Nun aber war der Augenblick gekommen, im Gestöber der Lettern den Geschichten nachzugehen, die sich am Fenster mir entzogen hatten. Die fernen Länder, welche mir in ihnen begegneten, spielten vertraulich wie die Flocken umeinander.
(Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit um 1900*)

Sometime in the European winter of 1915, while the warring powers are preparing for the carnage at Verdun, a German colonial officer plucks a piece of home from the soil of an antipodean island:

I could hardly believe my eyes, but it was no mirage: it was an edelweiss, the tropical sister of our most beloved alpine flower, exactly the same snowy flower, only with more and more finely structured petals. I had to have it, even if I could only gather it from its dangerous perch with the help of a rope, and even if the stiff fingers could hardly grasp it. And I got it, the beautiful flower, which came to be the crowning specimen, the most valuable treasure, of my herbarium, which consisted of a copy of Goethe’s «Faust.» I pressed my mouth and cheeks to this salutation from the home country, which was struggling far away; my throat felt like it would close, and I would almost have let a bright yodeler sound over the depth that was increasingly filling up with masses of fog. Crazy fellows those Germans, that they can get so excited about a flower and put themselves in danger and forget everything around them so as to get a hold of it – this flattering verdict I read clearly in the features of my colored companions; I took it in quietly and moved on. (Detzner, *Vier Jahre unter Kannibalen* 117–18; all Detzner translations mine)

Hermann Detzner is in the highlands of New Guinea when he appropriates this botanical sibling of the arguably most Germanic of all flowers, to stow it away in his volume of the indispensable literary text of German ‘Bildungsbürgertum.’ The sentimentality leaves no doubt regarding the plant’s significance. The edelweiss constitutes a link to his native land. The risk he runs to gain possession of the flower not only elicits admiring native gazes, but also aligns him, if ever so slightly, with his comrades and their struggle in a far more deadly environment. The edelweiss in his hand underscores his claim to belong, to both the country and the army from which events have parted him. The flower does even more: it aligns the land that produced this particular edelweiss with the land commonly associated with the species. The flora of the New Guinean highlands is alpine. Beyond maudlin emotion, Detzner’s yodeler would have emphasized proprietorship and a belief in a natural affinity...
between Germany and the tropical island on the opposite side of the planet. The reason why he did not in fact yodel may be the same that prompted him to write his memoir: the ties between the two countries are less firm than he would like – at the heart of affirmation lies doubt.

Hermann Detzner was born in 1882 into a solidly middle-class family; his father was a successful dentist. Detzner thus received significant amounts of, in Bourdieuean terms, social and cultural capital, together with a predisposition for complementary political structures. His birthplace was Speyer, a mid-sized town dominated by a Romanesque cathedral that the Salian emperors had erected so as to monumentalize their power as they struggled with the Popes for control of the German lands. During the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly during the French occupation, the structure had become a reference point for German nationalism. Detzner attended the ‘Gymnasium,’ where he would have received the humanist education typical of his day, revolving around the classics of antiquity and the German literary canon of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, «no education for the world, [but rather] an education against the world» (Breuer 28; all Breuer translations mine). At school and outside of it, though, he would also have been exposed to the fervent nationalism present in the Kaiserreich, a state that had only come into existence a decade before his birth. He may, for instance, have read Felix Dahn’s bestselling historical novel Ein Kampf um Rom (1876), a celebration of Germanic culture, its warlike spirit and penchant for heroism and sacrifice. Another obvious candidate for young Detzner’s leisure-time reading is Karl May, the master fabulist of his day, whose books made his readers «identify with the heroes, yearn for far away places and long for manly adventure» (Reulecke 98).

In the narrative of his New Guinean adventures, Detzner will allude to having read David Livingstone’s (1813–73) accounts of his African travels (235), but not specify when.

As an adolescent, Detzner would almost certainly also have come in touch with German ‘colonial fantasies,’ texts from high and popular literature that had been circulating since the eighteenth century and which celebrated a specifically German aptitude for colonization. The effect of these narratives was that «[b]y the time national unification was achieved, the myth of Germans as superior colonizers and of Germany’s moral entitlement to its virgin island had become firmly entrenched in the popular imagination by way of positive identificatory figures such as Columbus, Humboldt, and ‘German’ conquistadors – the Welsers, the Great Elector, the Bechers and Nettelbecks of the past» (Zantop 202). After 1871, and especially from the early 1880s onward, once strong societal forces such as the Deutsche Kolonialverein (founded in 1882) began pushing the imperial agenda, production of such texts became an indus-
try. In fact, as Jeff Bowersox has recently shown, boys (and to a lesser degree girls) of Dettzner’s generation grew up in a culture saturated with colonial imagery and narratives. Even many toys had an imperial aspect, and popular culture as well as youth organizations, such as the Pfadfinder, consistently placed German children within (mock-)imperial contexts.2

This realm more than the one suggested by bourgeois educational institutions, with the prospect they held out of a respectable life in the provinces, seems to have attracted Dettzner. Rather than follow his father’s footsteps to university and into a profession, he joined the pioneer corps of the Bavarian army in 1901 and later became a surveyor in the «Kaiserliche Schutztruppe,» the troops responsible for the protectorates of the Reich. Even if one disregards the attraction of adventure, this career choice is not as surprising as it may seem. As John Phillip Short has demonstrated, (upper) middle-class men dominated the colonial movement within the German Reich;3 men similar in background to Dettzner were also often drawn to careers in the overseas possessions because the class structure of the Kaiserreich with its favoritism toward the aristocracy placed them «hors compétition in political fields defined mainly as military and economic» (Steinmetz 68). True, men who made their careers in the colonies generally held (advanced) degrees in relevant fields such as ethnography, allowing them to claim positions of authority that would have been barred to them at home, but a hope for more rapid advancement may also have played into Dettzner’s decision to pursue a colonial career. And so it was that at the outbreak of the war in August 1914, he found himself in Kaiser-Wilhelmsland, a stretch of territory in northeastern New Guinea that had become a German protectorate in 1884.

