

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 49
Issue 1 *Refugee Voices in Contemporary Literature*

Article 5

2025

Hospitality and Tolerance: Portrayals of Migrant Communities in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015) and Saša Stanišić's *Herkunft* (2019)

Carol Anne Costabile-Heming
University of North Texas, carolanne.costabile-heming@unt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [German Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Costabile-Heming, Carol Anne (2025) "Hospitality and Tolerance: Portrayals of Migrant Communities in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015) and Saša Stanišić's *Herkunft* (2019)," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 49: Iss. 1, Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2278>

This Special Focus is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Hospitality and Tolerance: Portrayals of Migrant Communities in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015) and Saša Stanišić's *Herkunft* (2019)

Abstract

This essay analyzes two recent German-language texts, Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015) and Saša Stanišić's *Herkunft* (2019) that present different perspectives of refugee experiences. Utilizing the frameworks of refugee studies and hospitality, I interpret how these authors portray the treatment and reception of refugees in Germany. I juxtapose Derrida's focus on the need to subject hospitality to jurisdiction with Sara Ahmed's writings about post-coloniality and critical refugee studies scholars' efforts to re-center the refugee experience in my analysis of the portrayals of migration, asylum, and refugees in Erpenbeck's and Stanišić's texts. Both depict the precarity of the refugee existence and the hurdles that migrants face as they seek to find welcome and acceptance in the "foreign" country of Germany.

Keywords

refugees, migration, hospitality, tolerance

Cover Page Footnote

I am indebted to the support of the DDGC Remote Write on Site members, most especially to Claire Ross, Kathryn Sederberg, and Rebekah Slodounik.

Hospitality and Tolerance: Portrayals of Migrant Communities in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015) and Saša Stanišić's *Herkunft* (2019)¹

Carol Anne Costabile-Heming
University of North Texas

In 2015, migration to the European Union experienced explosive growth with some one million refugees seeking sanctuary (Peters, Engelen, and Cassimon 1). This migration occurred as a direct result of the ongoing war, ethnic conflict, and economic hardships in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Eritrea, among others. This influx of migrants challenged humanitarian aid efforts across the European continent and led to the passage of legislation regulating migration and the granting of asylum. While many referred to this as a refugee crisis, Alison Phipps, in her plenary address at the 2022 MLA International Symposium in Glasgow, Scotland, stated emphatically: “We are experiencing a hospitality crisis.” By reframing the crisis from a focus on refugees to a focus on hospitality, Phipps shifts attention from the security concerns of the host countries to the needs and circumstances of those seeking sanctuary. Like Phipps’s reframing, Critical Refugee Studies seeks to re-center the refugee as a person with agency, who nonetheless is caught within conflicting humanitarian aid policies, promises, and practices that serve less to render aid and resources to refugees and more to validate the host countries’ (the so-called rescuers’) worldview as superior (Espiritu et al. 26). Indeed, Jennifer Hyndman had noted in 2000 that humanitarian responses to refugees tended to focus on specific groups and geographic locations, a practice that eschewed the “sustained examination of practices that cross borders, of policies that manage difference according to organizational and legal standards across space, and of strategies that aim to contain human displacement in highly politicized ways” (xvii). As the author collective shows in their 2022 volume *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies*, little has changed. The typical refugee story follows a pattern of “crisis-rescue-gratitude,” wherein gratitude represents the resolution of the refugee story (Espiritu et al. 77). Without this resolution, they write, “the refugee story would leave the reader—in this case, citizens of the host nation—unsatisfied, confused, and even angry” (Espiritu et al. 78). This emphasis on the host nation’s expectations serves to render refugees powerless to break free not just from their traumatic pasts and places of origin, but also from their crises and suffering (Espiritu et al. 103).

¹ This essay is an expanded version of a presentation I gave at the 2022 MLA International Symposium in Glasgow, Scotland. I am grateful for the support I received throughout the writing and revision process. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for their valuable suggestions for clarity, Dr. Rebekah Slodounik and Dr. Kathryn Sederberg for their guidance, patience, and encouragement, and the members of the DDGC Remote Write on Site group for their support, especially Dr. Claire A. Ross.

The Federal Republic of Germany has long been a sought-after destination for immigrants. Through the guest worker initiative begun in the 1950s, millions of mostly unskilled laborers primarily from Italy, Spain, Greece, and Turkey entered the West German workforce, aiding the country's economic boom. Following the dissolution of the communist Eastern Bloc in the early 1990s, Germany became a place of refuge for ethnic Germans residing in the former Warsaw Pact countries, as well as for those displaced by the ethnic wars in the former Yugoslavia. According to the Migration Policy Institute, "more than 1 million immigrants and asylum seekers have arrived in Germany since 2012," with nearly 500,000 requesting asylum in 2015 (Rietig and Müller). In the last decade, the plight of immigrant refugees has moved beyond commentary in daily news reports to become a major theme in recently published German-language prose fiction. In this essay, I analyze two novels, Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015; *Go, Went, Gone*, 2017) and Saša Stanišić's *Herkunft* (2019; *Where You Come From*, 2021), that present different views of the refugee experience. Within the frameworks of refugee studies and hospitality, I discuss how these authors portray the treatment and reception of refugees in Germany.² Erpenbeck introduces her readers to the stories of a group of African men who had to flee their homes and homelands in Nigeria, Ghana, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Libya. The men's experiences are filtered through the eyes of her protagonist, the white East German retired classics professor, Richard, who himself was forced to flee Silesia as a very young child. Stanišić's autobiographical tale relates the refugee experience through a first-person narrator, allowing readers to perceive migration through the refugee's perspective. First-person narration centers refugees within the locus of their own experience, returning voice and agency to them.

