

'The Rendezvous for All Pessimists (*Schwarzseher*): Foote's Afro-American Company and the Performance of Racial Uplift in Imperial Germany (1891)

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Around the turn of the twentieth century, dozens of African American entertainers toured on a circuit that linked Germany and the Habsburg lands with the UK, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, France, Russia and the Balkans. From the 1870s to the 1890s, most of these performers came as members of a few large troupes that paved the way, from the 1890s onward, for an ever-growing number of smaller groups and soloists. By 1914 they had become a regular part of variety show programs across the German lands; from bases in major cities like Berlin, Vienna, Hamburg and Budapest they toured regularly to mid-sized cities like Cologne, Graz, Leipzig and Prague and also made occasional stops in smaller towns reaching from Aachen to Zagreb.¹ These black entertainers produced and profited from a broader interest in American popular entertainments, especially those that came to be associated with African Americans. These included what contemporaries considered to be 'traditional' minstrel and folk songs as well as the spirituals made popular by the visit of the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 1877-1878. More popular still were the undeniably 'modern' musical forms inspired by ragtime and such dances as the cakewalk, which captivated middle-class consumers across central Europe after 1900.

Unlike the expansive commentary on the engagement with jazz in the volatile 1920s and 1930s, these pre-war trends in popular entertainment have drawn limited attention.² Much of what we know about black popular entertainers in the German lands has come from the work of Rainer Lotz, whose foundational excavation of biographical, touring and recording details has facilitated further work, but he stops short of drawing conclusions about their broader significance.³ A few scholars of dance and music trends have gone further, exploring the commercial appeal of elements variously understood as 'exotic' or

'modern', the class politics involved in the popularity of 'savage' cultural forms, the extent to which Germans and Austrians appropriated these forms in their own production, and what all of this tells us about the sincerity of their embrace.⁴ Generally speaking, however, these works tend to treat the pre-1914 period as the pre-history of jazz and thus overlook the ways that earlier transatlantic connections were already shaping understandings of nation, race, culture, tradition and modernity in the German lands.

As works by James Deaville, Astrid Kusser and Kira Thurman suggest, the earlier engagement with African American entertainers and entertainments destabilized the presumed links among these concepts, in particular the associations of modernity, progress, culture, and nation-ness with white Europeans and of backwardness, stasis, instinct, and tribalism with black Africans. This destabilization provoked what Jonathan Wipplinger, has described as a 'reevaluation and reinterpretation of the very notion of what it meant to be German in modernity.'⁵ The performers themselves were not incidental or passive bystanders but actively contributed to this dynamic process of contestation, reconfiguration and popularization of competing ideas of race and nation, tradition and modernity. As I will suggest here, understanding the nature and impact of this intervention benefits more from looking backward to the age of romantic nationalism and the rise of an international culture of commercial entertainments than from looking ahead to the age of jazz and high modernism.

To illustrate the challenge presented by African American performance and the range of German responses, this article takes up a little-known case study, the German tour of William Foote's Afro-American Company.⁶ In 1891 the white American impresario William Foote brought together around forty African American entertainers representing the broad range of black popular performance – minstrel song and dance, jubilee choirs, social dance and concert singing – and built a show to demonstrate the rapid progress of African American cultivation since emancipation. With a mostly English-language show,

Foote aimed to win over the land of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. Further, he hoped to parlay that success into a two-year tour through Europe before returning triumphantly to celebrate black cultural achievement at Chicago's Columbian Exposition. The tour did not quite reach this lofty ambition, disbanding after seven months despite consistently enthusiastic crowds, but it was significant nevertheless because it allows us to see the collision between the project of African American racial uplift and German audiences' desire for spectacular entertainments.

I will argue that Foote's company contained a disruptive potential in its pursuit of what Jon Cruz has labelled 'ethnosympathy', a strategy of framing African American culture in ethnographic terms in order to encourage a sympathetic interest in their inner cultural world.⁷ In contrast to the exoticizing frame conventionally chosen by organizers of ethnographic 'people shows' [*Völkerschauen*] of the era, Foote embraced the ideology of racial uplift promoted by African American elites like Booker T. Washington.⁸ In the 1880s and 1890s this meant a focus on cultural development to counter the racist perceptions of white Americans and to build a positive sense of black identity based around patriarchal ideas of respectability and achievement.⁹ In line with the class-based presumptions at the heart of this program, Foote's celebration of African American culture was based on a bourgeois, Eurocentric model that was intended to put black performers and white audiences in the same frame. In this model, African Americans, like Germans, possessed distinctive folk forms that could be refined into cultivated forms with universal value, demonstrating that they had something to contribute to European civilization without having to reject their innate blackness.

While this emphasis on 'folk ethnography' made an uplifting case for an equivalence between African American and German cultures, there was also an ambivalence built into Foote's project that weakened the show's message. Most notably, the white organizers occasionally played to audiences' racialized expectations in their promotional materials.

Further, comic portrayals that built on minstrel tropes arguably undermined the show's claims to bourgeois respectability. As such, Foote's troupe confronted Germans with forms of entertainment and interpretive frames that variously confronted and confirmed their expectations, and this forced German commentators to engage. As they did so, these commentators grappled both with the conflicting messages within the show and with the apparent contradiction posed by black Americans: racialized others from a civilized land.

If we accept that these performers were provoking and contributing to German conversations about race around the turn of the century, the challenge lies in how we understand their impact. One interpretation of this tour would emphasize Germans' predilection to view the performers in terms defined by the increasingly racialized worldview being produced through real and imagined colonial encounters.¹⁰ There is no question that anti-black rhetoric became commonplace within German discussions about the African colonies, and this became part of a broader biopolitical re-framing of the German nation.¹¹ This process was shaped by distinctively American influences as well, although these transatlantic exchanges need more attention.¹² But even as Germans variously merged colonial and American ideas of white supremacy, in practice anti-black discourses were unstable and inconsistent, a fact marked not least in the contrast between the challenges faced by most African migrants to Germany and the relative openness experienced by African Americans.¹³ Such distinctions point to the need to understand competing discourses of blackness in the German lands and the ways they could be used strategically.

Additionally, understanding these performers' impact requires taking into account the site of their engagement with German audiences. Popular entertainments, dependent as they were on the tensions between spectacle and authenticity, provided variable opportunities to exploit the instability of German discourses on blackness. Even within the sharply circumscribed limits of people shows, for example, performers could resist and even confound presumptions of racial alterity and audiences' responses could vary greatly.¹⁴ By

comparison, African Americans on popular stages had more liberty to invent themselves and to engage directly with their audiences, even if their reliance on English could raise a barrier to communication.¹⁵ For Foote's company, we have few sources on the individual performers' strategies or their interactions with audiences, but reading reviewers' commentaries against the grain can give us a glimpse of the disruptive possibilities in their performances.¹⁶

It is unmistakable that Germans drew racialized connections between African Americans and African colonial subjects. Nevertheless, as I will suggest here, performances of American blackness, including those by Foote's Afro-American Company, destabilized Germans' racialized expectations about the connections between folk, nation and culture. They directly challenged presumptions of black inferiority, and they raised the possibility, even if only dimly understood, that German audiences could find common ground across presumed racial differences. This possibility became more apparent when African American music and dance became especially popular among middle-class consumers after 1900. In critics' sometimes agonized efforts to explain the performers' appeal we can see an acknowledgement of this possibility. And in their efforts to reconfigure racialized boundaries in ways that preserved both the integrity of the German nation and their authority as cultural gatekeepers we can see their contributions to a much broader process of boundary-drawing that, as Jürgen Osterhammel has noted, was a characteristic response to the global entanglements of the *fin-de-siècle*.¹⁷

The article begins by surveying Germans' expectations of African American culture through their responses to blackface minstrelsy, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 'Negro songs' and the first black performers in the German lands. As commentators tried to define the 'blackness' and 'Americanness' in these popular entertainments, they argued over the lines between authenticity and invention and between commercial exploitation and artistic merit in ways that conditioned their reception of Foote's troupe. The article then draws on the company's

promotional materials and newspaper reportage to show the crafting of its message of racial uplift, the positive response of the African American press, and the ambivalences built into the project that could undermine its core message. Using German newspaper coverage, I then move on to discuss the German tour and theater and music critics' responses, showing that they engaged incompletely with its message of racial uplift. The article closes by discussing the place of Foote's company within a broader history of African American touring in the German lands that, even before 1914, contained a broad potential to both disrupt ideas on race and culture and provoke their production anew.

The encounter between Germans and African American performers must be understood in the context of two distinct but intertwined developments already underway by the early nineteenth century. The first was the rise of a musical nationalism across Europe and North America that relied on drawing links between essentialized folk forms and modern composition, constructing a narrative that divided civilized Europeans (and their descendants) from the non-civilized inhabitants of the rest of the world.¹⁸ Following Herder's lead, generations of German commentators and collectors integrated folk songs into a linear narrative of cultural development with the nation as the teleological endpoint. In this schema, pastoral folk cultures existing out of time provided an eternal wellspring of particular and 'authentic' cultural references whose preservation and refinement into modern musical 'art' forms defined a nation's ability to progress into the future.¹⁹ These references were imagined to root the nation in an era when expanding human mobility and the spread of commercial capitalism threatened to erode such essential differences and lead to decadence.

