CARAH
«Who is This Black Man in a Prussian Spiked Helmet?»
A Conversation with Jeff Bowersox from the Black Central
European Studies Network

CARAH: How did the idea for Black Central European Studies Network (BCESN) emerge? What prompted the specific focus on German-speaking Central Europe? And in what ways has the network grown or transformed since its inception— academically, institutionally, or publicly?

Jeff Bowersox: The project initially emerged out of a very practical problem faced by my friend Kristin Kopp, a Germanist at University of Missouri, and myself, then in the history department at the University of Southern Mississippi. We were both concerned that our departments, and humanities programs generally, were struggling to draw in students of color. As one way to address this, we wondered if there was any way that we could connect the stories of Black Americans in particular with our own academic specializations in German studies. We were both trained as scholars of German colonialism (Kristin with a focus on Germans' views of Eastern Europe and myself focused on how young Germans were educated on the colonial world overseas), and Kristin was familiar with the then even more marginalized field of Black German studies. If I remember correctly, we had this conversation in the bar at a German Studies Association conference. We sat there and talked through how we might structure a semester-long class on the subject, literally sketched out details on a cocktail napkin, and then went back to our departments to pitch the idea and find scholarly and historical materials. As we struggled with the challenge of finding suitable materials for the course—at the time, resources on this topic were not easy to obtain in the US—and realized we would have to translate class readings for our students anyway, we hit upon the idea of making them publicly available for anyone else who might want to do something similar. For help with this work, we reached out to friends and colleagues with more expertise in the area, formed an informal research network, and the idea grew from there until the website became a reality.

We have always thought that it was important to keep it focused on our own particular area of expertise (German-speaking Europe) to maintain academic credibility for the project. It's also been important to us that it be known that this region has had a very long and little-known history with ideas and experiences of Blackness. This supports those ‹on the ground› in the Germanophone world who want to challenge those who ignore this reality, while also offering important insights for those familiar with other contexts. The German-speaking lands have their own distinct histories, even when these are intertwined with those of the Anglophone world or the rest of Europe. We've had a vision from the start that Black Central Europe could be just one of a host of similar projects tracing similar histories across the continent.

CARAH: One of the network's main platforms is its website, which offers an extensive collection of texts and images related to over 1,000 years of Black history in the German-speaking world, carefully organized by chronological era. In addition to this historical material, the site features biographies of key figures, links to documentaries and YouTube videos, and provides information on Afro-European and anti-racist organizations active in Central Europe. It's an immense and ambitious undertaking. What were the incentives or goals behind creating such a comprehensive digital resource? What are the advantages and challenges of using a digital platform to share this research and engage the public?

J.B.: As I mentioned before, our goal has always been to provide resources of use on the ground in the German-speaking world, both for activists seeking to push forward societal awareness on a national scale and also for members of the general public interested in local community projects. We have worked with Philipp Khabo Koepsell and the Each One Teach One empowerment project in Berlin, for example, publicizing material from their archive and supplementing some of their publications.[1] One of the main challenges faced by anyone working in this area is making connections with others doing related work, and we wanted to do what we could to make that possible. One measure of the success we've had in this regard is the steady drip of emails that I get from the widest range of people: undergraduates working on a thesis, artists looking for information, museum exhibitors seeking permission to use materials, any number of people reaching out with their own personal stories to share. It's a treat to get to correspond with them. That said, it's pretty clear that in our social media age this is no longer a job well-suited to an old-fashioned website! The most productive way of keeping up with events is surely through other, more immediate media, but the steady number of visitors and the frequency of individual contacts suggest to me that the website still fulfills its central mission.

If there's another major challenge worth noting, it's less technical and more about resources. Maintaining, much less updating the website takes a lot of time. So, regular visitors over the years will have noticed that the site goes through periods when it suddenly expands as we find new materials or our students write new entries, or we introduce a new feature. It's always been a volunteer project run off a few very small grants for specific purposes (e.g. translations), which means that our passion unfortunately often must give way to our teaching, writing, and administrative responsibilities.

CARAH: What significance do images and visual sources have for you as a historian and in your research?

J.B.: For me, visual material is absolutely crucial to my work. I am a specialist in the turn of the twentieth century, an era when often striking visual imagery could be produced on an unprecedented mass scale and used in entirely new ways to communicate and argue and entertain and manipulate and profit. In my own narrow research, which traces Black entertainers in the ragtime era, the visual record these entertainers left behind is crucially important.[2] These were peripatetic performers engaging in ephemeral activity, the only evidence for which is often found in a few words of a newspaper review. But the postcards and promotional images they used to advertise and to amplify their presence were forms of self-expression, often the only expressions that survive. These images offer a glimpse of what they might have done on stage, but, more importantly, they also show us how these entertainers wanted us to see them. Here the visual record is itself an intervention, a form of

testimony facilitated by the technological innovations and capitalist structures of print culture and popular entertainments that otherwise profited handsomely from stereotypes that performers had little control over.

