

“Their Skin Is Black”: Invoking and Subverting Problematic Imaginaries of Africa in Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Go Went Gone* (2015)

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Abstract

This article examines *Go Went Gone* (2015), an award-winning novel by the German writer Jenny Erpenbeck on the plight of African refugees in Berlin in the context of what has been called the European refugee/migrant “crisis.” I interrogate the preponderance of the imagery of racial difference especially at the beginning of the story and explore the narrative roles given to the novel’s main protagonist, Richard, as the story’s main focaliser through which the reader is given access into the minds of the novel’s German characters. Adopting a mostly postcolonial approach, I argue that the narrative reveals the continuing impact of the colonial archive on the European social imagination despite attempts to transcend those problematic imaginaries over the past decades. I also show that although apparently committed to dismantling familiar stereotypes and clichés, Erpenbeck struggles with a larger conundrum related to the dialectic of representation and misrepresentation and the question of how to call up and critique prejudices and problematic ideas without automatically reinscribing them.

Keywords: Jenny Erpenbeck; *Go Went Gone*; refugee “crisis”; African refugee; Germany

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Introduction

Jenny Erpenbeck's *Go Went Gone* was written in German and translated into English by Susan Bernofsky. It was published just before one of the major highpoints of what has been described as the European refugee/migration “crisis,” which saw a record 1,3 million applications for asylum in the 28 European Union (EU) countries as well as Norway and Switzerland in 2015 according to the Pew Research Center (Connor 2016). Although the vast majority of these refugees were from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq (54%), a significant number (approximately 111,000) were from the sub-Saharan countries of Eritrea, Nigeria, Somalia and Gambia. A 2018 Pew Research Center study finds that “more than half of migrants living in Europe [were] born in South Africa, Somalia, Senegal, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon, in addition to Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya” (Connor 2018). That black Africans constitute a visible proportion of this dramatic wave of refugees is also reflected in the 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck in which close to 400 mostly sub-Saharan refugees drowned—an event which Erpenbeck has identified as an inspiration for her novel (see Scheck 2017). This possibly informs Erpenbeck's decision to focus on African refugees in this novel in addition to the fact that she also had extensive discussions with some of the African refugees and their activist supporters who protested at Oranienplatz in Berlin between 2012 and 2014.¹

In his review for *The New Yorker*, James Wood (2017) notes that the novel represents an important response to jaundiced attitudes to black African refugees in particular. These attitudes are reflected in some events that happened both inside and outside Germany after the publication of *Go Went Gone*. One is the reported molestation of young women in Cologne, Germany on New Year's Eve 2015 by “gangs of men described by the authorities as having ‘a North African or Arabic *appearance*’” (Eddy 2016; my italics). Also, then United States' president Donald Trump made derogatory comments about Haitians and Africans amidst heated debates across the Western world on immigration during various elections from the United Kingdom's Brexit referendum in 2016 to national elections in France, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, Hungary and Italy (see Mark 2017; Peyton 2018). In addition to its socio-political effects, this refugee movement has been accompanied by an avalanche of graphic images of asylum seekers in overcrowded boats and rescue ships on the Mediterranean Sea, at port cities such as Lampedusa, Lesbos and Algeciras, at border fences in the Spanish enclave of Ceuta and in camps in conditions that are mostly chaotic, dehumanising and precarious.²

¹ The refugee camp in Oranienplatz in Berlin was set up in September 2012 following a protest against the asylum application system by refugees and sympathetic activists. It was cleared in 2014 (see Litschko 2013).

² One of the key findings of an in-depth quantitative study on newspaper coverage of the “crisis” in five EU countries is that there are few reports focusing on potential benefits of what asylum seekers and migrants can bring to host countries (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore 2015). However, on the flip side, in May 2018, a Malian refugee who made a daring rescue of a toddler dangling from the