The second development was the rise of a culture of commercialized entertainment that allowed performers to circulate ever more widely and raised fears about the degeneracy of popular culture. Middle-class critics concerned about a culture of superficial sensationalism targeted new light entertainment venues and the increasingly international cultural products associated with them. They drew sharp distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture and defended these invented categories to establish their authority as cultural gatekeepers with a leading role in the cultivation of the nation.²⁰ Debates over the respectability of various entertainments continued throughout the century, swinging between distant poles. At one end were those who celebrated mass culture and international connections as a democratic liberation from outmoded restrictions. At the other end were those who decried mass culture as 'filth and trash' [*Schmutz und Schund*] that played to base instincts and thus threatened to erode civilization altogether. These debates remained vigorous because they revolved around renegotiations of hierarchies in a society being dramatically re-shaped by industrialization, commercial capitalism, international connections and demands for a more democratic distribution of political power.²¹

These two broad developments framed German discussions about African American cultural forms in the nineteenth century, as commentators tried to locate African American music and dance at the nexus between ennobling folk cultures, transcendent art and variously troubling popular entertainments. This effort was complicated by the performers' blackness and the alterity that came along with it in the age of colonialism.²² African Americans' paradoxical position as racialized 'primitives' from a 'modern' land provoked a number of questions with the potential to destabilize both categories.²³ Did African Americans have a folk tradition on which they could draw? If so, precisely how 'African' and how 'American' was this tradition? What traces could be preserved and refined into something modern, and to what extent had white mediators interfered with this process through scholarly collection or commercial exploitation?

German commentators grappled with these questions chiefly through discussions of blackface minstrelsy, an influential American entertainment form in which white performers impersonated blacks for comic value. The genre was not simply about racist denigration, but its claims to authenticity and reliance on reductionist depictions of African Americans conditioned Germans' later expectations of black entertainers.²⁴ Blackface minstrelsy began in the United States in the 1820s and soon thereafter became established in Britain, but Germans only received their first visit from minstrels in 1847-1848. The Lantum Ethiopian Serenaders toured northern and western German cities and made an immediate impact, with papers across the German lands reporting on their performances.²⁵ The fact that they performed in English, in a minstrel version of 'Negro dialect', did not detract from their show's appeal but rather focused audiences' attention on their movement and music. Commentators enjoyed the lowbrow spectacle of burlesque buffoonery, but they also sought out ethnographic truth in clowning that expressed the 'fiery and often drastically childish Negro nature' as well as in 'serious' songs meant to convey the pathos of the slave experience.²⁶ The Lantums proved to be only a passing fad, but the dramatic success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* only a few years later sparked a more lasting interest.²⁷

Inspired by Beecher-Stowe's novel as well as by the need to add music to stage adaptations, in the 1850s and 1860s a number of German composers arranged versions of minstrel tunes, and a few commentators explored African American folk music in more detail.²⁸ Collectively they came to agree that these 'Negro songs' [*Negerlieder*] offered a reservoir of folk authenticity that was marked by an immediacy of emotion and an insight into their unique characteristics, tragically long-suffering but still cheerful and comical. As did the music of European peasants, these forms required refinement by more worldly collectors and performers who knew how to make them useful in the present. There was, however, little agreement on the authenticity and aesthetic value of the adaptations circulating within commercial entertainments. This became especially apparent when a

troupe billing itself as Christy's Minstrels arrived in Hamburg in March 1866. They inaugurated a wave of whites in blackface touring across the German lands that crested in the 1890s before receding in the face of competition from African American performers. Commentators argued over whether blackface offered, on the one hand, a fraudulent or racially debased product or, on the other, a liberating encounter with the culture of a racialized other. Meanwhile, urban, middle-class audiences unconcerned by such debates flocked to the shows in large numbers.

This was the context when African American entertainers began performing for Germans and Austrians in the 1870s. Due to their familiarity with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 'Negro songs' and the recent wave of blackface performers, these audiences had been conditioned to expect some reflection of the non-threatening and buffoonish caricature. Germans had also come to see African Americans as rural, anti-modern and defined by their uniquely localized experience of slavery, which made them a suitable subject of interest for those studying folk culture. However, the association of black culture with the urban commercial entertainments of minstrelsy also raised questions about authenticity and artificiality. As they argued over blackface minstrelsy, German commentators deployed the language of folk authenticity and the relative respectability of highbrow and lowbrow entertainments. This conversation did not prepare them for the interventions of African American performers who undermined their basic presumptions, not least by making claims to their own equal place within European and American modernity.

Touring the German lands offered African American entertainers the opportunity to escape the crowded American and British circuits and to tap into the vogue for American entertainers stirred by blackface minstrels. Such touring also offered black entertainers the chance to escape the personally and professionally stifling racism of the United States, but, as James W. Cook argues, this was about more than a search for refuge. In a tradition that dated back to black abolitionists speaking across the British Isles, these black entertainers

around the turn of the twentieth century took control of their own representation and compensation. They used their successes in the great capitals of Europe both to establish their own legitimacy as artists and to draw comparisons that could 'denaturalize' the American color line. They were part of an increasingly global circulation of black performers, artists, athletes, writers, speakers and students who strategically traded on their racial authenticity in international markets to accrue financial and cultural capital that could be spent to circumvent and undermine American racist structures back at home.²⁹

Although there were a few isolated black solo or double acts who toured the German lands on their own from the 1870s into the 1890s, most black performers in this period first came as members of three larger troupes. Charles Hicks's Georgia Minstrels performed in Hamburg in February and March 1870, presenting themselves as an authentic alternative to their white competitors in blackface.³⁰ They moved beyond mere caricature with artful dancing innovations and adaptations of folk songs but did not make much of an impact and cut their planned European tour short.³¹ By contrast, the Fisk Jubilee Singers were already an international sensation when they began their nine-month tour of Germany in October 1877. They moved audiences with their 'spirituals', religious folk songs of slaves that spoke of endurance, redemption and faith but adapted into a form of refined art music. Introducing complex harmonies and dynamics allowed them to showcase their skill as concert singers and also allowed them to make a direct case that they could make a distinctive contribution to the broader project of civilization.³² Their successes inspired a very different vehicle for African American performance, Henry Jarrett and Harry Palmer's touring production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The two white impresarios brought sixty black performers to Europe in 1878 to serve as musical accompaniment to an all-white cast of actors. They formed 'jubilee choirs' made up of dozens of black singers, and groups of black musicians, dancers and comedians entertained audiences between scenes.³³ We must recognize the overt cynicism and condescension of the organizers, which we can see reflected both in the demeaning

nature of the blackface performance and in numerous German commentaries that traded in overtly colonial caricatures. At the same time, the black performers exerted an appeal that transcended their exoticizing frame.³⁴ Combining the solemn religiosity of the Fisk Jubilee Singers with the exuberant eccentricity of the Georgia Minstrels and a virtuosity that defied expectations, they proved to be the real stars of the show. On the strength of their performances, Jarrett and Palmer could break the company into two groups that toured Germany and the Habsburg lands simultaneously between November 1878 and January 1880. A number of the black performers returned to the German lands to tour on their own over the course of the 1880s and 1890s.

Although these three shows took very different forms, they were bound by two features to varying degrees. First, whether adapting minstrel forms or turning spirituals into a new genre of concert music, the black performers presented a story of racial uplift based on Eurocentric, bourgeois models of cultural development. They made a case for distinctive cultural forms that both expressed the particular suffering and redemption of an African American '*Volk*' and showed their progress into the present. Second, although outwardly 'traditional' in their reference to the cultural practices of slaves in the rural American South, their forms were undeniably 'modern': produced out of inter-ethnic contacts in American cities and cultural institutions, shaped to suit the dictates of the art music market and the growing popular music industry and carried along newly accessible transportation routes through Europe and beyond. In their carefully cultivated performances of American blackness, performers met audiences' expectations and offered something surprising, testing the racialized boundaries between high and low culture, traditional and modern.

