

# **Fashioning Germanness: Colonialism and Modernity at the 1896 Berlin World Fair**

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## Introduction

The German overseas colonial empire, once the third largest in the world, lasted from 1884 to 1919.<sup>1</sup> The orthodox understanding of German colonialism was that it was a marginal phenomenon as the empire was short lived, particularly when compared to impact of the World Wars. However, this comparative methodology assumes that imperialism was limited to formal geopolitics, affecting colonialists and the colonised but not the everyday individual in domestic German territory (Eley 2015: 20). This approach to German colonialism recycles the trope that colonialism ‘happened elsewhere’ (McClintock 1995: 5), allowing Germany to divorce itself from its responsibility to publicly engage with its past. I respond to this assumption by demonstrating the pervasiveness of cultural colonialism within everyday Germany and the vital importance of the colonial project to conceptions of German nationhood and identity through an analysis of the 1896 Berlin world fair.

25 years after the German Empire was created, the 1896 Berlin world fair, or trade exhibition, was occurred in the Treptow borough between 1 May and 15 October. But more than just an exhibition of industrial wares, the trade exhibition can be read as a unique site of ‘self-representation and self-admiration’ where the imperial dimension of the state cannot be ignored (Steinmetz 2017: 47). Specifically, I propose that the world fair was an opportunity ‘to create and cement Berlin’s identity as a *Weltstadt*, a world city’ (Zelljadt 2005: 308) through its orchestrated vision of Germany as state and empire intertwined, and simultaneously the ‘opposite of a world exposition’ (Badenberg 2004: 192), as it was primarily concerned with propagating this cosmopolitan, modern vision of Germanness, contingent on an overseas colonial empire, to German citizens.<sup>2</sup> I posit that the fair encapsulated how imperial strength was considered to be economically and culturally necessary for the establishment of Germany as a modern nation (Schmoller 1900: 48), as Germanness was defined through racial difference from images of the colonial. In particular, I argue that the exhibition was not just comprised of a virtual journey in space, but also a journey through time.



Figure 1 The Berlin 1896 trade exhibition ([Aerial view] 1896).

<sup>1</sup> I use ‘German empire’ to refer to the overseas German colonial empire, and ‘Germany’ to refer to the Imperial State of Germany (1871–1918), also known as the ‘German Empire’.

<sup>2</sup> In reality, many workers were not paid. Women waitresses had to resort to prostitution. Several construction workers and exhibition machine operators were severely injured or died (Zelljadt 2005: 322).

## A Journey through Space, Place and Time

The world fair was a vehicle through which Germany could establish its identity as a modern nation. As a belated imperial power, the young political nation was eager to demonstrate its strength alongside more established empires. Berlin was also perceived to be a provincial backwater even by Germans themselves, a former fishing village with petty bourgeois aspirations compared to Paris or London (Brockhoff 1880: 19). An industrial exhibition would signal Berlin's arrival as a cosmopolitan world city (Spranger 1946: 301) through showcasing Germany's colonial success, as strength on the world stage was at the time inextricably linked to overseas conquest. I propose that this was achieved through emphasising temporal and spatial difference between Germany and its colonies.

The world fair disciplined the popular gaze (Breckenridge 1989) to view Germany as it was 'factually' presented at the exhibition: a utopian vision of progressive nationhood. This was achieved through embedding the visitor in a built structure of nationalist self-expression 'partitioned from the rest of the city' (Davis 1998: 392), where a strict spatial hierarchy demarcated the German from the non-German, and progress from the past.

Germany's futuristic progress was represented by the specially created 'New Lake' (Neuer See) and industrial showcase, the focal point of the site. The Old Berlin site and the Cairo and colonial exhibits were separated by streets to the south and to the east. The colonial exhibit, mirroring the segregation of European and non-European peoples, was on the margins of the exhibition, and the Cairo exhibit was outside of the gates entirely (Steinmetz 2017: 54). These four sections represent the different temporal spaces spatially demarcated by the exhibition's layout.