The novel has enjoyed positive critical responses along the lines of Wood's (2017) review in terms of its commentary on the ordeals of refugees and migrants and its criticism of racist attitudes among some politicians, government officials and in sections of the media (see, for example, Shafi 2017; Stone 2017). It was nominated for the 2018 Man Booker Prize and the 2015 Deutscher Buchpreis, and it won the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize and the English PEN Award. However, it has also been argued that the novel's overarching focus is not on the refugees and their plight, but on its middle-class European protagonist. For Daniela Roth (2020, 101), who discusses this novel alongside the 2016 short story "Widerfahrnis" by Bodo Kirchhoff, "the depicted fugitives are functionalized for the personal development of the protagonists." Roth argues further that the plight of the African refugees in *Go Went Gone* are subordinated to the main protagonist's "personal crisis in a phase of uncertainty" (101). John Hawley (2019) makes a similar point. Noting the great lengths to which the main protagonist, Richard, goes to demonstrate commitment to the refugees, Hawley argues that in the end, the novel focuses "relentlessly on what Richard has discovered about *himself*—though himself as embodying the human condition" (2019, 15; original italics).³ These comments indicate that, as a timely and significant contribution to the growing archive of the migration "crisis," *Go Went Gone* has the potential to deepen our understanding of the ways in which the figure of the African refugee and migrant in particular and Africa as a historical, ideological and socio-cultural sign in general are re-imagined within recent narratives and discourses in Europe.

There is a fictional rendition of the actual Oranienplatz event near the beginning of the novel where 10 black male African refugees are protesting for the right to work. It is this event that inspires the protagonist, a widower named Richard, who is a recently retired German classics professor, to become involved in the lives of the 10 men. Richard had been in the area of the protest but only becomes aware of it later in the day when he watches the evening news. Without a family, job or other commitments, Richard picks up keen interest in the men. He seeks them out where they are being accommodated by the government, befriends them, supports their efforts to secure asylum and work legally and offers his home to some of them as a shelter. During this process, he learns more about their personal histories and cultures and also reviews his own lack of knowledge of Africa as a whole, all the while reflecting heavily on colonialism and the problematical relationships between Africa and the West.

Following this introductory section, I examine the preponderance of the imagery of racial difference (especially at the beginning of the story) as a mark of identification for the refugees and ask what this implies for other forms of identification and associations evoked by the narrative. After that, I explore the narrative roles given to the novel's main protagonist, Richard. In this regard, I examine the ubiquitous parallels which he

balcony of a high-rise Paris apartment block received positive media coverage globally and recognition from the French president (Tosunglu and Byrne 2018).

³ Others who have criticised the novel in a similar vein include Stefan Hermes (2016), Johanna Vollmeyer (2017) and Christiane Steckenbiller (2019).

draws between the conditions of the refugees and those of people (like his own family) who had been displaced and had lived precarious lives during the Nazi era; between ancient histories and contemporary realities; between Europe and Africa, the visible and the invisible. In the final part of the article, I adopt a mostly postcolonial approach to analyse the novel's depiction of the personal histories and circumstances of the refugees in whose lives Richard becomes closely involved. Commenting on how this affects the overall representation of the refugees, I foreground the potential contradiction of simultaneous representation and misrepresentation which dogs the narrative: How does a European writer call up her mainly white readership's problematical ideas without falling into the trap of automatically re-inscribing those same ideas? Overall, I argue that the narrative reveals the continuing impact of the received colonial archive on the European social imagination despite attempts to transcend those problematic imaginaries.

“Their Skin Is Black”

When we first encounter the refugees in the second chapter of the novel, we are only told by the narrator that they are “ten men” in a short passage that is very significant for this analysis and which we will return to again and again (Erpenbeck 2015, 10). Two or three lines later, we learn that “[t]heir skin is black.” This racial descriptor is used repeatedly in this short chapter with phrases like “the men with dark skin” (11), “black and white people” (11), “the dark-skinned men” (14, twice), and “the men with dark skin” (15). This does not end in the beginning parts of the novel but extends throughout, although it is more ubiquitous in the early chapters. Given that the novel apparently seeks to humanise the refugees through its protagonist, Richard, I suggest that Erpenbeck's decision to use this descriptor is not to perpetrate the racialisation of African subjects of which many European narratives (especially in colonial times) have been accused (see Achebe 1977). What, then, might this insistent problematical marker mean? And what does it say about the novel's portrayal of the black African refugees?