The Georgia Minstrels, Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Jarrett and Palmer company were pathbreaking in combining authenticity, tradition and invention, despite their very different styles and the very different politics of their performances. They laid the groundwork for arguably the most spectacular and ambitious touring group of black entertainers in the German lands up to 1914, William Foote's Afro-American Company. Like Jarrett and Palmer, Foote was a white business manager who organized a troupe of black performers for a tour of Europe. Unlike Jarrett and Palmer, however, Foote aimed explicitly to place black performers at center stage through a show that challenged prevailing assumptions of black inferiority. He framed the show around a claim that blacks had joined civilized society, but on their own terms, by drawing on and refining their distinctive folk forms. To demonstrate this, he recruited around forty black performers from the entire range of black performance, including comic minstrels, jubilee singers, modern social dancers and art musicians. He planned to take them on a two-year tour of Europe, starting in Germany, and to return to the United States for a triumphant performance of black cultural achievement at Chicago's World Columbian Exposition in 1893.³⁵

Foote came to this project out of his long experience as a minstrel-show impresario.³⁶ However, as he explained in a promotional interview, he had become distressed by what he considered the decline of a great genre. In his view, minstrelsy had started as an entertainment form based on a sympathetic study of black cultural forms but then had turned toward burlesque spectacle, with most blackface performers nothing more than buffoonish imitators. By contrast, Foote had long experience with industry old-timers and had also carried out his own research. While in London he had read everything he could find in the British Museum on Africa and its people, and back at home he had spent time visiting a variety of African American neighborhoods, attending black churches and schools and getting to know residents. On this basis Foote presented himself as an expert on 'the humorous side of the Negro', and he wanted to use his expertise to build a new kind of

show that would both celebrate black performers and draw in white audiences turned off by the supposed degradation of minstrelsy.³⁷

More than a mere minstrel show, Foote envisioned a 'black opera' that would be 'edifying, interesting and highly amusing', using music, dance and comedy to construct a narrative about African Americans' redemption and cultural progress.³⁸ Entitled 'The African in Slavery and Freedom', the show would chart a course of racial uplift from savagery in the wilds of Africa, through the suffering of slavery in the American South, to the fight for freedom as soldiers in the Civil War, before finally ending up with the exercise of political rights in the present as full citizens. The show's various sketches and songs would authentically illustrate each of these four stages of cultural development to show how African Americans had made special progress toward civilization. The goal was to demonstrate that African Americans had become more refined than their African ancestors while nevertheless retaining 'innate' cultural traits, most notably musical talent and a penchant for comedy, that gave them a distinctive place within modern American society.

To fulfill this vision of racial uplift, Foote sought out only 'high class colored artists, of unmistakable Negro Origins.' Performers had to be respectable, not a 'freak' or a 'monstrosity', and he offered 'equitable and liberal pay' as well as 'the only opportunity for Genuine Colored talent (if accepted) to appear before the crowned heads of Europe.'³⁹ He sought performers of the most extraordinary variety, including singers, dancers, comedians, acrobats, instrumentalists and juggling drum majors.⁴⁰ Foote scored a particular coup by negotiating a three-year contract with Marie Selika, known as the 'black Patti' in reference to the star Italian soprano Adelina Patti, along with her husband Sampson Williams, a baritone singer who performed under the stage name Signor Velosko.⁴¹ Some of Selika's friends were surprised and even disappointed by what they saw as a downward step for a celebrated soprano who had sung for President Hayes at the White House and for Queen Victoria at St. James Hall. The fact that she would be earning the substantial sum of \$7,000 per year

testifies both to the value that Foote placed on her talents and to the extraordinary cost of such an ambitious troupe.⁴² In the end, Selika and Velosko left the troupe after only a few months to travel on their own, but their understudies Mamie Flowers and Matthew Simmons proved themselves equally talented as concert singers.

In its final form, the troupe offered Germans an extraordinary range of entertainments. The first section, surveying the progression from 'savage' to 'slave' to 'soldier', focused on displaying folk traditions and comedy. The show opened with the entire company singing popular antebellum songs, punctuated by buck, wing and jig dancing and imitations of animal sounds.⁴³ This first half of the show then moved between two modes. On the one hand, there was solemn material, spirituals reminiscent of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and sentimental minstrel songs like Stephen Foster's 'Old Folks at Home.'⁴⁴ Some German reviewers found particularly moving an otherwise unidentified soldier's song and a speech by an old man who had lived free in the west for years and then returned to his southern homeland.⁴⁵ On the other hand, there were extravagant and lively numbers. Some of these demonstrated virtuosic instrumental ability, for example on the banjo and castanets and mandolin. Some showed acrobatic skill, as in a drum major routine involving six synchronized male performers juggling batons or in a performance by 'cow-belloians' on the cowbells.⁴⁶ Others were straightforward comedy routines that played with black claims to citizenship and tried to draw the audience into more universal, humanistic understandings of the performers. For example, one routine found humor in two aspirational black dandies on their first visit to the big city.⁴⁷ Another portrayed a captain of the Skidmore Guards, one of a number of controversial black militias raised in New York City after the Civil War, who struggled to teach his recruits right from left. In its front-page review, the African American paper *New York Age* judged the Skidmore sketch to be the best number of the entire show.⁴⁸

[ILLUSTRATION 1]

The second half of the show turned more serious, illustrating the progress made toward citizenship by focusing on the New York City black elite. The progression was made at first appearance by a costume change. (Illustration 1) In the first half the performers were dressed in colorful, stitched-together rags, a vaudeville version of the work clothes slaves might have worn, and wore their hair in unruly styles. In the second half they appeared in elegant salon dress, the men in tuxedos and top hats and the women in ballgowns with fashioned coiffure.⁴⁹ The progression was further illustrated through song and dance. Instead of comedy and extravagance of movement, the performers demonstrated their command of middle-class, Euro-American musical and dance forms. Choirs, soloists and duos presented European folk songs and art music, including arias from Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* and Verdi's *Il trovatore* seemingly in German translation, and the show closed with the entire company singing M. W. Balfe's popular but ponderous parlor song 'Excelsior.'⁵⁰ Interspersed were numerous conventional society dances, including the Virginia reel and the polonaise, but performers also danced the cakewalk, introducing Germans to this dance a full decade before its more celebrated arrival 'from Paris' after the turn of the century.⁵¹ In the process, the show made a distinctive case not only for a sense of progress beyond the earlier 'stages' of development but also, by including the cakewalk, for an implicit cultivation and refinement of specifically 'black' cultural traditions that could be integrated into the mainstream, Euro-American canon.⁵²

Foote presented this combination of different forms as a spectacularly authentic study aimed at 'instructing and delighting the fun-lovers of Europe.'⁵³ As such the show invited an ethnographic framing but its claims to cultivation also frustrated a simplistic othering of the performers. This explains the unqualified support Foote's production received from the African American press, which endorsed the tour from start to finish. The

Freeman promoted the show as a 'grand opportunity for the Negro talent of the country.' Not only could performers 'show Europeans the possibilities and abilities of the race', but they could also improve their country's reputation abroad; the paper wagered that Foote's 'company of cultivated Negroes' and the simultaneous touring of Buffalo Bill's 'band of wild injuns' would 'convince our trans-atlantic neighbor that the United States is quite prolific in novel and attractive resources.'⁵⁴ The *New York Age* was even more enthusiastic, agreeing with Foote that it was time for black performers to take their 'legitimate place in the drama and upon the stage.' Noting Ira Aldridge's successes decades earlier, the author claimed that audiences were ready for black entertainers to step out of the grotesque shadow of minstrel caricature and demonstrate that 'there is as much humor and wit and pathos in the African nature as in the Irish.'⁵⁵ A later editorial by W.E.H. Chaise continued this thread, calling Foote's troupe the most elevated black company ever put together. He placed at the end of a noble line of black minstrels running from Haverly's Georgia Minstrels up through the Bohee Brothers and Sam T. Jack's Creole Company. What really set Foote's show apart for Chaise was the placement of the usual plantation melodies and dialect comedy into the service of a historical narrative, a strategy that this commentator felt could elevate the minstrel show and draw new audiences.⁵⁶

What also set Foote's troupe apart was their intention to tour Europe before touring the United States. In explaining this decision, the music historians Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff suggest in passing that the show was judged to be too progressive to succeed in the United States, but if we take seriously Foote's plan to return for the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 then we can better understand the excitement in the black press.⁵⁷ For African Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Europe was a place where they could engage in cosmopolitan exchange, amassing cultural capital that would allow them to turn back the claims of American racism. Germany, as the land of music and education, was the ideal starting point for Foote's project, and he made certain that the black press kept its eye

on the troupe's progress by sending back regular reports.⁵⁸ In these reports he made sure to note that the concert and choral singing, the most cultivated components of the program, had received the most praise from what were presumed to be sophisticated German audiences.⁵⁹ In response, the press continued to note their general pride in 'such gifted talent', in performers who were 'doing a great work in producing the vocal melodies of music in that far off land.'⁶⁰

Indeed, the responses in that 'far off land' were enthusiastic. German audiences and reviewers embraced the humor they saw in the comic dances and sketches, the solemnity of the spirituals and folk songs and the skill and grace of the society dancing and concert singing. At the same time, reviewers showed a marked ambivalence about the show's core narrative that African Americans were making a distinctive contribution to modern culture, a contribution rooted in their experience under slavery. In part this was the result of Germans' expectations, split as they were between racialized assumptions about black backwardness and the conventions of folk ethnography that presumed that any folk could progress toward modernity. But this was also the result of an ambivalence built into the show by the organizers. The comic frame that facilitated audience engagement could also mask the sophistication and hybridity of the cultural forms on display. And although the reliance on a folk-ethnographic frame placed African Americans into the broader tradition of European cultural development, the involvement of the Canadian *Völkerschau* impresario Robert A. Cunningham also pointed to a more compromising reliance on racializing tropes that undermined claims to equality.

