

# Paradigms of Refuge: Reimagining GDR Legacy and International Solidarity in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (Go, *Went, Gone*) *TRANSIT* vol. 12, no. 2

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## A. Introduction

The former East Germany rarely features in contemporary discussions about distressed migration.<sup>1</sup> When it does, this typically occurs in the context of antirefugee violence and the rise of right-wing nationalist movements and political parties such as *Pegida* and the *AfD*.<sup>2</sup> Biases and violence against distressed migrants, many of whom arrived in Germany from a number of African, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian countries between the early 2010s and the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015, tend to be higher in former East German federal states. This is in part because of the GDR’s fraught relationship with the legacy of pre-1949 German history, specifically with National Socialism and Second Reich colonialism, for which the East German state failed to shoulder full responsibility.<sup>3</sup> Yet

<sup>1</sup> Distressed migration here serves as an umbrella term for migrants who are more frequently regarded in terms of their specific motivations – as refugees, asylum seekers, or undocumented immigrants – for seeking a new home in another country. Normative discourse ignores distress as an underlying commonality by distinguishing among different motivations for migration. While insisting on the important legal distinctions between terms such as refugee and asylum seeker, Homi Bhabha recently used the terms “distressed migration/migrant” when talking about the general phenomenological condition of refugees and asylum seekers alike. Bhabha, Homi. “Statelessness and Death: Reflections on the Burdened Life.” Delivered at the Cornell School of Criticism and Theory on June 18 2018.

<https://sct.cornell.edu/videos/2018-videos/>. As Nicholas Courtman states in the context of writing about refugees in contemporary German works by Jenny Erpenbeck and Terézia Mora: While there are marked and contested legal distinctions between these terms, they “exist as a muddled amalgamation in the public imaginary.” Courtman, Nicholas. “Seeing the Human in the (Queer) Migrant in Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* and Terézia Mora’s *Alle Tage*.” *Edinburgh German Yearbook* 10 (2018): 153-76. 172. “Distressed migration” here is not understood as interchangeable with the more general concept of “precarity,” but it is closely related to recent debates on precarity and the concepts of *Heimat/Heimatlosigkeit* with their attendant racism, state violence, and socio-economic insecurity. Kathöfer, Gabi, and Beverly Weber. “Introduction: Precarity/*Heimatlosigkeit*.” *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, 54.4 (November 2018): 411-417. 413.

<sup>2</sup> The anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*) for the first time gained representation in the *Bundestag* in 2017. The *Pegida* movement (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamification of the Occident), founded in Germany in 2014, ostensibly promotes minority rights to propound anti-immigration policies.

<sup>3</sup> Though David Bathrick considers denazification in the GDR to be in part more “genuine” than the Bonn Republic’s less thoroughgoing claims to economic, administrative, and personnel reforms, Bathrick also sees

current discussion of present-day violence against distressed migrants in the new *Bundesländern* (formerly East German federal states) is seldom understood as inflected by colonial and Nazi pasts. Instead, the discussion tends to be supported by the two following erroneous assumptions: first, that the GDR had been racially homogeneous – an assumption that excludes both migrants in former East Germany and East Germans of color – and second, that it had been geographically isolated or at most located exclusively along an East-West axis, with the Soviet Union on the one hand and the United States and West Germany on the other, thus disregarding relations that the East German state had sustained with the global South.<sup>4</sup>

This article turns to a recent novel, Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015, translated as *Go, Went, Gone*), which reminds us that the GDR was an active member of the international socialist community, which, under the explicitly political banner of international socialist solidarity, fostered engagements with countries that had emerged as a result of the decolonization of Africa (including Algeria, Angola, Ghana, Kenya, and Mozambique) as well as Cuba and Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> While socialist solidarity "attempted to overcome the traditional power relationship between donor and recipient," these programs all too often entailed unequal economic and educational exchanges, which were also at times accompanied by racialized oppression. They further recalled various forms of domination inflicted by Germany in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on populations of several African countries with the claim of furthering these countries' modernization.<sup>6</sup> Here I argue that a hitherto overlooked strength of Erpenbeck's novel is the possibility it offers of reappraising the concept of international socialist solidarity. Thus the novel may help recuperate an egalitarian potential of the GDR for contemporary discussions about refugees in reunified Germany, while also taking into account the potential neocolonial implications of this political initiative. Erpenbeck's novel is

denazification in the GDR as limited by the state's official narrative, which comprised of hagiographies of communist antifascists and effaced specific victims of the Holocaust. See Bathrick, David. *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. 32, 17. For an analysis of rightwing extremism in the GDR in its historical context, see Danyel, Jürgen. "Spätfolgen? Der ostdeutsche Rechtsextremismus als Hypothek der DDR-Vergangenheitspolitik und Erinnerungskultur." Behrens, Jan C., Lindenberger, Thomas, and Patrice G. Poutrus. *Fremde Und Fremd-Sein in Der DDR: Zu Historischen Ursachen Der Fremdenfeindlichkeit in Ostdeutschland*. Berlin: Metropol, 2003. 23-40. For a brief summary of the GDR's discussions on German colonialism, see Conrad, Sebastian. *German Colonialism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 8.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of experiences of migrant workers in the GDR and East Germans of color, see Piesche, Peggy. "Black and German? East German Adolescents before 1989: A Retrospective View of a 'Non-Existent Issue' in the GDR." *The Cultural After-Life of East Germany: New Transnational Perspectives*. Ed. Leslie A. Adelson. Helen & Harry Gray Humanities Program Series 13. Washington, D.C.: American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, 2002. 37-59.

<sup>5</sup> Kuck, Dennis. "'Für den sozialistischen Aufbau ihrer Heimat'?" *Ausländische Vertragsarbeitskräfte in der DDR*. *Fremde und Fremd-Sein in der DDR*, 271-83. 272. See also Piesche, "Black and German?" 411.

<sup>6</sup> The GDR understood socialist solidarity as "'mutual support and commitment, the willingness to help and sacrifice' as a 'basic principle of the working class and all progressive forces.'" As cited by Witkowski, Gregory. "Between Fighters and Beggars: Socialist Philanthropy and the Imagery of Solidarity in East Germany." 73-75. Slobodian, Quinn, ed. *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2015. 73-94. 73. See also the editor's introduction and contribution to the volume. For an in-depth discussion of how 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century German discourse on the modernization of, among others, Egypt, Kenya, and Somalia, was informed by a colonial program with often disastrous consequences for these countries, see Berman, Nina. *Impossible Missions? German Economic, Military, and Humanitarian Efforts in Africa*. Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2004.

especially suitable for an analysis of this underrepresented side of the GDR because, among several contemporary novels by and about refugees and asylum seekers in Germany – including Sherko Fatah’s *Das dunkle Schiff* (*The Dark Ship*, 2008), Abbas Khider’s *Ohrfeige* (*A Slap in the Face*, 2016) and Joachim Lottmann’s *Alles Lüge* (*All Lies*, 2017) – , it remains unparalleled in the way it pairs recent distressed migration to Germany with specifically East German content.

