

**Cross-Cultural Self-Assertion and Cultural Politics:
African Migrants' Writing in German Since the Late 1990s**

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In his study on postcolonialism and postmodernism in German literature, Paul Michael Lützeler suggests that postcolonialism combines the critique of colonial conditions and legacies both in the former colonies and in Western societies with a new reading of colonialism as a global transcultural process.¹ Recent research has focused on German mainstream literature's contributions to the postcolonial project of 'rereading and rewriting colonialism'² and on postcolonial readings of German-Turkish literature, the most prominent strand of 'inter-cultural literature in Germany', to use Chiellino's term.³ However, the most obviously postcolonial strand in contemporary German literature and the one most clearly reflecting the transcultural dimension of global migration has to be the much smaller tradition of African migrants' writing in German, which emerged during the 1980s and has since seen significant development and diversification.

This strand of transcultural literature can be seen as postcolonial in three ways. Firstly, the authors originate from former European colonies in Africa and they (largely) choose to write in German, thus addressing a German readership as well as the growing African diaspora in Germany. In this respect African migrants' writing is one of the few examples of a German postcolonial literature in the literal sense, since there is very little evidence of the

¹ Paul Michael Lützeler, *Postmoderne und postkoloniale deutschsprachige Literatur: Diskurs – Analyse – Kritik*, Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2005, pp. 24-25.

² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (2nd edition, London, New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 221.

³ *Interkulturelle Literatur in Deutschland: Ein Handbuch*, ed. by Carmine Chiellino (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 2000). See for ex. *Der postkoloniale Blick: Deutsche Schriftsteller berichten aus der Dritten Welt*, ed. by Paul Michael Lützeler (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1997); Dirk Göttsche, 'Der neue historische Afrika-Roman: Kolonialismus aus postkolonialer Sicht', *German Life and Letters*, 56 (2003), 261-280; *Interkulturelle Texturen: Afrika und Deutschland im Reflexionsmedium der Literatur*, ed. by M. Moustapha Diallo and Dirk Göttsche (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2003); *(Post-) Kolonialismus und Deutsche Literatur: Impulse der angloamerikanischen Literatur- und Kulturtheorie*, ed. by Axel Dunker (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2005); Herbert Uerlings, *'Ich bin von niedriger Rasse': (Post-) Kolonialismus und Geschlechterdifferenz in der deutschen Literatur* (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau, 2006); Margaret Littler, 'Diasporic Identity in Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Mutterzunge*', in *Recasting German Identity: Culture, Politics, and Literature in the Berlin Republic*, ed. by Stuart Taberner and Frank Finlay (Woodbridge, Rochester/NY: Camden House, 2002), pp. 219-34; Leslie A. Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Toward a New Critical Grammar of Migration* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005); Dirk Göttsche, 'Emine Sevgi Özdamars Erzählung *Der Hof im Spiegel*: Spielräume einer postkolonialen Lektüre deutsch-türkischer Literatur', *German Life and Letters*, 59 (2006), 515-525.

‘Empire writing back’⁴ in the German context. Secondly, the largely autobiographical texts in question contribute thematically to the postcolonial project by critiquing the legacies of colonialism, both in Germany and in the authors’ African countries of origin. Thirdly, the history of African migrants’ writing in German reflects the shift from the anti-colonial discourse of African decolonisation and the corresponding Third World discourse in Germany since the 1960s, to more recent postcolonial discourse, which engages with experiences of migration and cultural hybridisation in a globalising world of continuing power imbalances. Contributing to the transcultural diversification of contemporary German literature, African migrants’ writing can thus be read both as African literature in German and as German literature by writers with an African background. It illustrates how postcolonial literatures and diasporic writing undercut the traditional notion of national literatures, operating at the ‘interstices’,⁵ as Bhabha puts it, of two or more cultures.

Reversing the traditional German gaze at the African Other and responding to it, African migrants’ writing reflects and promotes significant changes in German society and culture itself. Since the late 1990s, much of the autobiographical writing in this tradition combines accounts of cross-cultural self-assertion in the face of often traumatic experience with an explicit agenda in cultural politics, raising the African voice in both German and transnational debates. Other recent texts comment on African and German history and culture from positions of authority outside the potential stereotypes of migrants’ writing. After a brief summary of the early phase of African migrants’ writing in the 1980s and 1990s, this essay will focus on these new developments since the late 1990s, which have yet to be mapped in German postcolonial studies. The related, but distinct literature by Black Germans, which could be seen as the other strand of African diasporic writing in German, deserves separate discussion and cannot be included in this article.⁶

In historical terms, the African presence in Germany dates back to the late Middle Ages, gaining momentum through the slave-trade and later through German colonial involvement in

⁴ Ashcroft et al.

⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 2.

⁶ See the landmark anthology *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*, ed. by Katharina Oguntoye, May Opitz and Dagmar Schultz, with a contribution from Audre Lorde (Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1986); also see the relevant recent online dossiers published by the Heinrich Böll Foundation: *Dossier Schwarze Community in Deutschland*, ed. by Maureen Maisha Eggers (May 2006; http://www.migration-boell.de/web/diversity/48_583.asp, accessed 20.10.2008); Stafnie Kron, ‘Afrikanische Diaspora und Literatur Schwarzer Frauen in Deutschland’, in *Dossier Migrationsliteratur – eine neue deutsche Literatur?*, ed. by Sibel Kara (March 2009; http://www.migration-boell.de/web/integration/47_1900.asp, accessed 8.3.2009).