[MAP]

At the end of April 1891 the Afro-American Company sailed from New York on the Dutch steamer *Zaandam*, which, sparing no cost, Foote had chartered.⁶¹ With the assistance

of Cunningham and a German impresario named Wilhelm Gottschalk, Foote's company toured from May to December 1891, starting in Hamburg and visiting at least fourteen other cities across central and northern Germany before finally disbanding in Copenhagen. Despite drawing sell-out crowds everywhere they went, the European tour ended a year earlier than planned. The precise reason is unclear, but the *New York Clipper* reported vaguely that there had been dissatisfaction within the company.⁶² It is reasonable to speculate that financial and creative control were at the root of it, as such conflicts were common, especially between white managers and black performers, and there was a substantial investment at stake. The headline talents Selika and Velosko left after only a couple of months, and Foote himself left the show in October, returning to the United States with a plan to organize a new black minstrel troupe for the Columbian Exposition.⁶³ He sold his shares to managing director Colonel Charles Dodd. Dodd promptly rebranded the show for its final two months, moving it away from its focus on uplift, but he was not able to keep the show together. Although all the performers were paid as per their contracts, investors lost 60,000 M of an initial outlay of 100,000 M. Many of the performers decided to stay in Europe and successfully toured on their own. When the rest of the company returned to the United States in January 1892, they travelled home in steerage.⁶⁴

We cannot define the company's internal disputes with certainty, but we can speculate about creative differences because of evident tensions in the show's message in Germany. These were particularly visible in the tour's promotional materials. The tour's advance agent, and thus the man responsible for framing the show for theater managers, reviewers and prospective audiences, was R.A. Cunningham. Cunningham was a people show impresario who has become notorious among scholars for mistreating his performers, and even in his own time he was called a scoundrel by no less a figure than the zoo and people show magnate Carl Hagenbeck.⁶⁵ Cunningham had long embraced an exoticizing, racializing advertising strategy that demeaned his performers as 'cannibals' and

'primitives.'⁶⁶ As such, he was an unlikely contributor to a project of African American uplift.

It is not clear if Foote was aware of or concerned by Cunningham's notoriety or advertising tactics, but the promoter's experience in the United States and Germany surely recommended him for this tour. Cunningham devoted himself to promoting the show in the brashly 'American' style of Barnum and Buffalo Bill, and the publicity he generated brought in vast crowds.⁶⁷ Before the company arrived in Hamburg, for example, Cunningham had four carriages built, each measuring 12' x 30' and pulled by a team of four black horses, which toured the city with giant billboards.⁶⁸ In Aachen, and likely at the other stops on the tour as well, the performers themselves paraded through town providing samples from the show and giving Germans a chance to interact with them directly.⁶⁹ Perhaps more important was Cunningham's work in the press. In addition to advance press releases, he paid for photograph-laden advertisements in daily papers as well as a mass-produced four-page insert in German with high-quality images that provided a detailed survey of the show.

Because this detailed program was the basis for most advertisements and was clearly used by reviewers as well, it is the best source for illustrating what organizers hoped German audiences would see.⁷⁰ In broad strokes, it fills out the vision outlined in the American press: the 'black opera' offers the 'true essence of Negro comedy' through depictions of each stage of black life, moving through a narrative of noble progress from African savagery through slavery and self-emancipation to modern civilization. At the same time, the program illustrates a negotiation of uplifting and stereotypical portrayals that must have characterized the show as well. I contend that Cunningham's involvement is particularly visible here and helps to explain the notable divergences in Germany from what had been promised to the African American press.

[ILLUSTRATION 2]

The program is especially striking because of its images, which included idealized male figures representing each stage (Illustration 2), group scenes of each stage meant to provide an aura of historical authenticity (Illustration 3) and naturalistic depictions of entertainers in their costumes (Illustration 1, above). The first stage is embodied by a naturalistic 'savage' who is mostly naked but nevertheless stands proudly with arms raised in some sort of joyous dance. By contrast, the accompanying group scene of an African 'Negro dance' [*Negertanz*] is more stereotypical in its depiction of an uncivilized mass living in nature. Likely taken from a historical European travel report, it reduces the individual figures to silhouettes marked chiefly by their nakedness and angular movements. They are situated in a generically tropical landscape featuring monkeys and an out-of-place Indian tiger in a cage; foreshadowing the next stage, a sailing vessel sits at anchor off-shore. The individual 'slave' who embodies the second stage wears simple work clothes, a broad-brimmed hat and a leg chain. He stands facing outward and with eyes downcast, indicating the travails of slavery. By contrast, the accompanying group scene depicts happy slaves singing and working on a Georgia cotton plantation, reproducing a minstrel trope that reinforced the legitimacy of the slave system.⁷¹

[ILLUSTRATION 3]

The images for the third and fourth stages challenge stereotypes more consistently. Representing the third stage, a 'soldier' in Union uniform stands with his back to the slave and savage, his right arm raised and pointing forward toward the representative of the fourth stage, a 'citizen' who stands in a dapper suit with his chest puffed out. These images are accompanied by a scene of a military parade in New York's Madison Square celebrating the Emancipation Proclamation, as well as a scene of an elegant private ball of the New York

City black aristocracy.⁷² These final images reflect the clear endpoint of a narrative of linear progression marked by masculine claims to citizenship through military service and by Eurocentric, bourgeois markers of cultivation that required the demeaning of slaves as passive and of Africans as uncivilized.

[ILLUSTRATION 4]

In addition to the progress narrative, the images offered proof of racial authenticity, a heavy emphasis in the program's text as well. The program uses innumerable euphemisms (Illustration 4) to emphasize that the performers were 'real Negroes': 'Americ. Negroes', 'Afric.-Americ.', 'full-blooded Negroes', 'sons and daughters of African savages', 'comedians drawn from the New York City black aristocracy', 'tanned', 'sunburned', 'pitch black', 'children of the South', 'colored' and 'black' over and over again. It repeatedly refers to slavery, both as a theme of the show and as the personal experience of the performers or their parents. As the Fisk Jubilee Singers had demonstrated, emphasizing such personal experience heightened the pathos of their performance for audiences. At the same time, it grounded the performers in American culture and provided a way for them to move beyond their African forebears.⁷³

To illustrate the significance of their African inheritance, the program includes a lengthy account of African music and dance by the British explorer William John Burchell.⁷⁴ In this excerpt Burchell expresses his amazement at the beauty, freedom and joy of the performance, which swept him away until he felt that he was a part of the tribe and altogether 'forgot civilization [*Cultur*] and Europe.' This excerpt invites an ethnographic comparison, but it does so literally within the frame of the progress narrative. Above Burchell's description is an invitation to 'be convinced of the success of the emancipation of the slaves, of the fruits of education [*Erziehung*] and the progress of modern civilization

[*Civilisation*].’ Below the description, the program outlines the movement of the show toward a present in which black citizens have shown how far they have come.⁷⁵ Portraits of Velosko and Selika in elegant dress bookend Burchell’s text, which wraps around the sketch of the aristocratic private ball in the middle of the page.

Nevertheless, amidst all the effort to evoke ethnographic sympathy and admiration, there are two discordant notes in the program that nod to contemporary prejudices and work to undermine the broader project. At one point the program acknowledges that ‘one may doubt the intelligence and faculties of the Negro; nevertheless, his inborn **original character**, bound up with **humor**, are displayed in a lively manner.’ Even if this is read as an acknowledgement of prevailing prejudice to be overcome, a brief ‘concluding remark’ placed after Burchell’s description and next to the ballroom image is far more explicit in explaining how audiences should approach the performers: ‘allow us to note that W. Foote & Co. in no sense invite artistic comparisons between Europe’s famous musical talents and our performers. The performances are simply the amusements of former slaves.’ Here the program trips over itself, undermining the progress narrative that was based on African American claims to an equal place among Europe’s leading concert musicians. Cunningham’s name sits in bold-faced type at the bottom of the page, alongside Dodd’s, and it seems reasonable to assume that he played a central role in introducing such qualifiers that diverged so markedly from the reports to the American press. When the program closes by praising the performers as ‘black geniuses in their own right’ [*Schwarze Genien in ihrer Art*], the qualifiers suggest that we should read it as an ambivalent celebration of performers who must be distinguished from their white counterparts.⁷⁶

It is difficult to assess whether or how these competing messages registered with general audiences, but it is absolutely clear from newspaper reviews that audiences loved the show; the performers were met by enormous crowds and tremendous applause wherever they went. This is all the more impressive given that some of the performances

were over three hours long, and in all them the comic routines and most songs were performed in an accented English that at least one reviewer found challenging to understand.⁷⁷ Audiences with some experience of blackface minstrelsy would have expected a degree of linguistic incomprehension, and for the rest it likely added to the exotically 'American' allure. In any event, it did not prevent audiences from engaging with the performance. Reviewers agreed that audiences were enthralled by the show's variety, with the comic buffoonery and tricks of the first half providing a welcome contrast to the more serious music and dance of the second half. Listeners were especially drawn to the sonorous choral numbers reminiscent of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and to the familiar concert singing that closed the show. The headline singers, first Marie Selika and Signor Velosko and then Mamie Flowers and Matthew Simmons, regularly received 'colossal applause' and even, despite the admonishment in the program, flattering comparisons to white concert singers.⁷⁸ An exception that proves the rule came from a Magdeburg reviewer who was disappointed because the 'black Patti' was 'in no sense black and perhaps not quite enough Patti.'⁷⁹ It is revealing that this reviewer was less put out by the comparison to the Italian opera star Adelina Patti than by a presumed lack of blackness on Selika's part.