I propose that the repeated use of skin colour to describe not only the refugees but also Europeans, occasionally, can be understood as a mimetic device by which Erpenbeck reports and critiques a social practice—the ingrained and perhaps involuntary way of seeing the black African other in the kinds of socio-cultural contexts that the story is set in. This recalls the earlier cited example of Wood (2017), the book reviewer who intuitively uses the same skin colour marker, “dark-skinned”—along with other terms, it should be noted—in his perception and description of real-life African refugees in Italy. Interestingly, the novel includes an episode that is remarkably similar to Wood's experience. On their return from a holiday trip to Italy, Richard's friends, Monika and Jörg, end their account of their exciting experiences in this way:

[W]e were expecting a lovely drive through the Tuscan countryside, so we took a side road instead of the highway, there was even snow on the ground. But then—this is incredible—out in the middle of nowhere we see all these *black* women—Africans! standing at the side of the road soliciting. (Erpenbeck 2015, 196; my italics)

Although this couple is portrayed as belonging to the group of Europeans who hold explicitly stereotypical racist views of Africa, they are not the only ones who use skin colour markers in the story. These markers of difference are also used liberally in the many portions of the story focalised through Richard, indicating that there are instances where he himself might have instinctively perceived the refugees in those ways. This is exemplified where he ponders the irony that despite having a shortage of low-skilled workers, Germans were “unwilling to accept these dark-skinned refugees” who are apparently keen to do low-wage jobs (125). Furthermore, one of the refugees, Awad, who was born in Ghana but grew up in Libya, narrates how “black Africans [and] . . . some Arabs, from Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt” were selectively targeted by the Arab majority in the post-Gadhafi civil war (61).

This way of seeing dramatises the ways in which generalisations are made in the minds of the novel’s European characters, including Richard himself, as the 10 desperate, dark-skinned refugees—who are actually random individuals—soon become representative of Africans and Africa in the minds of the novel’s German characters, including Richard. In other words, not only are the refugees identified as people from Africa, they quickly become a synecdoche for all of Africa and all Africans everywhere. For Richard in particular, this plays out in his instinctive response to the news of the protest at Alexanderplatz as he soon makes flighty references to vast stretches of the continent (Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, Angola) in a very short narrative space. Indeed, Richard’s ignorance of Africa is manifestly linked to his initial monochromatic perceptions of the world, which as Ludewig (2017, 29) argues, are a product of his “racism, chauvinism and Euro-/Germanocentrism”:

He initially only sees things in black and white, black men and white sympathisers (44–45), recognises the Tuareg as a VW car model (67) rather than as a tribal group, and reaffirms his dichotomous views of the world of East and West, good and bad.

Another way of understanding the preponderant use of the racial marker in this novel is, to use a grammatical idiom, as a subtextual reinforcement of the dependent element—rather than on the modifier—in the representational syntax. This becomes more evident given that, in this novel, the colour marker is applied both to “dark-skinned” or “black” subjects as well as “white” subjects. And although the former (“black”) is more preponderant in the novel, its use invariably implies and invokes its absent other (“white”). It is possible, therefore, to interpret the dominant imagery of the “black man and the white man” as an invitation to contemplate on “man,” the common denominator in discourses of racial differentiation, rather than—and in spite of—the optional contingent modifier. This can indeed serve as a means of foregrounding the instability, illogicality and unreliability of racial modifiers as is highlighted in the following scene where the young refugee Awad is learning to play the piano while watching videos of three expert pianists that Richard plays to him:

For a long time the old man and this young man sit there side by side at the desk, waiting and listening as these three musicians use the black and white keys to tell stories that have nothing at all to do with keys' colors. (Erpenbeck 2015, 161)

The colours of the piano keys are a not too subtle metaphor for the harmony that is possible between the African and the European, between locals and refugees. As a mimetic act, this scene also has a diegetic complement provided through one of Richard's intense reflections on the slippery and constructed nature of ingrained social differences in the last third of the story. On New Year's Eve, he is standing on a friend's balcony overlooking the entrance of the refugees' residence that has been fenced off with metal barricades manned by German police officers in riot gear to keep the refugees in. He then wonders if the fortified residence and German society were not actually "two halves of a universe that actually belong together" according to an ancient Inca myth (209):

Is the rift dividing them in fact a bottomless chasm; is that why such powerful turbulences have been released? And is it a rift between Black and White? Or Poor and Rich? Stranger and Friend? Or between those whose fathers have died and those whose fathers are still alive? Or those with curly hair and those with straight? Those who call their dinner *fufu* and those who call it stew? ... Or between speakers of one language and another? How many borders exist within a single universe? Or, to ask it differently, what is the one true, crucial border? (209–210; original italics)

