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SKINNING THE SKUNK: REFLECTING RACE, DYSTOPIA, AND GERMANY-NAMIBIA ENTANGLEMENTS IN UAZUVARUA EWALD KATJIVENA'S »MAMA PENEE: TRANSCENDING THE GENOCIDE«[1] AND SCHLETTWEIN'S »AT THE TROPIC OF JACKAL«[2]

Introduction: Narratives as live artefacts

Namibian literature on German colonialism has served and continues to serve as a portent force that articulates the ›unsaid‹, the ›unsayable‹, and the ›yet to be said‹ myriad forms of a festering wound which presents the reader with paradoxical spaces of the Southern African postcolony that is present-day Namibia.[3] Being forms of literary artefacts, stories have an uncanny agency that speaks to an audience that is both present and distant, and – equally so – present and future.[4] More so, as imaginative utterances, narratives are live artefacts, eschewing that which was, is, could be, and can be, and in this regard, my conception of Namibian literature about German colonialism is as an object of knowledge embodying the affective and the reflective, rendering these complexities more concrete, felt, real, and immediate. In this fold, therefore, I read Sylvia Schlettwein's story *At the Tropic of Jackal* and Uazuvarua Ewald Katjivena's biographical account in *Mama Penee: Transcending the Genocide* as a paradoxical rendering of sensitive, enduring, and unresolved historical-present-future realities of Germany-Namibia encounters. As a ghost that refuses to be exorcized, my reading of the texts can be accurately expressed by the saying »skinning the skunk«, which speaks of the bold nature of narratives as penetrative arrows that expose that which is whispered about and yet whose presence is enduring.

1 Uazuvara Ewald Katjivena, Mama Penee: Transcending the Genocide, Windhoek 2020.
2 Sylvia Schlettwein, At the Tropic of Jackal, in: Bullies, Beasts and Beauties, ed. by Sylvia Schlettwein & Isabella Morris, Windhoek 2020, pp. 1–5.
3 Nelson Mlambo & Colletta Kandemiri, Articulating the unsayables: An exploration of »visible voices« in Sifiso Nyathi's The Other Presence, in: Journal of Arts and Humanities, 4 (2015) No. 10, pp. 53–64.
4 Terence Cave, Live artefacts: Literature in a cognitive environment, Oxford 2023.

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As a story set in present-day and distant-future Namibia, what colours the imaginative artefact that is *At the Tropic of Jackal* is how it seeks to silence and resist resistance on complex issues haunting German-Namibian relations, particularly so with regards to the themes of race, history, and colonial legacies, which remain poignant subjects of exploration. *At the Tropic of Jackal* memorializes the horrendous annihilatory violence of the past and its lasting impacts, and, as such, the story delves into the violent and fraught history of German colonialism in Namibia, thereby offering a dystopian vision that fictionalizes the legacies of race and colonial conflicts. *Mama Penee: Transcending the Genocide* does the same but with a distinctly more historically realistic approach through the mode of »faction« (fact and fiction), whereby the narrator/biographer's grandmother's life story as a young girl, who witnesses her parents being killed by German soldiers, in part reads like dystopian fiction, yet it represents the narrative of an eye-witness-account. When she, at a very tender age, witnesses the brutal murder of her father and mother, who »were equipped only with calabashes for carrying water«, the impact is forceful: »She was in shock and wandered without direction or purpose, as if sleepwalking« (p. 16). These reflections in both narratives are indicative of the enduring sense of remembrance, one fictionalized and the other a true account that constitutes faction, which is rooted in the historical entanglements between the Germans and Namibians.

