Travel and Hybridity: Hans Grimm’s *Afrikafahrt West* and Robert Müller’s *Tropen*

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Shortly before and after the outbreak of World War I, Imperial Germany, which had entered the mad dash for overseas colonies belatedly in 1884, witnessed the appearance of two overseas travel accounts by German-speaking writers which, in their own particular way, dealt with the issue of racial hybridity. In 1913, Hans Grimm published his travel guide *Afrikafahrt West. [...] Ein Reisebuch und ein Einführungsbuch*,¹ and, in 1915, the Austrian expressionist writer Robert Müller published his avant-garde novel *Tropen. Der Mythos der Reise*. These two *Reisebücher* also guide potential travelers as they embark upon their journeys to non-European shores. From a European point of view, Grimm’s *Einführungsbuch* to Germany’s Southwest African colony and Müller’s Brazilian jungle narrative present a fertile mix of the barbarian, the primitive, and the exotic.

Within this common framework, however, the authors and their texts are at odds with one another in many respects, none more crucial than the notion of hybridity. Whereas Hans Grimm (1875–1959) proscribes any intimate contact between the European masters and the indigenous population of the colonies, Robert Müller (1879–1924) delights in portraying his protagonists’ no-holds-barred approach to going native. *Tropen* presents the voluntary exposure to the attractions of the exotic, instinctual life of the jungle inhabitants – be they fauna, flora, or humana.

In bringing these quite different *Reisebücher* together, I would like to explore two constructions of hybridity in travel literature: one in which hybridity is seen as leading to a loss of subjectivity through contamination, and another in which, quite to the contrary, hybridization is rewarded with a gain in subjectivity. By proscribing any contact with the other – in particular sexual contact – Grimm’s text embodies the imperialist and ultimately racist fears conjured up by the specter of hybridity. By contrast, Müller’s narrative of submitting to the exotic allure, performed in the service of the expressionist pathos of the New Man, welcomes the hybrid intermixing of European and non-European cultures. Thus, what distinguishes the two approaches is the status of the exotic as conveyor of difference – with the exotic female as the cipher of hybridity.
My thesis will be, however, that in spite of these differences between a negative and an affirmative approach to hybridity, the effect of the representation of non-European cultures in these travel accounts is ultimately similar, different in degree only. While Grimm’s is a racist account, Müller’s depiction of non-European cultures—despite his clear rejection of exoticism—is bound up with an evolutionist primitivism that instrumentalizes non-European cultures in the pursuit of the New Man. The critique of exoticism, which potentially runs counter to an idealization of non-European cultures as either Edenic or barbaric, is voided by an evolutionism that all too often depicts indigenous people as prehuman animals. The persistence of this primitivist strand in Müller’s discourse has the effect of annulling the otherwise progressive concept of racial mixing.

The title of Hans Grimm’s Afrikafahrt West […] Ein Reisebuch und ein Einführungs Buch is indicative of its program: this travel account aims to entertain and to provide historical information to the German traveler and possible colonist on his way to Africa. In his text, Grimm provides ample information about the countries the traveler passes en route and about their history. But principally, and quite openly, Afrikafahrt West is a course in ideological indoctrination. Grimm tells the traveler who he has been, who he must become, and how to properly behave in the presence of an inferior people. In the course of his text, Grimm aims to turn the German adventurer from an apathetic creature beholden to authority into a self-directed force of colonial domination.

He starts off with a diagnosis: at the beginning of the 20th century, Germans have lost all pride in their national character. Over the centuries, they gave up something that the British, the principal colonial force, still possess, namely the independence of their Herrentum, their sense of being masters. Germans have lost their sense of national pride (42). They have relinquished their status as free yeoman and abandoned their mutual respect for one another, which had formerly found expression in the free gathering of equals (Volksversammlung). Germans need to regain this state of self-possessed men of action if Germany is to be a player in the international competition for world power, which, in the early twentieth century, is being waged among the United States, England, and Germany (48).

Grimm makes himself the historian of this loss: the worst thing to have happened to the Germanic tribes occurred when the Frankish kings took power. Apparently from this period date the sequence of actions «[die] den germanischen Verfassungsgrundsatz vom Herrentum des freien Mannes ausrottete und vergessen machte» (42). During the ensuing centuries, the Germans slowly learned to let someone else take care of things for them (44).
Grimm is very annoyed with what he calls the «Gefolgschaftsfreudigkeit des heimbleibigen Deutschen» (44), the sense of happy contentment the stay-home German finds in following a leader, i.e., his subservience, and he counsels Germans to travel and settle new land in order to regain the former national character of their Herrentum.