In response to the involuntary dislocation of (European) individuals who had been displaced by Nazi Germany's genocide policies and the ravages of war, the 1951 UN Refugee Convention defined a refugee as a person who,

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself [sic] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his [sic] former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (UNHCR)³

² The topic clearly resonates with readers and critics. *Gehen, ging, gegangen* was named to the shortlist for the German Book Prize in 2015, and *Herkunft* was awarded the prize in 2019. During his acceptance speech, Stanišić criticized the Swedish Academy for awarding that year's Nobel Prize in Literature to the Austrian writer, Peter Handke, who had expressed sympathy with the Serbians and whose works failed to address the victims of Serbia's aggressions.

³ Jennifer Hyndman and Wenona Giles note that this regulation as well as its 1967 Protocol "codify [...] protections and entitlements for refugees whose cases are adjudicated on an

This definition, however, does not adequately account for our current global crises including war, famine, natural disasters, and climate change that are affecting the livability of vast swaths of our planet. Hyndman recognizes this shift and notes that countries are becoming increasingly “less inclined to harbor refugees and more inclined to intervene in conflict areas so that the need to provide asylum is prevented” (xxv). Refugees today are viewed through a binary lens, “either as threats to be detained [...] or charity cases to be saved” (Oliver 57). Erpenbeck and Stanišić vividly portray the challenges and existential threats that refugees face in our contemporary times in their respective novels.

Phipps’s emphasis on a hospitality crisis provides an interesting lens through which to consider how refugees are received, treated, and tolerated. The term “hospitality” suggests an acceptance of the “stranger” or foreigner, and tolerance is generally acknowledged “as a reasonable form of compromise that allows the peaceful coexistence of different individuals or groups with heterogenous ethnic, cultural, religious identities” (Bejan 39). Deriving from the Latin *hostis*, which can designate both friend and stranger, the word hospitality denotes both tolerance and intolerance.⁴ For Immanuel Kant, hospitality represented the right of a stranger to be treated without hostility. Nonetheless, the relationship between the stranger and the host is one governed by rules and laws. It is this rule of law that determines how the stranger, the foreigner, is accepted. Jacques Derrida argues that “hospitality, reception, the welcome offered have to be submitted to a basic and limiting jurisdiction” (59-61). Even tolerance assumes “compliance, acceptance, assent, approval” (Bejan 39), expectations that derive from power structures. As Petru Bejan describes it, this is a “discourse of the powerful relating to the discourse of the weak” (40). According to EU migration policies, new migrant arrivals who do not have the right to asylum are not welcomed; they are not offered hospitality (Derrida 59-61). Rather than being treated as a guest who is deserving of hospitality, such migrants are viewed “as [...] a guest who is wrong, illegitimate, clandestine, liable to expulsion or arrest” (Derrida 59-61). In this essay I juxtapose Derrida’s focus on jurisdiction with Sara Ahmed’s writings about post-coloniality and critical refugee studies scholars’ efforts to re-center the refugee experience in my analysis of the portrayals of migration, asylum, and refugees in Erpenbeck’s and Stanišić’s novels. Both depict the precarity of the refugee existence and the hurdles that migrants face as they seek to find welcome and acceptance in the “foreign” Federal Republic of Germany. Additionally, these novels highlight

individual basis,” which does not reflect the circumstances of most refugees today. Refugees today are “caught in a web where they lack permanent legal status, experience restricted livelihoods in their place of temporary refuge, and are unable to return home” (2). This is the precise predicament of the male African refugees Erpenbeck depicts.

⁴ As Oliver writes, tolerance can also have a sinister connotation, one that “defines and quantifies how much suffering we can tolerate in terms of proportion logics and the lesser of evils” (Oliver 65). In other words, it becomes a type of benchmark or threshold.

the challenges that involuntary dislocation poses to contemporary German society: as increasing numbers of displaced refugees seek safe haven there, xenophobic attacks are also on the rise. Such challenges are experienced differently by the migrants and their German hosts. Erpenbeck's novel meticulously captures the precarity of existence that asylum-seeking refugees endure as they are frustrated in their quest for freedom and security by a complex bureaucracy rooted in international treaties about asylum. Erpenbeck thematizes the idea of "home" and being "grounded" or "rooted," which for these men is an impossibility because of their temporary status. Stanišić draws on his family's refugee experience and their forced flight from Višegrad when civil war erupted in the former Yugoslavia in 1992. He narrates his own successful migration story to Germany against the backdrop of childhood memories and coupled with a quest to understand his origin and ancestry.⁵ These novels paint two very different pictures of migration and refugee status, as well as varied approaches to offering and receiving hospitality. As Europeans, Stanišić and his family seemingly have an easier time acquiring services and acclimating to their new environment than the African refugees featured in Erpenbeck's novel. These different refugee experiences reveal latent racist perceptions and underscore how nation-states consistently view refugees and asylum seekers through a lens of security, offering asylum and sanctuary more readily to those deemed non-threatening to the nation-state's status quo.

