



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literary Theory and Criticism***Positioning Kenya in the German Schlager: A case of Roger Whittaker's *Himmel und Heimat***Gideon Kiptoo 

University of Arizona, USA

Email: gideonkiptoo1@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

Roger Whittaker offers in his music a chance for transnational dialogue, aesthetically addressing the polarized tensions surrounding borders, identity, foreignness, and otherness. His fusion of German-style Schlager with narrative elements from pre- and post-independent Kenya provides a unique perspective on the intersection of Kenyan, and German discourses, and beyond. Whittaker's works serve as an exemplary conduit for exploring the minimized musical landscape of Schlager and its reception, offering a rich field for unpacking cultural hybridity in music. This paper attempts to position Roger Whittaker's *Himmel und Heimat* as integral to understanding multiculturalism within global north and global south discourses and how it was heavily influenced by his experiences while in Kenya. It also unveils the richness of culture and history, embedded in the German Folk music which has received little attention, especially as it relates to multiculturalism. This approach reveals how Kenya and Africa by extension was and still is (being) perceived within the German imagination and beyond.

KEYWORDS: borders and migration, German folk music, Kenya in Germanic discourses, multiculturalism

Hybrid Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies

Volume 6, Issue 2, 2025

ISSN: 2707-2169 (Print)

ISSN: 2707-2150 (Online)

ARTICLE HISTORY

Submitted: 28 July 2024

Accepted: 30 January 2025

Published: 18 April 2025

HOW TO CITE

Kiptoo, G. (2025). Positioning Kenya in the German Schlager: A case of Roger Whittaker's *Himmel und Heimat*. Hybrid Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.58256/3tacn302>



Published in Nairobi, Kenya by Royallite Global, an imprint of Royallite Publishers Limited

© 2025 The Author(s). This is an open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 “I was born to sing the songs for you”

Roger Henry Brough arguably holds a special position in exploring ‘Kenyaness’. His hit song *My Land is Kenya* released in 1989 under the album *Die Stimme für Millionen*¹ otherwise translated as the voice of millions caught the public eye for its rich patriotism and melodic narration of the Kenyan beauty and the spirit of nationalism. During the events surrounding the post-election violence of 2007 as well as the promulgation of the 2010 constitution, this song was on repeat mode in most of the local television and radio stations admonishing Kenyans to remain united even as tribal differences attempted to dislocate the population. The song is also a clarion call for global tourism and appeals to the world to turn to Kenya and experience the magical landscapes, wildlife, cuisines, and a rich cultural heritage.

Citizen Television, a major local Kenyan broadcaster reported the various emotional statements echoed by Kenyan leaders eulogizing Roger Whittaker as an icon, who shaped the Image of Kenya and what it meant to share in the Kenyan identity. “As Kenya celebrates 60 years of independence, his hit *My Land is Kenya* remains one of the most beautiful tributes to the beauty of Kenya and appreciation of our cultural heritage,” said Ezekiel Mutua, paying homage to Whittaker’s contribution to Kenyan music and culture.”² Not only was Roger Whittaker received in the Kenyan-German spaces but also stretched out into the English-speaking spaces. His unique style of performance and tackling topics like return and nostalgia made him an international icon from Europe to the United States.

The New York Times reported his death with the following title: “Roger Whittaker, Balladeer with an International Reach, dies at 87 A Briton with a rich baritone, he charmed audiences, mostly in Europe and America, with sentimental songs, like his signature hit, *The Last Farewell*”³. Nuanced in Roger Whittaker’s life are the ideologies surrounding identity and belonging, own and foreign. The intersecting and transcending identities as depicted through his life, work, and times provide a basis for multiculturalism in a contact-polarized space and provide a framework that is relevant at this time when multicultural contact has become a fluid reality.

