

LEGACIES OF GERMANY IN AFRICA:
SLAVERY, COLONIALISM, AND THE BRANDENBURG AFRICA COMPANY

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INTRODUCTION

The world built by slavery, on the backs of Africans and Indigenous peoples to uplift a white European hegemon, is unable or perhaps unwilling to hide where it came from. The habit of “forgetting and detracting from the thought and acts of the people of Africa” that began during the colonial era remains at play, today (du Bois 2007:1). To look at the broad reach of this harm, we focus on Germany’s¹ involvement in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and colonization of Africa. In our analysis of Germany, we explicate some of these forgotten and detracted acts. This evocation is not intended to posit a hierarchy of suffering, but rather to expand our attention to how such suffering took place. As W.E.B. du Bois recalled, writing in the years immediately following the second World War,

There was no Nazi atrocity—concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood—which the Christian civilization of Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world. (2007:15)

Diversifying our understanding of German colonialism and slavery is essential to understanding its ongoing discrimination of African people.

¹ While we recognize that Germany as a nation-state did not exist when the slave trade we describe was operating, the economic entanglement of individual German entrepreneurs with slavery, trading companies and their participations as sales and trading powers and financiers (Raphael-Hernandez and Wiegink 2017) are elements upon which the German state was built. Beyond Brandenburg, subjects of other related precursors to Germany worked as sailors, locksmiths, carpenters, or surgeons on slave ships (Weindl 2008:250). Moreover, Marko Richter (2022) argues that from the Brandenburg Navy, which played a key role in the German slave trade, the German Imperial Navy evolved.

We begin our argument by analyzing an era of Germany's past, put into context by the Brandenburg Africa Company (later known as the BAAC). This history makes space for some speculative work in what Saidiya Hartman has called "critical fabulation," a way of working with archives of slavery to simultaneously uncover what slavery erased (2008:11). Through this dual analysis we turn critical attention to an era with long-lasting impacts on the way the German nation-state operates today.

THEORY AND ANALYSIS- FABULATION

In this paper, continuing from our previous discussions (Bass and Teunissen 2021), we posit that slavery was not an isolated force, but one driven by and embedded within vast networks. Structural forms, institutions, ideologies, and technologies of space that were present at the slave trade's origins have evolved and survived over time. These evolutions did not repair or address historic violence, rather they sought to erase it and deny its relevance. To further flesh out what slavery wrote of the world, as well as the counterpoints and critiques that remain the margins and archives, we employ Hartman's strategy of "critical fabulation" (2008:11). As this paper engages with histories and archives of slavery, critical fabulation is a way of attending to the particular considerations of Archival Studies in the African diaspora. Slave archives are not merely historical artifacts, but evidence of mass death and ongoing dying. As McKittrick expresses:

The tolls of death and violence, housed in the archive, affirm [B]lack death. The tolls cast [B]lack as impossibly human and provide the conditions through which [B]lack history is currently told and studied. The death toll becomes the source.
(2014:17)

Within such a source, one full of death and dying, there remain stories to be told, also known as *fabula* (Hartman 2008:11).

Fabula, as presented by Hartman, begin to build a narrative wherein critical fabulation can then be used by "re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view" (*ibid.*). Divergent stories of slavery step away from the ledger of death to "imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done" (*ibid.*). In relation to the legacies of slavery and colonialism, fabulation "weaves present, past, and future in narrating the time of slavery as our present" (Hartman 2008:12). Reading for Black humanity in the archive turns away from the "slave's status as object commodity" and insists on an archival presence that "not only enumerates the dead and dying, but also acts as an origin story" (McKittrick 2014:17). This is simultaneously a move against

the documentation and framing of slavery as a tangible and primarily economic pursuit. Critical fabulation upends the legitimacy of slavery past and present. This connects to a notion that underlies our argument: the theorization of abolition.

In an abolitionist approach, we pick up what scraps and stray knowledge we have and use these as a mechanism to imagine otherwise. Denise Ferreira da Silva reminds us that reparation and repair, at a minimum level, are comprised of the demand “for the return of the total value extracted under total violence” including both the lives lost and “the pasts, presents, and futures that were no longer because of their obliteration” (2020:50). Abolition, as part of this reparative process, is not about hierarchies of suffering and oppression, but seeks to build a better world. Moving beyond the “lies” established by slavery, an abolitionist approach urges us to “conceive of forms of relationality in which new modes of humanness might be possible” (Walcott 2019:406). Through our dual critique of slavery past and present and use of critical fabulation to theorize outside of these constraints, this paper contributes to the pursuit of such possibilities.