This is where Afrikafahrt West comes in: on the ocean, bound for new land, «ändert sich der Charakter des deutschen Volkstums» (46). And later, in the steppes of Africa, the German who by nature is the «autoritätsbedürftigste und autoritätsfromme Mensch der Welt» (46) becomes a Herrenmensch again. The settler who has spent some time in the presence of indigenous peoples develops the attributes of a stand-up human being: «[Er] hat sich in Südafrika zu einem aufrechten Wesen entwickelt» (46). So much so that the German military, assisting the settlers in periods of indigenous uprisings, is surprised at the Tonart of the settlers: «die oprechte Tonart dieser Deutschen war den Militärs was ganz Neues» (46). This is the kind of German who will be able to found colonies and secure new land for his home country.

There is, however, one terrible danger above all that every German in the colonies has to be wary of, namely the mixing of races (72). Relating, first, the history of the Dutch and then the English colonial administrations of Capetown and the lands beyond, Grimm points out that the greatest mistake is to go native, and that it is incumbent upon all German colonists to know that «jede eingebildete menschliche Gemeinschaft zwischen ihnen und den anderen [werde] unerbittlich in ihrer Wurzel zerstört» (72–73). Although he concedes that slavery was an aberration (71), and wholly unnecessary – and thus, for a moment seems fairly enlightened – Grimm instructs his readers that the worst that can happen is what he calls the «schwarze Gefahr, d.h. die Vergewaltigung weißer Mädchen und Frauen» (73). The most unforgivable (unsühnbar) crime is when a white woman enters into sexual relations with a colored man. For by doing this she endangers the honor of an entire race, «und kein Tod ist schnell und kein Grab ist tief und verschwiegen genug für solche Ungeheuerlichkeit» (91). Grimm also makes sure that the traveler gets a piece of his mind with respect to missionary work in Africa: the Church, in his view, ought to be much more reluctant when bringing heathens into the fold, and first scrutinize their own motives for such actions – intimating, at the very least, that their actions are driven by considerations of financial gain rather than religious fervor.

It will be fairly clear by now that Grimm is a racist and a colonial apologist with stable binary oppositions – no mixing of white (superior) and black (inferior), civilization and barbarism, white order and colored disorder (79). Strict apartheid is to be the norm. The only hybridization and competition
to be allowed is amongst Europeans. The nonwhite world is unworthy of intermixing on any level, furnishing the servant peoples. He admonishes his readers, «Hebt die Eingeborenen, aber vermischt nicht die Rassen» (90). His Reisebuch prepares the new settler for this task.

The more interesting, more ambitious, and more ambiguous text when it comes to travel and hybridity is Robert Müller’s expressionist tour de force Tropen. Der Mythos der Reise. The ambiguous nature of this text starts with its subtitle. Mythos has at least two meanings here: its Greek, generic meaning of narrative or story and then the colloquially familiar one of a false explanation in need of correction. As readers, we keep asking ourselves whether we are dealing here with the narrative of an actual journey – or is the entire idea of travel a myth? Thus, the subtitle to Tropen alerts the reader to use caution when deciphering the content of the novel.

In spite of this warning, it seems natural that an expressionist writer like Robert Müller would choose the tropics as the setting for his novel. The southern climates lend themselves quite easily, or so it would seem, as literal and metaphorical backdrop to the avant-garde’s antibourgeois revolt in turn-of-the-century Europe (the cold North). The tropics represent the exotic image to all that seemed, to both fin-de-siècle artists as well as expressionists, most stifling about Western civilization. Expressionist painters (Pechstein, Nolde), in particular, looked to non-European cultures for alternatives to Western civilization and for inspiration concerning what they called the New Man.

Taking up the cue Müller himself provides in the title of his novel – Tropen meaning both tropics and tropes – I would like to suggest that the organizing principle of Müller’s novel must be seen in its essentially Nietzsche-inspired reach, both on a thematic and a rhetorical level. As will be seen, the tropics of Müller’s novel are equally important as geographic location and as metaphor, and Nietzsche’s epistemological radicalism combined with his critique of Western civilization ultimately holds the key to understanding the main features of Tropen: namely its exoticism, primitivism, and its colonial and racial dimensions. Put differently, Nietzsche stands behind Müller, providing the link between the philosophical and literary dimensions of Tropen.

In Tropen, a German, a Dutchman, and an American hire a small group of Indian navigators and set out to find a treasure deep in the jungle between Venezuela and Brazil. After two weeks’ journey they come upon a small Indian village. They stay there for a few weeks until an accident/murder occurs. In haste, they leave the next morning, accompanied by Zana, an alluring Indian woman, and proceed to the purported hiding place of the treasure. Un-
surprisingly, given the rest of the novel, they do not find, nor do they really
look for, the treasure: instead, the American and the Dutchman die mysteri-
osous deaths at this very place in the jungle, and the narrator, a German engineer
by the name of Brandlberger, is the only one to survive.

