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Black Diaspora and Germany Across the Centuries Conference at the German Historical Institute

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Call for Papers

Black Diaspora and Germany Across the Centuries Conference at the German Historical Institute Washington, D.C., March 19-21, 2009

Persons of African descent have been present in Europe throughout the past millennium. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Africans crossed the Mediterranean to Spain, Sicily, and Italy or made their way to Europe via the Middle East and the Byzantine Empire. In later centuries, the system of transatlantic trade brought black people from the different regions of the Americas to Europe.



In Central Europe, African "court moors" became increasingly present during the Early Modern Period and were an integral part of courtly representation. As a result of exchange processes between Europe, Africa, and the West Indies, the social roles of blacks in Europe and European discourses on blacks diversified over time. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, an increasing number of black Europeans lived in middle-class households, especially those of retired colonial officials, plantation owners or merchants residing in Europe. Others lived independently as seamen or as guild members. Transatlantic chattel slavery, however, fundamentally reconfigured Afro-European relations and transformed perceptions of black people throughout the Atlantic World. Over time, black people were increasingly referred to as "slaves" or "negroes" instead of "moors," an older term associated with, among other things, images of brave warriors that derived from the presence of black soldiers in the armies of the Islamic Empire on the Iberian Peninsula and humanist images of a Christian "land of the moors" ruled by a mythical Prester John in Ethiopia.

By the early nineteenth century, racist views on blacks had found broad public acceptance in Europe. Scientific racism, a branch of ethnology that began to infiltrate Western science from the 1840s onward, further consolidated notions of black inferiority and was widely used to justify the continued enslavement of African peoples. Simultaneously, proslavery arguments were vehemently challenged by Enlightenment ideas of human equality, which gained broader significance on both sides of the Atlantic through the rise of various abolitionist and revolutionary movements. This dialectical contest between racial egalitarianism and white supremacy persisted well into the early twentieth century, when the latter reemerged forcefully in the guise of European imperialism.

The conference "Black Diaspora and Germany Across the Centuries" will retrace these processes of change and reevaluation from the eleventh century to the beginning of World War I. Particular emphasis will be laid on the interactions between blacks of various origins (the Americas, the Caribbean, Byzantine Empire, Africa, or born in Europe) and people in the German-speaking parts of Europe. Researchers of all disciplines are invited to discuss continuities and ruptures in this history of mutual perception and contact: migration, art and court historians, American, German and African studies as well as scholars from the field of cultural studies, literature, sociology, musicology, linguistics, etc.

Possible conference topics include: (1) Geopolitical and social spaces of communication and interaction: Which geographical areas and groups of individuals or social classes were involved in processes of exchange? What kind of action repertoires did these spaces leave or offer to people of color? (2) Perception and appropriation of African culture, art, music, etc. and their representations in various contexts (e.g. European court cultures, literature, art production). (3) Altering influence of religious, philosophical, and scientific discourses on modes of Afro-European contacts. (4) Race/Racism vs. egalitarianism as discourse and social practice in the African-German encounter.

Please send a proposal of no more than 500 words and a brief CV to Martin Klimke at klimke@ghi-dc.org; website <http://www.ghi-dc.org>. The deadline for submission is October 15, 2008. Participants will be notified by mid-November. The conference, held in English, will focus on discussing 5,000 to 6,000 word, precirculated papers (due February 1, 2009). Expenses for travel and accommodation will be covered. Conveners: Martin Klimke (GHI Washington), Anne Kuhlmann-Smirnov (History Department, University of Bremen), Mischa Honeck (Heidelberg Center for American Studies, University of Heidelberg).