

Black Diaspora and Germany Across the Centuries

Konferenz des Deutschen Historischen Instituts, Washington D.C.

Washington D.C., 19. bis 21. März 2009

Conveners: Martin Klimke (German Historical Institute, Washington D.C.), Anne Kuhlmann-Smirnov (University of Bremen), Mischa Honeck (Heidelberg Center for American Studies); supported by the German Historical Institute, Washington D.C., and the Heidelberg Center for American Studies, Heidelberg.

„Black Diaspora and Germany Across the Centuries” embarked on an ambitious task: the conference retraced six centuries of mutual perception and contact between blacks of diverse origins (from the Americas, the Caribbean, the Byzantine Empire, Asia, Africa, and Europe) and people from the German-speaking parts of Europe. Over the past several years, transnational and global historians have successfully challenged monolithic concepts of national identity by emphasizing the interconnectedness of various regional developments, no longer treating them as separate entities. One recent area of inquiry that has benefited immensely from this perspective focuses on the intersections of black and German history. But while important strides have been made for the twentieth century, Afro-German interactions of earlier periods are still comparatively underexplored. To fill this gap, the conference brought together scholars from various disciplines – history, art history, cultural studies, and literature – to map continuities and ruptures in the long history of the African-German encounter from the Late Middle Ages to the First World War.

The conference kicked off with a panel investigating representations of black people in art and social discourse in the Renaissance and early modern periods. Using the Calenberg Altarpiece as his point of departure, *Paul Kaplan* (Purchase) demonstrated how Africans in religious art served to enunciate a Christian universalism which was less concerned with racial identities than with stressing the inherent unity of a divinely ordained Christian society and world. Patterns of racial differentiation, however, emerged more forcefully from the eighteenth century onward. As *Allison Blakely* (Boston) argued, Kant, Blumenbach, and other German Enlightenment intellectuals proved instrumental in cementing stereotypes of black inferiority by turning them into legitimate objects of scientific investigation. In the first of two keynote addresses, *Kate Lowe* (London) then looked at different ways of imagining, performing, and experiencing blackness in Renaissance Germany. Parallel to the conspicuous presence of blacks as court moors and servants, as Lowe pointed out, staging blackness for satirical purposes in popular comedy and carnival reflected the identity struggles of a burgeoning German middle class. In his response to Lowe, *Dirk Hörder* (Arizona State) added that the terms „moor” and „black” had no fixed meaning but carried various racial, social, and religious connotations which could change over time.

The second day started with *Peter Martin* (Hamburg) addressing theoretical and methodological problems pertaining to early Afro-German history. His deliberations culminated in a call for a more nuanced terminology that would transcend the simplistic black-white dichotomy and capture a greater array of social spaces occupied by blacks in German society across the centuries. *Anne Kuhlmann-Smirnov* (Bremen) followed Martin, providing valuable information on migration routes as well as the social and geographical dispersion of blacks in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Germany. Presenting statistical evidence which showed that as many black migrants came from the Caribbean and North America as from Africa, Kuhlmann-Smirnov

moved away from an African essentialism to espouse a more global understanding of Germany's place in the Black Diaspora. *Rashid Pegah's* (Würzburg) talk on real and imagined Africans in eighteenth-century court divertissements highlighted yet another facet of early modern Afro-German interaction: as blacks started to figure more prominently in the world of courtly entertainments, deteriorating images of Africa and Asia began to supplant older notions of exoticism and increasingly tended to ascribe inferior status to dark-skinned people.

The next two panels moved ahead in time, shifting the focus to literary and scientific representations of blackness in nineteenth-century Germany. *Heike Paul* (Erlangen) focused on German receptions of black writing, establishing that they rarely connoted an independent black agency, and *Eva Ulrike Pirker* (Freiburg), through a close reading of Theodor Storm, showed that the spaces where black figures were allowed to excel were circumscribed by prevalent racial stereotypes of the time. *Jens-Uwe Güttel* (Pennsylvania State) went on to investigate the racist ideas and pro-slavery attitude of the late eighteenth-century Göttingen professor Christof Meiners. Placing his writings in the context of transatlantic slavery, Güttel underscored that, even though blacks were a fringe phenomenon on German streets, Enlightenment scholars intervened vigorously in the transnational debate on the existence of different 'races', with various leanings and results.

