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# An Animal-Centered Perspective on Colonial Oppression: Animal Representations and the Narrating Ox in Uwe Timm's *Morenga* (1978)

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**Abstract:** As a result of its topic and its narrative style, Uwe Timm's novel *Morenga* (1978) marks an important step in the development of postcolonial German literature. The main theme of the book is the bloody suppression of the Herero and Nama uprisings through the German army in South-West Africa at the beginning of the 20th century. With recourse to historical and fictional documents and by using different narrative perspectives, the text achieves a plurality of voices and thereby destabilizes a one-dimensional view on colonialism. The present article discusses the functions of the nonhuman animals appearing in *Morenga*. It is assumed that the animal representations are an essential part of the plot and underscore the criticism of colonial rule in a narrative manner too. The novel contains several descriptions of suffering animals and links them to the harm of the Herero and the Nama in order to point out the ruthlessness of the colonists. Moreover, the book features a story-telling ox, which initiates a reflection process about possible ways of narrating colonial history. The talking ox adds a specific animal-centered perspective on colonial oppression and raises questions about emancipation, self-determination, and the agency of the nonhuman 'other'.

**Keywords:** Uwe Timm; *Morenga*; African history; colonialism; postcolonial German literature; animal narratology; speaking animals; multi-perspective narration; animal agency

## 1. Introduction

As one of the first German novels, Uwe Timm's *Morenga* [1]<sup>1</sup> (1978, translated into English in 2003)<sup>2</sup> takes a decidedly critical perspective on the violent structures of European colonialism in Africa. The text reveals a dark chapter of the German past: it centers on the Herero and Nama genocide undertaken by the Colonial Troops ('Schutztruppe') in today's Namibia between 1904 and 1908. During an insurrection of different ethnic groups, about 10,000 Nama and between 24,000 and 100,000 Herero were killed by the German army or died of exhaustion and disease in concentration camps. Besides the crimes of the 'Schutztruppe', Timm's novel illustrates the cultural differences between the European traders, soldiers, and settlers and the natives in the so-called 'protectorate' of South-West Africa.

<sup>1</sup> The title refers to Jacob Morenga (or Marengo, 1875–1907), who was one of the African leaders and an important identification figure during the rebellion. Morenga was a child of a Herero mother and a Nama father. He is known as 'the black Napoleon' for his strategic skills and his resistance against the numerically superior German army. Today, Namibia remembers him as one of the country's national heroes.

<sup>2</sup> *Morenga* was translated from the German by Breon Mitchell, who received the Helen & Kurt Wolff Prize for Translation for his work on the novel. Apart from a few exceptions, I will use the English version of Timm's novel since its 'sound' and use of language are very close to the original.

Since *Morenga* provides a critical and also an innovative view on the history of colonization, it is cited as a postcolonial novel “avant la lettre” ([2], p. 407). By combining the fictional story of the German army veterinarian Gottschalk with counterfeited historical sources as well as real documents from the era of colonialism and Post-World War II historiography, the text creates a wide panorama of voices: “Ein wichtiger Effekt dieser Montagetechnik ist dabei, daß sie zu ständigen Perspektivwechseln führt, die in diametralem Gegensatz zur [...] erzählerischen und ideologischen ‘Eindimensionalität’ steht” ([2], p. 407: An important effect of this montage-technique is the change of perspectives, which contrasts a narrative and ideological one-dimensionality). With its collage-style, wherein the text includes a variety of documents from personal diaries to military dispatches, the novel stands out from common Eurocentric approaches to colonial history. There are many articles and monographs about the book’s multi-perspective composition, which results from changing focalizations and the diverse attitudes expressed in the cited documents. An aspect that is analyzed in a few articles [3–5] but still deserves a closer look is an intradiegetic narrative of a speaking trek ox called Big-Red. This animal focalizer tells about the domestication of his oxen ancestors and describes the beginnings of European colonialism in Southern Africa, which were accompanied by oppressive structures for both humans and animals.<sup>3</sup>

According to Christine Ott, the animal representations in Timm’s novel are not as well examined as the rest of the text (see [6], p. 14). This is all the more surprising since the book frequently refers to animals. Even though the ox is the only nonhuman character that receives his own point of view, *Morenga* outlines several other situations that concentrate on animals. The present article has two aims: firstly, I want to demonstrate that the novel pictures human encounters with different animals, especially ostriches, cattle, horses, and camels, to sensitize the reader to the negative impacts of colonialism and to the terror of the German warfare. The second purpose is to discuss the functions of Big-Red’s narrative. In contrast to most former articles, I want to illustrate that the talking ox cannot simply be identified with a ‘wild’ culture or with the voice of the Africans. My thesis is that Timm establishes an ox-narrator to provide a specific animal-centered perspective on the loss of independence during the colonization of Africa. By lending the ox a voice within a puzzle of many other ‘human’ narratives, *Morenga* raises general questions about emancipation and self-determination. A contextualization of the ox-episode in present historiographical discourses, in turn, shows that the novel anticipates a recent interest in animal agency. The book understands the oxen as important actors in colonial processes and thereby starts a reflection process about animals as ‘protagonists’ in history. Overall, this article offers new impulses for a close reading of *Morenga* in the context of literary animal studies.