Africa.⁷ The end of World War I saw the beginnings of African diasporic politics in Germany, when immigrants from Germany's colonies began to organize themselves in the face of racist discrimination. Indeed, German colonialism was accompanied by an undercurrent of diasporic politics and anti-colonial African intervention, which historical research has only very recently begun to explore.⁸ Due to the early end of Germany's colonial empire in 1918, however, a sustained African diasporic discourse did not develop until the 1980s,⁹ when anti-colonial theory and growing West German multiculturalism gave rise to both fictional and autobiographical accounts of African experiences of (West) Germany. Pioneering works such as the novel *Die Täuschung* ('The Deception', 1987) by Ali Diallo from Mali, *Der Blues in mir* ('The Blues Inside Myself', 1986) by the Togolese artist El Loko, or – most notably – *Unter die Deutschen gefallen: Erfahrungen eines Afrikaners* ('Fallen Prey to the Germans: Experiences of an African', 1992) by the Nigerian medical student and oral surgeon Chima Oji focus on the critique of continuing German racism and on African self-assertion in the aftermath of colonialism.¹⁰ Although attempts to reclaim African traditions and values unspoiled by colonialism are exposed as precarious, these texts tend to operate with clear-cut oppositions between Europe and Africa, often leaving the African migrant torn between two irreconcilable worlds. Mostly written by male authors from an academic context, they foreground African experiences of discrimination and alienation in West Germany.¹¹

⁷ See Peter Martin, *Schwarze Teufel, edle Mohren*, Mit einem Nachwort von Hans Werner Debrunner (Hamburg: Junius, 1993); *Unbekannte Biographien: Afrikaner im deutschsprachigen Europa vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zum Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, ed. by Ulrich van der Heyden ([Werder/Havel:] Kai Homilius Verlag 2008).

⁸ See in particular *Unbekannte Biographien; Kolonialmetropole Berlin: Eine Spurensuche*, ed. by Ulrich van der Heyde and Joachim Zeller (Berlin: Edition Berlin, 2002); *Zwischen Charleston und Stechschritt: Schwarze im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. by Peter Martin and Christine Alonzo on behalf of the 'NS-Dokumentationszentrum der Stadt Köln' (Hamburg, Munich: Dölling & Galitz, 2004).

⁹ Exceptions include Wilhelm Amo, Emily Ruete, and – as a pioneer in modern African migrants' writing in German – Kum'a Ndumbe III's four German plays, written in 1968-70; see Sara Lennox, 'Das afrikanische Gesicht, das in deinem Raum spricht: Postkoloniale Autoren in Deutschland: Kum'a Numbe III und Uche Nduka', in *Text + Kritik-Sonderband Literatur und Migration*, ed. by Heinz Ludwig Arnold (Munich: text + kritik, 2006), pp. 167-176. It is symptomatic that Kum'a Ndumbe's literary works in German have not been printed until very recently in a joint venture of the publishers AfricAvenir (Douala/Cameroun) and Exchange & Dialogue (Berlin): *Ach Kamerun! Unsere alte Kolonie...: Ein Dokumentarstück in zehn Szenen* (1970/2005); *Das Fest der Liebe: Die Chance der Jugend* (1970/2005); *Lumumba II. (ein Stück in neun Szenen)* (1970/2006); *Kafra – Biatanga: Tragödie Afrikas (ein Stück in elf Szenen)* (1970/2006).

¹⁰ Aly Diallo, *Die Täuschung*, Aus dem Französischen übersetzt von Gabriele Henschke (Frankfurt/M.: Nexus, 1987); El Loko, *Der Blues in mir: Eine autobiographische Erzählung*, Mit Holzschnitten des Autors, Nachwort von Al Imfeld (Oberhausen: Graphium press, 1986); Chima Oji, *Unter die Deutschen gefallen: Erfahrungen eines Afrikaners* (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer, 1992).

¹¹ For an overview cf. János Riesz, 'Autor/innen aus dem schwarzafrikanischen Kulturraum', in *Interkulturelle Literatur in Deutschland*, pp. 248-62 (248-50). See also Sonja Lehner, '“Unter die Deutschen gefallen”: Afrikanische Literatur in deutscher Sprache und der schwierige Weg zur Interkulturalität', in *Interkulturelle Texturen*, pp. 45-74; Patrice Nganang, 'Autobiographies of Blackness in Germany', in *Germany's Colonial Pasts*, ed. by Eric Ames, Marcie Klotz, Lora Wildenthal (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), pp. 227-39.

Miriam Kwalanda's autobiography *Die Farbe meines Gesichts* ('The Colour of My Face', 1999),¹² the story of a former Kenyan prostitute who marries a German sex tourist before finding her own place in German society, marks the transition to a new phase in African migrants' literature, now largely written by female African migrants from various social backgrounds, who engage the help of professional German co-authors for the literary presentation of their lives. Hybrid renegotiations of African identity in the light of German diaspora and greater emphasis on the African background of postcolonial migration, already seen in Amma Darko's novels from the 1990s,¹³ also mark recent autobiographies such as *Tränen im Sand* ('Tears in the Sand', 2003) by the Somali immigrant Nura Abdi,¹⁴ *Geboren im Großen Regen: Mein Leben zwischen Afrika und Deutschland* (*Born in the Big Rains: A Memoir of Somalia and Survival*, 2004) by the Somali Fadumo Korn,¹⁵ and *Feuerherz* (*Heart of Fire*, 2004) by the Eritrean refugee Senait Ghebrehiwet Mehari.¹⁶ These texts illustrate the shift in this strand of minority literature from the anti-colonial discourse represented by Diallo and Oji, to the postcolonial and cross-cultural discourse represented by Kwalanda.¹⁷ Alongside the wave of popular German mainstream novels and autobiographies about Africa since the mid 1990s,¹⁸ African women are beginning to write in German about their experiences of Africa and Germany with particular emphasis on the pressures of survival in postcolonial Africa and the challenges of life in German diaspora.