Jeannette Jones (Nebraska), in her talk on Heidelberg anatomist Friedrich Tiedemann, delved further into the complexities and divergences of German Enlightenment culture and its impact on the evolution of anti-black racism. Contrary to Meiners, however, Tiedemann employed scientific methods to challenge, not bolster, dogmas of racial hierarchy, emerging as a spokesman of abolition in German academia and beyond. Also linking German discourses of blackness to transatlantic and global developments, *Bradley Naranch* (Stanford) argued that competing mid-nineteenth-century images of the Black Diaspora, which stressed either philanthropy or savagery, can only be properly understood if situated in the evolving struggle for a German national identity. In the section's concluding presentation, *Frank Mehring* (Berlin) offered a fresh appraisal of the German-American artist Winhold Reiss and his involvement in the Harlem Renaissance. Reiss's portraits of iconic African Americans, Mehring elucidated, mirrored his complex transition from a German immigrant used to seeing the world through a colonial lens to a cosmopolitan artist visualizing "the unfinished business of democracy."

At the end of the day, *Maria Diedrich* (Muenster) delivered the second keynote speech on her new research project, which seeks to rescue the individual and collective life stories of the Black Hessians from oblivion. This community consisted of former slaves who had served in the ranks of pro-British German regiments during the Revolutionary War, and their families. Faced with a relative dearth of primary sources, Diedrich made a case for „critical fabulation” (Saidiya Hartman) as a way to reconstruct the circum-Atlantic worlds through which the „Kasseler Mohren” moved, from their African homelands via the slave fields of North America to the domain of Hesse's Landgrave Wilhelm IX.

The third and last day was set aside for two panels that addressed Germany's place in the Black Atlantic during the long nineteenth century, both of which put a strong emphasis on black agency. *Mischa Honeck* (Heidelberg) revisited the European sojourn of the African-American abolitionist and churchman James W. C. Pennington, contending that his idealized depiction of mid-nineteenth-century Germany grew out of his search for an egalitarian, non-racist society. Echoes of a black cosmopolitan mobility also resonated in *Stefanie Michel's* (Hannover) talk, which probed the opportunities and limits of two privileged Afro-German families in transit, the Jimenez family from Cuba and the Bells from Cameroon. *Kendahl Radcliffe* (Fullerton) unearthed the story of the Tuskegee Institute's cotton-production scheme in German Togoland. This effort, while catching the attention of Germans trying to develop methods of scientific agriculture in their colonies, was above all intended to propagate the Tuskegee vision of uplifting the socio-economic status of blacks through education.

Robert Aitken (Liverpool) then brought the discussion back to the heart of the Hohenzollern Empire when he charted the migration stream of young Cameroonians into the German metropole. The migrants' experience, said Aitken, was shaped by their status as colonial subjects, as well as by imperial policies which sought to restrict and control migrants' exposure to German society. Imperial Germany's fascination with colonial Africa, too, was reflected in its burgeoning consumer culture. As *David Ciarlo* (Boston) demonstrated, advertisements such as those featuring the Duala leader „King Bell” provided a powerful justification for colonial rule and fixed stereotypes of racial difference. Finally, *Christian Koller* (Bangor) shared his ideas about German perceptions of African colonial soldiers enlisted in the French Army from 1859 to the First World War. Claiming that most statements had to be read in the context of Franco-German antagonism, Koller also identified a common sentiment of white civilizational superiority that was prevalent on both sides.