## 2. The Oppression of Humans and Animals under German Colonial Rule

The main plot of Timm’s novel takes place during the rebellions of the Herero and the Nama, which were provoked by the repressive structures of German colonial rule at the beginning of the 20th century. Furthermore, the narration refers back to the start of European land-grabbing in Southern Africa about fifty years earlier. These subplots, which mainly occur in the “Regional Studies” chapters (see [1], pp. 88–114, 135–76, 213–47), open up a wider context in order to point out the economic and ecological consequences of the European influence in Africa.<sup>4</sup> While the main issue of the book is to illustrate the *inhuman* system of the military campaign against the natives, it is noticeable that it also turns toward the animals, which suffer from the colonial situation as well. In many cases, there are connections between these descriptions of oppressed animals and

<sup>3</sup> For better readability, this essay terminologically distinguishes between ‘animals’ and ‘humans’ although humans are actually mammals too.

<sup>4</sup> The chapter headings of the novel are statements of an omniscient narrator who knows about the illegitimacy of European colonialism. They should not be misunderstood since they are often named in a distanced and ironic way. Especially the long and meaningful titles of the ‘Regional Studies’ episodes are euphemistic and contradict the content of the chapters.

humans. For one thing, the animal representations reinforce a critical discussion about human dignity. Then again, they address the animals themselves to offer a more comprehensive view on the victims of colonization. Overall, *Morenga* pictures European colonialism as a history of violence for both humans and animals.

The chapter 'Regional Studies 2' stands out especially since it takes a closer look at the early human and animal victims of colonization in the middle of the nineteenth century. It explains the reasons for the extermination of the ostriches in the region of Bethany and thereby reveals the complex relations between European trading strategies and the devastating aftermath for the natives and the animal population. The chapter begins with the following description: "From time immemorial the ostrich, with its reddish neck and small, pop-eyed head, had roamed unmolested, grazing peacefully among the cattle herds. Until the day a rider appeared on the horizon and, galloping toward it with yells and whip cracks, got it running, though it had no desire to flee" ([1], p. 135). With two other hunters the rider finally chases the ostrich until it collapses and dies. Afterward, the narrative voice raises the crucial question, "Why was this bird, living peacefully and nourished solely on hydrous plants, forced to sacrifice its feathers?" ([1], p. 136). This question starts the tale of Klügge, a German businessman who comes to Africa in 1842 and who "specialized in buttons, pots, and pans, trading them for cattle, goats, and sheep" ([1], p. 145). Because the sale of these household objects is not as lucrative as he hoped, Klügge merges his business with the English trader Morris. To increase profits, the two men make plans to export cattle to St. Helena. Therefore, they develop a strategy to move the Nama "from stealing [livestock] when forced to for food, to systematic theft on economic principles" ([1], p. 148). In their calculations, alcohol plays a major role; by giving the Nama brandy as a payment, they manipulate the cattle trade and force the natives into subordination. This business plan—Morris and Klügge also sell gunpowder—sets off a deadly avalanche for both humans and animals. To satisfy their growing thirst for alcohol, the Nama have to sell more and more livestock to the Europeans. Thus, they start to raid and kill the Herero in order to steal their cattle, but the natives and their livestock do not remain the only victims; a few years later, as he wants to settle up with the Nama, Klügge notices the increasing demand for ostrich feathers in Europe. Meanwhile, the meat prices have fallen. Since the trader is "no longer willing to give out brandy on credit" ([1], p. 164), the Nama now have to find another way of paying him, namely they have "to chase every last ostrich in the region to death" ([1], pp. 164–65) to repay their debt. Before Klügge's life is told to the end, we can find a statement that refers back to the beginning of the chapter: "Two weeks later the last ostrich in the region around Bethany was killed and robbed of its tail feathers. The vultures circled in the sky" ([1], p. 165).

While the 'Regional Studies' chapters point out the devastating ecological impacts, which are triggered by the selfish motives of the colonists and their thirst for profits, the main plot relates to animals in the context of human warfare. The book contains many descriptions of wild and domesticated animals as two of the protagonists, Gottschalk and Wenstrup, are veterinarians of the German Colonial Troops. Their main task is to take care of the soldiers' horses during the insurrection of the Nama. Right from the start, Wenstrup is characterized as a critical person who is aware of the illegitimate methods applied by the German Empire. In contrast, Gottschalk's reason to join the 'Schutztruppe' seems to be a naive and romantic thirst for adventure influenced by his parents who are running a shop for colonial goods. Throughout the text, both veterinarians grow more scrupulous and begin to think of possibilities to improve the natives' situation. As we will see, Timm's novel discusses the two men's opportunities of resistance by picturing different encounters with animals.

The book repeatedly shows that most of the German soldiers do not distinguish between animals and humans when it comes to enforcing colonial rule in South-West Africa. During the uprisings, they arrest Herero and Nama and also seize cattle, sheep, and goats that originally belonged to the natives. These animals are in a poor condition, which catches the veterinarian's attention: "When Gottschalk asked how the livestock was used, [staff veterinarian] Moll said it provided meat for the troops. The rest simply died. [...] The cattle were a pitiful sight, totally emaciated, many injured by thorns or

bullets, with festering wounds. Bodies of dead animals lay scattered everywhere. The stench of carrion filled the air" ([1], p. 17). The Colonial Troops have also built a concentration camp for the conquered rebels. The description of the prisoners' situation—they are treated like animals—is reminiscent of the suffering livestock: "A large area next to the kraal had been enclosed with barbed wire. Sentries were posted in front with fixed bayonets. Beyond the fence Gottschalk could see people, or rather skeletons, squatting—no, something halfway between humans and skeletons. They huddled together, mostly naked, in the piercingly hot sun" ([1], p. 17). Moreover, "[s]omeone had lettered a sign and hung it on the fence: Please don't feed the animals" ([1], p. 18). This inscription corresponds to Captain Moll's sexist statement that most of the 'Hottentot' (Nama) women are "completely immoral, total animals" ([1], p. 17).<sup>5</sup> The cited passages are essential for the rest of the novel. By describing humans as well as animals in a related situation of starving, they have the function to raise questions about the status and dignity of humans in captivity. Gottschalk's discovery of the wounded and dying animals on the one side and the exhausted and dehumanized rebels on the other side also triggers his further character development. After spending some time working near the concentration camp, the veterinarian slowly loses his initial naivety and starts to wonder about the conduct of the own troops: "What upset Gottschalk was the absurd fact that human beings were starving to death while a few meters away cattle dropped to the ground and rotted away" ([1], p. 20). Even if he still cannot believe Wenstrup, who feels confident that the camps are part of a systematic plan to exterminate the natives, Gottschalk composes a two point petition to Captain Moll: "1. If used for food, the dead animals would not rot, thereby reducing the risk of plague for the Colonial Guard and the prisoners. 2. The lives of women and children would be saved" ([1], p. 20).