This shift in cross-cultural discourse is matched by the move from the mostly small specialist publishers of early African migrants' literature¹⁹ to major publishing houses such as

¹² Miriam Kwalanda (with Birgit Theresa Koch), *Die Farbe meines Gesichts: Lebensreise einer kenianischen Frau* (Frankfurt/M.: Eichborn, 1999).

¹³ Amma Darko, *Der verkaufte Traum*, transl. Carmen Baerens (Stuttgart: Schmetterling, 1991). The English original appeared four years later in 'Heinemann's African Writers' Series': Amma Darko, *Beyond the Horizon* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995). Also see Amma Darko, *Spinnweben*, transl. and abridged by Anita Djafari (Stuttgart: Schmetterling, 1996).

¹⁴ Nura Abdi (with Leo G. Linder), *Tränen im Sand* (Bergisch Gladbach: Ehrenwirt, 2003).

¹⁵ Fadumo Korn (with Sabine Eichhorst), *Geboren im Großen Regen: Mein Leben zwischen Afrika und Deutschland* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt 2004). English translation: *Born in the Big Rains: A Memoir of Somalia and Survival*, transl. from the German and with an Afterword by Tobe Levin (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2004). Quotations in this article are from the German original.

¹⁶ Senait G. Mehari, *Feuerherz* (München: Droemer, 2004). In this case the German co-author Lukas Lessing is acknowledged in the epilogue (p. 307) rather than on the title page. English translation: *Heart of Fire*, transl. Christine Lo (London: Profile Books, 2006). Quotations in this article are from the German original.

¹⁷ See Dirk Götttsche, 'Colonial Legacies and Cross-Cultural Experience: The African Voice in Contemporary German Literature', *Edinburgh German Yearbook*, 1 (2007), 160-176.

¹⁸ Cf. Dirk Götttsche, 'Zwischen Exotismus und Postkolonialismus: Der Afrika-Diskurs in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur', in *Interkulturelle Texturen*, pp. 161-244.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Nexus (Diallo), Graphium (El Loko), Schmetterling (Darko), Evangelische Verlagsanstalt (Thomas Mazimpaka, *Ein Tutsi in Deutschland: Das Schicksal eines Flüchtlings* [3rd edition, Leipzig 1998]). The publication of Oji's *Unter die Deutschen gefallen* in the renowned Peter Hammer Verlag marks an exception and has certainly contributed to the larger impact of his text, given the publisher's long-

Eichborn, Droemer, Ullstein, or Rowohlt. Recent African migrants' writing clearly reaches a much wider mainstream readership than its predecessors, reflecting growing cross-cultural interest and awareness in German society. At the same time, marketing strategies – such as book covers and titles, as well as blurbs promising sensational biographical adventures in partially exotic terrain – suggest that publishers continue to target exoticist fascinations. There is thus friction throughout between these autobiographies' critical and emancipatory postcolonial identity discourse, which implicates Germany in the contemporary world of global interaction and migration, and a presentation which seems to invite uncritical reading and othering. It would seem such ambiguity is the price that this particular strand of African migrants' writing pays for commercial success.

Second phase African autobiographies since the late 1990s continue to engage critically with resurgent post-unification racism, right-wing violence, German immigration policy, and xenophobic prejudice. However, they break with the earlier antithetical construction of African and European cultural identities, embracing the postcolonial condition as a dynamic 'Third Space'²⁰ and combining detailed accounts of traditional and modern African life with transnational cultural politics. Kwalanda, for example, uses an epilogue by her German co-author to reinforce her message of empowerment, cross-cultural dialogue and respect.²¹ Refusing to be cast purely as a victim of colonial legacies, she presents the history of her migration as one of both crisis and success. Engagement with German culture and Western feminism allows her to develop her own mix of 'identity and culture' ('meine eigene Mischung aus Identität und Kultur'), and to amalgamate her pride in being a Kenyan with German notions of emancipation and self-determination.²² Although the traditional trope of being torn between cultures persists – 'Zerrissenheit' between Kenya and Germany and the image of 'verlorene Ziege' are recurring motifs –,²³ this postcolonial transformation of personal identity ('ich [...] begann, eine andere Haltung anzunehmen')²⁴ enables her to claim her place in German society and to contribute to the African voice in contemporary German literature.

It is worth noting that the validation of diasporic existence and the representation of transformative cross-cultural experience in this autobiography (as well as in those discussed

established reputation as a leading publisher of Latin-American and African literature in German translation.

²⁰ Bhabha, p. 37.

²¹ Cf. Kwalanda, pp. 307-8.

²² Kwalanda, p. 270; also see Nina Berman, 'Autobiographical Accounts of Kenyan-German Marriages: Reception and Context', in *Germany's Colonial Pasts*, pp. 205-226 (214).

²³ Kwalanda, pp. 259, 270, 302.

²⁴ See Kwalanda, p. 283.

below) does not include celebration of ‘happy hybridity’²⁵. The transcultural reinvention of self, which makes a full return to the African migrant’s country of origin increasingly impossible, is seen as the result of painful ‘Lehrjahre in Deutschland’,²⁶ with criticism directed both at Africa and at Germany. The postcolonial condition’s liberating potential as a ‘third space’ beyond seemingly self-contained and mutually exclusive cultures is presented as the result of sustained agency and resilience, which in Kwalanda’s case involves psychotherapy and German reading, enabling her to rethink and transform her life. Kwalanda’s highly individual strategy of survival and self-assertion in diaspora has little to do with ‘mimicry’ of German culture, but it illustrates Bhabha’s more general understanding of identity as a dynamic process and transcultural construction, as ‘complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation’.²⁷ African life-writing in German since the late 1990s marks the transition from post-colonial migration in a literal (historical) sense, to African migration to Europe and North America in the contemporary context of globalisation. Dedicating her book to her mother and her brothers and sisters ‘in Kenia, Deutschland und Amerika’,²⁸ Kwalanda conjures up this transnational world of multiple transcultural affiliations, which puts both African tradition and German concerns about multi-culturalism in perspective.