On 11 September 1914, Australian troops landed in Kaiser-Wilhelmsland. After a few skirmishes, the Australians took over most of the coastal settlements, and on 21 September the German forces, composed almost entirely of irregulars, capitulated. At the time, Dettzner, together with a German subordinate and some seventy-five native soldiers and carriers, was on a surveying expedition in the hinterland (under orders by the civilian authorities, not the military (Pilhofer 19)). The expedition’s task was to check on the work of a 1909 Anglo-German commission that had established the border between the German and British possessions on New Guinea. The Australians communicated a demand for surrender to Dettzner, which he rejected. According to Christian Keysser, a German missionary, Dettzner considered surrender irreconcilable with his honor as an officer. Most of his troops dispersed and returned to their villages; the other German succumbed to malaria and was captured in February 1915 while convalescing at a missionary station. Dettzner, however, remained by and large healthy and spent the duration of the war hiding out
in the interior, most likely in the proximity of Keysser’s missionary station
with its supplies of food, clothing, books, and newspapers. Detzner mentions
Keysser in *Vier Jahre unter Kannibalen* and describes him as a model patriot,
who extols uniquely German accomplishments to his native flock (311–12).
(Detzner could also be critical of German missionaries when he considered
them to have acted cowardly or to have lacked in patriotism, though he accepts
the pledge of neutrality they gave the Australians after the occupation of the
colony; see e.g. 141–42.) Only rarely, if at all, did Detzner venture into the un-
explored jungles and mountain ranges. Following the armistice in November
1918, he surrendered and was interned in Sydney for three months, before be-
ing repatriated in the late spring of 1919.

That same year, Detzner published a fifteen-page account of his experi-
ences, «Kreuz- und Querzüge in Kaiser-Wilhelmsland (Deutsch-Neuguinea)
während des Weltkrieges,» in *Mitteilungen aus den deutschen Schutzgebieten.*
Subsequently, he expanded this article into a book, *Vier Jahre unter Kanni-
balen: Von 1914 bis zum Waffenstillstand unter deutscher Flagge im uner-
forschten Innern von Neuguinea,* which appeared in 1921. Paratextual ele-
ments mark both narratives as reportage, though they contain exaggerations
and untruths, and particularly the book abounds with entirely fictional de-
scriptions of forays into uncharted territory, confrontations with natives, and
images of perseverance in the face of natural obstacles. Most importantly for
Detzner’s (self-)image as a patriot ready for struggle and sacrifice, in *Vier Jahre
unter Kannibalen* he writes in detail of a hide-and-seek game with Australian
pursuers and multiple attempts to break through their lines so as to reach the
neutral Dutch possessions in western New Guinea. His ostensible goal was to
embark from there for Germany, so as to go «to the front where every German
arm was without doubt urgently needed» (145).6

In the early 1920s, Detzner found employment in the «Reichskolonialamt»
and was engaged in corresponding with former colonists over requests for as-
sistance and reparations. An exchange of letters in 1923, housed today in the
manuscript department of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, between Detzner
and Felix von Luschan, a well-known anthropologist and expert on the peo-
ples of New Guinea, shows Detzner making plans for a west to east expedition
across the island. However, it appears he was unable to obtain funding, and
the endeavor came to naught.7 The year 1933, then, brought another rupture
in his life. He did not join the National Socialist Party and was obliged to bow
out of further state employment. During World War II, Detzner was called up
for duty and served in a bureaucratic capacity in the logistical branch of the
military administration, the «Wehrwirtschaftsamt.» Following the war, he and
his family moved from Berlin back to his home region of the upper Rhine val-
ley, and he spent the remainder of his professional life as the director of a small Heidelberg publishing company owned by his wife’s family.

Detzner’s timing as an author was fortuitous, as was his choice of venue. In 1920, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck had published his war memoirs, *Meine Erinnerungen aus Ostafrika*. Lettow-Vorbeck was the only German commander in an overseas possession who had not laid down his arms before the end of the war. Up to the final days, he had conducted a guerilla campaign, mostly in Deutsch-Ostafrika (today Tanzania), against British and Commonwealth troops. His patriotic book received huge acclaim in the young Weimar Republic. The demoralized country needed heroes. (Literary quality cannot have been the reason for success. *Meine Erinnerungen aus Ostafrika* reads like a report to headquarters.) Lettow-Vorbeck’s was amongst the most prominent in a flurry of publications aimed at servicing the public’s demand for war memoirs; there were Admiral Scheer’s *Deutschlands Hochseeflotte im Weltkrieg* (1919), Liman v. Sanders’s *Fünf Jahre Türkei* (1920), and Gerold v. Gleich’s *Vom Balkan nach Bagdad* (1921), to name but a few. (Ernst Jünger’s autobiographical war novels also fit into this category, though Jünger’s writings are more literary in nature.) The latter three books, though not Lettow-Vorbeck’s, appeared in the August Scherl Verlag, founded by the newspaper tycoon of the Wilhelmine epoch (Scherl himself, however, had relinquished control of his empire in 1913 after a bout with mental disease and passed away in 1921).8

There lies a certain logic in the fact that the Scherl Verlag operated in the war’s literary metabolization. Scherl’s publications, particularly the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger* and the more aspiring *Der Tag*, had strongly supported the Kaiserreich’s expansionist agenda and the waging of the war. When *Vier Jahre unter Kannibalen* appeared in the Scherl Verlag’s 1921 program, the book thus found a well-defined market in which the publisher had been active for some time. This contributed to the favorable reception of Detzner’s memoir. *Vier Jahre unter Kannibalen* garnered rave reviews and by the end of its year of publication was in its fourth edition. Though Detzner never claims a similarity between his and Lettow-Vorbeck’s wartime existence, he does, suggestively, reference the East African campaign (333, 335). He too had not surrendered before the armistice, and, in the most complimentary interpretation of his actions, he could be said to have bound «large numbers of enemy soldiers who might have been used in other theaters of war to guard against the chance that he might organize a full-scale native rebellion» (White 95). In fact, Detzner, alone in the jungle, or at best heading up a tiny contingent, hardly troubled the Australians. But be that as it may, like Lettow-Vorbeck, Detzner reaped the postwar rewards. He was fêted, received the Iron Cross (first class), and went on lecture tours; he also received a number of awards from geographical
and ethnographical societies and an honorary doctorate from the University of Cologne for «expeditions that bordered on the miraculous […] and thus for all times erected a monument to selfless German research» (my translation).  

