

VOICE AND VOICELESSNESS IN GENOCIDAL FICTION: THE CASE OF JASPAR UTLEY'S *THE LIE OF THE LAND*

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Abstract

The literary depiction and perception of the Nama and Herero in the Nama/Herero genocide has been neglected by literary academics. The lack of representation, the dehumanisation of the Nama and Herero in this genocide, and by extension, the marginalisation of the locals, renders them voiceless. This paper analyses Jaspar Utley's *The Lie of the Land*, a historical travel-writing narrative set in then German South West Africa (GSWA), present day Namibia, during what is now referred to as the first genocide of the 20th century which took place from 1904-1907. Using Marie Louise Pratt's "imperial eyes" (1992), and more specifically, Elizabeth Baer's (2019) "genocidal gaze", this study shows that the narrator provides a typical white male racist view of Africa, and specifically, of the then German colony which invisibilizes the indigenous locals. The paper reveals that the gaze renders the locals voiceless, and the narration silences them just as the genocide brutalises them.

Keywords: Jaspar Utley, Genocidal fiction, Germany, German South-West Africa (Namibia), Herero, Nama

1. Introduction

This paper analyses Jaspar Utley's *The Lie of the Land* (2017) which is largely set in central and southern German South West Africa, currently called Namibia, with a focus on the historical 1904-1907 Nama/Herero genocide. Although this is a work of fiction, the author acknowledges that "the historical background and several of the characters are all too real" (Utley, 2017, p. 191). Attention is paid to how voice and voicelessness in this narrative create a flawed view of the local inhabitants and a misrepresentation of the landscape. The concepts of voice and voicelessness are utilised to test and demonstrate how killing people is literally denying them a voice at one level and another, not allowing them space and opportunity to relate their own story even when they are present is metaphorical silencing. The result, as the analysis shows, is the marginalisation of the perspective and experience of the victims, as well as their animalisation, extraction of natural resources, and the objectification of women as sexual objects. An examination of this male trope of travel writing and the "imperial gaze" (Pratt, 1992) or what is referred to as the "genocidal gaze" (Baer, 2019) reveals the impact of voicelessness to which the local Nama, derogatorily referred to as "Hottentots", Damara, and Herero inhabitants have been rendered.

In *The Genocidal Gaze from German Southwest Africa to the Third Reich* (2019), Elizabeth Baer defines the genocidal gaze as that which "[...] cast the indigenous people in the position of being subhuman, of being expendable, a perspective that in turn permitted the Germans to achieve

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their goal of domination and exclusive possession of the land” (Baer, 2019, p. 17). In the same view, this gaze writes the landscape as “[...] uninhabited, unpossessed, unhistoricised, and unoccupied, even by the travellers themselves. The activity of describing the geography and identifying flora and fauna structures as a social narrative in which the human presence, European or African, is marginal, is a constant and essential aspect of travelling itself (Pratt, 1992, p. 51). In this novel, the landscape, animals, and local inhabitants however foregrounded and always present, are nonetheless awarded little to no relevance, voice, or agency.

The Lie of the Land (2017) is narrated by an undercover British agent, Sam, who is sent to Namibia by Britain to work as a German national during the German colonial invasion. Sam is a linguist, and his supposed mission in the colony is to study local languages, that is Herero, Nama, and Damara (what is today called Khoekhoegowab) for German authorities to infiltrate locals and thwart their combat plans. However, his orders as a British agent are different in that he was to spy on the Germans and their plans for the colony and report back home in a bid to prevent Germany from invading the entire colony, that is German South West Africa (GSWA). Germany and Britain shared GSWA and Britain wanted to prevent German authorities from taking over the Walvis Bay port which belonged to Britain at the time. Upon his arrival in Namibia, Sam passes for a German national and is asked by the military leader to join the German military so that he can assist with translation during the soldiers’ encounters with the locals. Sam narrates his view of the country and its people as he travels from the Walvis Bay port to central Namibia, and later to southern Namibia when he visits Shark Island in Lüderitz.