Richard's conclusion, a few lines later, is that social differences in general and racial differences in particular are a result of what he calls an "an absurd misunderstanding" of relations between the cosmos and its temporal individual inhabitants (210). Richard's attempt to correct this misunderstanding and to collapse the symbolic borders between the refugees and their German hosts proceeds on at least two interlinked fronts: on the one hand, he points out similarities between the conditions of the refugees and those of people affected by wars and political tension from different periods in different parts of Europe. In this regard, he draws mainly on the effect on his family of the Second World War (WWII) and life in communist East Germany. Also, he carefully investigates and describes the personalities, individual histories, cultures, circumstances, aspirations, challenges, etc. of the 10 men throughout the course of the story. In this way, the novel performs the symbolic act of making the refugees as fully visible to the reading public as possible, dramatising the message proclaimed during their protest at the start of the story—"We become visible" (19; original italics). In other words, the details provided by Richard's involvement in the lives of the men make readers aware of the refugees' plight in a humanitarian context.

In doing so, Erpenbeck acknowledges their socio-cultural distinctiveness and calls up the negative public sentiments they often provoke, as is the case at the Alexanderplatz protest:

They speak English, French, Italian, as well as other languages that *no one here understands*. What do these men want? ... Who are you, they're asked by police officers and various city employees who've been called in. We won't say, the men reply. But you have to say, they're told, otherwise how do we know whether the law applies to you and you're allowed to stay here and work? We won't say who we are, the men say. If you were in our shoes, the others respond, would you take in a guest you don't know? The men say nothing. You might be criminals, we have to check. They say nothing. Or just freeloaders. (10–11; my italics)

Not only does this perform some of the common anti-refugee sentiments in Germany at the time of the novel's publication, it can also be read as a subtle allusion to, and critique of, the well-documented ways in which the black and African subject has been constructed over time in the colonial canon and dominant Western imagination as strange, unintelligible and unknowable (see Achebe 1977; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989; Said 1978).⁴ There is indeed a sense in which the suggestion that the words of the refugees could not be understood by the Berlin crowd recalls Chinua Achebe's (1977) famed criticism of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. It is the scene where the local Africans are portrayed as "a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—*who could tell?*" (Conrad [1899] 1971, 36; my italics). In this regard, Sara Ahmed's (2000, 5) ideas about the "fetishisation" and social construction of the figure of the stranger paradoxically as the "origin of danger" and as object of attraction are useful. According to Ahmed, the discourses and social acts by which a community purports to determine that the stranger is "the origin of danger" actually mask the fact that certain individuals are "already recognised as stranger[s]" by the community through certain forms of social differentiation (5). The above encounter can be understood in such a way rather than as a sincere inability to recognise the refugees.

A more explicit example is found in the following advice by Monika, one of Richard's friends who has just learnt of his attempts to assist refugees: "You really have to be careful, a lot of times they're carrying illnesses—hepatitis, typhus, AIDS. *Or so I hear*" (Erpenbeck 2015, 196; my italics). It is important to note that these negative responses directed at the refugees go beyond mere sentiments even though the story does not contain acts of racist violence. Indeed, given the intensity and avalanche of vitriolic comments online and elsewhere, Richard is surprised that the refugees' tents at Oranienplatz were not set alight by angry residents (182). Comparing the narrative present with Nazi-era events, he notes apprehensively that "only if [the refugees] survived Germany *now* would Hitler truly have lost the war" (50; my italics). Richard's sentiments can therefore be understood as a form of fictionalised euphemism for the spate of racist attacks reported at the height of the so-called refugee crisis (Faiola 2015; Taylor 2017). These attacks, according to Fabian Georgi (2019, 97), dramatise the

⁴ See Boulila and Carri (2017) for the immediate political fallout of German chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to welcome over one million asylum seekers into Germany.

“social struggles and structural contradictions associated with migration and border regimes, which are shaped by racism and in turn shape racism’s dynamic.”

Focalisation through Richard

Richard plays a central role in the novel’s overall narrative scheme as the main focaliser through whose eyes and mind readers encounter not only the refugees, but also the German public and government. Therefore, his consciousness operates as a clearinghouse of both private and public imaginaries where a wide range of impressions, notions, stereotypes and projections of the refugee Other in general and the black African subject in particular interact. It is also where his psycho-social transformation plays out. Richard’s personal experiences and intense reflections provide a filter and frame through which the nuances of the narrative can be processed. As an academic, he is very well-suited to the role of a compulsive thinker who habitually relies on his expectedly expansive knowledge of the Western canon. Central to his role as focaliser are his interactions with different characters. These include members of his close circle of friends, among whom are the couple, Detlef and Sylvia, who are supportive of the refugees as well as Monika and Jörg, another couple who display negative attitudes to the African refugees (Erpenbeck 2015, 196). Through this means, readers are connected to the social imagination of a cross-section of contemporary German society regarding the refugee “crisis” and prevailing immigration debates. Very significantly, it is via Richard’s reflections that the issue at the heart of the refugees’ plight is foregrounded. This is the European Union’s impossible cross-border asylum system encoded in the Dublin II regulation:

