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A great many valuable books have been written about black lives and experiences in very different geographical contexts. However, a relatively low number deal specifically with the experiences of people of African descent in Europe before the world wars. A handful of individual stories have been marginally integrated into European history, but most of these relate to the history of enslavement or to colonial encounters from the fifteenth century onwards. Published work often pairs the term ‘black presence’ with a specific geographical area. From ‘black presence in Europe’ to ‘black presence in Wales’, these volumes map out the lives of people of African descent in the named places. The kinds of books that are readily available are also often about known men and women. Of course, such individuals are worth examining, and these biographies provide interesting interpretations and bring new light to their life stories. For example, over the last few decades, several volumes have been dedicated to former enslaved people. From Olaudah Equiano to Mary Prince, both of whom lived in Britain, the focus seems to be on eighteenth-century abolitionists and their connections to various groups of people.

Black abolitionists and other black men and women have been looked at in relation to their roles as models in well-known paintings or as servants who feature in travel writings and other
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artistic productions. When examined as individuals, these men and women are generally perceived as exceptional characters whose lives were transformed by complex encounters with Europeans. In such accounts, the notion of exceptionalism is used as a plausible reason for their fame. Some of their stories are believed to have survived because of the extraordinary nature of their contributions to European societies. Little, however, has been published about further aspects of their lives, such as the close connection they might have had with other people of African descent. Some histories have been forgotten or their importance underestimated. For example, African resistance to enslavement on African coasts or the fight against the transatlantic slave trade in Africa are scarcely mentioned in volumes about enslavement in European colonial history. Yet resistance was not uncommon, with examples including the powerful story of Queen Nzinga in the seventeenth century, the numerous slave revolts aboard ships along African coasts, and the disruption of plantation lives by Maroons and enslaved people living in proximity to masters. There is a continuum in the history of black resistance to enslavement that forms part of what Cedric J. Robinson saw as the ‘roots of black radicalism’. According to Robinson, the West got hold of black bodies through violence to produce wealth, but that also signalled the end of capitalist states. In fact, the seeds of destruction were embedded in the means of acquiring wealth.

The black figures who are remembered are only part of the broader story of a fight against exploitation. The connections between these various stories have been forgotten, because physical subjugation was accompanied not only by a rewriting of the oppressor’s history but also by a shaping of the story of the oppressed. Robinson examines the way certain stories have been overlooked—even those that were uncovered by respected scholars long before transatlantic slavery. The renowned historian
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Herodotus, for example, recalled encounters with Ethiopians and with the Colchians, who he thought were descended from the Egyptians. Those encounters, in Robinson’s analysis, are missing pieces that although recorded by historians have remained largely untold in the modern and contemporary Global North. Using the example of American slavery, Robinson also demonstrates how early European travellers recorded the social, cultural and agricultural systems they saw in areas in West Africa; nevertheless, by the eighteenth century the narrative of unsophisticated ‘Negroes’ was shaping colonists’ ideology. Robinson notes that ‘the destruction of the African past’ was a process that went through various stages. For example, naming played a crucial role in the process of erasure. ‘The construct of Negro, unlike the terms “African,” “Moor,” or “Ethiope” suggested no situatedness in time, that is history, or space, that is ethno- or politico-geography. The Negro had no civilization, no cultures, no religions, no history, no place, and finally no humanity that might command consideration.’ Robinson remarks that ‘the creation of the Negro, the fiction of a dumb beast of burden fit only for slavery, was closely associated with the economic, technical, and financial requirements of Western development from the sixteenth century on’. Africans who were valuable enough to be remembered were those who had been deemed exceptional.