The plot outlined here takes up a mere fraction of the novel. By far the
greatest part is given over to reflections, discussions, dream sequences, hallu-
cinations, and states of trance. What makes matters still more nebulous is that
the reader can never be too sure if the narrated events are imagined or real.
For long stretches, the novel refuses to provide a reality index to the narra-
tive events. Occurrences that in a first account appear to be dream sequences
may, according to a subsequent account, have actually happened. Important
events, such as the death of an indigenous woman (was it murder or an acci-
dent?), are left ambiguous.

On a thematic level, these reflections, dream sequences, and hallucinations
address a multitude of issues. In the words of one critic, in *Tropen*, there are
zahlreiche Anklänge an Abenteuer-, Schatzsucher- und Kriminalromane, an Schauer-
und Schicksalsstories und Urwald- und Liebesschmökern [...] sowie ein teilweise
schwindelerregender gedanklicher Parforzerritt über anthropologische, kulturhi-
storische und zivilisationskritische Fragestellungen, über Künste wie Tanz, Malerei
und Musik, ja über das Erzählen und Schreiben selber, über Probleme der Erkennt-
nis-, der Zeichen- und Wissenschaftstheorie, über das Verhältnis der Geschlechter
zueinander, über Lust, Jagd und Brutalität, Gesundheit, Krankheit und Perversi-
tät, über Identität, Co-Existenz, und Ichverlust, über Geschichte und Fortschritt
und über einen neuen zukünftig zu erwirkenden Menschentypus. (Hermes 428)

And all of the above is presented in the form of a journey to the tropical jungle.
How do the white protagonists experience the tropics and the inhabitants of
the jungle? The first answer is: in the tradition of most literature dealing with
far away lands during the colonialist period. The indigenous people are rep-
resented as savage, childlike, instinctual, and sometimes cruel beings; they are
closer to nature, animal-like, and they do not shy away from modes of con-
duct and forms of physical violence and sensual excess that are unacceptable
in civilized Europe. This makes for their attraction as well as repulsiveness in
the eyes of the travelers. In sum, Müller at first portrays the members of the
indigenous tribe in terms of the clichés typical for the depiction of primitive
cultures as seen by the West – less so, however, in the mode of Gauguin’s dia-
ries and paintings, and closer to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

As for the travelers themselves, true to their preconceived notion of the
tropics, they abandon themselves to the new impressions by consciously giv-
ing up rational control and letting themselves drift. The narrator describes his
experiences thus:

In spite of the boredom he experiences in the «timeless» jungle, the narrator espouses the tropics as an alternative to his Western life style. He is convinced that his future lies with the inhabitants of the tropics, who live in a state of happiness. His first erotic encounter in the jungle proves to him what he had always known, namely that «das fremdrassige dunkle Mädchen» would dispel the memory of the «abgeschmackte[,] bürgerliche[ ] Turnier mit Scharen zu Seelen verkrüppelter Weiber» (51) that he had been engaged in in Europe. From this moment on he swears to forsake the culture of the German bourgeois, and to honor the «überlegene[] Bildung dieser Wilden» (52) and the spirit that emanates from their carefree life. «Der Kampf der Rassen und Sinne ist in meinem Herzen entschieden» (51). In other words, his exoticism has gotten the better of him: he has gone native.

However, this state of affairs does not last long, and, in the end, the novel provides an entirely different picture of exoticism and of exotic literature than was the rule in turn-of-the-century Europe. In a nutshell, it suggests that the tropics, into which Europeans project their fantasies, do not exist. The longer Brandlberger stays in the tropics, the more he realizes this fact:

Was spreche ich da viel von den Tropen? Der Wilde kennt sie nicht, nur der Nordländer, sie sind ihm ein Tropus für seine Glut und das verzehrende Fieber in seinen Nerven. Er erfindet sie, um sich ein Gleichnis zu setzen. Aber sie sind nicht vorhanden, sondern nur eine langweilige monotone Wachstumsbeziehung. Es ist überhaupt nichts da, als diese Wachstumsbeziehung. (185)