The protagonist of *Go, Went, Gone* is a German – and formerly East German – professor of Classics named Richard. Richard is a privileged contemporary European, who as a citizen of the former GDR “has experienced first-hand the precarious nature of seemingly ironclad political systems [and] knows all too well that borders, rules, and ownership are transient and shifting.”<sup>7</sup> When Richard was an infant, his family fled Silesia for Germany. His father was a *Wehrmacht* soldier, later becoming a prisoner of war. Richard’s family reunited and settled in East Berlin, where Richard became a professor at the Humboldt University. Post-89, he was one of the few East German academics who kept their jobs.<sup>8</sup> Set in 2013, he lives in a large house by a lake on the outskirts of Berlin – even though his pension is reportedly smaller than that of his West German colleagues and he still finds Berlin geographically disorienting more than three decades after the German reunification of 1990.<sup>9</sup> As a childless and recently retired widower, Richard is struggling with loneliness and has too much time on his hands. He spends his days engaged in pointless tasks and routines.

Toward the beginning of the novel, Richard encounters a group of asylum seekers. These are described as men “[whose] skin is black” and who are on a hunger strike in order to speed up the German authorities’ verdict on their asylum.<sup>10</sup> Richard visits their camp at Oranienplatz – a fictionalized site of an actual refugee-run protest camp that had existed in Berlin-Kreuzberg between 2012-14.<sup>11</sup> He becomes interested in these men and begins to ask them questions about their biographies; later he helps them navigate German bureaucracy and offers financial help. The substantive focus of the novel are the men’s fates prior to their arrival in Germany. These are stories of illegal and often traumatic migration from countries that include Burkina Faso, Chad, Ghana, Libya, and Nigeria (none are from Syria because Erpenbeck had finished the novel before the escalation of the Syrian civil war).<sup>12</sup> When the Berlin Senate ultimately denies asylum to these refugees,

7 Shafi, Monika. “‘Nobody Loves a Refugee’: The Lessons of Jenny Erpenbeck’s Novel *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen*.” *Gegenwartsliteratur: A German Studies Yearbook* 16 (2017): 185-208. 186.

8 Post-1989, three quarters of GDR academics were made redundant, while out of a total of 1,878 professors employed in the former East German region between 1994 and 1998, 104 came from the East. Cooke, Paul. *Representing East Germany since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005. 3. For an additional account of the reunifications’ effects on the German school system, see de la Motte, Bruni. “East Germans Lost Much in 1989.” *The Guardian*. 9 November 2009. Web. August 16 2019.

9 Erpenbeck, Jenny. *Gehen, ging, gegangen*. München: Knaus, 2015. 56, 41-42.

10 Erpenbeck 18. All translations into English are from Susan Bernofsky’s translation of Erpenbeck’s novel. Erpenbeck, Jenny. Trans. Susan Bernofsky. *Go, Went, Gone*. New York: New Directions, 2017. 10.

11 For an in-depth study of the Oranienplatz camp, its practices of resistance, and demolition following a much-criticized settlement between the asylum seekers and the Senate, see Landry, Olivia. “‘Wir sind alle Oranienplatz!’ Space for Refugees and Social Justice in Berlin.” *Seminar* 51:4 (November 2015): 399-411.

12 See for instance the demographic survey of asylum seekers in Germany from 2014 to the present, compiled by the *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*.

<<https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/flucht/zahlen-zu-asyl/265710/demografie>>

Richard promptly converts his large house into a refugee shelter where the refugees stay illegally as his new surrogate family.

In order to understand the novel, some knowledge of its origins and the context of its publication is crucial. Displacement and the former GDR have played key roles in much of Erpenbeck's career. Her previous novels, including *Heimsuchung* (*Visitation*, 2008) and *Aller Tage Abend* (*The End of Days*, 2012), thematize the biographies of her grandparents, the German writer and critic Fritz Erpenbeck and the Austrian-Jewish actress and writer Hedda Zinner, who as communist antifascists went into exile in Moscow and later immigrated to the newly founded East German state.<sup>13</sup> Born in former East Berlin in 1967, Jenny Erpenbeck studied opera and theater, partially under Heiner Müller, and was twenty-two years old when the Berlin Wall came down. *Go, Went, Gone* is her first work to bring the East German past into conversation with distressed migration in Germany today. In a recent lecture, Erpenbeck said that the idea for the novel came to her in 2013, after mass drownings of refugees in the Mediterranean were met with relative indifference in German society and media.<sup>14</sup> To research the novel, the author volunteered in assisting refugees from the Oranienplatz camp. At that time, Erpenbeck also began recording the refugees' life stories, some of which she fictionalized in her novel, and the author has acknowledged the partially autobiographical origins of her well-meaning but clumsy protagonist Richard.<sup>15</sup>

Given the time of its publication, the book caused quite a stir in Germany and abroad, especially after an acclaimed English translation by Susan Bernofsky appeared in 2017. Overall, the novel garnered praise from both major German and English-speaking media owing to its timeliness and social engagement.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the renowned postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha called *Go, Went, Gone* a "migration masterwork" while presenting his forthcoming project on statelessness, death, and the right to narrate.<sup>17</sup> While

<sup>13</sup> Klaedtke, Uta, and Martina Ölke. "Erinnern und erfinden: DDR-Autorinnen und 'jüdische Identität' (Hedda Zinner, Monika Maron, Barbara Honigmann)." Huml, Ariane, and Monika Rappenecker, eds. *Jüdische Intellektuelle im 20. Jahrhundert: Literatur- und kulturgeschichtliche Studien*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003. 249-75. See also Wachtel, Eleanor. "An Interview with Jenny Erpenbeck." *Brick* 97 (2016): 38-47. 44.