Exploring the trajectory of Roger Whittaker forms the basis of this paper and will show how he subverted the constructed expectations of his time when multiculturalism was too volatile a concept owing to the British colonization of Kenya at the time. He was born in 1936 in Nairobi, then under the colonial administration of Britain. His parents were of English origin and had settled in Kenya and worked as grocery vendors after his father was advised by the doctor to move to a warmer place to facilitate healing caused by the amputation of his leg after being involved in an accident. It is interesting to note that the relocation to Kenya was not welcomed by his maternal grandparents as noted in his book *So far, so Good: The Autobiography of a Wandering Minstrel* (Whittaker & Whittaker, 1986)

“How dare this young man, a physical wreck, have the effrontery to want to marry their daughter, let alone think of whisking her away to a foreign, uncivilized country, with no prospects and no future except certain danger and deprivation” (p. 8).

This fear of the unknown served unfortunately as a foreshadow as to what occurred to his father after he was found dead in 1989 after a gang robbery. This affected him and since he and his father had not been on good terms he remarked; “It will affect me for the rest of my life, but I believe we should all live without hate if we can.”⁴ He lived to witness the struggle for independence in Kenya and notes in his autobiography that “As with many nations, Kenya suffered a painful birth before emerging as the modern African state it is today (1986: 2).” From an early age, Roger Whittaker was interested in music and learned the guitar at 7. At the Prince of Wales, now Nairobi School, he sang in the choir and later in clubs. After high school, he served in the Kenyan regiment and fought against the *Mau-Mau* movement, a land and freedom liberation movement that fought against the colonialist act of land grabbing. In an interview with Express, he remarks: “Before I did National Service in the Kenya Regiment, I was stupid, selfish and angry – the Army made a man out of me.”⁵ He further went on to South Africa, the University of Cape Town to pursue a degree in Medicine. He later quit the university in South Africa and moved to Britain to pursue Education and it was from there that his musical career was nourished.

Although Kenyan-English, Roger Whittaker also sang in German, a language he did not speak. Berlin Morning Post reported that after his albums found their way into the German charts, he began singing in German and that was exciting for him as long as no one expected him to speak fluently in that language.⁶ What is being presented in the life of Roger Whitaker is one that prompts a discussion on what it entails to be a Kenyan of British origin, a German folk singer, and a human being with a delocalized sense of identity, transversing all the normative lines created to categorize works and beings. Where does ‘Kenyanness’ in him begin? And why is he still inspired to sing about Kenya and its beauty even after the circumstances surrounding the tragic loss of his father left an indelible mark on him? Why does he sing in German, charting the lists in German-speaking countries, yet he remarks that he is not a fluent speaker of the language? Why did he live his retirement years in southern France and not any of his previous stations that had supposedly shaped his identity in the most beautiful and momentous ways he could ever imagine? This subversion of expected norms is well depicted in his life, and this offers glimpses into how the modern being is rendered trans-cultural. As noted by Okoko (2014),

Globalization and the inherent shrinking of geographical borders have rendered modern societies progressively culturally heterogeneous spaces. Increased encounters between people from different cultures have thus become a normal occurrence. Germany is in no way an exception to this socio-cultural phenomenon and has witnessed an emergence of multi-cultural societies, leading to concerted efforts in developing intercultural competence in all spheres of influence. Literature plays a pivotal role in the representation and transfer of culturally determined imaginations and perceptions of the “other”.
(p. iii)

1.2 *Himmel und Heimat: Harmonizing Identity with Nostalgic Reflections*

Roger Whittaker’s oeuvres are emblematic of nostalgia, longing, and Home, and *Himmel und Heimat* which can be understood as Heaven and home as will be explained in this paper, is no exception. By piercing into the listener’s inner thoughts and emotions, a sense of longing is evoked, referencing German romanticism where the protagonists were confronted with strong heavy emotions as well as fantasy. Nature in this epoch also proved to be a quiet solace for those who attempted to escape Weltschmerz. This is witnessed in *Sieben Jahre, Sieben Meere* (1987) which explores the return of a lover who had traveled to faraway lands, *Abschied ist ein scharfes Schwert* (1984) explores the difficulty of separation, *Fernweh* (1985), which encapsulates the feeling of longing just to name a few.

Not only was he a musician but also a filmmaker and his Film *A Musical Safari* (1982) captures the Kenyan aesthetic by diving into nature, music, and culture. Many themes can be explored in his collective works but *Himmel und Heimat* presents an interesting point of discussion namely the question of Identity, belonging, and nostalgia. It takes the form of a dialogue in which we meet two personas; both of whom have a history of transcending borders and must negotiate their different backgrounds and realities.