The Somalians Abdi and Korn and the Eritrean Mehari go one step further than Kwalanda’s individualist approach to the postcolonial condition by dedicating their autobiographies to more specific political causes, the international campaigns against female genital mutilation and the use of child soldiers, respectively. All three use appendices with relevant contact details to encourage the readers’ support. In this strategy, Abdi and Korn are clearly influenced by their fellow Somalian, Waris Dirie’s bestselling autobiography *Desert Flower* (1998),²⁹ which contributed substantially to raising international awareness of female genital mutilation. Like Dirie, Abdi and Korn highlight the ordeal of female circumcision, subsequent pain and traumatization, and the long road to female self-determination and restorative surgery in Western diaspora. However, Dirie presents her life as a story of personal liberation through professional success as a star model in a globalised world, devoting little space to issues of cultural identity. By contrast, Abdi and Korn continue in the German tradition of African migrants’ writing, emphasizing the themes of cross-cultural self-

²⁵ See Adelson’s critique of uncritical Bhabha reception in Adelson, p. 5

²⁶ Kwalanda, p. 257.

²⁷ Bhabha, p. 2.

²⁸ Kwalanda, p. 309.

²⁹ Waris Dirie (with Cathleen Miller), *Desert Flower: The Extraordinary Journey of a Desert Nomad* (London: Virago, 1998).

assertion and personal development in Germany as well as presenting comparative critiques of African and German societies from a migrant's perspective.

Abdi's *Tränen im Sand* tells the story of a Somalian migrant, who comes to Germany via Kenya as a refugee from the Somalian civil war in 1994. She is granted residence as an asylum seeker and eventually becomes a German citizen, who continues to support her family in Kenyan exile. Like Kwalanda's and Korn's autobiographies, *Tränen im Sand* has a tripartite structure. The first part is devoted to a nostalgic account of childhood in Mogadischu, brutally disrupted by the onset of civil war, which forces the family to flee to Nairobi. The second part represents Kenya's capital symbolically as the ambivalent threshold between tradition and modernity, Africa and Europe, where life without fear proves impossible.³⁰ The book's third part covers Abdi's experience of Germany as she embarks on a course of both personal and economic self-assertion and development. The narrative concludes with a visit to Nairobi some six years after her departure, where she now realizes: 'Kenia kam als Heimat für mich nicht mehr infrage. Auch deshalb nicht, weil ich in Deutschland so vieles erreicht und erkämpft hatte, was ich nicht aufgeben wollte.'³¹ Trying to define the idea 'in Europa leben und trotzdem Afrikanerin bleiben' for herself,³² she accepts Germany as her 'neue Heimat wider Willen'³³ and realizes that she has changed through migration ('Wie sehr ich mich verändert hatte').³⁴ At the same time, she insists that she could not survive in diaspora without the teachings of her parents and grandmother, or faithfulness to the memory of Somalian nomad culture.³⁵

One of the most striking features of Abdi's narrative is her unprejudiced comparison of social conditions and cultural practices in Somalia, Kenya and Germany, creating a highly complex network of very specific similarities and differences, regarding, for example, gender roles, love,³⁶ family structures,³⁷ and conflict management in both hemispheres.³⁸ Meeting women from other parts of Africa in Germany she realizes 'wie wenig ich Afrika kannte'³⁹ and becomes aware of the differences between African cultures: 'Wir sind alle schwarz, das ja, aber das ist auch so ziemlich das Einzige, das uns verbindet. Afrika ist groß, und wir

³⁰ See Abdi, p. 203.

³¹ Abdi, p. 334.

³² Abdi, p. 242.

³³ Abdi, p. 310.

³⁴ Abdi, p. 107.

³⁵ Abdi, pp. 30, 284, 46.

³⁶ Abdi, pp. 15, 178, 296.

³⁷ Abdi, p. 21.

³⁸ Abdi, pp. 105-7.

³⁹ Abdi, p. 314.

Afrikaner sind von Land zu Land verschieden.’⁴⁰ Paradoxically, postcolonial diaspora thus also acts as a space where new understanding and appreciation of African identity and diversity develops. In stark contrast to post-independence Pan-Africanism (critiqued, for example, in Diallo’s *Die Täuschung*), this re-exploration of African identity and culture now focuses on multi-layered difference and diversity, undercutting the colonial binary of ‘Africa’ vs. ‘Europe’, which continues to inform stereotypical German perceptions of Africa.

In this context it is worth noting that African diaspora has only recently become a factor in the African experience of Germany, as reflected in these autobiographies. Early texts from the 1980s and 1990s are marked by the experience of isolation in (West) Germany (echoing Black German experience during the post-war decades), or by selective diasporic communities preoccupied with the politics of ideology (such as the rivalry between Francophone and Anglophone African student groupings in Diallo’s autobiographical novel *Die Täuschung*). In Kwalanda’s *Die Farbe meines Gesichts* the emerging African diasporic community in Germany seems to hinder rather than facilitate cross-cultural self-assertion (although this is partially due to the world of sex-tourism with which Kwalanda is associated on arrival). Despite joint themes and Oji’s alignment of his critique of racist legacies in German culture with the African-German (feminist) movement of the 1980s,⁴¹ there is also surprisingly little reference to Black German experience and debate in African life-writing in German. Seen in this context, Abdi’s *Tränen im Sand* may point towards a shift in African migrants’ literature towards validation of African diaspora as a (network of) minority culture(s) in contemporary Germany.

