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Poster Presentation

Challenges of Cross-Cultural Dialogue: The Other in Peter Altenberg's *Ashantee* (1897)

Referring to the dynamic relations between past and present, Walter Benjamin writes, "To articulate the past [...] means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." In other words, we tend to remember particular historical events, developments, and cultural artifacts at times when they become relevant for corresponding present-day tensions. It is therefore not surprising that the current debates about the benefits and challenges of cultural co-existence in the global era have inspired the renewed interest in past literary treatments of communication between people of different racial and cultural backgrounds.

In this context, I have rediscovered Peter Altenberg's 1897 collection of Impressionistic autobiographical sketches entitled *Ashantee*. In them, the author describes his relationship with a group of Ashanti tribespeople from the Gold Coast of Africa (the former British colony known today as Ghana) who had been installed a year earlier in the Vienna Prater as living objects in a popular ethnographic exhibit. Altenberg's depiction of the Europe-touring Africans shows genuine curiosity about cultural difference and severe criticism of his Austrian contemporaries' dehumanizing prejudices. At the same time, this literary representation of certainly well-intended cross-cultural communication between an Austrian white male and female African "Paradieses-Menschen," as Altenberg calls them, bears elements of idealizing projection, essentialization, and, in fact, Eurocentric, racist, and sexist perspectives.

The 40-page dialogical and therefore linguistically relatively easy text (or selected passages thereof) and accompanying visual material lend themselves to class discussions about the challenges of cross-cultural dialogue in the multinational Habsburg Empire during the colonial era and about the construction of Self and Other, then and now. A unit (of varying length) based on this text may be incorporated in Austrian and/or German literature or culture courses at the advanced undergraduate and graduate levels as well as languages-across-the-curriculum courses which link German discussion sections to history or art history courses such as Central European History, The Habsburg Monarchy, European Impressionism, or The Other in European Art.

As part of a German-taught upper-division undergraduate literature course "Fictions, Frictions, Fun(ctions): German Literature between Entertainment and Social Commentary," I scheduled four weeks à three contact hours for a unit "Self and Other: Peter Altenberg's *Ashantee* (1897)." Supported by reading questions and glossaries, students read selected passages of the text. Visual material helped understand the historical subject matter. The goals of this unit were:

- managing the linguistic and content challenges of reading a longer literary work
- discussing complicated subject matter at the intermediate low/medium/high levels
- analyzing the construction of self and other in Peter Altenberg's *Ashantee*
- comparing the depiction of African women in Altenberg's *Ashantee* to visual representations of African women in ethnographic literature and the arts
- learning about the racist and sexist implications of nineteenth-century ethnographic exhibits and gaining insights into cross-racial/cross-cultural perspectives in Austria and Europe during the colonial era
- comparing cross-racial and cross-cultural perspectives of late nineteenth-century Austria and Europe to

cross-racial and cross-cultural perspectives in the students' own national and personal environment today.

My poster will contain

- quotes from Peter Altenberg's *Ashantee* (1897) and Viennese newspapers (1896)
- drawings of the Vienna Ashanti exhibit, by Wilhelm Gause (1896)
- photographs of the 1896 Vienna Ashanti exhibit
- depictions of African women in European nineteenth-century ethnographic publications
- paintings of African women by Manet, Picasso, and German Expressionists
- some information on both Austria's and Asante's involvement with colonialism
- questions and topics of class discussions

My students and I have experienced this unit as very challenging and enormously rewarding. At the linguistic level, students have expanded their vocabulary and practiced describing characters and situations and expressing opinions (in speaking and writing). At the content level, the initial outrage about racist and sexist elements in the nineteenth-century literary and visual depictions of Africans was followed by learning to read and interpret the texts and visuals within their historical Austrian/European contexts. The students experienced their own positionality as 21st-century readers of a particular gender, ethnicity, and national background. Taking the 1890s Austrian and European texts and visuals as points of departure, they were inspired to reflect on current questions of cultural differentiation and integration as well as on their own cultural identity, experience with gender, racial, and cultural stereotypes, and behavior in cross-cultural and cross-racial communication. Several students have since chosen Altenberg's *Ashantee* for further research in special projects or honors theses in Literature, History, and Anthropology.