

Migration Meets *Bildung*: Jenny Erpenbeck's *Go, Went, Gone*

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In the summer of 2015, amid media reports of an influx of migrants risking dangerous sea crossings and arduous land journeys to enter the European Union, German author Jenny Erpenbeck published her third novel, *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (*Go, Went, Gone*, 2017). As refugees were greeted by celebratory crowds in Munich's main train station and by welcome banners in the country's soccer stadiums, the novel's dramatized goal of rendering the stories and conditions of individual migrants visible seemed to resonate with the broader German public (Anlauf et al.; Connolly; Edwards). While citizens encouraged each other to perform small acts of *Willkommenskultur* 'a culture of welcoming'¹ with the viral #welcomechallenge (Polansky), German feuilletons praised Erpenbeck's novel for providing a worthy literary representation of migrants (Granzin) and a worthy place in German literature for those interested in the migrants' plight (Schmitter 127). The novel was hailed as the book of the hour (Schmitter; Knippahls; von Sternburg) and labeled a *Tatsachenroman* 'non-fiction novel' for dramatizing recent protests by migrants in Berlin and addressing what many called the *Flüchtlingskrise* 'refugee crisis' (Apel).² After the novel's swift translation into English by Susan Bernofsky in 2017, American reviewers quickly joined the laudatory chorus, praising its ability to foster understanding and incite action through sympathetic

¹ The term *Willkommenskultur* entered the German political debate in the early 2000s and expresses a basic attitude of openness and acceptance towards immigrants, particularly skilled employees and students. In 2015, however, it became shorthand for the concurrent but unconnected welcoming policies of Angela Merkel's government and the grassroots movement among German citizens to welcome migrants who arrived that year in search of asylum. As part of a longer public discourse on multiculturalism and integration in German society that started in the 1980s, *Willkommenskultur* marked a liberal and empathetic stand on immigration, which, in turn, sparked increasing resentment toward migrants, eventually leading to the increased popularity of far-right, nationalist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim political organizations including the Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident (PEGIDA) and the Alternative for Germany political party (AfD). See Kösemen (1-3), and Windel (3-6).

² Fatima El-Tayeb reads the "German refugee crisis" as a "German identity crisis, oscillating between the welcome culture of do-gooders and open borders, on the one hand, and the burning of refugee housing and the tightening of asylum law, on the other" (10; all translations of *Undeutsch* in this article are our own). In her critique, El-Tayeb argues that "welcome culture" negates Germany's long migration history as it "stages the compulsively repeated first encounter with the foreign" (15).

reading (Wood) and recognizing it as a reaffirmation of “the mission of art to engage our imaginative empathy and hold the status quo to a higher account” (Lemon).

The overwhelmingly favorable reception of *Go, Went, Gone* on both sides of the Atlantic emphasized the timeliness of its theme over any critical engagement with its presentation. Inspired by Erpenbeck’s interviews with refugees protesting in Berlin’s Oranienplatz in 2014 (Bartels), the novel intervenes in the contemporary migration debate by attempting to translate the demands of refugees and the failure of the German state to address them in a literary form that is familiar to a *gebildet* ‘educated’ German public. The novel follows a recently retired East German professor of Classics, Richard, who befriends asylum seekers from various African countries challenging German and European Union asylum laws. Richard immerses himself in the asylum seekers’ past and present lives and offers to help them navigate their precarious legal, economic, and living conditions. Because of its subject matter and date of publication, *Go, Went, Gone* is frequently read as a migration narrative,³ yet as Dana Buchzik contends in the German news outlet *Spiegel*, Richard’s bourgeois perspective—a shameless appeal to the Richards of the feuilletons and literary prize juries—effaces the refugees’ stories. Indeed, Erpenbeck’s ironic choice of protagonist undercuts the generic expectations for a novel that purports to make visible the physical, psychological, and economic plight of migrants. Therefore, beyond pointing out the obvious tension between the narrative’s sustained focus on both its educated white, heterosexual, middle-class, male “hero”⁴ and its migration theme, we ask: what is rendered visible through such an overdetermined figure—a figure whose prevalence in literature has historically marginalized the voices and narratives of the very people that *Go, Went, Gone* supposedly features?

Several critics have argued that Erpenbeck’s novel traces Richard’s “coming of age as a global citizen” (Baker 509) or, phrased slightly differently, his transformation from *Bildungsbürger* ‘educated citizen’ to *Weltbürger* ‘world citizen’ (Janzen 283), or from thinker to activist (Ludewig 272). For others, Richard represents a “form of lived cosmopolitanism that is built on acceptance, improvisation, and solidarity” (Shafi 186). In contradistinction to these generally positive accounts of the protagonist’s trajectory and the cultural work done by Erpenbeck’s novel to offer “an alternative, postnational vision of inclusion and

³ In using the term “migration narrative,” we draw on Brent O. Peterson’s distinction between “migration literature” and “migration narratives.” In the German speaking context, the term *Migrationsliteratur* ‘migration literature’ is often used in reference to the work of authors who migrated to Germany, whereas “migration narrative” describes literary works whose subject matter is migration, its causes, and its consequences.

⁴ In an interview with Gerrit Bartels in *Der Tagesspiegel*, Erpenbeck and Bartels often refer to Richard as the novel’s “Held” ‘hero’ unironically.

community” (Shafi 187), our essay strikes a more somber note. In our collaborative contribution to this special edition on European migration, we argue that the focus of *Go, Went, Gone* on the European male subject reveals the biases and epistemological limitations programmed into the Eurocentric perspective of its protagonist. In doing so, the novel reckons with the enduring legacy of colonial epistemologies that continue to exist despite, and alongside, Richard’s newfound critique of, and engagement with, the xenophobic injustices of the European asylum process. Furthermore, the inadequacy of his postcolonial benevolence towards the asylum seekers and his inspired social engagement for political change reveal the deep-seated structural impediments that render individual action ineffectual in creating a post-national and post-migrant social order beyond one’s own living room.