Italy ... allows refugees to depart for other countries, in fact it’s happy to let them go, since it has more than enough of them. Italian law gives them the freedom to travel to France, Germany, indeed any European country, to look for work. Germany, however—for reasons still not clear to Richard—refuses to take them, so after a three-month stay as “tourists,” they’re required to return to Italy for a least a quarter of a year. They’re only allowed to look for work in Germany after five uninterrupted years of asylum in Italy—and even after then, only if they can produce a so-called *illimitata* issued by the Italians, a document granting them the same residency rights as Italian citizens. If they aren’t in possession of an *illimitata*, they can leave Italy so as not to starve there, but no one else will let them in. (68; original italics)

A key part of his function as focaliser is the metamorphosis which he undergoes. This is triggered by the recognition of his own subconscious inattentiveness to the presence of the refugees whose protest at Alexanderplatz he fails to notice despite being there at the time of its occurrence. Although Ludewig (2017, 29) attributes this to Richard’s pre-occupation with his own thoughts, it might also be a possible critique of the apathy to the plights of refugees and of social and cultural others in wealthy European societies, which the Catholic Pontiff famously denounced as “the globalization of indifference”

(Friedman 2016).⁵ Beginning with a self-reflexive question—“Why didn’t he see the demonstration?” (Erpenbeck 2015, 18)—Richard undertakes to learn more about the protesting refugees, taking time to read up on the 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck, about African refugees and Africa in general and in detail. This project leads not only to the gradual exposure of his ignorance of Africa but also to the realisation that his formative and current impressions of Africa and Africans remain linked to racist colonial narratives, one of which is still on his bookshelf:

He reads that somewhere over Nigeria a man from Burkina Faso fell from a height of ten thousand feet after stowing away in an aircraft’s landing gear. . . . Where exactly is Burkina Faso? The American vice president recently referred to Africa as a country, even though—as the article about this faux pas pointed out—there are fifty-four African countries. Fifty-four? He had no idea.

[...]

He shuts the atlas and goes to the other room to the shelf with *Negerliteratur*. “Negro” is a word no one would say now, but back then people printed it on book jackets. When was that? During Richard’s postwar childhood, his mother had often read to him at his request from the book *Hatschi Bratschi’s Hot-Air Balloon* that she’d found in a suitcase in the rubble of Berlin. (23–24)

Erpenbeck uses him to both call up and critique familiar European stereotypes and clichés about Africa and Africans, including those he himself holds. She does this apparently to mitigate the risk of assuming the problematical figure of the “white saviour” who sets out to “save” hapless non-Europeans stripped of human agency and dignity (see Cole 2012). Furthermore, as John Hawley (2019, 14) demonstrates, Erpenbeck deploys Richard’s transformation and his encounter with the refugees to provoke introspection among the novel’s European readers as the character’s “personal story slowly comes into focus as a national parable.” Similarly, Robert Lemon (2018) observes in a summary of three of Erpenbeck’s novels (including *Go Went Gone*) that life for her characters “is a vector, a movement through time and space, in which both temporal and spatial circumstances impinge on the individual’s trajectory.”⁶

An important feature of Richard’s transformation and his role as focaliser is the constant parallels that he draws between the precarious conditions of the refugees and those of his own family during WWII in which his father had fought. While his family fled Poland for Germany, it was only by luck that the infant Richard missed being separated from his mother at a train station and it was only after two years that his father saw him for the first time. As a three-year-old child, his then future wife was hit by a bullet from German planes as she fled from Russian tanks (Erpenbeck 2015, 17). He evokes the image of refugeedom when he recalls his life in communist East Germany and the post-socialist era during which he sometimes felt a “sense of isolation that could no longer be found at home, a sense of *refuge*, as if sheltering from the wind behind a wall” (43;

⁵ See also Davies, Isakjee and Dhesi (2017, 1263) who explore links between “deliberate political indifference towards refugees and the physiological violence they suffer” in European states.

