

BOOK REVIEW

**WRITING AGAINST THE COLONIAL FORGETTING  
MACHINE: AFRICAN EUROPEANS – AN UNTOLD  
HISTORY**

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When Césaire talked about the mechanisms of what he called the “colonial forgetting machine,” he pointed out how the history of the colonized before colonization was pushed into oblivion (Césaire 2000 [1950]). What becomes painfully clear in Otele’s book is that this forgetting does not stop there. The book frontlines stories and biographies of African Europeans that have remained in the shadows of western canonical historiography and collective memory up until today. By African Europeans, Otele means people of African descent that have either lived in Europe or have played integral roles as intermediaries between European and African cultural contexts. Their individual stories offer entry points into the exploration of the larger historical and political conditions in which their lives have been embedded and which they have interacted with. While some of the people mentioned here such as the French eighteenth century composer Joseph Boulogne, have relatively well-preserved stories and may be comparatively well-known, as their contributions to Western culture have been deemed exceptional, there are also fragments of other life stories resurfacing here that have languished in relative obscurity. While most of the more detailed life stories chosen recount the lives of

male figures – most certainly a result of patriarchal power structures that have allowed men rather more than women to inscribe themselves in the course of history and be remembered –, Otele very clearly makes a point out of bringing in African European women’s roles and agencies throughout history all the way up to the present. Spanning a huge time frame from 20 BCE to the twenty-first century, Otele offers next to these micro-narratives a large historiographic picture of European identity formation, processes of othering, the formation of racism and colonial exploitation but also the emergence of transnational activism and resistance against these oppressive structures. Her account is largely but not rigidly chronological; which allows her to skip back and forth in space and time weaving insightful connections between disparate eras and locations.

Otele, an outstanding historian of slavery and the memory of slavery and first black female professor of history in the UK, writes this book not as an outsider. Being born in Cameroon, raised in Paris and living today in Great Britain, she might herself be considered an African European. Having been only recently appointed in 2020 to a professorship at Bristol University, she has proclaimed her intentions of wanting to open her work on the city’s colonial history also to communities outside academia through public events on her research. The inseparability of her academic work from her political stance and anti-racism activism renders her an undisputed organic intellectual. This is clearly reflected in many aspects of her *African Europeans*, such as in the choice to present it also as an audio book (read by herself), which no doubt helps enhance the audience reach of the work. Further, despite repeated references to postcolonial theories, the book does not proffer a global integrated analysis based on them, nor does Otele state this as her objective. Consequently, it is overall rather light on theory, and thus, very accessible to readers even without a specialized academic background. Otele’s stance as an organic intellectual and activist academic is further evidenced by her explicitly expanding on her chosen terminology in the introduction to her book:

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’. It is also a daring invitation to rethink the way we use and read European and African histories and define terms such as citizenship, social cohesion and fraternity that have been the basis of contemporary European societal values. In addition, it challenges the use of such terms against various groups as exclusionary tools. (Otele 2020, 8)

But it is of course not only her terminology that questions preconceived categories of ‘self’ and ‘other’, Europe and Africa; it is all the historical interconnections she draws between the continents largely through her African European protagonists that serve as a manifesto against the simplistic idea of neatly separate culture areas.

As Otele herself explains in the introduction to her book, the present volume is based on already existing scholarship, which addresses the long historic entanglements between Africa and Europe as well as biographies of those people of African descent intricately linked to the history of both continents. Very similar in historical scope is for example Stefan Goodwin’s gigantic two volume opus, *Africa in Europe*, that covers these interconnections since antiquity up to now (Goodwin 2008 and 2009). Other publications cover in more detail specific époques or geographic areas. Hence, Otele’s work doesn’t unearth facts unknown to the field but through her way of narration she does show interconnections between disparate geographic areas and within time that can get lost more easily or be overlooked by the reader in other works. She further offers a comprehensive condensation of the field’s scholarship which makes her *African Europeans* a valuable introduction to the field.

Her book is divided into an introduction, seven chapters and an epilogue. While she does show in her first chapter the existence of intense connections between Africa and Europe since 20 BCE and through the medieval ages, it is the period of European colonization between the fifteenth and the twentieth centuries that constitutes the main focus of the ensuing four chapters and consequently of her book. The last two chapters are largely concentrating on an exploration of African European activism in the twenty-first century with a special orientation towards African European feminist movements.

Through her account of the transmutations of categories of otherness and belonging, Otele very compellingly shows their historical contingency. While in Roman Antiquity the othering of African provinces was based on the distinction between center and periphery, in the medieval ages it was mostly predicated on the opposition between Christendom and Islam, while dark skin, as a sign of inferiority and absolute otherness, was not fixed yet as a definitive category as is exemplified by the existence and popularity of the worship of black saints. Ultimately it was a slow process accompanying the intensification of slave trade since the seventeenth century that brought about pseudo-scientific theories based on race and increasingly

fixed social hierarchizations based on skin color. While her book never relativizes the unequal and discriminatory power structures that were established through the course of colonial history, the biographies of African Europeans demonstrate intriguingly, how a simple dichotomy between active perpetrators and passive victims falls short of describing adequately the power dynamics in place and the agencies of the actors therein. Through illuminating these individuals' lives, Otele therefore avoids the pitfalls of oversimplification and abstraction and more importantly demonstrates the possibility of agency and therefore change that exist even in suffocating social structures. Her focus on African European activism in the concluding chapters therefore seems to be a logical and consistent continuation of these stories of African European individuals that very often managed to not only ingeniously survive racist oppression but to carve out their own spaces which allowed them agency. However, her particular narrative approach to the Herculean task of condensing over 2000 years and disparate geographies on less than 300 pages does result in some shortcomings. Not all parts are equally well fleshed out, which makes some of the inferences she draws plausible but at times not fully convincing while some of the connections she makes between different contexts do not seem to follow naturally. While many accounts of individual stories and historical contexts are extremely lucid, several examples she gives appear to be rather sketchy and the logic by which some of these are woven into cohesive themes or arguments could be made more explicit at several points in the book.

Nonetheless, her book is an instructive and comprehensive mosaic of stories that urgently deserve to be heard and which brought together in the present form offer a big historical picture serving at once as both a source of knowledge and a political manifesto and thus ultimately defying the “colonial forgetting machine.” Her epilogue leaves us with these hopeful and poignant words,

Complete erasure of the past is illusory, because residues lurking in the outskirts of memory and history always resurface. [...] However, simply remembering is not the ultimate goal. Triumph against institutionalised brutality, everyday forms of racism and micro-aggression, poverty, exclusion and marginalisation requires a radical way of using transmitted experience of resistance. It demands a collective degree of consciousness that runs across social, economic, gender and cultural barriers. (Otele 2020, 220)

## References

- Césaire, Aimé. 2000 [1950]. *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
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