Gehen, ging, gegangen was published in 2015, the same year that unprecedented numbers of refugees made a perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea and entered Europe. Appearing at a time when Europe faced the challenges of how to serve the needs of these masses of involuntarily displaced peoples, the situation that informs the novel draws on the real circumstances of some 100-150 mostly African refugees who had occupied the Oranienplatz, a centrally located square in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin, from 2012 to 2014.⁶ The novel tells the story of Richard, a retired East German classics professor, in search of meaning in a post-retirement world. After seeing a television news report about a group of the Oranienplatz refugees staging a hunger strike at Berlin's Alexanderplatz in order to draw attention to the absurdity of their indeterminate legal status, Richard begins to take an interest in the plight of male African refugees in Germany.⁷ Though he had actually been at Alexanderplatz that day, indeed, he walked right by the protestors twice, Richard did not see them. The refugees' lack of visibility, despite their presence in a busy public square, presents a seeming contradiction between Germany's public and political posturing about its openness to refugees and the relevance

⁵ Stanišić's first novel, *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* (2006), thematized the war in Višegrad directly from the perspective of the fictional child, Aleksander. *Herkunft* focuses specifically on the time after Stanišić's family fled, and, because it is narrated in the first-person, can be read as an autofictional account.

⁶ For an insightful analysis of the Oranienplatz camp, see Landry.

⁷ As Monika Shafi argues, the focus solely on male refugees further limits the visibility of female refugees (202).

of such political actions for ordinary citizens. Despite Germany's willingness to accept refugees, Erpenbeck's novel shows that ordinary Germans remain oblivious to the plight of these guests on their soil.

The protesters want nothing more than to be able to work and support themselves, a sign that they want to contribute meaningfully to the society in which they live. During the protest, police repeatedly ask them to identify themselves:

Wer seid ihr, werden sie von der Polizei und von Beamten des Senats, die hinzugeholt werden, gefragt. Wir sagen es nicht, sagen die Männer. Das müsst ihr aber sagen, sagen die andern, sonst wissen wir nicht, ob ihr unter das Gesetz fällt und hier bleiben und arbeiten dürft. Wir sagen nicht, wer wir sind, sagen die Männer. Würdet ihr denn, wenn ihr an unserer Stelle wärt, einen Gast aufnehmen, den ihr nicht kennt, sagen die andern. Die Männer schweigen. Wir müssen prüfen, ob ihr wirklich in Not seid, sagen die andern. Die Männer schweigen. Vielleicht, sagen die andern, seid ihr Verbrecher, das müssen wir prüfen. Die Männer schweigen. Oder einfach Schmarotzer. Die Männer schweigen. (18)⁸

Who are you, they're asked by police officers and various city employees who've been called in. We won't say, the men reply. But you have to say, they're told, otherwise how do we know whether the law applies to you and you're allowed to stay here and work. We won't say who we are, the men say. If you were in our shoes, the others respond, would you take in a guest you don't know? The men say nothing. We have to verify that you're truly in need of assistance. The men say nothing. You might be criminals, we have to check. They say nothing. Or just freeloaders. The men are silent. (10-11)

These men, who initially left their war-torn homelands in search of work in Libya and were subsequently forced to flee for their lives, have ended up in Germany, where their fates are held hostage by the ambiguities of German and international immigration laws: because they are living in Germany, Germany

⁸ One of the key points that Phipps made in her plenary address is that hosts offering hospitality to refugees should offer food and drink, a bath, but most of all ask no questions. Once displaced people have had their basic needs met, they will tell their stories of their own volition. The constant questioning forces refugees repeatedly to relive the very traumas they seek to escape. The police's interrogation of the protesters focuses on administering the refugees; it does not accept the "rules" of hospitality, and it serves to "other" the protesters as criminals and free loaders. The focus on the law blinds the police and others to the fact that the protestors do not want charity, but rather the ability to work and support themselves. They want to free themselves from the involuntary limbo that immigration policies have imposed on them. It is also noteworthy that the police use the informal form of address (*ihr*) when questioning the refugees; informal address is typically used with children, among friends and family members, but not with strangers. I read this as an indication that the police do not see a need to treat the protestors with basic respect.

must feed them and provide for their basic needs. However, because they first entered Europe via another country, namely Italy, they are not eligible for asylum in Germany. In other words, they are not really Germany's "problem."⁹ Though the Berlin Senate tries to negotiate with the refugees to provide for their basic needs, these negotiations ultimately derive from "ein Grenzproblem" (48) 'borders' (35). Indeed, once the refugees sign an agreement with the Berlin Senate, "muss man sie auch *verwalten*" (64; my emphasis) 'it became necessary to *administer* them' (49; my emphasis), a situation that serves to further limit their freedom and access to hospitality, echoing Derrida's critique of the need to subject newcomers to jurisdiction. The regulations include stipulations about where the men live, raising the specter of carceral humanitarianism, whereby limitations are placed even on the men's freedom of movement.¹⁰

Richard, in search of something to occupy his time and thinking that he might write something about the refugees' plight, interviews the men in order to learn about their lives and journeys.¹¹ While his questioning is not as abrasive as the police's interactions with the protesters at Alexanderplatz, the mere fact that Richard has a list of questions to pose signals that he is the one who is determining which trajectories of the men's life stories are revealed.¹² Richard (and readers) hear the men's stories: Raschid, Zair, Abdusalam, and Ithemba are originally from Nigeria; Apoll and Osarobo are from Niger; Awad was born in Ghana but grew up in Libya; Rufu was born in Burkina Faso, Yussuf in Mali, and Ali in Chad. Richard learns about the political situations in their African homelands, the arduousness of their journeys, and the physical and mental struggles they have endured in their quest for freedom. Their ambiguous immigration status prevents them from seeking employment, a situation that robs them of a piece of their identities. Richard, who had fled Silesia as a young child and ultimately was able to live a secure and productive life, first in the former GDR and then in unified Germany, cannot comprehend the obstinance of German bureaucrats:

In Wahrheit wollen sie [die Männer] auf Arbeitssuche gehen und sich ihr Leben selbst organisieren, so wie jeder, der bei Kräften und bei Verstand ist. Diejenigen aber, die dieses Gebiet bewohnen, erst seit 150 Jahren heißt es *Deutschland*, verteidigen ihr Revier mit Paragraphen [...] (102-03; emphasis in original)

⁹ As Hyndman and Giles show, the EU's Dublin II regulation "stipulates that asylum seekers must register in the EU country through which they enter, effectively externalizing asylum to 'border states' of the EU, away from those buffered by others" (9).

