

# African Europeans: An Untold History

Olivette Otele, 2020

Publisher: C Hurst & Co Publishers

Pages: 208

Language: English

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Alexander Pushkin, Sarah Baartman, Pierre Louis Alexandre, Caty Louet, Giannis Antetokounmpo. Some of these African Europeans are well-known, extraordinary examples of Black Europe, while others have been relegated to obscurity. However, as Olivette Otele's monograph shows, the lives of extraordinary and 'ordinary' African Europeans give us invaluable insight into the connections and mutual influences between Africa and Europe.

Otele's book is an instructive and engaging introduction to the history of African Europeans, exploring African European history from as early as the third century to the present day. The monograph is organized through biographical vignettes, featuring questions of gender, race, sexuality, and nationalism, among other topics. Its narrative illustrates how African Europeans, who include mixed-race individuals and Europeans of African descent, also speak to issues of citizenship, integration, and acceptance.

*African Europeans* is an ambitious study of African experience and lives across Western Europe. Otele argues that the influence of Africa "shaped the social practices and identities of European communities and continue to do so today." The work includes stories from Britain, Spain, France, Italy, Germany, Sweden, Portugal, Greece and includes a brief foray into Eastern Europe, particularly Russia. Each chapter features an African European from the country or region and weaves their lives into the greater context of European and African history. The integration of African European existence and European cultural and social history reveals Otele's ability as a storyteller and the immensity of her intellectual undertaking.

A secondary but equally important facet of Otele's approach is her synthesis of groundbreaking works in Black and Africana Studies. From titans such as Stuart Hall and Audre Lorde to contemporary leading academics, including Tiffany Florvil's work on Afro-Germans and Robin Mitchell's work on Black women in nineteenth-century France, Otele's monograph provides an excellent overview of significant narratives on Blackness in Europe, particularly those written by Black academics.

Among the diverse theories Otele draws upon, the book is anchored in Geraldine Heng's argument that race was fundamental to the formation of European identity and in Dienne Hondius's contention that five patterns shaped the European history of race and race relations. Hondius contends these patterns are infantilization, exoticism, bestialization, distancing and exclusion, and exceptionalism. She contends that "[e]xceptionalism can lead to a thorough analysis of the tensions between what has been forgotten and lurks on the outskirts of the discourse." Thus, the biographies of exceptional African Europeans are contextualised within the history of Europe and race relations for each period. Otele successfully demonstrates how the definitions and functions of race, identity, and belonging intersected and changed throughout European history.

Another strength of the monograph is its discussion of the difference between anti-racism and anti-racialism and how these two factors continue to shape the lives of contemporary African Europeans. These themes are underscored in her examples of Sweden and the Netherlands, including the Dutch cultural conflicts surrounding the infamous *Zwarte Piet* character.

One of the few shortcomings of Otele's book is her cursory treatment of African Europeans in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Pushkin, the most famous African European from Eastern Europe, is included. However, Otele takes Pushkin's dual heritage for granted. At various points, Pushkin's Blackness was celebrated or disputed depending on the aims and national ideas of the Soviet and Imperial Russian governments. This shortcoming exposes the work that remains for historians of Russia and Eastern Europe.

Dr. Otele is also representative of the extraordinary African Europeans she studies. She is the first Black woman appointed to a professorial chair in History in the United Kingdom, and *African Europeans* is the perfect culmination of her work as a historian and as a public intellectual. Her book is a well-written and powerful addition to European and African history. It is accessible to lay audiences but remains a scholarly study of African Europe. Furthermore, it provides a productive introduction to theories in Black thought for students while also contextualizing contemporary developments in race relations in Western Europe. In the book's epilogue, Otele emphasizes that we, as members of communities and as individuals, should learn from the experiences of African Europeans to fight against violence, racism, and oppression. It is a powerful reminder that the work of historians is not created nor read in an intellectual vacuum.