<sup>14</sup> The author made this statement in a lecture delivered at the Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard University on March 8, 2015. <<http://mahindrahumanities.fas.harvard.edu/content/jenny-erpenbeck-conversation-claire-messud>>

<sup>15</sup> (*Ibid.*)

<sup>16</sup> See, among others, Schmitter, Elke. "Der Stand der Dinge: Jenny Erpenbecks Roman über das Flüchtlingselend in Deutschland." *Der Spiegel*. 5 September 2015. Web. Granzin, Katharina. "Roman über Flüchtlingsbiografien: Der gute Richard." *Die Tageszeitung: taz*. 13 September 2015. Web. Apel, Friedmar. "Roman Gehen, ging, gegangen: Wir wurden, werden, sind sichtbar." *FAZ*. 16 September 2015. Web. Lemon, Robert. "Go, Went, Gone by Jenny Erpenbeck." *World Literature Today*. August 2017. Web. Battersby, Eileen. "Go, Went, Gone by Jenny Erpenbeck review – humanising migration." *The Guardian*. 23 September 2017. Rooney, Sally. "Sally Rooney on Go, Went, Gone: Timely and compelling." *The Irish Times*. 30 September 2017. Web. Webb, Kate. "Jenny Erpenbeck finds a novel way to tackle the migrant problem." *The Spectator*. 20 January 2018. Web. All reviews have been accessed between 15-20 August 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Bhabha, Homi. "Statelessness and Death: Reflections on the Burdened Life." <<https://sct.cornell.edu/videos/2018-videos/>> In his praise of the novel, Bhabha highlights Erpenbeck's capturing of what he calls the ontological condition of every surviving refugee who has made it to Europe as being "simultaneously alive and dead," their survival being a mere "matter of happenstance" (Erpenbeck 208, as quoted by Bhabha); this matter of happenstance, Bhabha continues, occurs because the mishandling

I would not call this novel a migration masterwork on account of its contradictory and restrictive presentation of contact between modern German history and distressed migrants, I argue that a key moment in the novel, set at Alexanderplatz in former East Berlin, juxtaposes GDR history with the present in order to propose the building of a transnational community that would be inclusive toward distressed migrants in contemporary Germany. It thereby aims to continue state socialism's largely unfulfilled utopian promise. In what follows, I will show how Erpenbeck's narrative contextualizes East German history before focusing on the novel's specific constellation of refugees and the GDR.

## B. Narratives of Contact

Didacticism is a fundamental feature and goal of Erpenbeck's novel. The novel's key pedagogic device is its flawed protagonist Richard, whose observations, perspectives, and memories are frequently focalized by the third-person narrator. For its pedagogic goals, the novel chiefly relies on the reader's active engagement with Richard's quasi-archeological ruminations on the cityscape of contemporary Berlin. Though the narrative shows the newly retired Richard as staidly ensconced within his daily routine before he meets the refugees, Richard's encounter with them turns him into something of a contemporary flaneur. As Richard wanders through Berlin, his thoughts string together histories and cultural narratives surrounding German colonialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Second World War and the Holocaust, the Cold War, and the ongoing transnational capitalist exploitation of the African continent.

Ruminations of this kind link present-day distressed migration to Germany with past moments or bygone periods without spelling out the specific connections among them. To bring them into contact, the narrative often refracts Richard's contemplation of a specific site in Berlin through the prism of multiple histories that are separated from one another by informational, syntactical, and sensory gaps. Such gaps mobilize the reader as an active producer of meaning, recalling critical pedagogies developed in the context of GDR literature by Bertolt Brecht and his successors, whom Erpenbeck has listed as among her influences.<sup>18</sup> In accordance with the author's indebtedness to the Brechtian tradition, which had sought to democratize the production of meaning in art, the disjunctive presentation of history in *Go, Went, Gone* calls upon the reader to reconstruct the missing relationships of hierarchy, causality, coherence, and chronology. In this largely paratactic mode of writing – whereby parataxis is here understood both in its grammatical sense as well as a juxtaposition of larger narrative units<sup>19</sup> – the reader is mobilized to arrive at new

of the migrant crisis allows for refugees to die while legal and political actors express their horror but can refuse their help.

<sup>18</sup> In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Erpenbeck named the “left-wing tradition led by Brecht and the Russians, like Mayakovsky” in East Berlin as among her influences, and has expressed a sense of loss at the erasure of this tradition from the culture of reunified Germany (Wachtel 41-42). Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, Erpenbeck's own grandfather Fritz Erpenbeck (1897-1975) was well-known as Brecht's literary opponent and nemesis in early GDR debates on the relationship between politics and aesthetic form.

<sup>19</sup> In the novel, parataxis is operative, first, as “the placing of propositions or clauses one after another, without indicating by connecting words the relation of coordination or subordination between them.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. 1 February 2020. <<https://www.oed-com.ezp->

insights into the complex entanglement of modern German history and distressed migration to Germany today. In the following analysis I seek to demonstrate but also inquire into the limitations of such narration in terms of the audience for whom such education is intended. In section C, I will analyze a crucial moment in which the disjunctive mode of Erpenbeck's writing has the potential of bringing contemporary distressed migration and modern German history into a more inclusive and genuinely productive contact.

When Richard pays his first visit to the refugee camp at Oranienplatz, which used to be in former West Berlin, the narrative takes several historical detours. At first, we are told that Richard and his late wife, former East Berliners, visited Oranienplatz for the first time after 1989:

Kurz nach dem Mauerfall war Richard mit seiner Frau zusammen zum ersten Mal nach Kreuzberg gekommen. Sie hatten damals an jedem Sonntag einen Spaziergang durch einen der westlichen Stadtbezirke gemacht. Am Vorabend lasen sie im Stadtführer und am Sonntagvormittag spazierten sie. Huguenottische Flüchtlinge waren die ursprünglichen Siedler in den Straßen rings um den Oranienplatz gewesen [...]. Und Lenné hatte dann im vorletzten Jahrhundert den Platz geplant, da gab es hier noch einen Kanal, der Platz war ein Ufer gewesen, und das, was jetzt Straße ist, eine Brücke. Später zeigte Richard auch seiner Geliebten den Platz und erklärte ihr, wer Lenné war, einen guten Buchladen gab es gleich um die Ecke, ein Programmkino und ein schönes Café.