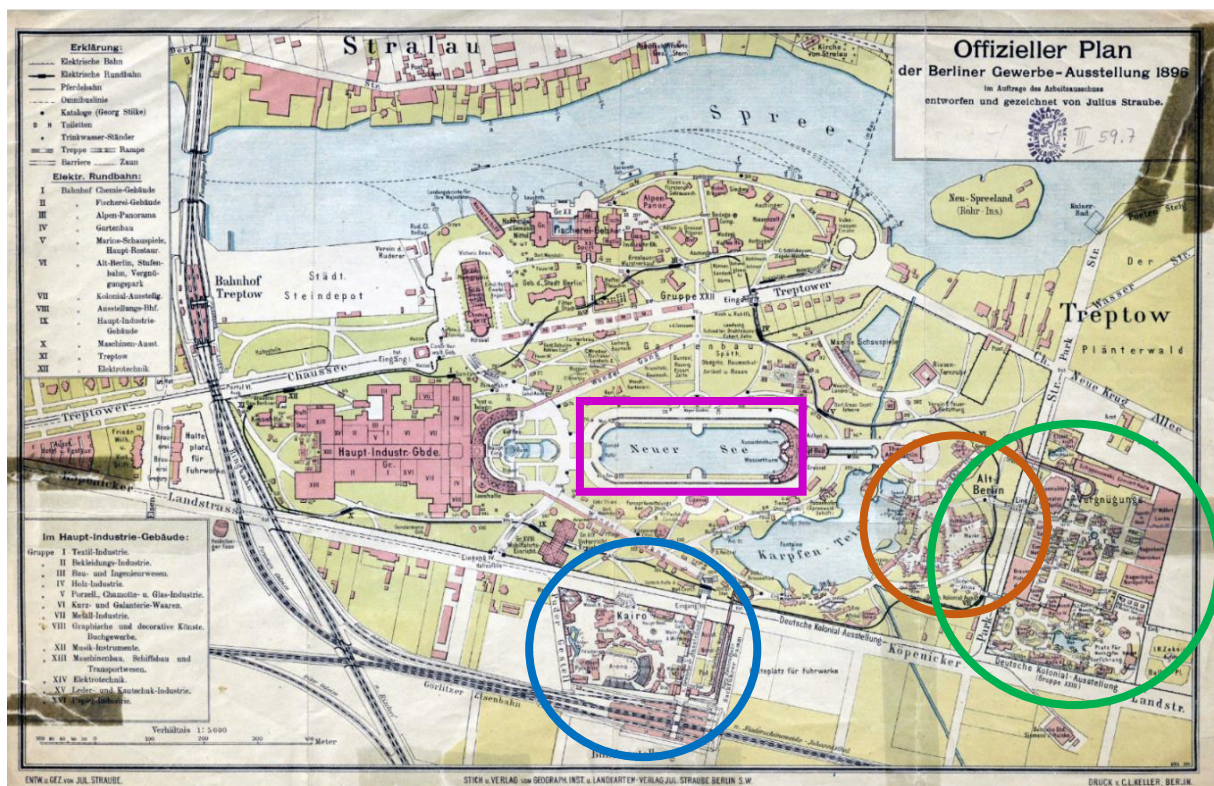


Figure 2 A diagram of the exhibition (Straube 1896). The Cairo exhibit is indicated by the blue circle, Old Berlin with the brown, the New Lake by the purple, the colonial exhibit by the green.

The Old Berlin site was an aestheticised version of the city with ‘heritage’-style architecture from around 1650, as it was only after the Thirty Years War that the Hohenzollern monarchs had become truly strong (Zelljadt 2005: 314). Its aim was to foster city pride, despite the fact that actual Berlin in 1650 was far from the historical fantasy portrayal of monarchical strength, working-class industriousness and justice (*ibid.*: 313). This site was a conscious use of the historical to counterpose the modern industrial buildings, to argue that Germany’s awe-inspiring technological progress was a necessary result given Germany’s great beginnings. Its existence was confirmation that Germany had an identity and a past worthy of remembrance, which fulfilled Germany’s need to have a distinct, deep-seated history and culture (no matter how fabricated) to have a current national identity. This romanticised notion of the past is evident in Figure 3, where a young boy richly garbed waves at picturesque Old Berlin during sunset – a ritualised, aestheticized spectacle. Sunset shades reflect off the plaster townhall, rather than a realistic portrayal of Berlin, which contemporaries noted to be misery and dirt incarnate (George 1896: 294).