THE BRANDENBURG AFRICAN COMPANY

The *Brandenburgische Afrikanische Compagnie* (Brandenburg African Company (BAC)) was established in 1682 by the Elector of Brandenburg, Frederick William. The Brandenburg-Prussian Empire was one of the last European powers to enter the exploitative market. William intended to enter the Brandenburg Principality (as it was called at the time) as a leading actor in the transatlantic marketing of human beings. He joined forces early with a Dutch merchant named Benjamin Raule, who had his own fleet of trading ships, appointing the entrepreneur as the General Director of his Navy. Raule offered his services as a privateer to the Brandenburg envoys in the Netherlands in 1675 (Richter 2022:239). Prior to the BAC’s official establishment, in 1677, Raule was commissioned to build up a Navy, managing to accumulate 28 warships for the Brandenburg Navy which engaged the Spanish fleet in a few battles and sometimes successfully captured their ships (*Postcolonial Potsdam* nd.). His experience with dual military and financial accumulation was a likely influence on his successes in the trade and capture of people.

At its origins, the BAC joined a European market that was increasingly aimed towards African exploitation, and the company was founded “first and foremost for the purpose of participating in the transatlantic slave trade” (Raphael-Hernandez and Wiegink 2017:423). While “one has to turn to trading companies and their participations as sales and trading

powers as well as financiers” to flesh out the economic entanglements of most German entrepreneurs with the financial gains of the slave trade, this explicit founding mission makes the BAC an easier target (Raphael-Hernandez and Wiegink 2017:422). In September 1680, the Elector of Brandenburg and Raule initiated the first voyage to the African coast by embarking with two vessels, the “Morian” and the “Wappen von Brandenburg,” with the intention to trade gold, ivory, corn and capture enslaved people on the coast of Guinea and Angola (Weindl 2008:252). The court of Brandenburg, as described by Weindl, “requested half a dozen young and handsome slaves of 14, 15, and 16 years of age” (ibid.). In January 1681, the two vessels reached the shores of Guinea, upon which the Brandenburgers built a trading post and a fortress that became an important infrastructure for the Brandenburgers’ exploitative trade practices (*Postcolonial Potsdam* nd.).

After the initial journey, the BAC was officially founded and continued to traffic in goods and peoples on the route down the Atlantic Ocean. The initial profits were used to strengthen the organization, increase the number of laborers, and expand the fleet of ships (Weindl 2008; Richter 2022). The Brandenburg-based company was not to be satisfied with its initial acquisitions, however. Its next engagements reveal further the kind of inter-European exchanges that cemented an idea of superiority against the lives and livingness of the peoples of the global South, as the fleets of the BAC began to look further West and deeper into the Atlantic.

At the end of four years of “successful” voyages, following an agreement with the Danish West India Company in 1685, the BAC “rented” the Caribbean Island of St. Thomas from its former Danish occupants. In addition to facilitating the establishment of trading posts, the rental agreement treaty allowed the BAC to “own” as much land as it could farm with 200 enslaved people (Weindl 2008: 254). The three terms placed in scare quotes in the preceding sentences (successful, rented, and own) are exemplary of the way language itself normalized colonialism and slavery, and how critical a disruption of this normativity is. “Successful” voyages of the BAC would be those in which the majority of the intended cargo was acquired, transported, and sold for profit. A “success” would have meant, on a microscale, that an African child of 14 was taken from puberty and their family, shackled to a ship, and forced into a life of servitude at the hands of a white European family. The notion of “renting” and “owning” Caribbean lands are similarly violent, and similarly hidden within the neutrality of the language. These lands were homes to Indigenous peoples who were either displaced, exterminated, or turned into slave laborers. Ownership was acquired by force.

Focusing on the way violence is made mundane through its repetitions further implicates those who operated and benefited from this system.

Following their legal establishment, initial launch, and the acquisition of foreign lands to further the entire endeavor, the Brandenburgers entered the transatlantic slave trade between Europe, Africa, and the Americas as a robust force. There are about fifty-six slaving voyages documented that were dispatched to Africa under the flag of Brandenburg. According to some documentation, during its first 35 years of operation, from 1682 until 1717, these voyages carried an estimated 22,750 captured Africans, just 18,400 of whom arrived in the Americas alive (Weindl 2008: 252; Raphael-Hernandez and Wiegink 2017:423). However, as stated by Weindl (2008), these numbers should be considered a mere minimum figure, as the accounting of the BAC was limited and poorly executed, and the existing documents do not include the BAC's involvement in intra-Caribbean trafficking.