¹⁰ For more on carceral humanitarianism, see Oliver. Gary L. Baker notes that the location where the refugees are housed, a former nursing home, suggests an "infirmity associated with [the men's] lack of productive activity" (505).

¹¹ Catherine McNally argues that even though Erpenbeck's novel depicts the refugees' experiences, it is because "they are at the forefront as distractions for Richard from his otherwise mundane life" (249).

¹² Erpenbeck conducted interviews with African refugees in Berlin in preparation for writing the book. Richard's questions reflect that research.

What [the men] want is to be allowed to look for work, to organize their lives like any other person of sound body and mind. But the inhabitants of this territory—which has only been called *Germany* for around 150 years—are defending their borders with articles of law (81; emphasis in original).

As the Critical Refugee Studies Collective describes, “refugees and asylum seekers are aware of their relationship to the law and submit to its requirements intentionally whenever possible in the hope of attaining protection” (Espiritu et al. 52-53). The men Richard befriends attempt to follow the law, and in return they receive housing, food, transportation passes, and even language instruction. The nation-state, Germany, attends to their basic needs, and from the perspective of the state, the men are protected. As Hyndman and Giles show, however, refugees who face prolonged displacement “are not treated as fully endowed rights-bearing subjects, ostensibly because their situation is temporary” (12). Erpenbeck draws attention to the precarity of this protection by highlighting the refugees’ lack of “status” as a catch-22 situation.

The men, who suffer from the trauma of war and flight, simply are not permitted to “arrive” in Germany, a condition necessary for them to experience peace. Brangwen Stone suggests that the empathy Richard develops toward the refugees and their plight derives from his own forced migration from Silesia as an infant. While it is questionable whether Richard has any memories of that expulsion because of his young age, he was able to establish a fulfilling and productive life. In other words, Richard was allowed to arrive. He thus realizes that what for him is a peacetime existence remains a continuous state of war for the men he is trying to help. As a white European, Richard’s migration experience was vastly different from that of the men he befriends. Indeed, Erpenbeck draws attention to Europe’s historic role as colonizer, citing a continental complicity that has allowed colonial ideologies of race and ethnicity to continue to determine economic and political status. Portraying the refugees as men, “die aus [der Zeit] hinausgefallen sind” (51) ‘who have fallen out of [time]’ (38), she underscores their plight by showing that they must become foreign in order to start a new life. As Awad remarks: “Wenn man ein Fremder wird [...] hat man keine Wahl mehr. [...] ich weiß nicht mehr, wer ich bin. Ein Fremder werden. Sich selbst und den andern. So also sah ein Übergang aus” (80-81) ‘When you become foreign [...] you don’t have a choice. [...] I don’t know who I am anymore. Becoming foreign. To yourself and others. So that’s what a transition looks like’ (63). One aspect of becoming foreign is the acquisition of a new language, which the title *Gehen, ging, gegangen*, the principal parts of the German verb *gehen* (to go) highlights: Apoll has hung a list of irregular verbs on the wall near his bed. German language lessons are the only service that the Berlin Senate ensures that the refugees have; intended to help them acclimate to their new environment, it is a pointless exercise if Germany refuses to grant them asylum. Derrida criticized the need for the

foreigner “to understand us, to speak our language, in all senses of this term, in all its possible extensions, before being able [...] to welcome [them] into our country” (15-17). Yet, this compulsory learning of another language, along with expectations of mastery of that language, robs the men of the ability to tell their stories in their own tongues and can contribute to refugees feeling less intelligent because of their limited German-language abilities (Espiritu et al. 26). As Bejan forcefully claims, the “assertion of the language can be a new form of violence and intolerance,” a type of “linguistic imperialism” that is accompanied by “colonial practices” (41).

Erpenbeck’s novel indicts the bureaucracy of the system by exposing the inanity of the asylum laws. For instance, displaced people are issued a *Fiktionsbescheinigung* (103) ‘certificate of fiction’ (82), a document that confirms that a person exists without granting the person the right to call themselves a refugee. In exposing the limitations of the asylum laws, Erpenbeck’s novel advocates for making the men visible: “Dort, wo das eine Leben eines Menschen an das andere Leben desselben Menschen grenzt, muss doch der Übergang sichtbar werden, der, wenn man genau hinschaut, selbst eigentlich nichts ist” (52) ‘At the border between a person’s life and the other life lived by that same person, the transition has to be visible—a transition that, if you look closely enough, is nothing at all’ (39). Richard, like Erpenbeck, is a product of the former East Germany and thus keenly aware of the power of borders. He wonders: “Hatte man ausgerechnet in Berlin schon wieder vergessen, dass eine Grenze sich nicht nur an der Größe des Gegners bemaß, sondern ihn auch erschuf?” (261-62) ‘Have people forgotten in Berlin of all places that a border isn’t just measured by an opponent’s stature but in fact creates him?’ (211).