Figure 3 An official postcard of Old Berlin (Wendisch 1896).

Old Berlin was used to show that given Germany’s splendid beginnings, there could not have been any other path for Germany other than enlightened progress. However, this was not the only way in which modern Germanness was created through spatial and temporal – the Cairo exhibition also served to create Germanness out of difference. A contrast was also wrought between the purity of the Egyptian past<sup>3</sup> and its tainted modernity – which Germany had naturally avoided. Furthermore, Egypt represented Germany’s cultural colonialism - the Khedival (royal) school system was directed by a

<sup>3</sup> The Kaiser admired Bedouins for their racial purity, viewing them as ‘fearless, unspoiled by civilisation’ (Gossman 2013: 20).

German-educated Swiss citizen, and the Khedivial Library was directed by Germans from 1873 and 1914 (Steinmetz 2017: 61).

The privately-owned Cairo exhibition was surrounded by a high wooden fence that unambiguously demarcated the exhibition from the surrounding exhibition and the city (*Deutsche Bauzeitung* 1896: 382). In the ancient section, streets were modelled off a compressed interpretation of the old city in Cairo, complete with a smaller replica of the Great Pyramid of Giza, mosques and a peasant village – a microcosm of the German perspective of Egypt. The model town was a toy picture of the past, indicated by the ‘peeling back’ of the present day (and simultaneously futuristic) Berlin exhibition to reveal the glorified, sand-coloured Egyptian past, seen in Figure 4. However, the postcard also represents how Germany’s modern success has overwritten the once great Egyptian empire – both had racially pure and noble beginnings, but whereas the imagined exoticism of Egypt’s ‘ancient’ village had led to the modern recreation of a poverty-stricken ‘Fellahin’ (agricultural labourer) village (Steinmetz 2017: 63), representative of modernisation gone wrong, Germany could boast its industrial strength. As the postcard depicts, Germany was in full colour, whereas Egypt was stuck in the sepia of the past.



Figure 4 A postcard of the Cairo exhibit (Zottmayr 1896).

In addition to these two temporal contrasts – Germany’s great beginnings leading to its futuristic advancement towards progress, and the purity of an exoticised past against the potential failings of modernity, which further emphasise Germany’s great development – the colonial exhibit posed another spatial-temporal dichotomy which shaped the visitor’s views of Germany. In contrast to the worlds of Old Berlin and Old Cairo, which represented idealised, romanticised purity, I argue that the location of the colonial exhibit in the past was designed to construct Germanness as white and metropolitan in contrast to racialised primitiveness.

## The Colonial Exhibit

The 1896 fair featured Germany's first colonial exhibit, twelve years after the Berlin West Africa Conference (1884-5). I posit that the function of this exhibit was to further a view of Germanness which was contingent on the 'strength' of conquest, and to present the colonies such that colonialism would be considered justifiable in the eyes of the visitors (Osayimwese 2016: 4), by locating cultures from colonised lands in an artificial past.

To attract a larger audience to the colonial exhibition, key for establishing the Imperial vision of *Reich*, the then-Chancellor Bismarck demanded an 'ethnological' aspect to the exhibition in addition to the 259 colonial-specific stalls. The colonial exhibit featured 106 people from colonised lands, many of whom were wealthy, educated and powerful (Kurt 2019). Some voluntarily came to establish diplomatic relations, some had been promised a cultural exchange, and some were lured by employment contracts (Geppert 2010). They were expected to build replicas of villages from Togo, Cameroon, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda and New Guinea with materials from their homelands, never returned.



*Figure 5* Nine members of the Herero and Nama peoples at the exhibition. Photograph looted by Germans during the Herero and Nama genocide (Kurt 2019).

These villages, as presented in Figures 6 and 7, were referred to as 'Eingeborenendörfern' (literally, 'native villages'). At specified times, the demonstrators were expected to engage in activities which were ostensibly authentic to the colonised lands, such as dancing, cooking and craft making in supposedly traditional clothing.<sup>4</sup> This was to present the different cultures as primitive and savage in comparison to Western Europe's progressive and enlightened state – justifying the colonial project as of 'benefit' to the colonised lands, a narrative which remained after the end of Empire, which many Weimar revisionists used to justify colonial revisionism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'participants' has been used to describe individuals in ethnological exhibitions/human zoos, but I have chosen to use 'demonstrants' to avoid implying that their participation was willing.