In sum, the conference broke important new ground in the complex, contested, and highly volatile history of Afro-German interaction prior to the twentieth century. Rather than promulgate a linear narrative grounded in static notions of racial difference, it presented the story of Germany's entanglement in the Black Diaspora as one of many competing strands of discourse and social practice vying for dominance across time and space. Germany's place in the Black Atlantic might have been marginal in a geographical sense; intellectually and discursively, however, it proved significant for the formation of modern social and national identities.

In addition to very stimulating and productive exchanges, the conference also sparked a long-term multi-national and multidisciplinary collaboration. Tangible fruits of this cooperative endeavor will soon be made available to a larger academic audience and the general public, including a forthcoming publication with a distinguished American university press and a joint online site that presents many diverse sources on the Black Diaspora with regard to Germany.

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Programm:

Welcome: Mischa Honeck, Martin Klimke and Anne Kuhlmann-Smirnov

Panel I: Black-European Encounters in the Early Modern Period I: Images and Realities

The Calenberg Altarpiece: Black African Christians in Renaissance Germany, Paul Kaplan (Purchase College, SUNY)

Blacks in Early Modern Europe: Image vs. Reality?, Allison Blakely (Boston University)

1st Keynote Address: Black Diaspora in Europe in the 15/16th Centuries, Kate Lowe (Queen Mary, University of London)

Comments: Dirk Hoerder (Arizona State University)

Panel II: Black-European Encounters in the Early Modern Period II: Between the Global and the Local

Black Africans in German History: Afterwords on „Schwarze Teufel, edle Mohren“, Peter Martin (Hamburger Stiftung zur Förderung von Wissenschaft und Kunst)

Mapping 17th- and 18th-Century Black Germany: Migration Routes and Social Spaces, Anne Kuhlmann-Smirnov (University of Bremen)

Real and Imagined Africans in Court divertissements, Rashid Pegah (University of Würzburg)

Panel III: Writing and Reading Blackness: Literary and Academic Representations

The German Reception of Black Writing and Black Authorship in the 18th and 19th Century, Heike Paul (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg)

„On the Brain of the Negro“: Craniometry, Abolitionism, and German Debates on the ‚Negro Character‘, Jeanette Jones (University of Nebraska-Lincoln)

White Bertha – Black Jenny? Fantasies of Race in Theodor Storm’s Novella *From Beyond the Sea* (Von Jenseits des Meeres), Eva Ulrike Pirker (University of Freiburg)

Panel IV: Images of Blackness in 19th-Century Germany

The Political and Social Function of Race in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany, Jens-Uwe Güttel (Pennsylvania State University)

Global Travelers, Uncle Toms, and Native Savages: The Antinomies of Black Identity in 19th-Century Germany, Bradley Naranch (Stanford University)

Synecdochic (Trans-)Nationalism? Portraying the Black Diaspora from a German-American Perspective, Frank Mehring (Free University of Berlin)

2nd Keynote Address: Black Hessians in the 18/19th Centuries, Maria Diedrich (University of Münster)

Comments: Anke Ortlepp (GHI Washington)

Panel V: Transatlantic Migration and Travel

Liberating Sojourns? African-American Travelers in Mid-Nineteenth Century Germany, Mischa Honeck (University of Heidelberg)

A German Black Atlantic? – ‚Race‘ and Space between Haiti and Cameroon, 1789-1914, Stefanie Michels (University of Hannover)

Uplift Ideology vs. An Imperialist Agenda: Tuskegee’s Cotton Growing Scheme in German Togoland, Kendahl Radcliffe (California State University Fullerton)

Panel VI: Colonial Interactions in the Age of Imperialism

German Advertising and the African Chief: King Bell in the German Consumer Imaginary, 1884-1914, David Ciarlo (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

Education and Migration: Cameroonian School Children and Apprentices in the German Metropole, 1884-1914, Robert Aitken (University of Liverpool)

“... diese verwilderten, rohen, zum Theil unmenschlichen Gesellen als Vortruppen gegen das deutsche Volk” – German Perceptions of African Colonial Soldiers in the French Army 1859-1914, Christian Koller (Bangor University)

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