



Dear Johny Pitts, ladies and gentlemen.

The Prize we are gathered to celebrate today bears the title “European Essay Award”. To be honest, it is not crystal clear what our founding father meant – and what we mean – by labelling this prize as “European”. It is like St. Augustine’s answer to what “time” is: If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner, I do not know. In our jury’s practice, the concept “European Essay” rather evokes a bundle of connotations than it denotes a semantically unequivocal entity. What can the adjective “European” actually refer to? Hardly to the original *nationality* of the prize winner, who – if we look at our award’s history – can equally well be of oriental or American cultural origin. Nor can the predicate “European” be taken to refer to the *contents* of the crowned essay: indeed, this would imply an all-encompassing understanding of this term, since the laureates’ topics range from Ancient Egyptian theology to modern societal challenges, from urbanism to identity building. In fact, we would be hard pressed to explain what precisely we intend or exclude with this definition, all the more so since our own country frequently takes itself to represent the epitome of the European spirit, only to display reluctance to become part of, or apparently even be closely associated, with the EU – which is after all the closest approximation we have at our disposal to a sociopolitical understanding of what Europe “may” mean.

But this semantic opaqueness seems to vanish when we look at this year’s laureate. Indeed, if there is one book that we all consider prototypically European, that book is Johny Pitts’ *Afropean, Notes from a Black Europe*. I do not know whether you as author will necessarily feel pride in receiving an official accolade of Europeanness from a country that invests a lot of energy trying to convince the rest of the world that while we are located in the center of Europe, our vocation is neutral and global. But since I was bestowed the great honor to report to you the

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motivation of our jury, I have to be sincere and face you with this untoward reality: yes, in our eyes, your essay “Afropean” is so quintessentially European that it perfectly reflects the continent we long for: simultaneously national and international, self-referential and self-ironical, Judeo-Christian and enlightened, looking for utopia and sacrificing with non-dystopia, whitish but not white.

In your book, you – a British journalist of Euro-Afro-American descent – analyze the situation of black communities in Europe as a result of both historical colonialism and postmodern diversity. European post-colonialism, particularly in the UK, is indeed a different cultural discourse from postcolonial studies in the US. When you speak of the “blurring” that affects both those who consider themselves Europeans and those who do not, you verbalize in fact the main difference between the two approaches. In the US, this discourse always involves the expectation of a correction of past wrongdoing, what I would define as a “mode of recompense”. In Europe, where black community mostly lacks iconic figures whom it can refer to, things are different: through the lens of your encounters you show that the sense of wrongdoing has not yet fully entered the arena of everyday politics, only now perhaps beginning to affect cultural discourse, e.g. in the restitution of stolen artifacts now kept in European museums. This difference implies that it may be easier for a non-whitish European to develop a sense of ownership for the European project. Your book has this reassuring vein: it is uneasy, but possible and certainly desirable, to be a European of African extraction.

It is as if you had written this book having our jury in mind, dear Johny Pitts – something that we ourselves found unlikely, especially after we realized that we were not the only jury you must have had in mind when writing the book: in a major book fair in another European country even

larger than Switzerland, one we sometimes like to refer to as a larger Canton, you have been awarded a certainly less impressive prize than ours, but one that nonetheless shows that your essay has definitely struck one of our continent's chords.

What impresses and moves us at the same time is also the sense of discrete decadence that you seem to recognize in contemporary Europe. You warn us subtly against the winds of nationalism that blow across the continent. "Travelling through the cities of western Europe during the winter months," you write, "I got the feeling I was witnessing a slow decline, that the continent was looking backwards, dining out on a warped, sentimental view of itself." But unlike other authors you don't just *warn* us, you also *remind* us of the common history that both unites and separates the two continents that make out the Afropean reality. Your personal observations on blackness in Europe today, the descriptions of the cities you visited and the accounts of some of the influential people of African descent who have lived in these places, help us *visualize* – and I use this term on purpose – that color has always belonged to Europe. But in reminding us of this uncommon common history, you do not subscribe to the victimist agenda of postcolonial studies. You point to Europe's duplicity, without delegitimizing it, thereby scoring a home run in our whitish hearts. On the one hand, you offer us stories of self-assertion, talking to the reggae singer and poet Linton Kwesi Johnson or reconstructing the traces of anti-colonial figures such as James Baldwin or Frantz Fanon. You describe black communities in places as diverse as Paris and Lisbon, in their negotiating diverse forms of identity in a continent that seems to emotionally accompany their quest, since Europe is itself trying to figure out what it wants to be, or what it can afford to be. You talk about blackness, but also address whitishness.