This article, therefore, explores how Schlettwein, a young-generation white Namibian author, and Katjivena, a Herero and direct descendent of the genocide, use dystopia, race, and the specific complexities of Germany-Namibian relations to confront the historical and contemporary ramifications of colonialism. Through her short story, Schlettwein not only critiques the imposition of racial hierarchies but also reflects on the psychological and cultural wounds left by centuries of exploitation and failure to take ownership of the historical injustices whose reverberations still haunt the present. One can, therefore, argue that Schlettwein's and Katjivena's stories take as their cue the idea of Namibian literature on German colonialism as pragmatic utterances which demonstrate the essential fluidity and mobility of human cognition and its adaptiveness.[5] My position in this article is that critical cultural forms are quasi-autonomous entities which speak of and speak to human experiences in context with profound

5 Nelson Mlambo, Postcolonial trauma, resilience and Afro-triumphalism: Some kinds of entanglements in Southern African literary artefacts. An Advanced Seminar presentation at the Perforated Memory: Memorialisation and the genocide of the Nama and Herero in textual mnemoscapes on 18 November 2024, Stellenbosch University.

attunement to issues of relevance/relatability, thus calling for the prioritization of the practical and functional aspects of cultural expressions and their utility and autopoiesis within the Southern African context.[6] In the quest to valorize researching ›historical-future‹ narratives, I further position encodings of society in Namibian literature as a form of Afro-dystopia, portraying fictional worlds which offer the reader moments of critical engagement with pertinent societal issues.[7]

The critical dystopian landscape of *Mama Penee: Transcending the Genocide* and *At the Tropic of Jackal*

The historical text, *Mama Penee: Transcending the Genocide*, can be understood in the present discussion, as a precursor to the short story by Schlettwein. The text, as a historical but live artefact, is a blunt, accurate, living, and pedagogical account whose renderings are indisputable. This is particularly the case in the way in which it is patterned in an indigenous form of storytelling, with the grandmother being a repository of history, culture, and chords of life. Katjivena recounts that when he went into exile in 1964, he asked his brothers to probe their grandmother to talk about the horrendous events characterized by ruthlessness, racism, repression, and genocide. It is from these »notes« that he also knits the current text that is available to the reader. The atrocities of life under German occupation as recounted over 106 pages read like a fictionalized horror movie, where, for example, after the brutal murder of the harmless man and woman who are simply fetching water, »The Germans – the killers – let out a cry of victory. They appeared happy with their actions« (Katjivena, 2020, p. 16).

Similarly, *At the Tropic of Jackal* is set in a dystopian ›historical-present-future‹, where the historical wounds of colonialism remain festering. The geographical setting of the story is made clear in the opening line, that is, »Water Post Windhoek East« (Schlettwein, 2012, p. 1), and immediately arresting to the reader's eye is the presence of two characters: Katja on one side and, on the other, »the young German in camouflage uniform, chewing biltong behind the electric fence …« (p. 1). The narrative unfolds in a speculative space where the

6 Nelson Mlambo, Narratives, identities, and the festering genocide wound: Some Postcolonial provocations. A Keynote presentation at the Perforated Memory: Memorialisation and the genocide of the Nama and Herero in textual mnemoscapes on 18 November 2024, Stellenbosch University.

7 Volker Winterfeldt & Helen Vale, Encodings of society in Namibian literature, in: Journal of Namibian Studies, 9 (2011), pp. 85–108.

repercussions of German colonial rule in Namibia have not only persisted but have also deepened in their effects. This is particularly evidenced through the binary presentation of the two characters who are separated by the »electric fence«, a physical symbol of separateness – which evokes images of apart-ness (apartheid). Moreover, the author's attention to detail and furtherance of these societal dichotomies is unmistakable, as on one side is the »young German soldier« who is »chewing biltong«, a symbol of affluence and luxury. This is sharply contrasted with the state of Katja, whose »scalp burnt under the sun« and who »could feel blisters forming on her lips that became more and more sore with her licking« (p. 1). The visual imagery and descriptive language employed certainly impress the idea of a divided society where control, affluence, and authority are the preserve of one race/cultural group on the one hand, and, on the other hand, misery and deprivation, as represented by Katja, point to oppressive regimes and their effects. This is further corroborated by numerous epithets of pain, suffering, and endurance, marked in the story not only by the fact of juxtaposing male versus female characters: the author also evokes in the reader a heightened sense of fellow-feeling and empathy as »[Katja] could hardly see her hurting feet under her swollen belly where the baby kicked as though it was also getting impatient« (p. 1). The emotive atmosphere of the scene in this way furthers the dystopian undertones of the story, where oppressive regimes are exposed and how gender is a marker of the socio-political landscape. The preoccupation with the past in this story that is set in the future can be inferred and correlates with Cave's (2024) conception of relatability and one that corroborates Katjivena's account.