Richard’s social and economic stability is a crass counterpart to the precarity of the refugees’ existence; Richard assesses the refugees’ fates from his privileged Eurocentric perspective.¹³ Though Richard also has an immigration background, he, unlike the African refugees, was able to pursue an education and be gainfully employed. Unable to see beyond the horizon of this traditional Western upbringing, Richard has difficulty remembering the refugees’ real names, so he gives them nicknames like “Tristan” and “Apollo,” names that he will be able to remember later (84). He tries to use his privileged status for good, accompanying them to meetings with various lawyers and government officials, even inviting Osarobo to his home to play the piano. Whereas Sara Ahmed has written that an “endless obligation to give defines the form of hospitality as an opening to the other, an open home” (150), this scene in Erpenbeck’s novel very clearly illustrates the clash of two cultures and the specific expectations that Richard has for his guest. When Osarobo forgot that Richard was going to pick him up, Richard becomes irritated and wonders why he is so annoyed:

¹³ Anna Horakova pointedly criticizes the novel for “privileging yet again, the life, perspective, and interiority of the white European individual” (78).

Dass der Afrikaner nicht so glücklich und dankbar ist, wie er es von ihm erwartet? Dass der Afrikaner ihn, den einzigen Deutschen von draußen, der wie es scheint, jemals dieses Heim hier freiwillig betritt, einfach vergisst? Vielleicht auch darüber, dass der Afrikaner nicht verzweifelt genug ist, um seine Chance zu erkennen? Oder eher darüber, dass er ihm, Richard, durch seine Achtlosigkeit keine Chance darstellt, sondern allenfalls einen geringfügig besseren Zeitvertreib als das Schlafen? (145)

Because this African isn't as happy and grateful as he expected? Because he was so easily able to forget him, the only German from outside the home who voluntarily sets foot here? Or maybe because this African isn't desperate enough to understand that Richard is offering him an opportunity? Or is it more that Osarobo's carelessness has casually made clear to Richard that his offer to let Osarobo play his piano isn't really an opportunity at all but at best a way to pass the time, only marginally more attractive than sleeping? (116)¹⁴

These different cultural expectations and behaviors also play out in differing performances of hospitality. Though the refugees seldom experience welcome themselves, they repeatedly extend kindness and hospitality to Richard. When Richard forgets his wallet, Rufu pays for his groceries (€16.50). Richard wants to repay him immediately and invites him to his house for lunch. Rufu refuses to take any more than €10 as repayment (though he only receives €300 for an entire month). After lunch, Rufu clears his plate from the table and wants to do the dishes, behavior contrary to that of a Western guest. Similarly, whenever Richard visits the refugees at their temporary residence, they place large plates of steaming food in front of him: "Ist das nicht ein bisschen sehr viel für mich allein?, fragt er, allerdings ohne viel Hoffnung, dass diese *Gastfreundschaft*, die aus ihm einen Idioten macht, plötzlich aufhört" (204; my emphasis) 'Isn't that too much for me alone? He asks—without really expecting that this *hospitality* that's turned him into a sentimental idiot will suddenly cease' (165; my emphasis). At the end of his visit, "begleitet Raschid Richard zum Ausgang, so, als hätte er den Besucher bei sich zu Hause empfangen" (205) 'Rashid accompanies him to the exit like a man who's received a visitor in his home' (165). As Gary L. Baker acknowledges, the men's consistent attention to comforting and caring for others derives from their longing "to have a home and a family and to live self-sufficiently in peace" (518).

The migration story that Saša Stanišić tells in his 2019 book, *Herkunft*, contrasts sharply with that of the African refugees in *Gehen, ging, gegangen*.

¹⁴ Bernofsky's translation makes this passage more personal by repeating Osarobo's name. Erpenback, by referring repeatedly to "der Afrikaner," the African, ignores Osarobo's individuality, thus generalizing his behavior as typical of all African refugees.

Like Erpenbeck's Richard, Stanišić is an Eastern European. While he, too, fled his homeland because of war, he experienced a soft landing in the recently unified Federal Republic. Stanišić combines autobiographical facts with fictional elements in order to reflect on his origins. Though the story takes place in 2018, the novel unfolds as a series of vignettes that interweave memories of his childhood in Yugoslavia with his flight from the Bosnian war at age fourteen, his teenage years in the Emmertsgrund suburb of Heidelberg, and the recent past and conversations with his grandmother, whose memory is slowly being eroded by dementia.¹⁵ Stanišić writes from a perspective of double alienation, as one who is a stranger in his new homeland of Germany and for whom his homeland, Yugoslavia, which no longer exists as a political entity, is nothing but a distant memory. As Stanišić seeks the answer to the question of his *Herkunft*, his origin, he exposes feelings of alienation and acceptance in both Germany and his hometown of Višegrad. These emotions echo Ahmed's musings on strangers: "the stranger is an effect of processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion, that constitute the boundaries of bodies and communities, including communities of living" (6). Stanišić relates the complexity of his heritage, which is complicated by the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia into multiple ethnically diverse nations:

Das Land, in dem ich geboren wurde, gibt es heute nicht mehr. Solange es das Land noch gab, begriff ich mich als Jugoslawe. Wie meine Eltern, die aus einer serbischen (Vater) bzw. einer bosniakisch-muslimischen Familie stammten (Mutter). Ich war ein Kind des Vielvölkerstaats, Ertrag und Bekenntnis zweier zugeneigter Menschen, die der jugoslawische Melting Pot befreit hatte von den Zwängen unterschiedlicher Herkunft und Religion. (13-14)

The country where I was born no longer exists. For as long as the country still existed, I thought of myself as Yugoslavian. Like my parents, who were from Serbian-Orthodox (Father) and Bosnian-Muslim (Mother) families. I was the child of a multiethnic state, the fruit and avowal of two people who were drawn to each other and whom the Yugoslavian melting pot had liberated from the constraints of different origins and religions. (9)¹⁶

In pondering the question of where he comes from, Stanišić emphasizes that origin has different meanings depending on one's perspective:

Komplexe Frage! Zuerst müsse geklärt werden, worauf das Woher ziele. Auf die geografische Lage des Hügels, auf dem der Kreißaal sich

¹⁵ In the novel *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*, Stanišić's grandmother stayed behind. Raffaella Mare describes the grandmother as tied to the past. While her family's life continues in Germany, there is no present for her (248).