2. The Nama/Herero Genocide

Between 1904 and 1907, the German government ordered the extermination of indigenous Herero, Nama, and Damara in the fight for land and livestock. Although there are no exact figures on the number of indigenous people killed, Steinmetz (2005, p. 5) in *The First Genocide of the 20th Century and its Postcolonial Afterlives: Germany and the Namibian Ovaherero* reports that “at Shark Island, the mortality rate was over 90 per cent”.

Baer’s (2019) brief history of Britain and Germany’s common invasion and sharing of southern African colonies is a helpful starting point.

The British and the Germans had alternately collaborated in their efforts to suppress indigenous people in southern Africa and sparred with each other over land. In the early years of World War I, the British invaded German South-West Africa and took control of the colony. As the war continued, and an allied victory became more likely, the British began to take steps to prevent Germany from repossessing its colonies after the war concluded (p. 46).

Although Germany and Britain initially worked together in the scramble for southern African countries, Britain did not support Germany’s treatment of

local inhabitants. Sam's observation of the country as a tourist and outsider is what is referred to in this paper as the "genocidal gaze", a term from Baer (2019), through what Pratt (1992) calls "imperial eyes". It is argued that Sam's gaze creates the "other" for humans, landscapes, and animals. Baer notes that

[t]he Germans committed the first genocide of the twentieth century in German Southwest Africa between 1904 and 1907. Though the word had not yet been invented, in the terms subsequently defined by the United Nations Convention on Genocide, genocide was clearly intended as the infamous pronouncement of German General Lothar von Trotha: "I finish off the rebellious tribes with *rivers of blood and rivers of money*. Only from these seeds will something new and permanent be able to grow" (Baer, 2019, p. 13).

The mass murder of the Herero, Nama, and Damara communities in Namibia by the Germans was not initially termed genocide, but rather war. Genocide is war, according to the Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin (1944, as cited in Anyaduba, 2019). However, the main difference between war and genocide is that "genocide signifies total war in which no distinction is made between enemy combatants and civilian non-combatants" (Anyaduba, 2019, p. 427). The word genocide was invented in 1944. The 1904-1907 visceral annihilation of locals by the Germans was officially referred to as the first genocide committed in the 20th century (Mbembe, 2019, p. 125; Baer, 2019, p. 13). Lemkin (1944, as cited in Anyaduba, 2019) coined the definition for genocide.

... responding to Nazi Germany's atrocities in Europe and also to such historical precedents as Ottoman Turkey's attempted extermination of Armenians in the second decade of the twentieth century, coined the word genocide to describe as a crime of the deliberate exterminatory acts and practices directed against human groups. In his 1944 book, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, Lemkin uses "genocide" "to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves." In other words, what makes genocide different from other varieties of mass murder is not its production of tremendous numbers of corpses. It is rather, according to Lemkin, its attempt to destroy a people (Lemkin, 1944 as cited in Anyaduba, 2019, p. 425).

Although the Germans failed in ethnically cleansing Namibia of the Nama, Damara, and Herero, they committed grievous damage in coordinated plans aiming at mass murder, rape, and permanent obliteration and destruction of the landscape, animals, way of life, and the targeted tribes. Although, as stated earlier, no definite numbers have been recorded of the local genocide's casualties, it is estimated that at least more than 80% of Nama, Damara, and Herero lost their lives. They also lost their livestock, especially cattle, which

is a symbol of wealth, particularly for the Herero, land, its natural resources, and wildlife. The Herero were 'slaughtered' inland, as the narrator states, "No one knew the extent of Ovaherero casualties. No one cared. Their bodies were sprawled in their hundreds, lying where they had fallen, to be left for the hyenas and jackals" (Utley, 2017, p. 73). Also, the Nama and Damara with some Herero were abducted and sent to Shark Island (also known as the deathcamp), a German prison formed in Lüderitz after the war. There, they were brutalised, raped, and worked to death.

