

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> Sheffield Hallam University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UOA28 – History		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Making Visible the Invisible: Germany's Black Diaspora Community, 1884-1945		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> February 2003 – present		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>  Robbie Aitken	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>  Senior Lecturer 2010; Reader 2015-20; Professor 2020	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> September 2010 – present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> January 2015 - present		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		

## 1. Summary of the impact

Aitken's research has made visible the forgotten history of Germany's first Black community, 1884-1945, enabling new narratives of the German past to be told. In shaping exhibition projects in Germany (18,000 visitors) and through staging his own exhibition in the UK, Germany, and Cameroon (3,700 visitors) his work has had local and international impact.

For the first time diverse audiences, including schoolchildren, educators, refugees, museums, and the public, have discovered the active role Black people have played throughout German history. In connection with discussions about the colonial past his research has attracted interest from the German media and the German parliament, and it has helped multiple Black German families learn more about the remarkable lives of their ancestors.



## 2. Underpinning research

Throughout his career at Sheffield Hallam University Aitken's research has challenged continued public perceptions in Germany and beyond that Germanness and Blackness are two mutually exclusive categories, and that the country's Black population is a recent phenomenon. Instead, he

### Impact case study (REF3)

has demonstrated the active role played by Black people throughout German history. His major findings were first showcased in the ground-breaking monograph *Black Germany* (2013, **R5**), co-written with Eve Rosenhaft, University of Liverpool, and later synthesized in his 2018 book chapter (**R1**). *Black Germany* was the first work to comprehensively evidence the existence of a Black community in Germany from the onset of German colonialism in 1884 up to the collapse of Nazi rule in 1945, when the community was in decline.

The monograph moved beyond the handful of pioneering texts, produced foremost by Black German activists from the late 1980s, which consisted primarily of single biographies of well-documented lives. *Black Germany* made a major contribution by bringing together unknown materials from 65 archives, in 11 countries, 3 continents, and in 6 languages as well as interview material with several Black German families to provide a collective biography of first-generation arrivals from Germany's African colonies. Employing biographical information on over 285 Africans (primarily Cameroonians) as well as on dozens of their German-born children and grandchildren it demonstrated the existence of a small, visible Black community and embedded its stories into the wider contours of European and Imperial history. Among many important findings it detailed the ways in which community was constructed, outlining the social and political connections a diverse range of Black people formed at local, national and transnational levels. This revealed their role in an evolving, global Black diasporic vision; a theme taken up in a later 2018 article (**R2**) which detailed Black Germans' links to prominent African Americans as well as their ties to Black Internationalism. *Black Germany* was also the first work to demonstrate the trajectory and genocidal intent of Nazi policy and practice towards Black people.

More recent publications have continued this recovery work including a 2016 article (**R3**) which employed a database constructed with information over 1,000 African visitors to Germany pre-1914. Utilizing a vast array of unused primary materials, it added considerable empirical depth to existing knowledge about the African presence, demonstrating how diverse this presence was, while also presenting explanations for this diversity.

From the outset Aitken unearthed and collected a wealth of unpublished visual materials, which provided a unique insight into Black peoples' everyday life in Germany. Extensive use of these was made in *Black Germany* and in later work (**R4**). The arresting power of the images and the remarkable biographies they spoke to inspired Aitken to create a travelling exhibition (**R6**) as a means of increasing public awareness and reaching non-academic audiences. Developed in 2014 and expanded in 2017 the modular exhibition, *Black Germany 1884-1945*, is composed of 10 displays featuring 19 biographies and multiple photographs as well as timelines which anchor the biographies in wider German and African history. Collectively the pieces tell the story of Germany's first Black Diaspora Community.

### 3. References to the research

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- R1.** 'Germany's Black Diaspora: The Emergence and Struggles of a Community, 1880s-1945', in BDG Network (eds.), *Black Diaspora and Germany: Deutschland und die Schwarze Diaspora* (Munster: Edition Assemblage, 2018), pp. 84-100  
<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/24396/>
- R2.** 'Embracing Germany: Interwar Germany and Black Germans through the Eyes of African-American Reporters', *Journal of American History* 52/2 (2018), pp.447-473  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187581700041X>
- R3.** 'A Transient Presence: Black Visitors and Sojourners in Imperial Germany, 1884-1914' in *Immigrants and Minorities* 34/3 (2016), pp.233-53  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02619288.2016.1202769>
- R4.** 'Selling the Mission: The German Catholic elite and the educational migration of African youngsters to Europe', *German History* 33/1 (2015), pp.30-51  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghu109>
- R5.** *Black Germany: The Making and Unmaking of a Diaspora Community*, with Eve Rosenhaft (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 2015)

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139649575>

- R6. *Black Germany* Exhibition, 1884-1945, travelling exhibition (2015-present)  
<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/27299/>

All publications and articles were rigorously peer-reviewed prior to publication.