Jetzt sieht der Platz wie Baustelle aus. Eine Landschaft aus Zelten, Bretterbuden und Planen [...]. (Erpenbeck 43-44)

Not long after the fall of the Wall, Richard went to Kreuzberg with his wife for the first time. They'd gotten into the habit of walking in one of the city's Western districts every Sunday. (The evening before they'd read up on the neighborhood in a guidebook, and then on Sunday morning they'd take their stroll.) Huguenot refugees were the original settlers in the streets surrounding Oranienplatz [...]. And then Lenné planned out the shape of the square the century before last, back when there'd still been a canal here, the square forming its banks, with a bridge where the street is now. Later, Richard showed his lover this square, explaining to her who Lenné was, there was a good bookstore around the corner, a repertory cinema, and a lovely café.

Now the square looks like a construction site: a landscape of tents, wooden shacks, and tarps [...]. (Erpenbeck, transl. Bernofsky 32)

Through Richard's biography, the narrative outlines the history of Oranienplatz over the last four centuries.<sup>20</sup> After mentioning Kreuzberg's location in West Berlin during the German division, it harks back to the original settlers in the area, who were Huguenot refugees fleeing France for what was then Brandenburg-Prussia in the late seventeenth century. The text then jumps two hundred years ahead to tell us about the nineteenth-

[prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/Entry/137669?redirectedFrom=parataxis#eid](http://prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/Entry/137669?redirectedFrom=parataxis#eid)>. Second, parataxis also functions in the novel in its more general meaning, as a juxtaposition of larger narrative units that mobilizes their mutually undetermined relationships "as a potential opening to construction of new perspectives on historical relatedness." Kaakinen, Kaisa. *Comparative Literature and the Historical Imaginary: Reading Conrad, Weiss, Sebald*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Richard's private life is an important subplot that, moreover, bears on his engagement with the refugees. As the novel develops, the reader learns about Richard's poor treatment of his late wife; this subplot is frequently juxtaposed with the (exclusively male and heterosexual) refugees' overwhelmingly positive relationships.

century architect Lenné, whose ambitious redesign of the square gave it its current elegant look. It ends with the district's more recent gentrification and the latest addition of the protest camp in its midst. As the protagonist continues to observe the protest camp, his thoughts return to the second half of the nineteenth century when Germany had had colonies:

[Richard] sieht das prächtige Eckhaus [am Oranienplatz], das den Hintergrund für das alles abgibt. Es mag ungefähr aus der Zeit stammen, als hier, wo er jetzt sitzt, noch der Kanal war. Es sieht wie ein ehemaliges Kaufhaus aus, aber nun ist im Erdgeschoss eine Bank. Als hier der Kanal war, hatte Deutschland noch Kolonien. *Kolonialwarenladen* stand in verwitterter Schrift an manchen Fassaden im Osten Berlins noch bis vor zwanzig Jahren zu lesen, bevor der Westen anfang zu renovieren. *Kolonialwaren* und die Einschüsse vom Zweiten Weltkrieg auf ein und derselben Fassade, und in der verstaubten Vitrine eines solchen für die Renovierung schon leergezogenen Hauses vielleicht obendrein noch ein sozialistisches Pappschild: *Obst Gemüse Speisekartoffeln (OGS)*. (Erpenbeck 49)

[Richard] sees the elegant corner building that furnishes the backdrop for all of this, probably dating back to around the period when there was still a canal where he is sitting. It looks like a former department store, but now there's a bank on the ground floor. Back when there was a canal here, Germany still had colonies. The word *Kolonialwaren* was still visible in weathered script on some East Berlin facades as recently as twenty years ago, until the West started renovating everything, including the last vestiges of these ancient grocer's shops with their imported wares. *Kolonialwaren* and WWII bullet holes might adorn the very same storefront. (The dusty shop window of such a building – its tenants evicted to prepare for renovation – might also display a Socialist cardboard sign reading *Obst Gemüse Speisekartoffeln (OGS)* to advertise the “fruit, vegetables, and potatoes” that gave East Germans greengrocers their acronym.) (Erpenbeck, transl. Bernofsky 36-37)

Linking different times and places, such passages appeal to the need for German hospitality toward refugees and asylum seekers by suggesting various ways for thinking historical accountability. They suggest connections among, for instance, the affluence of nineteenth-century Germany and its colonial ventures in East and Southwest Africa. They also trace colonial legacies to the German division via spatial motifs of the “East Berlin facades” and the Kreuzberg neighborhood of West Berlin. In addition, the novel's description of the “colonial goods” facades as ridden with WW2 bullets recalls recent scholarship that has dwelt on the extent to which the origins of the genocidal politics of the Nazis must be located in the “[*Kaiserreich's*] brutal colonial wars in Africa [particularly against the Nama and the Herero in today's Namibia]” (Conrad 38-44). The two historical catastrophes of modern German history, moreover, converge via “multidirectional memory” in the site of the refugee camp itself.<sup>21</sup> This aggregate memory is further differentiated and elaborated by the novel, which stages the refugee encampment as a site of protest (“Wenn das

<sup>21</sup> In contrast to a model of “competitive” collective memories, i.e. the interaction of which within the public arena unfolds as a “zero-sum struggle for preeminence,” Michael Rothberg argues for considering memory as multidirectional, the characteristics of which include ongoing, intercultural “negotiations, cross-referencing, and borrowing” that in turn has the “potential to create news of solidarity and new visions of justice.” Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. 3-5.

Nichtstun zu schlimm wird, organisieren wir eine Demo” 48; “When doing nothing gets to be too much for them, we organize a demonstration” 35), and politicizes the history of Berlin-Kreuzberg as a place of postwar immigration for Turkish migrant workers, whose solidarity with the refugees is briefly thematized by the text (46).<sup>22</sup> Finally, the novel contrasts Oranienplatz’s gentrification with refugee shacks in its midst. In so doing, it points out global inequalities, causally linked in another passage in the novel, where the conditions from which some of the refugees are fleeing are ascribed to the ongoing economic exploitation of among others, Chad and Niger, by European, American, and Chinese corporations (181-83, 252-53).

