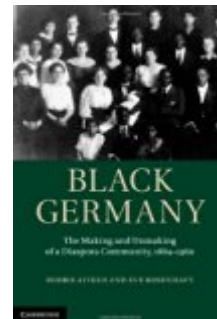


Robbie Aitken, Eve Rosenhaft. *Black Germany: The Making and Unmaking of a Diaspora Community, 1884-1960.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 379 pp. \$125.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-04136-3.



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Robbie Aitken and Eve Rosenhaft's book, *Black Germany: The Making and Unmaking of a Diaspora Community, 1884-1960*, is a richly detailed history of German nation-building, colonialism, and black diasporic migration that deserves close attention. Using a wide variety of documents from sixty-five—sixty-five!—different archives located in eleven different countries on three continents, Aitken and Rosenhaft were able to trace the lives of Cameroonian immigrants to Germany and their descendants between the 1880s and the 1960s. Their close readings of these sources give the reader individual micro-histories and larger, big-picture analyses of identity-making at work.

The title of the book (*Black Germany*) is somewhat misleading, for Aitken and Rosenhaft make it clear early on that they are not documenting the entirety of black diasporic lives in German history. There were, of course, countless other black travelers from the Americas, Caribbean, and Africa who lived and worked in German-speaking Europe. But the advantage to the authors in tracing one set of exchanges (German-

Cameroonian) is that they can better observe continuities and ruptures in this particular black German history. Moreover, another advantage to documenting the history of Cameroonians and their descendants in Germany is that most of it took place before World War II. Historians assumed for a long time that black bodies on German soil were a contemporary phenomenon that had its origins in the post-World War II era. But recent scholarship is overturning this way of thinking.[1] In so doing, scholars such as Martin Klimke, Mischa Honeck, Anne Kuhlmann, and others are resisting the notion that blacks are new—and hence outsiders—to German history. Aitken and Rosenhaft have joined this growing chorus of historians who argue that black men and women have always been part of the national fabric of Germany, and they use their work to illustrate how German discourses of antiblack racism are more historical, firmly embedded, and potent than we might have expected

The eight chapters in *Black Germany* move chronologically while discussing a few themes

unique to each period. Chapter 1 examines how the community of Cameroonians formed in Imperial Germany. What characterized early black migration to Germany in the 1880s was its chaotic nature: black Cameroonians (mostly men) were scattered throughout the country, and their population was constantly in flux. They were personal servants to colonial administrators, language instructors at colonial institutes training Germans to go to Africa, university students earning a degree, young schoolchildren who were often the sons and daughters of Cameroonian elites, or shoemakers and bricklayers seeking out apprenticeships. This generation of young Cameroonians lived in isolation and apart from one another.

And they were constantly being handled by the German state. Never free to wander on their own, black residents always needed supervision, shepherding, guiding, and handling. Indeed, white Germans' need to police and monitor black bodies throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is one of the most resonant and terrifying themes that Aitken and Rosenhaft are able to tease out through their meticulous research. It was always understood that blacks were to be visitors, and that they were to be guarded as such. German officials were as committed to protecting white Germans from their growing black population as they were in guiding these African elites through German society. This remained a truism from the 1890s well through the 1960s, where in places such as communist East Germany African students were again supervised and placed in separate housing, as were African American GIs who had fled to the GDR to plead asylum.[2]

Why do we know so little about the lives of people of African descent in Germany before World War II? In part, Aitken and Rosenhaft show us, it is because Germany's black residents were always policed, stymied, and scattered about in ways that hindered collectivization. The fact that communities formed at all should be understood as an Olympic feat in overcoming what were

nearly insurmountable odds. Placed in isolation and prevented from forming meaningful bonds with other people of color and with white Germans, black Germans' fragmentation explains why it has been so difficult to trace a distinct Afro-German culture. If American segregation created concentrated African American communities who over the years forged a unique cultural identity, the deliberate isolation of Germany's black residents prevented the creation of new cultural roots.

Chapter 2 follows what happened to Cameroonians in Germany once Germany lost its colonies. Would these German subjects be allowed to stay? Could they be granted German citizenship? Many of them had arrived when they were children and knew little else. Some were second-generation Cameroonian Germans. Aitken and Rosenhaft's second chapter is, above all, a case study in the inconsistency on the state and federal level in granting citizenship to black Germans. No consistent form of documentation appears to have been applied to Wilhelmine Germany's black population. Given a perplexingly large variety of identity papers (including but not limited to a native passport, a personal ID, a foreigner's passport, a certificate of state residency, a notification of status as a residential dependent, a temporary residency stay, or citizenship cards), black residents' petitions for citizenship or permanent stay were often at the mercy of local officials who were prone to contradict each other.