The question of *Heimat* has emerged to be a contentious topic in recent Germanic discourses and beyond. More attempts seem to be deconstructing the idea of *Heimat* as a place and a more radical shift embracing the fluidity of what it means to belong to a particular space within a specific temporality. As noted above, German society is rendered multicultural through migration and globalization and the once-thought-static idea of *Vaterland* or fatherland now presents a myriad of different identities and expressions all claiming ownership of this idea of a one homogenous German society. This subversion of the normative trend is seen in *Himmel und Heimat* which follows what Blickle (2002) categorizes as follows (1) A spiritualized province: mentally and psychologically perceived as well as (2) a provincial spirituality that is spatially perceived (7).

The idea of *Heimat* does not exist in isolation and with it comes feelings of nostalgia, remorse, and longing. For example, it is still common to have a sense of longing for East Germany then and what it had to offer, commonly referred to as *ostalgie*. Attachments to places and objects and the loss thereof can in an exaggerated fashion evoke senses of longing as Berdahl (1999) notes: “They thus illustrate not only how memory is an interactive, malleable, and highly contested phenomenon, but also the processes through which things become informed with a remembering - and forgetting - capacity (p. 198). Memory and remembrance are often connotated with trauma and this is still undergoing constructions in Germanic discourses for example through

the *Erinnerungskultur* (culture of remembering) as depicted in *100 Tage* by Lukas Bärfuss (2008). Here, the protagonist David Hohl, a ‘survivor’ and thus witness of the Rwandan genocide narrates about the horrific 100 days of genocide.

As the tradition of memory is examined, less concentration is accorded to the musical soundscape let alone Schlager, an important component of German musical heritage, which is slowly losing popularity, especially among the young generation as noted by Mendívil (2008): “Die Adjektive jedoch, die meine Kommilitonen und Freunde in Deutschland für den Schlager bereit hielten, waren allerdings von ganz anderer Natur: “Spießig”, “decadent”, “kitschig”, “mittelmäßig” und “dumm” (p. 15). (“The adjectives used by my fellow students and friends in Germany to describe Schlager were of a completely different nature: “Bourgeois,” “decadent,” “kitschy,” “mediocre,” and “stupid”; my trans. 15). As such remarks surface, it makes sense to explore the rich history and narratives embedded in Schlager as will be explored here and make connections as to how it has shaped our thinking of ideas like colonialism, own and the foreign as well as multiculturalism.

Himmel und Heimat was released in 1991 under the Album *Seine Welt - Seine Musik* (His world his music) Just a year after the reunification of Germany. As Fuhr (2023) suggests, this time was a defining moment for Germany to rethink the concept of the collective identity that was still taking shape, owing to the political atmosphere as witnessed through the Cold War and further back, the blood and soil ideology of *Heimat* and *Lebensraum* (home and “living space”), which was propagated by Hitler (p. 12). He further goes on to explore that racist and xenophobic tendencies tend to shape the approach of *Heimat*, since Germany’s socio-political landscape was changing at the time (as is still) due to migration and according to Okoko (2015), the shrinking of geographical borders.

The title suggests two spatial locations which tend to exemplify ‘a feeling of’. *Himmel* could mean various things if translated. Chief of it is a common heaven, a religious space intended for after-earth life as well as the sky, which is also used with *Himmelszelt*, translated to as the firmament, mostly going back to the creation of the universe. *Heimat* becomes a point of contestation but as argued above, could mean a physical reality as depicted through space, or an imagined temporal spatiality. Without context, the title alludes to Heaven and Earth, well nuanced with the alliteration but in this case, *Erde* would be suited to concretely refer to the physical earthly space. Therefore, *Heimat* in my argument here remains open, allowing for varied interpretations.

