

DEFINING BLACK EUROPEAN HISTORY

Conference at the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI), June 22–23, 2018. Co-sponsored by the University College London Global Engagement Fund, the University of Michigan College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, the University of New Mexico History Department, and the Transatlantic Program of the European Recovery Program through the “German History: Intersections” project. Conveners: Jeff Bowersox (University College London), Tiffany N. Florvil (University of New Mexico), Atiba Pertilla (GHI), Kira Thurman (University of Michigan). Participants: Robbie Aitken (Sheffield Hallam University), Mara Blake (Johns Hopkins University), Debra Blumenthal (University of California, Santa Barbara), Jennifer Boittin (Penn State University), Andrew Daily (University of Memphis), Silke Hackenesch (University of Cologne), Kennetta Hammond Perry (De Montfort University), Axel Jansen (GHI), Nick Jones (Bucknell University), Justin Joque (University of Michigan), Marc Matera (University of California, Santa Cruz), Maxim Matusevich (Seton Hall University), Robin Mitchell (University of California, Channel Islands), Jennifer Palmer (University of Georgia), Lara Putnam (University of Pittsburgh), Meredith Roman (SUNY Brockport), Erin Rowe (Johns Hopkins University), Eileen Ryan (Temple University).

“Defining Black European History” was conceptualized as an opportunity to bring together scholars investigating the diverse experiences of the Black diaspora in Europe across multiple eras and in a wide variety of national and transregional contexts to examine how using Black Europe as an analytical category can surface the agency of Black lives while deconstructing national and imperialist narratives of European history and the silencing of the Black experience. Such work has often been met with pushback because of the myth of a timeless “white Europe” that helps to foster racism in contemporary Europe, as the analytical category of race is constantly underplayed and even erased from national narratives. The Black European History conference gave historians of Black Europe the opportunity to share their studies and stories and engage in a wider discussion of the discipline as a whole.

Lead conveners Jeff Bowersox, Tiffany N. Florvil, and Kira Thurman designed the conference with three main goals in mind: to examine the significance of Black Europe as an analytical category, to interrogate the limitations of the discipline in both content and practice,

and to move the discipline out of the academic world and encourage public engagement with Black European history. The current methodology and historiography of European history is fractured in its downplaying of race as a category of analysis, and the conveners invited participants, whose papers spanned the chronological and geographic distance from the late medieval Iberian Peninsula to the Cold War Soviet Union, to illustrate the benefits of this analytical lens. The conference was divided into five thematic panels with the inclusion of a workshop on digital humanities and a concluding panel designed for reflection and discussion of interest in future collaborations. The conference was a balance of content, practice, and encouragement to engage the public and adopt creative practices, making it a vital event in the progression of the discipline.

The first panel introduced issues of “Methodology and Historiography” relating to histories of Black Europe that would be contemplated throughout the conference. Jennifer Boittin began the panel with a discussion of the concept of Black Europe and colonial aphasia in contemporary France. Boittin noted the absence of race as a factor within mainstream French national narratives, pointing to the legacy of the contrasts between the colonial empire’s refusal to make racial categories official and the racialized deployment of police violence and political repression. Another hardship that complicates/obscures the discipline is the violence that is inscribed within archival records. Lara Putnam’s discussion on women’s labor migration in the greater Spanish Caribbean during the early twentieth century raised vital questions regarding the role of agency and silence in sharing accounts of sexual violence. Putnam admitted to struggling with her role as a historian in telling the stories of young Black women and girls who were victims of sexual assault and using sources bounded by the state’s legal frameworks. Debra Blumenthal concluded the panel with a discussion of the different forms of Black agency found in late medieval Iberia, bringing an important chronological perspective to the discussion. Blumenthal’s talk raised the question of whether “Blackness” was a geographical category, a racial category, or both during this period, further complicating the concept of Black Europe. Each of the three panelists expressed the difficulties in the methodology and current historiography of Black Europe, setting the tone for the remainder of the conference.

The second panel focused on exploring and telling the histories of Black Europe through “Public Memory and Public Engagement.”

Eileen Ryan began the panel via Skype with her discussion on Andrea Aguyar's role in the unification of the Italian states and his memorialization in contemporary Italy. One larger theme she introduced was the issue of national identity and how Blackness initiated a struggle to define whiteness in bordering European states. Robbie Aitken's paper on the historical memory of the experience of Black Germans during and after the Holocaust raised the importance of public engagement with the histories of forgotten victims. The majority of Aitken's talk concerned the opportunity for historians to seek out better primary sources and more interdisciplinary collaborations in order to create a richer and more well-rounded public history. Finally, Erin Rowe's paper on material culture and memory in Iberia's Black history revealed the widespread diversity of religious iconography in Spain and Portugal in the early modern period, and the current tendency to reject these histories by some within the local communities where such imagery is found. Rowe and the other panelists focused on the attempted erasure of Black culture in local and national narratives and the potential for future re-surfacing of these stories in public engagement.

