

From Fantasy to Nightmare: Patricia Anne Simpson's *German Empires and Decolonial Fantasies, 1492–1942*

Matthew Childs

Wake Forest University (Winston-Salem)

Childsm@wfu.edu

Abstract:

Patricia Anne Simpson's volume offers a reassessment of Germany's involvement with global conquest, arguing that its imperial ambition and racist structures were embedded in its culture for five centuries. It investigates how narratives of expansion shaped national identity. The analysis contrasts imperial stories with the voices of resistance from colonized peoples. By linking this history to the ideologies of the Nazi period, the study shows that the German imagination was organized around global dominance and its loss.

Von der Fantasie zum Albtraum. Patricia Anne Simpson's *German Empires and Decolonial Fantasies, 1492–1942*

German Abstract:

Patricia Anne Simpsons Band bietet eine Neubewertung der deutschen Verwicklung in die globale Eroberung. Simpson argumentiert, dass der imperiale Ehrgeiz und die rassistischen Strukturen fünf Jahrhunderte lang in der Kultur verwurzelt waren und untersucht, wie Narrative der Expansion die nationale Identität prägten. Die Analyse stellt imperiale Geschichten den Stimmen kolonisierter Völker gegenüber. Indem die Studie diese Geschichte mit den Ideologien der NS-Zeit verknüpft, zeigt sie, dass die deutsche Vorstellungswelt auf globale Dominanz und deren Verlust ausgerichtet war.

How to cite:

Childs, Matthew: "From Fantasy to Nightmare: Patricia Anne Simpson's *German Empires and Decolonial Fantasies, 1492–1942* [Review of: Simpson, Patricia Anne: *German Empires and Decolonial Fantasies, 1492–1942*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2025.]". In: KULT_online 73 (2026). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2026.1553>.



From Fantasy to Nightmare: Patricia Anne Simpson's *German Empires and Decolonial Fantasies, 1492–1942*

Matthew Childs

Wake Forest University (Winston-Salem)

Simpson, Patricia Anne: *German Empires and Decolonial Fantasies, 1492–1942*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2025. 340 Pages, 46.45 EUR. ISBN: 9780472057375.

Patricia Anne Simpson's ambitious and meticulously researched monograph, *German Empires and Colonial Fantasies, 1492–1942*, represents a sizable contribution to ongoing discussions of the German-speaking world's relationship with the history of imperialism and colonialism. Simpson's volume demonstrates that the short-lived German Empire's venture into colonialism was merely a brief, formalized manifestation of a far older, deeper, and more persistent cultural and intellectual entanglement with colonial enterprises, expansionist logic, and racialized fantasies. In so doing, it challenges previous periodization, reframing German imperialism as a centuries-long undertaking.

Simpson's text is divided into three parts: "Imperial Entanglements," "Transatlantic German Worlds," and "Global Imaginaries." Following a lengthy introduction in which the decolonial theoretical framework and historical context are elaborated in full, citing in particular the sociologist Aníbal Quijano's concept of the *colonialidad de poder*, Simpson dives into the time period from 1492 to the *Goethezeit* with chapters on "Prussia's First Fortress," "Enlightened Colonialism," and "Enslaved Souls, Perfect Freedom, and Savagery." Wonderfully insightful and backed by considerable evidence, including images from the author's own fact-finding mission to former German colonial holdings in Ghana, this section brings attention to a period often overlooked due to the historical fragmentation of the German lands. Crucial to the author's thesis is the foregrounding of Prussian investments in West Africa in the seventeenth century. Simpson links early Prussian state-building directly to transatlantic slavery and mercantilist colonial efforts. Through her exploration of this history, which begins with a reading of the Great Elector Frederick William's equestrian statue (originally located on the Rathaus Bridge,

but currently standing in the courtyard of the Charlottenburg Palace), it becomes clear that German coloniality predates and exceeds the German Empire. She recounts the establishment of Fort Groß-Friedrichsburg from 1683 to 1685 (located in Ghana), under the direction of the Brandenburg Company. Intended to defend economic interests against Dutch encroachment, these outposts would contribute to “[e]arly modern German geographies of the colonial world” that would “foreground the cosmopolitan project of knowledge expansion” and fuel “later narratives of empires” (p. 39). These narratives informed, contemporaneously and consequently, the development of discourses about race, gender, ethnicity, and religion that would establish and police the boundaries of European whiteness.