A look at the reviews suggests why *Vier Jahre unter Kannibalen* resonated. «German will and German character, German drive and German colonial spirit shine from Detzner’s book,» the *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung* opined, and the *New-Yorker Staatszeitung*, a German-language publication for expatriates, wrote: «For it requires a strong, proud, self-confident people, in which books such as these can achieve print runs such as these, and not an internally broken victim of an enormous world-wide conspiracy of pale envy.»  

*Vier Jahre unter Kannibalen* articulated deep-seated anxieties over the country’s position in the world after the loss of the war and with it of the colonies, voiced pride in Germany’s cultural and military achievements, and argued against the perceived humiliation of the Versailles Peace Treaty. The text thus provides an opportunity to study how the discourses of German self-conceptualization and colonialism interlink during the early 1920s and to gauge the psyche of a member of the *Frontgeneration* and colonial military establishment in early Weimar. This essay is therefore concerned not with the colonial era per se, but with its political, cultural, and psychological afterlife. Detzner’s writings have received some attention from historians and ethnographers who analyze how far exactly he strayed from the truth. This question, though intriguing, is of secondary importance here. The focus lies on his rhetorical strategies: How and with what goals does he portray a colonized country, its landscape and inhabitants? How does he inscribe himself into Germany’s colonial heritage? How does *Vier Jahre unter Kannibalen* reflect the context of the writing situation? And finally, does the text point ahead to Detzner’s future – could his exposure to foreign peoples during his time in the colonies have influenced his decision to sidestep co-option into a racist regime?  

Ultimately, misfortune resulted from the literary efforts of this accurate surveyor but inaccurate writer. In the late 1920s, missionaries challenged the veracity of *Vier Jahre unter Kannibalen*, and in 1932 Detzner felt compelled to publish a retraction in the *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin*, admitting that he had embellished his wartime actions and invented others wholesale:  

This book is only in part a scientific account. For the most part, it is a novelistic rendering of my stay there that came into being as a result of the special circumstances I experienced at home after my return from the war. Some of the travels I undertook are not treated in the book; on the other hand, it contains passages that do not correspond to the facts […]. The described attempts at breaking through did not occur […]. A copy of the book that contains the necessary deletions and changes in the text and map is deposited in the library of the Gesellschaft für Erdkunde. (308)
Making this statement must have been humiliating; in the closing sentence Detzner declares that he has quit his membership in the Gesellschaft.\textsuperscript{11} The copy of \textit{Vier Jahre unter Kannibalen} he mentions may still exist. One copy in the Staatsbibliothek, to which the Gesellschaft’s holdings were transferred after World War II, carries the stamp of the Gesellschaft. The markings in this book are sparse, consisting mostly of brackets around certain chapters in the table of contents and occasional vertical lines next to individual paragraphs. The passages thus marked are, however, the ones that would incite suspicion, tending as they do to self-aggrandizement or lacking outside corroboration. The above-quoted edelweiss-episode is marked with a short vertical line. (The volume’s fold-out map is missing).\textsuperscript{12}

As an epigraph for \textit{Vier Jahre unter Kannibalen}, Detzner chose three lines from Rainer Maria Rilke’s lyrical narrative \textit{Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke} (1906): «Be proud! I carry the flag,/Be without worry! I carry the flag,/Hold me dear [habt mich lieb]! I carry the flag» (21; my translation). The text tells of a young soldier, ostensibly the author’s ancestor, who participates in an expedition against the Turks in the seventeenth century and ultimately sacrifices himself on the battlefield, carrying the burning flag. With some misreadings the Cornet was assimilable to a nationalist reception and thus counted amongst the favorites of the German war generation. (Detzner does not provide the source of the lines; he could rely on his readers recognizing them.) In that sense, Detzner’s choice of epigraph with its reference points of glory and pathos appears obvious. At the same time, though, there are a few things quite odd about his usage of these lines. For one, their efficacy as an epigraph depends on an elision. In Rilke’s text, the hero writes these words to his mother; the line preceding those Detzner quotes would have made this clear. By cutting strategically, he turns the reader into the addressee, for a curious blend of hubris and desperate cry for appreciation: Detzner appears to be literally asking for love. To make his case for deserving such sentiment, he aligns himself with a figure who gave his life for the cause of Christendom, while he, Detzner, who certainly did carry the flag, arguably experienced less discomfort during the war than he would have if he had spent it in the trenches. Moreover, in Rilke’s text these words never reach the grieving mother: after writing them, the hero secretes them away in his coat, and this coat, the narrative makes a point of emphasizing, falls victim to a final conflagration. Detzner is quoting from a dead letter of sorts: first not sent and then destroyed, existing only in the realm of literature. But, presumably, now the communication is being delivered, to the German postwar audience, just as distraught as the bereaved mother from the Turkish Wars, and by the lost son himself no less, who has miraculously made it home after all.
After this epigraph, *Vier Jahre unter Kannibalen* opens in medias res: «The small white clouds that stretched across the distant horizon took on a darker color and gradually changed to a champagne hue. I had to leave my surveillance post at an altitude of 3,500 meters if I wanted to reach the camp of the expedition that lay forty minutes away» (13). Detzner could have begun differently. Most obviously, he could have referenced the context of his writing situation, Germany in late 1919 or in 1920. But in most of Detzner’s text this present is absent. To gauge the relevance of his narratorial stance, it is instructive to look at the one minor instance of slippage: describing his familiarity with native customs, Detzner recounts that he drafted plans for the Papuans’ improvement, only to conclude that «unfortunately, we for the time being[vorerst] lack the power to realize them» (135). Leaving aside for now the implicit rejection of German impotence, Detzner’s words clearly allude to the political reality after the Versailles Treaty, which resulted in Germany’s loss of her colonies, either to the former adversaries or the League of Nations. (From December 1920 onward, Kaiser-Wilhelmsland was administered by Australia under a League of Nations mandate.) If one brackets the two concluding chapters, which are less narrative than political pamphlet (on which more shortly), these lines constitute the only instance within *Vier Jahre unter Kannibalen* of what narratology terms an external proleptic moment, that is, a reference to a point in time lying beyond the scope of the narrative. There are quite a number of internal prolepses – e.g., Detzner writes that «now they began, the days, weeks, months, years – fortunately, it is not given to the human being to look into the future – of loneliness, deprivation, and exertion» (94) –, but these passages avoid reference to the postwar world. The outer limit of what the main body of the narrative acknowledges is the November 1918 armistice. Here a typical passage from the center of the book:

