

Space Oddities: Urbanity, American Identity and Cultural Exchange 21--23 November 2014, Graz

Discovering Timbuktu: An American Perspective on a Legendary City

Before the American Robert Adams was enslaved in the early nineteenth century and forcibly taken to Timbuktu, there had been many attempts by Europeans to set foot in this legendary African city. However, none actually managed to do so, which explains why there was so much public interest in *The Narrative of Robert Adams* (1816), the first account of a Westerner who visited Timbuktu and lived to tell the tale. And yet, not only the city itself, but also his accounts are shrouded in mysteries. Adams's captivity narrative is filled with fantastical elements and geographical, historical and biological inaccuracies. On top of that, there remain a lot of open questions about his true name and identity - all unanswered because Adams vanished into thin air, shortly after relating his story to his editors. Allegedly, Adams did not even stay long enough with his benefactors in England to collect his royalties. In any case, he was right about one thing: far from being an African El Dorado, Timbuktu was not as rich as people imagined it to be. Interestingly, this fact turned out to be the main reason for initial disbelief - nobody was prepared to accept that this supposedly great city was actually just one among many. In my paper I will try to point out some of the peculiarities about this account, written by a man who might or might not have been the first Westerner to report from Timbuktu. I will also talk about the convoluted publication history (Adams himself was illiterate) and the public reactions to his narrative. After all, it is not only interesting to see how Adams portrayed a city that had never been seen before, but also to find out how Americans and Europeans actually wanted it to be.

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Short Biography

Tobias Auböck is a PhD student at the University of Innsbruck, where he also received his Diploma in English and American Studies, specializing in American Barbary Coast captivity narratives. From October 2013 to March 2014, he worked as an assistant at the American Corner Innsbruck, an information platform that is anchored at the Department of American Studies at the University of Innsbruck. Since Spring 2014, he has been research assistant for the FWF-funded project European Slaves: Christians in African Pirate Encounters (ESCAPE: Barbary Coast Captivity Narratives 1550-1780).