It is very difficult to say more about audiences' reactions beyond noting their general enthusiasm, but newspaper reviews give us a clearer picture of how the show challenged reviewers' expectations about race, nation and culture and where they resisted its messages. The mixed messages outlined in the program – a celebration of black progress, a comic romp to be enjoyed by all, an ethnographic study of African American music and dance, an exotic spectacle of racial otherness – were all reflected to varying degrees in these reviews. As the critical Magdeburg review just above suggests, commentators saw in the show a spectacle of racial difference. Perhaps the most obvious feature in these reviews is the obsessive commentary on the variety of skin tones visible on stage.⁸⁰ Virtually every performer's particular shade was described and fitted on a spectrum to illustrate the diversity of 'the

Negro type'⁸¹; one reviewer took this to almost parodic lengths, describing the performers as 'real Negresses and Negroes, some of them black, blacker and even blacker than black, and others of a lighter coloring ranging up to light brown.'⁸² Like the Magdeburg reviewer, a few commentators drew particular attention to lighter-skinned female singers precisely because they seemed to break down this racialized spectacle. For example, a Berlin reviewer was surprised to see performers who 'were so 'light' that they might have been not from Africa but rather from Saxony' and, despite the organizers' assurances, did not seem entirely convinced that the women were genuinely black.⁸³ This sort of commentary makes clear that the performers' very presence on stage both fed a racialized curiosity and confounded Germans' expectations of blackness, at least among reviewers.

We can see reviewers further grappling with their expectations as they considered the narrative at the heart of the show. In one sense, the message of progress made since 1865 was perfectly obvious; in the words of a Hamburg commentator, the show demonstrated a 'sharp contrast between then and now and also something new.'⁸⁴ But when reviewers tried to move beyond the obvious 'contrast' to explain the nature of the progress made and its significance for their understandings of modern culture, they were forced to reconfigure their ethnographic vision. As they did so, they variously embraced or ignored elements of the show's message. A Hanover reviewer, for example, viewed the show as an illustration of a civilizing mission defined by the gradual imposition of order and control, according to a Eurocentric, bourgeois standard. This commentator distinguishes between a first half reminiscent of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and a second half that demonstrated the 'power of culture' [*Cultur*] in moving beyond a state of savagery. The reviewer notes that the performers 'no longer danced the dances of their African ancestors, consisting primarily of stamping and swinging feet, but rather moved in the measured forms of the polonaise and the contredanse.' In musical terms the performers showed their progression from the comical and 'very noisy' sounds of tambourines and castanets to Selika's command of an aria from

Robert le diable and Velosko's 'winsomely confident' flair.⁸⁵ In essence, this commentator praises the performers for demonstrating their cultivation but entirely misses the point about specifically black continuities, about building new modern forms on the back of African American folk traditions. Perhaps this explains why the commentator did not describe the Fisk-style choral spirituals nor even mention the cakewalk, which later became popular precisely because it challenged the 'measured' conventions of society dance.⁸⁶

A lengthy review in Magdeburg's *General-Anzeiger* grappled more directly with the question of continuities and cultural development, making a direct connection with European traditions in a way that channeled the musicological discourses sketched above. The review draws an obvious connection with Jarrett and Palmer's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* tour that had visited Magdeburg just over a decade before, but the reviewer feels the clearest similarity lies with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. In contrast to the African American commentator in the *New York Age* who made the same comparison, this commentator does not view the two as complementary examples of American creativity. Instead, the similarity lies in the common 'cultural historical, ethnographic interest' that brings to mind an ethnographic people show. In this schema, 'authentic black figures' with the most diverse skin tones take the place of the 'redskins', and their performances offer 'much valuable material for the musician and the musical researcher.' But the reviewer introduces a twist, noting that the singers demonstrated 'folkways that, naturally, have developed entirely independently of ours but that still demonstrate here and there a surprising relation with the basic character of the central European folk song.'⁸⁷ It is noteworthy in this context that the opening slave melodies, Mamie Flowers's rendition of Stephen Foster's 'Old Folks at Home' (a.k.a. 'Swanee River') and the buck dancing performed during 'Hurry Little Children' all came in for special praise.

Having noticed this 'surprising' parallel, the Magdeburg reviewer then measures the progress toward modern refinement. A mixed male-female quartet was 'probably the most

accomplished offering of the night, musically speaking', because they 'almost entirely avoided the manner one observes in Negro song of squashing the tone or letting it melt broadly.'⁸⁸ Like the dancing identified by the Hanover review, these singers sang in an 'almost entirely' measured, controlled manner that indicated the distance they have moved from their folk origins. In other words, even if they could never shed the external features that made them a spectacle in the first place, they have shed their 'Negro' cultural traits as they moved toward full cultivation. This reviewer discusses progress in terms very similar to the Hanover reviewer but also plays with the tensions between difference and similarity across racial lines. In the process, this commentator both channeled an ongoing German discourse and engaged directly, even if incompletely, with the project of African American uplift.

It is clear from reviews that the extraordinary variety and skilled performances, as well as the show's narrative, challenged many reviewers' expectations of American blackness and forced them to reflect on the tensions between measures of civilization and notions of racial difference. At the same time, we should be cautious about over-stating the effectiveness of the show's challenge or Germans' receptiveness to it. The show's focus on comedy, and in particular on 'innate' comedy, could undermine the potency of its challenge, diffusing its urgency. This is illustrated well in the lessons taken by a Hamburg reviewer. From the first half, this commentator learned chiefly that African American slaves were 'so harmless and so decent', with a 'childishly funny' character. 'Only such a people', the author reasoned, 'could have borne the trials of slavery in such a relatively easy and carefree manner.' The lesson of the second half, which was judged even better than the first, was that 'our black brothers now enjoy the same political and social rights as whites.'⁸⁹ This commentator came away from the show convinced that easygoing African Americans could bear pain and suffering more easily than whites and that American slavery was a system easily overcome.⁹⁰ There is a profound irony in these lessons drawn at the dawn of the

1890s, a decade that saw the institutionalization of Jim Crow segregation and an expansion of racial violence that, thanks to the work of activists like Ida B. Wells, began to draw the attention of major newspapers in the United States and Europe.⁹¹

As this Hamburg review suggests, it was quite possible to miss the show's intended challenge to racialized presumptions. This was especially true after October 1891, when Dodd took over the management of the show from Foote and re-branded the show for its Berlin tour. No longer billed as a 'black opera', with its connotations of art music and cultivation, the show was instead entitled 'Musical Africa', perhaps hoping to seize on the current vogue for 'African' entertainments in the capital. A promotional review in advance of opening night made explicit the obvious associations:

'Musical Africa', presenting a choir of Negroes and Negresses including members who perform different singing genres with quite phenomenal strength and highly interesting appearances In any event, this is the first time that Berlin has been able to see and hear such a numerous and trained contingent of artists from the black continent.⁹²

Even though the troupe was identified in some advertisements as an 'African American ensemble', the American connections were undermined by a racialized framing that insistently situated the performers in an 'African' tradition. Silencing the story of redemption and black cultural development that originally bound the show, the first half was simply advertised as 'popular songs and dances from the time of slavery', and the crucial second half presented scenes from '*Africa au fin de siècle*.'⁹³ That this framing inclined itself to an essentialist reading decoupled from the American context is clear from an advertisement for their closing night in Berlin, which noted generically that the show would present 'scenes of Negro life' [*Darstellungen aus d. Negerleben*].⁹⁴ On the basis of this sort of advertisement, audiences could be excused if they arrived at Berlin's Wintergarten Theater expecting to see something similar to the performance of 'African cannibals' that had closed the previous night at the Feen-Palast.⁹⁵

Berlin reviewers seem to have adopted this generically racialized framing of the show, as we can see in a representative review from the *Berliner Tageblatt*. On the one hand, this commentator was generous with praise. Although acknowledging that there was starkly divided opinion on the minstrel genre, the reviewer commended the first half's comic performers for the skill of their 'crude and drastic nigger gags' (*Niggerspässe*). The reviewer was more effusive in celebrating the well-trained voices, especially of Mamie Flowers, Matthew Simmons and the choirs that recalled the Jubilee Singers, 'but more varied and more interesting.'⁹⁶ On the other hand, this author completely effaced the progress narrative and its American setting, most notably with regard to the second half of the show. Where earlier reviewers had highlighted the social dancing and placed this within the intended uplift narrative, this Berlin reviewer took that grace and elegance and interpreted it solely within the frame of a racialized burlesque: 'The screaming colors of the costumes and the inadvertent comedy of the movements, the rolling little eyes and the grinning – little mouths. Everything comes together in an entirely captivating image of unadulterated naturalness.'⁹⁷ This review illustrates the extent to which delivering the show's message of uplift depended on an overt narrative that confronted the inclination to see black performers in stereotypical terms, as happy-go-lucky buffoons ruled by instinct and mimicry rather than skill and creativity.