[O]nly this much was clear from them [Detzner has gotten hold of some copies of an Australian magazine] […], namely that Germany and her allies had won victory over victory, which however had not been able to rob the main enemy England of her own hopes for victory; in every line one could read that Great Britain still clung to her hopes for an imminent economic collapse of the central powers. (140–41)

A single clause pointing out that Britain’s hope eventually came to be justified would be sufficient to establish the distance of a retrospective view that comprises knowledge acquired after the events related. But the text avoids this act of distancing. The narrator Detzner, unlike the author Detzner, does not know the postwar world; the narrative is focalized through the war-period Detzner (see Genette 189ff.).

What does the text accomplish via this restriction of the narrator’s field of vision? For one, a higher degree of immediacy and momentum. Detzner’s
memoir adopts the narratorial strategy of classic nineteenth-century realist novels in which «a narrator [...] must appear more or less to discover the story at the same time that he tells it» (Genette 67), making it easy to spring surprises on the reader. This notion should not be disregarded. Detzner was interested in literature, and it stands to reason that he reflected upon issues of craftsmanship so as to create a more appealing narrative, or he chose the most advantageous narratorial voice by instinct. But this explanation only goes so far, for while there may be unexpected events in Detzner’s narrative, the ultimate outcome of the struggle in which Germany is winning «victory over victory» was known to his readers. There is, however, also a psychological pay-off: neither they nor the narrator need confront the fact that early 1920s Germany has been radically severed from its Wilhelmine past of less than a decade before, that, as Thomas Mann noted in his diary on 15 April 1919, «nothing is more certain than that the old social and economic order is over and done with» (47). In Detzner’s book the war at least appears neither over nor done with; rather it is preserved as if in amber. In 1932, Detzner’s justification for playing fast and loose with the truth were the «special circumstances» he faced after returning to Germany in 1919. These, he claims, drove him to falsify his narrative. Perhaps this explanation should be taken with a measure of goodwill. The shock occasioned by the confrontation with a changed world prompted disavowal. In 1932, Detzner is apologizing for aggrandizing his own role in the war, but his lies are surface phenomena. They appear linked to the more fundamental artifice of writing from a contrived temporal perspective, and if at all Detzner seems to have been only dimly aware of the implications of this sleight of hand: mentally he has not yet arrived in the postwar world.

On the final twenty pages, Vier Jahre unter Kannibalen, in synch with Detzner’s literary persona, enters this postwar world. «I was forced to lend credence to the news of the enemy’s final victory!» (322), he realizes after emerging from the jungle and giving himself up to the Australian authorities. Hindsight begins to materialize, if only hesitantly: «[T]he defection [Übertritt] of the emperor to neutral ground, the onset of the revolution in Germany, the retreat to the Rhine, these reports I had, at that time, still relegated to the realm of fables» (322; emphasis added). There is a reference to his lecturing for the cause of colonialism in early Weimar (333): the new world, brought into being by the emperor’s defection and the retreat of German armies is not accepted. Detzner’s book closes with a call to defy the postwar situation:

> Are you aware, German people – yes, you must be – that you need to regain the colonies stolen from you, if only for material reasons? [The colonies] where the raw materials grow that are necessary for reconstruction […]. Do you want to cut off
yourself the breath of life [...]? Do you want to watch quietly how the mandataries of a non-existent League of Nations gradually turn into the owners of the parts of the colonies that have been entrusted to their proxy-administration? (334)

The narrative proper has ended; now Detzner is, by implication, placing his story of personal survival within the context of national survival. The past that was related without reference to the future is contrasted with a present that heralds a departure from the historical trajectory, one aspect thereof being a future without colonies. Detzner’s holdout in the New Guinean wilderness underwrites the legitimacy of Germany’s claim to her colonies and of a return to the prewar order. The country’s ability to recover appears dependent on reconstructing, at least in territorial terms, the world of the Wilhelmine epoch. The tropes he mobilizes are reminiscent of the prewar drumbeat for empire that Short has analyzed. Whether Detzner is blinded by his own idiosyncratic relationship to colonialism or whether he is knowingly distorting the facts is hard to tell. Germany’s colonies were never a significant economic factor; they «produced very little of what German industry required,» the bulk of «tropical commodities imported before 1914 flowed freely from Central and South America» (Short 38), and the colonies’ raw materials were irrelevant for reconstruction, in particular as Germany had sustained little damage in terms of infrastructure.