¹⁶ Unless otherwise noted, the English quotations derive from the published translation.

befand? Auf die Landesgrenzen des Staates zum Zeitpunkt der letzten Wehe? Provenienz der Eltern? Gene, Ahnen, Dialekt? Wie man es dreht, Herkunft bleibt doch ein Konstrukt. (32-33)

Not a simple question! First it depends on what your *where* is aiming at. The geographical location of the hill where the hospital was? The national border of the state at the time of the final contractions? Parents' provenance? Genes, ancestors, dialect? However you look at it, your place of origin is just a construct! (28-29)

Though a seemingly flippant response about his own birth, Stanišić pointedly draws attention to the complex relationship that exists between identity, belonging, and feeling at home. He is unwilling to accept that *Herkunft* means just one thing. His readiness to accept multiple definitions of origin signals a type of arrival, a comfort in multiple lands that is unavailable to the African refugees in Erpenbeck's novel. Nonetheless, Stanišić also concedes feelings of estrangement.¹⁷ Ahmed acknowledges that migrants, in particular, are constructed as strangers: "the strangers are the ones who, in leaving the home of their nation, are the bodies out of place in the everyday world they inhabit and in the communities in which they come to live" (78). This estrangement occurs already with the spelling of names. Names like Stanišić's have "Häkchen" 'little checkmarks,' which the author describes "eher als Hindernis. Sie stimmten Beamte und Vermieter skeptisch, und an den Grenzen dauerte die Passkontrolle länger" (61) '[as] a hindrance more than anything. They put bureaucrats and landlords in a skeptical mood; passport control takes longer' (57). Though Heidelberg proved a safe haven for Stanišić's family for a while, it was not openly welcoming: "In unserem ersten deutschen Zuhause teilten wir uns mit anderen Geflüchteten das Bad und den Fernseher und jede Türklinke" (125)¹⁸ 'In our first place in Germany, we shared the bathroom and TV and every door handle with other refugees' (122).¹⁹ Refugees were housed away from Heidelberg's tourist center, and the family eventually settled in the suburb Emmertsgrund: "Auf die Ausländer im Emmertsgrund war man sowieso stolz. Solange wir keinen Scheiß bauten" (129) 'The city was proud of the foreigners [there] too, as long as we didn't get up to no good' (125). Though Stanišić acclimated to life in Germany very well, he recalls that "mit jeder Regel, an die

¹⁷ In *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*, the protagonist's uncle Bora is a *Gastarbeiter* (guest worker) in Germany. The young Aleksander struggles to understand the term: "Ich wundere mich zwar, dass es Orte gibt, wo Gäste arbeiten müssen, bei uns lässt man einen Gast nicht mal abwaschen" (47) 'Although it puzzles me that there are places where guests have to work, in our family we don't even let a guest do the dishes' (30).

¹⁸ It is noteworthy that Stanišić uses the preferred term "Geflüchtete" rather than the more pejorative "Flüchtlinge." Though both are typically rendered in English as refugee, the former allows for the identity of the person being described not to be wholly ascribed as a refugee—that is, "a fleeing person" rather than a "refugee."

¹⁹ The choice of "place" as a translation for "Zuhause" does not convey the sense of familiarity, comfort, and home that the German original does.

man uns erinnerte, erinnerte man uns auch daran: Ihr seid fremd hier” (155) ‘along with every rule people reminded us of, they were also reminding us: You don’t belong here’ (152-53). Unlike the African men in Erpenbeck’s novel, Stanišić’s parents were permitted to work, albeit in menial jobs far removed from their actual training and experience in Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, his parents were never permitted to fully “arrive” in Germany; they were forced to leave in order to avoid deportation.

Intimate portrayals of Stanišić’s family, including visits to Višegrad where he was born, reveal an openness and generosity, benevolence and respect within the familial bond that contrasts sharply with the feelings of estrangement that he experienced upon his arrival in Germany. In addition to the immigration story, Stanišić relates his grandmother’s memory loss to dementia. When his family fled Yugoslavia, his grandmother chose to remain behind in Višegrad. As her memory lapses, she longs to go home, a metaphorical construct she barely remembers that is bound up with memories of her deceased husband. From Stanišić’s first-person perspective, his grandmother’s memory loss also signals that his connection to his former homeland is fading. His assimilation into the German culture requires an abandonment of his origin, making his quest to understand his origin all the more poignant. During one visit, Stanišić accompanies his grandmother to visit the graves of his ancestors, an act Derrida describes as a type of “pilgrimage” that helps the displaced define and connect to “home” (87-89).²⁰ While there, they celebrate with a meal: his relatives “tischten die mitgebrachten Speisen auf, Getränke in Plastikflaschen. Die Grabplatte war die Tafel. Fleisch und Brot lagen schon da” (28) ‘dished up the food she had brought along, drinks in plastic bottles. The grave slab was the table. Meat and bread were already there’ (my translation). At the gravesite, the grandmother experiences the sense of home that she seeks. The connection to the past remains strong, and scenes like this represent home, at least for his grandmother. For Stanišić, however, the concept of home is more complex—it is not grounded in an “Ort” (64), a ‘place’ (60), but is tied up with memories: “Als meine Großmutter Kristina Erinnerungen zu verlieren begann, begann ich, Erinnerungen zu sammeln” (64) ‘When Grandmother Kristina started losing her memory, I started collecting memories’ (60). In this way, Stanišić himself can hold onto the past of his childhood while making new memories in Germany.