The *Berliner Tageblatt* critic opened this review by quoting a popular couplet that seemed appropriate given the audience enthusiasm: 'But black is my favorite color!' The critic closed by commenting that it would be 'no wonder if the Wintergarten Theater soon became the rendezvous for all *pessimists*! (*Schwarzseher* – literally, those who see black)⁹⁸ Beyond indulging a taste for puns, the reviewer was likely winking at critics who saw such

commercial spectacles as a threat to *Kultur* and already in the 1890s had begun speaking of that threat in racialized terms.⁹⁹ If so, that would place this review in a line of German commentary on the relationship between African American folk culture, popular entertainments and modernity, one that dates back to the visit of the Lantum Ethiopian Serenaders in 1847 and extends through twentieth-century discussions of jazz. In these discussions there were significant overlaps and parallels with discourses on colonial blackness, but the distinctively American features have not drawn sufficient attention for the period before 1914.

These discussions were carried out almost exclusively by white intermediaries until African American performers began to intervene directly in the 1870s. In 1891 Foote's troupe ambitiously brought together the various genres of black American performance through an uplifting narrative that linked folk culture and modern forms. The folk ethnographic frame challenged German audiences to see the black performers not as exotic others but as equal yet distinctive members of the same modern civilization. If the troupe had made it to Chicago in 1893, they certainly would have taken part in the creative confluence of black composers, entertainers, activists and thinkers whose exploration of these links between folk and modern helped spark the rise of ragtime and black musical theater in Chicago, New York and beyond.¹⁰⁰

In a more abstract sense, the Berlin reviewer's pun is also useful for raising questions about the tour's impact on German audiences. How should we interpret Germans' desire to 'see black'? A 'pessimistic' reading of the company's tour would focus on the ambivalences within the show that undermined its emphasis on uplift, especially as these seem to have been magnified under Dodd's management. It would also highlight reviewers' persistent focus on the performers' race and their difficulty in grasping the claims at the heart of the show. In this reading, Foote's troupe illustrates a stable German racial consciousness destined to frustrate efforts to make connections across racial lines. To the extent that any

such connection were possible, it would be unlikely to take place within popular culture forms that depended so heavily on stereotype and spectacle.

There is a broad truth in this interpretation, but it is limited in important ways. It runs the risk of overstating the stability of ideas of race and relies too heavily on a particular class of critic as representative of the broad range of public opinion. This reading also does not take seriously enough the agency of the performers and organizers, especially insofar as it frustrates a more nuanced engagement with their rhetorical and performance strategies.¹⁰¹ While sources on the motivations and tactics of the performers in Foote's company are frustratingly sparse, if we place the company's performance of uplift in the broader context of African American performance in Germany, then we can see a broader conversation about the meaning of race taking place within popular culture. Seeing performance and commentary as part of a conversation, albeit one carried out under unequal relations of power, draws our attention to a degree of instability as competing ideas of race were produced, negotiated and contested. Even if Germans did not entirely grasp the essence of the troupe's message of uplift in 1891, their delight and surprise suggest that performers had expanded what they expected from African Americans. As Kusser argues in her study of the cakewalk's popularity in Europe, this confrontation could open the way to more humanistic understandings of racialized others, just as it could and did call forth defensive efforts to reinforce racial boundaries.¹⁰² Appreciating the dialectical nature of this process can help us to explain the increasing racialization of public discourse in a range of areas up to 1914.

In both a discursive and a material sense, these tours laid the foundation for further German-African American encounters within popular culture. As had previous troupes, Foote's company demonstrated that there was a market in the German lands for performances of American blackness and helped members build connections that they could use to strike out on their own.¹⁰³ At least nine of Foote's performers stayed behind in Copenhagen while the rest of the company returned to the United States. Seemingly under

their own management, they banded together as the 'elite members of the Black Company', entertaining crowds at the Circus Variété until the end of January 1892 before pairing off and touring across Scandinavia.¹⁰⁴ Some of those who returned to the United States may have come back to Europe as members of R.A. Cunningham's San Francisco Minstrels, who toured Scandinavia in 1894 and 1895 and possibly carried on to Russia as well.¹⁰⁵ While most of the original troupe ultimately returned to the United States, some, like the 'Negro eccentrics' George Jackson, Edgar Jones and Sam Jackson, spent their careers touring in and around the German lands.

Collectively, these performers were the thin end of the wedge, as African American entertainers began touring central Europe in ever greater numbers after 1900. They confronted audiences and commentators with the contradictions in prevailing notions of race, nation and culture, and they forced audiences and commentators to reconfigure their ethnographic vision in response. Understood in this context, Foote's Afro-American Company sits at the beginning of a consequential conversation taking place within popular culture. In asserting their own humanity and the distinctiveness of their cultural forms, African American entertainers offered a new posture toward the modern age that excited many in the German lands even if they did not fully understand it. At the same time, these itinerant performers also sowed the seeds of concern about a racialized degeneracy taking root through popular culture, a sentiment that tied together fears of transatlantic and colonial corruption. Even before 1914 these concerns led to defensive discursive strategies: composers and performers appropriated their work by claiming to 'refine' it, satirists mocked middle class Germans' embrace of American music and dance as well as the black performers' claims to equality, and a few commentators even articulated a murderous antipathy toward an African American presence in the German lands that has not been identified in this era. If we are to understand how these competing postures fed into the volatile debates of the jazz age, we first need to situate them within transatlantic

conversations around the *fin-de-siècle*, when Germans and Austrians took part in broader debates about nation, race, empire and humanity as refracted in the carnival mirror of commercial entertainments.

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¹ I have visualized this presence through an interactive map that can be accessed at

<https://blackcentraleurope.com/mapping-entertainers/>.

² J. Wipplinger, *Jazz Republic: Music, Race, and American Culture in Weimar Germany* (Ann Arbor, 2017), p. 10.

³ R. Lotz, *Black People: Entertainers of African Descent in Europe and Germany* (Bonn, 1997); J. Green, R. Lotz and H. Rye, *Black Europe* (Holste-Oldendorf, 2013).

⁴ H. Schwab, "'Jonny spielt auf'". Berichte und Bilder vom Auftreten des schwarzen Musikers in Europa', in K. Hotschansky (ed.), *Opernstudien. Anna Amalie Abert zum 65. Geburtstag* (Tutzing, 1975), pp. 175-87; A. Eichstedt and B. Polster, *Wie die Wilden. Tänze auf der Höhe ihrer Zeit* (West Berlin, 1985), pp. 9-52; I. Harer, "'Lustige Neger'". Verbreitung und Nachahmung der Musik der Afro-Amerikaner in Österreich um 1900', *Jazzforschung/Jazz Research* 30 (1998), pp. 181-96; F. Ritzel, 'Synkopen-Tänze. Über Importe populärer Musik aus Amerika in der Zeit vor dem ersten Weltkrieg', in K. Maase and W. Kaschuba (eds.), *Schund und Schönheit. Populäre Kultur um 1900* (Cologne, 2001), pp. 161-83; K. Nowakowski, "'30 Negroes (Ladies and Gentlemen)": The Syncopated Orchestra in Vienna', *Black Music Research Journal* 29, 2 (2009), pp. 229-82; J. Papenburg, 'Plantage, Militär, Maschine. Artikulationen populärer afroamerikanischer Musik in Deutschland, 1900-1925', in M. Fischer and C. Jost (eds.), *Amerika-Euphorie – Amerika-Hysterie. Populäre Musik made in USA in der Wahrnehmung der Deutschen 1914-2014* (Münster, 2017), pp. 99-118.