“Transatlantic German Worlds” continues the story, shifting the focus to the nineteenth century through the explosion of German migration to the Americas and Africa. In chapters titled “The New World Wilderness,” “German Pioneers,” and “Upon the Water: Immigration as Destiny,” Simpson masterfully analyzes cultural materials, from Wilhelm Rotermund’s Brazil inspired diasporic writings (e.g., “Die beiden Nachbarn: Bilder aus der Kolonie”) to Maria Hellemeier’s contribution to *Auerbachs Deutsche Kinderkalender auf das Jahr 1902* (“Die Kleine Urwälderin”) that encouraged and romanticized (not to mention rationalized) German migration and colonization. In this context, the ‘pioneer’ became a crucial narrative vehicle for projecting German imperial and colonial desires onto far away landscapes. This cultural preoccupation with movement into foreign spaces would feed into fantasies of *Lebensraum*, which took root far before its darkest manifestation in the twentieth century.

The final section – “Global Imaginaries” – addresses the period from around 1900 to 1942, where Simpson argues that colonial fantasies only intensified through an eventual preoccupation with the recovery and recolonization of former imperial holdings. A high point is the analysis of Ernst Ludwig Cramer’s 1941 text *Die Kinderfarm* (in the chapter titled “Global German Frontiers”), which exemplifies the fantasy of German reoccupation of German Southwest Africa (now Namibia) through the nostalgic depiction of life on the Cramer family farm. As Simpson puts it: “The Cape Cross and the legend of Behaim fuel Cramer’s narrative of German belonging in Südwestafrika and its belonging rightfully to the German Reich. His life writing is a work of mourning subsumed into a political moment that captures the palpable

belief in a “recolonial Africa” (p. 286). Here, as elsewhere, Simpson is able to parse the subtle grammar of imperial and colonial thought channeled through what might otherwise be enticing popular narratives. In the final two chapters of this section – “*Wohin? The Ungovernable*” and “*First Footprints and Recolonial Fantasies*” – Simpson first delves into the commodification of the “ungovernable” (indigenous bodies regulated along Eurocentric notions of race and gender) under German colonial rule, including in the publications of Gustav Meinecke. Meinecke, who published both nonfiction and fiction, composed his works “through an optimistic prism” that “ideologically aligned colonialism with emigration” (p. 248). Such an example perfectly demonstrates Susanne Zantop’s idea of a colonial fantasy and the subtle manner in which these fantasies tended to capture and channel the German imagination. The latter chapter closes her argument with a return to Cramer’s *Kinderfarm* and an examination of the *Argentinisches Tageblatt* and its influence on ideas about “economic migration and the right to cultivate the land outside the nation” not to mention its stiff opposition to the “imperialism of National Socialism” (p. 277).

Simpson’s methodological breadth and depth of research, which draws on an incredible variety of cultural materials, from literary works and art to magazine publications and personal encounters with the physical remnants of German colonialism, distinguishes *German Empires and Decolonial Fantasies* as a major contribution to decolonial scholarship and German Studies, more specifically. By insisting that the colonial past is not a marginal or brief episode, but rather an inherent and enduring feature of German culture and history, Simpson forces scholars to reexamine their sources and assumptions.

If there is a critique, it stems from the inherent challenge of maintaining a single, unified analytical thread across such a vast historical and geographical spread. The book’s ambitious reach from 1492 to 1942 sometimes compresses – however necessarily – regional or temporal nuances. For example, the closing chapter (“*First Footprints and Recolonial Fantasies*”), with its strikingly interesting exploration of the *Argentinisches Tageblatt* feels a touch short, and would benefit from further explication. However, this quality is more a testament to the scale of the author’s undertaking, and the coherence she does achieve is remarkable.

With the publication of *German Empires and Decolonial Fantasies, 1492–1942*, Patricia Anne Simpson has provided an essential work for the study of Germany’s colonial and imperial history, and a testament of the importance of continuing decolonial scholarship. It serves as a powerful and sophisticated challenge to scholarly exceptionalism that minimizes Germany’s role in global imperial and colonial systems. Its insights are crucial not just for understanding the past, but for navigating the politics of race and decolonization in the present.