The text has been moving toward this overt formulation of a political agenda for over three-hundred pages, yet because the narrator lacked hindsight he was unable to put into words any demands predicated on knowledge of postwar reality. But the narrative proper does anticipate this closing move of an argument for Germany’s continued existence as a colonial power. Detzner’s edelweiss-episode provides a case in point: in the realm of biology Germany and New Guinea are siblings. The linkage of the countries in the political realm rests on natural foundations. The edelweiss constitutes no isolated occurrence: Detzner enjoys «fantastic hiking in the resin-filled forest air» (Vier Jahre 108) of the New Guinean highlands as if he were roaming the Black Forest, and he even sights a «butterfly sporting the German colors» (289). By the latter instance of selective perception, he admits, his mind may be showing signs of strain after more than three years outside of Western civilization, but the pattern of constructing a kinsman-like similarity between Germany and New Guinea is unmistakable.

And things do not end in the realm of nature. The native inhabitants complement their surroundings in its display of German attributes: the Papuans take naturally to patriotic German songs (142), and the «whole interior of New Guinea seems predestined for Germandom. The three main colors that the Papuans know to produce and with which they beautify their dark skin for
festivities or battle or when engaging in courtship are the colors of the German
flag» (189). Detzner is not the first to suggest an affinity of the Papuans for
the German national colors – the empire’s, of course. Otto Finsch, the doyen
of German explorers in New Guinea, describes the following scene in 1884:
«Great joy was elicited by the hissing of the flag itself whose colors (black <sed>,
white <ruo>, red <siar>) appear to please the natives particularly because they
are those that they know» (110; my translation). Finsch, however, appears
mostly bemused at a coincidence and does not draw conclusions regarding his-
torical destiny, which makes his description credible enough, though he cer-
tainly did favor German colonial expansion. By contrast, Detzner’s affective
investment in the essentialist nature of his construction is worth emphasizing:
in his view, the Papuans’ cosmetic practices precede their exposure to Ger-
man culture; they have not acquired a liking for the German colors through
acquaintance with them, but have always had this predilection. Hence, Ger-
many’s natural right to the island. Detzner was probably not fabulating en-
tirely regarding the issue of the colors, though there is also another possibility
he does not take into account. By the time of his sojourn, German colonial
rule was three decades old. It therefore appears not unlikely that the usage of
the German colors by the Papuans – even by tribes of the interior who had no
direct exposure to the colonizers – now also bespeaks deliberate appropria-
tion, an attempt to claim the symbols of colonial power. In any case, Detzner’s
almost comical straining after points of resemblance between Papuan and Ger-
man nature and culture is rhetorically significant. These points form the ba-
sis of conceptual elaboration. «Predestined» implies teleology: the only logical
future for the Papuans, the only future that would constitute an evolution of
existent predispositions, is a German one.

Some chapters before Detzner has already formulated the equation’s other
half, namely that the past of German culture is the one of New Guinea. Writing
of the Papuans’ rich oral tradition, Detzner states: «In this manner may have
come into being our old folk songs, whose poets and first singers have been
forgotten, whose sentiments and inspirations live on to this day» (143). On the
foundations of related realms of nature there exists a historical imperative for
the conjoined existence of the peoples of Germany and New Guinea. This tie
spans the millennia and bookends the development of civilization. Vestigial in-
dicators point toward a propensity of Papuan cultures for a German elabora-
tion, and German culture finds in Papuan cultures constitutive elements – and
what could be more German than a folk song? – of an Ur-German culture.
To borrow a term Homi Bhabha has theorized in a very different postcolo-
nial context, Detzner engages in a strategy of «mimicry» that shows «the desire
for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost
the same, but not quite» (Bhabha 122). The goal of colonialist discourse is the construction of a language-based «apparatus of power» (100) that enables the «discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchization» (96). In Detzner’s vision, the Papuan cultures mime, in a mode of anticipation, the German one, which they precede on the anthropological line of development. This miming, paradoxically, negates agency on the part of the colonized: the Papuans, in his view, are not imitating, engaging, or playing with the visual codes of German culture; they are awaiting it. This is why – though not yet reformed, at least not to the desirable degree – they are certainly reformable. The hierarchy is narrowly defined; it is not between Papuan cultures and Western culture, but between Papuan cultures and German culture. Unbeknownst to themselves, the inhabitants of the colony, Detzner implies, are striving toward this acme of achievement. Their natural mentors and rulers on this march through centuries of development are those who have taken the path before.

On the final pages, the Papuans feature as a putative audience, transparent to the colonial gaze: «And now, no, for years already, you have understood who is the better master for you, that it is the German who may be more strict but whose heart beats for you, who has not only come to your tropical land to take, but also to give» (333). This display of (psychic) communion is dishonest. Detzner cannot have believed that his words would reach the illiterate Papuans; he is writing for his Weimar readership. By submitting to their benevolent German masters – far less forbearing in fact than Detzner would have his readers believe, as will be shown below – the natives signal that they have «understood» what he now wants this audience to understand: that the new republic must make every effort to gather the Papuans back into the national fold. The trope of German superior qualifications in colonial matters, of the Germans’ «calling to being a colonial people» (334), suggests destiny, but also duty: Germans possess both the pedagogical toughness and moral fiber necessary for colonial ventures, and they cannot shirk their responsibility. The boosters of German colonialism cherished this notion, in particular as a strategy of distinguishing oneself from the great rival: the German empire «is staged differently than the empire of the English and organized around tropes of empathy with the colonized» (Berman 10).