The first part of our article exposes the ways in which *Go, Went, Gone* employs an intentionally problematic protagonist to confront the colonial underpinnings of the Eurocentric epistemology that drives his interactions with the migrant characters. At play is an ethics of perception and knowledge production underwritten by the Eurocentrism of *Bildung* ‘education’ and its established narrative—the *Bildungsroman*. While Erpenbeck’s nod to the quintessential western narrative of self-formation has often been noted in passing (Janzen; Steckenbiller; Baker), the second part of our article considers the novel’s engagement with characteristic elements of the *Bildungsroman* and reads it as a self-reflexive gesture. By evoking and altering the form of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel implicates its own narrative form in the very Eurocentrism that it seeks to expose, thus introducing a politics of form that must be addressed. In close affinity with our exposition of *Go, Went, Gone*’s focus on Eurocentric epistemologies, we articulate a political reading of Erpenbeck’s substitution of the traditional young protagonist with one of advanced years to ask: if the generic form of the *Bildungsroman* is not only a symbol of youth but, as Franco Moretti argues, also one of European modernity, what is at stake when this narrative form is used to chronicle the retirement of a mature European protagonist?

Schemas of Knowledge

Jenny Erpenbeck, born in East Berlin in 1967, often explores the consequences of twentieth-century transnational history and German politics in her formally innovative prose works through intimate portrayals of individual lives. After her prize-winning debut *Geschichte vom alten Kind* (1999; *The Old Child and Other Stories*, 2005) and her subsequent publication, *Wörterbuch* (2004; *The Book of Words*, 2007), Erpenbeck’s novel *Heimsuchung* (2008; *Visitation*, 2010) interlaced the history of a mansion on the outskirts of Berlin, the fates of its changing owners, and the migratory movements induced by the racial and political

atrocities of Nazi Germany and the East German state. In *Aller Tage Abend*, published in 2012 (*The End of Days*, 2014), she related the story of an unnamed Jewish girl as she moved from the outskirts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Vienna, Moscow, and East Berlin through a series of hypothetical lives and possible deaths.

Migration caused by social and political upheaval is an important theme in the latter two novels and one that Erpenbeck continues to engage in *Go, Went, Gone*—with three noticeable differences. She shifts her temporal focus from the calamities of the twentieth century to the contemporary while also broadening her geographic scope: although *Go, Went, Gone* is set in Berlin, the novel traces migratory routes from Africa to Europe, setting the latter in relation to its former colonies and colonial history. Lastly, the formal innovation we have come to expect from Erpenbeck—based on the experimental prose and narration of her previous works—is absent from this novel; instead, she opts for a linear storyline and straightforward prose whose generic arrangement echoes a more traditional form. Nevertheless, the strength of Erpenbeck’s novels remains the differing ways in which they envelop the reader in the world as perceived by, and filtered through, her distinctive protagonists—and here *Go, Went, Gone* is no exception.

The novel opens on Richard, a European bourgeois, a German *Kulturbürger* ‘bourgeois citizen’, as he contemplates the possibilities offered by the endless amounts of unstructured time occasioned by his recent retirement: “Zeit, um zu reisen . . . Zeit, um Bücher zu lesen . . . Zeit, um Musik zu hören” (9) ‘Time to travel . . . To read books . . . Time to listen to music’ (3).⁵ Unable or unwilling to mark too great a transition from his *modus operandi*, Richard settles into the comfort and luxury of routine. *Go, Went, Gone* meticulously recounts the details of his highly organized and ritualized life including his eating habits: “Morgens trinkt er Tee, Earl Grey mit Milch und Zucker, dazu ein Brot mit Honig und eins mit Käse” (32) ‘At breakfast, Richard has Earl Grey with milk and sugar, accompanied by a slice of bread with honey and another with cheese’ (31) while listening to a radio station that plays classical music, and for dinner he consumes “belegte Brote mit Käse und Schinken, dazu Salat” (24) ‘[o]pen-face sandwiches with cheese and ham, with salad on the side’ (18) while watching the evening news. The text marshals a myriad of seemingly insignificant details and trivia—his repetitive shopping lists, his onion-slicing method, and his afternoon naps taken under a blanket of “echtem Kamelhaar” (31) ‘genuine camelhair’ (21), for example—to generate a thick description of a privileged European’s everyday habits and preoccupations.

But what purpose does such a habitual anchoring of everyday life serve in the novel? Critics mostly agree that Richard’s “rootedness and stability,” his sense

⁵ English translations of *Gehen, ging, gegangen* are from Susan Bernofsky’s 2017 *Go, Went, Gone*. Any modifications to her translation are indicated accordingly.

of “home and security,” are set in contrast with the “indeterminacy and incessant social and economic insecurity” of the migrants (Baker 507). While the contrastive function of Richard’s domestic routines is readily apparent, several fundamental aspects of the novel’s emphasis on everyday habits have yet to be examined. For one, the narrative sustains a fine irony toward its protagonist through the overabundance of detail that reveals Richard to be a privileged European and a pedantic German academic:

Er setzt sich zu Tisch und schaltet den Fernseher ein . . . auf dem Alexanderplatz haben sich zehn Männer versammelt, Flüchtlinge offensichtlich, und sind in einen Hungerstreik getreten, einer der Hungerstreikenden ist zusammengebrochen und wurde ins Krankenhaus abtransportiert. . . . Warum hat er die Demonstration dann nicht gesehen? Das erste Brot hat er mit Schnittkäse belegt, nun kommt das zweite, mit Schinken. (27)

He sits down and turns on the TV . . . and at Alexanderplatz a group of ten men—refugees apparently—have begun a hunger strike, one of them collapsed and was taken to the hospital. . . .Why didn’t he see the demonstration? He dressed his first sandwich with sliced cheese, and now comes the second, with ham.⁶ (18)

The news of the migrants’ hunger strike—sandwiched between Richard’s first and second slices of bread—barely disrupts his evening meal. Undoubtedly, the “grounding character of everyday practices shapes Richard’s existence,” as Baker notes, yet these painstaking details do more than characterize Richard in a narrow sense (508). They delineate the exact location from which migration is viewed, examined, and apprehended in the novel: that is, the position of the well-meaning but out-of-touch European intellectual.