This kind of didacticism – or the way the novel contextualizes present-day distressed migration vis-à-vis the histories of European colonialism, racism, anti-Semitism, and neocolonial exploitation – is also problematic. Although the novel brings into contact disparate historical referents, such analogies often stop short of becoming visionary “touching tales” – a term Leslie A. Adelson coins to denote a narrative commingling of generally counterintuitive cultural developments and historical references that “reframe German and transnational pasts, presents, and futures” from a contemporary vantage point.<sup>23</sup> Rather than pointing the reader toward newly imagined effects of distressed migration, Erpenbeck’s analogies frequently index already existing and well-known categories, causes, and concepts by means of their subtle structuring. While the narrative succeeds in leaving mutual relationships of such histories unclarified (e.g. in its paratactic juxtaposition of colonial, WW2, GDR, and post-Wall histories in the motif of the Berlin facades using the coordinating conjunction “und”), overall it tends to reinsert chronologies and causalities into its otherwise loose narrative structure. For instance, it switches from the simple past to the present perfect tense, or from the simple past to the present tense respectively, so as to relate present-day migration in and out of Berlin-Kreuzberg to the more distant multicultural origins of the neighborhood (“[...] am Sonntagvormittag spazierten sie. Hugenottische Flüchtlinge waren die ursprünglichen Siedler [...] um den Oranienplatz gewesen”). This temporal switch brings into dialogue recent German affluence and the state’s inadequate political response to the refugee crisis (“einen guten Buchladen gab es gleich um die Ecke, ein Programmkino und ein schönes Café. Jetzt sieht der Platz wie Baustelle aus.”). Chronological relationships are further insisted upon by the narrative’s deployment of adverbial phrases, adjectives of time, and subordinating conjunctions, as in an example when the narrative’s use of chronological devices fleshes out capitalism’s colonial roots (“Es sieht wie ein *ehemaliges* Kaufhaus aus, aber *nun* ist im Erdgeschoss eine Bank. *Als* hier der Kanal war, hatte Deutschland noch Kolonien”).<sup>24</sup> Such lessons thus target an audience who is unaware of ways in which the history of, for instance, European colonial ventures continues to affect the contemporary world. This is not to say that audiences like these do not exist or that Erpenbeck is wrong to confront them with

<sup>22</sup> See also Debarati Sanyal’s analysis of contemporary migrant detention centers such as the Calais “Jungle” encampment, self-organized refuges, shantytowns, humanitarian camps, and Guantánamo. Sanyal, Debarati. “Calais’s ‘Jungle’: Refugees, Biopolitics, and the Arts of Resistance.” *Representations* 139.1 (8/2017): 1-33.

<sup>23</sup> Adelson, Leslie A. *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Toward a New Critical Grammar of Migration*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 20.

<sup>24</sup> Here “hypotaxis” is a useful counterpoint to parataxis, given that the former describes features with which an albeit loosely organized narrative, introduces hierarchies, chronological sequences, and relationships of cause and effect. See Hale, Constance. “There’s Parataxis, and Then There’s Hypotaxis.” 2013. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 7 August 2013. Web.

histories of this kind. However, the combination of didacticism and Richard's (and the novel's presumed white European reader's) evolution by means of his encounters with refugees reduces the latter to the occasion by which both the white protagonist and audiences can self-reflect on their relative privilege or guilt, and potentially self-actualize by virtue of such endeavors.<sup>25</sup> In trying to deconstruct the colonial mindset that still affects German and European behavior towards refugees, Erpenbeck's novel reproduces that mindset by privileging yet again the life, perspective, and interiority of the white European individual.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, however, the novel engages with GDR history in a way that might challenge these patterns. This portrayal of the GDR as well as the state's goal of building transversal networks of socialist solidarity across the globe more broadly prove to be potentially more inclusive toward refugees than the model I have just outlined.

### C. Reappraising Socialist Solidarity Today

*Go, Went, Gone's* engagement with the GDR is well known. So far, critics who have commented on the GDR's status in the novel tend to focus on how East Germans themselves had once been refugees, referencing the approximately four million people who

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, Jonathan Dee's incisive critique of Erpenbeck's choice of protagonist. Dee, Jonathan. "The Lives of Others: Does the Social Novel Have a Future?" *Harper's Magazine*. September 2017. Web. 15 August 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Two additional examples illustrate how the novel's limited innovation of loosely conjoined historical narratives works in the text. The first one juxtaposes the protagonist's ruminations about German colonialism with his reported ignorance of the subject ("Wie Deutsch-Ostafrika heute heißt, weiß Richard nicht" 49, "Richard has no idea what German East Africa is called today" 37) and a colonial fantasy in which Richard imagines "black servants" ("schwarze Diener") fetching coals for Lenné's contemporaries, "grin[ning]" at the idea (49-50). The narrative promptly distances itself from the fantasy it has focalized, portraying Richard as a character that is pitiable ("aber wenn man als älterer Herr allein auf einer Parkbank sitzt und vor sich hin grinst, mag anderen das bedenklich erscheinen" 50; "An old man sitting alone on a park bench grinning to himself might raise eyebrows" 37), but also salvageable, because Richard's subsequent interactions with the refugees lead to self-improvement.

In the second example, Richard has already familiarized himself with German and European colonial histories. The scene opens with a passage citing views on "Africans" commonly held by the German public ("die Afrikaner müssen ihre Probleme in Afrika lösen, hat Richard in letzter Zeit häufig Leute sagen hören" 252; "The Africans have to solve their problems in Africa, Richard's heard people saying many times in recent weeks" 203). It subsequently debunks such views by virtue of handing out imaginary "to-do lists" ("Erledigungslisten") with incommensurate tasks to Richard's refugee friends ("Klage gegen den Konzern Areva Frankreich einreichen", "Verbot, im Tschad Erdöl zu fördern und außer Landes zu bringen (USA und China)" (252-53); "File lawsuit against the Areva Group (France)", "Prohibit U.S. and China drilling for oil in Chad and exporting it" 204). As Stefan Hermes points out in his discussion of Erpenbeck's didacticism, these function as somewhat reductive educational devices that contextualize the presence of distressed migrants in contemporary Germany via the country's implication in transnational capitalist ventures and colonial history. Hermes, Stefan. "Grenzen der Repräsentation: Zur Inszenierung afrikanisch-europäischer Begegnungen in Jenny Erpenbecks Roman *Gehen, ging, gegangen*." *Acta Germanica* 44 (2016): 179-91. 184. A subsequent passage switches to a description of Richard's decision to purchase a piece of land in Ghana for a refugee's family, presumably to suggest better ways in which the "problems in Africa" can be solved. The land purchase, however, constitutes an act of a paternalistic do-goodism accompanied with musings on economic privilege and an othering description of customs surrounding the wiring of the cash by dropping it through a hole in the floor (254, 278-79). Here, the novel's social critique stops short, promoting private charitable acts with colonial overtones that are, moreover, unfit to address a phenomenon of such vastness and complexity as distressed migration today.