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see Choi (2020).



Figure 6 A constructed village (Kurt 2019).

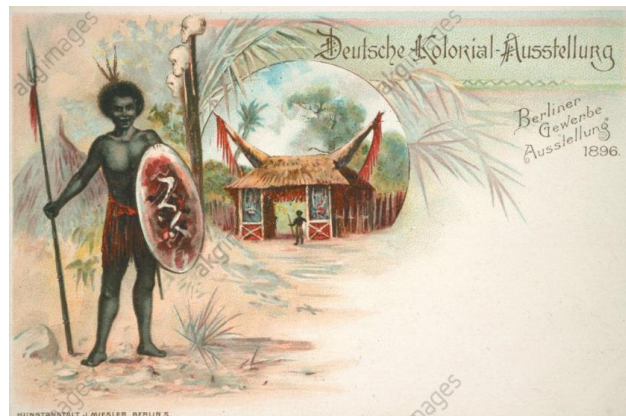


Figure 7 A postcard featuring a constructed village and a demonstrant (Miesler 1896a).

The demonstrators were treated inhumanely: three people died. During their journey, they lived under corrugated iron sheets or had to camp in the open air (Habermalz 2017). Every individual's skull was measured by phrenologist, anthropologist and future director of the Berlin Ethnographic Museum Felix von Luschan and the demonstrators were housed in barracks (Schultze 1971: 117–118).



Figure 8 An image from the „zurückGESCHAUT“ ('LOOKING back') exhibition showcasing the perspectives of the demonstrators at the trade exhibition (Habermalz 2017). For more information about resistance see Steinmetz (2017).

Treating people as objects of anthropological interest, as objects among wares for consumption, was not new. 19<sup>th</sup> century theories about racial superiority (Stoecker et al. 2013) led to human bones, mostly victims of colonisation, being gathered from German colonies and researched upon in order to prove how races are unequal (Pape 2017: 5). The anthropological gaze, enabling ideologies of racial superiority, facilitated imperial propaganda. Cyclically, the anthropological gaze was also a result of commercial and political imperial desires. Recall Fanon's statement that the corporeal schema available to the racialised individual was provided by 'the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details' (1986: 111).

This supposedly 'scientific' study of racial difference was used to justify colonial conquest, perceived as a benefit to colonised people. This attitude was reinforced by the 'fascinating in itself' division of the colonial exhibit into two sections (*Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* 1896a: 138): the 'scientific/commercial' and the 'ethnological', which mirrored racial spatial segregation in the colonies and solidified ostensible racial difference. This is evident in Figure 9. The 'scientific/commercial' section featured a scientific hall designed as both an 'Indian temple' and 'Arabian mosque' (Von Schweinitz et al. 1897: 60), examples of settler houses, and stalls featuring missionaries and businesses, juxtaposed against the performances in the 'ethnological' section. However, despite the importance of the division in creating a juxtaposition, both elements cannot be disentangled: after all, it was not only the 'ethnological' which fascinated the visitor – it was also the fantasy of being a colonialist settler, which I expand upon in the next section. The latter needed the former; Germanness needed the colonial ideal.



Figure 9 Postcard (Miesler 1896b).

This dichotomous spatial presentation contrasts with Old Berlin, representing a pure past on its linear way to Enlightenment reason, rather than the primitive constructed past of the colonial exhibit's racialised time structure. It also implies that the colonised lands will never reach industrialisation, further justifying colonialism. This is compounded by the fact that the subject is not just transported to a future vision of Germany with immense economic and technological success – the subject knows that this is merely a temporary, transient vision, reflected in the temporary structures of the exhibition. And since this performance of the future is established against racialised temporal constructions, participation in the colonial project was a way to achieve the future promised to them.