A similar pattern of cross-cultural self-assertion emerges in Korn’s autobiography *Geboren im Großen Regen*. In defining postcolonial identity, Korn, who initially came to Germany in 1980 for medical treatment and went on to marry a German, a convert to Islam, even goes one step further than Abdi by seeing herself as both ‘eine deutsche Frau’ and an African.⁴² Rather than being torn between cultures, as suggested by the book’s German subtitle (‘Mein Leben zwischen Afrika und Deutschland’), Korn presents the transforming impact of European ideas of self-determination and female equality on her African identity in a similar light as Kwalanda. Adopting elements of European thought and culture is seen as personal growth rather than alienation from African roots: ‘Mir waren die Sprache und die Traditionen meiner Heimat keineswegs fremd geworden. In meinen Augen hatte ich nur

⁴⁰ Abdi, p. 289.

⁴¹ Oji, p. 285.

⁴² Korn, p. 251.

einige Freiheiten einer anderen Kultur hinzugewonnen.⁴³ In this context Korn's voluntary work with African refugees in Germany and her active involvement in the political campaign against female genital mutilation play a significant role, helping her to define her place as an African in German society. At the same time, Korn is more analytical than Abdi in her representation of Somali life and politics. Memories of her childhood in a traditional nomad family and later in the very different milieu of modern upper-class Mogadischu alternate with general comments on Somali history and culture. The account of Korn's life in Germany also chronicles Somalia's decline into civil war and chaos, and the failure of UN and US intervention. Although the German UN mission in Somalia is not discussed, her lament that the world eventually left her country to its own devices – 'Die Welt überließ das Land sich selbst'⁴⁴ – clearly implicates Germany morally in this African catastrophe.

In Mehari's autobiography *Feuerherz* the discourse of cross-cultural self-assertion in German diaspora works along very similar lines, although the political theme here is the traumatizing experience of civil war and training as a child soldier in Eritrea. (Public debate about the authenticity of her account of childhood participation in Eritrea's civil war does not need to concern us here.)⁴⁵ Too young for active fighting of the kind described by Ishmael Beah in his best-selling 'Memoirs of a Boy Soldier' from Sierra Leone, *A Long Way Home* (2007),⁴⁶ Mehari is recruited to the Eritrean Liberation Front ELF in 1980 at the age of six and suffers the ordeal of survival in a rebel army in disarray and defeat, until able to escape to Sudan and Germany three years later. The third section of *Feuerherz* focuses on her development as a teenage refugee in Germany, who breaks with her family to take life into her own hands and eventually succeed as a singer-songwriter. Growing up in the multiculturalism of Hamburg, Mehari experiences Germany as a society which allows her to be herself, overcome traumatization and claim respect for her achievements ('Anerkennung für das, was ich geleistet habe').⁴⁷ Despite all crises, diasporic identity thus turns into a position of strength, in which the two sides of her life – 'meine beiden Seiten, die nebeneinander leben, immer und gleichzeitig'⁴⁸ – are reconciled. Despite of her many formative years in Germany, this cultural hybridisation is again presented as the result of a long process of negotiation and struggle, expressed in line with the traditional trope of 'Zerrissenheit':

⁴³ Korn, p. 214.

⁴⁴ Korn, p. 229.

⁴⁵ See Karen Krüger, 'Kindersoldaten: Von wegen Skandal', in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16.2.2007 (accessed through <http://www.faz.net> on 31.7.2007).

⁴⁶ Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (London: Fourth Estate, 2007).

⁴⁷ Mehari, p. 303.

⁴⁸ Mehari, p. 296.

In Deutschland lernte ich, was es heißt, frei zu sein. [...] Trotzdem prägte mich immer noch etwas anderes, und solange ich das nicht verarbeiten konnte, passte ich nicht hierher, weil ich zwischen meiner alten Identität und meiner neuen ständig hin- und hergerissen wurde.⁴⁹

Just as in the case of Kwalanda, Mehari's reconciliation of her 'old' African identity and her 'new' German life is the result of resilience and agency. Like all African migrants discussed here, she refuses to be cast as a victim – 'Opfer zu sein reicht mir nicht mehr'⁵⁰ – and presents migration as success, both in terms of cross-cultural self-assertion and finding one's place in German society economically and socially, without abandoning African roots. Revisiting and reassessing her African heritage⁵¹ is crucial to Mehari's identity as a postcolonial migrant, who refuses to be typecast in any way. This cross-cultural dynamic is also reflected in her music, which is both transnational – she sings in her native Tigrinya as well as in English and German – and hybrid, mixing 'Rhythm & Blues, Pop' and African rhythms.⁵² Such 'world music' epitomizes the transcultural and potentially global frames of reference in the postcolonial renegotiation of personal identity, which is the basis of these African migrants' cultural politics in Germany.

Recent African migrants' writing in German, however, extends beyond the particular kind of postcolonial autobiographies represented by Kwalanda, Abdi, Korn, and Mehari, all of which belong in the field of transcultural women's writing. The last section of this essay looks at other recent texts (by mostly male authors), which illustrate the richness and diversity of the African voice in German literature since the late 1990s. These African interventions in German cultural debates reiterate critique of colonial legacies and anti-foreign sentiment in German society, but they also undercut the potential stereotypes of migrants' writing by engaging with German political discourses from positions of experience and expertise.

The first example provides a male counter-perspective to the postcolonial identity discourse in the African women's life-writing discussed above. Jones Kwesi Evans's autobiography *Ich bin ein Black Berliner: Die ungewöhnliche Lebensgeschichte eines Afrikaners in Deutschland* ('I'm a Black Berliner: The Unusual Life-Story of an African in Germany', 2006) is a timely reminder of the continuing problems facing African immigrants in their private and professional lives in contemporary Germany. Although the title suggests postcolonial concepts of cultural hybridisation in the stylistic blending of German and

⁴⁹ Mehari, p. 300.