So what happened to those who wanted to leave Germany and return to Africa? Here, too, black residents faced a web of bureaucratic red tape and a cacophony of inconsistent double-speak that made their process of leaving difficult. Leaving required the blessings of the French, British, and German governments (the British and French now having laid claim to Germany's African territories), and all three states had their own complicated and conflicting reasons for granting or rejecting an applicant's plea. The

French did not want Germanophone Cameroonians to return. They saw Germany's Cameroonians as anticolonial, and if not anticolonial then certainly pro-German and anti-French. It took years before the British consulate were willing to help former colonial subjects return to the region that the British now occupied. Ultimately, less than half of all applicants returned to Africa. And there were plenty more that never applied. They were, after all, European-born and -bred. Why would they go? As the 1920s inched ever closer to the 1930s, the residency and citizenship status of Germany's black residents remained fraught, tied up in bureaucracies, or hidden. Some Cameroonians figured it would be easier to become social ghosts, hiding from authorities and living quietly in the shadows.

But then they fell in love. And wanted to marry. Which demanded paperwork. Chapter 3 examines the complexities of love and marriage between Cameroonians and German women. Nearly all marriages were mixed, both in terms of nationality and race, and nearly all marriages faced a series of legal, social, and political challenges. Rosenhaft and Aitken suspect that one of the primary reasons marriages were either delayed or blocked altogether concerned the status of these formerly colonial men marrying German women. To marry required approval from the state. The Civil Code of 1900 required proof of legal capacity for marriage (*Ehefähigkeitszeugnis*) and proof that both partners were single. Any application to marry would lead to an inquiry into the groom's citizenship status, and since many men were stateless in the eyes of the administration, they were often stuck in a bureaucratic no-man's-land until authorities decided on their status. Moreover, when a German woman married a foreigner, she lost her nationality and the children inherited the nationality of the father. What did she gain in marrying someone whose status was either indeterminable or undesirable in the eyes of the state? Love and marriage, then, became a reason for many Cameroonians to request German

citizenship, even if it meant facing years of hurdles and questioning to get it. In one case, a black German resident refused to marry his wife or recognize his daughter until he had become naturalized. Only after gaining German citizenship did he fill out paperwork to claim his daughter and to marry the daughter's mother.

But how did these men (and some women) find work in Germany? Who was willing to hire them? Chapter 4 explores the daily lives of black Germans through the world of work. Black residents' work lives were characterized, Rosenhaft and Aitken illustrate, by a central paradox: "getting on in Germany often depended on exploiting the things that made them different from other Germans" (p. 119). Being black meant being sought after as performers, and often in roles that reinforced their marginalized status as racial outsiders. Whether they were "wild African savages" in exhibitions, charming audiences as snake handlers or fire-eaters in a circus, acting in an exotic film, or singing in a jazz band in the 1920s, blacks in Germany found employment easiest when they could take on roles that were racially performed. At the popular "Indian Bar" in Hamburg, for example, the bar's attractions included black waitresses who served *Köm* (caraway schnapps) to customers (p. 123). As entrepreneurs, several businessmen and women used their exotic blackness to sell colonial products on the German domestic market in ways that echo what David Ciarlo discusses in his book, *Advertising Empire*.^[3] Many, however, also found themselves repeatedly visiting the unemployment office as they bounced around from one temporary gig to another. Lacking citizenship and identity papers, they found it difficult to convince employers to take them on for work, especially as economic depression raged through 1920s Germany. Some turned to crime. Many died in poverty.

Because more people of African descent gravitated towards urban areas like Hamburg and Berlin in the 1910s and 1920s, they were finally

more able to connect with each other than in the past. In places like Berlin, blacks gravitated towards Berlin's West End or found safe spaces in working-class neighborhoods like Kreuzberg and Wedding. Location brought black Germans together, and so did events, traditions, and rituals like marriages and christenings. A group photograph from around 1928, for example, shows a black community in Hanover celebrating the christening of a new black German child (p. 129). Black Germans were often each others' godparents, bridesmaids, and parental figures.