## Colonial Conquest and Consumption

Not only were conceptions of the nation state and the imperial interwoven in a public representational space devoted to the industrial, colonialism bled into the everyday conceptions of Germanness for the individual. When entering the colonial exhibition, the subject was not just inducted into a panoramic 'spectacle of the ocular' (Breckenridge 1989: 196), but entered the 'verisimilar' scene of past and ongoing conquest to make further cultural conquest of their own. As noted by Frau Buchholz, the housewife protagonist of the satirical novel 'Hotel Buchholz' depicting a middle-class family's visit to the exhibition, 'For an admissions fee of only thirty pfennigs we enter our colonies, picturesquely situated by the carp pond between the bushes, and can get an idea of our acquisitions in Africa' (Stinde 1897: 200).

The colonial exhibit was where over two million visitors were inducted into colonial ideologies of domination and superiority (Von Schweinitz et al. 1897: 335). The trade exhibition produced an authoritative view of people from colonised lands as racially inferior for the everyday German, made all the stronger by the immersive and experiential presentation of people-as-objects, rather than only objects. However, the colonial exhibit was more than mere voyeurism or the application of an Enlightenment teleology: it encouraged colonial consumption and participation through the inclusion of settler buildings and administrative technologies, solidifying Germanness.

In this way, colonialism came to be cultural, an everyday feature of German conceptions of nationhood. Through the spatio-temporal contrast between colonial administration and the 'primitive', domination insinuated itself into the everyday consideration of the visitors. The postcards are one facet of cultural colonialism: they distributed more than the meaning of the messages inscribed on them; they allowed the visitor to prove themselves as participating in this performance of conquest through their illustrations as meant for display.

The emphasis on the local landscape and colonial buildings mingling in Figures 10 and 11 foregrounds the German in the 'foreign'. As Frau Buchholz notes, '[the colonial exhibition] is to be understood as a representation of Zanzibar, in a mixture of African buildings and Berlin refreshment halls' (Stinde 1897: 204). This framing of the colonial lands as German is compounded by the illustration of exotic fruits, representative of German economic exploitation. The illustrated people are also naturalised as part of the landscape-as-property, in this case captured in the postcard to be sold and circulated.

This exhibition-like gaze reinforces the German conception of self-identity as owners and that German perception of the world as objective (Macdonald 2003: 3). 'Whiteness is inherited through the very placement of things' (Ahmed 2007: 155): the spatio-temporal hierarchy within the fair, and within the colonial exhibit itself, represents the freezing of ostensibly intrinsic differences between 'discrete' cultures, the colonial cultures located in temporally distant, less advanced times. This distinction is apparent in Figure 10: the white display hall and colonialist buildings contrasted with the depiction the New Guinean and East African buildings.

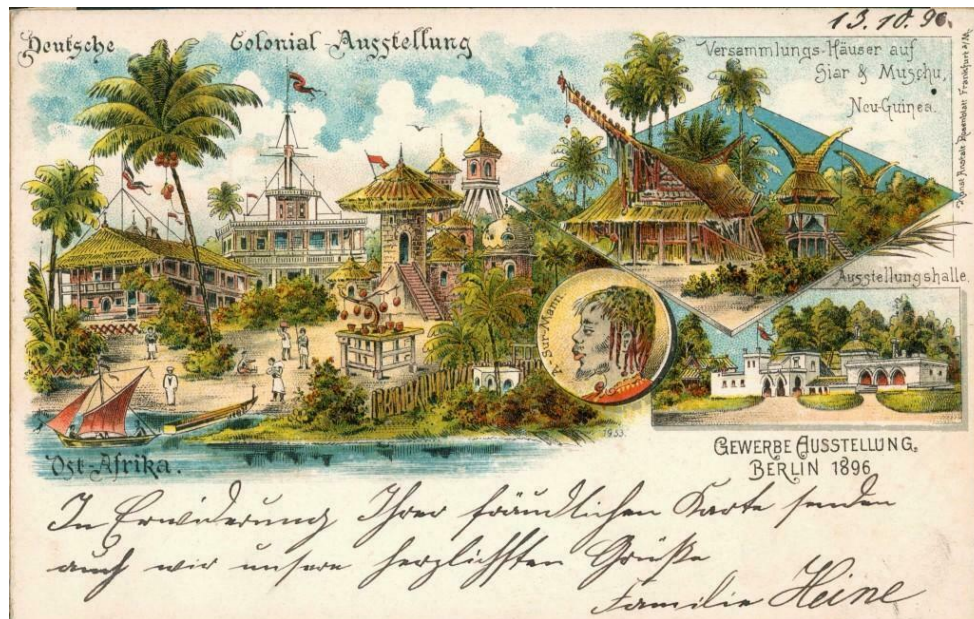


Figure 10 Postcard featuring East African and New Guinean buildings, and the colonial display hall (Rosenblatt 1896).