While most of the German officers believe in the use of the "hippo-hide whip, [...] an internationally recognized language" ([1], p. 82), which exerts violent control over the natives, Gottschalk's perception of colonial policy changes. On the one hand—and agreeing with Kora Baumbach—his overall development can be analyzed as a "scheiternder Versuch des *going native*" ([7], p. 93: failed attempt of going native): in the end, he still feels an unbridgeable cultural distance between the Herero and the Nama and the Germans. On the other hand, the veterinarian stands out from his comrades since he is "putting aside half his ration of army bread and then, when he thought no one was looking, passing it through the barbed wire to the Hottentots" ([1], p. 129). As Gottschalk becomes more and more uncertain if the implementation of colonial rule is justified, he also develops a specific feeling of compassion for animals that goes beyond the 'duty' of an army veterinarian. For example, he saves a sow from being slaughtered by comrades and rescues a "cow with strikingly long, shadowy lashes, light brown coat, and high withers" ([1], p. 127) by performing an embryotomy. While Lieutenant Dr. Haring thinks that the veterinarian wants to refine his surgical skills, Gottschalk replies, "he'd just done it. A Hottentot boy had come for help, that was all, the cow couldn't have its calf, it was going to die, and everyone would lose the milk" ([1], p. 127). Haring, in turn, counters with the question, "why one would want to dirty his hands with a cow in this country" ([1], p. 127). In doing so, Gottschalk attempts to find his personal way to help the Nama who need the milk and the meat to survive. At the same time, the cow-episode illustrates that the veterinarian struggles against his moral scruples; even if he fears the consequences of siding directly with the rebellious natives, he at least can justify the treatment of the local cattle herds according to his tasks as a veterinary surgeon.

*Morenga* does not stick to a unilateral reading of Gottschalk's character development and thereby offers a multifaceted approach to the opportunities of anti-colonial resistance. In the end, the text critically questions the veterinarian's individual form of 'rebellion' and its negative impacts on both animals and humans. Before Gottschalk ultimately quits his service and returns to Germany, he announces in front of a superior officer that "he no longer wished to take part in the slaughter of

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<sup>5</sup> There are several other examples of German soldiers comparing Africans with animals for various reasons (see [1], pp. 10, 37, 40, 198).

innocent people" ([1], p. 323). With the term 'slaughter' he clearly criticizes the colonial regime and the downgrade of natives to dehumanized 'animals'. Nonetheless, his overall conduct does not change much, neither for the indigenous people nor for the animals. For one thing, the veterinarian recognizes "that he was helping maintain the circulatory system of force and terror" ([1], p. 208). Then again, he does not take the final step since he is not willing to desert or to support the 'enemy'. The passages in which Gottschalk supposedly 'rescues' certain animals disclose an ambivalent behavior towards the nonhuman victims of warfare too; while the veterinarian protects the animals from his *German* comrades, he has no concerns about the *natives* utilizing and slaughtering the cattle. A related episode, which shows that Gottschalk is trapped in contradictions, focuses on the veterinarian's task "to test the feasibility of camels as pack animals in German South West Africa" ([1], p. 257). Although he knows about the military plans to use the camels in order to fight the Nama, Gottschalk accepts the job of managing the experimental program. While he tries to calm himself with the idea "that every innovation brought to this land furthered its development and would benefit the natives one day" ([1], p. 258), we soon learn that "[t]hree years later, in 1908, the last rebels were tracked down and defeated in the Kalahari with the help of a German camel corps" ([1], p. 259).

In regard to his direct involvement in the military campaign, Gottschalk differs from Wenstrup. His veterinarian comrade is inspired by the anarchistic book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902) by the Russian philosopher Pjotr Kropotkin. This text, which is often cited in the novel, explores specific forms of cooperation including mutual aid in 'societies' of nonhuman animals as well as close relations between humans and animals. Kropotkin criticizes, for example, a social Darwinian understanding of the thesis that only the fittest, here seen as the strongest and most ruthless competitor, can survive. The radical interpretation of this phrase, which originally emerged in evolutionary theory, is also a specific colonialist way of thinking. Based on his lecture, Wenstrup sympathizes with the rebellious natives and in particular with the animals in the colony. He tries to act according to the following maxim: "There is a hell for animals, created and maintained by human society and institutions. [...] Freedom of choice and freedom of opportunity for animals too!" ([1], p. 126). At an early point of the novel, Wenstrup disappears. Although rumors circulate that he might have deserted, the book refuses to give a clear explanation of his motives and the veterinarian remains lost. Since Wenstrup's anarchistic type of resistance is not successful as well, *Morenga* ultimately presents a gloomy picture of a potential equality in colonial situations. In the end, both veterinarians fail since they cannot seriously endanger the colonial endeavor.