⁶ The other two are *Visitation (Heimsuchung)* (2008) and *The End of Days (Aller Tage Abend)* (2012).

my italics). Reflecting on the discovery of tunnels dug by rats underneath shacks that had stood in the dismantled refugee camp at Oranienplatz, Richard recalls the underground tunnels of the Polish town of Rzeszów during WWII and Nazi occupation. These tunnels provided shelter for the town's residents and temporary refuge for Jewish people during the occupation of the city (12, 40). He also notes that the suburb was originally inhabited by an earlier set of refugees in Berlin—the Huguenots who fled religious persecution from France in the seventeenth century (32). These, he likens to Germans hiding in the Berlin subway during the Allies' air raids that lead to the defeat of the Nazis (12).

Through these accounts of displacement, loss and trauma in different eras and places, the narrative seeks to “establish points of empathic connection between Richard and the refugees, and attempt[s] to establish the same between the reader and the refugees” (Stone 2017, 2). These accounts portray refugees—then and now—as hapless victims of complex political and historical circumstances far beyond the remit of individual human agents and serve to counter the problematic perceptions among some Germans of Africans as bearers of disease and sources of danger and as people whose socio-cultural ways are incompatible with those of Europe. Such stereotypical ideas are dispelled by the narrative's rigorous portrayal of the humanity of the refugees. Indeed, Richard's reflections and internal monologues function, in large part, as a dialogue with Europeans (including the changing Richard himself) who hold anti-immigrant views that are founded on ignorance as well as on racist, colonial and long-discredited narratives about Africa on the one hand. It is meant, on the other, to confront those who are apparently ignorant or forgetful of Germany's and Europe's own history of discrimination, racism, war and displacement.

The Refugees' Individual Stories

By delineating the broad historical and political factors leading to the refugee movements, the novel offers a compelling ethical and humane case for the refugees. This is done in at least two major ways: first, through information from Richard's private self-education and research on Africa's political history such as the article on the policies of domination that were part of German aid to developing countries (Erpenbeck 2015, 118) and the cryptic allusion to the exploitative role of France in Niger's uranium industry (146, 275). The second way is the personal eye-witness testimonies the refugees give to him such as this excerpt from Awad's account of his escape from the civil war in Libya:

There were already hundreds of people in the barracks. Most of them were black Africans, but there were also some Arabs, from Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt. Not only men, but also women, children, babies, old people. They took everything away from us: money, watches, phones, even our sock, he says and starts laughing. He laughs and laughs. It's not easy, he says again, shaking his head, it's not easy, as if this were the end of the story (61).

While some of these stories account for the causes of the men's displacement from their countries, others detail the circumstances (largely beyond their control) that bring them to Germany from their places of arrival in Europe:

For as long as I was in the camp in Italy, I received seventy-five euros a month. ... But after a year the camp was closed. With that I stood on the street. I went to the train station to sleep there until a policeman woke me and sent me away because I don't have a train ticket.

Outside was a man from Cameroon. He said he had a brother in Finland. We called the brother. Yes, I could go to Finland and stay with him. I went to Finland, but the brother ... didn't answer the phone.

For two weeks I slept on the street in Finland. It was very very cold. Then I went back to Italy. I walked around with my bag on my back. One day I threw away a pair of shoes and some pants, because the bag was so heavy.

I spent a total of one year and eight months in Italy.

Then I went to Germany.

All the money was gone, the five hundred euros.

I looked in front of me and behind me and saw nothing. (115)

Furthermore, the parallels drawn between the novel's fictional refugees and experiences of war and displacement from European history operate as a way of familiarising the black African others to their German and European hosts in ways that the latter can relate to with minimum difficulty. The systematic insertion of these comparisons into different episodes in the narrative transforms disparate experiences and fragmented accounts—dispersed across seemingly far-flung times and spaces—into shared histories, common denominators, an appreciation of which is capable of producing mutual understandings of the contemporary moment as well as empathy between readers and characters and between refugees and citizens. This is explored in considerable detail by Jessy Carton (2020, 27), who examines the potential of literary accounts of refugee narratives to “enhance the narrative interactions currently performed” in the management of refugee movements and migration in Europe using *Go Went Gone* as example.

