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Although Black European history has gathered academic interest in the last decade—most notably through the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of the African American George Floyd—Austria as part of Black Europe is noticeably absent from the narrative. Albeit briefly touched upon in publications such as Kira Thurman’s *Singing Like Germans*, which has its primary focus set on Germany but also assesses Black musicians in other German-speaking countries, an all-encompassing historiography of Black Austrian history does not yet exist in English-speaking academia.[1] Even Johny Pitts *Afropean*, which includes chapters on a variety of European cities such as Moscow, Brussels, and Stockholm, acknowledges the absence of Vienna and various eastern and southern European cities.[2]

Walter Sauer, professor of economic and social history at the University of Vienna, is so far the only historian to extensively research the field of Black Austrian history. Although currently only available in German, his 2022 publication *Jenseits von Soliman* not only serves as a compilation of his previous works but also aims to carve out a space for Austria among contemporary narratives of Black European history.[3] Sauer explains this lack of knowledge through a combination of amnesia regarding colonialism and racism, and a lack of research funding for both fields. With an approach to creating history from below, which focuses on Black Austrians and their personal experiences, Sauer aims to support contemporary Afro-Austrian identity building while combating xenophobia and ignorance of racism in present-day Austria. Through an individual focus on all migrants of African heritage within Austria’s current (post-1919) borders, Sauer intends to create a broad compendium of knowledge upon which further researchers can build.

*Jenseits von Soliman* is structured into eight chronologically ordered chapters and utilizes a plethora of primary material appropriate to the time period at hand, spanning from antiquity to the modern day. These sources range from ancient tombstones and statues to medieval manuscripts and modern newspapers. Sauer’s analysis of primary material is especially impressive in the first two chapters, which focus on uncovering a Black presence in Austria reaching back to the Roman Empire and the medieval period. Although Sauer is not an expert in the fields of art, ancient, and medieval history, he offers a broad investigation of how and why people of African heritage traveled to Austria. He subsequently establishes potential contact points that may have served as avenues of cultural transfer and collaboration, primarily taking place through the medium of religious exchanges seen in the case of the Egyptian
Isis cult or Christian People of Color visiting Austrian medieval monasteries (pp. 33, 52-53).

In the following chapter, Sauer assesses the Habsburg involvement in the early slave trade and the subsequent practice within white European aristocratic families of employing Black servants as exotic representatives of the “Orient.” He describes their living conditions as a “gilded cage” (p. 67): although their positions granted them greater freedoms than white servants, such as better provisions, education, and symbolical acceptance, they were subjected to jealousy, envy, and court intrigues by white Austrians due to their hypervisibility (pp. 66-67). One minor point of critique is Sauer’s focus on the Austrian courtier Soliman, to which he dedicates two-thirds of the chapter, though he criticizes the historiographical focus on Soliman in his introduction. Such emphasis, however, can be explained through Sauer’s extensive research into the life of Soliman and the limited availability of historical documents on other Black Austrians.

Chapter 4 assesses a rapid shift in white Austrian public perceptions: during the nineteenth century, the prestigious “exotic” servant morphed into the stereotypical “uncivilized” African. Sauer analyzes this shift through the topics of clerical slavery, employment, and student migration from 1814 to 1918. Political and perceptual changes went hand in hand with increasing media attention that reinforced these stereotypes, while the end of state-wide censorship introduced white Western race theories to Austrian intellectuals. The Austrian state was now increasingly concerned with the mobility of People of Color and perceived them as a potential security risk (pp. 105-108). Such sentiments were reinforced in the interwar period, in which Sauer notes a shift regarding employment possibilities, as the entertainment industry established itself as one of the few viable niches for Black Austrians. Public opinion was divided between discrimination and exoticism, with Black performers and athletes who performed to the desired white European stereotype of the Black “brute” more readily accepted in comparison to artists performing acclaimed “white” culture. In particular, classical music performances were harder to “explain” in “civilizational” terms (pp. 121-122). Sauer also notes how Weimar Germany’s discourses on the “Black Horror on the Rhine” and social Darwinism fueled a further brutalization of Austrian society (pp. 123-124). Within these previous two chapters, Sauer expertly identifies names, dates, and places regarding Black Austrians, thereby providing an extremely useful service to future researchers.

Chapter 6 assesses the Austrian National-Socialist period in which People of Color were progressively subjected to the racialized and exclusionary policies of the Nuremberg Laws, which were extended to Austria and severely limited their freedoms and human rights. Although it would have been preferable to follow up on previously mentioned individual stories, Sauer includes an interview with the Black Austrian Holocaust survivor Achmed Kranzmayr (p. 131) and shifts his focus to forced labor, internment, and the concentration camp system in Austria. People of Color who were placed within such systems were involuntarily transported to Austria from German-occupied territories. However, this move away from biographical traces of previously mentioned individuals is a result of the fragmented availability of primary sources on those individuals, as many official records were either destroyed during the Second World War or simply do not exist.

In the following chapter, Sauer investigates the immediate post-1945 period and revisits the topic of student migration and the associated employment and visa possibilities, which were initially less tightly regulated, but eventually turned exclusionary to discourage permanent migration to Austria. He furthermore addresses the increase in anti-Black police violence in the 1990s, which led to cases of murder and false arrests. He argues that although police violence has declined in re-
cent years, racial profiling still affects the majority of Black Austrians today. Still, Sauer ends on a positive note. He reflects on the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in Austria, which were organized by Afro-Austrians who, after the Second World War, have increasingly found avenues of community building and ways to initiate conversations on inequality and discrimination in Austria.

Vanessa Spanbauer authored the last chapter of the book. In it, Spanbauer assesses the formation of a “second” generation of Black Austrians, who are confident enough to speak out against racial injustice and find their own voice through activism on social media and through street protests. She pinpoints numerous Afro-Austrian activists and their achievements, while criticizing the lack of a Black presence in state-level politics. She concludes that although activists address injustice and attempt to normalize diversity, change, especially regarding the funding of Black-led projects in Austria, is necessary.

A milestone in historiography and providing a wealth of factual information, Jenseits von Soliman will undoubtedly become a foundational text upon which future researchers will build. Sauer highlights prevailing perceptions and stereotypes that continue to affect Afro-Austrians today while contextualizing their history by tracing a Black presence in Austria back to Antiquity. He successfully describes Black Austrians not solely as victims, highlighting individuals who managed to create their own existence in Austria albeit while being subjected to social isolation and racial discrimination. One critique is the lack of an overarching conclusion in the book, which would have allowed for reflection on recurring themes, such as Black resistance, protest, marriage, and student migration, emphasizing their continuities and changes throughout the volume. Overall, though, Jenseits von Soliman is a groundbreaking contribution to the field of Black European history. Translating this publication into English would not only foster further research in this field but also promote awareness of Black European histories without obvious colonial links to Africa.

Notes
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