The novel focuses on the victims of colonial injustice and on the guilt of individual German soldiers in several other passages. In addition to the Herero and the Nama and their livestock, especially horses are the sufferers.<sup>6</sup> 'Schutztruppen' officer Captain Tresckow loses his mount during a battle and has to select a new one. As a replacement, he chooses "a somewhat bony but well-built black horse" ([1], p. 41) from the Cape Colony, but the mount kicks and rears up and the captain falls to the ground. After a second unsuccessful try, Tresckow declares the horse "as unfit for duty" ([1], p. 42) and has it shot, although it is otherwise completely healthy. Based on a previous case, Gottschalk's assumption is that the mount dropped the captain because it was not used to his strong aftershave lotion. The reason for Tresckow's harsh reaction, in turn, is his feeling of being humiliated in front of subordinates by a supposedly inferior being, especially since the horse allowed any other rider to mount it. The story of the unwilling animal is framed by reports about war crimes against helpless prisoners and an artillery attack on a village where over fifty Nama are killed. At first sight, there does not seem to be a direct connection between these narrative fragments. Nevertheless, we can easily link the descriptions; in this case, the vulnerable horse and the unarmed Nama are dead within just a few seconds due to a single command of a German officer. This is an example that it is not well-meant

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<sup>6</sup> To illustrate the large number of horses which had to participate in colonial processes: there is data for the Second Boer War that during this conflict between 494,000 and 520,000 horses were used, about 325,000 of which were killed in 'duty' (see [8], p. 58).



statements but rather the specific combination of short episodes, which creates the book's critical perspective on the ever-present violence. *Morenga* resists giving direct moral commentary and yet assumes an ethical stance in order to deprecate injustice and violence against all beings. All things considered, the text effectively blurs the line between human and animal victims without trivializing one of the two sides.

### 3. The Narrating Ox: Colonial History through the Eyes of an Animal

Timm not only achieves a nuanced depiction of colonial oppression by discussing this topic on the level of content but also by choosing a specific form for his book. The overall narrative situation in *Morenga* is complex and not easy to characterize: we cannot identify a single character that connects the diverse storylines as a narrator, nor is there a 'typical' omniscient voice which knows or tells everything. Following the terminology of Gérard Genette, Stefan Hermes speaks of a zero focalization, which, in turn, does not correspond with an "autoritären Erzählgestus" ([9], p. 184: authoritarian gesture of telling). On the one hand, this zero focalization prevails in many parts of the novel; a heterodiegetic narrator gives us historical and cultural details that are not bound to a limited perspective. On the other hand, the narration often changes between different internal focalizations and, as a consequence, between diverse points of view with individual states of knowledge in each case (variable internal focalization). In this way, we learn more about the thoughts, feelings, and prejudices of different characters. In addition to the internal perspectives of the protagonists, the narration also contains excerpts from both real and made-up documents, such as newspaper articles, scientific studies, letters, diaries, and official military reports. To quote Herbert Uerlings, this concept of intertextuality leads to a diversity of speech, "einer formalen, sozialen, inner- und interkulturellen Vielfalt der Stimmen" ([10], p. 133: a formal, social, inner-, and intercultural variety of voices). Altogether, the distinct narratives establish a multi-perspective view on the situation in South-West Africa. As a result, the narration undermines a one-dimensional 'truth' of the colonial discourse.

Even though the reader gets used to this multilayered story-telling technique quickly, one narrative strand sticks out: it is the tale of a speaking draft ox called Big-Red. Big-Red, who appears in the chapter 'Regional Studies 1', is the lead animal of Gorth, a German missionary who travels the land with his ox wagon in 1852 in order to convert the natives to Christianity. On their way through the desert, Gorth walks beside the wagon and suddenly hears the voice of his animal companion. What follows is a short but meaningful intradiegetic narrative that is divided into two parts.

The first part of Big-Red's tale focuses on the domestication of his cattle ancestors and describes how "we came under the yoke" ([1], p. 106). The animal narrator follows the livestock back to a time when "the broad plains belonged to the cattle" ([1], p. 105). This independent way of life—Big-Red mentions that the herds were free and "went where they wished" ([1], p. 105)—is destroyed by Hurt-Knee, "the ancestor of all Hottentots" ([1], p. 105). Since Hurt-Knee is limping and cannot follow the cattle, he thinks up a strategy to force the animals under his will. For this purpose, he helps a suffering cow named Dotsy<sup>7</sup> by removing a thorn from her hoof. Big-Red, who has a narrative 'connection' to his relatives and, therefore, the possibility to empathize with them, reports that the cow naively accepts this aid; she allows Hurt-Knee to milk her in return, but this form of mutual help quickly develops to a unilateral relationship, and Dotsy's male calf "soon found that there was no more milk in her udder" ([1], p. 105). Later, as the bull grows up, Hurt-Knee catches him and castrates him by biting off his testicles. Afterward, he ties him "to a tree, struck him with a whip and called out, Ox, until he responded to that name and stood quietly while Hurt-Knee sat on his back. Then Hurt-Knee rode off on the ox, while Dotsy followed the ox, the [other] bulls followed Dotsy, and the herds followed the bulls" ([1], pp. 105–6). In the end, Big-Red describes that the animals

<sup>7</sup> The descendants of Dotsy—for example White-Mouth, Long-Tuft, Big-Red, Christopherus, Fork-Horn, and Soft-Mouth—are named and appear throughout the novel (see [1], pp. 109, 141, 174, 214).

completely depend on their human ‘leader’: “Before long they couldn’t find the springs any longer without Hurt-Knee, they forgot their directions and how to smell the rain. Cattle who had lost their way stood on the plains and lowed in fear” ([1], p. 106).