⁵ Although Wipplinger is talking specifically about responses to whites in blackface, I contend that the point is more apt when talking about the challenges posed by black entertainers. J. Deaville, 'African American Entertainers in Jahrhundertwende Vienna: Austrian Identity, Viennese Modernism and Black Success', *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 3, 1 (2006), pp. 89-112; A. Kusser, *Körper in Schiefelage. Tanzen im Strudel des Black Atlantic um 1900* (Bielefeld, 2013); K. Thurman, 'Singing the

Civilizing Mission in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms: The Fisk Jubilee Singers in Nineteenth-Century Germany', *Journal of World History* 27, 3 (2016), pp. 443-71; J. Wipplinger, 'The Racial Ruse: On Blackness and Blackface Comedy in *fin-de-siècle* Germany', *The German Quarterly* 84, 4 (2011), pp. 457-76, here p. 458.

⁶ L. Abbott and D. Seroff, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889-1895* (Jackson, 2002), pp. 149-51.

⁷ J. Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton, 1999), pp. 3-7.

⁸ For a survey of this exotic framing, see A. Dreesbach, *Gezähmte Wilde. Die Zurschaustellung 'exotischer' Menschen in Deutschland 1870-1940* (Frankfurt/Main, 2005), pp. 110-21, 133-81.

⁹ K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Nation: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1996), pp. 67-80, 88-96. On the uses and limits of this strategy within the era's discourse on racial uplift and music, see L. Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878-1943* (Jackson, 2012), pp. 12-20, 38-64; W. Brundage, 'Working in the Kingdom of Culture: African Americans and American Popular Culture, 1890-1930', in Brundage (ed.), *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill, 2011), pp. 5-13.

¹⁰ For a thorough review of recent scholarship, see M. Yekani and U. Schaper, 'Pictures, Postcards, Points of Contact: New Approaches to Cultural Histories of German Colonialism', *German History* 35, 4 (2017), pp. 603-23.

¹¹ F. El-Tayeb, *Schwarze Deutsche. Der Diskurs um 'Rasse' und nationale Identität 1890-1933* (Frankfurt/Main, 2001); M. Schubert, *Der schwarze Fremde: das Bild des Schwarzafrikaners in der parlamentarischen und publizistischen Kolonialdiskussion in Deutschland von den 1870er bis in die 1930er Jahre* (Stuttgart, 2003); C. Geulen, *Wahlverwandte. Rassendiskurs und Nationalismus im späten 19. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg, 2004).

¹² H. Paul, *Kulturkontakt und Racial Presences. Afro-Amerikaner und die deutsche Amerika-Literatur, 1815-1914* (Heidelberg, 2005); A. Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton, 2010); D. Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

¹³ K. Oguntoye, M. Opitz and D. Schultz (eds.), *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (West Berlin, 1986); D. McBride, L. Hopkins and C. Blackshire-Belay (eds.), *Crosscurrents: African Americans, Africa, and Germany in the Modern World* (Columbia, 1998); R. Aitken and E. Rosenhaft, *Black Germany: The Making and Unmaking of a Diaspora Community, 1884–1960* (Cambridge, 2013).

¹⁴ E. Ames, *Carl Hagenbeck's Empire of Entertainments* (Seattle, 2008), pp. 88-102; S. Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 2011), pp. 126-82; A. Gouaffo, 'Prince Dido of Didotown and "Human Zoos" in Wilhelmine Germany: Strategies for Self-Representation under the Othering Gaze', in E. Rosenhaft and R. Aitken (eds.), *Africa in Europe: Studies in Transnational Practice in the Long Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 19-33; R. Andreassen, *Human Exhibitions: Race, Gender and Sexuality in Ethnic Display* (Farnham, 2015), pp. 83-114.

¹⁵ M. Otte, *Jewish Identities in German Popular Entertainment, 1890-1933* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 7-16; J. Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC, 2008), p. 4.

¹⁶ On the challenges of performing blackness as well as the transformational possibilities of audience engagement, see K. Jackson, 'Introduction: Traveling while Black', in H. Elam and K. Jackson (eds.), *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture* (Ann Arbor, 2005), pp. 1-39, here pp. 1-6; E. P. Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, 2003), pp. 206-18.

¹⁷ J. Osterhammel, *Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Nationalstaats. Studien zu Beziehungsgeschichte und Zivilisationsvergleich* (Göttingen, 2001), pp. 15, 208-39.

¹⁸ P. Bohlman, *The Music of European Nationalism: Cultural Identity and Modern History* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 81-102; R. Taruskin, *Music in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 378-88; M. Gelbart, *The Invention of 'Folk Music' and 'Art Music': Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 24-7, 225-39; C. Applegate and P. Potter, 'Germans as the 'People of Music': Genealogy of an Identity', in Applegate and Potter (eds.), *Music and German National Identity*, (Chicago, 2002), pp. 1-35, here pp. 1-15, 31-2; G. Tomlinson, 'Musicology, Anthropology, History', in M. Clayton, T. Herbert and R. Middleton (eds.), *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, (2nd edn, London, 2012; 1st edn, 2003), pp. 59-72, here p. 60.

¹⁹ Gelbart, *Invention*, pp. 40-79, 102-7, 197-224.

²⁰ On the production of these categories in musical commentary, see B. Sponheuer, *Musik als Kunst und Nicht-Kunst. Untersuchungen zur Dichotomie von 'hoher' und 'niederer' Musik im musikalischen Denken zwischen Kant und Hanslick* (Kassel, 1987); Gelbart, *Invention*.

²¹ Maase, *Die Kinder der Massenkultur. Kontroversen über Schmutz und Schund seit dem Kaiserreich* (Frankfurt/Main, 2012); N. Leonhardt, *Piktoral-Dramaturgie. Visuelle Kultur und Theater im 19. Jahrhundert (1869-1899)* (Bielefeld, 2007), pp. 137-45.

²² R. Radano and Bohlman, 'Introduction: Music and Race, Their Past, Their Presence', in Radano and Bohlman (eds.), *Music and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago, 2000), pp. 1-53, here pp. 16-8; Bohlman, 'Erasure: Displacing and Misplacing Race in Twentieth-century Music Historiography', in J. Brown (ed.), *Western Music and Race* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 3-23; F. Carl, *Was bedeutet uns Afrika? Zur Darstellung afrikanischer Musik im deutschsprachigen Diskurs des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts* (Münster, 2004), pp. 154-5.

²³ On the centrality of these tensions for the development of a modernist aesthetic, see S. Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford, 1998).

²⁴ For an excellent introduction to the rich scholarship on blackface, see S. Meer, 'Minstrelsy and Uncle Tom', in J. Richards and H. Nathans (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of American Drama* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 81-6.

²⁵ For more on blackface performance in the German lands up to 1914, see my forthcoming 'Blackface and Black Faces on German and Austrian Stages, 1847-1914', in P. Layne and L. Tonger-Eck (eds.) *Staging Blackness* (Ann Arbor, 2020).

²⁶ 'Kleine deutsche Theaterschau', *Der Humorist* (5 Jan. 1848), p. 14; *Königlich privilegirte Berlinische Zeitung von Staats- und gelehrten Sachen* (6 Jan. 1848), p. 9.

²⁷ G. MacLean, *'Uncle Tom's Cabin' in Germany* (New York, 1910); Paul, *Kulturkontakt*, pp. 127-83.

²⁸ M. Busch, 'Zur Charakteristik der Neger in den Vereinigten Staaten', *Das Ausland* (2-5 Aug. 1852): pp. 733-5, 738-9, 745-7; L. Wittig, 'Neger-Poesie in den Vereinigten Staaten', *Magazin für das Literatur des Auslandes* (13-20 Oct. 1857), pp. 489-90, 494-5, 498-9, 502-3.

²⁹ J. Cook, 'Finding Otira: On the Geopolitics of Black Celebrity', *Raritan* 34, 2 (2014), pp. 84-11, here pp. 103-11; Brown, *Babylon Girls*, pp. 8-13.

³⁰ I have recently discovered reports of a 'Mohren- und Mulattogesellschaft' that performed in Berlin and Hamburg from December 1856 to January 1857 and that appears to have been made up of light-skinned black performers who blacked-up for the show. If true, this would be an exceptional early example of African American performers in Germany but one that does not seem to have had much impact on the later trends I trace here. M. R. 'Theater bei Kroll', *Vossische Zeitung* (3 Dec. 1856), pp. 2-3; *Hamburger Nachrichten* (hereafter *HN*) (4 Dec. 1856), p. 1.

³¹ E. Southern, 'The Georgia Minstrels', in A. Bean, J. Hatch and B. McNamara (eds.), *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover, 1996), pp. 163-78, here pp. 172-173; J. Hatch, 'American Minstrelsy in Black and White', in E. Hill (ed.), *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 93-134, here pp. 108-12, 124-7; Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift*, pp. 57-62.

³² A. Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise: The Story of the Jubilee Singers Who Introduced the World to the Music of Black America* (New York, 2000), pp. xiv, 363; Cook, 'Finding Otira', pp. 90, 103-111; Thurman, 'Singing', pp. 462-8.

³³ J. Frick, *Uncle Tom's Cabin on the American Stage and Screen* (Basingstoke, 2012), pp. 127-9, 137-41.