The dystopia in Schlettwein's story is steeped in the continuation of colonial racial ideologies. The conception of a dystopia as presented in the story can be understood as an extrapolation of the colonial period's unchecked racism, where the state's control over the Namibian populace is reinforced through racialized policies and the perpetuation of the colonial past. However, instead of being presented as mindless sub-humans, the oppressed are presented as questioning beings, as a rhetorical question is posed, presumably by Katja, »Why did it always have to take so long? Surely the Germans could find a more time-effective way to hand out the water rations?« (p. 1). This interrogative posturing by the marginalized can be understood with reference to the brutal colonial history marked by von Trotha's extermination order of 1904 and the subsequent genocide.[8] This corroborates Baccolini's idea of dystopian literature's intricate rela-

8 Nelson Mlambo, Colletta Kandemiri & Collen Sabao, Memorialising gender and childhood under the throes of von Trotha's extermination order: Trauma, agency and

tionship to history.[9] Moreover, encapsulated in the words »always« and »surely« is also the idea that this has been ongoing for a long time and that this is something man-made and deliberate. Yet, the idea that water, a basic human need, is being rationed in this manner paints dystopian and apocalyptic visions of Germany-Namibia encounters that are enduringly embedded in the daily lives of the people and clearly possess a historical rootedness which continues to shape the present and future. Equally, in Katjivena's text there is more than ample evidence of similar such consternations, which ironically, are symbolized by the name Jahohora, which is explained as meaning, »our village is depleted« (p.11). The impassioned recount of how his grandmother »was born at the time when land grabbers were selling our lands to other sneak-thieves who came to our country« (p. 5) serves to render the whole colonial period an absurdity – a unique form of dystopia which defies all logic. In this way, the dystopia reflects a deep fear of racial homogenization, a fear that goes beyond biology into the realm of identity and memory, and Katjivena's and Schlettwein's stories reinforce Zeb et al.'s idea that »dystopian literature has developed into a potent prism that helps understand social concerns and political intricacies«.[10]

Fictionalization of race and identity

One of the most striking aspects of Katjivena's and Schlettwein's stories relates to the fictionalization of race, which goes beyond simply narrating the divisions of race during the colonial era. Katjivenas recurring use of the phrase »German settlers« in the text, contrasted with the repetition and foregrounding of *ohange* (peace), serve to build a dichotomous presentation of the two warring parties. While on the one hand »[the] German settlers were in the process of taking the land and the cattle from the Ovaherero,« and »[it] was becoming increasingly obvious that the Germans were not interested in peace or peaceful solutions«

survival in Serebov's Mama Namibia, in: Sub-Saharan Political cultures of deceit in language, literature, and the media, Volume II, ed. by Esther Mavengano and Isaac Mhute, Cham 2023, pp. 21–40.

9 Raffaella Baccolini, A useful knowledge of the present is rooted in the past: Memory and historical reconciliation in Ursula K. Le Guin's The Telling, in: Dark horizons: Science fiction and the dystopian imagination, ed. by Tom Moylan & Raffaella Baccolini, London 2003, pp. 113–134.

10 Alam Zeb, Raoul G. Moldez. et al., Dystopian literature in the 21st century: Themes, trends and sociocultural reflections, in: Harf-o-sukhan 7 (2023) No. 4, pp. 77–86.