The novel’s profound attention to the life world of its protagonist is realized in the meticulous descriptions of Richard’s shopping list, cooking procedures, and reading habits. “Das ist seine Welt, ist inzwischen die Welt, in der er sich auskennt” (72) ‘This is his world, it’s become the world in which he knows his way around’ (56), remarks the narrator, emphasizing the familiarity sustained by such an order of things—Richard’s feeling of being at home in the world. The habitual order of Richard’s world extends beyond the realm of everyday life to include the very structures of his thinking. In juxtaposing mundane regimens with what Étienne Balibar might call Richard’s “schemas of knowledge,” the narrative transposes a profound habitual rootedness onto his structures of thought (40). Though only a

⁶ Translation modified from “His first slice of bread had cheese on top, now comes the second slice, with ham” (18) to keep Richard as the active agent in the last sentence.

turn of phrase in Balibar's writing, "schemas of knowledge" has analytical potential in that it recognizes the constructedness of epistemic frameworks that structure one's way of being in the world. Aníbal Quijano's concept of coloniality delineates the direction and critical force implicit in Balibar's phrasing. Quijano distinguishes between coloniality and colonialism, where the former is the epistemic framework that disseminates Eurocentric social orders and forms of knowledge in the wake of the destruction of indigenous epistemologies. Coloniality enabled and fed off colonialism, the "formal system of political domination by Western European societies" (Quijano 168). The recognition of coloniality as a schema of knowledge allows Quijano to extend colonial power dynamics even after "colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed" (170).

Richard's routines are suggestive of exactly this kind of deeply ingrained Eurocentric pattern of thought. While Richard is a problematic protagonist because he embodies in several ways the hegemonic structures that keep marginalized voices from being heard in literature, the narrative attention to his schemas of knowledge exposes him as a *gebildet* 'traditionally educated' German, well-versed in the European literary and cultural tradition but generally ignorant of most things outside of the confines of that canon. More importantly, however, through the steady focus on its problematic protagonist, *Go, Went, Gone* demonstrates Balibar's assertion that "the colonial heritage [is] constituted by both human and economic relations, and by schemas of knowledge" (40). Erpenbeck's novel establishes Richard's ingrained schemas of knowledge and concomitantly reveals the "shortcomings, flaws, and gaps" inherent in them (Steckenbiller 69). While the novel's narrative strategy continues to hinge on details, the attention shifts to the particulars of the interactions between Richard and the migrants. The details that Richard registers and those he misses foreground the Eurocentrism of the methodology, practices, and assumptions informing his perceptions and actions.

For Quijano, Eurocentric epistemologies are based on a "subject-object relation," in which the European subject is defined by reason and rationality and its non-European object is necessarily constructed as different "in nature" (172). As if Erpenbeck wanted to highlight a contemporary manifestation of this power dynamic (widely discussed in the field of anthropology and ethnology), she turns her retiring protagonist Richard into a hobby ethnographer who reassumes his role as researcher when he devises a questionnaire to interview the migrants. His catalogue of roughly thirty questions sketches the contours of an entire life from childhood ("Wo sind Sie aufgewachsen? . . . Wie sah die Wohnung, das Haus aus, in dem Sie aufwuchsen?" [52] 'Where did you grow up? . . . What did the apartment or house you grew up in look like?' [39]), to a career ("Haben Sie einen Beruf gelernt?" [52] 'Did you learn a trade?' [39]), a hypothetical future and family ("Wenn Sie Kinder hätten, die hier aufwachsen, was würden Sie ihnen von der Heimat erzählen?" [52] 'If you had children who were growing up here, what would

you tell them about your homeland?' [39]), and eventually, death ("Wo soll man Sie begraben?" [52] 'Where do you want to be buried?' [39]). While several critics including Baker frequently note that Richard has "meaningful encounters with people who are ostensibly different from him" (507), the specific terms of these encounters have yet to be scrutinized. To begin with, Richard is presented as a character who assumes the right to interview migrants and never doubts the existential universality of his questions. The ideological charge of his inquiries—grounded in specific ideas pertinent to a western middle-class life trajectory (such as childhood, profession, home, and life goals) and stereotypical markers of foreignness (language, clothing, and food)—is exposed as Eurocentric and colonial when the questions hinder rather than facilitate communication between Richard and his "research subjects."

In bringing Richard and the migrants into conversation, Erpenbeck seems less interested in demonstrating the success of this dialogue than she does in examining the various ways in which the communication between Richard—standing here for the educated German public—and the migrants breaks down: monosyllabic answers, long silences, and rhetorical questions that indicate Richard's limited perspective. One of the most poignant examples of such a failure occurs when an unnamed young man from Niger withholds the most telling information about his life as he answers Richard's probing interview questions with single-word responses. The information he conceals from Richard during those pregnant silences is, however, disclosed to the reader. When Richard asks about his family, "[d]er Junge schweigt" (67) '[t]he boy is silent' (52), and the dialogue transforms into a monologue, rendered as free indirect discourse: "Warum sollte er einem fremden Mann sagen, dass er nicht weiß, warum er nie Eltern hatte?" (67) "Why should he tell a stranger he doesn't know why he never had parents?" (52). Interrogated about his ability to write, the young man once again withholds his answer from his interviewer as the free indirect discourse takes over: "Soll er einem fremden Mann sagen, dass die Kinder der Herdenbesitzer mit ihren Müttern vor den Zelten saßen und im Sand Tifinagh schreiben lernten, die Tuareg-Schrift, während er die Kamele noch einmal melken musste, bevor es Nacht wurde?" (68) 'Should he tell the stranger that the children of the herders would sit beside their mothers in front of the tent, learning to write Tifinagh—the Tuareg script—in the sand while he had to go milk the camels one last time before nightfall?' (53). Richard's questions (and, by extension, world view) foreclose the possibility of a childhood spent as a slave, without parents or basic education. The Nigerien's silence—an act of resistance—leaves Richard oblivious to the rhetorical questions that not only undermine the basic premise of the conversation, but also expose the limits of the European's schemas of perception and the presumptuousness of his "research project."