CARAH: BCESN primarily brings together Germanists and historians, yet the site places striking emphasis on visual sources including portraits, prints, posters and photographs. What guided your decision to foreground visual culture as a central form of historical evidence? Was this an intentional effort to challenge traditional textual hierarchies in historical scholarship, or did the visual archive emerge organically as particularly revealing in the context of Black Central Europe?

J.B.: I wouldn't say that it was an intentional effort to challenge scholarly conventions or hierarchies, although, as someone who works a lot with visual material, I'm sympathetic to that effort. Rather, I think it's a practical response to the challenge of uncovering experiences and representations of Blackness in eras where that Blackness has been erased, forgotten, or otherwise omitted from traditional archives. This is particularly true for the Middle Ages and early modern period, when the most obvious and richest evidence lies in the visual record, e.g. religious iconography and various kinds of portraits. As a modernist by training, working with these sources has been one of the greatest delights of this project, but this material is also especially useful both for classroom teaching and for efforts to publicize historical presences. Providing visual evidence is a striking rejoinder to anyone who might presume «well, there just weren't Black people around then,» and it's a really efficient way to raise destabilizing questions: who is this Black man in a Prussian spiked helmet,[3] and what does our surprise at this mean about our assumptions of Germanness? I would go further to say that the visual record can also illustrate the tools by which such presences have been erased or minimized. For me, the best example of this is a photograph of two Black students in Berlin, one of whom we know is named Kwassi Bruce (fig. 1),[4] happily going to school with white schoolmates. Here is a scene

1 Otto Haeckel, «Ausländer in Berlin», 1905, photograph published in *Die Woche: moderne illustrierte Zeitschrift*, 7:42, 1905, pp. 1837–1840, p. 1837

of camaraderie among young Berlin boys, but the caption works very hard to frame what we are seeing as something else. It highlights that they are «foreigners in Berlin» even if the article also celebrates the fact that they are «a pair of colored schoolboys who otherwise are no different than real Berliner lads.»[5] The commentary on the visual record works to make Blackness visible but also foreign. Despite being raised in the city from a young age, these boys cannot be «real Berliner lads» and thus are more easily forgotten in the historical record.

CARAH: From an art historical and visual studies perspective, the material you've collected and contextualized spans a very broad spectrum—from Erasmus Grasser's *Morris Dancers* (1480, fig. 2) and Albrecht Dürer's *Portrait of Katharina* (1521, fig. 3), to early 20th-century postcards of members of a performance troupe called the Bonambelas (fig. 4), as well as photographs of Black university students storming the premiere of *Africa Addio* at the Astor Cinema on Kurfürstendamm

2 Erasmus Grasser, Morris dancer with headdress, 1480, painted limewood, height 63 cm, Munich Stadtmuseum / Photo Guther Adler, Ernst Jank

3 Albrecht Dürer, *Katharina*, 1521, silverpoint drawing on paper, 20 × 14 cm, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence / Photo Raffaello Bencini

4 The Bonambelas, postcard, ca. 1927, 10,5 × 14,8 cm, Collection Aitken

in 1966. This wide range not only reflects the evolving presence of Black individuals in German-speaking countries but also exposes the shifting visual codes of racial representation—from exoticized stereotypes, to the work of artists challenging those tropes, to moments of outright political defiance and resistance. How do you approach the question of representation when working with such a varied and sometimes problematic visual archive? And along the way, what were some of your most surprising findings?