With the growth of black communities in Germany in the 1920s and 30s came more collective self-awareness of their black diasporic identities and more of an attempt to articulate their position as blacks institutionally and politically. Here, in chapter 6, Aitken and Rosenhaft are at their strongest in showing the making of a collective. It was Germany's loss of colonies that led to a new kind of collective identity among blacks in Germany. Since many Cameroonian Germans had either been born or raised in Germany or were now second- or third-generation, they had less reason to identify with an African homeland. Instead, they began to articulate more publicly their sense of place in Germany. For what might have been the first time, blacks in Germany collectively called for better treatment as *Germans*. In a thirty-two-point petition in July 1919, a group of black Germans declared, "[we] demand, since we are Germans, equality with [Germans], because in public we are always described as foreigners. The new government must issue a public statement to eliminate this misapprehension" (p. 201).

In Chapters 7 and 8, Aitken and Rosenhaft examine how blacks managed their lives in Nazi Germany. Most of the families that Aitken and Rosenhaft traced gathered their belongings and left for France (chapter 8). For those who did not flee or find themselves in a concentration camp, black life under Nazi rule was subject to a series of paradoxes. The ways in which the Nazi state

treated its black citizens and residents was highly inconsistent. True, Nazi policymakers feared racial miscegenation and a growing "mulatto" population in Germany. But they loathed the Jewish presence more, and sought to target it more systematically and wholeheartedly than their black population. Nonetheless, as more official policies developed over time, blacks witnessed their protections erode. Even one's status as a former colonial (which, let's face it, had always been a mixed bag) or a celebrated local could no longer offer protection. The most threatened group within black communities were multiracial children. They implied an erasure of the color line and a racial pollution to be shielded against. Worse, Aitken and Rosenhaft argue, these children implied a sense of settledness among blacks that had allowed for mixed couples to form in the first place.

Blacks in Nazi Germany faced extreme exclusion from German social and cultural life. Constantly subjected to verbal and physical abuse, refused employment, banned from performing, threatened with sterilization or slave labor, and denied social protections, blacks in Germany stayed hidden from the public's eye as best as they could. A few black Germans with colonial ties received some worry and attention from the Foreign Office and colonial organizations, who tried to find them odd jobs (animal keepers at a zoo, for example) when they could. But exile—internal or external—remained the most appealing option for those who could pursue it.

In the postwar period, Afro-Germans struggled to put their lives back together and form connections again. Scattered throughout western Europe, these Cameroonian Germans came back to a divided Germany to discover that their presence and stories had been overshadowed by a new national anxiety: the *Besatzungskinder* or so-called occupation babies of West Germany. Only in the 1980s, as the burgeoning Afro-German movement began to take shape, did older generations of

Afro-Germans connect with the newer post-45 generations.

I have two criticisms of Aitken and Rosenhaft's rich and rewarding project. This book can weigh the reader down with its great number of details. It is so meticulous and thorough that it borders on being exhausting and overwhelming. But that might also be part of the point. In order to dispel myths about the lack of a black presence in Germany, and in order to stop making the past so vague and unclear, Aitken and Rosenhaft have made it their mission to flesh out the lives of these black German figures as much as possible. Second, Aitken and Rosenhaft skirt around the issue of identity-making. It is not always clear when they wish to acknowledge the black agents in their book as "black Germans" or simply "blacks in Germany." When, why, and how did the black men and women in their book see themselves as Germans?

Black Germany should and hopefully will be picked up by readers interested in exploring new histories of nationalism, colonialism, and racism. What Aitken and Rosenhaft have exposed to us is not a forgotten history but a history of forgetting. It is a history of erasing black bodies and experiences from white German memory, so much so that we continually express surprise when we encounter black people in Germany's history or present day. Yet *Black Germany* reminds us that we must always interrogate our understandings of the past. Whose stories are we choosing to remember, and whose are we choosing to forget?

Aitken and Rosenhaft's book shows how it has been possible for so many of us to not know about Germany's black population for so long. It explains why this history escaped the public's purview. Germany's black history was never in the public because it was never *meant* to be public. Always marginalized, always pushed to the fringes, never encouraged to grow, routinely fragmented and fractured, Germany's black population is a historical lesson in resilience in the face

of greater forces of racism and nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Notes

[1]. See Mischa Honeck, Martin Klimke, and Anne Kuhlmann, eds., *Germany and the Black Diaspora: Points of Contact, 1250-1914* (New York: Berghahn, 2013).

[2]. See Larry Greene and Anke Ortlepp, eds., *Germans and African Americans: Two Centuries of Exchange* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2013); and Gilbert Ofodile, *I Shall Never Return: Eight Months in Communist East Germany—A Nigerian Student of Journalism Reports* (Munich: Bechtle Verlag, 1967).

[3]. David Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

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