The tropics are – as announced by the title – but a trope for the longing in «modern man,» i.e., the European, the Northerner (Nordmenschen), for an experience that is more instinctual than life in Western Europe. Therefore, the true nature of the exotic consists not in geographical location, in the distance gained to decadent Europe, but rather in a psychological condition. It is in this sense that, as the narrator claims, the tropics do not exist («Tropen gibt es nicht» [85]). The myth of travel, as false expectation, consists, therefore in the assumption that the traveler will satisfy some sense of longing in far-away tropic regions. The reality, the narrator suggests, is that he finds the longing within himself, and no amount of travel to the far ends of the earth will quench it. What the traveler is really looking for he may just as easily en-
counter at home: «Überallhin trägt er seinen inneren Menschen mit, für den es keine Geographie gibt. Und exotischer denn eine brasiliansche Wildnis ist die Straße im Verkehrszentrum einer großen Stadt» (120). This means that the inhabitants of the tropics are not essentially different from the European city dwellers. *Die Tropen*, the cipher for the instinctual life, exists in the *Stadt-mensch* as much as in the *Dschungelmensch*; southern and northern cultures merely represent different degrees of *tropicality*. Having understood the true meaning of the subtitle of *Tropen*, i.e., *Der Mythos der Reise*, European travelers will thus be thrown back upon themselves and their own culture.

But if the tropics do not deliver as geographic location, if the exotic constitutes merely a psychological dimension expressing a certain species longing, why does Müller employ the tropical setting? Indeed, why travel at all? As it turns out, midway through his narrative, still languishing in the jungle village, the narrator, while taking stock of his adventures up to this point, explicitly asks himself this very question: «Wozu reist dieses Geschlecht?» And he provides a very interesting answer: «Um den Menschen in sich zu erreisen» (118). What might it mean to say that «our» generation must reach its human essence through travel?

In order to properly understand this statement we need to take a closer look at Slim, the American of the group. Slim’s ancestry includes Arabic, European, and African heritage, and the narrator emphasizes that he is equally at home in the jungle and in the European cities. Slim, then, is the emblem of hybridity in Müller’s novel, and, as such, he plays a pivotal role in the story and its thematic development. Slim’s vision of the New Man relies heavily on the Nietzschean affirmation of the instinctual life (*die Eingeweide*), an attitude which Slim, like Nietzsche, uses primarily to undermine European rationalism (*das Gehirn*). Slim comes equipped with his own, Freud-inspired metaphysics of pleasure (*Lust*): «Das Leben zutiefst gefasst ist Ich; Ich zutiefst gefasst ist Lust. Lust ist der direkteste Inhalt des Bewusstseins» (65); according to this view, the search for pleasure, rather than the pursuit of reason, constitutes the true motive for human action and leads to physical and spiritual health. As a descendent of both European and non-European cultures, Slim is as much in touch with his atavistic nature as hunter as he is with the refined habits of life in the big cities (68). Not rejecting either one of these, he nevertheless seems to hold more sympathy for the instinctual underbelly of civilization with its primal experiences of lust, violence, and horror (*Grauen*). Slim concludes, «Wenn Europa einstmals eine einzige Fabriksmetropole sein wird, wird man hier noch zu leben wissen» (69).

From here we can extrapolate a first clue as to why the European must travel. The European culture of the *Gehirn* is no longer excessive, heroic enough for
Slim. Civilization does not heed the call for pleasure, the true source of being human, in a manner that is most conducive to its own health. Slim believes, with Nietzsche, that civilized mankind has become too refined, it has lost its vitality, its health. «Sehen Sie denn nicht, Johnny, wie mir Exzess mit der höchsten Gesundheit identisch ist und dass das Einfache nur das Übertriebene ist? Darum ist ja eure Kultur […] eben eine Kultur, weil sie übertrieben ist, weil sie das Gehirn überbetont. Und sie ist keine Kultur – versuchen Sie zu folgen, Sie können es – weil sie zu wenig überbetont» (68). What looks like a piece of sophistry at first (… ist eine Kultur … ist keine Kultur …) points to an essential lack within Western civilization («Westarier», 137), namely the loss of a direct connection to instinctual pleasure, the basis of all life. The only way to retrieve this vital link is to travel so as to encounter other cultures, more primitive cultures, where the pursuit of pleasure is still on the surface of everyday life. In other words, what this European generation needs, in order to find the human essence within itself, is to identify and then seek out primitive cultures.

Slim’s elaborations, confirmed and reinforced by both the narrator and the Dutchman, force us to revisit what we have said above about exoticism. We must now differentiate between the critique of exoticism and the affirmation of a certain primitivism in Tropen. While the novel negates the existence of exotic places and debunks the idealizations of traditional exoticism, it preserves a certain kind of primitivism at the same time. As will become clear below, the existence (and experience) of purportedly primitive cultures is an essential requirement for the civilized European on his way to transforming himself into the New Man. The question is whether such primitivism is one of the costs of Müller’s celebration of hybridity.

