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Book Review

Black German: An Afro-German Life in the Twentieth Century

[*Deutsch sein und Schwarz dazu. Erinnerung eines Afro-Deutschen*]

by Theodor Michael

Translated by Eve Rosenhaft

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Reviewed by Molly Krueger and Michael Sandberg

Michael, Theodor. *Black German: An Afro-German Life in the Twentieth Century*. Translated by Eve Rosenhaft, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017. 216 pages.

Who is a “statesman?” This is the principal question of Theodor Michael’s memoir *Deutsch sein und Schwarz dazu. Erinnerung eines Afro-Deutschen* (2013). Its English translation *Black German: An Afro-German Life in the Twentieth Century*, first published in 2017, provides a valuable English-language intervention into an under-researched field in recent German cultural history. Born to a German mother and a Cameroonian father in 1925, Michael was forced to grapple with questions of identity, community, and nationality, at the beginning of an era in which racial purity was inextricably bound with national identity. He not only survived the Third Reich, but also went on to serve as an important voice both in movements for a more unified Afro-German consciousness, as well as larger discussions concerning the African diaspora. In *Black German* his contributions to German dialogues on identity and race appears for the first time in English, due to the work of Eve Rosenhaft, Professor of German Historical Studies at the University of Liverpool and scholar of Black German studies. Access to this work is invaluable not only as a firsthand historical account of race politics in Germany, but as a timely reminder that the racial discrimination Michael faced during the Nazi period—though it may appear in different, and at times in subtler forms—is still a marker of contemporary Black German experience.

Michael’s childhood is informed by the friendships he makes with his white, German peers, but this is quickly thrown into disarray when the racialized rhetoric of Nazi propaganda seeps into his fellow Germans’ perspectives. His own family, too, falls prey to the more insidious effects of this propaganda; his stepmother leaves because she is not “up to the strain of being married to an African. [In fact,] Neither of [his] father’s wives had known anything about the African traditions and social attitudes that [his] father and his countrymen brought with them from Cameroon. Their behavior and expectations collided

with the ways people lived in Europe in the twenties and thirties of the last century” (15). In this context, one might assume that Michael would find solace in the community of his so-called “countrymen,” other members of the black diaspora relegated to the margins of German society. Yet, these alleged compatriots mysteriously halt communication with Michael’s family as soon as his father falls ill.

Michael becomes increasingly isolated, sick, and hopeless as his political situation becomes ever more dire. His older siblings flee to different parts of Europe. Unable to complete a formal education because of National Socialist policies, Michael has no choice but to turn to the circus as a means of sustenance, mobility, and ultimately survival. Despite the fact that the mobility of the performance troupe offers him salvation, the function of this state-sponsored circus, as Rosenhaft argues in an explanatory note, was nevertheless tied to the German racial political agenda Michael had sought to flee. The *Völkerschau*, or German Africa Show, was meant to “gather all the Africans living in Germany and their ‘offspring’” (47) and, in addition to providing cheap entertainment, evoke a nationalist nostalgia for Germany’s former colonialism, an apparatus that “[kept] black people under control” (211). Paradoxically, the existence of this German Africa Show undermined the very idea of the pure “Germanity” which the performance was meant to reinforce. Colonial subjects were at once kept under the umbrella of a German nationality while simultaneously denied recourse to its benefits. This historical background serves to highlight the extent to which identity conflict pervades Michael’s formative years. It is from this hellish ground-zero that he begins the lifelong process of reclaiming and redefining his identity.

During the height of National Socialism, Michael is at best a tolerated stranger in his own land. Despite his German heritage, language, and cultural identity, he is forcibly estranged and deemed officially ‘illegal’ by the German state. Accustomed to a life of mere survival, Michael is able to navigate his legal status by utilizing his previous performance experience to work as an ‘exotic’ extra in propaganda films. Eventually, as World War II progresses, he is forced to work as a laborer in a German arms factory, as he is “visibly too un-Aryan” (79) to serve in the military. In recounting his wartime memories, Michael makes sure to note that his “method of avoiding problems before they happened had helped [him] survive, but [he] was no hero” for surviving (107). He feels liberated by Nazi defeat, but “also filled with sadness at the destruction and division of Germany, which was still [his] home” (107). Michael’s account is unique in that in living on the margins of German society, he remains on the one hand spared from the fate of a ghetto or concentration camp, and on the other, denied his humanity among those with whom he so intimately lived.

