

Report & Summary from ACRL European Studies Section (ESS) Forum

22 June 2021

The European Studies Section (ESS) of the ACRL held a virtual discussion about research into the present-day Black European experience on June 22, 2021. Our speakers presented their work, followed by a Q&A addressing important questions such as the following: How can North American research librarians support scholars and students who want to learn more about the Black European experience and do so in respectful and responsible ways? How are the experiences of communities of color reflected in libraries and archives in Europe?

Speakers

Stephen Small, PhD, is a professor in the Department of African American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, where he has taught since 1995. His most recent book is *20 Questions and Answers on Black Europe* (2018). He is co-editor of *Black Europe and the African Diaspora* (with Darlene Clark Hine and Trica Danielle Keaton) (2009), and is the author of *Living History: The Legacy of Slavery in the Netherlands* (Amrit/NINsee Publishers, The Hague, 2012). He was born and raised in Liverpool.

Natasha A. Kelly has a PhD in Communication Studies and Sociology with a research focus on visual communication, colonialism and feminism. Her new book, *Mapping Black Europe: Monuments, Markers, Memories*, will be published in 2022.

Dr. Stephen Small

Our first speaker, Stephen Small, is currently working on the topic of Imperialism in Great Britain. He is carrying out interviews with people in Liverpool. He mentioned that researchers tend to focus on capital cities such as London and Paris, but that important work remains to be done on other cities and centers of trade and industry. Liverpool, in the UK, is a good example of a non-capital city that contains droves of research material on the issue of the Black experience, since it was the slavery capital of the world.

Presenters were asked to address how librarians can responsibly and respectfully support research in the Black European experience. His suggestions include:

Recognize that primary resources exist all over western Europe on white colonialism, and there are vast archives of imperial/official materials. These are mainly found in government archives, and there is substantial access to these resources online. "However, these sources have their own biases and reflect the colonial perspective; it leads one to suspect that, as the Audre Lorde conundrum: "The master's tools cannot be used to dismantle the master's house." For the

moment, we must identify and evaluate these sources as they provide important points of departure for broader and deeper research.

Acknowledge the existence of community resources, bookstores, and archives that are oppositional, independent, and collaborative. There are Black cultural archives such as the Society of Black Lawyers and a wide range of organizations that have extensive documentation about themselves and their communities.

Drop assumptions about explicit official discussion of race when you are searching in the archives. There are much more open discussions happening in the US, while official government policies in European countries are “color-blind.” The first census question around race in the United States came in 1790. It was not until 1991 that race became a topic in the UK census, and the only other European country with a census question about race is Ireland (2011). This is not an oversight: other European nations refuse to have a race question in their census.

Students and researchers who go to Europe will be told that “we do not discuss race here” and that it is an “American obsession.” Be prepared for opposition, reluctance, dismissal, condescension, even contempt, if you pursue research into questions of race.

Patterns and activities in research are very uneven across European countries, and the last 20 years have seen much more activity, development, and activism. The prevailing view across the governments and society is that Black people are immigrants, that they should be tolerated, and that they should be grateful for this tolerance. In the Black Europe Summer School, the research orientation is that Black people are citizens of Europe and demand the same respect as everyone else (very different).

There are huge amounts of material such as documentary archives, photos, maps, videos artifacts, images of dance in mainstream archives, and there is much to be done. Black Europeans think research is important and want research into Black Europeans to be done, but they are fed up with being used for research without compensation or consent. There is so much work involved in collecting research materials, and there have been too many uncompensated requests to do this work with no benefit to the communities involved.

Dr. Small also pointed out that many Black Europeans have been socialized into the color-blind approach to society that depicts race as a factor in US but not in Europe.

This can be seen in various countries with the efforts and mobilization around removing statues of racist historical figures. This mobilization is a means to an end and an end in itself—the statues are thus viewed as the visualization of racism, as an affront to a color-blind society. But removing these statues does not remove institutional racism. These statues are symbolic of a deficient education system and the widespread impact of institutional racism.

And, finally, Dr. Small concluded by pointing out he is a Black European, and he is in the US, so he represents both “us” and “them.”

Dr. Natasha Kelly

Natasha Kelly was born in London and grew up in Germany, and since Brexit she is officially German. Her book [*Mapping Black Europe: Monuments, Markers, Memories*](#) (co-edited with Olive Vassell, Columbia UP) will come out in 2022 (it was postponed by covid).

She commented that Black German scholars tend to end up with jobs in the US as a result of structural racism in the European, particularly German academic system. For example, she has a visiting professorship in Rhode Island as of September. Black German scholars being forced to leave German academic institutions reinforces the exclusion and perception that Black scholars don’t belong. Even in secondary schools, immigrants, and people seen as immigrants, are often placed on academic tracks away from university.

She and her co-author founded the Black European Academic Network because Black academics in Europe do not have access to university jobs. How institutional racism plays out is important to state—the problem is larger than the higher educational institutions.

She usually teaches the average white middle/upper class student in Germany in her courses. This is reflected in the material that is taught, which reflects the white Eurocentric perspective with no alternatives. Blackness is objectified—the Black perspective is not centered as a starting point in academic discourse.

Dr. Kelly has been freelancing for the larger part of her career—which is what is leading her to the US again.

