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African European Stories: Entangled Past, Present, and Future

In *African Europeans: An Untold History* (2020), Olivette Otele unveils the entangled history of Africa and Europe by narrating the diverse stories of African Europeans. In doing so, she vividly demonstrates how Europe’s violence toward Africa influenced and continues to influence the lives and identities of African Europeans. Despite this violence, the narratives she presents reveal resistance to racialization and marginalization in the homes they made for themselves in Africa, Europe, and the rest of the African diaspora. Otele’s work complicates African and European history, details the complexity of African European identities, experiences, and biographies, and shows how this group has contradicted stereotypes promoted by white Europeans.

It is particularly impressive that Otele’s perspective on African European history does not default to the standard Eurocentric view of Africa. Rather, she emphasizes the reciprocal relationships between Africa and Europe. Here a Eurocentric view is subverted in favor of a more nuanced recounting of African European history. This is a transnational story of movement—a complex fluidity that is reflected in the identities of African Europeans. The term “African European” itself is complex and challenges a phantasma of a homogeneously white European society and history. For Otele, “the term ‘African European’ is therefore a provocation for those who deny that one can have multiple identities and even citizenships, as well as those who claim that they do not ‘see colour’” (p. 8). Besides “African Europeans,” she also uses the term “dual-heritage,” which further emphasizes the complexity of African European identities without reproducing racializing categories.

The book contains an introduction, seven chapters, and an epilogue. The chapters are arranged chronologically and provide an overview of the stories of African Europeans “from the third century to the twenty-first century” (p. 6). Otele re-
counts various stories of African Europeans during the Roman era, the Renaissance, the transatlantic slave trade, European colonialism, during and after the world wars, and in the twenty-first century. Many of them were enslaved and brought to Europe, but some African Europeans came to Europe by other routes. Otele does not solely employ chronological narration; she repeatedly builds in cross-references, flash-forwards, and flashbacks. In this way, she succeeds in depicting a “variety of stories across time” (p. 217) and space. She combines the stories of ordinary and exceptional individuals in a way that makes tangible the complexity of African European heritage.

One such exceptional African European was Saint Maurice. The story of Saint Maurice, who lived in medieval Europe, is important because it shows how African European stories travel through time and space. Born in the third century CE probably in what is now Egypt, he became a “commander of Roman troops” (p. 19). A statue commemorates him in Magdeburg Cathedral in Germany—likely dating from thirteenth century, long after his death in 287 CE. Saint Maurice became the “patron of the Holy Roman Empire” and was used a symbol for the expansion and power of the Roman church in the second half of the tenth century: “By erecting a statue of Saint Maurice, Magdeburg Cathedral clearly stated that the place was a crossroads and a spiritual reference for the expansion and celebration of the Christian faith, as well as a powerful symbol of the status of the Roman church” (p. 21). His popularity, according to Otele, led Maurice to be widely discussed among the elite. Otele also notes, “His African features did not pose any problems for contemporaries, as he was himself the expression of the common values across boundaries that were embodied by the strong Roman Empire” (p. 21).

A great strength is that Otele not only narrates the lives of African Europeans who were born or grew up in Europe, but also describes the experiences of African Europeans in Africa. This decentralizes Europe and demonstrates that Africa continues to shape Europe and the rest of the world. Her research uncovers the complexity and plurality of African European histories. Otele ensures that in her retelling of various African European histories, individual stories, struggles, experiences, and encounters of African Europeans are not lost. She describes these individual stories in detail, but endeavors to connect them to larger transnational historical events. Aided by her transnational and interdisciplinary perspective, Otele weaves the past, present, and future. A network of African European histories emerges that have been previously excluded from the memories of the white European societies. Otele’s book describes the heterogeneous, dynamic, and multilayered history of African Europeans. So, African Europeans is truly a “celebration of long histories—African, European, and global—of collaborations, migrations, resilience and creativity that have remained untold for centuries” (p. 12). It enriches readers by uncovering diverse stories that have not been shared before, but are part of European and world history.

The book makes an important contribution to the historicization of Black Europe. By focusing on numerous stories of African Europeans long before the two world wars, Otele’s African Europeans narrates the Black presence in Europe as a significant part of Europe’s history. Europe’s sociohistorical plurality is revealed by making visible this historical presence. Moreover, by contextualizing the stories of African Europeans within European history, Otele impressively demonstrates that “the question of colour and enslavement was dealt with in different ways across Europe” (p. 65). It should be noted that she goes beyond western Europe and addresses African European history in countries such as Denmark and regions such as eastern Europe that have been mostly outside the purview of debates on colonialism and racism in Europe. Moreover, Otele shows that an intersectional perspective is needed.
to grasp the complexity of African European history. While the plurality of Europe has long been a reality, minorities and their stories continue to be erased by the prevailing narrative of a homogenously white continent. This is an ongoing process that Otele’s work powerfully counteracts. She shows clearly how African Europeans have been and continue to be subjected to violence. Through her intersectional perspective, she convincingly explains how the emergence of social hierarchies based on religion, race, class, and gender have dynamically changed over time, but remain still powerful.

However, Otele also shows how throughout history some African Europeans have at least partially and temporarily subverted these hierarchies. This includes the stories of “colonial subjects in West Africa [who] tried to create spaces where they could have forms of agency” (p. 102). As one example, Otele describes the Signares in Senegal, who were dual-heritage women. Some of these women found wealth and influence by marrying Europeans. Therefore, African European history also includes individuals who have achieved a certain—sometimes temporary—acceptance and influence in society. Nevertheless, Otele critically notes: “Acceptance was sometimes achieved through a process that required them to renounce their heritage, or one of their parents. This, however, did not always lead to inclusion, as the experiences of numerous African Europeans in France demonstrated” (p. 7).

African Europeans offers numerous points of connection for further research. The historical overview of the entangled stories of African Europeans demonstrates the potential for interdisciplinary research. Otele pushes disciplinary boundaries as she repeatedly engages with the artistic expressions of African Europeans, creating a rich collection of African Europeans’ roots and routes. In this way, her rich study strengthens the field of Black European studies, which is not yet a course of study at European universities. African Europeans could, however, provide a foundation for the development of Black European studies. The significance of African European history for Black Europeans must not be underestimated. The collected stories that reveal an entangled past, present, and future of African Europeans also provide opportunities for conversations in the African diaspora as well as with the African continent. Transnational and intergenerational conversations outside of academia are vital for preserving knowledge of African European stories in the collective memory. Works like African Europeans reestablish the stories, resistance struggles, and activist movements of African Europeans in the European past, present, and future. After all, African European history is European history.
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