Even through the experiences of the demeaning German Africa Show and the hardships of being identifiably ‘not Aryan,’ Michael never questions his own German identity. It is, for him, in no way performed; he is German through and through. This is illustrated after World War II, when Michael has the opportunity to emigrate to America in the hopes of finding community and belonging. He decides against it, despite his interactions with black American pilots with whom he feels an immediate connection: seemingly through the shared experience of living within racist and oppressive societies. America, as Michael comes to see it, practices similar forms of racial oppression to those he has experienced in Nazi Germany; he concludes that emigration offers only an alluring, false façade of freedom. This revelation reinforces his idea of Germany as home, and Michael comes to embrace his paradoxical identity as a stateless German of Cameroonian descent, a German

who does and (in the eyes of others) does not belong and a member of a displaced global diaspora.

Michael chooses to make a family in Germany, pursues his long-denied education in the German system, and builds a career in the new German government. It is not until after his official retirement that he becomes involved with ADEFRA (Black Women in Germany [*Schwarze Frauen in Deutschland*]) and the ISD (Initiative of Black Germans [*Initiative Schwarze Deutsche*]) movements. In the 1980s Michael witnesses the paradox of Afro-German identity, which had always been a source of existential conflict for him, becoming a more prominent social issue. Indeed, in a Germany that was and is increasingly multicultural, issues of race have come to the forefront of political discourse. However, the opening of a dialogue is not always enough to exact rectification for historical racial injustices; in sharing his story, Michael provides not only a historical account of Nazi terror, but also insight into an inspiring, politically combative mindset. He portrays himself as a role model, someone who is “experienced in dealing with the majority society [while] [. . .] never accept[ing] its conditions” (190). He embraces his status as a symbol of hope and survival for his fellow “countrymen,” be they fellow Afro-Germans or members of the larger global African diaspora.

For English-speakers, access to similar works are far and few between. However, there are several comparable works. One notable autobiography is Hans J. Massaquoi’s *Destined to Witness: Growing Up Black in Nazi Germany* (2001), which offers another account of Afro-German childhood in the Third Reich and an alternate post-War trajectory with his immigration to Liberia and then America in the late 1940s and 50s. There is also a wealth of literature available on Jesse Owens and W. E. B. DuBois, both African-American figures who spent time in Germany and have offered their own perceptions of Germany and comparative race politics.

For German-speakers, there are a number of resources that help contextualize Michael’s project. Alongside the resources listed above, available in German as well, the websites of the [Initiative Schwarze Deutsche](#) (ISD), [Schwarze Frauen in Deutschland](#) (ADEFRA) and [Vergessene Biografien](#) are good places to start. One might read *Preußisches Liebesglück: Eine deutsche Familie aus Afrika* (2007) by Art Historian Gorch Pieken. Inspired by a 1890 oil painting of an, until now, unknown Afro-German Prussian soldier and his lover from the German Historical Museum, Pieken traces the history of the pictured Gustav Sabac el Cher and his family in Germany from 1843 through the second World War.

In a time marked by rising racial tensions, the translation of Michael’s account of his Afro-German experience is something to be treasured, not only for the societal critique and defiant hope Michael’s experience embodies, but also for Rosenhaft’s historically-informed translation which includes rich explanatory notes and a detailed timeline of the modern German state. Through this historical contextualization, the reader, regardless of prior knowledge, is able to situate Michael’s story within a more panoramic perspective, following the story of his life as it runs parallel to German history. Although the text in its current form is marked, unfortunately, by deficient editing in regards to punctuation and spelling, the English translation is rife with haunting formulations such as “make Germany great again” that only serve to emphasize how relevant and contemporary Michael’s account really is. Moreover, words like “statesman” and “countrymen” with their incredibly potent connotations, speak to the ironic position inhabited by many minorities

today within American politics, as well as signal a claim to belonging outside of categories limited purely to national identity. As Rosenhaft notes in her introduction, the very word illustrates the existence of a diasporic consciousness that predates contemporary and more globally accepted vocabulary. Indeed, it is for this reason that this translation is so valuable—it is another voice that rings throughout history, that provides meaning to the diaspora of the past, present and future.

— Molly Krueger and Michael Sandberg, UC Berkeley