fled to the West before 1989 in order to escape state oppression and pursue greater economic opportunities as well as greater freedom of expression and movement. Claire Messud underscores that Richard is “attuned to the potential of fleeing and needing assistance,” precisely because of his East German past. While Branwen Stone somewhat more pointedly highlights “similarities between the experiences of the asylum seekers and [Richard’s] personal history,” she rather loosely glosses GDR history as it appears in the novel as “life under surveillance.”<sup>27</sup> Yet other critics give focus to Richard’s slight underprivilege as a former East German in contemporary Germany. Writing for *The New Yorker*, James Wood remarks, for instance, that the dishwasher that Richard owns still “makes him smile: for him it’s a relative novelty, a toy of privilege.”<sup>28</sup>

The implicit connection that these critics draw between the former East and the refugees is premised on a similar degree of unbearable political conditions and relative economic disadvantage. However, underscoring the shared experience of former East Germans and refugees in Germany today elides the specificities of both historical instances and contexts, and reinforces the unequal conditions of the German reunification of 1990.<sup>29</sup> More importantly for my purposes here, these readings obfuscate the real work that still needs to be done on the GDR’s relationship with the global South in its political and ethical ambivalence. In order to reorient our understanding of the possible relationship between Richard and the refugees, it is necessary to recover the historical connections between East Germany and the global South, into the ambiguities of which Erpenbeck’s novel offers a valuable glimpse. These include the counter-histories and real – or imagined – solidarities that offer an alternative framework within which the legacies of the Cold War and of colonialism are not discrete histories but are rather much more entangled.

Contemporary distressed migrants and remnants of GDR history are shown repeatedly as coming into contact throughout Erpenbeck’s novel, with GDR history being mostly represented by means of ruins. These ruins include disused public buildings in which refugees are now quartered and that are named after revolutionaries and all but forgotten GDR poets (Ernst Thälmann, Johannes R. Becher); refugees are shown using the furniture from erstwhile domestic initiatives (such as *Volkssolidarität*), and housed in a makeshift shelter in Buckow, the setting of Bertolt Brecht’s late poetic cycle *Buckower Elegien* (1953) in which Brecht depicts the fledgling socialist republic as imperiled and

<sup>27</sup> Messud, Clare. “Lives Other Than His Own.” *The New York Times*. 12 December 2017. Web. 1 February 2019. Stone, Branwen. “Trauma, Postmemory, and Empathy: The Migrant Crisis and the German Past in Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Gehen, ging, gegangen* [Go, Went, Gone]. *Humanities* 6.4 (2017): 1-12. 3. Erpenbeck herself has contested what she calls the “Western” expectations of the GDR as a totalitarian state, which she relates to her own memories and experiences as follows: “It was a happy and normal life – it was not like the Stasi behind every tree, you know, or hundreds of friends put in prisons. We knew that sometimes things happened that were not good and not okay, but it was not so much part of daily life the way people in [...] the West would probably imagine” (Wachtel 40-41).

<sup>28</sup> Wood, James. “A Novelist’s Powerful Response to the Refugee Crisis.” *The New Yorker*. 18 September 2017. Web. 1 February 2019.

<sup>29</sup> The inequalities are reinforced because such comparisons posit that former East Germans should remember that from which they have been rescued by German reunification, and use the relative wealth they now enjoy as German citizens to help those who have been less fortunate. As Paul Cooke has argued, the process of German reunification entailed “economic and social subjugation of the former GDR by the FRG.” Though Cooke’s analysis remains in many ways unparalleled in its account of the detrimental effects of German reunification on former East Germans, I do not condone Cooke’s use of the term “colonialization” as a metaphor for the post-reunification social and economic transformations of the GDR.

reflects on the persistence of revolutionary hope.<sup>30</sup> The most prominent constellation of refugees and GDR ruins, however, occurs early in the novel when the protagonist is shown pondering the socialist architecture of Alexanderplatz, East Berlin's administrative and cultural center as well as the location of the TV tower as perhaps the most iconic piece of GDR architecture. Framed by reflections on the refugees, who are conducting a hunger strike in front of the *Roten Rathaus* where the Berlin Senate is deliberating over their cases, the narrative follows Richard's gaze as he looks up at the TV tower constructed in the late 1960s by the GDR state. Against the backdrop of thoughts and questions concerning the fulfillment of socialism's utopian potential, the passage proves key for the proposed legacy of the GDR and refugees in contemporary Germany:

Auch zwei Stunden später auf dem Rückweg zum Bahnhofsgebäude sieht Richard nicht zum [Roten] Rathaus hinüber, er schaut nach links auf die Fontänen, sieht die treppenförmig angeordneten Bassins, die zum Sockel des Fernsehturms aufwärts führen. Gebaut zu sozialistischen Zeiten, Sommer für Sommer übersprudelt von Wasser, ein Wagnis für glückliche Kinder, die auf den Querstegen mitten hindurch balancierten, ringsherum ihre lachenden stolzen Eltern, und Kinder wie Eltern von Zeit zu Zeit aufblickend zur silbrigen Kugel des [Fernseh]Turms [...]. Der Vater erzählt den Kindern, aber nur, wenn sie wollen, die Geschichte vom Bauarbeiter, beim Bau der Spitze des Turms soll der heruntergefallen sein, aber weil der Turm eben so hoch ist, dauerte der Fall des Bauarbeiters so lange, dass es den Bewohnern der umliegenden Häuser gelang, schnell Matratzen herbeizuschaffen, während der Arbeiter fiel, fiel und fiel, und der Stapel war genau fertig, als der Arbeiter nach seinem langen Fall unten ankam, er landete weich darauf – wie die Erbsenprinzessin im Märchen! – und stand vollkommen unverletzt wieder auf. Die Kinder sind froh über das Wunder der Arbeiterrettung, nun aber wollen sie wieder spielen. Bei den Fontänen am Alexanderplatz in Berlin sah die Menschheit Sommer für Sommer schon so heil und zufrieden aus, wie es im allgemeinen erst für die Zukunft versprochen war, für die ferne, vollkommen glückliche Zeit, *Kommunismus* genannt, die irgendetwann für alle Menschen erreicht sein würde, nach treppenförmig angeordnetem Fortschritt bis in schwingvolle, kaum zu glaubende Höhen hinein, so in ein-, zwei- oder spätestens dreihundert Jahren.