The novel meticulously catalogs the ways in which Richard reworks the select information he receives concerning the migrants' stories, experiences, and identities through his habitual epistemic frameworks. In one of the most offensive acts of this kind, he renames several migrant characters. He christens, for instance, the young Nigerien "Apollo," because he fancies the youth resembles the Greek god. The contemporary western imagination of the Greek and Roman worlds is overwhelmingly white due in large part to the whitewashing of classical sculpture that has enabled assumptions and supported theories about cultural, aesthetic, and racial superiority since at least the eighteenth century (Painter 59-71). By renaming the young Nigerien after the god often considered by modern Europeans to be the epitome of classical beauty,⁷ Richard aestheticizes and erases the black body by recontextualizing that body within the (white) Greek pantheon—Richard's professional field of expertise.⁸ In a similarly symbolic act, Richard christens Awad, an asylum seeker from Ghana, "Tristan," after Gottfried von Straßburg's medieval epic hero, because, like Tristan's, Awad's life began with the death of his mother and has been *triste* 'sorrowful' ever since: "So wie Blanscheflur, denkt Richard, so wie die Mutter von Tristan" (75) 'Just like *Blanchefleur*, Richard thinks, just like the mother of Tristan' (58). In a moment that brings to the fore the symbolic force of Richard's practice, he is portrayed as a paternalistic, colonial master: Awad's father had previously supplied his son with a sense of self-identity—"Mein Vater sagte mir, wer ich bin" (76) 'My father told me who I am' (59)—but after his father's murder and his subsequent flight to Europe, Awad experiences a loss of self: "Und ich – ich weiß nicht mehr, wer ich bin" (81) 'And me – I don't know who I am anymore' (63). When Richard intervenes in Awad's identity crisis—imposing on him an unsanctioned western name and identity—he conjures the deeply colonial fantasy of the "human family," that Fatima El-Tayeb describes as the image of the "civilized European father" who casts his careful gaze upon the childlike "primitive people" (52).

Richard's acts of renaming are of interest here because they reveal that he perceives and makes sense of the migrants' lives and experiences by relating them through the western literary and cultural canons. Their yearning for their homeland is comprehensible to him as the longing of Goethe's Iphigenia—"Emigrantin auf Tauris" (82) 'emigrant in Tauris' (65)—and their perilous pursuit of happiness ("Wir dachten uns, vielleicht hat wenigstens einer Glück und kann dann später dem anderen helfen" [221] '[W]e decided to go our separate ways, in the hope that one of us might get lucky' [178]) is only fathomable as the adventures of a Grimms' fairy tale. Lacking touch points beyond his European *Bildung*, Richard cannot make

⁷ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the influential eighteenth-century German art historian, for example, asserted that the *Apollo Belvedere* was "the embodiment of perfect human beauty" (Painter 60; emphasis in original).

⁸ For an extended analysis of Richard's "exoticizing practices," see Steckenbiller 73-75.

sense of the migrants' experiences without first recontextualizing them—often quite literally—within works of the European tradition,⁹ and thus perceiving them through the categories stipulated by his habitual episteme. *Go, Went, Gone* forces its readers into the same pattern of thought as it continually uses the migrants' westernized names throughout the narrative. By slyly compelling its readers (and critics) to sanction the westernization of the migrants' identities, it demonstrates the ease with which the accrual of interpretation and meaning can be passed on, compounding the epistemological damage inflicted on the original subjects.

The novel clearly situates Richard's epistemological center in western Europe, but Richard never reflects on the positioning of his knowledge even as it expands. *Go, Went, Gone* illustrates this issue through Richard's growing awareness of African geography. As he reads from the works of Herodotus, "verrückt sich für ihn plötzlich auch der griechische Götterhimmel . . . und er versteht plötzlich neu, was es bedeutet, dass sich für die Griechen das Ende der Welt da befand, wo heute Marokko ist . . ." (178) '[Richard] experiences a sudden shifting in his conception of the Greek pantheon . . . and suddenly he has a new understanding of what it means that for the Greeks the end of the world was located in what is now Morocco . . .' (141). The retired classicist realizes for the first time that the Greeks' conceptualization of the world extended to the Atlas Mountains to include North Africa. Present-day Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria, he learns, were the settings for the birth of Athena, the legend of the Amazons, and Medusa's murder, and "waren in der Antike das Gebiet vor dem Ende der Welt, also die Welt" (176; emphasis in original) '[were] understood to be the territory just before the end of the world, ergo the world'¹⁰ (141). This reclamation of the entire Greek classical world—the cultural forebear of enlightened Europe—suddenly renders these heretofore foreign lands familiar to Richard. But as a movement outward from its geographic center, the expansion of his geographical awareness resembles a colonial or imperial expansion, as if he is reclaiming lost lands.

In a moment of reflection spurred by the new orientation of the world won through his rereading of Herodotus, Richard unwittingly admits to a deep-seated theory of knowledge as he questions the seemingly endless pursuit of knowledge:

Wie oft wohl muss einer das, was er weiß, noch einmal lernen, wieder und wieder entdecken, wie viele Verkleidungen abreißen, bis er die Dinge

⁹ The novel compellingly illustrates Dipesh Chakrabarty's point that while "an entity called 'the European intellectual tradition' is a fabrication of relatively recent European history," the fabrication proves nonetheless efficacious because it represents "the genealogy of thought in which social sciences find themselves inserted" (5). Richard, as protagonist, invites us to extend Chakrabarty's claim to literature as well.

¹⁰ Translation modified to add "ergo the world," which follows the German "also die Welt" (176).

wirklich versteht bis auf die Knochen? Reicht überhaupt eine Lebenszeit dafür aus? Seine – oder die eines anderen? (177)

How many times, he wonders, must a person relearn everything, rediscovering it over and over, and how many coverings must be torn away before he's finally able to truly grasp things, to understand them to the bone? Is a human lifetime enough? His lifetime or anyone else's? (142)

The imagery of discovery and revelation, of exposing the bare bones of the matter where real understanding lies, vividly depicts Richard's belief that absolute certainty can eventually be attained—a belief not even new insights can shatter. He realizes, for instance, the arbitrariness of the straight lines drawn by colonial powers over the map of northern Africa and the Sahara (66; 51); he also acknowledges the extent of Europe's neocolonialism when he discusses Niger's rich uranium deposits, claimed and plundered by the French energy company Areva, which sponsors the German professional soccer team in Nuremberg (182; 147). However, despite demonstrating a growing awareness of the Eurocentricity of political and economic policies in many parts of Africa—and becoming increasingly acquainted with the history, politics, and economies of various African countries—he never questions Europe as the center from which his epistemological horizons extend. Drawing on Quijano's distinction, we could say that Richard recognizes colonization, the “formal system of political domination” (168), but fails to recognize coloniality as its epistemic underpinning and his own implication in it. Instead of a relativization of his knowledge, which could recalibrate his geographic focus and allow for multiple poles anchoring diverse points of view and forms of understanding, Richard remains fixed to a European center.