#### 4. Details of the impact

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##### **Black German History - Changing Attitudes and Understanding in Cameroon, Germany and the UK**

Since 2015 Aitken's exhibition has been viewed in Cameroon, Germany and the UK by a diverse audience (approximately 3700 visitors) including students, activists, museum practitioners, educators, and members of the public. In December 2019 it opened at the Goethe Institute (GI) Yaoundé, Cameroon. The GI is Germany's principal cultural institution. The exhibition met its declared objective of critically engaging with Germany's colonial past. Black Germany was groundbreaking in becoming the first exhibition on the historical experiences of Black Germans ever staged in the country. (E1) Over three weeks it attracted around 350 visitors and received 1,400 likes on the GI's Facebook page. (E1) Aitken ran a series of workshops with a dozen local postgraduate students, archivists and schoolteachers, providing them with in-depth knowledge of an aspect of Cameroonian history they knew little about. Several participants were subsequently inspired to carry out their own research and Aitken has continued to provide support in the form of archival materials and texts. A copy of the exhibition was left in Yaoundé as a legacy of the cooperation with the GI, enabling it to help local community and school groups learn more about this shared German/Cameroonian history. (E1)

In the UK and Germany the exhibition has been staged at fourteen locations including the Museum of Slavery, Liverpool (2015), the GI, Freiburg (2017), Off the Shelf Festival, Sheffield (2019), and the German Historical Institute, London (2019). The latter's Director praised it as "*a prime example of how longstanding, pioneering research can be made more widely accessible.*" (E6) In Freiburg it served as a 'frame' for Here and Black, a series of public events promoting Black German history, and was seen by over 340 visitors. The programme convener described it as a series 'highlight', which 'raised public awareness', 'imparted inaccessible knowledge' and demonstrated the contemporary relevance of this forgotten history. (E3) A month-long run at the Global South Studies Centre, Cologne in 2017 was considered "*one of the most successful events in the centre's history,*" contributing 'significantly' to the centre's outreach activities through reaching a wide and diverse public audience. (E3) 140 people attended an opening public discussion on the marginalisation of Black History, which featured as guest of honour the 93-year-old Black German Holocaust survivor Theodor Michael, about whom Aitken has written.

100% of visitor feedback in the form of guestbook comments and questionnaires was positive. The exhibition was variously described as 'wonderful', 'important', 'fascinating' (E2, E4, E7). Visitors expressed surprise at the histories encountered and/or explicitly expressed a desire to find out more (65%). Especially in Germany and Cameroon visitors expressed feelings of empowerment in seeing aspects of their history being told (35%):

*"For Afro-German people in Germany like myself it is important, inspiring and incredibly heartening to take part in events like todays."* (E4)

*"Thank you that through this you have made us Afro-Germans a little more visible."* (E4)

*"Your work sheds tremendous light on the history of our country and world history. It gives the energy to dig further."* (E2)

In Freiburg, African refugees who visited the exhibition were amazed to learn of migrants who 100 years earlier had similarly fought to create a life in Germany. This moved one Gambian man to interview Aitken about this for 'Our Voice' on Radio Dreyeckland, a programme aimed at and organised by refugees. (E3)

In Germany, the exhibition received extensive media coverage from national (ARD), regional (WDR), and local (DomRadio) radio stations as part of wider growing media engagement with

### Impact case study (REF3)

German colonialism.(E3) This coverage served to extend public awareness of the links between the colonial past and Black German present and the exhibition's contemporary relevance was explicitly commented on by the *Badische Zeitung* (circulation 145,000) and *Kölnische Rundschau* (circulation 250,000). The former praised the 'incredible and impressive' biographies presented, while the latter reported that it offered 'new starting points' for recovering this neglected history.(E5)

The exhibition has been used with schoolchildren. In 2019, secondary schoolchildren in Biedenkopf, Germany participated in workshops on anti-racism, centred around the exhibition. Feedback demonstrates they were surprised by the lack of public knowledge about this aspect of their history, while they actively made links between the colonial past and the contemporary experiences of refugees in Europe.(E8) In 2019 Aitken ran workshops with over 70 secondary schoolchildren in Liverpool and Cambridgeshire on Black experiences of Nazi Germany. Pupils' feedback shows the exhibition sparked interest in Black history as well as deepening and broadening their knowledge of German history. Teachers' responses emphasised the benefits pupils gained from hearing different historical voices, which caused many to think about whose history is represented on the school curriculum.(E8) Several schools are reusing the workshop materials Aitken created with future year groups and these materials have been shared with three further schools enabling them to diversify their curriculum content. Teacher Jess Angell wrote about the value of working with exhibition for Teaching History, a magazine aimed at secondary school teachers: these materials and knowledge are "something we can begin to use when we come to re-plan our Key Stage 3 curriculum."(E8)