Wider Erwarten aber war dann der Auftraggeber für die Fontänen, der volkseigene Staat, nach vierzig Jahren plötzlich abhandengekommen, mit dem Staat auch die dazugehörige Zukunft, nur die treppenförmig angeordneten Wasserspiele sprudelten weiter, sprudeln auch jetzt noch Sommer für Sommer in schwingvolle, kaum zu glaubende Höhen hinein, wagemutige, glückliche Kinder balancieren weiterhin quer, bewundert von ihren lachenden, stolzen Eltern. Was erzählt eigentlich so ein Bild, dem die Erzählung abhanden gekommen ist? Wofür werben die glücklichen Menschen heute? Steht die Zeit? Bleibt noch etwas zu wünschen? (Erpenbeck 21-22)

Richard doesn't glance over at [the Red] Town Hall two hours later either when he's walking again past the train station, he's looking at the big fountain on the left, its various terraces arranged like a staircase leading up to the base of the TV tower. Built during Socialist times and bubbling over with water summer after summer, it was the perfect spot for happy children to test their mettle, balancing their way across the stone rows separating the fountain's pools as their laughing, proud parents looked on, and both children and

<sup>30</sup> Leeder, Karen. "Lateness and Late Style in Brecht's Last Poetry." *Edinburgh German Yearbook 5: Brecht and the GDR: Politics, Culture, Posterity*. Ed. Laura Bradley and Karen Leeder. Vol. 5. Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2011. 45-64.

parents alike would now and then gaze up at the [TV] tower's silver sphere [...]. A father tells his children – but only if they really want to hear it – the story of the construction worker who fell from the very top of the tower as it was being built, but because it's so tall, it took the man a very long time to fall to the bottom, and meanwhile the people who lived in the buildings down below were able to drag mattresses outside while the worker was still falling, an entire huge pile of mattresses while he fell and fell, and the pile was finished just in time for the worker to arrive at the end of his fall, and he landed as softly as the princess and the pea in the fairy tale and got right back to his feet without a scratch on him. The children delight in this miracle that saved the worker, and now they're ready to go back to playing. At the Alexanderplatz fountain, summer after summer, humankind appeared to be in fine fettle and content – the sort of condition generally promised only for the future, for the distant age of utter contentment known as *Communism* that mankind would eventually make its way to via a sort of staircase of progress leading into dazzling, astonishing heights, a state to be achieved in the next hundred, two hundred, or at the very most three hundred years.

But then, defying all expectations, the East German government that had commissioned this fountain suddenly disappeared after a mere forty years of existence along with all its promises for the future, leaving behind the staircase-shaped fountain to bubble away on its own, and bubble it did, summer after summer, reaching to dazzling, astonishing heights while adventurous children continued to balance their way across, admired by their laughing, proud parents. What can a picture like this that's lost its story tell us? What vision are these happy people advertising now? Has time come to a standstill? Is there anything left to wish for? (Erpenbeck, transl. Bernofsky 13-14)<sup>31</sup>

In this excerpt, the TV tower and the staircase-shaped fountain at its base are coded as architectural manifestations of the East German project, which understood itself as having embarked on a linear trajectory that would take it from its present historical stage to the utopian dimension of communism, exemplified here by the tower's "dazzling, astonishing heights" (14). In the GDR the certainty of communism's arrival was underwritten by both the teleology of Marxist dialectics on which the state understood itself to have embarked as well as the progressive temporality, which it was prone to expedite in its official narrative.<sup>32</sup> Such a simplified prognosis is contested by Erpenbeck's text in several ways. The story of the falling worker can be understood as a metaphor for the GDR claim to have saved the working class. Yet that narrative was revealed after a lapse of forty years to have been no more than a fairy-tale, in which the promise of future happiness is countermanded. The passage leaves us with a happy but empty image of the conditions in contemporary Germany, where no one appears to be tied together by a common social goal. Then, right after posing the last rhetorical question – "Is there anything left to wish for?" – the text turns back to the striking refugees who by now have reportedly been joined by allies (22). The paratactic juxtaposition of Richard's reflections with the discussion of refugees proves to be key for the novel. Rather than mobilizing its loose organization for the education (or self-realization in charitable acts – see footnote 26) of the privileged white European

<sup>31</sup> Please consult figures 1-2 included in the appendix.

<sup>32</sup> For example, in the mid-1960s – so only a few years before the TV tower was completed – the East German Party Secretary Walter Ulbricht had actually declared the arrival of an imperfect but nevertheless stable and harmonious form of socialism in the GDR, which in the foreseeable future would be replaced by communism proper. Emmerich, Wolfgang. *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR*. Leipzig: Kiepenheuer, 1996. 185.

subject, the device recuperates socialist histories and solidarities for the purposes of a broad social change.

Having posed its rhetorical question, the novel suggests solidarity with refugees in contemporary Germany as a potential continuation of the GDR's largely unfulfilled socialist ideals. In other words, the solidarity expressed by those who ally themselves with the refugees appears as something that might fill the social vacuum following the collapse of the socialist collective imaginary in 1989 that led some critics to proclaim history to have ended. Though the quoted excerpt alludes to and questions the end-of-history thesis ("Has time come to a standstill?"), it simultaneously cautions against the resumption of the teleological narrative of progress, which another passage from the novel identifies as at best the state of naïve obliviousness about the disasters that had taken place before our time (30). In general terms, moreover, Fatima El-Tayeb shows this narrative to have propped up a widespread idea about the emergence of capitalism from the exclusion of ethnicized others under colonialism and Nazism respectively.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, the text also leaves a socialist future open as a possibility, using the formulation "abhanden kommen" to designate its loss. This formulation retains a connotation of something going astray or no longer being available, rather than being irretrievably lost. In so doing, Erpenbeck proposes an alternative legacy of state socialism in Europe: a utopian imaginary shared beyond the confines of the ethnically defined nation state that seems temporarily *abhanden* but can be recuperated for our present day. Erpenbeck thus also suggests a partial renegotiation of these failed utopias, for instance, by opening up the imagined community of the East German nation and posing the question for whom these utopian projects had once been built. Who was the people – or *das Volk* – within the GDR's moniker "volkseigener Staat"?<sup>34</sup>

Here, however, the international socialist solidarity programs which the GDR had conducted with a number of countries in the global South ought to be mentioned in their problematic ambiguity, and sieved through for moments that attest to the fact that the GDR also occasionally resisted the idea of an ethnically-defined national community. These programs flourished mainly in the 1960s and 1970s under the complex circumstances of the Cold War. They included, for instance, solidarity campaigns with prominent activists of color, film co-productions with and medical assistance to Vietnam, and training programs for students in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Namibia. These schemes have come under scrutiny and much-needed criticism by Peggy Piesche, Quinn Slobodian, and Gregory Witkowski, who document how these programs were all too often accompanied by state-sponsored racist iconography – and that participants in programs that ostensibly promoted socialist solidarity were often subjected to racism and denied their self-determination. The underside of these initiatives, which I believe must be read jointly with

<sup>33</sup> This temporality has served to bolster what Fatima El-Tayeb with reference to Stuart Hall calls "the internalist story of European modernity – with capitalism growing from feudalism and Europe's self-generating capacity to produce the circumstances of her own evolution from within her own body," and relies on the exclusion of the colonized and ethnicized others not only outside of this temporality, but also to the West's own past. El-Tayeb, Fatima. *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 13, 89-90.