The tension in *Go, Went, Gone* thus rests on the contrast between a German society that is, once again, undergoing significant shifts because of migration from former European colonies to Germany and Richard's schemas of knowledge that nonetheless remain remarkably stable, with colonialism conspicuously absent. His consideration of the historical movement of the Berbers “vom Kaukasus über Anatolien und die Levante bis nach Ägypten und ins antike Libyen, später dann in den heutigen Niger und vom Niger wieder zurück ins heutige Libyen und über das Meer bis nach Rom und Berlin” (178) ‘from the Caucasus by way of Anatolia and the Levant all the way to Egypt and ancient Libya, then later into modern-day Niger and then back from Niger to modern-day Libya and across the sea to Rome and Berlin’ (143) occasions Richard's more general reflection on migration, with noticeable lacunae:

Tausende von Jahren dauert die Bewegung von Menschen über die Kontinente schon an, und niemals hat es Stillstand gegeben. Es gab Handel,

Kriege, Vertreibung, auf der Suche nach Wasser und Nahrung sind die Menschen oft dem Vieh, das sie besaßen, gefolgt, es gab Flucht vor Dürre und Plagen, Suche nach Gold, Salz, oder Eisen, oder es konnte dem Glauben an den eigenen Gott nur in der Diaspora die Treue gehalten werden, es gab Verfall, Verwandlung, Wiederaufbau und Siedler, es gab bessere oder schlechtere Wege, niemals aber Stillstand. (178)

This movement of people across the continents has been going on for thousands of years, and never once has it come to a standstill. There was commerce and, wars, and expulsions; people often followed the animals they owned in search of water and food, they fled from droughts and plagues, went in search of gold, salt, or iron, or else their faith in their own god could be pursued only in the diaspora; there was ruin, transformation, reconstruction, and settlement; there were better and worse paths, but it never came to a standstill.¹¹ (143)

Moving swiftly from the concrete example of the Berbers to migratory movements in general, Richard's reflection lacks much-needed specificity: his temporal and spatial scales become so vast that they allow for nothing but generalizations. Disregarding for the moment his problematic attempt to philosophize about "natural laws of migration," the phenomena that he considers probable causes of migratory movement—wars and expulsion, availability of material goods, climate, religion—are revealing. They are, of course, not wrong, but if Richard did not veer so swiftly from the specifics of the Berbers' migration to migration in general, the vague allusions to commerce, wars, climate, commodities, and religion would have to be specified, necessitating the mention of French colonial history in northern Africa, and European colonialism more broadly. The bird's eye view that Richard takes allows him to leave colonialism unexamined, and to obscure the specific causes of contemporary migration with what he calls a "Naturgesetz" 'law of nature,' likening migration to the natural cycles of foliage, "wo so viele der Blätter, über deren Erscheinen er sich im Frühjahr gefreut hat, nun schon auf dem Gras liegen" (178) 'where so many of the leaves whose appearance cheered him in spring now lie on the grass . . . ' (143). Both Richard's haste to move from the example of the Berbers to generic migration and his particular argumentation about migratory

¹¹ The following modifications were made to the translation: from "never once has this movement halted" (143) to keep close to the German noun "Stillstand"; from "There was ruin and then transformation and reconstruction" (143) to keep the German sentence structure intact and the word "settlement" in the sentence; from "There were better roads and worse ones, but never did movement cease" (143) to keep the German sentence structure intact and the semantic field of "Wege," which refers not only to roads but to paths more abstractly; and to repeat "Stillstand," as the repetition adds emphasis in the German.

movements enact precisely what El-Tayeb identifies as the absence of colonial history from European discourses (24-25).

Go, Went, Gone thus exposes not only its protagonist's Eurocentrism but also his selective awareness of history. Richard is attuned to the atrocities of German history and nonetheless often demonstrates ignorance concerning the historical specificities of European colonialism and consequential contemporary migratory movements to the European continent. While at several points in the novel the narrator's presence is palpable, as the tone toward Richard is colored by irony and even mockery,¹² the novel's perspective also frequently hovers so close to that of its protagonist that it appears as if Richard has taken over the narration.¹³ With this oscillation between ironic distance and its near-complete dissolve, *Go, Went, Gone* acknowledges Richard's problematic epistemological practices and yet implicates itself in the very structures that it reveals. The novel's relentless vacillating between these two positions also reverberates on the level of genre. Erpenbeck's invocation of the *Bildungsroman* demonstrates that a focus on the Eurocentricity of *Bildung*—enabled by the problematic choice of protagonist—also has repercussions for a genre that references *Bildung* as a concept, even if it summons *Bildung* in the more general (and dynamic) sense of individual development.

The Politics of Form

Let us return for a moment to the scene of Richard at his dinner table, watching the eight o'clock news features on the protesting refugees in between sandwiches. Richard considers briefly whether it is ethical to continue with his meal while observing the suffering of others: "Aber deswegen muss er nicht, nur weil ein Verzweifelter heutzutage einen Hungerstreik macht, gleichfalls verhungern" (27) 'But that doesn't mean he has to starve himself just because a desperate man has begun a hunger strike' (18). The non-specificity of "ein Verzweifelter"—a nominalization that ignores the man's humanity by reducing him to his state of

¹² The irony is present in the novel's excessive detailing of Richard's everyday habits, which simultaneously indicates the luxury of routine and a small-minded bourgeois existence: shopping lists (German 30-31, 72, 116, 161; English: 21, 56, 92, 129); meals (German: 24, 30, 121, 128; English: 15, 20, 96, 102), and interior design (German: 117; English: 93). One particularly piquant example of the novel's mockery of the German *Bildungsbürger* 'educated bourgeois' is the narrator's comment when Richard talks about his new acquaintances: "Apoll, Tristan und der Olympier bekommen nun ihren Platz in einem deutschen Wohnzimmer mit Couchecke, Fernseher, Obstschale und Bücherregal" (117) 'Apollo, Tristan, and the Olympian now have a place in a German living room with its L-shaped sofa, TV, fruit bowl, and bookshelf' (93).

