Introduction

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When I was invited to commission and edit this special issue on Africa and Europe in the Renaissance, the precise form the topic would take was left open. I have chosen to gather together a group of European scholars working on new perspectives on European views of sub-Saharan Africa and sub-Saharan Africans. It is heartening that academic scholarship in this area is gathering momentum.[1] The lack of research in the past[2] can now be seen as an advantage—because there was so little, the field offers enormous possibilities not available in other, more traversed terrains. The contributors to this special issue come from six different European countries; four of them write on countries or bodies of material beyond their own national borders. Although united by a broad interest in cultural history, they come originally from many different disciplines, ranging from history to historical sociology to cartography to social anthropology, and they represent a range of age groups and career stages.

Difficulties and imbalances that have long dogged relations between Africa and Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries still remain, however—some of which are related to sources—and it is important to make clear what this volume is not going to cover. The emphasis here is on European versions of Africa and Africans—in particular, on the European reception of sub-Saharan Africans—and not on African versions of Europe and Europeans.

Three distinct strands of research are represented. The first focuses on European fantasies and beliefs about what the huge and partially unexplored continent of Africa might contain. From the 1440s onwards, reports of the "realities" of Africa from European merchants and travellers who had been there should have supplanted classical, biblical, and medieval views of Africa (many of which were utterly fantastical), but they did not. Instead, all these views co-existed for many years in constantly swirling and regrouping patterns. New and recent information could not so easily dislodge older, familiar, "authoritative" accounts, and many people used their discretion to decide what was, and what was not, likely to be "true." At the same time, there was always a gap between the "known" Africa, and everything beyond, and the space beyond was where many of the more fantastical African inhabitants and sites were relegated when the "reality" of the known Africa was acknowledged. The work of Alessandro Scafi, on the positioning of the Garden of Eden in Africa

on an early sixteenth-century map belonging to a Spanish cardinal, and of Saara Leskinen, on two French sixteenth-century writers who denied that monstrous people existed in Africa but for different reasons, both illustrate this well.

The second strand of research focuses on the processes whereby diasporic sub-Saharan Africans, uprooted and enslaved, started to assimilate to, or be absorbed into, the European population in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, that is, in the first few generations after their arrival. The host European country or area—Portugal in António de Almeida Mendes's case, and the Italian peninsula in mine—had an influence upon the ease with which this could be accomplished and the kinds of narratives that were written around assimilation, but so did regional and more local sets of behaviour and expectations, and so did the Catholic church. The levels of acceptance depended not only on upon African ability to come to terms with a new environment and new realities and obligations, and on the host populations' willingness to accept newcomers, but also upon the age, legal status, language skills, occupation, and sex of the Africans. Black female slaves merit particular attention.[3] They were preferred to males as domestic servants, and were at the sexual mercy of their owners, but the children of black females and white owners could sometimes find a route to absorption and/or inclusion, precisely because their mixed inheritance could allow them access to both worlds.[4] The Catholic church relayed conflicting messages to people who had previously not been Catholic,[5] and converts found themselves forever suspended in a state of transition rather than arriving at a state of acceptance; but in Portugal and Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there was simply no religious alternative to Catholicism, so sub-Saharan Africans, like everyone else, had to make their peace with this religious monopoly.

The final strand investigates two examples of the construction and representation of real, contemporary Africans in Renaissance and early modern Europe. Here it is interesting to compare historical and cultural construction or reconstruction with literary representation (but it could just as easily have been art historical representation). The historical example, presented by Dienke Hondius, comes from the Netherlands, where enslaved sub-Saharan Africans have been found living as Jewish converts and "servants" to members of the Jewish community, and where freed Africans, living as a small group, were perceived to threaten the social order in seventeenth-century Amsterdam by their rowdy and aggressive behaviour. Aurelia Martín Casares and Marga G. Barranco offer equally arresting images, but from two early modern Spanish broadsheets, that is, from the point of view of Spanish popular literature. These two pieces—a short play and a poem—take as their subject black weddings, in an attempt to ridicule and vilify sub-Saharan Africans

and highlight their difference from white Spaniards. In both seventeenth-century Amsterdam and Golden Age Spain, many sub-Saharan Africans were not assimilated or accepted but existed outside the boundaries of "normal" society, even—or perhaps especially—when freed, and as a consequence, crude representations and stereotypes of them abounded. What is particularly noteworthy is the fact that this happened not only in Spain but also in the Netherlands, because the two contexts were unalike in almost every major respect: numbers of sub-Saharan Africans (in Spain there was a large population, in the Netherlands only a small one); contacts with and knowledge of Africa; histories; religion (Spain was Catholic whereas Amsterdam was predominantly Protestant); politics; economics. This generalized, cross-European response indicates that for those sub-Saharan Africans unable to assimilate to white society, being black and of prior slave status was an indelible mark of difference.

These three strands cover a whole European trajectory of conceptualizing Africa and its inhabitants, from the imaginary moment when they were unknown and unreal, to the inclusionary moment when Africans had arrived and were known in Europe, and there was a possibility of assimilation and incorporation, to the exclusionary moment when freed Africans were settled in Europe but leading an existence outside or parallel to that of white society. The chronology of this trajectory was not linear and often the phases occurred simultaneously. The present collection is an attempt to understand this trajectory in conjunction with the complications of its Renaissance and early modern context.

Notes

1. T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe ed., *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Dieudonné Gnammanou and Yao Modzinou, ed., *Les Africains et leurs descendants en Europe avant le XX^e siècle* (Toulouse: Maison de l'Afrique, 2008) and Darlene Clark Hine, Trica Danielle Keaton, and Stephen Small ed., *Black Europe and the African Diaspora: Blackness in Europe* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008).
2. For some suggestions as to why this might be so, see my article "La place des Africains sub-sahariens dans l'histoire européen, 1400–1600," in *Les Africains et leurs descendants*.
3. "Black" and "white" are just being used as constructs here.
4. See Berta Ares Queija and Alessandro Stella ed., *Negros, mulatos, zambaigos: Derroteros africanos en los mundos ibéricos* (Seville: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2000).

5. Nelson H. Minnich, "The Catholic Church and the pastoral care of black Africans in Renaissance Italy," in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe,* pp. 280–300.