The notion of exceptionalism is an interesting tool with which to understand history. It is used in history writing to shed light on histories that intersect with class, gender, religion, race and so on. A pitfall of the term is its suggestion that one story, circumstance or character is better than another. Yet as Philippa Levine contends, these comparisons can make room for transnational and cross-cultural analyses that may help to build bridges between different stories and countries, bringing contradictory ideas together. The problem lies instead in the universalising aspects accompanying many comparative studies, which imply
that we draw lessons from stories because of the guiding principles that are supposedly shared by all of us. Levine argues that exceptionalism sometimes attempts to ‘humanise’ a story, a context or a character, as exemplified by Niall Ferguson’s accounts of the British Empire. It can also ‘demonise’ a story, as shown through studies of dictators such as Hitler. Nonetheless, the appeal of the exceptional is undeniable if we are to believe the high number of books presenting their stories as unique accounts of specific regional, national or global aspects of history.

Exceptionalism is also a notion that plays an important role in studies of race, racism and race relations. Dienke Hondius has argued that exceptionalism was the last of the five patterns that shaped the European history of race and race relations. Hondius contends that Europe has shifted between ‘infantilization, exoticism, bestialization, distancing and exclusion, and exceptionalism’. While infantilisation posited that Africans and Asians were, in essence, children, it also brought with it the highly disputed idea of ‘paternalism’, whereby Africans needed to be taken care of or even saved from themselves and their peers—as exemplified by the justification of slavery by its supporters in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Exoticism, on the other hand, related to the European fascination with difference and with black and brown bodies, minds and cultures. Equally important in the history of European hierarchisation of extra-European communities was the notion of bestiality, which worked in conjunction with the two previous alleged traits. Both the appeal of the perceived exotic body and the fear it inspired were intertwined with the question of bestiality. The African was equated with a wild animal, untamed and prone to violence. Associated with evil, Africans needed to be ‘domesticated’ if Europeans in contact with them were to feel and be safe. Undomesticated, they needed to be kept at a safe distance, preferably away from Europe.
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Exceptionalism in this context needs to be envisaged alongside other aspects, such as the relationship between Africans and Europeans and the European gaze imposed upon Africans. Exceptionalism raises several questions about whose views have shaped one group’s trajectories and whose position with regards to race and racism determined the social status of certain African Europeans. Citing the African American novelist Richard Wright, Hondius notes that ‘racism is primarily a white problem because whites governed the conditions through which the discourse of race emerged and endures’.¹²

Grouping the lives of certain populations in one carefully packaged and recognisable word such as the term ‘Empire’, or resting one’s case study on the life of an individual, also helps us understand that exceptionalism encompasses specific and complex contexts. The recognition of these contexts allows for a rich analysis of crossroads and ruptures in historical accounts, as well as making room for the study of local and international trajectories. Exceptionalism can lead to a thorough analysis of the tensions between what has been forgotten and lurks on the outskirts of the discourse (those forgotten or untold histories), and how history is presented and transmitted for various social, cultural and, of course, political reasons.

Exceptional stories serve a purpose in the construction of identities. In the case of the histories of African Europeans presented in this volume, they are exceptional because they have defied obscurity to be included in European accounts. However, many of these stories already existed outside of European hagiographies. Some have been at the heart of accounts from Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic civilisations. A vast number of those stories inform us about the nature and legacy of encounters between various worlds. The following chapters move from well-known individuals who are often considered to have been exceptional, to contexts that have provided the opportunity for their
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recognition and even celebration. These stories follow a chronological order at times, but at others the narrative explores modern and contemporary experiences in a certain place before considering previous histories of people of African descent in the same country or city. The chronological approach helps us to understand historical changes across Europe and their impact on African Europeans at the time, or how these groups of people may have contributed to shaping later mentalities. The choice to focus on specific places, individuals or groups was dictated by the availability of sources and the relevance of these stories to contemporary questions about intercultural collaboration, identity and so on. The stories span from the third century to the twenty-first century. This volume is based on the scholarship of those who have been working on various aspects of the histories of people of African and European descent, and brings these studies together in a comprehensive and unique way that moves beyond a mapping of black presence in Europe to delve into questions such as identity, citizenship, resilience and human rights. African Europeans are defined and perceived as travellers. They are citizens of the world, which would lead some people to accuse them of being 'citizens of nowhere'.

