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Priscilla Layne. *White Rebels in Black: German Appropriation of Black Popular Culture*. U of Michigan P, 2018.

Mona Eikel-Pohen
Syracuse University, meikelpo@syr.edu

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Abstract

Review of Priscilla Layne. *White Rebels in Black: German Appropriation of Black Popular Culture*. U of Michigan P, 2018. ix + 259 pp.

Keywords

Black popular culture, German studies, literature, film

Priscilla Layne. *White Rebels in Black: German Appropriation of Black Popular Culture*. U of Michigan P, 2018. ix + 259 pp.

We live in an era where matters of Black lives are at the forefront of the news, our awareness, and also central topics in German studies. Priscilla Layne's *White Rebels in Black: German Appropriation of Black Popular Culture* is more than a contribution to this discourse. It stresses not only how Black studies are needed in German studies, but also delivers a method for approaching this undertaking, with a focus on Black identity and its appropriation in Germany in various genres (autobiographies, children's books, musicals, novels, feature films, and film adaptations). The book asks several questions related to appropriation and Black culture, as many of the characters Layne analyzes transition from one culture to another: Why do white male characters in German film and fiction after 1945—such as Jochen Rull in *Ich bin ein Elefant, Madame* (*I am an Elephant, Madame*) the 1969 movie adaptation of Thomas Valentin's 1963 novel *Die Unberatenen* ('The Unadvised')—identify with Black men whom they only regard through the myopic lens of rebellion, mostly not even first-hand but through other media? Why does it seem necessary for Black Germans, as depicted in Hans Jürgen Massaquoi's 1999 autobiography "*Destined to Witness: Growing up Black in Nazi Germany*," to leave Germany and find Black role models away from these perceived rebel/hero images? And why, when coming to Germany, do Black men like Fergusson from Paul Beatty's 2008 novel *Slumberland* develop the need to identify with preconceived rebel/hero categories before they seem to become accepted by white Germans?

Layne's study deconstructs appropriating techniques and opens the reader's eyes to exclusion, marginalization, Othering, and other discriminatory practices. The text supplies a list of well-known texts that are looked at from the angle of Black studies in Germany. It also presents currently, or rather, so far lesser-known fiction, creative nonfiction, and films on people of color in German cultures, foregrounding masculinity and highlighting music.

Many characters she focuses on establish distance from themselves to develop an outside view of themselves. For example, in *Ich bin ein Elefant, Madame* Rull employs cultural appropriation while simultaneously maintaining a hardly covert racist attitude and conduct. He appropriates what he perceives as Black culture to create distance between himself and his fellow local white Germans, trying to become the Other. The character Youth from the play *Passing Strange* (Stew and Heidi Rodewald), however, transforms into the Other, so that the white male German locals are willing to understand and accept him in their community. Layne discovers the motivations and mechanisms that spin off when white male German culture is taken, for whatever reasons, as the norm. Thus, the processes of identity formation through appropriation paradoxically achieve

opposite results: on the one hand, to be the Other and on the other hand, to stop being the Other.

This comprehensive study cannot investigate all areas in depth, so potential follow-up research could analyze sociological concepts and definitions of transnational cultures and identities in the context of Black German texts. Additional studies of recent twenty-first century texts about people of color in German contexts, for example adaptations from novels and plays to movies, would be desirable, too.

White Rebels in Black has taught me, a white female reader with transcultural experience with German and US cultures, several things. Not only has it drastically extended my reading list but also shown by example how German films, fiction, and non-fiction can be studied from a transnational perspective. I obtained the chance to acquire a greater and more distinct awareness what my work as a white scholar, instructor, writer, and educator might have lacked thus far.

Layne's book provides insights and ways into diversity understanding and should be read by those studying transnational literature, German studies, Black studies, or film studies. Yet, by covering German texts from the post-war to present periods and with its inclusion of numerous genres, it is also an accessible and almost required reading for authors, filmmakers, journalists, and German teachers. *White Rebels in Black* not only holds an astute analysis, but also calls for readers' changes in approaches, choices, and perspectives towards these texts.

Mona Eikel-Pohen
Syracuse University