But Detzner’s theatrics of empathy in the context of the vanished empire are in fact so pronounced that they undermine the construction of a racial Other «as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.» Unlike conventional imperial condescension toward «children of nature» and also unlike Bhabha’s view of colonial power, Detzner’s conception of the relation allows for a blurring of self and Other. In a scene of heavy-handed sentimentality, he goes so far as to ventriloquize the voice of a young girl and have her describe
herself and her people as «dark-skinned Germans» (315) – and the narrator remains silent in approval. Not even a decade and a half after Detzner’s publication, official German policy will regard such a statement as a contradiction in terms, but even for the early 1920s and their lack of ideological certainties this is an astonishingly flexible construction of national identity. Detzner severs the concepts of race and nationality to support his argument for a German colonial empire. He defines German identity culturally and in such a broad manner that to his postwar German readers heretofore stable borders may appear porous – «almost the same, but not quite» is shading into «in principle the same, but not yet identical.» Undoubtedly, this rhetoric is tactical, designed to bolster his political vision, but it is hard to believe that he was being wholly insincere. Hermann Hiery has remarked that Detzner must have developed a rapport with the native population, since the Papuans – despite the reward they could have expected – did not betray him to the Australians (Die Deutsche Südsee 816; The Neglected War 25). This interpretation seems a little facile. The German colonial administration had often acted brutally toward the Papuans from the earliest days of Kaiser-Wilhelmsland onward. A 1904 uprising that already faltered in its beginning stages resulted in the execution of ten Papuans; as recently as 1912, an unsuccessful uprising had led to the banning of rebels and their families (Krug 207–30). For obvious reasons, Detzner does not mention these events, though he must have been aware of them. Probably the Papuans associated Detzner less with the colonial administration than with the missionaries on whose largesse he depended and thus tolerated his four-year sojourn. Detzner’s sympathy toward the Papuans is paternalistic and late-Rousseauian. Whether it was reciprocated – if it was reciprocated at all – because of a native allegiance to Germany seems more than doubtful.

Detzner’s depiction of Papuans and Germans as an instance of Goethian cultural «elective affinity» may appear to run into problems when he addresses Papuan practices that cannot so easily be wrapped in the German flag, most notably cannibalism. Repeatedly, he describes this as a staple feature of tribal warfare, and the question arises whether, by the same logic that governs folk songs, cannibalism, then, must also have featured in ancient Germany. This question Detzner elides, but the trope of cannibalism can in fact be integrated quite easily into German self-conceptualizations as educators and promulgators of a more refined culture. As Gananath Obeyesekere, amongst others, has shown, European projections of cannibalistic practices onto native peoples can be traced back to the earliest days of Spanish imperialism. These notions, part and parcel of «savagism» (though ritualistic anthropophagy may have existed), were self-serving, since they could be used to reinforce perceptions of native populations as subhuman and justify expulsion and genocide (Obeyeskere
1–24). But they could also be mobilized for purposes of self-perceived benevolent paternalism on the part of the colonizer. Hence, Detzner’s harping on his role as an emissary from the cultural future. His presence and that of the German missionaries not only improves the Pauans’ lives, it improves the Pauans, most notably by curbing their tendency toward violence and cruelty (e.g. Vier Jahre 129); one more reason why a German presence on New Guinea is indispensable. The term «cannibal» in the book’s title also added a touch of dime-novel sensationalism that was likely to boost sales. The term fulfilled expectations on the part of the readership; cannibalism was de rigueur in a text on New Guinea, so much so that the theme even figured in learned works on the challenges of missionary endeavors.

Regarding the construction of the two populations, German and Pauan, the degree of the text’s self-awareness is at times hard to gauge. In some instances the question whether there is any self-awareness at all can only be approached by way of circumstantial evidence. In the realms of botany and zoology the alignment of the two countries is carried out with so much rhetorical effort that only self-awareness can account for the accrual of hyperbolic imagery. The same holds true for the emphatic inscription, at different historical moments, of Pauans and Germans into the same anthropological trajectory. Yet how is one to evaluate a statement on tribal warfare such as this one: «Then begins a slaughter, an eating of each other, since the man believes that the good characteristics of the enemy pass on to himself through the consumption of his meat […]. According to careful records, almost twenty percent of the natives die every year in these battles» (Vier Jahre 133)? The invitation to compare this body count with that on the Western front seems obvious, but this invitation is never articulated. Is the text trying to guide the reader toward a realization that in percentage terms modern warfare is less lethal than stone-age warfare? Or that thousands of years have not occasioned any substantive developments in Western civilization? (The eating of the dead enemy may have disappeared, but warfare has not.) Or are these solely the reader’s conjectures, the text being unaware of the additional parallelism that has opened up between Germany and New Guinea? An anachronic aside, perhaps ironical, could locate the narrator vis-à-vis the events related and render clear his affective investment. Yet the narrator never tips his hand. This could be attributed to structural limitations: no open comparison is possible because at this point in time Detzner’s horizon is confined to that of an individual marooned on a tropical island, and he does not know the dimensions of the slaughter taking place in northern France. Yet there is also no rhetoric of kinship; the text does not charge this theme with the sort of imagery that putative German-New Guinean similarities receive. A choice not made or a
chance not perceived? On balance, it would appear to be the latter. If so, then on the subject of massively destructive warfare narration occurs, so to speak, unobserved by the narrator. Rhetoric ceases as a consequence of lacking self-awareness, and layers of meaning appear that run counter to each other and to the efforts at shaping the recipient’s response so far displayed. The reason appears obvious and shows how strongly the work is shaped by the historical moment of its creation: Detzner cannot perceive the Papuan wars in stereoscopic perspective because of his disorientation in the world that the Great War has brought into being. He is unable to assimilate this war into his construction of history and thus cannot contain war itself within lay-anthropological musings. His rejection of Weimar and of its elite’s accommodation to Germany’s diminished stature is not fully processed and perhaps all the stronger for being so. Incapable of a detached appreciation of the event that caused the new state to come into existence, he cannot map this event onto his antipodean literary territory.