While the first passage illustrates the unequal interdependency between humans and animals, the second part of Big-Red’s narrative relates to European colonialism and to the backgrounds of the ‘cattle wars’ between the Herero and the Nama. The ox gives us the information that hostilities between local ethnic groups existed before Europeans came to Southern Africa. Nonetheless, he explains that there is a causal relation between colonization and the following increase of violence: after “white men [...] from Holland” ([1], p. 108) begin to fight the ‘Hottentots’ in the south, these Nama, in turn, “kill and drive off the local Bushmen” ([1], p. 108) in order to settle the regions north of the Orange River. “But since the land conquered by the Namas had little rain and few springs, they couldn’t keep large herds” ([1], p. 108). That is why the Nama move farther to the north and start to chase the livestock of the Herero, “the friends of cattle” ([1], p. 108). As Big-Red states, European traders even fuel these conflicts by selling guns, bullets, and powder to the different groups. A negative effect of this process for the animals is that cows and oxen increasingly become trading goods and therefore lose their status as sacred animals and respected ‘friends’ of the natives. As a consequence, they frequently end up in the slaughterhouses in Cape Town.

The narrative strand of Big-Red stands out since it is the only part of the book presented from the viewpoint of an animal.<sup>8</sup> It also shows stylistic differences: in contrast to other chapters and especially to the cited military documents, the ox-narration reminds the reader of a fairy-tale gone wrong. The second part of the narrative, for example, begins with the phrase “Long, long ago” ([1], p. 108), which alludes to the fairy-tale-opening ‘once upon a time’. In some other passages, Big-Red unfolds the history of oppression in a ‘biblical’ manner (see [11], p. 89); the sentences are figurative, memorable, and often use a repetitive syntax (“Hurt-Knee rode off on the ox, while Dotsy followed the ox, the bulls followed Dotsy, and the herds followed the bulls” [1], pp. 105–6). Nevertheless, the episode might confuse the reader as it blurs the boundaries between realistic and fantastic representation methods. In this context, Axel Dunker claims that the narrative style of Big-Red is inspired by the magical realism of Latin American literature. He describes the effect on the reader as follows: “Die entsprechenden Passagen des Buches werden tatsächlich als ‘fremd’, als einer außereuropäischen, ‘anderen’ Tradition verpflichtet, empfunden” ([5], p. 49: The relevant passages are actually experienced as ‘alien’, bound to a non-European, ‘foreign’ tradition).

The animal narration differs from the rest of the novel in another respect. Big-Red participates in the story as a character and can be categorized as an intradiegetic narrator. At the same time, his descriptions of the cattle herds and the conflicts in Southern Africa are zero focalized. In other episodes we can either find a zero focalization on the events that are presented by a narrator that does not participate in the story or the perspectives are limited and connected to individual characters. The narrative of Big-Red, in turn, contains much information that goes beyond the presumed knowledge of such a homodiegetic narrator. This leads to the conclusion that the ox holds a representative voice; he does not only speak for himself but also for someone or something else. A characteristic feature of Big-Red’s speech backs this assumption: in some parts of his narrative, the ox empathizes with his ancestors by telling their thoughts and feelings. For example, he conveys the experiences of Dotsy and her calf (see [1], p. 105). Big-Red also uses the personal pronoun ‘we’ which addresses all of his oxen companions: “Thus we came under the yoke” ([1], p. 106).

This narrative style and the impression that the ox possibly raises his voice for someone else have prompted different interpretative approaches. A short overview illustrates that most of them are human-centered and often simply ignore the ox’s own viewpoint. The research primarily highlights

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<sup>8</sup> The book gives a small hint that all three ‘Regional Studies’ chapters are possibly told by Rolfs, one of the native rebels (see [1], pp. 325–26). However, the changing focalizations as well as the stylistic and narrative differences between the individual chapters and subplots speak against this explanation.

a supposed allegorical function of the passage and thereby tends to link the animal narrator to the perspective of a 'foreign' culture or directly to the Herero and the Nama. Martin Hielscher argues that all three 'Regional Studies' chapters are part of a narrative strategy to circumvent the imperial and rational logic of colonialism, as they contrast with the "zitierten Dokumenten, authentischen Äußerungen und Aufzeichnungen der Militärs und Behörden" ([11], p. 86: cited documents, authentic statements, and records of the soldiers and authorities). Hielscher locates Big-Red within this narrative comparison of distinct discourses and attributes a representative function to him; in his view, the voice of the ox fills "eine Leere, die bleiben muss, weil die Unterlegenen ihre Geschichte noch nicht selbst erzählen können" ([11], p. 89: an emptiness which has to remain since the underdogs are not yet able to narrate their own history of oppression). In this context, Hielscher associates the talking ox with the oral traditions of the Nama and their 'sensual' perception of the world (see [11], p. 87). We find a similar argumentation in Kerstin Germer's exploration of narrative strategies in Timm's novels. Germer claims that the mythical and fantastical episodes of *Morenga* are an attempt "der nur unzulänglich zu fassenden afrikanischen Kultur eine potenzielle Stimme zu verleihen" ([12], p. 40: to lend the elusive African culture a potential voice). Christine Ott mainly follows these interpretations. She states that Timm could not rely on written sources of the oral historiography of the Herero and the Nama (see [6], p. 25). The speaking ox, in turn, represented these oral narratives: "Die Erzählungen des Roten Afrikaners [Big-Red] bieten einen solchen Zugang, wie ihn die Historiographie nicht vermitteln kann. In ihnen transportiert der Autor die Eigengeschichtlichkeit der indigenen Kultur, für die er die Rezipientinnen und Rezipienten sensibilisieren möchte" ([6], p. 81: Big-Red's narratives provide an approach which conventional historiography cannot offer. In these passages, the author transports the genuine historicity of the indigenous culture in order to sensitize the reader to it). At the same time, Ott questions if the ox-episode and the 'Regional Studies' chapters actually convey African history and oral traditions in an adequate way (see [6], pp. 26–31): "Das, was als indigene Eigenheit im Roman beschrieben wird, fußt möglicherweise auf einer klischeehaften Vorstellung des Autors von Afrika" ([6], p. 31: The supposed indigenous peculiarity, which is described in the novel, possibly arises out of the author's stereotypical picture of Africa).