⁵⁰ Mehari, p. 301.

⁵¹ See Mehari, p. 300.

English, there is no sense of personal or cultural empowerment through migration in the life-story of this student from Ghana, who falls in love with a German student in France in 1984, eventually marrying and joining her in Berlin. His ordeals with the German administration about immigration and residence, his struggle for economic survival and satisfactory work, his experiences of resurgent post-unification racism and increasing competition between workers from different ethnic minorities, and his private problems, as his marriage breaks down and he raises his son on his own, all illustrate the continuing difficulties of succeeding as an African in Germany. It is with some effort that Evans tries to reassure himself that his life is an ‘Erfolgsgeschichte’,⁵³ thus highlighting the psychological background to this emerging trope of African migrants’ writing in German since the late 1990s. It is clearly not (just) the German publishers who seek to combine adventurous and arduous stories of African migration with a narrative of self-assertion and success in German diaspora; the African authors themselves reflect their postcolonial condition along these lines.

In his account of discrimination and alienation facing Africans in Germany, Evans returns to some of the themes and concerns of earlier African migrants’ writing from the 1980s and 1990s, also by focusing on African experiences of Germany and giving little space to the memory of African childhood and youth. On the other hand, his account of diasporic identity has more in common with Kwalanda, in particular, than with Diallo, El Loko, or Oji, who all returned to Africa. Indeed, his choice of biographical emphasis reflects his defining experience as a migrant, namely that there is no return to African origins for anyone like him:

Der Traum von der Rückkehr lebt im Kopf jedes Schwarzen, der nach Europa kam. Was das betrifft, stecken wir in einer großen Lüge. [...] nach fünf Jahren in Europa gibt es kein Zurück mehr. [...] Nach fünf Jahren fängt man an, zum Europäer zu werden.⁵⁴

For Kwalanda, Abdi, Korn, or Mehari migration to Germany meant escape from traumatic experience, and as women from traditional patriarchal societies they experience German individualism and feminism as personal liberation, transforming their lives and enabling them to amalgamate elements of African and European cultural identity in an active process of cross-cultural self-assertion. By contrast, Evans experiences the transformation of cultural identity and the emergence of cultural hybridity in diaspora as the result of economic pressure and cultural assimilation: ‘Ich musste mich auf die europäische Kultur einstellen, und das

⁵² Mehari, p. 282.

⁵³ Jones Kwesi Evans, *Ich bin ein Black Berliner: Die ungewöhnliche Lebensgeschichte eines Afrikaners in Deutschland*, erzählt von Kai Schubert und Robin Schmalzer (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder 2006), p. 221.

⁵⁴ Evans, pp. 212-13.

habe ich recht erfolgreich getan.’⁵⁵ On the one hand he has successfully adopted German attitudes which separate him from his ‘African roots’ – ‘Meine Sprache, meine Denkweise – all das ist von Deutschland geprägt’ –; on the other hand he believes that black Africans will never ‘problemlos dazugehören’ in Germany and, in a symbolic act of defiance, refuses to adopt German citizenship.⁵⁶ His account of African diasporic identity therefore echoes Kwalanda in combining the traditional trope of ‘in between’ as challenge – ‘zwischen den beiden Kontinenten stecken geblieben’⁵⁷ – with pride in his migrant identity and his personal achievements. Evans’s autobiography thus implicitly questions Bhabha’s vision of postcolonial migration as empowerment, and it also casts doubt on Bhabha’s belief in migration as a dynamic force in the transformation of Western mainstream culture. If Evans is confident about his son’s future (and second-generation Afro-Germans in general), this is because he sees them as fully at home in German society rather than as agents of cross-cultural revolution.⁵⁸ Evans thus provides a much more cautious assessment of the postcolonial condition than his female counterparts.

Other recent publications are even more obvious illustration of diversification in African migrants’ writing since the late 1990s. A piece of postcolonial literature in the literal sense of ‘the Empire writing back’ can be seen in Lucia Engombe’s autobiography *Kind Nr. 95: Meine deutsch-afrikanische Odyssee* (‘Child No. 95: My German-African Odyssee’, 2004), which tells the story of a Namibian girl from an Ovambo family, who spent her formative years between the ages of 7 and 18 in the GDR in the context of East German support for the SWAPO’s fight for Namibian independence. Taken from a refugee camp in Zambia in 1979, Engombe is part of the first group of 80 children who receive German schooling and SWAPO training in the GDR to become ‘die Elite des neuen Namibia’, as they are told.⁵⁹ Taught in German and forced to speak German even amongst themselves, the children soon begin to forget their native Oshivambo and have to be reminded of their ‘African roots’⁶⁰ by German teachers who ironically model their image of Africa on the European colonial imagination. Problems of ethnic or cultural identity, however, only arise much later, when secondary schooling and teenage leisure bring the Namibians into closer contact with their German peers. Faced with resurgent racist violence and envy in the crumbling GDR of the late 1980s, the Namibian adolescents are forced to live ‘wie Exoten’

⁵⁵ Evans, p. 213.

⁵⁶ Evans, pp. 213-14.

⁵⁷ Evans, p. 215.

⁵⁸ See Evans, pp. 214-15, 221.

⁵⁹ Lucia Engombe (with Peter Hilliges), *Kind Nr. 95: Meine deutsch-afrikanische Odyssee* (Berlin: Ullstein 2004), p. 173.

