



Q&A

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What area of research do you focus on and why?

From school onwards I was most interested in German history and when I started my PhD this was what I was intending on focusing on – I loved all things Weimar, especially the cultural scene – the art, the films, the fiction and theatre of the period. But; I was fortunate that my supervisor at Liverpool University, Eve Rosenhaft, had found some notes in the margins of a Weimar police report where it mentioned two Black men who were involved in Communist demonstrations around 1930 as well as two other Black men who had forged British banknotes in Berlin – she suggested I try to find out more. Well...it took me some time and I ended up writing a PhD on something entirely different (white settlers in the German colony of German Southwest Africa - Namibia), but these stories never left me. I continued to dig in archives and the more I eventually found, the more I was encountering a side of German history about which I had absolutely no idea. And; I could find almost nothing written about it by other historians – either in German or in English (there was certainly nothing in any textbook on German history – and this hasn't changed). Here was a real hidden history.

More than 17 years later I am still trying to recover the stories of these Black men, from Germany's African colonies, and others who lived and settled in Germany from the 1880s onwards up to the end of the Nazi period. I would now describe myself as an historian of Black Europe. This field is vital because it challenges traditional histories of Europe, which tend to exclude or ignore the active role that Black men and women have played in European history. It also demonstrates that Europeaness and Blackness are not two mutually exclusive identities. And; it helps to show that ideas of a global Black identity were/are also shaped in Europe.

What book in your field should everyone read?

Showing our Colors (*Farbe Bekennen*, originally published in 1986). This is more of an activist book than a traditional history book; a collection of materials written by Black German women of three different generations (a real primary source) in which they talk about their experiences of being Black in Germany. There are fantastic poems written by the late May Ayim, roundtable discussions, historical overviews and interviews, including one with two ladies who lived through the Weimar and Nazi periods – this provides a really important insight into the lives of Black people during the Nazi period. When I started working in this area, *Showing our Colors* was one of the very few books to focus on Black Germans. It is now seen as being a foundational text for a Black German identity – a moment when a Black community became increasingly visible.

I would also recommend the recently translated autobiography of the late, Theodor Wonja Michael, *Black German: An Afro-German Life in the Twentieth Century*. I was very fortunate to get to know Herr Michael, who was born in 1925. He lived a quite remarkable life and the book captures a lot of this.

Which book inspired you to study History?

That's a good question. I'm not sure if there was any one book, but I do think that my love of comics such as Tin Tin, Asterix, and the cowboy Lucky Luke all of which engaged with history (and are themselves now useful primary sources – especially Tin Tin), helped make me more curious to know more about the contexts in which the stories were set.



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What book are you currently reading?

At the moment, I'm struggling to find time to read! In my spare time I have been making my way through *His Dark Materials*, which I'm really enjoying. For research, I am not actually reading a book, but I have been very fortunate that the daughter of one of the Black German families I write about has sent me dozens of her mother's letters and 4 albums worth of photographs. For me this has been like Christmas and my Birthday coming at once! It a real treasure trove of information and I'm still thinking through what I will do with it. The photographs are really amazing and provide intimate, visual evidence of a Black community pre-1945, that no one has seen!

Which historian has had the greatest influence on you?

I'm going to cheat and suggest two people (one of whom is not even an historian!):

- 1) Prof. Anthony McElligott, an expert in German history – especially of 1890-1945. I was fortunate to have Tony as a tutor when I started studying at St Andrews University. From the beginning he challenged, encouraged and to a certain extent frightened me! He completely changed my ideas as to what history is (and can be). Tony used paintings, poems, sociological texts and films in his teaching – he introduced me to classic Weimar films such as *Metropolis* and my favourite film *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*, as well as to the paintings of Grosz, Dix, Mammen – he gave us the tools to see history as more than simply names, dates and facts. It really felt like moving from 2D to 3D! I have tried to instil the same interests, intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm in my own students.
- 2) My late, former colleague Prof. Kate Marsh, Professor of French. Kate and I started together and shared an office at the University of Liverpool, when we were both beginning postdocs. Kate was an expert in French colonial literature, who also knew a huge amount about French colonial history, especially about the relationship between France and India – she was brilliant at combining literature analysis with historical studies. Amongst my peers she was, without doubt, the most impressive academic I have ever met. Despite being fiercely academic, Kate was always able to engage with and get enthusiastic about the work of others (from undergraduates to world experts), regardless as to how different their research might be – she would always take the time and find something constructive and positive to say and was always encouraging. She is sadly missed and was, for me, a great role model.

What is the best museum you have ever been to?

Wow, that's a tough question. My favourite museum is the Riverside, Museum of Transport in Glasgow. I'm old enough to remember the old museum of transport, which I also loved. The new museum is not just a fabulous building, designed by Zaha Hadid, but I really like the recreated Glasgow street. You can go into numerous recreated shops, pubs, cafes to get a sense as to what life was like in pre-World War Two Glasgow. I also love the recreated underground – known as the Clockwork Orange in Glasgow because of the colour of the trains – which you can also 'travel' on.

We found your exhibition and lecture on Black Germany fascinating! Thank you!



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