<sup>34</sup> In the quoted passage, the term *volkseigener Staat* (literally meaning "publicly owned state" and often translated as "the people's state") is being rightfully contested. The German word *Volk* is contentious in contemporary German because of its Nazi connotations, though in the GDR the word remained in use after the war because *Volk* was recoded under the banner of the socialist so-called "worker and peasant state."

the scene at the *Fernsehturm*, is thematized in Richard's memories of encountering students from the GDR's partner countries Mozambique and Angola, on whose account, as Richard recollects full of shame, he may have bought a volume entitled "*Negerliteratur*" (33). Fast-forwarding into the present, another passage laments the presence of an "increasingly popular" party's racist slogan targeting the Roma and Sinti (167), precisely "in dem Teil Deutschlands, in dem bis vor fünfzig Jahren der *proletarische Internationalismus* das Motto für unzählige Spruchbänder abgegeben hat" (207); ("in the part of Germany where, until twenty-five years ago, the words 'proletarian internationalism' served as a slogan for countless banners" 167).<sup>35</sup> The novel thus also identifies shortcomings with the GDR's internationalist politics which were prone to be ordered from above, and all too often deteriorated into empty slogans.

Recent scholarship has helped us see that, in some circumstances, these solidarity campaigns facilitated genuine connections between East Germans and oppressed peoples elsewhere: how, for instance, East German pharmaceutical workers voluntarily worked overtime in acts of solidarity to send medication to North Korea (Young-Sun Hong), how the East German public engaged in spontaneous protests against the apartheid in South Africa, or how they launched protests that simultaneously critiqued analogous components of foreign and domestic regimes (Slobodian 44-45, 74-75, 74). Such actions differ from a top-down model of European solidarity with the developing world, in so far as they at times understood themselves as sharing the common goal of fighting against a transnationally understood oppression, and pursued a utopian solidarity that was envisioned as taking place outside of the nation-state and bearing on the success of building socialism at home. In the novel, the Alexanderplatz ruin as a failed utopian, socialist project by and for the ethnically defined nation state is put in dialogue with a potentially egalitarian transnational socialism that might yet come into being in solidarity with refugees today. Such examples show that while the socialist community only partially succeeded in representing the radical antifascist alternative it had understood itself to be, it was at times also a community organized along lines of communalism and social solidarity – a model on which, Erpenbeck seems to be suggesting, we might still be able to draw.<sup>36</sup>

## D. Conclusion

Contemporary discussions revolving around the historical legacy of the GDR in relation to the current refugee crisis generally fail to mention the international socialist community and solidarity schemes in which the East German state was actively involved. Erpenbeck's novel offers an original contribution to this debate, by suggesting that socialist institutions

<sup>35</sup> See also May Ayim's essay on the unleashing of racism and anti-Semitism in the wake of the German reunification. Ayim, May. "The Year 1990: Homeland and Unity from an Afro-German Perspective." Gökürk, Deniz, Gramling David, and Anton Kaes. *Germany in Transit: Nation and Migration 1955-2005*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 126-29.

<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of antifascism as East Germany's "foundational narrative," see Hell, Julia. *Post-fascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History, and the Literature of East Germany*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. Jürgen Danyel has recently related this foundational narrative to the unwitting and paradoxical enabling of the extreme right by GDR officials who shied away from the taboo topic of the presence of a homegrown far right in the "antifascist state" (which had emerged particularly in the final five years of the GDR's existence), used the antifascist rhetoric to curb regime criticism, and to maintain their positions of power during the *Wende* (Behrens 23-24).

and ideals should not be solely considered within the chronological boundaries of a past socialist experiment, but should rather be redefined as a historical period that can productively shape our understanding of previous German history (including colonialism and National Socialism) and possible political futures.

As *Go, Went, Gone* powerfully reminds us, the GDR's international solidarity programs were characterized by their deep ethical ambivalence. Erpenbeck's novel suggests that the colonial discourses of modernization and the racist mindsets that had accompanied them make imperative a critical reappraisal and broad social reckoning with this past. However, Erpenbeck's juxtaposition of refugees with GDR history also accords with the GDR's largely unfulfilled aspirations to overcome colonial legacies, transcend the boundaries of an ethnically-defined socialist community, and thus build genuine solidarity with refugees as relevant for thinking distressed migration in Germany today. As the present study has argued, while at times Erpenbeck's disjunctive narrative appears subtly hierarchical in terms of the predefined "lessons" its active readers are encouraged to draw from it, its open-ended paratactic structure can also be a productive literary device, allowing us to reimagine socialist history and solidarity through a more inclusive and genuinely egalitarian lens.

This reimagined perspective is, I believe, central to Erpenbeck's critical reappraisal of GDR history vis-à-vis contemporary distressed migration, and in a condensed form, can be found in the title of Erpenbeck's novel itself. One of the novel's most striking semantic juxtapositions, both defamiliarizing and bringing new connotations to a well-known verbal form, *Gehen, ging, gegangen* is a grammatical paradigm of the verb "to go" as the basic verb of motion. This also appears within the narrative itself, in a description of refugees quite literally conjugating this basic verb of motion in a makeshift classroom in Berlin (65) – before they are told to go again.

"Go, went, gone" thus evocatively sums up the refugees' present, past, and future, bringing the title into conversation with contemporary debates on the tragic shortcomings of institutional models when faced with distressed migration. A decolonized model of international socialist solidarity, within the utopian horizon of a reimagined GDR legacy, might provide an additional paradigm for thinking and negotiating this pressing global issue.

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## Appendix



Figure 1

*Fernsehturm: Alexanderplatz Berlin. Die neuen Architekturführer. Berlin: Stadtwandel Verlag, 2012. 7.*



Figure 2

*Fountains near TV-tower in Berlin-Mitte (Germany). Built in 1970-72. Digital photograph by Manfred Brückels (circa 2008). Wikimedia Commons.*

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