



## GREY SKIES AND SILVER LININGS ALEXANDER BEVILACQUA

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Early on a Saturday morning in October, I visited Sanssouci for the first time. Rushing to make my allotted time slot, I entered the park from the east, past an obelisk spangled with fake hieroglyphics. Frost iced the hedges and the early morning sunlight sliced diagonally across the path. Soon I reached four marble busts on plinths: two Black women and two men. Glistening in the light and frost, the sculptures were more arresting than anything else I saw that day (only later would I learn that I'd been looking at twentieth-century copies). Within the palace, four further Black busts dotted the long gallery dedicated to the *fêtes galantes* of Watteau and others. Why did Frederick II of Prussia place these works in the garden that was dearest to him, as well as in the gallery of his most beloved paintings?

As the city of Berlin went into ever deeper versions of lockdown, and non-essential businesses (not to mention archives, libraries, and museums) closed to the public, I plumbed the history of the Black people at the courts of the Holy Roman Empire. My questions moved beyond the design of the garden and the placement of the busts to the presence of Black men at the Brandenburg-Prussian court, starting not with Frederick II but with his great-grandfather, Friedrich Wilhelm, the so-called Great Elector. Fortunately for me, historians like Craig Koslofsky, Rebekka von Mallinckrodt, and many others have explored aspects of this history. By the end of the seventeenth century, Black attendants were common at German courts. The Atlantic slave trade enabled elite Europeans to acquire enslaved Africans and forcibly bring them to Central Europe, where they were put to work as musicians, pages, valets, and groomsmen. This effort to employ Black people at German courts and in noble households stemmed from the lively interest of European princes and nobles in embodied forms of human difference and, especially, in skin color. The Brandenburg-Prussian case is unique, however, because Brandenburg was the only member of the Holy Roman Empire to participate in the Atlantic slave trade.

As I collected printed and digitized primary sources, as well as modern treatments of this history, I also read art-historical scholarship, histories of the Atlantic economy, whiteness studies, Black feminist scholarship, and intellectual histories of race and racism. That I was able to pursue any of this is a testament to the Wiko library, which never went into lockdown and continued to feed my curiosity with books, journal articles, and exhibition catalogues. I could not be more grateful to Anja, Kirsten, Stefan, Timo, and Jane. For me, their work was the heart of the Wissenschaftskolleg, a heart that continued to beat as the rest of the institution went into a vegetative state.

I had not come to Berlin to work on this. On the contrary, I was preparing a project on the European study of Asian history during the early centuries of European expansion. This work, which was temporarily on hold in Berlin, issued from my earlier research into the European study of Islam in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As a historian of the cultural and intellectual consequences of global interactions, I take a broad interest in how people of the past have perceived and organized human difference. While earlier I focused on religion, race is an enduring way in which people have organized the variety of humankind, and in a manner that exceeds what is colloquially meant by “racism,” for genealogical thinking pervades self-understandings of individuals and groups from families to nations. The European nobility of the medieval and early modern eras were great self-mythologizers, and their self-representations (for example, their invention of the

family tree as a way to visualize descent) contributed to racialization in Europe and beyond, with enduring consequences. In my current work, I am most interested in how European princes and nobles enacted their racialized self-understandings through court festivities such as masquerades and carrousel that often evoked ancient Rome. I will continue to pursue this research well after I have left the Wissenschaftskolleg.

This year did not go as expected. But changing direction in one's research is surely one of the less striking examples of how people transformed their lives in response to a global pandemic. What I also take from this is that if the experiences that we temporary Berliners had anticipated did not occur, other, equally meaningful ones did.

Our disembodied year tested the boundaries of what kind of intellectual community can be sustained without the intimacy of daily interaction. I learned that platforms like Zoom are best at enabling smaller intellectual communities to flourish, for example a workshop for work in progress that I created with Nadine Amsler, the other early modernist in our cohort. Daniel Schönplflug, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, and Nadine's husband, Nadir Weber, were generous conversation partners, and papers by Lorraine Daston, Shamil Jeppie, and Yael Sternhell expanded the range of our discussions, which began in person in the autumn and ended, happily, with a final in-person session in the Wiko garden in June.

Moreover, to say we had a remote community is not to say that we had no community. Even in the darkest moments, whether via email, WhatsApp, or on cold winter walks, the Fellows sustained each other and took care of one another. I am especially grateful to Johannes Böhme and Imogen Savage, Merve Emre and Christian Nakarado, Jaeeun Kim and Sung Ho Kim, Yael Sternhell and Ishay Rosen-Zvi, and Magdalena Waligórska for their friendship. When Wiko itself seemed to disappear into the locked-down city, we found community in each other. Eva Marlene Hausteiner and Helen Pfeifer were likewise indispensable Berlin companions. I took particular joy in getting to know my friends' children, who seemed blissfully unaffected by the ambient gloom. Aydin and Altan Nakarado, who used the year to learn German and grow several inches, surely had the most fruitful fellowship year of anyone. (They were also the most fun to be around.)

In spite of all the lockdowns, even the city itself occasionally delivered: particularly memorable were exhibitions on Aby Warburg (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, pre-lockdown) and Rembrandt's Orient (Museum Barberini, Potsdam, during a two-week reopening of museums in March before they all closed again). Our final month has witnessed reopenings of virtually everything – more riches than we can take in. (This

includes the Prussian State Archives, where I have made an initial foray.) As we prepare to leave, a welcome sound I first heard last August from the street below my Charlottenburg apartment has returned: a man playing a barrel organ for passersby, grinding out, at breakneck speed, the melodies from *La traviata*. This organ grinder is a good deal more cheerful than the lonely one who concludes Schubert's *Winterreise*, because he leaves out Violetta's final, tubercular Act. Good riddance.