While those expansive historical parallels contribute to an overall humane and dignifying depiction of the refugees, the same cannot be said of many aspects of their individual histories. Except for two of the refugees, these individual accounts are replete with many of the images and themes—poverty, war, illiteracy—for which Western narratives of Africa have been severely condemned over the decades. The abjection of some of the refugees particularly recalls Helon Habila's (2013, n.p.) influential comment on narratives

inundate[d] ... with images and symbols and allusions that evoke, to borrow a phrase from Aristotle, pity and fear, but not in a real tragic sense, more in a CNN, western-media-coverage-of-Africa, poverty-porn sense. We are talking child soldiers, genocide,

child prostitution, female genital mutilation, political violence, police brutality, dictatorships, predatory preachers, dead bodies on the roadside.⁷

One example is when Apollo, whose family lived in a hut made of “reeds, palm leaves, woven mats, and sticks” (Erpenbeck 2015, 54), responds in the affirmative to the following question from Richard: “*in Niger* they dig very deep wells. And then a donkey pulls up the bucket of water. Is that really true?” (148; my italics). Then there is this description of a photograph of Karon’s family and their home in Ghana:

They’re wearing t-shirts and pants with holes in them. The older brother’s shoulder is higher than his right, he looks misshapen. ... Karon’s mother and his three siblings are standing beneath the eaves of a cinderblock house that has two doors hanging crooked on their hinges and no windows.

[...]

The house has three rooms, but in the rainy season only one of them is habitable, the other two don’t have a roof, so they get flooded. (263–264)

Furthermore, Richard suggests that Rufu does not know what GPS is (236). This is highly unlikely, given that smartphones and internet applications are known to play a key role in contemporary refugee movements (Alencar, Kondova, and Ribbens 2019; Zijlstra and Van Liempt 2017). Abdulsalam “can’t read a street sign or the name of a subway station”; “Rufu has most certainly never been to a dentist before. He may not even know that mankind has invented dentistry” (Erpenbeck 2015, 235) and Osarobo “has never before seen a map of any city or country” (123). Furthermore, there are occasions where descriptions of the specific circumstances of certain individuals and specific locations are offered in response to questions about entire countries, resulting in the totalisation of narrative subjects. An example of this is the case of Karon, who wants to send money home to his mother in Ghana. In response to Richard’s question, “So how do you buy property in *Ghana*” (222; my italics), Karon’s answer paints the picture of a rural and primitive society where—as recently as 2011 or later—the location and dimensions of landed property are still measured “[f]rom that tree there to this stone, or the house, or the river. The witnesses can remember” (223); where contracts are still signed with fingerprints; and where people have to travel long distances with huge sums of cash because there are no banks “near [their] village[s]” (227).

The aforementioned—whether intentionally or not—resonate with colonial clichés of Africa, which tend not only to be totalising but also to cast Africans as mostly primitive and ignorant, as Chinua Achebe (1977) demonstrated in his impassioned criticism of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. But given that these specific instances are external to Richard’s consciousness, it would be helpful to understand them in the extra-diegetic context of Erpenbeck’s overall thematic mission as well as her stylistic and

⁷ Although Habila writes specifically about African works, his comment is relevant here as his criticism relates to imageries and narrative techniques associated with colonial representations of Africa such as those echoed in those sections of *Go Went Gone* being discussed here.

narratological techniques. While the source of these problematic images cannot be determined with certainty, they highlight the ever-present danger of representation and misrepresentation associated with projects of such a sensitive nature regardless of Erpenbeck's apparent commitment to humanise the African refugees and to challenge several common racist stereotypes and clichés. This commitment is displayed in the rigour with which Richard highlights auspicious accounts of African history such as his references to the technological prowess of the ancient Garametes, ancestors of today's nomadic Tuaregs among whom are two of the refugees from Niger (Erpenbeck 2015, 140–143).

While making such references, Richard unapologetically and constantly exposes his own ignorance and denounces the deleterious legacies of racist colonial assumptions and relations between migrants and citizens and between Africans and Europeans. This is illustrated by the mother of Anne (Richard's friend) who fears her refugee caregiver, Ali, "because he is black" (174); to which Richard says, "That goddamn Nazi education. ... Things like that show up in old age" (185). Furthermore, Erpenbeck consciously ensures that Richard does not fall into the trap of making excuses for the inevitable personal failings of the refugees out of sympathy or condescension. Therefore, when Richard suspects Ali of stealing some jewellery from his place but tries to downplay it, Anne insists that he confronts Ali:

So you think it was him. You're judging him without giving him a chance to defend himself. That isn't nice.

What would be nice?

Ask him if he did it.

And if he did?

You said the thief took your mother's ring.

Yes.

That's terrible.

I guess so. But it's not as if I had any plans for it in the end.