Figure 11 Postcard featuring three buildings and a person with a flag (Miesler 1896c).

Visitors were encouraged to imagine themselves as settlers as they walked through a replica of the German consulate in Zanzibar which featured typical products of each colony and administrative offices of German civil servants (Von Schweinitz 1897: 222), a bureaucrat's house mirrored after a settler bungalow that was eventually sent to Togo to be used as an administrative building (*Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* 1896b: 146), complete with a bed surrounded by mosquito netting (*Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* 1896c: 171), and even a tropical hygiene hospital which demarcated the division between the 'ethnological' and 'scientific/commercial'. Visitors were encouraged to engage in symbolic re-enactments of domination, as colonial managers themselves (Steinmetz 2017: 57).

Moreover, official reports note that the colonial exhibit was the most popular among visitors 'because the 'savage' had never been brought so tangibly close to them as here' (Von Schweinitz 1897: 356).

The colonial exhibit made the far-away accessible, with the public seeking participation in more 'intense' and 'true' encounters which would mark them as part of the Empire, as part of the dominating Imperial force which was synonymous with Germanness. As 16-year-old Marie von Rhamm wrote in 1896, she was greatly interested by being able to watch the participants cook: 'When the corn dish was ready, the black cook washed up the bowls so thoroughly that many a German kitchen fairy could take her as an example, and then she slid into the bamboo hut with the corn dish' (Habermalz 2017). To participate in national identity, one had to engage with the colonial.



Figure 12 The bourgeois visitor's experience was fully interactive (Kaufmann 1896).

Visitors were also encouraged to imagine themselves conquering, not merely as conquerors. As Frau Buchholz arrives at a replica of the Nyamwezi chief Siki's Quikuru (fortress, see Figure 13), she imagines herself as part of the military campaign who seized it in 1892. The author Stinde uses the present tense to place Frau Buchholz in the midst of the campaign, as if she were living it herself: 'You have only one thought: here they kill! There is no escape. You flee deeper and deeper into the mousetrap and do not find the way out again. And now they start shooting' (Stinde 1897: 202).



Figure 13 The Quikuru (Von Schweinitz 1897: 22).

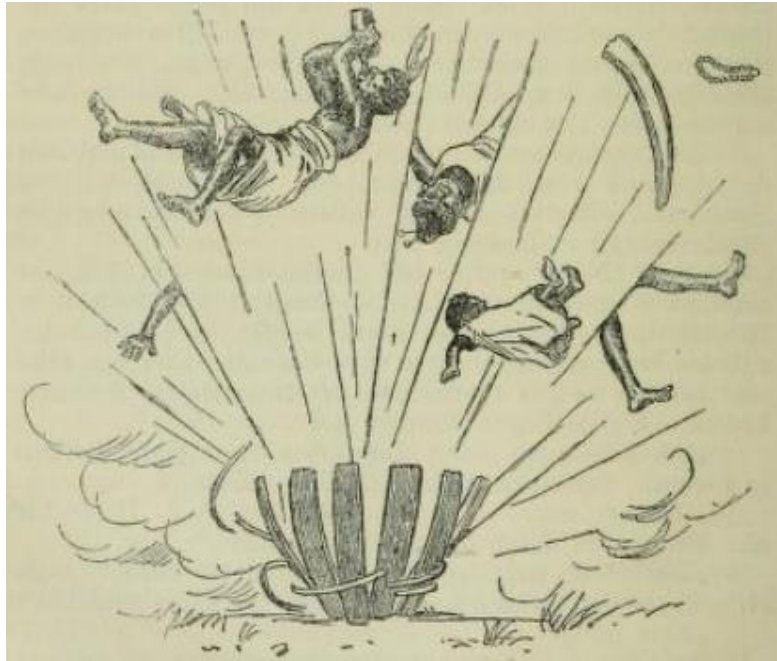


Figure 14 The illustration of Frau Buchholz's imagining (Stinde 1897: 202).