³⁴ F. Gerstner, *Inszenierte Inbesitznahme: Blackface und Minstrelsy in Berlin um 1900* (Stuttgart, 2017), pp. 98-156.

³⁵ *New York Age* (hereafter *NYA*) (28 Feb. 1891), p. 3. Foote's plan was all the more ambitious, considering the marginalization of African Americans within this celebration of the American nation.

A. Paddon and S. Turner, 'African Americans and the World's Columbian Exposition', *Illinois Historical Journal* 88, 1 (1995), pp. 19-36; B. Cooks, 'Fixing Race: Visual Representations of African Americans at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893', *Patterns of Prejudice* 41, 5 (2007), pp. 435-65.

³⁶ Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, p. 146.

³⁷ *NYA* (28 Feb. 1891), p. 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.* and (4 Apr. 1891), p. 4.

⁴⁰ *New York Clipper* (hereafter *NYC*) (28 Mar. 1891), p. 54.

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- ⁴¹ S. Gable-Wilson, 'Let Freedom Sing! Four African American Concert Singers in Nineteenth-century America', (Dissertation, Gainesville, 2005), pp. 77-87; Southern, *Biographical Dictionary of African American and African Musicians* (Westport, 1982), pp. 334-335.
- ⁴² *Cleveland Gazette* (9 May 1891), p. 2; *Leavenworth Advocate* (hereafter *LA*) (16 May 1891), p. 2.
- ⁴³ *Echo der Gegenwart* (Aachen) (hereafter *EdG*) (5 Sept. 1891), p. 2.
- ⁴⁴ *General Anzeiger* (Magdeburg) (hereafter *GAM*) (1 Jul. 1891).
- ⁴⁵ *GAM* (2 Jul. 1891).
- ⁴⁶ *HN* (11 Jun. 1891), p. 9; *GAM* (1 and 2 Jul. 1891); *Berliner Tageblatt* (hereafter *BT*) (18 Oct. 1891), p. 6.
- ⁴⁷ *EdG* (5 Aug. 1891), p. 2.
- ⁴⁸ *NYA* (2 May 1891), p. 1.
- ⁴⁹ *Hannoversche Tageblatt* (hereafter *HT*) (18 Jun. 1891); *GAM* (27 Jun. and 1 Jul. 1891).
- ⁵⁰ *HT* (24 Jun. 1891); *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* (hereafter *HFB*) (19 May 1891); *GAM* (2 Jul. 1891).
- ⁵¹ Kusser, *Körper*, pp. 221-226.
- ⁵² They were integrated into the canon of social dance, although often in ways that served to reinforce racialized fictions. *Ibid.*, pp. 227-247; M. and J. Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York, 1968), pp. 95-102; Brown, *Babylon Girls*, pp. 128-188.
- ⁵³ *Historic Times* (Lawrence, KS) (15 Aug. 1891), p. 2
- ⁵⁴ *Indianapolis Freeman* (hereafter *IF*) (28 Feb. 1891), p. 4 and (11 Apr. 1891), p. 4.
- ⁵⁵ *NYA* (28 Feb. 1891), p. 6.
- ⁵⁶ W.E.H. Chaise, 'Gossip of the Stage', *NYA* (6 Jun. 1891), p. 1.
- ⁵⁷ Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 146.
- ⁵⁸ Foote's regular reports to the black press included sending a German handbill to the *Richmond Planet*, which occasioned a bemused comment about how much they enjoyed looking at the pictures. *Richmond Planet* (6 Jun. 1891), p. 2. On Germany as a destination for African Americans seeking education, see L. Hopkins, 'Spiritual Fatherland: African American Intellectuals and Germany, 1850-1920', *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 31 (1996), pp. 25-35; C. Walker, 'Of the Coming of John [and Jane]': African American Intellectuals in Europe, 1888-1938', *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 47, 1 (2002), pp. 7-22.
- ⁵⁹ *NYC* (23 May 1891), p. 182; *NYA* (23 Oct. 1891), p. 3.

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- ⁶⁰ *IF* (18 Jul. 1891), p. 19, reprinted (1 Aug. 1891), p. 8.
- ⁶¹ *LA* (16 May 1891), p. 2; *NYA* (2 May 1891), p. 1; *HFB* (14 May 1891); *NYC* (23 Jan. 1892), p. 763.
- ⁶² *NYC* (23 Jan. 1892), p. 763.
- ⁶³ *NYC* (3 Oct. 1891), p. 503 and (14 Nov. 1891), p. 603.
- ⁶⁴ *NYC* (23 Jan. 1892), p. 763.
- ⁶⁵ Dreesbach, *Gezähmte Wilde*, pp. 59, 66-8. On Cunningham's career, see R. Poignant, *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle* (New Haven, 2004).
- ⁶⁶ Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire*, pp. 93-4.
- ⁶⁷ *HFB* (19 May 1891); Poignant, *Professional Savages*, p. 200.
- ⁶⁸ *NYC* (20 Jun. 1891), p. 247.
- ⁶⁹ *EdG* (5 Aug. 1891), p. 2.
- ⁷⁰ The program was initially produced in Hamburg and then repurposed as the show travelled, including in a version that was included for subscribers to Magdeburg's *General Anzeiger*. 'Program', *GAM Extra-Beilage* (27 Jun. 1891).
- ⁷¹ S. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-century America* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 29-32.
- ⁷² 'Program.'
- ⁷³ Thurman, 'Singing', pp. 457-61.
- ⁷⁴ W. Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, 2 vols. (London, 1822-5), published in German as *Reisen in das Innere von Süd-Afrika*, 2 vols. (Weimar, 1822-5).
- ⁷⁵ 'Program.'
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁷ *EdG* (5 Aug. 1891), p. 2.
- ⁷⁸ *HFB* (19 May 1891); *BT* (18 Oct. 1891), p. 6; *Berliner Volkszeitung* (24 Oct. 1891), p. 6.
- ⁷⁹ *GAM* (1 Jul. 1891).
- ⁸⁰ This sort of commentary was common when the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Jarrett and Palmer troupe visited between 1877 and 1879, and it remained a feature of commentary on black performers into the jazz age. Thurman, 'Singing', 456.
- ⁸¹ *GAM* (1 Jul. 1891).

⁸² *GAM* (5 Jul. 1891).

⁸³ *GAM* (1 Jul. 1891); *BT* (18 Oct. 1891), p. 6.

⁸⁴ *HN* (19 May 1891), p. 7.

⁸⁵ *HT* (18 Jun. 1891).

⁸⁶ Kusser, *Körper*, pp. 71-103; Eichstedt and Polster, *Wie die Wilden*, p. 16.

⁸⁷ *GAM* (1 Jul. 1891).

⁸⁸ *GAM* (1 Jul. 1891).

⁸⁹ *HFB* (19 May 1891).

⁹⁰ H. Paul, 'Cultural Mobility between Boston and Berlin', in S. Greenblatt (ed.), *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 140-5.

⁹¹ The scale of the mob violence used to enforce white supremacy in the United States has been made visible through a remarkable mapping project: *Monroe Work Today*, <http://www.monroeworktoday.org/>.

The German and Austrian newspaper reportage on this violence is a topic that needs thorough investigation.

⁹² *Berliner Börsenzeitung* (hereafter *BB*) (14 Oct. 1891), p. 8.

⁹³ *BB* (16 Oct. 1891): 12; *BT* (17 Oct. 1891), p. 8.

⁹⁴ *BB* (31 Oct. 1891), p. 12.

⁹⁵ A group of fourteen members of the Azande (Niam Niam) people, they performed in a pantomime entitled 'Dr. Peters among the Cannibals' and later joined an exhibition on Hermann von Wissmann's travels through Africa. *BT* (30 Oct. 1891), p. 8.

⁹⁶ *BT* (18 Oct. 1891), p. 6.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Wipplinger, 'Racial Ruse', p. 458.

¹⁰⁰ Paddon and Turner, 'African Americans', pp. 30-6; Brown, *Babylon Girls*, pp. 92-127.

¹⁰¹ Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift*, p. 17. For an insightful interrogation of black performance in a British context, albeit one that emphasizes its relative ineffectiveness, see T. Saxon, 'In Dahomey in London: A (Negative) Transatlantic Performance Heritage', *Atlantic Studies* 13, 2 (2016), pp. 265-81.

¹⁰² Kusser, *Körper*, pp. 455-65.

¹⁰³ To wit, two duos made up of erstwhile members of Jarrett and Palmer's company – Gaines and Thompson and Brooks and Duncan – were performing in Berlin around the same time that Foote's Company was in town.

¹⁰⁴ The 'elite members' were George Jackson, Mamie Flowers (performing as the Black Patti), Matthew Simmons, Henry Tate, Thomas Hopkins, William Campbell, Edgar Jones, (Joseph?) Carter, Mary Bell and Minty Mason. Starting in February, the headline talents Jackson and Flowers went on to tour together, as did Simmons with Tate and Jones with Carter. It is not clear whether the other performers also continued touring or returned to the United States.

¹⁰⁵ Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, p. 151.