Erpenbeck’s *Gehen, ging, gegangen* attempts to personalize the refugee existence by highlighting, albeit fictionally and focalized through the white European protagonist, individual stories of the refugee experience. Each of the African men with whom Richard engages becomes humanized by the details of his life story. While this approach may encourage readers to view refugees as individuals with valid humanitarian needs rather than a nameless category of others, Erpenbeck nonetheless foregrounds Richard’s point of view, filtering the migrants’ experiences through his perspective,²¹ which denies them agency.

²⁰ Bejan also describes home as “the settled place of graves” (41).

²¹ See also McNally, 248.

Richard's interest in the African men's welfare does set him apart from the majority of Germans; Germany as a country remains an inhospitable host. Though the state is legally responsible for the men's welfare, it abdicates that responsibility. Unlike the comforting idea of home that Stanišić presents, Erpenbeck's portrayal of home remains an unattainable goal for the refugees because of their lack of legal residency status. Drawing from his own history of displacement, Richard realizes the importance of hospitality in such situations, enabling him to provide the men with the only sense of home and security they experience throughout their ordeal. As the novel draws to a close, Richard and his friends open their homes to some of the refugees so that they can remain together in Berlin until their cases are heard. While we can read the actions of Richard and his friends as a form of "outlaw hospitality" (Min), offering sanctuary to refugees that resists local laws and jurisdiction, it is a simplistic action that adheres to the aforementioned "crisis-rescue-gratitude" pattern that many refugees experience. Richard's simple act of defiance provides a temporary solution for a handful of refugees, yet it does nothing to resolve the tenuous situation of the hundreds of thousands of other refugees in Germany. Though the men that Richard houses are safe, their fates remain in limbo. Shafi concedes that Erpenbeck's goal is "to foster comprehension, empathy, and perhaps even encourage action" (186), but as xenophobic attacks against asylum seekers continue, it seems that novel did not have a substantial impact on the discourse of the overall situation of migrants in Germany.

Stanišić relates a migration success story from a first-person perspective, and the narrator is well aware of the rarity of his good fortune. He describes Heidelberg as "eine zufällige Stadt" (123) 'an accidental city' (119), a place that was to be merely "als kurzzeitige Rettung [...] aus der wirklich gewordenen Unwirklichkeit des Krieges" (123), a 'short-term escape from the unreality of the war' (119). Unlike the men in Erpenbeck's novel, whose fates remain in limbo as the novel concludes, Stanišić's future was secure: he attended German schools, gained admission to the University of Heidelberg, and ultimately acquired German citizenship in 2013. As he reflects on his refugee experience, he acknowledges that refugees today continue to face widespread structural disadvantages. He concedes that immigration policies have become much more restrictive in the twenty-first century: "Müssten wir jetzt fliehen, wären also die Zustände an den Grenzen 1992 so restriktiv gewesen wie an den EU-Außengrenzen heute, würden wir Heidelberg nie erreichen. Die Reise wäre vor einem ungarischen Stacheldrahtzaun zu Ende" (123) 'If we had to flee today, or if the conditions at the 1992 border were as restrictive as they are at the EU borders now, we would never have reached Heidelberg. The trip would have ended at a Hungarian barbed wire fence' (119). The reference to barbed wire at the Hungarian border is a sad commentary on the xenophobic violence now perpetrated against migrants throughout Europe, particularly since it was Hungary that had opened its border with Austria in 1989, paving the way for thousands of East Germans to flee to the Federal Republic. Unlike the African refugees in *Gehen, ging, gegangen*, Stanišić benefited from multiple

opportunities: “Je mehr Chancen ich nutzen durfte, desto schwieriger wurde es, mich ins Abseits zu stellen oder zum Opfer zu machen. Der existenzielle Druck, dem meine Eltern ausgesetzt waren, blieb mir erspart” (185) ‘The more opportunities I was able to take advantage of, the harder it became to push me aside or make me a victim. I never had to feel the existential pressure my parents were exposed to’ (183). Both of these contemporary novels scrutinize the rigidity of German law, underscoring the power structures that inhere in tolerance prohibiting immigrants from changing status from stranger to friend. As Ahmed writes in *Strange Encounters*, the underlying assumption of hospitality as “welcoming the stranger” means “to welcome the unassimilable” (150-51). Erpenbeck and Stanišić highlight how the welcoming of the refugee serves merely to assimilate “others into an economy of difference” (Ahmed 150-51).

By filtering the refugee experience through both a third-person (Erpenbeck’s protagonist, Richard) and a first-person (Stanišić) perspective, these novels draw attention to the considerable power that the European Union wields over refugees’ fates: “humanitarian assistance will be largely anchored in the protection of nations of the European Union, which strategically links the functions of its two global aid departments—to safety at home” (Espiritu et al. 84-85). The constant labeling of the plight of refugees in Europe as a refugee crisis serves to “further obscure the context of political and economic violence from which they come” (Espiritu et al. 110). Though Richard creates a type of sanctuary in his home, his acts of kindness only serve a small number of the more than one million refugees seeking safety on European shores.²² His actions do nothing to break the cycle of representation that links refugees “perpetually to the past and to their place of origin—and to crisis and suffering” (Espiritu et al. 103). Indeed, as Hyndman and Giles note,

refugees tend to register with governments, media and civil societies that consume global messaging only when they are either at risk of death in an emergency situation, or a potential threat, especially for state security. Once the emergency is over, people at risk have been fed and mortality rates have declined, world attention wanes and the displaced disappear from the world stage. (15)

Once the men are safe in the care of Richard and his friends, their cause disappears from the world stage, making it easier for Germany to turn their back on them. The experiences that Stanišić portrays in his novel make a different contribution to our understanding of refugee stories. While the protagonist very definitely describes how hospitality is offered and accepted differently in Heidelberg and Višegrad, he also represents an immigrant who has arrived in

²² Horakova emphasizes the importance of Richard’s East German socialization and proposes that the novel’s open ending offers an opportunity “to reimagine socialist history and solidarity” (84).