Before we can proceed to explore this question, we need to demonstrate more clearly how Müller identifies hybridity with the expressionist dream of the New Man. Here is the narrator, «Johnny» Brandlberger’s description of Slim: «In ihm lag jene Universalität, die auf die tiefsten menschlichen Gründe zurückgeht. Sein Nervensystem war ein Rest Tropen, in ihm war der Geist des Boulevards wieder mit seiner Urform, der animalischen Tiefe des Lebens, eins geworden. Ich ahnte in ihm den Vertreter einer neuen Menschlichkeit» (69–70). In this passage, Slim appears as the hybrid of the boulevard and the tropics. He is not the representative of an individual race but of the mixture of races, a self-proclaimed deracine (199), delighting in his status as parvenu par excellence (200). As such, Slim represents a new type of human being who has overcome all longing for the other. He no longer knows the need for false (exotic) longing because he combines in himself all aspects of the New Man, the man of the future: «Die große Synthese bricht an. Wir stülpen Asien und
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Europa und Amerika aufeinander. Und was entsteht ist eine Menschheit […]. Wir sind ein neues Geschlecht. Wir haben die Sehnsucht überwunden» (201). Slim’s incarnation of the American as the New Man who will integrate civilization and barbarism represents Müller’s expressionist idealism of the new hybrid human being that has emerged from the jungles of both Brazil and Berlin.

In statements such as the last one, the pathos of an entire generation of expressionist writers and artists is visible in full force. This Menschheitsdämmerung echoes the radical spirit and activism of an entire generation of writers and artists who volunteered for the Great War and returned, if they did, either as revolutionaries or as pacifists. However, the universal ideals of these revolutionaries and pacifists are also troublesome or naïve – and not only because, as the twentieth century made all too clear, the call for a single human brotherhood usually comes with a geopolitics to which not everyone assents. It is important to keep this framework in mind when we now turn to what I have called the costs of hybridity above.

To recapitulate, up to the midpoint of his novel, Müller develops a critique of exoticism as a figment of the European imagination. However, it now seems that he does not reject the promise of exoticism, only its geography. The promise of exoticism was to find an alternative, a space for renewal that would counter the detrimental effects of European civilization. In light of the argument in the previous section it seems that Müller still holds on to this promise of renewal, though uncoupled from its geography. I have tried to allude to this fact as his primitivism and referred to it as the costs of hybridity.

We must now ask about the precise relationship between hybridization and primitivism in Tropen. Returning to Slim’s self-proclaimed status as New Man, even as Weltmann, we may now inquire as to how he achieved this status. The answer is training. Not being rooted in any particular culture – neither bourgeois Europe, modern America, ancient India, nor barbaric indigenous Brazil, yet being a part of all of them – Slim, the American, needs to undergo special training: «Training ist ein verkürztes Verfahren für Rasse. Rasse hat die Hündin Zana und jedes Tier hier im Walde» (199).³ As an American, Slim has all imaginable cultures in his blood; what he lacks is racial purity for which he compensates through training: «Diesen ausschlaggebenden Mangel ersetze ich durch Training. Ich bringe jede, auch die heterogenste Saite in mir zu einem Klingen. […] Ich bin der Amerikaner, der parvenu, der sich aber zugleich überwunden hat» (200).

How does he accomplish this? How does this mixed-blood American reconcile the most heterogeneous aspects of his being? I would suggest that it
is principally through travel, through the encounter with different cultures that are at various stages of development. For Slim, as for the narrator, who first presents this theory, human evolution knows five dimensions. The European inhabits the fifth dimension, the apex of the hierarchical evolutionary scale – only Slim himself, as Weltmann, has left even this dimension behind, as he intimates in the passage above. The indigenous culture of the Brazilian jungle, however, exists only on the second dimension, a level somewhat closer to, though not identical with, the deepest ground of all human existence (physisches Urschicksal, 138). Yet life on the second dimension is preconceptual, instinctual, and therefore, as we have already seen, more primitive: «Die Sprache des Indianers ist seine Malerei; auch seine Wortsprache ist nur malerisch, nicht begrifflich. Die avancierte Sprache und Philosophie sind eins. Ist es Ihnen entgangen, dass die Welt auf deutsch bereits anders aussieht als auf französisch oder englisch? Die avancierte Sprache regiert in der fünften Dimension» (136).