(p. 9), on the other, the Ovaherero lived under the peace mantra of *ohange*, especially enshrined in the wisdom that »[peace], like love, is active« (p. 6). Similarly, Schlettwein imaginatively mirrors these sentiments. Her story employs a speculative lens that addresses the ongoing racial stratification and its consequences in the lives of Namibians. This reimagining of race serves not only to critique the past but also to interrogate its contemporary paradoxical manifestations as illustrated through the relationship between Katja and Private Jörg Killnitz (the ›young German soldier‹). They are both wounded on the same day and are subsequently hospitalized – »he was standing next to her German Protectorate Hospital bed« (p. 3) –, circumstances that are more telling than a superficial reading might suggest. Schlettwein's story demonstrates that German colonialism in Namibia cannot be understood in simplistic terms but as a complex web of conjunctions that go beyond the binaries of the oppressor and the oppressed, victim and the victimized. The emphasis by Private Jörg Killnitz speaks of myriad senses of mutuality as marked by the phrase »our accident«, which is demonstrative of possible racial reconciliation. Indeed, he explains to Katja »… I made sure to get in the ambulance with you and that you were attended to. I've been checking on you regularly« (p. 3). One line of interpreting this is that the author presents to the reader not only moments of but the desirability of racial harmony as cords that bind the human race, and thus a possible common destiny. However, from another perspective, this can be read as a parody of that very sentiment, as Private Jörg Killnitz's actions can be regarded as condescending overtones of the white saviour mentality. The repetition of the personal pronoun »I« shows how he presents himself as the one who makes things happen, and yet, nevertheless, the humane side of his personality cannot be ignored. The author, therefore, simply projects the realities of life to demonstrate that the residual effects of Germany's colonial enterprise in Africa have brought about complex human relations that refuse to be defined within previously given categories. What is evident, however, is that in the context of the story, race is depicted as a mutable and constructed entity. The characters in the story, especially Katja and Private Killnitz, wrestle with their identities in a society that defines them based on arbitrary racial categories. Through this fictional narrative, Schlettwein offers a powerful critique of the racial constructs that were entrenched during the German colonial period. It is therefore interesting to draw parallels with Mama Penee's descriptions and reflections on meetings with German soldiers. She states clearly that she feels no gratitude towards the soldier who spared her life or to the soldier who gave her water. A German soldier »pressed the bottle (of water) to her chest but she didn't react. She didn't move and the water bottle fell at her feet« (p. 21). Her pride and dignity remain intact

in spite of all that has happened to her, and she continues to grapple with what is happening to her and its senselessness: »I was in my country and I did nothing to anyone to deserve to be threatened, or to be saved, or to be forced hungry and thirsty by invaders in my country who turned out to be deadly assailants« (pp. 21–22).

Both stories, therefore, engage with the idea that colonialism did not merely shape the physical structures of society but also crafted the very way that people saw and understood themselves. Katjivena and Schlettwein suggest that racial identity, rather than being a natural and unchangeable characteristic, is a socially constructed tool of oppression and dominance, and yet also point to the possibilities of rainbow-ism, where there is racial harmony, though this can never be understood in simplistic ways. Schlettwein, by imagining a future where these racial divides are intensified, negotiated, and re-interpreted, questions the role that historical colonial ideologies continue to play in contemporary racial dynamics in Namibia. In this re-imagined future which stretches ahead as far as »28 February 2070«, it is also evident that race becomes a tool not only for oppression but also for the perpetuation of trauma. Private Killnitz's struggle to assert his humanity against a backdrop of racial degradation mirrors the struggle of post-colonial societies to reconcile their histories with their present identities.