Germany. Both Stanišić and his protagonist embody a sense of belonging in and to Germany.²³ Indeed, his initial “otherness” has been seemingly pushed aside. His 2019 German Book Prize also signals that stories like *Herkunft* are accepted openly as German literature.²⁴ Both of these novels underscore how local and global contexts influence how hospitality is offered, how gratitude is expressed, and what the German host nation is willing to tolerate. They shed concrete light on the work that remains to be done as Europe and other countries in the global North will continue to attract migrants seeking refuge from war, famine, natural disasters, and climate change in the global South.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. Routledge, 2000. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203349700>
- Baker, Gary L. “The Violence of Precarity and the Appeal of Routine in Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Gehen, ging, gegangen*.” *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2018, pp. 504-21. <https://doi.org/10.3138/seminar.54.4.007>
- Bejan, Petru. “About Hospitality and Tolerance in South-Eastern Europe.” *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 9, no. 26, 2010, pp. 36-46.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Anne Dufourmantelle. *Of Hospitality*. Stanford UP, 2000.
- Erpenbeck, Jenny. *Gehen, ging, gegangen*. 4th ed., Penguin Verlag, 2018.
- . *Go, Went, Gone*. Translated by Susan Bernofsky, New Directions Books, 2017.
- Espiritu, Yén Lê, Lan Duong, Ma Vang, Victor Bascara, Khatharya Um, Lila Sharif, and Nigel Hatton. *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies*. U of California P, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520386396>
- Horakova, Anna. “Paradigms of Refuge: Reimagining GDR Legacy and International Solidarity in Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (*Go, Went, Gone*).” *TRANSIT*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2020, pp. 70-89. <https://doi.org/10.5070/T7122047468>
- Hyndman, Jennifer. *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism*. U of Minnesota P, 2000.
- Hyndman, Jennifer, and Wenona Giles. *Refugees in Extended Exile: Living on the Edge*. LRoutledge, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315618029>

²³ See also Leech, who writes about Stanišić’s first novel as an example of a story of Eastern Europe that relates to canonical German events and literature.

²⁴ This is important for Stanišić, who abhors terms like “migrant literature.”

- Landry, Olivia. “‘Wir sind alle Oranienplatz’! Space for Refugees and Social Justice in Berlin.” *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2015, pp. 398-413.
<https://doi.org/10.3138/seminar.2015.51.4.398>
- Leech, Amy. “Expanding the *Nationalgeschichte*: Multidirectional European Memory in Nino Haratischwili and Saša Stanišić.” *Edinburgh German Yearbook*, vol. 15, 2022, pp. 224-41.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781800103221.010>
- Mare, Raffaella. „Ich bin Jugoslawe—ich zerfalle also.“ *Chronotopoi der Angst.Kriegstraumata in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*. Marburg, Tectum Verlag, 2015.
- McNally, Catherine. “Traumatic (Self) Exile: Narrative Marginalization in Recent and Postwar German Fiction.” *German Studies Review*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2023, pp. 247-61. <https://doi.org/10.1353/gsr.2023.0040>
- Min, Susette. “Outlaw Hospitality.” MLA International Symposium. Glasgow. June 3, 2022.
- Oliver, Kelly. *Carceral Humanitarianism: Logics of Refugee Detention*. U of Minneapolis P, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452958507>
- Peters, Linda, Peter-Jan Engelen, and Danny Cassimon. “Explaining Refugee Flows. Understanding the 2015 European Refugee Crisis through a Real Optical Lens.” *PLoS ONE*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2023.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0284390>
- Phipps, Alison. “These Are Our Neighbors: Hospitality, Cultural Justice, and Everyday Bordering.” Plenary Talk. MLA International Symposium. Glasgow. June 2, 2022.
- Rietig, Victoria, and Andreas Müller. “The New Reality: Germany Adapts to Its Role as a Major Migrant Magnet.” *Migration Policy Institute*. August 31, 2016. www.migrationpolicy.org/article/new-reality-germany-adapts-its-role-major-migrant-magnet. Accessed March 7, 2024.
- Shafī, Monika. “‘Nobody Loves a Refugee’: The Lessons of Jenny Erpenbeck’s Novel *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen*.” *Gegenwartsliteratur*, vol. 16, 2017, pp. 185-208.
- Stanišić, Saša. *Herkunft*. 9th ed., Munich, Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 2019.
- . *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone*. Translated by Anthea Bell, Grove Press, 2008.
- . *Where You Come From*. Translated by Damion Searls, Tin House, 2021.
- . *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*. 4th ed., München, btb Verlag, 2010.
- Stone, Brangwen. “Trauma, Postmemory, and Empathy: The Migrant Crisis and the German Past in Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Gehen, ging, gegangen* [Go, Went, Gone].” *Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2017.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/h6040088>

UNHCR. *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*.
<https://www.unhcr.org/media/convention-and-protocol-relating-status-refugees>. Accessed December 4, 2024.