J.B.: The website's broad purpose is to make visible both experiences and ideas of Blackness over the last millennium or so, not least because they are often inseparable. The experience of being Black in a moment—whatever that might mean in that particular moment—is never untouched by the range of visual imagery that floats through the ether and gets deployed in media, state policy, interpersonal interactions, and other contexts. Inevitably that means engaging with even the most demeaning of representations, not least because resistant practices must be understood at least in part as a challenge to those. Indeed, doing so can also help us see how even the most offensive portrayals are not omnipotent or even necessarily stable but constantly require shoring up in the face of challenges large and small. Perhaps the most interesting, powerful, and indeed also surprising findings—especially for a modernist like myself—have lain in how we historicize visual imagery from the distant past and how we relate those to the present. The reason why we reach as far back into the Middle Ages as we do is partly because there are Africans and their descendants in the German-speaking world far earlier than most presume.
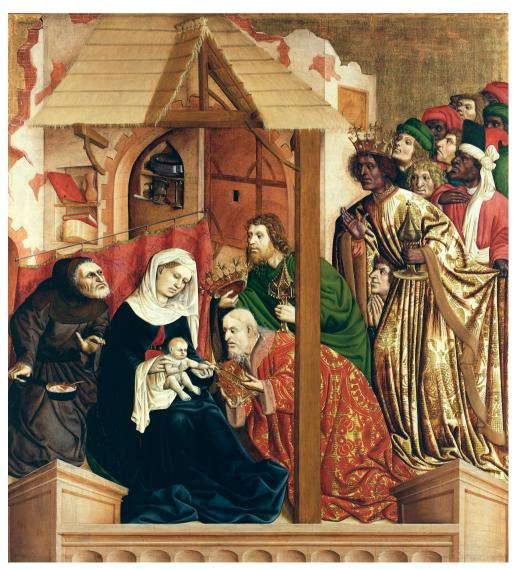
5 St. Maurice in Magdeburg, Cathedral of St. Maurice and St. Catherine, choir, ca. 1240–50, sandstone, height 115 cm

But, just as importantly, it is because there are representations of what we today call Blackness in an era before the development of our modern understandings of race, shaped as they were by the transatlantic slave trade. So, a 13th-century depiction of St. Maurice (fig. 5) or 15th-century depictions of a Black magus (fig. 6) raise profound questions about how to conceive of human difference in an era shaped by very different presumptions. Charting the paths by which more recognizable frames of reference entered the historical record, we can appreciate that they are not inevitable or permanent or even fully consistent in any era, even if it might seem that way from inside the moment. If I had to pick one set of images that illustrate this best, I'd have to point to the shifts in depiction of St. Maurice in coats of arms over centuries,[6] as it's a particularly bald example of colonial and racist reference points seeping into German visual culture and thus also helps challenge those who might argue that a racist caricature is simply a ‹tradition› that must be maintained.

CARAH: Are there particular scholars or methodological approaches from within art history and visual culture studies that have shaped how you approach visual material within the project?

J.B.: Probably the most important scholar who has shaped our approach to visual material is Paul Kaplan, an art historian who specializes in medieval and early modern visual culture.[7] The insights around these eras owe a considerable amount to his pathbreaking work in the field and the efforts he has put into helping modernist scholars (like myself) understand our trips into the strangeness of these long-distant periods. Other scholars who have a more indirect influence would include Tina Campt. She has written with such insight on how to take everyday sorts of images, like personal photo albums or studio photographs, and listen for the low-frequency hums that resonate with an aspirational quest to live lives unbounded by existing racist structures.[8]

6 Hans Multscher, *The Adoration of the Magi* (Wurzach altarpiece), 1437, oil on fir wood, 150 × 140 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie / Photo Jörg P. Anders

CARAH: The website is, for the most part, bilingual—making its content accessible in both English and German. This opens it up to a wider audience but also introduces complex questions around translation, especially when dealing with historically and culturally loaded terms and context-specific references. What are some of the key challenges you've encountered in navigating these linguistic dynamics? How do you deal with problematic or offensive terms in titles, captions, and annotations in the context of BCESN and your own research?

J.B.: I think there are probably two fundamental translational challenges involved in how individual words translate between German and English, languages that have different histories and politics surrounding the question of race. Take the very word, ‹race›. In German you might translate that word as ‹*Rasse*›, but the associations are very different. *Rasse* is a word associated with the Nazi project and animal breeding and is basically taboo as a descriptive term. It would certainly never be taken up as a neutral term of analysis or as a term of minority empowerment, and instead the English word ‹race› has been taken up to fill this role, especially within academic or activist or even journalistic discourse. Racism/Racist (‹*Rassismus/rassistisch*›) have been more commonly used in German since 1945 since they refer to the problems of *Rasse* as a concept, and you might say one exception to this rule is the occasional incorporation of certain academic neologisms from English into German (to racialize = *rassifizieren*). But there is a profound discomfort with both the language and the concept of ‹race› that posed challenges, for example, for the translations of document introductions from English into German.

