

## **BLACK DIASPORA AND GERMANY ACROSS THE CENTURIES**

Conference at the GHI, March 19-21, 2009. Conveners: Martin Klimke (GHI), Anne Kuhlmann-Smirnov (University of Bremen), Mischa Honeck (Heidelberg Center for American Studies). Participants: Robbie Aitken (University of Liverpool), Manfred Berg (University of Heidelberg), Allison Blakely (Boston University), David Ciarlo (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Maria Diedrich (University of Münster), Jens-Uwe Guettel (Pennsylvania State University), Maria Höhn (Vassar College), Dirk Hoerder (Arizona State University), Jeannette Eileen Jones (University of Nebraska), Paul Kaplan (Purchase College, SUNY), Christian Koller (Bangor University), Kate Lowe (University of London), Peter Martin (Hamburg), Frank Mehring (Free University, Berlin), Stefanie Michels (University of Frankfurt), Bradley Naranch (Stanford University), Anke Ortlepp (GHI), Heike Paul (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg), Rashid Pegah (Independent scholar), Eva Ulrike Pirker (University of Freiburg), Kendahl Radcliffe (California State University, Fullerton).

“Black Diaspora and Germany Across the Centuries” embarked on the ambitious task of retracing six centuries of mutual perception and contact between German-speaking Europe and blacks of diverse origins (from the Americas, the Caribbean, the Byzantine Empire, Asia, Africa, or Europe). Over the past several years, practitioners of transnational and global history 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 has been research on the intersections of black and German history. While important strides have been made for the twentieth century, however, 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 interrogating 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 demonstrated how religious art used Africans to enunciate a Christian universalism that was less concerned with racial identities than with stressing the inherent unity of a divinely ordained Christian world. Patterns of racial differentiation emerged more forcefully from the eighteenth century onward. As Allison Blakely argued, Kant, Blumenbach, and other German Enlightenment intellectuals proved instrumental in cementing stereotypes of black inferiority by turning them into objects of scientific investigation. In the first of two keynote addresses, Kate Lowe 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, the staging of 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 Hoerder argued 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 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 that blacks occupied in German society across the centuries. Next, Anne Kuhlmann-Smirnov analyzed migration routes as well as the social and geographical dispersion of blacks in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Germany. Presenting statistical evidence 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 talk on real and imagined Africans in eighteenth-century court entertainments highlighted yet another facet of early modern Afro-German interaction: Just 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 ascribed inferior status to dark-skinned people.

The next two panels moved forward in time, shifting the focus to literary and scientific representations of blackness in nineteenth-century Germany. Heike Paul focused on German receptions of

black writing, establishing that they rarely connoted an independent black agency. Eva Ulrike Pirker provided a close reading of Theodor Storm to show that the spaces where black figures were allowed to excel were circumscribed by prevalent racial stereotypes of the time. Jens-Uwe Guettel 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, Guettel 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.” Jeannette Jones’s talk on the Heidelberg anatomist Friedrich Tiedemann delved further into the complexities of German Enlightenment culture and its impact on the evolution of anti-black racism. Contrary to Meiners, Tiedemann employed scientific methods to challenge, not bolster, dogmas of racial hierarchy, emerging as a spokesman of abolition in German academia and beyond. Linking German discourses of blackness to transatlantic and global developments, Bradley Naranch 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 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 showed, mirrored his complex transformation 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 conference’s second day, Maria Diedrich 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. Faced with a 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 of the conference featured 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 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 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 unearthed the story of the Tuskegee Institute's cotton-production scheme in German Togoland. This effort, while catching the attention of Germans bent on developing methods of scientific agriculture in their colonies, was above all intended to propagate the Tuskegee vision of uplifting the socio-economic status of blacks by means of education. Robbie Aitken then brought the discussion back to the heart of the Hohenzollern Empire when he charted the migration of young Cameroonians to the German metropole. The migrants' experience, argued Aitken, was shaped by their status as colonial subjects as well as by imperial policies that sought to restrict and control migrants' exposure to German society. Imperial Germany's fascination with colonial Africa was reflected in its burgeoning consumer culture. As David Ciarlo 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 shared his ideas on German perceptions of African colonial soldiers that enlisted in the French Army between 1859 and the First World War. While most statements had to be read in the context of Franco-German antagonism, Koller 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 stimulating and productive exchanges, the conference sparked a

long-term multinational 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 and a joint online site that will present diverse sources on the Black Diaspora with regard to Germany.

Mischa Honeck (Heidelberg Center for American Studies)