Although the novel is siding with the natives, it is indeed remarkable that Timm mainly avoids narrating through the eyes of the Herero and the Nama. In an interview, the author mentions that an aesthetic of empathy would be a colonial act itself (see [13], p. 452). At first glance, the tale of the ox appears to be a possible approach to African history, while avoiding a direct and 'colonial' assimilation of the voices of the natives. In the German original version of the book, the presumed connection between the nonhuman narrator and the history of Africa even 'sounds' stronger since Big-Red's German name is "der Rote Afrikaner" ([14], p. 138: the Red African). At the same time, it is problematic to identify Big-Red with the perspective of the indigenous people for two main reasons: firstly, even though they are rare and short, we *can* find passages which internally focalize natives and illustrate the perception of African individuals (see [1], pp. 29, 58, 60–61, 74, 91, 97, 110, 154, 326). When Baumbach suggests that there are no explicit "Äußerungen der Indigenen über die Kolonialherren" ([7], p. 97: statements of the indigenous people about the colonial rulers) in the entire novel, it is simply not correct. In this regard, the novel cannot fully avoid empathizing with the natives' experiences. Secondly, an equation of the narrating ox to the Herero and the Nama would do justice neither to the humans nor to the animals. On the one hand, it would animalize the natives and thereby adopt a colonialist position, which radically disregards human dignity as well as African culture and history. On the other hand, it would trivialize the specific animal-centered perspective, which the novel undoubtedly includes.

In the following, I want to show that, with his representative voice, the trek ox does not primarily speak for the natives but, above all, for the animals. In doing so, I can build on Esther Almstadt who, as an exception, points out that the narrative clearly focuses on the animals' point of view: "An der Ochsen-Erzählung ist signifikant, dass den geschilderten Tieren nicht ausschließlich die Funktion zukommt, menschliches Verhalten zu bebildern. Sie demonstrieren vielmehr die Vorstellung, dass



auch die Tiere Opfer der Kolonisierung seien" ([15], p. 190: It is significant that the descriptions of the animals in the ox-narration do not only picture human behavior. They rather demonstrate that animals are victims of colonization too).

When we look at the oxen's human 'audience', it is interesting who is able and who wants to understand their language and for what reasons. At first we could assume that Gorth only hears his draft animal because of sunstroke. It is mentioned that the missionary never wears a hat. Another presumption is that the talking ox is nothing but a drug-related hallucination since Gorth begins to listen to him after smoking "a small pipe of dagga" ([1], p. 104). That this is a reduced view becomes clear as the novel itself criticizes these explanations of Gorth's "confused state of mind" ([1], p. 106): after a letter appears in which Gorth writes that "he'd finally learned the language of the oxen" ([1], p. 106), a debate arises about the possible reasons for his 'expansion of consciousness'. There is no doubt that the novel ridicules the rational explanation attempts of the German Missionary Society. In contrast to the perspectives of most European colonists, we can find several statements of Africans who claim that they are able to communicate with animals. While the Nama Lukas explains that he can speak "a language the cattle understand" ([1], p. 101),<sup>9</sup> Gottschalk's former assistant Rolfs questions the skills of the German veterinarian because of his lack of empathy for the livestock: "You call yourself a cattle doctor and can't even understand what they say" ([1], p. 326). When Gottschalk performs the mentioned embryotomy—the suffering cow, Soft-Mouth, is actually a descendent of Dotsy—we also learn that he "understood nothing" ([1], p. 127) and solely hears a mooing animal. In addition to the natives and the missionary Gorth, it is surprisingly the German trader Klügge who ultimately learns to 'listen' to the oxen. Before he gets lost in the width of the desert, Klügge recognizes the harm he has done to both humans and animals; when Klügge's wagon master strikes their lead ox with his whip, the businessman "threw himself protectively across the animal and cried out: This is God's creature" ([1], p. 174). The text does not explain the trader's change of mind in detail, but the named episodes clearly contrast the 'limited' viewpoint of those who take part in the oppression of animals and those who try to empathize with the nonhuman 'other'.<sup>10</sup>

In this context, one might assume that *Morenga* just offers another anthropocentric approach to different ethnic groups and their disparate conceptions of the world, but it is an important feature of the text that it includes a perspective that explicitly attributes the *nonhuman* animals the means to express themselves. The novel concretely refers to animistic and ethnological positions which question a strict dichotomy between culture and nature: "Viele nicht-westliche Gesellschaften anerkennen Tiere als konstitutiven Teil der Welt, [...] interagieren mit ihnen und schreiben ihnen personenhaften [...] Status zu" ([16], p. 292: Many non-Western societies recognize animals as a constitutive part of the world, interact with them and attribute personhood status to them). According to such an animistic view, the communication between humans and animals is not a "Phantasieprodukt, sondern eine ernsthafte Angelegenheit" ([17], p. 227: product of fantasy but a serious issue). The novel takes up this perspective in order to include 'inexplicable' approaches to speaking animals "die mit unseren westlich-abendländischen Vorstellungen in keiner Weise zu vereinbaren sind" ([16], p. 289: which are in no way compatible to our Western ideas). With respect to the special role that the cattle play for the Herero and the Nama, it is no coincidence that Timm chose an ox for bringing up this topic; through Big-Red's narrative, we learn that especially the Herero keep "holy cattle" ([1], p. 109), which are an integral part of their ancestor worship. Furthermore, we can connect the animistic way of thinking to anarchistic ideas, which imply an "Gleichsetzung von Mensch und Tier" ([15], p. 190: equation of humans and animals). Since the narrative of the ox indicates a possible "verbale Verbundenheit

<sup>9</sup> Lukas claims that, in addition to the language of the cattle, he is also able to speak and listen to "the fat-tailed sheep, the jackal, the antelope, the sand viper" ([1], p. 101). By mentioning the cattle in the first place, Lukas underlines their importance for the natives.