The Lie of the Land (2017) allows the reader to viscerally see the implementation of the genocide under the German colonisation of Namibia. Sam, the narrator, arrives in GSWA and gets a tour of the "contact zone", which Pratt (1992) uses to refer to the "space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (p. 6). Sam narrates his view of the country and his witnessing of the genocide or what was seen then as the German war with the Nama, Damara, and Herero. It is through his voice that the voicelessness of the local people within this historical travel writing is felt and communicated to represent a lack of agency and the precarious position most locals (civilians, men, women, and children) found themselves in during the genocide.

The argument advanced in this paper is that the appropriation and extraction of Namibian wildlife, domestic animals, minerals, and the annihilation of the landscape are also genocidal because it leaves the locals homeless, bereft of means of survival, emaciated, and the environment barren. The victims are starved without land and the economy is permanently injured.

3. The genocidal gaze of the colonial landscape and animals

From his first briefing whilst in Munich, Germany, Sam gives his view of a country he has never seen or visited, "what are they protecting? The country is mostly desert with no permanent rivers on its northern or southern borders" (Utley, 2017, p. 3). Whilst in Namibia, Sam further describes the landscape as lifeless and uninhabitable. He states, "otherwise there was just burnt grassland, thorn trees and the dry red soil of Africa" (Utley, 2017, p. 51). Sam is typically "[t]he (lettered, male, European) eye that [...] could familiarise ("naturalize") new sites/sights immediately upon contact, by incorporating them into the language of the system" (Pratt, 1992, p. 31). This is even though the Herero tribe is known for its wealth of cattle and prime land, hence Germany's invasion of the land and their forceful removal, which resulted in genocide. However, in this narrative, the land is not acknowledged or described as full of life and able to sustain both people and animals. Sam's view of the land as empty confirms the "typical of European travel writing" (Pratt, 1992, p. 31) in which the white European male characterises African landscapes, and Namibia in particular, as dry, barren, and worthless despite

European invasion and colonisation.

As further evidence of typical European writing, the animals are described as lacking and scarce, especially wild animals “we had caught sight of a couple of ostriches and once a zebra, but little else. The marines were disappointed, they had expected at least lions and elephants” (Utley, 2017, p. 29). This again is resonant with a typical European white male travel writing trope. Similarly, Africa and its people are perceived and expected to live amongst the wildlife, cohabit with lions, and drink from the same wells as elephants, and the wildlife is expected to be visible and present within human environments. This is racist and stereotypical as the narrator opines that “humans must have lived like this in Africa for thousands of years, competing for food and water with the predators...” (Utley, 2017, p. 121). Ironically, the animals absent in the wild adorn German-owned homes as decorations “more animal heads on the walls and several African curios [...] zebra skin that served as a carpet [...] stool made out of elephant’s foot [...] a pair of tusks formed a gong stand” (Utley, 2017, p. 4), “his chair was decorated by the skin of a cheetah” (Utley, 2017, p. 33). This speaks to the hypocrisy of the colonial system of extracting and usurping African resources, leaving Africa bare and claiming that Africa had no animals, wildlife, and fertile land to begin with.

The colonial system also extracted mineral resources and precious stones from Namibia. Sam acknowledges the wealth of this country in his discovery of diamonds near Lüderitz. “It’s a diamond and it’s yours if you help me. I know where there are many many more just lying around. This country is rich with them, only the Germans don’t know it. At least not yet” (Utley, 2017, p. 151). Typical of the colonisers, Sam arrogates the diamonds as if they were his property, trading them within Namibia where necessary and taking them back to Germany for self-enrichment “I sold some of the diamonds to my cousin in Amsterdam and with the proceeds I was able to make life for Mama and Papa more comfortable” (Utley, 2017, p. 188). The African continent has been wealthy in hardworking people, minerals, land, and wildlife, hence, the “scramble for African resources, land and labour” (Deckard, 2018, p. 4). Studies show that in 1907, the Germans discovered diamonds in Kolmasnkop, a town near Lüderitz which belonged strictly to the Germans until 1916 before South Africa colonised Namibia.² These diamonds were thereafter depleted, and the town today has been rendered a ghost town. Historically, and as shown in this novel although rarely acknowledged, the colonial system has enriched the colonisers, leaving the colonies without the means to sustain themselves and their environments.