#### Shaping Remembrance in Germany

Aitken's research has made significant contributions to four recent exhibitions in Germany, enabling museums to bring a Black German dimension to larger historical events.

#### **Zurückgeschaut (2017), Treptow-Koepenick Museum, Berlin and Racism, German Hygiene Museum, Dresden (2018)**

Aitken was asked by the NGOs Postkolonial Berlin and the Initiative of Black People in Germany to contribute to Zurückgeschaut; the country's first and only permanent exhibition to critically engage with colonial and Black German history. He produced 15 of 25 biographies of Black Germans around which the exhibition is organised. His contribution was considered 'decisive' in enabling the realization of the project.(E9) Over 300 people attended the opening, including the Tanzanian and Namibian ambassadors. In the first 6 months over 4,000 people visited the museum: a 4-fold increase in visitor numbers. In total of 8,000 people have now seen the exhibition, which has received widespread media attention, including featuring on the German Parliament's webpage.(E9) This represents a growing recognition of the country's need to confront its colonial history. Aitken is currently working with the museum on an expanded version of the exhibition for 2021. This has included mentoring two young, Black German students on how to find and use archival documents for the relaunch. Additionally, two of Aitken's biographies were selected to provide personal stories to a larger exhibition on the history of race at the German Hygiene Museum, Dresden.

#### **Forschungswerkstatt: Kolonialgeschichte (2017) and Revolution 1918/19 (2018), Tempelhof-Schöneberg Museum, Berlin**

Museum director, Dr Goetz only discovered that Black men had lived in interwar Schöneberg after reading Black Germany. Aitken provided biographical and contextual information to enable her to include their stories as an important part of the 2017 exhibition on the district's previously hidden colonial links. This attracted 10,000 visitors.(E9) The museum continued to diversify the content of its exhibitions and in 2018 it was inspired to use Aitken's research on the Cameroonian Joseph Bilé as the basis for one of five stories through which the post-World War One experiences of people in Schöneberg were told.

#### **Recovering Family Histories for descendants of Black Germans**

Aitken's series of exhibitions, public lectures and research activities has often brought him into contact with the descendants of Black Germans he has written about. Correspondence with contemporary Black German families has demonstrated the profound personal impact of the discovery of family histories for those people who had previous little knowledge about their

### Impact case study (REF3)

relatives' lives. The following excerpts from correspondence are indicative of the significance of the recovery of lost family histories for the individuals concerned (E10):

Relative M.W. wrote: "*one of my life's puzzles has now been solved*", when hearing that *Zurückgeschaut* featured Aitken's work on her great-grandfather.

J.M. was astonished to see an image of her Togolese great-grandfather at Aitken's exhibition. He sent further photographs and information, which she shared with her wider family: "*We ... gave them to our grandmother on Christmas, she was extremely happy. ... It is very exciting to learn more about your own family this way.*" Her mother travelled from Germany to see the exhibition in London.

B.E. whose Cameroonian grandfather features in Aitken's work wrote: "*I want to thank you so much for bringing my grandfather to life ... he was just a man in a photograph ... now, all these years later, I'm communicating with his great grand-niece.*" Aitken connected B.E. with members of her wider family in the US and Cameroon about whom she had no previous knowledge.

T.M., a Black German, was recently connected by Aitken with the family of a Togolese German childhood friend he had grown up with in the 1930s.

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

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- E1.** Written statement and feedback from Goethe Institute, Yaoundé, Cameroon, 2019
- E2.** Visitor and workshop participant feedback, Yaoundé, Cameroon, 2019
- E3.** Written statements from German host institutions, 2015, 2017
- E4.** Collated visitor feedback Germany, 2017
- E5.** Media coverage Germany, 2017
- E6.** Written statement Professor Christina von Hodenberg, GHI London, 2019
- E7.** Collated visitor feedback, UK, 2015, 2019
- E8.** Feedback from schoolteachers and pupils, UK and Germany, 2019
- E9.** Written statements German museums, 2017, 2018
- E10.** Collated email communication excerpts from Black German families, 2014-2019