Like for most members of the front generation, Detzner’s emotional investments lie with the culture and society that has perished. Many will never transfer their investments; some will never even transfer their allegiance. From its earliest days, the fledgling state lacks the support of influential members of the population. In the words of Richard Bessel: «The idea of the front generation [into which Detzner inscribes himself with so much effort] was thus less a way to interpret the actual experience of the First World War than a means by which to retreat from the unpleasant realities of the war and the post-war period, and that is what made it politically so corrosive» (135). During the 1920s, these alienated citizens formed one quarter of the German electorate (Bessel 128). Detzner may eventually have made his peace with Weimar – he did after all begin a career in the civil services – but when the time came to choose between the republic and its nemesis all he was capable of was non-participation in the totalitarian regime. Hardship as he was prepared to endure for the Kaiserreich he was not prepared to endure for Weimar. The comparison is not entirely fair, of course. By 1933, Detzner was in his fifties and a family man. His time for heroics was over. In fact, his behavior on the whole appears commendable enough. Many of his generation played an active role in the rise of Nazism and considered Weimar’s demise not as a reason to quit promising careers but to hope for rapid advancement. It may very well have been the writing of his books that allowed Detzner to achieve what was denied many of his contemporaries: acceptance of loss and accommodation to the present. If that is the case, however, a cruel irony lies therein, for his mourning work certainly did nothing to promote the acceptance of Weimar in his readership.
There may have been other, more personal, reasons why the postwar world strained Detzner’s abilities to adapt. «You wonderfully beautiful island kingdom» (Vier Jahre 328) is how he eulogizes New Guinea on his book’s final pages. The island is a lost paradise, not only because of its beauty, but also, and perhaps primarily, because the difference in power between colonizer and colonized permits imaginative appropriation, allows for the perception of New Guinea as a land of adventures foreclosed in the disenchanted and bureaucratically supervised West. On this island, adolescence could be perpetuated, as the imperialist propaganda of Detzner’s youth appeared validated. In addition, Detzner seems to have held a genuine interest in Papuan cultures and affection for at least some individuals. He, for instance, describes how when one of his hunters fell ill from pneumonia, he, Detzner, nursed him back to health, and there is little reason to believe that this episode was invented (194–96). Also, his exhaustive descriptions of flora and fauna point to a relationship with the land that goes beyond the mercenary or exploitative. They suggest a blend of Rousseauean sensibility and the Enlightenment ethos that Russell A. Berman has identified as constitutive of early eighteenth-century colonial ventures and that still formed marginalized countercurrents once these ventures had turned into imperialist projects. Within the Enlightenment there may well lie the origins of Western discourses of hegemony and domination, but it is not «coincident with them, and its pursuit depends on a categorical disinterestedness, both as a regulative principle and as a source of egalitarianism» (Berman 56) – manifested in, amongst other traits, a recognition of peoples’ shared humanity. Berman also suggests that as a result of Germany’s fragmented political and cultural identity over much of the country’s history «a strand of German culture was quite curious about difference, and this interest produced a particular openness (perhaps less characteristic of the colonialisms of those nations with more rigidly defined identities)» (18). In the most charitable interpretation of Detzner’s writings and of his character, he represents this – unfortunately too weak – strand.

Regardless, however, of Detzner’s «openness,» his book’s rhetoric seeks to advance consciously a political agenda, namely the restitution of Germany’s colonial empire, and to mobilize support for this proposition amongst his German readership. Structures of his narrative – for instance, the narrator position – suggest disorientation and alienation in the new Germany to which he returned; occasional slips in the rhetoric of similarity – for instance, on the theme of warfare – that otherwise aligns Papuans and Germans highlight the degree to which the recent past is for Detzner still raw and unprocessed. In these regards, it stands to reason, he is very much a representative of the Germans, either military or civilian, who were forcibly returned to their home.
country after the loss of the war. That being said, individual character and experiences mattered, in the early 1920s as well as in the future. In all likelihood Detzner’s exposure to the Papuans was at least one factor that prompted him to steer clear of the racist ideology that would usurp his country in the decade following the publication of his books. At times there is sheer exuberance to his writing, as he attempts to convey his wonderment at this ‘strange and curious land.’ Perhaps his wish to do so was one more reason for him to romance his wartime existence.

Notes

1 Toward the end of his narrative, Detzner relates how his khaki uniform has become impenetrable to arrows because of all the patches that have been applied over the years (313). Such a coat is also an attribute of Sam Hawkens, one of the recurring characters in May’s novels set in the Wild West.


4 See Keysser 116–21.

5 Still in 1908, a primer on the German colonies describes large swaths of New Guinea as unexplored: «Es folgten die Entdeckungsfahrten Cooks, Forrests, der Franzosen Bougainville und d’Entrecasteaux; auch diese Fahrten geraten nur zu bald wieder in Vergessenheit, und erst im 19. Jahrhundert wird die systematische Erforschung der Insel, die bis zum heutigen Tag für uns zum größten Teil noch terra incognita ist, wieder aufgenommen» (Heilborn 90). For a detailed description of Detzner’s movements during the war see Biskup. Detzner must have tried the patience of at least some of the missionaries. His refusal to surrender led the Australians to contemplate rounding up all Germans on New Guinea and interning them in Australia. Hence, Detzner appears as an unnamed «foolish fugitive, who could not be found in the jungles of New Guinea like a needle in a haystack, and who was entirely harmless» in Rev. John Flierl’s memoir *Forty-Five Years in New Guinea* (Flierl 109). For another, less critical, view of Detzner’s years in New Guinea as well as for a good overview of the German colonial venture see chapters 8 and 9 in Sinclair.