4. Voice and voicelessness in genocidal literature

To begin with, voicelessness is defined as “indicative of a lack of dignity

² See Nicola Alexander’s (2010) mini dissertation titled “Kolmanskop: An industrial heritage resource or only a tourist attraction? The assessment of value with regard to Kolmanskop ghost town and the industrial landscape of the Sperrgebiet National Park, Namibia” in which the history of Kolmanskop is given.

borne out of the fact that the voiceless one has no means of expressing even his or her own dignity. It implies the failure or the lack of interest of those around such an individual to listen or at least pay attention to what he or she has to say” (Ayanga, 2016, p. 2). In this novel, the locals, especially the Nama, were often described in racist terms as “fool[s]...lazy, stupid idiot...useless” (Utley, 2017, p. 33), and the country was deemed to be beyond civilisation. Nama, Herero, and Damara were enslaved and overworked, and have contributed immensely to the development of the country to the German residents’ comforts. The locals under the order and supervision of the Germans constructed roads, railways, and built houses, tended to gardens, farming and all sorts of manual labour required of them without any pay or any form of recognition “we need them to build this country. The Herero are a physically strong race, and we shall keep them to build roads and railways and help farmers with their cattle” (Utley, 2017, p. 113). Rather, they were humiliated, raped, sexualised, and often abused, and even left to die in harsh weather conditions without any remorse.

Bolker (1979, as cited in Ayanga, 2016) gives one of the most incisive descriptions of voicelessness stating that it is the inability to write or speak our central concerns. Or to write but as a disembodied persona who bears no relation to our inherent voices. According to Bolker (1979, as cited in Ayanga 2016), people say only what they think they are expected to say and end up telling lies or half-truths. Voicelessness is also feeling powerless to speak and sensing that there is no one out there who speaks for us. There is an epidemic of voicelessness among women, according to Bolker (1979, as cited in Ayanga, 2016).

Further, “[v]oicelessness is like an insidious disease” (Ayanga, 2016, p. 2). Ayanga quotes Audre Lorde who points out that the one who remains silent is never a whole person. Thus women [and people] who have no voice are not fully human, for to be human is to express our feelings and our central concerns. She further emphasises that what is important to human beings ‘must be spoken, made verbal, and shared even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. “This is because the one who is silent is invisible” (Ayanga, 2016, p. 3).

In *The Lie of the Land*, the people have been rendered inhuman. They were usually exterminated upon sight in a way that is akin how the German combatants treated animals they disregarded or considered worthless in Namibia. There is a direct correlation between the treatment of local humans and the animals, both wild and domestic as shown in this novel. Humans and animals are both “hunted”, and burned at times, and their remains are kept as hunting trophies. For instance, the narrator observes that human skulls were used as “garden ornaments” (Utley, 2017, p. 34) just like animal remains which were used as home decorations. Later, the human skulls were studied by scientists to “[...] examine them for physical signs of degeneracy in these savages [...] to prove they are animals and inferior to us Germans” (Utley, 2017, p. 34). The animalisation of the Herero, Nama, and Damara

tribes is symbolised in the way the Germans treated them and by using scientific research to prove that the tribes are in fact not human, but animals. This justified Germany's effacement of the locals because they were not only seen as an enemy but rather as a species that needed to be exterminated.

According to Silvester and Gewald (2003, as cited in Baer, 2019, p. 12), the German colonial system invented a custom of flogging which "came to be called *Väterliche Züchtigung*, or "paternal chastisement", a shocking euphemism when one learns about the damage inflicted on the victims. This was a system of torture used as an interrogation measure. "Flogging... came to our people more regularly than their meals," stated a Herero headman, Silvester and Gewald, (2003, as cited in Baer, 2019, p. 12). In the novel, Sam describes one flogging of many.