<sup>10</sup> While the novel clearly states that Gottschalk is not able to understand the speech of animals, unfortunately, we cannot find any proof that his anarchistic comrade Wenstrup, who demands equal rights for humans and animals, possibly could.

zwischen Mensch und Tier" ([15], p. 191: verbal solidarity between humans and animals), it provides an innovative and novel angle on colonialism "that can prompt humans to focus afresh on subjects that have been marginalized" ([18], p. 128).

It is an important characteristic of *Morenga* that this comparison of different worldviews does not lead to a naive appreciation of a 'near-natural' form of perception. As Uerlings states, the 'animal-friendly' culture of the indigenous people has its limits too. Their religious and cultural 'connection' with the livestock does not mean that they would not utilize or kill animals. On the contrary, during the conversation with his lead ox, Gorth experiences the animals' relationship with the natives as a harmful life of suffering (see [10], pp. 135–36). When Big-Red describes how Hurt-Knee brutally domesticates the "cow's calf, and bit off its balls" ([1], p. 105), he reveals a history of consistent subordination and exploitation of animals. Therefore, the book does not romanticize the supposed 'animal-understanding' African societies. At the same time, the narrative of the ox questions predominant patterns of thinking. In this respect, we can agree with former research; by lending the animal a voice, the text clearly criticizes the rational and objective explanatory approaches of the Western colonial discourse. Following ethnologist Lukasz Nieradzik, the history of livestock is not only a history of human violence. In fact, *writing* this history can be a violent act too (see [19], p. 122). A quality of Timm's novel is that it turns towards the domestication of animals without an authoritarian Western viewpoint. Even though every literary animal is bound to the perspectives of humans who ultimately produce the text (see [17], p. 233), *Morenga* succeeds in questioning Eurocentric as well as anthropocentric forms of rule and representation. Moreover, since the book establishes a *speaking* animal, which is capable of reflecting the history of oppression, it implicates "that ideas of an absolute difference between the human and the animal (and the superiority of the former over the latter) owe a great deal to the colonial legacies" ([20], p. 414).

Reflecting dissimilar forms of understanding and talking about the oxen's loss of independence is just one purpose of the episode. The other function is to give the animals a voice in order to point out their important role in colonial history and, in this sense, their specific historical agency. According to Actor Network Theory, agency can be understood as "the capacity to affect the environment and history" ([20], p. 415). This capacity is not limited "to the conscious, rational choices made by human individuals" ([20], p. 415). It rather means "an effect generated in multiple and unpredictable ways from a network of interactions between human, animal, and environmental actors" ([20], p. 415). A journey through literary history shows that it is a particular privilege of fictional texts "Tiere mit großer Handlungsmacht auszustatten oder sogar als vollgültige Subjekte zu präsentieren" ([17], p. 236: to equip animals with a specific form of agency or to even present them as fully valid subjects).

The animals occurring in *Morenga* reflect different content-related motifs. While the representations of horses and camels are primarily integrated into the criticism of human warfare, the speaking draft ox addresses another topic: we associate oxen with stock farming, trading, and, since they are essential means of transport, especially with colonial 'movements' like land-grabbing, resettlement, and missionary work. Big-Red's tale demonstrates that animals are important triggers for colonial developments which, in turn, mostly end up in injustice for the natives as well as the animals themselves. As the trek ox explains, the violent conflicts and the raids in the southern parts of Africa always involve the fight for the best feeding grounds for the cattle herds; for example, he says that the Nama tribes move into Herero-territory because they want to occupy the "thick meadows flowing with water" ([1], p. 108) in order to keep more livestock. Therefore, the ox-narration presents animals as reasons and motives for historical changes. As actors, the cattle also affect the economic situation and thereby the course of the fights (see [1], p. 109). The term "the great cattle war" ([1], p. 157), which is used in the second 'Regional Studies' chapter and sums up the different Herero and Nama conflicts in the nineteenth century, indicates the livestock's significant influence on the circumstances in Southern Africa too.

With regard to this animal-centered perspective on economic aspects of colonialism, we can link *Morenga* to current historical studies, which focus on the agency of nonhuman 'others' in historical

processes. By characterizing the oxen as actors and, in general, as an important part of colonization, the novel reflects and anticipates the findings of an ‘animate history’ that questions the common position that animals are solely objects of history and its interpretations (see [21], p. 10). While most research firstly refers to the human parties that are involved in colonial experiences, German historian Gesine Krüger, in turn, underlines that the discourse has to be open to nonhuman animals for several reasons:

“Kolonialismus und Imperialismus bedeuteten nicht nur Herrschaft über Menschen, sondern waren zugleich in vielfacher Hinsicht Herrschaft durch und über Tiere. Ohne Tiere gäbe es keine imperialen Eroberungen. Tiere [...] sind Bedingung imperialer Prozesse, mit denen sie in vielfältiger Weise verflochten sind, die sie verändern und durch die sie verändert werden” ([22], p. 127: Colonialism and imperialism did not only mean rule over humans but rule by and over animals too. There would not be imperial conquests without animals. Animals are the requirement for imperial processes, with which they are interwoven in diverse ways. Imperial processes are changed by animals and influence them at the same time).