2.0 A Nostalgic Opening

The opening of the song reveals a tune that evokes melancholy through its melodious, nostalgic tones, which are blended with slow, elongated beats. It conveys a sense of calmness but also remorse over what has been lost. This opening tune is reminiscent of the soundtracks stereotypically fashioned to accompany wildlife films and landscapes in Africa or those used when exploring an African safari, featuring beautiful sunsets, “untouched” landscapes, and a variety of wild animals in the park. This carefully composed introduction sets the underlying tone for what is to come by establishing a mood of grave calmness, allowing the listener to reflect on the rich musicality and flute-like synthesis. The slow beat harmonizes perfectly with the instruments, enhancing the tone of calmness. The opening invites the listener to step into the space of an “African imaginary,” prompting discourse on how Africa is often generalized and positioned within German narratives.

2.1 Separating ‘Himmel and Heimat’

Then comes the rich Baritone Roger Whittaker’s voice which continues in the fashion of the nostalgic opening tune but this time, there is a calm male voice, and one can make meaning out of the lyrics which have a heavy connection to the general atmosphere and mood depicted through the instrumentals. The first words in the song reveal the apparent act of distancing and alienation and skin and hair color become the starting point of revealing foreignness and distancing from that which is common, usual, and unnoticeable. “Dunkles Haut, Dunkles Haar, er war fremd bei uns” (Whittaker 1991) (“Dark skin, dark hair, he was a foreigner among us”, my transl.) What also emerges in this initial stage is the “othering” thus alluding to Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). With this approach, the West defines the Orient (the foreign) from a Eurocentric point of view.

A binary is then created with the distinction between “Er” (Him) and “Uns” (Us). *Er* becomes a point

of reference to that which presents itself as unfamiliar and distant. The *er* is defined by the *uns*, who share in the Eurocentric milieu thus denying the *er* agency in the discourse. The aftermath of this delineation forms the basis of defining the *er* in *Himmel und Heimat* as explained by Said in *Orientalism* (1978): “How this happens is what this book tries to demonstrate (referring to the “other”). It also tries to show that European culture gained strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (p.11).

As it proceeds, the othering is further explored in the next lines where the persona identifies the sad state of the foreigner, who narrates about his country and himself and the basic reason he fled in search of food. On further inquiry, the foreigner reports having found “Arbeit und Brot”- Work and bread in this new country. Exploring the depths of these first lines reveals what has become of modern Germany, which is now characterized by migration and transculturality. According to Wolfgang Welsch, this hybridization has caused contemporary cultures to be more connected and interwoven (p. 43). Migration and asylum-seeking have become a modern reality where people are seeking refuge in countries other than the supposed Heimat thus allowing for the revisitation of Heimat, not only as a birthplace but also as a place offering refuge as seen in this segment where *Arbeit*- Work, which is required for survival allows one to get *Brot*- Bread, which is metaphorically used to mean life’s sustenance.

As the first stanza ends, the persona explains how difficult (living in this foreign space) can be and evokes a sense of longing for the apparent original home. The use of the verb ‘sehnen’ reveals a feeling of longing or yearning to go back home. The diasporic sense of home is thus lost because Himmel turns grey revealing a sense of not belonging, not fitting in, and all the challenges that one could think about when migrating to new territories.

2.2 Harmonizing Himmel and Heimat

The chorus offers a transition into what feels like a comforting appeal to the now emotionally ‘charged’ situation. It feels as though the first persona in the dialogue is reassuring the ‘foreigner’ that there exists an inextricable connection between *Himmel* and *Heimat*. It is also interesting to note that the chorus introduces more background voices. This collective approach towards singing the most important point of this song demonstrates that trans-cultural dialogues go way beyond just dialogue and that at some point, it becomes a communal affair that requires the input of different players in the society. The othering that results as a consequence of delineation based on skin color or heritage or any other form or shape becomes a harmful substance that tends to threaten a fruitful dialogue resulting in tensions and unguided outbursts that lack orientation such as the repeated chanting of *Ausländer raus*, a slogan gaining popularity in right wing Germany that is used to perpetuate feelings of xenophobia. Then comes in the idea that Heaven and home belong together:

“Himmel und Heimat gehören zusammen. Da sind alle Sterne dir so vertraut. Himmel und Heimat darfst du nie verlieren, denn sonst bist du verloren mit Haar und Haut“ (Whittaker 1991). (Heaven and home belong together. All the stars there are familiar to you. You should never forget heaven and home, otherwise you are forgotten with hair and skin”, my transl. What appears to be the consolation here is the idea that the spiritualized province cannot be separated from the provincial spirituality. The psychologized idea of home for the foreigner was in a way at odds with that which he had imagined to be and did not connect to his provincial reality. By exploring the chorus, Roger Whitaker presents the idea of Himmel and Heimat existing as parallel realities that should not be forgotten in the grand discourse of migration.