Tropen, of course, portrays the Europeans’ journey to the jungle, the second dimension. It is through the contact with this primitive culture that the representatives of the fifth dimension train, perfect, and improve themselves and their culture. The narrator states, for example, «Wir reisen. Wir bezwingen den Wilden, indem wir ihn sehen kommen. Und nun holen wir uns wieder, was wir für unser Gehirn eingetauscht hatten, aber wir geben den Tausch nicht auf. Wir behalten, was wir besitzen. Denn unser Gehirn ist unser Messer, eine feine Klinge der Beobachtung, die wir nicht vom Leibe geben» (112). The representatives from the fifth dimension keep what is theirs, adding to their arsenal what they once possessed on a less evolved level but are now lacking: «Vieles, was sich der Djunglemensch organisch erhalten hat, wird von uns jetzt nachgeholt werden. Die Hauptsache ist, dass wir über die Beilegung dieses Versäumnisses einig sind. Wir müssen physischer werden» (124). But as the penultimate quotation makes clear, this act of Nachholen is far from being reciprocal. It is not a situation of exchange – where the «savages» would also undergo a learning process – but rather of exploitation. In other words, the representatives of the fifth dimension take without giving. And they can easily exploit the «savages» because the latter, inhabiting only the second dimension of human evolution, have no conceptual wherewithal to challenge them. This act seems to be an act of colonial exploitation, rather than of equal exchange; the knife is retained.

I draw two conclusions from the above. One, the hierarchy of dimensions, espoused by all the adventurers, provides the justification for dividing the cultures of the world into advanced and primitive, thus producing the effect of primitivism that we observed above. Two, the kind of hybridity extolled in
the character of Slim benefits only the Western individual intent upon becoming the New Man. For although all cultures are supposedly on an equal footing and there is no justification for a value hierarchy between one (European) or another (non-European) culture, the narrator does differentiate:


Leaving aside the notion of the Phantoplasma for the moment, it is plain to see that no culture «other than ours» can harbor the idea of progress, of time, of history (and, by extension, of self-reflexivity) without being considered decadent (verderbt) and therefore in decline. The last sentences of this statement thus effectively contradict the argument put forward at the beginning of the passage. The culture of the fifth dimension has a definite evolutionary advantage since it is the only one exhibiting self-reflexivity. This statement represents a denial of coevalness, of Gleichzeitigkeit, to the object on the part of the subject of the gaze (see Fabian). The subject, the European, purports to inhabit a temporally advanced position with respect to members from a non-European culture sharing the same horizon of time: «Der Djunglemensch hat die Zeit […] nicht begriffen. Er lebt in der Ewigkeit, im seienden Raum, der ihm niemals unter den Füßen fortbewegt wurde zu einer höheren Existenzform, zu technischen Umgestaltungen oder geistigen Manövern. Nur wer die Ewigkeit verliert, entdeckt die Zeit. Wir verloren und entdeckten» (123). In spite of the critique of exoticism, statements like these are never retracted in the novel. In fact, as we saw above, they are necessary for hybrid humanity’s progress towards the New Man.

With the theory of dimensions and its importance for the expressionist utopia of the New Man, we have reached the midpoint of the novel. What happens in the rest of the book? In terms of plot: very little. Once the adventurers flee the indigenous village, they make their way to the treasure’s hiding place. When they fail to locate it, the jungle gets the better of them: they become suspicious of each other, fight for Zana’s attentions, stalk and point guns at each other or – merely imagine doing any of these things. The bulk of the remaining text consists of reflections and conversations among the three main characters. In the wake of these sometimes highly speculative ruminations the reader is left in the dark as to which events really occurred and which are merely hallucinated. Only two facts are beyond dispute: the deaths of Slim and van Dusen, and the fact that the narrator finds a way out of the jungle – whether with or without Zana’s help is again hard to decide.
What, we must ask, is Müller’s purpose in so disorienting the reader? The narrative devices responsible for such disorientation, namely dream, trance, and fever, are easily chalked up to the protagonists’ exposure to the tropical jungles and a resulting *Tropenkoller*. However, since *Tropen* is an expressionist rather than realist novel, we cannot stop there. I would like to suggest that, in the second part of the novel, Müller performs the *trop(e)rical* dimension of his title: it is here that the narrative escapes the narrator’s control by losing the distinction between reference and rhetoric. Müller’s trop(e)ical writing provides his novel with a unique, revolutionary texture that has since been identified as expressionist writing. What exactly does trop(e)ical writing mean?

The reflections on poetry in the paragraph below provide us with a hint. Although these are the narrator’s ruminations, they sound more like Müller’s own ideas than those of the adventurous engineer or his fellow travelers. Alluding to the ambiguous status of the exotic as discussed above, Brandlberger explains why he first decided to write a book entitled *Tropen*:

> Nicht nur dem Milieu zuliebe und gleichsam der hypertrophischen und deutlichen Entfaltung aller menschlichen Beziehungen wegen, die hier rein und ungehemmt, tropisch sozusagen, ins Kraut schießen; nicht nur weil das gesamte menschliche Gefühlsleben auf sein Vegetatives zurückgeführt ist: sondern aus Hinterlist, aus Spitzfindigkeit, weil alles Gegebene immer nur eine poetische Methode, ein Tropus ist. (184)