Flog them, loosen their tongues... Hartman eagerly barked an order and some of the soldiers grabbed the prisoners and pushed them to the ground. An old man, who was already bent double with age, was hauled to the tree and tied to it. The skin on his wrists was bleeding before it even began. The women began wailing and despite commands to stop, they continued throughout the flogging like Hell's version of a celestial choir. He grinned and raised a short whip. It was a sjambok, made out of rhinoceros hide and capable of stripping the skin from a man's back in two or three strokes (Utley, 2017, p. 45).

Shockingly, the victims were often the fragile, old, and sick men, women, and children "they are starved and not fit for work. Hang them" as the combatants and the able-bodied would have left to seek refuge at places of safety and to recoup and innovate strategies of defending themselves from the enemy (Utley, 2017, p. 46). The hangings, floggings, and all other gruesome images of the bodies of the colonised were often captured, and photos were sent home as postcards to the fatherland where they became a lucrative business. The Germans took pleasure in exterminating the race and often invented ways to make their deaths longer and photogenic, such as decapitation and scraping of skulls, flogging, whipping, and the constant sexualisation and fetishism of the African body, both male and female.

In its mission to erase and wipe out all Herero people, the German government tricked them into agreeing to a peace treaty, to which the Herero conceded. In this ceasefire, Herero people amounting to "50 000 [...in which only] four to six thousand [were] armed warriors [...and] thousands of cattle" (Utley, 2017, p. 67) were ambushed, gunned down by the Germans, massacred and the rest driven into the desert to die of hunger and thirst. "All around us, we could see the detritus of battle. Cartridge cases, abandoned spears, dead horses and cattle and the corpses; hundreds of Ovaherero corpses, many of them shredded by machine gunfire. The air smelt of gun powder, dust, and blood" (Utley, 2017, p. 72). In the aftermath of this wipeout, and because General Von Trotha realised that he did not succeed in killing ALL the

Herero people, he made a declaration in which “a nation had been sentenced to death” (Utley, 2017, p. 76). As Sam narrates,

Not all Herero were killed or driven into the desert at Waterberg. Many, maybe 20 000, were still in their ancestral lands, in small groups, mostly. The General knew this and ordered us to find them and deal with them. We were to sweep the area moving towards the ancestral lands as we did so. We are called the Cleansing Patrols (p. 76).

Another site of the visceral and horrifying genocidal treatment of the Namibian people took place at Shark Island, a death camp on the coast of Namibia, in a town currently known as Lüderitz. “Here the prisoners were exposed to the raw weather and provided no shelter, were locked behind barbed wire, lacked hospital and toilet facilities, and were systematically and intentionally underfed” (Baer, 2019, p. 22). This camp was built for and mostly occupied by what was referred to as the Hottentot and a few Herero and “all the prisoners were women, many of them almost naked, all of them reduced to animals in a slaughter’s yard” (Utley, 2017, p. 136). Unlike the Herero who were considered a strong race, and some were kept alive to work in building the country, the Hottentots were considered a weaker race whom the Germans had no use for. As stated, “there will be no more Hottentots once this war was over” (Utley, 2017, p. 113). The Herero and Hottentots who were sent to Shark Island were mostly the weak, the ones deemed useless, hence the prisoners being mostly women. They were sent to the Island mostly to die and for their skulls to be decapitated and shipped off to Germany for pseudo-scientific study.

In a description of the Shark Island prisoners, the Hottentots and the Herero were sent here to die.

They were a sorry lot. None of them looked fit or healthy and several of them were women. All of them were wearing only filthy rags though they were shivering in the morning chill ...I could see fresh weeping scars on their bony backs where a whip or sjambok had been employed. It was then I realised they were not prisoners of war. They were slaves...there is orders not to bother too much with keeping any of this lot alive especially if they can’t work (Utley, 2017, p. 133).

