptly gotten out of the car on the ferry to look for the young refugee woman. Now she informs Reither that she saw the woman leave the ferry. From there, however, she has disappeared without a trace, and Leonie, too, decides to continue her journey without him. Rather than offering any sense of 'catharsis' – for Reither or for the reader – as some critics have claimed (Platthaus, 2016), the ending stands as a bleak reminder of Europe's administrative, political, and economic dominance, perceived cultural superiority, troubling surveillance and security policies, and practices of control and exclusion.

## Conclusion

*Gehen, ging, gegangen* and *Widerfahrnis* address the mass displacement of refugees, the challenges posed by forced migration, and the ways in which white-majority German culture interacts with non-Europeans. Both texts call attention to echoes of colonial history and the daily struggles faced by refugees in Germany and in Italy. Individuals occupy and navigate complex spatial locations differently depending on their social status, nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, and access to resources. Refugees' experiences are presented as varying articulations of claim-

ing space, which tend to be met by efforts aimed at controlling, containing, and preventing such forms of spatial appropriation or disobedience. In addition, both works highlight the ways in which echoes of the colonial past can be discerned in contemporary politics. In *Gehen, ging, gegangen*, Richard, who is at first shockingly uninformed about current events and Germany's colonial legacy, starts as a result of his experiences to eagerly consume the news, peruse legal documents, and learn more about Germany's colonial past. His rigorous engagement with the history and politics of his own country leads him to identify structural similarities between colonial practices, National Socialism, and policies enacted by various (West) German and European institutions. *Widerfahrnis* similarly calls attention to exclusionary practices with respect to migrants and refugees, but here Reither is himself implicated in sharing a desire to curb the influx of newcomers and prevent them from entering Europe. Critics have accurately described Kirchhoff's novella as 'paternalistic' (Cordsen, 2018), but its approach also offers 'didactic potential' (Theele, 2018, p. 64). The reader might therefore interpret Reither's actions as emblematic of various containment strategies enacted by the EU, enabling criticism of the character's actions to serve as criticism of precisely such strategies. The encounter with the non-European Other, a female refugee, possibly from one of Europe's former colonies, symbolizes Europe's refusal to confront its colonial history, something that has been systematically repressed, erased, or whitewashed (El-Tayeb, 2011, pp. 8-14). Rather than accepting or working through this repressed past, Reither chooses to preserve the status quo.

The two texts thus construe mass displacement and colonial history as a particularly German but also European phenomenon and invite a reading that recognizes mass displacement and colonial history as interrelated, a subject taken up in the scholarly literature. Erpenbeck's novel is set in Berlin but also makes ample references to EU-wide policies. While Kirchhoff's novella is set predominantly in Italy, it must be read as a German experience, given its two German protagonists and the centrality of Italian travelogues within the German literary tradition. Literary and cultural theorists including Colpani and Ponzanesi (2016) and Gilroy (2016) insist that 'Europeans need to confront the effects of colonization and decolonization on the European space itself in order to better understand contemporary political struggles and move toward alternative modes of cohabitation in Europe' (Colpani and Ponzanesi, 2016, p. 6). These two works, by incorporating discussions of EU policy or shifting the setting to other parts of Europe, namely Italy, do just this, expanding the focus from a German perspective to a more broadly European one.

Responding to injustices and bringing about social and political change might seem an impossible task. Yet Erpenbeck's novel seems to encourage action, hospitality, and resistance. The German original, published in 2015, includes a call for donations, including information on where readers can contribute funds. Kirchhoff's novella, too, seems to propose that empathy, compassion, and critical self-

reflection go a long way, not just when it comes to current conflicts and divisions within Europe but also with respect to personal happiness and self-fulfilment. The character of Reither might be unlikable, but a critical reading of his actions may promote 'cultural and ethical competence' (Theele, 2018, p. 64). Finally, both texts participate in a larger conversation that positions historical knowledge and the awareness of cultural difference as the key to a more inclusive future. According to Gilroy (2016):

The political movements that have vowed to stop Europe's supposed Islamification and made a target out of immigrants, refugees, and sans-papiers are overwhelmingly populist in character. They are fueled by austerity, precariousness, anxiety, and fear, but they rely upon a deficit of historical information about Europe's colonial and imperial past ... Historical information is thus more important than ever, even, or perhaps especially, where it can promote the possibility of 'working through' the past. (pp. xiii-xiv)

One of the most important tasks in the years to come might well be to combat such 'managed ignorance' (p. xiv) – whether engineered by governments, political movements, or individual actors – and in doing so make this world a more hospitable place.

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