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Book Review

## African Europeans: An Untold History

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## Abstract

The history of Africans in Europe is unknown to many as it is a history that is not taught in most European schools. The book *African Europeans: An Untold History* educates the reader on this crucial missing aspect by detailing the influences and activities of Blacks in Europe and how they contributed to what Europe is today. The book helps readers to understand how the historical construction of the Negro as a beast of burden, without heritage or culture, contributed to the eradication of Black history in Europe. The author, Olivette Otele, then counters this by setting out the history of the many Black people and Black groups that did ordinary and extraordinary things in Europe. In doing so, Otele deconstructs a dominant narrative in European history that suggests that only exceptional Black people contributed and did so rarely.

## Keywords

Blacks; Europe; Culture; Exceptionalism; Negro

In her book, *African Europeans: An Untold History*, Olivette Otele sheds light on an aspect of history that is unknown to many and perhaps even unbelievably by some. Otele is one of the few historians who unveils and analyses the history of Blacks in Europe. With *African Europeans* Otele makes a timely contribution to the limited but extremely important literature that engages deeply with Black history in Europe (see Olusoga, 2017; Ugarte, 2010; Gilroy, 2008; Van Sertima, 1987; Scobie, 1972).

From the outset, this gripping book dives straight into an account of the enslavement of Africans and the construct of the Negro in a manner that is still applicable today with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests and prominent ongoing conversations around African history, slavery, racism and white supremacy. The BLM movement was founded in 2013 as a response to the acquittal of the killer of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old Black American student (Black Lives Matter, 2021). The movement has since grown on a global scale and resonates with Black people across the globe including those in countries like South Africa that have not fully healed from apartheid, as well as in Western Europe where countries are being confronted with their colonial past (Contreras, 2020; Dendere, 2020; Hans, 2020). The book explains the construction of race which led to Black lives being undervalued and controlled by others, and the loss of their lives being normalised. For example, Otele cites the historic case of France which, in 1738, passed a law that forbade Blacks from marrying. This was followed by the formation of a special police unit for Black people whose job was to limit the number of Blacks in the country under the assumption that all Blacks were enslaved people. There are similarities here to the kind of contemporary discrimination that led to the founding of the BLM movement: the treatment of Black bodies as dispensable, crime prone, jail deserving and guilty until proven innocent (DuVernay, 2020).

One of the key contributions of *African European* is its critique of the idea of African exceptionalism in the European context. Otele writes "Africans who were valuable enough to be remembered were those who had been deemed exceptional" (2020:3).

Here Otele highlights the problematic use of exceptionalism in the small number of cases of Black Africans' role in European history is acknowledged. Following the work of Hondius (2017), the author describes the five main patterns that shaped the treatment of racial minorities in European history: (1) infantilisation, a belief that Africans and Asians were equivalent to children; (2) paternalization, a belief that Africans and Asians needed to be cared for and protected, even from themselves; (3) exoticism, a fascination with African and Asian bodies, minds and cultures; (4) bestiality, a belief that Africans and Asians were like wild animals, lacking control and prone to violence; and (5) exceptionalism, the understanding that relationships between Africans or Asians and Europeans was extremely rare. By founding the analysis of the book on these five patterns and drawing links between them and historical events, Otele brilliantly illustrates how these patterns are not only reflected in the past but are still applicable today. For example, the book describes an historical narrative of Africans as needing to be domesticated to make the Europeans around them feel safe and/or being kept far away from Europe for the same purpose. Otele notes that similar narratives are not uncommon in discussions about refugees and irregular migrants in Europe today with refugee and migrant testimonies describing how they are viewed as a threat and treated as sub-human (see Adeyinka, Samyn, Zemni & Derluyn, 2021; Gray & Franck, 2019; Oxfam, Belgrade Centre for Human Rights & Macedonian Young Lawyers Association, 2017).

To counter the idea of exceptionalism, Otele underlines the complexity and uniqueness of each 'African European' character discussed in her book. For example, the book describes the life of 'Maurice the African' who eventually became Saint Maurice after he and some of his loyal men were executed by Rome for failing to pay tribute to the god, Jupiter. Historians now suggest the accusation against Saint Maurice was a ruse in Emperor Theodore's political game to discourage usurpers. Alessandro the Duke is another example, Alessandro was the Pope's nephew yet was depicted as a Moor and a slave by

his contemporaries, even though some believed his mother to have been a free African woman. Alessandro was considered a sexually immoral man and was eventually assassinated by his cousin, Lorenzino de Medicini in 1537. These are just two examples of the detailed descriptions of the minor and major roles played by *African Europeans* in the history of the European continent. From the resourcefulness and skills of the Nubites of Kush to the influence of Cairo-based Malmuk warriors of German, Hungarian and Italian descent, to the impact of the political and religious practices of *African Europeans* on the Roman Empire; the book vividly describes how treaties were made, peoples conquered, and elite groups created. In it all, Otele demonstrates the importance of Black African influence on the course of events and, thereby, reminds us that discussing European history without including the role of *African Europeans* is an injustice that results in an incomplete history.

Otele offers such a rich account of the history of African Europeans with reference not only to individuals, people groups and events but also broader issues such as gender equality and the socio-cultural and academic contribution of Black females, a dynamic very rarely discussed in dominant discourses. By detailing these largely untold and normally missing stories, the book raises questions about racism by omission because Black people have not traditionally been considered as part of the national history of European states. Instead, *African Europeans* have been too often forgotten, with 'exceptions' characterised as the ahistorical, cultureless Negro who broke the norm. Otele brings the analysis right through to the present time by demonstrating the contribution of Afro-feminists to ongoing gender discourses and contemporary feminism including in the movement associated with the #MeToo initiative which was created in response to sexual allegations made against the film producer, Harvey Weinstein, and which became a global symbol for denouncing sexual violence against women.

In concluding, Otele highlights the significance of the arts and social media in the more recent history of 'African Europeans'. The author reflects on how Black British artists are impacting Hollywood and the global music industry and thereby forcing a shift in pre-existing boundaries of race and ethnicity in the arts. Otele also reminds us of the crucial role social media has played in exposing recent acts of discrimination and violence against Blacks. While also highlighting how the work of BLM and other campaigns have pressurised institutions into prioritising racial diversity and equal representation in the workplace. Otele finishes *African Europeans* by saying "...the path to equality needs to be facilitated by access to political power and meaningful representation in all disciplines, industries and institutions. It is a path that we must pave together" (2020:224) – a prescient statement for our times.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION**

African Europeans: An Untold History

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