6 For biographical information on Detzner see Baumann et al. 72–74.

7 On 16 May 1923, Detzner sent a handwritten letter to von Luschan, requesting the anthropologist’s support for Detzner’s proposition of mounting a major scientific expedition (seventeen months in length) with three parties, so as to complete «meinen alten, nur durch den Weltkrieg in seiner Ausführung behinderten Plan der Längsdurchquerung von Neuguinea.» Luschan replied skeptically on 29 May, pointing out practical concerns, such as possible obstruction by Dutch and English authorities, likely difficulties in transporting sufficient amounts of foodstuff, as well as the required year-long preparation for in-depth studies of tribal cultures, ultimately suggesting that one might ascribe «einen überwiegend sportlichen Charakter» to Detzner’s plan. On 23 June, Detzner thereupon beat a retreat in a short, though exceedingly politely worded, typed message, bringing their correspondence to a close.

8 For a somewhat dated, but still readable biography of Scherl see Erman.
9 See Heidelberger Tageblatt, 16 October 1962, as well as the certificate of Detzner’s honorary doctorate, bestowed on him on 31 July 1921.


11 Whether this is true cannot be determined entirely. What is sure, however, is that Detzner stayed in contact with the Gesellschaft after 1932. In the Gesellschaft’s estate, housed today in the manuscript department of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, a letter by the Gesellschaft’s chairman, Admiral a. D. Paul Behncke, from 4 March 1935 can be found. In this letter, Behncke acknowledges the receipt of a letter by Detzner and asks him for a meeting.

12 In 1923, Detzner followed up on a second, less successful book, Im Lande des Dju-Dju: Reiseerlebnisse im östlichen Stromgebiet des Niger. This narrative is set in 1912 and 1913, when he was stationed in Cameroon, with orders to map the border between the German colony and the British colony of Nigeria to the north. Im Lande des Dju-Dju is a mélange of colonial-literature staples: hunting- and other adventures, nature descriptions, and ethnographical as well as historical observations, elements Detzner had already employed in Im Lande der Kannibalen, though in a tighter dramatic structure. Im Lande des Dju-Dju may, incidentally, display a less cavalier attitude toward the truth, but Detzner almost certainly also gilded his African adventures. His knack for (self-)dramatization is particularly evident if one compares his rendering of a scene with another author’s take. Detzner’s British counterpart on the expedition to the Cameroon-Nigeria border was Captain W. V. Nugent, who, already in 1914, published an account of the expedition. Not only is Nugent’s twenty-page account substantially shorter than Detzner’s, its prose is also far drier. This is Nugent, describing a feature of the African landscape: «Near the junction of the rivers Wom and Imba is a brackish pool or salt lick, where all kinds of animals congregate in the early mornings and late evenings. In the mud around the pool are countless tracks. From a clump of trees a few yards away it is possible to watch the herds approach. On a bright moonlight night, this is a sight well worth watching. Close to the water grow some beautiful purple ground orchids» (Nugent 640). This is Detzner on the same landscape feature: «Aus einem von hochstengeligen, purpurroten Bodenorchideen gebildeten Rahmen blitzte ein quecksilberner Wasserspiegel von kaum sechs Metern Durchmesser – ein Salzbecken! Zu ihm wallfahrt die Tierwelt der weiten Umgegend am Spätnachmittag, um sich einen köstlichen Trunk des salzigen Wassers zu erobern. Unzählige Tierpfade laufen strahlenförmig in dem Sumpf zusammen, der das köstliche Geheimnis birgt. Bewegte sich dort von Süden nicht schon eine lange Linie braungrauer Vierfüßer über die von der Abendsonne brennende Savanne? Jetzt stockte die vom Leittier geführte Kolonne. Wir waren gesichtet. Verhoffend äugte das Wild zu dem fremden Eindringling herüber, der hoch zu Roß die Baumgruppe umritt, um eine geeignete Beobachtungsstelle in den dichtbelaubten Kronen auszukundschaften, von der aus er in der nächsten Nacht das seltene Schauspiel zu schauen hoffte» (Detzner, Im Lande des Dju-Dju 292).

13 Detzner’s text is no exception in this regard. Lettow-Vorbeck’s book up to the final pages only obliquely acknowledges the existence of a postwar world.

14 See also Conrad 88ff.

15 For other instances of putative native affinities with the German national colors see Ber-man 189.

16 In his travel narrative of 1904, Richard Freiherr von und zu Eisenstein in a matter-of-fact tone locates the Papuans in the proximity of humanoids predating homo sapiens: «So wie die Kleidung steht auch die Entwicklung dieser Geschöpfe ganz nahe derjenigen der Ur-
menschen, ja sie sind dazu noch Kannibalen, betreiben die sogenannte Kopfjägerei und essen die getöteten Menschen auf» (91). After the war, the situation remains unchanged. Ferdinand Emmerich, relating in 1923 purportedly true adventures that predate even the establishment of the German colonial empire, retells with every sign of belief the tales of his interlocutors in New Pomerania, the island adjacent to New Guinea: «Und gerade hier auf der Halbinsel lebt das grausamste Volk der ganzen Südsee […]. Sie dulden keine Weißen unter sich und kommen uns nur so lange als Freunde entgegen, als sie etwas von uns brauchen. Nachher schießen sie uns mit Wonne einen Pfeil durch den Leib und braten uns, noch bevor wir den letzten Seufzer ausgehaucht haben» (57).

17 See e.g. Mühlhäußer 374: «Sich diese kostbare Substanz [Reis] zu bewahren, ist bei den Völkern des hinterindischen Archipels der beherrschende Gedanke im Leben des einzelnen. Aber noch mehr; es gilt, sie zu vermehren, und das geschieht u.a. dadurch, daß man sie einem anderen raubt. Daraus erklären sich manche Gebräuche, die dem Europäer zunächst sinnlos, meist aber zugleich grausam und abscheulich vorkommen müssen, vor allem der Kannibalismus.»

Works Cited


Martin Rosenstock