It is rare for a Black person in Germany to reach the PhD level in the humanities. It’s more common to find Black people in STEM since it is perceived as an area of research separate of “blackness.”

Black studies and Africana studies don’t exist in European universities, but there are scholars doing the work outside the institutions. Those who do study Blackness in Europe are white and looking from a Eurocentric perspective, or they are Blacks from the US. Americanization has been influential in German culture since WWII, so “Blackness” is located in the US, or else a Black person is seen as being from Africa and as African, not as German. There is no wide-spread idea in Germany of an African diaspora or of Black people as belonging to each other. This is not part of the mainstream curricula, which makes it difficult to find facts. Facts and lived experience are disqualified because they “are not German.”

In archives and libraries, scholars are forced to find their own search terms, access points, based on criteria that aren’t being cataloged. For example, the Black German experience is cataloged as

African. As Dr. Kelly pointed out, “You have to start looking for the non-existing... you have to define the ‘nothingness.’”

The political dimension has to be considered; for example, race has been eliminated from the French constitution. In Europe, race is read as a biological category rather than as a social category as it is in the U.S. There is reluctance to engage with the colonialist and national socialist past in Germany.

Those doing the work from a Black perspective are forced to find their own terms because they are not cataloged. When we go into archives, we are looking for “nothing” in the literal sense of the word; the same applies to libraries. “Afro-German” literature is cataloged under African, not under German literature.

Dr. Kelly recommends the following strategies for dealing with these issues:

The political dimension in focus is important—race in Europe is erased. Literally, in France, it is erased from the constitution. The decision was “postponed” in Germany. In Europe Black activists are fighting to have the category of “race.”

In Germany, “race” is read as a biological category, not a social category, and since the discussion of race is associated with the National Socialists, it brings up deep, deep historical guilt. That also means that there isn’t any awareness of the role of colonialism, although the Nazi propaganda was constructed and built on colonialism. To understand the Nazis, you must understand colonialism.

Black Germans are waiting for history to deal with the intertwining of race and colonialism. The “mixed marriage” laws are where the “White” German was invented, and those started in the German colonies. Children of both German and African parentage had to register/sign into lists and if they weren’t in these lists, they didn’t have the rights of German citizens.

For a long time, White German women weren’t allowed to travel to the colonies, but then it was realized that there needed to be nurses, and women were needed to do “women’s work.” German women who married or had relationships with African men lost their German citizenship, and their children had no chance of German citizenship. For Dr. Kelly, that is the beginning of Black German history.

In Germany, people judge others as “non-German” because of looks, but the politicians refuse to recognize this issue of race and racism. Racism is reduced to an individual level and focuses on the intentions behind an individual action: Did an individual really mean to call someone a racial slur? The emphasis is on individual incidents, not systemic issues. But institutional racism is not recognized – racism is seen as an action, not as something occurring on a structural level. This is the cycle that we are in, and it reflects back to the universities.

The German government wanted to find a quick solution after there was a huge demonstration in Berlin in the summer of 2020 to protest the George Floyd murder in the US. This was the largest protest about racial issues since the national propaganda against Black people after WWI that was called the “Schwarze Schmach am Rhein.” The response? The German Center for Immigration and Migration received 9 million Euros to research racism! However, this center focuses on immigrants, and the prevalent view is that migrants brought the issue of racism when they arrived in Europe rather than seeing it as a structural issue. The Black body has to be present for people to understand what racism is, but racism functions without the Black body being present.

Her forthcoming book moves beyond the individual national context and looks at the European level and combines the authors’ research strengths. This book is a comparative book that looks at ideas coming from Black communities and Black histories and community organizations. How is Blackness celebrated in Europe? Not as a counternarrative to Eurocentricity but what is the different starting point, creating our own center and putting Blackness at the center? What is the Black experience? What effect did BLM have on these cities with large Black communities?

Finally, Dr. Kelly teaches once a year in the U.S. to keep her foot in the academic door; to do that, she has to go to the U.S. in order to get a position. Often you have to leave the country to find out about blackness in Germany.

Q&A

Where can researchers start when looking for these “invisible” materials?

Dr. Kelly recommends using biographies, lots of descriptive terms, and looking to the cultural sector.

Dr. Small states that “race” is everywhere but it’s nowhere, and so much depends on who you are asking. Institutional racism was central to the expansion of the state in all of the countries, yet people in power will say “don’t look at” racism. Use proxy descriptors ---look under terms like immigrant, ethnicity, slaves, natives, africans, integration, missionary, civil service. The evidence of violence is in military museums, collections, etc. How to decolonize the mind: just ask black people, you don’t need fancy academics! The problem is the people in power don’t want to hear the answer. Look for books written by black people.

There is frustration with collection development issues and dissatisfaction with what our vendors provide. How do we collect these materials without being extractive?

Dr. Small recommends independent, alternative bookstores and going beyond regular academic books.

Dr. Kelly emphasizes the language point: buy the materials that are in German (because to write them in English makes it “international” and not national).

What are starting points for collections?

Dr. Kelly recommends for Germany starting with *Farbe bekennen* (Showing our Colors) - first contemporary work of black feminists from Germany, books like Robbie Aikens' *Black Germany*.

Any additional comments?

- Institutionalization means documentation and archiving materials. What can be digitized? How can it be made available to a wider audience?
- Find people who are doing the work in our own communities.