The consequence thereof becomes the loss of identity as alluded to by the usage of Hair and skin, an important component of one’s identity especially in the racial sense as depicted by Alice Hasters *Was weiße Menschen nicht über Rassismus hören wollen aber wissen sollten* translated as *What White People Don’t Want to Hear About Racism, But Should Know Anyway* (2019). Alice Hasters here looks at important components of a black person’s identity tackling thematic issues like hair, skin complexion and body figure. By uniting the two-fold idea of Heimat, one can have a stabilized sense of existing. Again, this is well nuanced as the song comes to an end where the chorus takes a new lyrical shape: “Himmel und Heimat die bleiben im Herzen, auch wenn man schon lang’ in der Fremde ist. Sorgen dafür, dass du niemals vergisst, wo du für immer und ewig zu Hause bist, wo du für immer und ewig zu Hause bist“ (Whittaker 1991). (Heaven and home belong in the heart

even if someone has been an outsider for long. Watch out lest you forget where you are forever at home, where you are forever at home”; my transl. This last part appeals to the infinite understanding of Heimat and that the marriage of the two dualities should exist up until the end of time. This can be instrumental in grounding the ever-changing socio-political landscape which may threaten to tear down the fabric that holds the concept of home as it reflects identity together.

As the song ends, an interesting concept is introduced which is like Heimat- at home. In her book *Zuhause Kann Überall sein* (2015), Irena Kobald explores the spatial dislocation which is imminent to a girl named Wildfang where after the war, she is forced to migrate to new lands which is difficult for her at first since the new home is supposedly and justifiably cold and foreign. In that space of isolation, she meets a girl who is a native and teaches her the language of the new land and together they grow in friendship which ultimately leads to her feeling at home once again. This is the same model of the presentation of the ‘own and foreign’ and serves as a prototype as to how successful trans-cultural dialogues should look like and how misery or the first suffering is instrumental in igniting the spark that turns into a fruitful dialogue.

2.3 ‘The faraway lands’

The second stanza becomes interesting as the dialogue takes a new shape. The second persona explains how he found refuge in the new lands and how that allowed him to fend for himself and how challenging it is to still exist in this new space. The first persona then invites him for coffee which symbolizes a chance for trans-cultural dialogue that is invested in meaningful connections instead of callous sweeping statements. This gesture invites trans-cultural dialogue to be approached from a point of less tension and creating time for each other.

The first person then has a chance to talk about himself and his own story: “Ich erzählte von mir und woher ich kam und er hörte begeistert zu. Ich hab’ von Kenia geschwärmt, von dem weiten Land und sagte, glaube mir manchmal fühl’ ich genau wie du” (Whittaker 1991). (“I narrated about myself and where I am from, and he listened attentively. I swam from Kenya- the faraway lands and believe me most of the time I feel just like you), my transl. It becomes evident that the first persona is hinting to be Roger Whittaker himself as having been born and raised in Kenya. He becomes empathic to the foreigner by allowing his story of searching for meaning and identity in a new land to be a connecting point with the ‘troubled’ foreigner who just like Whittaker, is trying to fit into the new system and structures.

This speaks largely to the reality faced by many migrants, who just like the foreigner, are trying to make ends meet in a land that has accorded them the chance to do so. His life, as witnessed through transversing borders and cultures, allows him to meet and connect with that which at first was described as different. This is a testimony to the vast opportunity for multi-cultural dialogue that could potentially stem from curiosity and travel thus breaking down the media-fed imaginaries and stereotypes that have continuously taken shape and form in the mindsets of many people.