Human rights and citizenship seem to be, at first glance, modern concepts. The rights of men and, later, women have been dependent on certain conditions from time immemorial. In Europe, the history of rights is heavily linked to political, economic and philosophical histories. From Ancient Greece to the Reconquista, the question of rights has shaped European history. But from the fifteenth century onwards it became a pressing matter as Europe slowly moved away from feudalism. With the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789, France was forced to acknowledge the shift that had taken place and the demands of the population for more rights and freedoms, and the rest of Europe rapidly followed. Particularly relevant in
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this history of human rights and citizenship is the question of the rights of extra-European peoples whose bodies had been deemed relevant only as wealth-building tools. Enslaved and African bodies, barely tolerated in European cities, brought to the surface the question of belonging, identity and freedom, as we will see in the next chapters. Africans enjoying a certain degree of freedom in Europe were considered to have earned or been granted their rights and privileges, and were therefore rendered exceptional, able to enjoy exclusive rights. Exclusivity in some instances required that they were welcomed by the majority group, but in other cases the acknowledgement of their existence did not ensure the acceptance of those African Europeans by all. Acceptance was sometimes achieved through a process that required them to renounce their heritage, or one of their parents. This, however, did not always lead to inclusion, as the experiences of numerous African Europeans in France demonstrated.

Questions of inclusion and acceptance are also linked to issues of citizenship and integration models for minority groups in Europe. France’s assimilationist model, for example, does not eradicate institutionalised racism, neither does it change the mentalities of racists at an individual level. In fact, the French assimilation model is based on anti-racialist views. David T. Goldberg suggested that:

Antiracism requires historical memory, recalling the conditions of racial degradation and relating contemporary to historical and local to global conditions. If antiracist commitment requires remembering and recalling, antiracialism suggests forgetting, getting over, moving on, wiping away the terms of reference, at best (or worst) a commercial memorializing rather than a recounting and redressing of the terms of humiliation and devaluation.¹⁴

The experiences of African Europeans regarding the question of citizenship and human rights vary greatly and are informed by diverse historical, social, political and economic contexts. Linked
to these ideas is a notion of identity that depends on variances across time and space in other notions such as race, heritage and culture. As a result, the terminology employed in this book varies too. It will use and quote terms such as Africans, Negroes, African Americans, African Europeans, mixed race, dual heritage, and so on, not as interchangeable and atemporal categories but as words that have significance in particular places and at specific times in history.

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. African Europeans living in Europe are at the crossroads of several intersecting identities. It would have been equally adequate to use the term ‘European Africans’ to refer to people of African descent born in Europe, but most of them are defined by other groups or define themselves firstly through their connection with the African continent. That connection and identification will be further explored in these chapters. The aims of this volume are to understand connections across time and space, to debunk persistent myths, and to revive and celebrate the lives of African Europeans.

Chapter One establishes the connections between past and present through the story of encounters in the Mediterranean regions between the Romans and the Meroites, Egyptians and Ethiopians. These connections bring to the forefront the views of Christendom on Arab Muslim worlds and the dynamics at play in identity construction along religious and ethno-racial lines from 20 BCE to the seventeenth century. These dynamics
allowed African Europeans such as Saint Maurice, the Queen of Sheba, Emperor Septimius Severus and other lesser-known individuals to navigate several worlds.

In Chapter Two we continue to travel in time along the Mediterranean, and discover that by the sixteenth century Southern Europe was characterised by a sizeable black population. Some of them, such as the first Duke of Florence Alessandro de Medici, reached prominence, while others lived their lives in subjugation. Although select individuals were free, the vast majority were enslaved and worked in rural areas of Italy and Spain or as house servants in wealthy households. Analysing the way various groups interacted in Renaissance Europe through the lives of Juan Latino and other, often unnamed, enslaved men and women allows us to understand how notions such as racism and racialism were constructed.