Their duties included among others scraping and cleaning the skulls of those who are more likely their dead relatives. This according to Baer is “[a]n early manifestation of eugenics [...] the decapitation of Herero and Nama in Southwest Africa after the genocides [...]” (Baer, 2019, p. 23). The women worked under hostile conditions and were often whipped, shot, and raped by the soldiers. There was no medical assistance to any prisoners. They died in masses and often, from hunger, diseases like malaria and negligence “several of them were blown to pieces when a charge went off before it was ready. It certainly saved us the job of burying them” (Utley, 2017, p. 137). In cases of

other causes of death that did not destroy the corpse, the corpses are “dumped on the beach until the tide dug them up and carried them away for the shark and hyenas and the amusement of the guards” (Utlely, 2017, p. 140).

There are no definite figures known today of the number of casualties at Shark Island, or the number of Herero and Hottentots whose skulls were sent to Berlin to be studied and of some prisoners who were exported to other German colonies. However, there were few survivors, for instance, in this testimony by a survivor “After the war, I was sent to Shark Island by the Germans. We remained on the island for one year. According to Silvester and Gewalt, (2003, as cited in Baer, 2019, p. 46). 3,500 Hottentots and Kaffirs were sent to the island and 193 returned. 3,307 died on the island”. This clearly shows that the majority did not make it out of Shark Island, just like inland where the Herero were cleansed off the land after losing the war. The results were that “African voices [in German Southwest Africa] were forgotten and their witness statements actively erased” (Baer, 2019, p. 28).

However, several Namibians are rewriting their history and telling their stories and the experiences of their ancestors during this barbaric attack on their ethnicity and race. One such Namibian novel on genocide by a Herero is Rukee Tjingaete’s *The Weeping Graves of our Ancestors* (2017). The author wrote this novel “after he had observed that their story was in the hands of others. They had the story as Hereros but did not own it as someone had to tell it on their behalf” (Kandemiri, 2021, p. 94). Although Tjingaete did not experience the genocide first-hand, it is through stories of the experiences of his ancestors and fellow countrymen that he could narrate the genocide from a local’s perspective who has for centuries been invisible since the local tribes were the most vulnerable and precariously placed. This speaks to the voice and agency of the victims who have long been silenced and rendered voiceless. Even in *The Lie of the Land*, there are moments of agency and insight, a testament to the resilience of the victims of this genocide. According to Utlely (2017), the Herero were known to poison water sources to attack the enemy, whilst the Nama and Damara used their knowledge in tracking ability to sense water and plant knowledge for survival in the wilderness. These skills are the reasons why there are still Herero, Nama, and Damara ethnicities in Namibia. These people managed to survive, and their stories are told today, despite the grave violence, inequality of the battlefield, and abuse and massacre by German authorities.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to analyse Utlely’s (2017) genocidal fiction *The Lie of the Land* which narrates the experience of a traveller, Sam, and his “genocidal gaze” of the country and its inhabitants which led to the silencing of the locals. The analysis demonstrates that in the genocidal gaze, nature is deemed lifeless, the land barren, the animals, especially wildlife, scarce, and the people lazy and foolish. Although this is a fictional story, it is based on the real 1904-1907 genocide committed by Germany against the Nama,

Damara, and Herero tribes in Namibia. This paper particularly investigated the characters who had a voice and those who were disregarded and rendered voiceless. In all histories told, there are always versions of that history that may be suppressed, such is the silenced history of the Nama, Damara, and Herero in this historical novel.

The style of writing is that of a typical European white male tourist, with a stereotypically racist view of Africa and its flora and fauna. Such a view results in the animalisation of the other and silencing of the locals' voice as well as the coloniser's gain from the colonies by appropriating labour, wildlife, and minerals, which has long-term detrimental effects still felt in Namibia today. For instance, presently, "some 44% of the best agricultural land in Namibia is in the hands of descendants of colonisers who expropriated the land by force" (Steinmetz, 2005, p. 5). The barbaric genocide led to the denigration of humanity and the extermination of most of the Nama, Damara, and Herero in casualties and figures that are unknown in history today.

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