¹³ Janzen identifies Richard as "the professor as narrator and protagonist" (278). Strictly speaking, Richard serves as a strong focalizing instance for the third-person narrator, but Janzen's inaccuracy bespeaks precisely the omnipresence of his voice.

desperation—is suggestive of Richard’s initial ignorance, which gradually gives way as he meets individual migrants with names, learns their histories of flight, and relates to their hopes and aspirations. Richard’s increasing—though ultimately limited—understanding and empathy lead to action, including acquiring and gifting farming land in Ghana to a refugee’s family and opening his house in Berlin to refugees. It is, indeed, a developmental narrative of an aging European. From Richard’s perspective, this may even be a flattering trajectory: one that begins with a lonesome dinner during which he experiences the political protest of refugees as a momentary ethical imposition and which culminates, quite emblematically, in the idyllic concluding scene of Richard’s birthday party, when the novel ends with Germans and refugees coming together in joyous conviviality.

Neither the developmental aspect nor the cautiously utopian and overtly celebratory tones of the novel’s final scene have been lost on critics. We propose, however, a reading that complicates interpretations of the protagonist’s trajectory as a successful (albeit problematic) development from German bourgeois citizen to global citizen (Janzen, 278-283) and ask instead: how does *Go, Went, Gone*’s focus on, and critique of, *Bildung*—the subject of the first part of our analysis—relate to the novel’s evocation of the *Bildungsroman* genre? Is it possible to put forth a critique of *Bildung*’s fundamentally Eurocentric nature and leave the genre of the *Bildungsroman* unscathed? Perhaps unsurprisingly, our response to the latter is no. Maintaining this stance means locating the political impetus of Erpenbeck’s novel at the critical juncture of *Bildung* as a theme and *Bildungsroman* as a genre. Contrary to readings that regard *Go, Went, Gone* first and foremost as a literary intervention into current debates on migration, we unfold an argument that also heeds the generic properties of the novel. In so doing, we recognize that the politics of the novel is found not only in its thematic treatment of contemporary migratory movements, but also in its triangulation of migration stories focalized through the lens of *Bildung* and put forth in a narrative evocative of the *Bildungsroman*—a genre whose history is intricately entwined with European modernity, German national identity, and their colonial foundations.

The *Bildungsroman* has a long and varied history, beginning in the Enlightenment and evolving through German, European, colonial, and postcolonial literary history. The genre’s long-lasting relevance to both authors and critics is based on its symbolic convergence of the individual and the world, as well as its self-critical reflex, which is expressed through constant formal deviations from the heuristic generic model. In Mikhail Bakhtin’s classic account of the genre, the *Bildungsroman*’s import lies in lending literary form to a particular sense of historicity that arose in the late eighteenth century: “man’s individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence . . . He emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself” (23, emphasis in original). Imbued with the “historical consciousness” of the Enlightenment, the

Bildungsroman situated the hero's developmental trajectory in a world that was also conceptualized as evolving (Kontje 11). Following Bakhtin, we can say that the genre's particular achievement has been in meaningfully relating two different scales of change: large-scale historical developments and individual life trajectories. This generic feature remains constant even as the *Bildungsroman* migrates from nineteenth century Europe to modernist, colonial, and postcolonial contexts and evolves with its plots, characters, and form. Deviations from its heuristic definition are a characteristic feature of the *Bildungsroman*—as Jed Esty reminds us, its “unmaking is always coeval with its making” (18).

So as *Go, Went, Gone* summons Germany as the *Bildungsroman*'s country of origin, Erpenbeck's rendering of the genre seems to harken back to its beginnings (as characterized by Bakhtin): her protagonist confronts a Berlin—synecdochally representing wider German and European society—that is undergoing fundamental shifts in the wake of migratory movements. However, instead of centering on a traditionally youthful protagonist, Erpenbeck's *Bildungsroman* eschews the figures who are of prime age for a developmental narrative, the migrants, for the aged Richard. Erpenbeck thus deviates from the traditional make-up of the *Bildungsroman* and in so doing remains within its tradition of deviating from generic forms. Following Esty's lead, then, we ask how the *Bildungsroman* is undone through Richard's advanced age and what the significance is of this consequential intervention into generic conventions.

Richard is both an aging and a successful protagonist. Though past the zenith of his life, he is the fully realized subject of the ideal *Bildungsroman*; his life can be read as the imaginary continuation of the protagonist's path once the traditional *Bildungsroman* has concluded by reconciling youthful idealism with the sobering realities of society. Richard's advanced age thus goes hand in hand with another crucial divergence from generic conventions: the reversal of the classic *Bildungsroman*'s emplotment, as Richard's journey begins at the heart of German society. Instead of staging an initial divergence between the protagonist's ideals and social requirements, *Go, Went, Gone* commences with their unproblematic union. Richard's social integration is epitomized by his position as a professor, which makes him a *Beamter* ‘civil servant,’ a representative of the German state.

If *Go, Went, Gone* begins with the unity between the two oppositional forces that the traditional *Bildungsroman* seeks to harmonize (as its *raison d'être*), we observe their gradual bifurcation over the course of the narrative. Moving counter to the direction of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, Richard's individual development—his growing awareness of the inadequacy of both German immigration law and the European Union's asylum-regulating legislation (Dublin III Regulation) to address the situation of refugees—ultimately leads him to distance himself from social institutions. Marike Janzen, who reads *Go, Went, Gone* as theorizing the *Bildungsbürger*-refugee relationship, argues that the novel

celebrates “German domestic life radically transformed through the presence of refugees” without disrupting “state institutions that marginalize citizens” (282). Janzen’s assessment thus exposes the private realm and the state as two separate but oppositional forces in the novel. Our critique goes further, taking into account Erpenbeck’s invocation of the *Bildungsroman* and the ways in which *Bildung*—understood here on the level of plot as a specific dynamic trajectory—configures the relations between Richard and the larger social realm. Read symbolically, a developmental process at the age of retirement confirms the necessity of transformation irrespective of age because of a persistently changing social realm. In this sense, Richard is a truly Bakhtinian protagonist of the *Bildungsroman*. Erpenbeck, however, also significantly modifies Bakhtin’s idea: *Go, Went, Gone*’s emphasis on its protagonist’s mature age negates the idea of *Bildung* as a single process completed at the threshold of adulthood and foregrounds life instead as a series of transformational processes necessitated by political and social change. Or, more precisely, by the situation described by Nicholas De Geneva: “In the wake of decolonization on a global scale, coupled now with many decades of transnational, intercontinental, postcolonial migrations that are the harvest of empire, Europeans today—like Germans confronting the Nazi past—are forced to contemplate the legacies of Europe’s historical crimes” (79).