The accessible records of the BAC offer rich details of inter-European collaborations. The Company's earliest collaborator and leader, Benjamin Raule, was from Zeeland, joining Brandenburg after his own nation's rich history of colonialism and slavery. The German traders involved in the slave trade, whether from Courland, Brandenburg, or the Hanse ports, were dependent on groups from other nations to buy the kidnapped Africans that they transported to the Americas (Weindl 2008: 266). The Dutch were one of the bigger colonizing forces, responsible for kidnapping, deporting, and enslaving approximately 550,000-600,000 people from Africa (discussed at length in Fatah-Black 2015 and Wekker 2016).² Germans collaborated closely with Dutch colonial capture in places like Suriname, where an overwhelming German presence "was a structural characteristic caused by the chronic shortage of manpower in the Netherlands" (von Mallinckrodt, Lentz, and Köstlbauer 2021:9). Other European powers like the Danes, through the aforementioned Danish West India Company, facilitated arrangements in the Caribbean, groups like the Hanseatic League and the Portuguese were active trade partners, and the Brandenburgers used Dutch capital for infrastructural support.

This connection between the Dutch, the Danes, other Europeans, and the powers of Brandenburg illustrates an economic and political connection within an economic market that was based on the violent exploitation of people from Africa, and which continues till this day (see our previous study on mobility regimes and the exploitation of undocumented migrants in agricultural farms in Southern Europe (Bass and Teunissen 2021). Relatedly, "although the

² The Dutch were also a big player in the East Indian Slave trade, which receives remarkably little attention, but further demonstrates the scale of the Dutch exploitation.

abolition movement in Germany was undoubtedly small compared to its counterpart in Great Britain, comparisons with various neighboring countries in central Europe such as the Netherlands and Denmark reveal significant similarities in both the dimension and the course of its activities” (von Mallinckrodt, Lentz, and Köstlbauer 2021:7). Reading the historiography of a lesser-known force in the transatlantic slave trade shows how competing companies and empires in Europe were able to form unions across linguistic and geographic boundaries that solidified a European selfhood at the expense of African object-making. Although the end of the BAAC came with the end of slavery, German colonial pursuits continued much further, demonstrative of a consistency in European behavior on the African continent/ against African peoples. As pointed out by du Bois, writing in the beginning of the 20th century, “When Germany invaded Belgium, and with that invasion brought war with England, it must be remembered that by that same token Germany was invading the Belgian Congo and laying claim to the ownership of Central Africa” (2007:4). The first set of actions made the next endeavor ideologically permissible.

BEYOND THE BAC: CRITICAL FABULATION

Outside of economic valuation, we seek to address the stories of Brandenburg that were not archivable and documented with such ease. Further, we place both the BAC and BAAC alongside their sponsoring body, Brandenburg itself. This allows us to see the ways such a relationship stretched the limits of violence from the moment of capture to the lives of African diasporic peoples in Brandenburg, and to their descendants today. Expanding the critique of the BAC is an experiment with Hartman’s critical fabulation, trying to look beyond the historiography of the powerful. In this sense, we want to encourage or dwell in the “promiscuity of the archive,” acknowledging that it may contain or highlight one reality without entirely erasing another (Hartman 2008:13). Turning to the practice of critical fabulation what might happen if we took up the discussion of the Brandenburg Africa Company and the German trafficking of human beings in another way?

We began first with a series of facts: the numbers of people trafficked by the BAC, their original homelands and sites of their dispossession, the economic impacts on such an industry on the larger state and society, as well as the individuals themselves. A straightforward next step, worthy of further exploration, could try to calculate this in direct terms in today’s Germany, where the leaders and stakeholders of the BAC would likely have ties. Without the exact numbers we can still envision how inheritance is passed forward into

infinite growth, from business earnings to home ownership, moving infinitely onward to cement an elite class. These elites, the ship captains and career traders who kept the BAC running, recognized their potential partners in foreign faces from across Europe, a familiarity that stopped when the phenotype shifted too far to another direction. An arbitrary line was drawn on the map and an arbitrary image of the human came with it; the boundaries of who the Brandenburg leaders would accept as human/ partner and who would be property were erected on African soil. This, too, was an inheritance of the BAC, an assertion of white supremacy passed along through the generations.