Seriously, Richard, you know what you can do with your excuses.

[...]

If it really was him who stole your ring, you have to yell at him! Tell him that you want your goddamn ring back. Make a scene.

Why would I do that?

Because you have to take him seriously. If you make excuses for his betrayal, then you're basically just putting on airs, playing the morally superior European. (256–257)

Another significant aspect of the portrayal of the refugees is their religious affiliation. It is interesting that all the dozen or so refugees whose personal stories are told in some detail are Muslims. When Richard visits them at their converted nursing home camp, he does not meet them and is told (in reference to all the refugees in the facility) that, "Friday afternoon is when the refugees go to pray" (96). He then asks, "There's no one here at all?" to which the answer is, "Just the *handful* of Christians" (96; my italics). This might suggest—wrongly and potentially problematically—that most Africans are

Muslims.⁸ Given the novel's strong credentials as an example of realist fiction—Carton (2020, 36) describes it as “semi-fictional”—it is likely that the religious affiliations of the fictional refugees coincide with those of the actual refugees whom the writer reportedly met as part of the research that went into the writing of the novel. Notably, the majority of the names of the people with whom she said she had “many good conversations” (Erpenbeck 2015, 285) appear to be Muslim names.

What is the possible effect of this on the novel's overall portrayal of the refugees? Given that Islamophobia and apparent fears of terrorism are sentiments reported among many anti-Europeans opposed to refugees and migrants, it might be possible that Erpenbeck chose to feature mainly Muslim refugees in order to demonstrate that they do not necessarily pose terrorist threats. In this connection, Lemon (2018, 55) is of the view that

the consonance of the names “Richard” and “Rashid” suggests that the cultural gulf between the two men is not insurmountable. Indeed, in the course of the novel Richard comes to understand that the overlap between himself and the refugees he comes to call friends can be greatly expanded, and that the intersection and interaction between self and other can lead to greater self-knowledge.

This is consistent with the portrayal of these refugees as individuals without extremist ideas or links. Furthermore, the novel's short expositions on some key tenets of the Islamic faith through Rashid, who tells Richard, among other things, that murder is un-Islamic, can be understood in this context (84).

Conclusion

In the different ways outlined above, *Go Went Gone* highlights the complexities involved in the simultaneous invocation and attempted subversion of the archive of images and centuries-old perceptions that sustain deeply entrenched stereotypes and clichés through its nuanced commentaries on the so-called European refugee crisis. This is achieved mainly through Erpenbeck's skilful deployment of Richard as protagonist and main focaliser. Richard's progressive psycho-social transformation and the curiosity that forces him to confront not just his ignorance about Africa, but the fact that his current imaginaries of Africa are directly traceable to dated racist colonial sources, are central to a personal metamorphosis. But if his initial state is indicative of a wider national or continental social imagination, as Hawley (2019) suggests, Richard's subsequent changes might then be read as Erpenbeck's prescription to readers who might resonate with Richard's experiences and sentiments.

⁸ According to a 2015 Pew Research Center study, Christians are in the clear majority in terms of religious affiliation in Africa. In 2010, they accounted for 63% (projected to be 59% by 2050), compared to 30% for Muslims (projected to be 35% by 2050). As of 2018, Christians in Ghana (from which Awad comes) constitute 71% of the population, while Muslims make up 18% (Ghana Statistical Service 2021).

Therefore, Richard's commitment to learning more about the 10 anonymous men and to un-learn his own preconceptions result in "a shifting in his conception" and "a new understanding" of the vexed encounter between citizen and refugee that has repeatedly reconstituted human relations across space and time (Erpenbeck 2015, 141). Yet, as the story and his "new understanding" unfold, problematic clichés of Africa continue to dog his representation of the refugees and their personal narratives. This demonstrates the enduring impact of the received colonial archive on the European social imagination despite Richard's determination to transcend those problematic imaginaries. It also demonstrates the resilience of that archive in the face of decades of sustained scholarship and official discourses exposing its blatant inaccuracies and racist underpinnings. Erpenbeck's careful delineation of Richard's path and process of transformation, which involves the combining of different narrative fragments and wide-ranging reflections into a coherent account, is clearly an impressive feat and a valuable contribution to the contemporary cultural archive. But without any prejudice against her intentions and achievements, the analysis presented in this article demonstrates that she may not have succeeded completely in doing much more than to acknowledge or even foreground the power of these imaginaries which she might have set out to dismantle.

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