This last sentence, namely that «everything given is always a poetic method, a trope,» represents, I believe, a radical, revelatory moment in the novel. Here, the technical term *Tropus* is applied to an ontological dimension, the given, and therefore assumes a theoretical status beyond its more narrow use as figure of speech. In other words, the rhetorical nature of the trope is here expanded to encompass, in Nietzschean fashion, ontological and epistemological dimensions. As is well known, Nietzsche’s most famous statements in this respect refer to truth as a «mobile army of metaphors» and to the true world as «a fable.» In such a world, reality is an effect of language, and what is real and what is merely rhetorical are impossible to disentangle. It is in this Nietzschean spirit that, a few pages after the above passage, Slim erases the difference between facts and dreams: «Es gibt Wachtatsachen und Traumtatsachen. Und was ich nun behaupte, ist dies: dass beide für das Individuum konstitutiv sind. Der Mensch besteht nicht nur aus dem, was er im Wachzustande, sondern auch aus dem, was er im Traume erlebt» (196). In other words, lived, conscious experience and the world of the imagination (dreams, hallucinations) equally contribute to the effect of reality. In fact, they both help create it. But there is more: «Wo eine Realität ist, kann auch die andere..."
sein. [...] Der Natur etwas abbeobachten, heißt ihr etwas zuschöpfen. Sehen und Produzieren ist das gleiche» (203). If we take Slim here as Müller’s spokesperson, then visual, linguistic, or conceptual acts are always trop(e)ical (not mimetic) acts when they assign discrete bits of language or visual images to the given. They are trop(e)ical because, in the final analysis, they are poetic, imaginative renderings of a world that could also be created differently.

The practice of trop(e)ical writing explains, I believe, why as readers we cannot give a reality index to, for example, the deaths occurring in the novel. We cannot be sure who killed Rulc, or how exactly Slim, and especially van Dusen, died. In the case of the latter, the novel provides at least three, maybe four, different scenarios (ranging from jealousy to cannibalism), all of which are mutually put in doubt – they are either recollections, hallucinations, inventions, or experiences. In these, as in other instances, the novel keeps all of the possible scenarios in play. Why?

There are two interrelated answers to this question: the first comes from the novel itself, the second has to do with the hubris of expressionist utopianism. The argument from the novel is centered on Slim’s elaborations concerning the twin notions of synthesis and combination as hallmarks characterizing the intellectually advanced position of the New Man:

Wir haben die Sehnsucht überwunden; mit ihr wohl auch die Beobachtungen, all das, was man unter der Etikette der ‹Analyse› verstand. Wir sind zu einer synthetischen Lebensform gekommen. Den Kombinationen ist freier Spielraum gelassen, die Kombination ist das Merkmal dieser Zeit. Es ist eine im letzten Grunde artistische Zeit; aber nicht dem Geschmack, sondern dem Wesen nach. (201)

At his advanced level of understanding, the hybrid Slim has overcome analysis and differentiation – the tools that help humanity distinguish, assess, judge, as well as make reasonable choices. Surveying the lot of historical choices from the heights of the fifth dimension (or even beyond it), Slim the New Man freely combines those images of reality that he deems most fruitful for the future. Here is his modernist credo: the New Man «ist ganz klar, ganz unromantisch, und die Analyse verdirbt ihm keine eingefleischten Räusche. [...] Er weiß, dass sie für ihn sehr neu sind. [...] Er stößt sich selbst fortlaufend um. Und eben diese feine Fähigkeit, in Bewegung zu leben, ohne unglücklich zu werden, ist neu. Er will gar nichts Ewiges schaffen. Er leistet der Zukunft Vorschub – that’s all» (203). Extrapolating from this description of the New Man, we could say that combination and synthesis are indeed what Tropen invites the reader to perform. True to Slim’s modernist value of staying in motion, however, the novel itself does not provide the synthesis, the end result of such combinations; rather, it merely lays out the dimensions of its «jungle» before the reader, its form thus enacting its message.
This leads us to my second point, the expressionist hubris, i.e., the assumption that artists are capable of providing the threshold experience to becoming the hybrid New Man. Both Slim and the narrator hold that artists are given the avant-garde role of inventing new human types: «Künstler schaffen Glückstypen und Schicksalsgenüsse. Auch eure Künstler tun nichts anderes, sie schaffen die Glückstypen eurer Zeit» (137). The Western type, according to Slim, is the person of analysis, the scientist, who will have to be morphed into a more complete synthetic type of man, as we saw above. Slim explains to the narrator:

Künstler schaffen Rassigkeiten, sind sozusagen das Ahnungsorgan einer Rasse. […] Künster sind Maschinen zur Erzeugung neuer … «Phantoplasmen,» sagte ich zufrieden und gelassen. (137)