What would it mean to be in Guinea, to be taken from green lands and warm waters to Brandenburg, as property of the Brandenburg state? A ship of strangers, unlike anyone you've ever seen, displaying an intrinsic knowledge that they are better than you, more valuable, and more human. The captured Africans would have been confronted on arrival by dark, gray seas as they crossed the ocean trade route to their new home (or rather new storage space, as property). The Indigenous Africans captured by the BAC would have spoken in tongues with melodies a far cry from the German dialects and other European languages used by their captors. Did the Brandenburgers bother to translate their gruff Germanic tongues into something their slaves understood, to share their speech with their captive property? If they did, what messages did they pass along? Was the refrain little more than "work harder, move faster," or did they sweeten the situation with some propaganda? Were the slaves told they were lucky to be here, in this illustrious land, part of an Empire's realm of great renown? Without some linguistic common ground, these African children may have only been able to cling on to the name that followed from Guinea's shores to the frigid North: Brandenburg.

How would it have felt to hear this name shouted and grunted out by the men who chained and carried you away from your native lands, to know it as some kind of higher power or overlord that was directing these engagements? For the enslaved who were lucky enough to be treated with a semblance of humanity, those few fortunate who were taught or taught themselves to read, what would the shape of those letters have conveyed? To see the elegant scripted name "Brandenburg" on official documents or signs, knowing that it was also attached to the ships and sailors, the kidnappers and killers of your past, present, and future? From the trauma of abduction to the subsequent forced movements of the captured African, the only consistency would have been Brandenburg.

With wars raging on simultaneously, and Brandenburg defending its sovereignty against other forces, would the fear of another displacement have generated a Stockholm

Syndrome-esque sympathy. This sympathy, wherein the enslaved cling to patriotism and national pride despite the horrors of their ruler's past? In the face of further unknowns and the indoctrination of their owners, could the horrible history of Brandenburg's oppression be reimagined as a form of care, an image of the Brandenburg captors as stern father-figures, saving these African children from Spanish savagery?³ Were they even aware of this other war, or did the violence of their own everyday lives consume them, close them off from thinking beyond and outside the sturdy walls of their new cages?

When did the end of slavery's legally permissible violence against Africans in Brandenburg mean an end to African suffering? How long did the memory of this past relationship last, the memories of Brandenburg as a place where African people had a price tag placed upon them? We have no way of tracking how, or if, these recollections carried forward, whether the generations born of these enslaved peoples under Brandenburg rule and those who would eventually be birthed into "freedom" would carry the haunting history of the BAC alongside their own family trauma. When, if ever, did Brandenburg transform from the deity of destruction to a moniker that was shorthand for the gray seas and flat plains of a new European *home*?

These alterities are incomplete and opaque, undocumented in formal archives. Brandenburg today is just one state in a larger nation-state, reformed and rebuilt away from such past problematics. The closing question unsettles this image, though, adding an uneasiness to such a simplification. Frustratingly, its answer evades us. The identification of practical steps taken to repair and redress slavery and ensure that Africans would be fully welcomed, acknowledged, and made human by Brandenburg remains an abolitionist imaginary.

Theoretical Analysis- BAC and Beyond

Through this analysis, the narrative experience of the BAC allows for insights into ideological, structural, institutional, and space-making elements that are embedded in the overall world-making project of slavery. Applying the theoretical model to the narrative of the BAC and BAAC helps us to elucidate the foundations of what would come; how the roots of

³ Jumping forward a few hundred years, when colonialism overtook slavery as the acceptable form of EuropeanAfrican engagement, the role of African diasporic soldiers in WWI encapsulates the complex ways Europeans permitted African belonging as a necessary tool of warfare as well as the ways that Africans remained outside of full humanity. Describing the so-called "Black Horror on the Rhine," or stationing of French colonial troops on the occupied Rhineland in 1919, Tina Campt, Pascal Grosse, and Yara-Colette Lemke-Muniz note that "Black soldiers intensified the trauma of defeat because they inverted the established colonial relationship of domination between 'whites and blacks' on German soil" (1998:207)

later racisms were planted and allowed to spread. The shifts from the kind of lawless expansion of Brandenburg imperialism into a Structured entity like the nation-state are evolutionary, and in the evolution we see how racial identities were stabilized. The BAC is primarily an artifact of the age of empires, a collaboration between Brandenburg as a principality with some forms of autonomy and other ruling powers, between peoples we would define as “Dutch” or “German” who may have then been considered Zeeland or Prussian subjects. These cross-cultural or cross-empire relationships were developed through the exploitation and colonization of the global South. Imperialism recognized itself.

