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Book Review

White Rebels in Black: German Appropriation of Black Popular Culture

by Priscilla Layne

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Reviewed by Dinah Lensing-Sharp

Layne, Priscilla. *White Rebels in Black: German Appropriation of Black Popular Culture*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2018. 272 pages.

What's so rebellious about black culture? Over the course of the 20th century, numerous works of German literature, film, art, and music have engaged with or borrowed aspects of African-American culture. Whether these kinds of engagement constitute a kind of admiration—the imitation-as-flattery claim—or form part of the long legacy of European colonialism, remains a matter of some debate in German Studies. Priscilla Layne notes in the introduction to *White Rebels in Black: German Appropriation of Black Popular Culture* that her book “intervenes in the largely positive discussion of the white German valorization of black popular culture” to argue that this trend represents “a selfish attempt to resolve postwar guilt over the Holocaust” (2). By covering six decades from the immediate postwar era through the early 21st century, Layne is able to investigate changing German attitudes toward black culture via works of literature, film, music, and autobiography. The first three chapters address white German aesthetic interpretations and political orientations toward African Americans or Africans in Germany, whereas the final two chapters turn to the aesthetic production and personal narratives of a several black German artists in consideration of a fuller perspective on the cultural exchange across lines of racial identification in Germany.

Layne's book attempts to parse the distinction between appreciation and cultural appropriation, taking works in which white German men identify themselves as “rebels,” as outsiders to mainstream German culture—and dominant conceptions of white German masculinity—through an affiliation or even outright identification with Africans, African Americans, or Afro-Germans. In these works, black culture is positioned as inherently “rebellious” and understood as always already counter-cultural in Germany despite the presence of black people in Germany since at least the 19th century, when the German Empire controlled large swaths of territory in then-German East Africa, West Africa, and Southwest Africa. At the same time, the reception of African-American culture in Germany—beginning, appropriately enough, with the introduction of jazz in the 1920s

through 50s—has shifted significantly from the Weimar period, through National Socialism, and into the postwar era. Music connects many of Layne’s chapters to her central questions—particularly in the first three chapters, she observes encounters between white Germans and new musical forms brought to Germany by African-American performers during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. The perception of these genres of music as “foreign” and “other” consolidated the widespread German impression that blackness as inherently separate from—and incommensurate with—German national identity. It is this false binary that *White Rebels in Black* primarily seeks to refute.

Some of the book’s strongest moments come from its engagement with other scholars’ work on the social and historical conditions of blackness in German culture. Layne summarizes and deploys such research effectively, providing enough information to contextualize her own analyses without lapsing into a list or a retread of previous scholarship in her field. Though Layne mentions Eric Lott’s book *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford University Press, 2013) in only a handful of instances, her study seems to fall in line with similar critiques that Lott levels at the United States’ history of white appropriations of black culture, specifically in the history of blackface minstrelsy. Layne argues that “white Germans’ engagement with black masculinity during the postwar period ... forms a kind of dialectic,” though in her reasoning, “black masculinity is perceived as both safe and threatening” (Layne 18), whereas Lott remarks upon the “dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation ... gesturing toward a specific kind of political or sexual danger” (Lott 18). Layne also cites Lott’s claims about the anxiety produced by encounters between black men and white women because of concerns about miscegenation, focusing for this reason primarily on interactions which facilitate some form of cultural exchange exclusively between white German men and black men. Thus, Layne’s study is even more specially concentrated on how the enforcement of hegemonic forms of masculinity constrains the self-expression of white German men to the extent that some choose to identify cross-racially with the ostensible “outsider” status of African Americans or black Germans, the expression of which only creates a greater sense of alienation for black Germans and “limits the possibilities of black subjectivity” (Layne 4). One of the more significant additions *White Rebels in Black* seeks to make to Black German Studies is the nuance of black diasporic perspectives—Layne devotes chapters 4 and 5 to analyzing a variety of works by black Germans, including a novel, a musical, poetry, and four autobiographies.

Layne’s introduction gives a convincing account of the marginalization and dismissal for which she hopes her book will be a corrective—she notes in more than one instance the surprised and even derisive reactions of some colleagues in German Studies to her critique of the protagonist Oskar’s appropriation of black culture in *The Tin Drum*. It is all the more surprising, then, that her critical apparatus seems to consist primarily of historical scholarship; while this offers a rich archive for contextualizing the cultural production which is her main object of study, an explicit theoretical approach remains difficult to discern. Layne justifies her broader methodology in the introduction in this way: “A postcolonial theoretical line of thinking suggests we take a look at texts with peripheral black characters or peripheral black tropes to question why they are there and what they say about the white protagonist. It is important to ask what knowledge about blackness is being conveyed in each case” (6). Indeed, the work of numerous postcolonial thinkers

would advocate an investigation of texts produced by a culture formed by its relationship to its present and former colonies—to understand more about the colonized through a critique of the colonizer’s gaze. A useful framework might include the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and the field of Subaltern Studies contains excellent and useful language to frame Layne’s project as well. *White Rebels in Black* draws on writing in critical race theory and philosophy, as with Layne’s use of James O. Young’s definition of cultural appropriation. She is certainly contributing to Black German Studies (as well as making evident the urgent need for German Studies to consider the significance of blackness in canonical literary texts), but it seems a shame that the book does not fully clarify the terms of its analysis with regard to any specific theoretical discourse. It is difficult to properly estimate the significance of Layne’s book without a clear sense of who her critical interlocutors might be, outside of German Studies.

Crucially, however, Layne proposes that we understand white German conceptions of blackness as rebellious as closely linked with the fraught process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or the project of coming to terms with the country’s fascist history and the legacy of the Holocaust. Layne’s project seems especially timely in light of recent historical scholarship such as *The Kaiser’s Holocaust: Germany’s Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism* by David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen (Faber & Faber, 2011), which argues that concentration camps under German colonial administration in Africa and the 1904 genocide of Herero and Nama peoples served as a model for the atrocities committed by the Nazis a few decades later. Layne’s white German “rebels” express their anxiety about the legacy of German fascism and the necessity of confronting their country’s past by identifying with black culture as “an act of empathy or solidarity with the Other” (2) which, as she argues, only further entrenches anti-black racism in Germany and erases both the presence and importance of black Germans to German culture.

Layne concludes *White Rebels in Black* on an ambivalent note, stating more than once that she is the “first scholar” (189) to formulate a critique of the appropriation of black culture in *The Tin Drum*. She has certainly identified a new and important dimension to a novel central to the postwar German literary canon, and more classic texts ought to be subjected to the same scrutiny when it comes to their treatment of race. However, her defensiveness about the significance of this critique detracts from an otherwise compelling final few pages, in which she calls for a renewed understanding of German identity as intimately shaped by its relationship to the African diaspora. Here, it seems, lies the great potential of Layne’s critique—in its clear, unapologetic insistence that “blackness has long been a part of German history, rather than outside of it” (197). Black Germans’ creativity has shaped art, music, and literature in Germany for decades, and *White Rebels in Black* continues the important work of excavating Germany’s complicated relationship with racism and blackness.