⁶⁰ Engombe, p. 153.

behind the protective barrier of their home, while they hope for normality and integration: ‘dort [in der DDR-Disko] hofften wir sein zu dürfen, was wir nie waren – ganz normale Jugendliche’.⁶¹ Namibia’s independence and the imminent demise of the GDR lead to the children’s premature return to Namibia in 1990, where Engombe is now seen as a German and finds that SWAPO politics have destroyed her family.

In this case therefore, it is the return to Africa which triggers a crisis of cultural identity and initiates a process of new cross-cultural self-assertion. Shocked by the reality of Namibian poverty and left very much to her own devices, Engombe eventually manages to complete her German school education in Windhoek and becomes a journalist in her native Namibia. Although the autobiography’s focus is on her German years, a sense of returning home – ‘dieses Gefühl, zu Hause angekommen zu sein’⁶² – when visiting her father’s Ovambo village symbolically indicates her integration in modern Namibia, where she is seen to move freely between white German and black African milieus. Reading Engombe’s account with Bhabha’s concept of ‘DissemiNation’,⁶³ Bruno Arich-Gerz has pointed out that there is little evidence in *Kind Nr. 95* of transnational displacement subverting national narratives either in Germany or in newly independent Namibia.⁶⁴ Instead Engombe’s cross-cultural self-assertion copes with her ‘Verunsicherung [...] angesichts der Diskrepanz zwischen individuell gefühlter und vom Kollektiv auf sie zurückgespiegelter Wahrnehmung’.⁶⁵ At the same time, however, this unusual history of transcultural identity formation contributes significantly to postcolonial memory in both countries. It acts as a forceful reminder of Germany’s implication in African history since colonialism. Closing with an appendix on the joint histories of Namibia and Germany and voicing the very specific transcultural experiences of young Namibians who witnessed the culture and demise of the GDR, *Kind Nr. 95* also combines two very different discourses in contemporary German literature: African postcolonial writing and the prominent post-*Wende* discourse of GDR memory.⁶⁶

All the recent examples of African migrants’ literature in German discussed so far are autobiographical writing in a postcolonial context. They present personalized histories of global migration and diasporic identities as stories of self-assertion and achievement rather

⁶¹ Engombe, p. 234.

⁶² Engombe, p. 352.

⁶³ See Bhabha, pp. 139-70.

⁶⁴ Bruno Arich-Gerz, *Namibias Postkolonialismen: Texte zu Gegenwart und Vergangenheiten in Südwestafrika* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2008), p. 118.

⁶⁵ Arich-Gerz, p. 118.

⁶⁶ On post-*Wende* GDR memory discourses see Frank Thomas Grub, ‘*Wende*’ und ‘*Einheit*’ im Spiegel der deutschsprachigen Literatur: Ein Handbuch (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003).

than failure. The African voice in contemporary German literature, however, also includes other forms of expression, which do not follow the same pattern and discourse. The most prominent example here is Asfa-Wossen Asserate, a member of the former Ethiopian imperial family, living in Germany since 1968. For this Ethiopian aristocrat, who has made Germany his ‘zweite Heimat’ (and German literature his ‘geistige Heimat’),⁶⁷ life in diaspora is not the result of postcolonial migration, but of political exile after the downfall of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. Developing the reference points of his European-style education in the cultural triangle of Ethiopia, Germany and Britain,⁶⁸ he participates in contemporary German cultural debates from a conservative transnational position. His memoir *Ein Prinz aus dem Hause David und warum er in Deutschland blieb* (‘A Prince from the House of David and Why he Stayed in Germany’, 2007) places his own life in the wider context of Ethiopia’s history and politics since the nineteenth century while also opposing the perceived ‘Verfall des kulturellen Erbes’⁶⁹ in both Ethiopia and Germany. As in his earlier, widely discussed study of manners (*Manieren*, 2003),⁷⁰ he takes the position of an informed outsider critiquing German and European culture from an almost ethnological perspective. Despite its conservative stance, this is a powerful reversal of the traditional European gaze at the African Other. Asfa-Wossen Asserate assumes an independent position of confidence and expertise in German letters and debates, which defies any typecasting as exotic migrant in need of empathy and support.

A similar position of African authority can be found in *Wende dein Gesicht der Sonne zu* (‘Turn Your Face Towards the Sun’, 2007)⁷¹ by Obiora Ike, a leading member of Nigeria’s Catholic Church, who studied in Germany and also makes Germany his ‘zweite Heimat’.⁷² Defining himself strategically as ‘ein afrikanischer Rheinländer und ein rheinischer Afrikaner’,⁷³ Ike promotes an agenda of intercultural understanding, sympathy and curiosity based on mutual appreciation and universal similarities between cultures. Ike’s and Asserate’s transnational interventions in German cultural debates clearly do not subscribe to the cultural politics of postcolonialism. But they underline the diversity, self-confidence and significance of the African voice in German literature today.

⁶⁷ Asfa-Wossen Asserate, *Ein Prinz aus dem Hause David und warum er in Deutschland blieb* (Frankfurt/M.: Scherz, 2007), p. 360.

⁶⁸ Asserate, pp. 215, 366.

⁶⁹ Asserate, p. 350.

⁷⁰ Asfa-Wossen Asserate, *Manieren* (Frankfurt/M.: Eichborn, 2003).

⁷¹ Obiora Ike (with Martin Lohmann), *Wende dein Gesicht der Sonne zu* (München: Pattloch 2007).

⁷² Ike, p. 10.

⁷³ Ike, p. 20.