The connections between the *Institutions* of slavery and colonialism in the BAC case are best exemplified by their moves in the Caribbean, where Indigenous peoples of the area and Africans were both under attack. Importing and exporting African peoples across different Atlantic routes was aided by BAC’s possession of Caribbean islands such as St. Thomas, “rented” from the Danes who had previously colonized and occupied it. Slavery in this case could not have been established without the thrust of the empire and the creation of the colony. After slavery’s outlaw in the empire, and shift to a state form, racial capitalism facilitated the elision of reparations; slavery-as-ownership was forbidden but other forms of exploitation of peoples and lands for the pursuit of profit continued onward.

The *Ideologies* of anti-Blackness, exacerbated in this instance by a disrespect for indigeneity even though it was not a driving motivation, facilitated the kidnapping and exploitation of African peoples by the BAC and BAAC. Anti-Blackness as an ideology turned a continent’s worth of people into objects, as Wilderson has described (2015). Even in such instances where it was not spelled out, there is a dearth of other ideological explanations that would trigger the movement of people from Northern Europe to wrap around the continent, crossing choppy seas and long routes to claim their share of capital; if all people were equally objectified, surely closer sources for extraction existed. Further, as pointed out by El-Tayeb, “German colonialism put the race theories already dominating the public mind into practice on a broad scale” (1999:156). The ideation of Black Africa as a non-human continent supported the work of the BAC. With this ideological underpinning, the role of *Spatializing* through the colony and plantation is a clear demonstration of how land was manipulated into profit. The colony’s spatiality “included the destruction of the tradition community and family structures, complete expropriation, mass deportations, and passes” that controlled the movements of all enslaved people (El-Tayeb 1999:157).

More abstractly, critical fabulation allows us to connect the displacement of slavery to an absence of comfort and knowledge of the physical environment. These disruptions are

exacerbated when attending to what this physically meant; someone raised in a tropical environment where temperatures likely stay in the range of 10-30 degrees Celsius suddenly thrust into temperatures less than half of what they have ever encountered before, lower than they could have dreamed. In this frigid cage they were put to work, far from friends and family. In this sense, spatialization takes place through a European manipulation of their own environmental knowledges and comfort in certain temperatures as a mechanism of fear and control of captured African peoples.

CONCLUSION

The BAC and BAAC were relatively short-lived and small within the broad world slavery built. This temporal bracketing and lower economic impact can seemingly be offered as an excuse, that the company ended their operations earlier than some others, and before the global tide against slavery had turned. This excuse is unacceptable for a number of reasons; its origins relied on such a radically violent operating principle, the dissolution was a financial and not moral decision, and the company's end did not mean an end to the suffering of those most impacted. Furthermore, Germans were known to not only "consume products produced by slaves in the colonies, they were heavily invested in the production of trade goods to be exchanged for slaves as well" (von Mallinckrodt, Lentz, and Köstlbauer 2021:2). In addition, the wealth generated was captured through the slave trade and the labor of enslaved people and kept amongst those elites and their kin, their collaborators, their countrymen; due to the institutional and ideological othering of the African diaspora, these finances only supported those seen as human, at the expense of the slave.

The idea of Germany as a Colonial Empire has been relegated and often placed in a collective amnesia or form of "exceptionalism," while attention is given to other tragedies (von Mallinckrodt, Köstlbauer, and Lentz 2021). Dating back to the thirteenth-century, "individuals of African descent have lived, studied, struggled, and worked in Central Europe" (Florvil 2020:13). However, these stories were largely subsumed into a linear depiction of white European dominance or falsely presented as evidence of equality. The latter type of analysis "fails to account for (and theorize) individual experiences of violence and discrimination, does not consider negative theological views on Blackness or the possibility of pre-modern forms of racism" and assumes that any privilege was undisputed in larger German society (Spohr 2021:60; see also Ayim, Oguntoye, and Schultz 1991). Against both

misreadings and erasure has come the movement for German decolonization and colonial redress.

Paying attention to slavery's past, digging deeply into the archives and making connections across the continents, is a critical mode of engagement. This historiography, however, is insufficiently able to accommodate and express those lives who were deemed unworthy of documentation, who offered only an itemized list of cargo or financial investment. By addressing the echoes of the past as a metaphor for failures in the present, we refuse such an impulse. Those people trafficked and their descendants, and those lost on the way, were as much a part of "Brandenburg" as its namesake company, and the gate that stands in the city center. The colonial-era leaders believed that "one drop of black blood was enough to poison the whole German nation;" a decolonizing response would be that the nation remains poisoned, though from an entirely different disease, from the violence of white supremacy (El-Tayeb 1999:160). The city and the state of the post-empire still bears the ghostly presence of its former property.

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