Chapter Three examines the lives of African Europeans in Western and Central Europe. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe continued to thrive through trade, and Western Europe’s involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery further shaped the relationship between Africa, Europe, and America. By the eighteenth century European competition for commodities and slave markets had shifted the nature of the relationship between Europe and Africa, as exemplified by the life of the Afro-Dutch minister Jacobus Capitein. The eighteenth century was a time at which black presence was severely controlled, and scientific classification of various species was employed in a bid to establish a racial hierarchy. It was also the era in which key figures such as Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, emerged and challenged those classifications.

In Chapter Four, we turn our attention to those born in Africa with both African and European parents, and the role of black women in shaping identities. This chapter looks at gender roles and trading interests in coastal towns. It studies how...
several European merchants settled, made a fortune and left behind children of African European dual heritage. It also analyses the blurring of racial hierarchies and boundaries in places where European descent offered great economic and social advantages, as typified by the lives of the Signares in Gorée and Saint Louis in Senegal, and of Ga women in Ghana. In addition, the chapter examines the legacies of these histories in contemporary Danish societies.

Chapter Five takes the territories of Brandenburg as an example of historical amnesia and looks at the processes that have led to the remembering and then forgetting of the region’s past and have thus allowed Germany to portray itself as ‘unblemished’ by the slave trade. The German colonisation of Africa and Cameroon is, however, well documented, and these links provide us with the opportunity to assess the histories of African Europeans such as Manga Bell. African European histories are transcontinental, and it is important to see how they are intertwined with the stories of key African American and Caribbean-, Senegalese- and German-born individuals.

Chapter Six assesses the journeys of African Europeans in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by comparing the experiences of Afro-Italians and the Afro-Swedish, particularly regarding the question of citizenship. The chapter continues its exploration of the stories of African Europeans by considering well-known individuals, such as Abram Petrovich Hannibal and Aleksandr Pushkin in Russia, and demonstrating that connections with Africa did not bring about a positive societal outlook on the question of race and interracial collaborations. The chapter ends with an example of resistance and resilience by African Europeans in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries through Afro-Dutch scholarly and grassroots activism.

Chapter Seven reflects on the way identities and identity markers function in contemporary Europe. The chapter brings
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together several notions, such as race, racism, racialism, citizenship, black radical liberation and activism. It looks at how gender, and Afrofeminism in particular, plays a crucial role in shaping African European identities. It also highlights the creation of organising spaces for healing and strategising in order to fight against social inequalities. This chapter sheds light on discrepancies in tackling discrimination within the European Union, as demonstrated by stop-and-search practice in Spain or the experiences of Afro-Greeks. It then recognises the extensive work done in Britain on the subject of African Europeans and the different ways twenty-first-century Black Britons fight against racial discrimination, inequality and marginalisation. The chapter ends by considering commonalities in the histories of African Europeans, and showing the ways in which they are embedded in transnational, European, African and American histories.

Just as they recover stories from the past of encounters, experiences and identity formation, these histories also inform us about the swift and creative ways various communities respond to negative perceptions about people of African descent in the Global North in the twenty-first century. Today, African Europeans continue to build transnational and transcontinental alliances that are powerfully inclusive. African Europeans from Generation Z have shown an appetite for reviving the empowering stories of their ancestors. They are actively seeking these pockets of knowledge by engaging with virtual learning, online debates, social media, and so on. They are also generating new narratives of resilience and diving into activism, from pushing for action on climate change, gender equality, and LGBTQ rights, to dismantling racism, islamophobia, antisemitism and other forms of discrimination.

This energy and active participation in driving forward social justice has reached a new height with the overwhelming global response to the police killing of African American George Floyd
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in May 2020. The mass demonstrations led by Black Lives Matter and consequent debates about racism have highlighted both the need to expand knowledge about the histories of people of African descent and the urgency with which we must revise the teaching of colonial history in the Global North.

_African Europeans_ is a response to these needs. It aims to provide multiple histories as a starting point to learn about the past and to dismantle racial oppression in the present. The book demonstrates that cross-cultural engagement is a powerful way forward to combat discrimination. Most of all, it is a celebration of long histories—African, European, and global—of collaborations, migrations, resilience and creativity that have remained untold for centuries.