The term race in Müller means type, or kind, and has no properly «racial» connotations of skin color as it does in Grimm’s text – otherwise his notion of the hybrid would be nonsensical. The narrator’s interjection «Phantoplasmen,» a combination of phantasy and plasma, refers to the artistic modeling of human experience which forms the basis of reality at all times. The notion of the phantoplasma thus refers us back to the Nietzschean underground of the novel as well as its expressionist radicalism. Reality, in this view, is always an effect of a particular phantoplasma, and since the bourgeois world has to be overcome, artists are called upon to create the New Man through hybrid combinations of human evolution, such as, for example, a combination of primitive and modern man. I have called such expressionist utopianism a case of hubris because the realms of the political and the aesthetic that expressionism endeavors to bridge face entirely different resistances when it comes to instituting them. As a rule, revolutions in art are less bloody than revolutions in politics. Müller’s *Tropen* escapes this assessment of hubris to the extent that its formal jungle does not allow us to define the shape of the New Man. Slim, after all, dies in the novel, and it is far from clear if the narrator who makes himself the advocate of «tropical Europe» (244) at the end of the novel can be considered an example of future man at all.

Both Grimm’s real and Müller’s fictional travel accounts thus have their problems from a contemporary postcolonial point of view. Both of them functionalize non-European culture in a straightforward manner for European ends – one racist and geopolitical, the other, in order to engineer an upgrade of European man. To be sure, from the standpoint of hybridization, these agendas are entirely different; one bans hybridity, the other embraces it. But both approaches deny the non-European culture what Johannes Fabian has called coevalness, i.e., acceptance as the contemporary that they in fact are. For both writers, the non-European culture is not at the height of the times.
Different lessons may be learned from this conclusion: one, that a focus on hybridization does not guarantee coevalness of the other culture – even benevolent approaches to hybridity do not automatically lead to a change in well-established hierarchies. A second conclusion derives from the relation between travel and hybridity, for it is only in Müller’s novel that travel is conceived as the precondition for a hybrid humanity which – ideally – would do away with the racist underpinnings of colonialism and apartheid. *Tropen* conveys this message primarily through its narrative style, its jungle of words. Here, the world and its order appear as a fable, or a myth, that the artist is called upon to (re)fashion. And while Grimm fabricates a myth of racially pure Germans, Müller spins that of the hybrid New Man. Thus, the writer who did not travel to the jungle proposes a concept of hybridity that can only be realized through travel, while the other, who lived in the German colonies, sees travel as a necessary but dangerous enterprise precisely because it has the potential of promoting hybridity.

**Notes**

1 Hans Grimm’s original text was published in Frankfurt in 1913 as no. 34 of Hendschels Luginsland Hefte, a series of travel guides. Its fairly unwieldy title read *Afrikafahrt West. Von Hamburg, Antwerpen, Boulogne und Southampton nach Madeira und den Kanarieren und über Madeira-Kanarieren nach Swakopmund, Lüderitzbucht und Kapstadt. Ein Reisebuch und Einführungsbuch*, and it included six maps and 56 images. In this paper I cite a later, shortened version of this text which was published under the title *Afrika-fahrt West 1912/13* in a collection of Grimm’s writings entitled *Landschaften, Menschen, Politik. Reiseberichte aus Europa, Afrika, Amerika*. (Lippoldsberg: Klosterhaus, 1971) 40–93.

2 Here is where critics of Müller’s work often part company. Of the most recent studies, some, like Köster, argue that Müller’s choice of the tropical setting is little more than a ruse, and that the novel is principally about the modern Grossstadt experience. In a slightly different vein, Dietrich critiques studies that lavish too much attention on the exotic or primitive dimensions of the text while neglecting the literary (i.e., expressionist) aspects of the novel. The text that combines the exoticist and literary dimensions of *Tropen* most successfully, in my view, is Thomas Schwarz’s most recent book. In an impressive study of the discursive networks structuring the universe of *Tropen*, Schwarz merges the approaches of literary history and cultural criticism, thus presenting the most comprehensive critical account of *Tropen* to date.

3 Zana is the Indian woman who is forced (?) to travel with the group of adventurers after they leave the indigenous village. She survives the trip along with the narrator. Slim’s description of her as bitch speaks for itself in the context of my argument. «Rasse,» interchangeable with «Blut» throughout Muller’s text, functions here as a signifier of pure pedigree in opposition to Slim’s hybrid nature.

4 On the history of *Tropenkoller* see Schwarz as well as Besser.
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5 “What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms …” (46–47) and “How the «true world» finally became a fable» (Nietzsche 485)

Works Cited