Using the example of horses and cattle, Krüger points out specific forms of agency which we can rediscover in Big-Red’s narrative; especially at the North American, Australian, and South African ‘frontiers’, oxen (and horses) affected substantial economic and ecological changes. The import, export, and commerce involving these animals influenced the landscape and small-scale agricultural systems as well as global market structures (see [22], p. 140). Timm’s speaking ox relates to these topics and illustrates how animals are interwoven with missionary work, trading, and, above all, with a spiral of colonial violence which has constantly increased since the middle of the nineteenth century.

In contrast to books that simply bring up such themes, *Morenga* deals with the agency of animals in a content-related as well as a narrative way. Due to this dual approach, which respects a viewpoint on and of animals, the novel anticipates the recent postcolonial interest in the perspectives of nonhuman ‘others’ (see [20], p. 417). With regard to the narrative situation, the novel does not entirely characterize animals as passive victims; the descriptions of Big-Red reveal that they are often downgraded to objects which do not have the opportunity to act independently, “aber im Erzählen wird der Rote Afrikaner zum Souverän seiner Geschichte” ([11], p. 89: but during his narration, Big-Red becomes a sovereign over his tale/history). Therefore, the text undermines a mere victims’ perspective. By lending Big-Red his own voice, *Morenga* gives at least the oxen the means to ‘emancipate’ in a narrative manner.<sup>11</sup> In this way, the book provides a reflected view on animals’ agency since it respects their ambiguous position (see [17], p. 234). As participants in historical processes their status is not clearly evident; animals always appear to be subjects and objects at the same time, tied to complex structures of political and economic interests.

#### 4. Summary

Analyzing animals in postcolonial literature and in (post-)colonial contexts in general can be a difficult undertaking. As Philip Armstrong states, “One reason might be the suspicion that pursuing an interest in the postcolonial animal risks trivializing the suffering of human beings under colonialism” ([20], p. 413). Uwe Timm’s *Morenga* gives us a striking example that literary texts can provide a kaleidoscopic perspective on European colonialism, which focuses on both humans and animals. By centering on two veterinarians, the book takes up an innovative viewpoint on a military campaign, which not only is a genocide committed against the Herero and the Nama but also kills “more cows than had been lost in the last ten years” ([1], p. 209). With its different animal representations and the specific interest in the nonhuman ‘protagonists’ of colonial history, Timm’s

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<sup>11</sup> However, this is an opportunity for the literary ox, not necessarily for his real ‘relatives’ that are “under the yoke” ([1], p. 106).

novel turns towards a topic that has often been marginalized. This animal-centered perspective, in turn, does not trivialize the harm done to the natives. As a short passage in Gottschalk's diary illustrates, the book recognizes humans as well as animals as victims of colonialism: "Those who come after us will trace our passage through this land for years to come: the skeletons of dead animals, and the graves of those who have fallen, will serve as milestones along the way" ([1], p. 212).<sup>12</sup> Overall, the text draws a comprehensive picture of colonialism in order to reveal the far-reaching brutality of the soldiers, traders, and settlers in the 'protectorate' German South-West Africa.

In a moment of recognition, 'Schutztruppen'-captain Tresckow asks, "What sort of campaign is chasing off the enemy's oxen, shooting their women and children, and burning their homes?" ([1], p. 209). It is remarkable that *Morenga* refuses to give a rational or ethical answer to crucial questions like these. As an alternative, the novel establishes a multifaceted narration, which deliberately leaves opportunities for critical reflection. With its polyphonic style, the text problematizes colonial practice as well as Eurocentric forms of representation. The trek ox Big-Red is a significant part of this narrative technique; the talking animal effectively undermines conventional literary approaches to the colonial discourse and thereby triggers a discussion about possible ways of narrating African history. His intradiegetic narrative describes the beginnings of colonization, which ultimately lead to the violent oppression of both humans and animals under German colonial rule. It is a story about the loss of independence and, nevertheless, about rebellion, emancipation, and equation. In this regard, and since it implies animistic ideas, the tale of the ox is closely linked to the Herero and the Nama, but the novel does not simply equate the animal's perspective to the experiences of the natives. The animal narrator does not claim to tell the 'truth' about the history or culture of the indigenous people but rather speaks for the oxen themselves.

The animals' point of view forces us to "think outside inherited paradigms" ([18], p. 128). Relating to Uwe Timm's statement that a 'narrative empathy' would be a colonial act itself, we might be surprised that the author decided to empathize with an ox and that he lends a voice to the *nonhuman* 'other'. At the same time, the story-telling animal represents a consequent and innovative postcolonial step as it opens up a new way of understanding the colonial past. Big-Red resists the perception that the marginalized could not express. In particular, his narration reveals an attitude toward the 'subaltern', which respects their importance for historical processes and thereby anticipates the recent ethnological and historiographical interest in animals as specific actors in colonial contexts. In this regard, *Morenga* is more than just one of the first postcolonial texts in German literature. Since it initiates a reflection process about the role of nonhuman animals in history, the novel can also be seen as an early literary approach to questions of animal agency.

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<sup>12</sup> In this specific passage, the German original version of the novel uses even more critical vocabulary: "Die Skelette der krepiernten Tiere [perished animals] am Wege und die Gräber der Gefallenen sind die Meilensteine" ([14], p. 278).

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