Furthermore, the figure of the victimised colonial woman allowed for the emergence of an agentic, enlightened German woman (Haggis 1998: 59). As the Buchholz party watch a mother play with her children, Frau Buchholz challenges her recalcitrant Uncle over the emancipation of women as her Aunt 'was silent. After a while she said, "I felt so sorry for that woman."' (Stinde 1897: 204). The exhibit made space for middle-class German women to pity colonised women for their entrapment, as they are complicit in the trapping. Empire building offered German women an avenue to secure public roles, such as in the later-mentioned German Women's Association for Nursing in the Colonies (who sponsored the tropical hygiene hospital) and assert their agency in relation to German men and colonised peoples as active workers, the 'superior gendered authority, as better women' (Midgley 2007: 1).

A juxtaposition emerges between the living presence of these people and the presentation of these people-as-objects as from a primitive state in the past – as further behind in a linear construction of time. It is a live performance of this specific narrative which temporally erases indigenous peoples, fuelling a justificatory narrative of colonialism. Movement through space becomes movement through time, and history is shaped around the progress of humanity from degeneracy into enlightened reason (McClintock 1995: 8-9). Germanness, inextricably linked with view of racial purity and whiteness, was reified by the presence of people from the colonies, which 'allows whiteness to be done' (Ahmed 2007: 150). Germany was crafted through showing what Germans were not – Germany was defined through its imperial agenda.

Moreover, the 'non-German' that was created from this narrative was a generalised whole, as the narrator Frau Buchholz notes: 'For me it is almost impossible to distinguish between the individual tribes, which are the Swahili and which are the Maasai or Dualla or Papuas or however else they are spelled' (Stinde 1897: 201). The exhibition represented a recognisable reality of a conflated colonial, simultaneously familiar and distant (Stewart 1984: 139). The exhibition contained the colonial, the colonial was accounted for by the elements of the exhibition; the exhibition oriented the subject in a space, filled with artificially frozen objects, which represented our continuous movement in and through time. The postcards function similarly: the 'accurate' artistic depictions of the reconstructed buildings, which are grounded in actual bodies of water and landscapes to emphasise the

reconstructions' verisimilitude to the actual buildings, make the colonies familiar by alluding to temporary replicas of the real thing.

A tension emerges: 'Those who saw [the exhibition] can say they saw a piece of the Orient' (Stinde 1897: 208), yet the 'authentic' replicas' are merely transient installations with an artistic function – that of performance. In the same way, the postcards are also metonyms of the exhibition as performative colonial conquest: marketed for purchase and circulation, but mere designs. As Homi Bhabha notes in a different context, this presumes the colonised lands 'as a fixed reality...entirely knowable and visible' (1986: 56), but through an ephemeral medium – hardly 'real' for the domestic German citizen. The public was thus an active subject in the engendering and consolidation of Germanness through seriously participating in a world of imagination.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I proposed that German identity was contingent on perceptions of the colonial, challenging Germany's asymmetrical relationship to its colonial past. As a nascent nation state, Germany needed the colonial to shore up its identity as a cosmopolitan world power - even to its own citizens. I argued that the colonial was mobilised to serve as a counterpoint to German identity, solidifying Germanness as modern and white through ostensible racial difference. To do so, cultures from to colonised lands were located in a constructed primitive past, justifying colonialism.

I argued that the 1896 fair was simultaneously an encapsulation of the attitudes of the time and a representation of visions of accelerated progress towards the future, contingent on Old Berlin and the Cairo and colonial exhibits. Through an analysis of the 1896 Berlin world fair, I posited that the different exhibits represented different temporalities, all of which were employed to present Germany as a progressive, future-looking state. The different temporal locations were emphasised by a spatial hierarchy. Finally, I noted that cultural colonialism did indeed pervade the popular realm and structure Germanness for the everyday citizen, as the fair encouraged participation in symbolic re-enactments of conquest and consumption at the exhibits. Germany's identity as a modern, powerful nation cannot be separated from representations of the colonies as located in a past time, demanding engagement from Germany.

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