Not only the histories but also the contemporary politics are different in the Anglophone and the Germanophone contexts. A persistent association of race with Nazis and the related assumption that anti-Black racism is a uniquely American problem has led to distinctive linguistic fights within the German language, not least surrounding terms whose equivalents have largely disappeared from polite speech in English. Some of these are largely anachronistic, like the occasional use of ‹*farbig*›, which is the equivalent of ‹colored›. But others are much more sharply contested, and this gets us right to the nub of the problem, namely how to deal with language that is objectionable to many in the present but was commonly used in the past, sometimes with different meanings than they have now. In Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, activists have made creating taboos around such terms a particular focus of their work, and this is because their use has been relatively commonplace until very recently and calls for change have been stubbornly resisted by some as political correctness (or, now, ‹woke-ness›). To push forward their case, activists have called for their elimination from speech (e.g. using *N-Wort*, the ‹n-word› as a euphemism) but also for writing practices designed to highlight their objectionable nature. In activist and academic circles and increasingly in more general media you will find the words dashed-out (*N----* or *N****).

This raises two really tricky questions: how to translate German words from historical sources into contemporary English and whether to use the words at all. Although the words today have a relatively straightforward meaning, in past eras they could be used in a variety of ways. Sometimes the *N-Wort* was absolutely pejorative, but more often it was in the same sense as the past use of ‹Negro›, which of course could be used pejoratively just as it could also be used as a relatively neutral descriptor and even a term of self-designation. The work of deciding whether to use ‹Negro› or ‹Black› or more pejorative options thus becomes a matter of interpretation

based on intention, context, and other factors to make the contemporary meaning legible to a present-day reader. And this is always done with cautious and precise language. We must remain aware of the temptation to anachronistically cast back into the distant past our current notions of ‹Blackness› onto people and times where those notions would have made little sense. As far as using the words themselves on the site, the fact is that we don't all agree! While most of the pages on the site reproduce the words in their original form, some authors choose to dash the words out in solidarity with activists on the ground. Just as in the Anglosphere, there are ongoing and fluid debates about how best to engage with such terms, and our site also reflects that.

CARAH: As the website is an educational resource aimed at students, it's great that it keeps evolving through contributions by students themselves. You mentioned earlier that you had a vision from the start—that Black Central Europe could eventually become more than a stand-alone project, growing into a model for collaborative, interdisciplinary research across disciplines and geographies. What would that broader vision ideally look like? What are the network's future plans or aspirations?

J.B.: We are delighted to see that there is such a wealth of scholar-activism all across the continent, and the diversity of forms this takes is really inspiring. There are museum exhibitions, archives, websites, podcasts, conferences, artistic and performance projects, and an innumerable collection of social media accounts, and we aspire to be a reference point and a support for anyone wanting to learn about Black histories in Europe. In the future we hope to further expand our student-produced projects and to find new ways to curate our materials so they are easier to find online. If anyone wants to use our material and spread the word, all they have to do is ask.

Notes

1 Each One Teach One (EOTO) e.V., founded in 2012, is a community-based education and empowerment project in Berlin. For more information see: https://eoto-archiv.de/ueber-uns, accessed July 15, 2025.

2 The broad research project is visualized through a map and brief overview hosted in *Black Central Europe*: https://blackcentraleurope.com/interactive-maps/, accessed July 17, 2025. For publications from this project, see Jeff Bowersox: Seeing Black. Foote's Afro-American Company and the Performance of Racial Uplift in Imperial Germany in 1891, in: German History 38:3 (2020), pp. 387–413; Jeff Bowersox: Blackface and Black Faces on German and Austrian Stages, 1847–1914, in: Staging Blackness. Representations of Race in German-Speaking Drama and Theater, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2024.

3 Jeff Bowersox: Gustav Sabac El Cher. A Prussian Love Story (1890), https://blackcentraleurope.com/sources/1850-1914/a-prussian-love-story/, accessed July 15, 2025.

4 Robbie Aitken: Kwassi Bruce To The Colonial Department Of The Foreign Office (1934), https://blackcentraleurope.com/sources/1914-1945/kwassi-bruce-to-the-colonial-department-of-the-foreign-office-1934/, accessed July 15, 2025.

5 Walter Tiedemann: Ausländer in Berlin, in: Die Woche 7:42, 1905, pp. 1837–1840, p. 1837.

6 Jeff Bowersox: St. Maurice becomes a Savage and a Caricature on a Family Crest (ca. 1345-present), https://blackcentraleurope.com/sources/1500-1750/st-maurice-becomes-a-noble-savage-and-a-racist-caricature-on-a-family-crest-ca-1345-present/, accessed July 15, 2025.

7 See for example: Paul Kaplan: The Rise of the Black Magus in Western Art, Ann Arbor, Michigan 1985 and Paul Kaplan: Contraband Guides. Race, Transatlantic Culture and the Arts in the Civil War Era, Penn State 2020.

8 See: Tina Campt: Listening to Images, Durham 2017 and Tina Campt: Other Germans. Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich, Ann Arbor, Michigan 2005.