The second panel was followed by a workshop on digital tools. Mara Blake and Justin Joque encouraged the group to think digitally throughout their research processes and presentation of results. Blake and Joque began the workshop by inviting the participants to share their experiences with digital humanities in and outside of the classroom. They then presented three types of digital tools that could be used to better present Black European history to a wider public: mapping and spatial presentations, data visualization, and textual analysis. The final section of the workshop was dedicated to using the discussed digital tools to brainstorm possible collaborations within the group. Blake and Joque made a compelling argument for the use of digital humanities to improve the research process and efforts to engage and disseminate Black European history to the public.

The third panel was concerned with restoring Black agency by centering the narrative of Black lives in the histories of Black Europe. Jennifer Palmer's paper on centering women of color in the French Empire reimaged conventional European personal narratives. Palmer focused on the journey of Marie Victoire Morisseau, an eighteenth-century woman living in Saint-Domingue, to prove her freedom to the state. In contrast to histories of gaining agency, Meredith Roman's paper discussed the pseudo-freedom of Black students in

the mid-twentieth century Soviet Union. Roman criticized the limits of students' agency by exploring their use as political tools against the United States during the civil rights era. Nick Jones concluded the panel by first airing the recently released music video "Apeshit" by Beyoncé and Jay-Z, whose setting in the Louvre placed Blackness at the center of the development of traditional European "high" art. Jones' paper argued that a way to build narratives of Black agency is through cultural "necromancy," by revealing Black practices that had been suppressed in the history of early modern Spain and then tracing the persistence of those practices in contemporary Spanish culture. The third panel demonstrated how Black European history forces historians to excavate the experiences of Black people while also crafting narratives that reflect agency rather than solely victimization.

The fourth panel, "State and Nation," dealt with the connection between Black lives and different varieties of European political orders. Kennetta Hammond Perry began the panel via Skype with her paper on the violent death of David Oluwale in twentieth-century England. Perry used the difficult process of piecing together Oluwale's history to expose state-instigated violence in physical form by the police and other agents and in the form of violence in the archives that both shaped and excised the record of Oluwale's experiences. Much like Putnam's criticism of learning about Black lives through the legal texts of their oppressors, Perry explained it was her role as a historian to tell these stories as a way of paying homage to Oluwale and deconstructing the ongoing racism overlooked by European governments. Maxim Matusevich's paper examined the history of African studies scholarship in the Soviet Union and its place in longstanding discourses about Russian anxieties about being on the geographical and metaphorical margins of European whiteness. In addition, he examined the conflicts that arose when African scholars visiting the Soviet Union pursued agendas that deviated from the expectations established by the communist state's preexisting stereotypes of Blackness. Robin Mitchell's paper on the capture and torture of Suzanne Simone Baptiste, the wife of Toussaint L'Ouverture, examined the circulation of stories and images of violence performed on the Black female body as a component of escalating political tensions between France and the United Kingdom in the aftermath of the Haitian revolution. The fourth panel highlighted the suppression of Black agency throughout European history, often in the service of important political agendas at the local, national, and international levels.

The final panel, “Time and Space,” focused on Blackness in various forms of cultural production. Andrew Daily’s paper interrogated the geographic bounding of both Europe and Black Europe. He used the writings and interpretations of Martinican writer and philosopher Edouard Glissant to question the conventional concept of Europe. Daily argued historians of Black Europe should be aware of the unique opportunity inherent in its use as an analytical category and continue to challenge Eurocentric histories by excavating stories that bend the idea of Europe in both time and space. Marc Matera’s paper analyzed the Jamaican sculptor Ronald Moody and his Afro-Asian style of Black modern art. Matera explained how looking at Moody is crucial to understanding the movement of Black art in twentieth century Britain, as its Afro-Asian elements decentralizes the typical centrality of Britain and Europe in narratives of Black modernism. The final paper by Silke Hackenesch explored overt racism in German material culture in the twentieth century. She examined the malleability of chocolate as a signifier with the history of a racially offensive icon used by a popular chocolate brand to interrogate cultural aphasia and the ways that Blackness has been used to “perform” exoticism.

The concluding discussion reflected on the conference and future collaboration possibilities. There was a consensus that prior to the conference, most of the participants had experienced difficulty in solidifying the concept of Black Europe, both as a category of analysis for their own scholarship and in the form of pushback both within the academic world and from the general public. Additionally, the archives posed a threat in the type of accounts produced on Black lives. Because of these complications, the group felt the conference acted as a solidifying event to cement a discourse and establish a network of those involved in Black European history. The participants saw how themes of nation, agency, erasure, empire, identity, and the concept of Blackness and whiteness, played a constant role in the variety of papers that spanned over time and space. These themes helped continue to build the theoretical frame of the discipline of Black European History. Because of their focus on similar conceptual ideas and shared experience of empowerment and strife, the participants found a natural desire to collaborate and evolve as a discipline. The conference ended by looking at short, medium, and long-term opportunities to develop the field in academia and the broader public and establish it as a vital component of European history.

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