Erpenbeck’s invocation of the *Bildungsroman* proves to be an intricate strategy: on the one hand, the genre’s deployment affirms the necessity of personal development—occasioned by the current migration to Europe and the reckoning with Europe’s colonialism and neocolonialism—as one of its causes. And yet, on the other hand, it reveals the social environment to be unaccommodating to that very process. Put differently: while *Go, Went, Gone* gestures to the genre of the (belated) *Bildungsroman*, the novel’s particular configuration records the very impossibility of Richard’s successful emergence into a radically transformed post-national and post-migrant¹⁴ German society. Richard’s own (relative) development must be understood vis-à-vis the failure of social institutions to adapt to the realities of a German society that would accept the long history of migration to Germany as given and whose self-definitions would reflect migration as integral to its own social makeup. While Richard as a character thus registers the necessity of such a social transformation in a post-migrant Germany—even as he proves incapable of decentering the categories of his own thinking—the institutions around him conjure

¹⁴ In employing the term post-migrant (“post-migrantisch” in German), we draw on Fatima El-Tayeb’s understanding of the post-migrant condition as one in which migration no longer serves as the representation of the other (23-34). El-Tayeb rightly argues that the word “post” should be employed in the sense of overcoming a previous condition, not merely in a temporal sense. She points out that the decisive question is whether the respective condition marked by “post”—El-Tayeb’s examples are postfascist, postsocialist, and postcolonial—has become central to a nation’s identity (24). Rather than describing a current state, post-migrant thus delineates the possibilities of a future Germany that deliberately grapples with the political and social consequences of migration.

the idea of nation-states engaged in what Stuart Hall called “boundary maintenance” (18).

Erpenbeck’s novel can also be situated within a tradition of *Bildungsroman* criticism that draws explicit connections between youth and modernity. In Franco Moretti’s account, the *Bildungsroman* easily traversed national traditions in the early nineteenth century to establish itself as a transnational genre because its youthful hero bestowed meaning upon modernity. More precisely, modernity found its symbolic expression in youth as it harnessed youth’s forward progression, future potential, and boundless dynamism (Moretti, 5-6). This conceptualization of modernity as unbridled progress, it must be acknowledged, is inherently and uncritically Eurocentric, because time, too, has been colonized and made integral to colonial epistemologies. Richard’s age, then, read with Moretti’s interpretation of the *Bildungsroman* as a symbolic form of modernity, does not appear incidental but rather seems to be a potent reflexive commentary on European modernity. Late age derives its significance from the fact that it does not endow modernity—in contradistinction to the *Bildungsroman*’s classical nineteenth-century form—with the endless potential of the future and the unlimited energies to push towards that temporal horizon. If youthful protagonists like Wilhelm Meister, Elizabeth Bennett, and Julien Sorel embody “modernity’s essence,” to echo Moretti, Richard is a symbolic figure of European modernity’s swansong. *Go, Went, Gone* imagines Europe no longer as a young, dynamic force but as an aging figure that is neither unwilling nor completely unable to change but fails to do so at the structural level of knowledge and epistemology. Richard thus represents both European modernity’s current condition and its scathing critique.

This critique, however, calls for specification. Richard emerges as a more potent figure of critique when we consider the novel’s peculiar constellation of characters. The youthful migrant characters do not figure as protagonists; instead, Richard, the retiring European, takes center stage in Erpenbeck’s *Bildungsroman*. Although this particular set-up may be charged from a representational point of view manifesting yet another instance of Eurocentrism, as critics have duly noted,¹⁵ the novel also enacts a critique of European modernity as it faces migration not at Europe’s shores but at its very center. Put more emphatically: Richard as a waning figure of European modernity becomes particularly striking as he is confronted with migration as a consequence of modernity’s colonial and neocolonial politics. Esty, drawing on Moretti’s reading of the *Bildungsroman* as a genre of symbolic and political significance, argues that the *Bildungsroman*’s modernist variants vividly

¹⁵ See Steckenbiller for Eurocentrism and *Bildung* (71); Janzen also notes Richard’s Eurocentric perspective but argues that “learning about Africans leads [Richard] to see Europe from the perspective of Africans, a process that reorients his worldview” (281). Baker claims that “the emphasis on Richard raises the risk of a Eurocentric point of view” yet contends that although “the novel is told from Richard’s perspective, he is not its topical force” (506).

demonstrate the nexus between “modernist aesthetics and modern colonialism” (2). Whereas for Moretti the *Bildungsroman* ends with World War I, Esty asserts that the genre continues beyond the early twentieth century,¹⁶ though the modernist version is significantly transformed on two accounts: Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce’s youthful protagonists “conspicuously *do not grow up*” (2; emphasis in original) and the *Bildungsroman*’s national frame of reference shifts to a global one (37). Connecting these two concurrent phenomena, Esty argues that “[a]s the national referent was increasingly embedded in the matrix of colonial modernity, the destinies of persons, and the peoples they represent, had to include not only the story of progress, but also stories of stasis, regression, and hyperdevelopment” (25).