3.0 Implications from *Himmel und Heimat*

Germany, just like any other country is undergoing a socio-cultural shift, which did not just begin with the migration situation of 2015. The socio-political landscape keeps on changing and as varied opinions and arguments come into the discussion, what could have been a meaningful encounter has become a polarized heated argument. This research paper has attempted to offer perspectives into how music especially German traditional folk music can be used as a tool for engaging in such discussions which in my opinion is less tense. Cultural hybridity has become a modern reality and as the geographic borders continue to shrink, cultures are going to be comprised of an assortment of many other cultures in it. It is also important to recognize that individuals carry this sense of hybridity even in their own identities and positionalities as witnessed in Roger Whittaker and his song. *Himmel und Heimat* presents what I call a blueprint of what trans-cultural dialogue could look like.

The song in and of itself takes up the form of a dialogue, thus allowing for a mutual expression of feelings. Empathy as modelled by Roger Whittaker settles the heated emotions surrounding the feeling of delineation. While engaging with this piece, colonialism comes to mind especially if we look at the process of othering as depicted in the first stanza. In the postcolonial discourse, listeners are encouraged to engage critically

with works that seek to further the concept of othering, which consists, a harmful potential for marginalization. Nostalgia and feelings of longing, traced back to the romantic period, offer a chance to slice through individuals' thoughts and emotions which, if effectively used, can lead to nourishing attitudes towards multi-culturalism and integration. Lastly, schlager as a music genre in Germanic discourses allows for more research to be done with this 'forgotten' music tradition that is as exemplified in this paper, a rich source for understanding the concept of Heimat, multi-culturalism and even the concept of language and ownership thereof.

Although this paper has not been exhaustive in its depths, it scratches the surface of what could be a potential research gap namely: Positioning Africa, concepts of identity, and multi-culturalism in German songs. There exists a rich artistic personality either from German-speaking nations or who present in the German language, who have traversed through Africa collectively or through specific nations in Africa and have left a trope of literature, music, biographies, films, etc. which could be useful in unpacking modern tendencies such as globalization, postcolonialism, media-culture and so on.

As Germany seeks to import skilled labor from countries like Kenya⁷, it is necessary to engage in trans-cultural dialogue between the two countries so that instances of polarization or xenophobia even if imminent, can be addressed through dialogue as depicted through the song. By engaging with such works, we critically go back in time to unpack the trends, witness parallels, and deconstruct some of the previously held beliefs and imaginations about 'Africa' by offering a more specific localized approach in dealing with artistic works and by constructing new epistemologies in so far as the African continent is concerned. That way, the 'African' story is re-written in Germanic discourses with a more objective idea in mind.

References

- Blickle, P. (2002). *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland*. Camden House (NY).
- Fuhr, T. B. (2023). "Eternal Return? Revisiting Heimat in Contemporary German Literature." (Doctoral Dissertation). University of Arizona, 2023. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/267c35220c46e205e0331a239cfeb4b2/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.
- Mendívil, J. (2008). *Ein musikalisches Stück Heimat: Ethnologische Beobachtungen zum deutschen Schlager*. Transcript Verlag.
- Okoko, L. A. (2014). "Interkulturalität und Afrikabilder in der zeitgenössischen Jugendliteratur." (Doctoral Dissertation). Stellenbosch University. <https://scholar.sun.ac.za/items/225b9f4e-b620-4cca-9f74-81325a26f076>.
- Kobald, I., Blackwood, F., & Kröll, T. (2015). *Zuhause kann Überall sein*. Knesebeck.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York, Pantheon Books.
- Welsch, W. (2010). Was ist eigentlich Transkulturalität. *Hochschule als transkultureller Raum*, 39-66.
- Whittaker, R., & Natalie, W. (1986). *So Far, so Good: The Autobiography of a Wandering Minstrel*. Barrie Publishing.

Discography

- mrwhittakersmusic. (2013, July 13). Roger Whittaker - *Himmel und Heimat* (1992) [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIr4xzVVuQU>.

Videography

- mrwhittakersmusic. (2012, April 15). Roger Whittaker - *In Kenya ~ a musical Safari ~ (1982) - Part I* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuQdAvTk-X0>