My last example to support this assessment is a collection of literary short prose pieces entitled *Das schwarze Auge* ('The Black Eye', 2007)⁷⁴ by journalist Luc Degla from Benin. Specifically literary engagement with the legacy of colonialism and diasporic experience in Germany played a fairly significant role in the early phase of African writing in German. Sara Lennox has drawn attention to Kum'a Ndumbe III from Germany's former colony Cameroun, who wrote eight plays (four in German and four in French) about German colonialism and contemporary Africa during his student years in Munich and Lyon (1968-76), long before African writing in German consolidated into a sustained tradition.⁷⁵ African migrants' writing from the 1980s includes Diallo's and Darko's novels (first published in German, but written in French and English respectively), and El Loko's *Der Blues in mir* clearly has literary qualities, complemented by the artist's wood engravings. By contrast, the recent autobiographies discussed above do not make any claims to literariness. In this context Degla's prose sketches, which draw on the German tradition of the literary 'Feuilleton',⁷⁶ stand out, moving freely between autobiographical and fictional material, narrative, satire and essayistic techniques.⁷⁷ Although many pieces are written in the first person, it quickly becomes obvious that this is a literary construct, which defies expectations of authenticity and references not just African experiences in Germany but also other minority perspectives and indeed German 'white mainstream' positions.

This flexible technique enables Degla to present and reflect a range of positions in terms of diasporic identity under postcolonial conditions. One recurring theme is the situation of first generation African immigrants and their 'Zerrissenheit' between – in Kwalanda's words – African 'Heimat' and German 'Zuhause':⁷⁸

Meine Heimat kann ich nicht vergessen, wenn ich in Deutschland lebe. Und Deutschland vergesse ich nicht, wenn ich in meiner Heimat bin. Im Gegensatz zu mir haben meine Kinder nur eine Heimat: Deutschland. Sie sind hier geboren und groß geworden. Trotz ihrer dunklen Hautfarbe sind sie innen deutsch. So wie Bounty, außen braun, innen weiß. Ich konnte nicht mehr deutsch werden, aber meine Kinder schon.⁷⁹

Echoing the assessment of diasporic identity in Kwalanda and Evans, being at home in both worlds is seen as both a burden and a precarious blessing. Cultural hybridity plays a crucial

⁷⁴ Luc Degla, *Das schwarze Auge* (Schwülper: Cargo, 2007).

⁷⁵ See note 9.

⁷⁶ See Dirk Göttsche, *Kleine Prosa in Moderne und Gegenwart* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2006).

⁷⁷ See Dirk Göttsche, "'Schwarze Blicke': Afrikanische Migranteliteratur in deutscher Sprache zwischen Diaspora und Integration', in: *Mont Cameroun: Revue africaine d'études interculturelles sur l'espace germanophone*, 6 (2010) (special issue on 'Literaturen der Migration in Deutschland: Das Beispiel Afrika', ed. by Albert Gouaffo) (in preparation).

⁷⁸ Kwalanda, p. 302.

⁷⁹ Degla, p. 69.

role in African cross-cultural self-assertion within German society and liberation from the pressures of the migrants' culture of origin. But the 'third space' of migration is presented as ongoing challenge rather than secure place, and (similarly to Engombe) there is little hope for transformation of German society through the agency of diasporic communities: the immigrant's children are Black Germans, but Degla's short prose piece does not suggest that they will continue to feel as Africans as well as Germans. To reinforce the point, the first person narrator's self-reflection is triggered by his encounter with a naive German cashier on a hot summer's day, who admires his African 'tan': "Gucken Sie mal, wie braun Sie sind, so möchte ich auch gern aussehen". Confronting her with the unconscious racism of her remark, the narrator suggests sarcastically: "Sie können diesen Bräunungsgrad leider nicht mehr erreichen, aber ihre künftigen Kinder schon. Wenn Sie wollen, können wir uns nach Ihrem Feierabend zu einem Drink treffen."⁸⁰ Degla's prose sketch thus presents the African immigrant's cross-cultural self-assertion as a melancholy response to the tenacity of colonial thought in contemporary German society – despite its multi-culturalism.

In the tradition of Walter Benjamin's emblematic prose sketches ('Denkbilder') as poignant expression of social concerns,⁸¹ Degla's piece, ironically entitled 'Bounty', raises the question of (post-) colonial legacies in a society, which, it seems, continues to privilege cultural assimilation over multi-cultural diversity and transcultural transformation. The pun on the eponymous sweet links this sceptical reflection of diasporic culture back to Frantz Fanon's astute critique of colonialism's cultural impact on the new African elite before and after independence in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/67),⁸² thus warning second generation Africans in Germany against facile integration at the expense of abandoning the critical detachment and awareness which the book's title *Das schwarze Auge* suggests. In addition, both the sweet's name and the title of the prose sketch are of course allusions to one of the mythical episodes in Europe's history of colonial encounters,⁸³ and the continued presence of Captain William Bligh's ship in contemporary consumer culture is itself testimony to continuing colonial legacies. There is little sign of any 'mutiny on the Bounty' in Degla's 'Denkbild', but its multi-layered literary engagement with African diaspora in contemporary Germany indicates that his poetic approach to postcolonial issues is by no means less political

⁸⁰ Degla, p. 68.

⁸¹ See Heinz Schlaffer, 'Denkbilder: Eine kleine Prosaform zwischen Dichtung und Gesellschaftstheorie', in *Poesie und Politik: Zur Situation der Literatur in Deutschland*, ed. by Wolfgang Kutteneuler (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1973), pp. 137-154.

⁸² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, transl. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967).

than the explicit transnational cultural politics promoted by the African women's autobiographies discussed above. In this way, emphatically literary engagement with the postcolonial condition contributes to the richness and diversification of the African voice in contemporary German literature.

⁸³ See Maïke Oergel, 'Changing Authorities on the HMS Bounty: Public Images of William Bligh and Fletcher Christian in the 1790s in Britain and Germany', in *Breaking Boundaries: The 1790s in Germany, France and Britain*, ed. by Daniel Hall and Maïke Oergel (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010; publication in preparation).