In *Go, Went, Gone* Richard conjures a related but different problem. If Esty regards modernist stories of delayed, stalled, and failed maturation as “indexing the uneven development . . . between metropole-colony relations,” Richard’s story of post-retirement self-formation is suggestive of the metropole-colony relations as they return and haunt the former colonizing power of Europe (7). Richard is a figure of European colonial modernity facing migration as its consequence. In some ways, this is a logical extension of the German *Bildungsroman* which, as Todd Kontje argues, has expressed “the exigencies of national identity in a land marked by shifting boundaries and moving peoples” (32). *Go, Went, Gone* cites the historical instability of Germany as both a cultural nation and a political state (45; 33-34) as Richard excavates Berlin’s colonial history on his walks through the city (49; 37), recalls his and his mother’s westward migration in the wake of advancing Soviet troops (25; 17), and reminisces about his life in the former GDR (21-22, 76-77, 276; 13, 59-60, 223). However, the current political and social upheaval overwhelms the traditional framework of the nation-state model in the novel, as migration and its consequences defy the very parameters of the nation-state, including its neatly defined ideologies, peoples, political entities, and legal jurisdictions.

If we regard Richard’s process of individual development as symbolic, *Go, Went, Gone* offers a nuanced picture and delineates a rather realistic, if not pessimistic, horizon of possibility for European post-migrant societies. The novel certainly attributes character development to its protagonist: not only does his perspective shift, but, in contrast to several of his counterparts from the tradition of the German *Bildungsroman*, he is also compelled to act—both for, and on behalf of, migrants. Yet even his capacity to act bears witness to the radical imbalance of power engendered by former colonial exploitation and is not only concurrent with,

¹⁶ Tobias Boes notes that “most scholars regard the novel of formation as a primarily nineteenth-century phenomenon. . . . There are canonical modernist *Bildungsromane*, of course, . . . but most scholars have treated these as limit-cases of the genre” (231).

but also predicated on, Richard's persistent Eurocentric epistemology and patterns of thinking.

With Richard unable to break with the legacy of colonialism in his individual actions, we must look to the novel's form for a political critique. The *Bildungsroman* form has been used before to critique Eurocentric patterns of thinking, particularly in the literatures of former colonies in Africa, India, and the Caribbean. José Santiago Fernández Vázquez, for example, argues that postcolonial writers employ the *Bildungsroman* genre with "the desire to incorporate the master codes of imperialism into the text, in order to sabotage them more effectively" (86). Ericka A. Hoagland defines the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* "as an act of subversion and inversion, a political act of counter-colonization, a reimagining and reinvention, a process of becoming through the act of unmaking its predecessor and unmasking the Bildungsroman's ideological flaws" (225). The postcolonial *Bildungsroman* that Vázquez and Hoagland reference attacks the *Bildungsroman*'s ideological foundations from outside of Europe, where the destructive consequences of colonialism on societal and individual formation are evident. In *Go, Went, Gone*, however, we have a different kind of postcolonial *Bildungsroman*, if we will, namely, one from the center of Europe focusing on the European subject haunted by the legacy of its own past and its metropole-colony relations. The European setting underscores the way in which both the protagonist and the genre are ensnared in Eurocentric epistemologies. Richard's actions still carry a colonial imbalance of power, because neither the character nor the genre has the power to undo itself or to subvert imperialistic power structures. Instead, the novel simply fails to realize the genre's traditional goal of reconciling the individual with the social.

Conclusion

To conclude, we return to the apparent idyll of *Go, Went, Gone*'s final scene, in which Richard celebrates his birthday with a group of migrants and German friends in his home, which now houses several asylum seekers. These concluding moments are easily misread as a potential vision for a German post-migrant society in miniature. Richard, once content to be alone in his house because "[e]s ist niemand mehr da, die Ordnung zu stören" (24) 'there is no longer anyone there to disrupt the order'¹⁷ (16), overcomes his deeply ingrained and clichéd German sense of order to welcome migrants into his home as a corrective to the state's failure to address their needs through effectual policy. However, a different

¹⁷ Translation modified to use "the order" instead of "your routine" (16) to reflect the ambiguity of the original "die Ordnung" (24), which could refer to the order of Richard's private sphere as well as a larger world order.

sense of order—what, drawing on Balibar, we called schemas of knowledge—runs throughout the novel: a Eurocentric epistemology and *Bildung* that render momentary gestures of inclusivity ineffective and unsustainable, because, as Quijano proposes, the political struggle of decolonization remains ineffectual without “*epistemic reconstitution*”¹⁸ (Mignolo 228; emphasis in original). Putting pressure on these modes of perception and means of knowledge production and perpetuation, Erpenbeck’s novel casts a pall over the possibilities of a post-migrant Germany, because the systemic structures most affecting the migrants have not changed despite Richard’s personal growth. In these recurring moments, the novel demonstrates Fatima El-Tayeb’s assertion that “the colonial past has vanished almost entirely from the public conscience” such that Eurocentrism and its colonial variants continue their afterlives undisturbed in the realm of epistemology and habits of thought (60).

The aging Richard, Erpenbeck’s purposefully problematic figure, thus turns out to be a hopeful, yet disappointing *Bildungsroman* protagonist. Hopeful because, after all, Richard’s development means that he learns accountability, and at the same time disappointing, because in the process he reproduces on different levels the historical power structures of colonialism and its contemporary injustices—in other words, precisely the wrongs he seeks to right. *Go, Went, Gone* does not attempt to resolve this tension; instead it shows how this ambivalence unfolds. Inserted into a plot that evokes the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, Richard and his emblematic blind spots become both a reckoning with, and a critique of, European modernity as it faces its colonial past in the form of migration. Erpenbeck’s twist on the *Bildungsroman* thus represents a self-reflexive gesture that demonstrates an awareness of the genre’s history in the project of European modernity while grappling with the limitations and possibilities of the form itself. In bringing *Bildung* and migration together, *Go, Went, Gone* does not allow the inadequacies of its form to preclude it from addressing contemporary migration. On the contrary, Richard, as protagonist, draws attention to the problems endemic not only to his Eurocentric worldview and epistemology, but also to the genre in which Erpenbeck has him perform his acts of empathy and benevolence.

¹⁸ Walter Mignolo specifies epistemic reconstitution as a twofold task: “to open up to the richness of knowledges and praxis of living that the rhetoric of modernity demonized and reduced to tradition, barbarism, folklore, underdevelopment, denied spirituality in the name of reason, and built knowledges to control sexuality and all kinds of barbarians. Second, and necessarily, epistemic reconstitution requires delinking from the bubbles of modern thoughts from the left and from the right” (228-29).

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