German-Namibian entanglements: The legacy of colonialism

It is undeniable that the history of German colonialism in Namibia, from 1884 to 1915, was characterized by some of the most brutal episodes of colonial violence. Whilst Katjivena's story, built around the African tradition of telling stories and passing on history from generation to generation (»I remembered what my mother had told me many times«), Schlettwein recreates these complexities with a creative poise that is equally profound. As he draws his text to an end, Katjivena dedicates Chapter 15, which is titled in the form of a rhetorical question, to ask what freedom really means. The conciliatory tone is unmistakable as he quotes Mama Penee advising them thus:

> The best would be if you can become so clever as to get the rest they still have, by using the rules they use in their own countries amongst themselves. Those whites who remain in the country and still have much power, maybe you could invite them to be partners to bring about the changes you want for your country. If you understand the rules of power, you can survive in the

> same way as you would if you swam in rough water and knew the unpredictability of the currents. (p. 103)

These words could be read as a positive gesture that calls for rainbow-ism, a form of truth and reconciliation and progressiveness, and yet, it also raises the lingering question of justice. Truth and reconciliation without justice bring about the perpetuation of inequalities; for where there is no reparation, there cannot be true reconciliation, as discontent and mistrust may continue to brew – especially for those who may, justifiably, feel aggrieved.

Schlettwein's story implicitly references these events, specifically through Granny Carla, thereby exploring the historical entanglements of the two nations and the enduring effects of that violent legacy. The German colonial government, which was among the most aggressive in its pursuit of control over the indigenous populations, left a mark on Namibia's political, social, and cultural life that remains visible to this day, and the story's references to the years »2040« and »2070« are telling. This corroborates Zeb et al. that in dystopian fiction (as exemplified by this short story) »the author provides a forceful critique of certain aberrations in our current socio-political structure by drawing attention to their potentially horrific long-term effects« (p. 79). The story invokes these historical entanglements, which are particularly clearly outlined by Katjivena, and they are employed by Schlettwein as the backdrop to the speculative world. The dystopia that Schlettwein portrays is not just a result of fictionalized imagination but also a direct reflection of the enduring consequences of these colonial relations. The presence of the German soldier who is featured in the »Allgemeine Zeitung« newspaper under »Local News« in »2070« serves as a pointed commentary on how colonialism continues to reverberate in contemporary Namibian society and perhaps *ad infinitum.*

Schlettwein further uses this historical entanglement to explore the psychological effects of colonial violence on both the colonized and the colonizers. The Namibian characters in the story – including even Inga, representative of a younger generation – are burdened by the trauma of their ancestors' suffering, while the German characters are haunted by their complicity in that suffering. The perpetuation of celebrating colonial conquest is exemplified by the awarding of the »Medal of Honour from the Federal Republic of Germany« (p. 4), to which Inga retorts, »He's mean, he doesn't deserve a medal« (p. 4). The tension between these two groups forms the crux of the story's dystopian vision, illustrating how the intergenerational transmission of trauma manifests in both individual and collective identities.

Conclusion: Fiction and life writing as a tool of critique and reflection

In conclusion, Katjivena's and Schlettwein's stories are powerful literary works that use historical fiction, life-writing, and dystopic imagination as lenses through which to view the complex entanglements of race, identity, and colonial history. By fictionalizing history and the future, Katjivena and Schlettwein create a space where the unresolved issues of Germany-Namibian relations can be examined in a speculative context. The stories critique the ways in which colonialism continues to affect contemporary race relations, showing how the legacies of the past continue to shape societal structures, identities, and psychological states.

Through the stories' exploration of race, dystopia, and the enduring colonial entanglements between Germany and Namibia, *Mama Penee: Transcending the Genocide* and *At the Tropic of Jackal* underscore the importance of remembering and confronting the past.[11] They highlight how the colonial legacy is not merely a historical artefact but an ongoing process that shapes the present and future. In this sense, Katjivena's and Schlettwein's stories are not just works of faction and fiction, but a call to action, urging readers to engage with the painful histories of colonialism and to reckon with the ways those histories continue to shape global and national identities.

11 Mlambo, Postcolonial Trauma.