By doing so, while not forgetting the daily suffering of the millions of Europeans of African descent, you also give a voice to examples of individual success, black Europeans "without a

hyphen”, as you write in your book, “without mixed-this, half-that or black-other”. Not half European, but rather both European and something else. At a time in our cultural history in which neo-romantic identities seem to triumph, we recognize in you an ally in your critical, but unmistakable allegiance to the now seemingly moribund Enlightenment model in which identity is not only something you are a recipient of, but also something you assertively help to forge. While indeed accepting the primacy of identity discourse, you in fact expand both the idea of blackness and that of British identity. Your book is, therefore, moderately disruptive. Moderate in the etymological sense, of constant mediation between potentially polarizing positions. And moderate in another sense, since yours is neither an essay in history nor one in sociology, but rather an essay in how to reinvent this genre by letting other communicative patterns emerge.

Far from being extremist, your reading of the “Afropean” reality evokes compromise – and you may know that there is nothing more Swiss than the concept of compromise. Your compromise is a dialectic togetherness of two continents that from the antiquity, where Africa was in the role of cultural colonizer (I am an Egyptologist), to the modern times, where the roles have been reversed, to the contemporary world, where ethnic distinctions are being critically revisited, have shared a common destiny. And precisely because it challenges a victimist paradigm, your book represents a genuinely European contribution to the discourse of post-colonialism. Why? Because it overcomes the binary North-South perspective of traditional postcolonial studies, with their polarity of colonizers vs. colonized, or center vs. periphery, and diversifies the emancipatory agenda. We discover that this “Europe of color”, if I may use this misnomer for lack of a better neologism, is in fact a mirror of the challenges our continent faces at a larger scale: the need to combine diversity and quest for unity, national or local specificities and a sense of a common mission in the world. While the US appears to us torn between rebellious

populism and cancel culture and China confronts us with its improbable wish that we seek economic proximity while recognizing political abyss, the bond between sociocultural and economic liberalism now appears less tight than the tradition of the European Enlightenment had taught us to believe. *Afropean. Notes from a Black Europe* helps us hope that we might still succeed.

There is a third sense in which Johny Pitts' *Afropean* is a moderately disruptive book. You examine the consequences of colonialism and the multicultural approach in Europe today without adhering to disciplinary boundaries. You are not a traditional scholar of texts, which makes you an ideal essayist of images. In describing who today's Afropeans are and how they inhabit and shape our continent, in traveling through many European cities, you don't *write texts*, you rather *paint pictures*. And a look at the emergence of smileys in alphabetic scripts should suffice to convince us that images are more proximal carrier of emotional load than textual knowledge, doomed to remain distal. In the descriptions of European cities in all their contradictions, the *visual* nature of your narrative becomes particularly distinct. Faithful to your professional origin, you are more a cineaste than a writer. The iconic nature of your prose is the reason for your essay's success. You succeed in persuading us precisely because you are a traveler not only between places, but also between academic conventions.

Balm for our enlightened, but depressed soul is also your choice not to examine the role of faith within Afropean life. In an era when Islam is under the political microscope more than ever, what could be taken as an omission is in fact a divine blessing, because – and this is another sign of your critical renegotiation of so-called identities – there are indeed more relevant differences than religion in shaping European diversity. You remind us, e.g., of the major differences between British and French culture in dealing with ethnic otherness. As a legacy of the cultural

diversity of the British empire, blacks in England are more confident than those in mainland Europe. (“We are very much not a racist family”, as Prince Williams recently put it in a vivid way.) This aspect is missing in France, Germany or Italy, where republican ideology cannot easily come to terms with a plurality of allegiances.

I found that your grasp of the dynamics of ethnicity and politics in Berlin is a particular highlight. While observing that one of the most prototypical bastions of white culture has generated one of Europe’s most interesting hubs of black culture, he also notes how the leftist movements could do much more to be inclusive of black people. And you are always prudent enough to explore precarious situations but to refuse to draw neat conclusions.

Today, we are especially delighted to bring Johny Pitts alongside our 1999 laureate, Amin Maalouf, whose *Identités meurtrières* Johny Pitts places at the beginning of his essay. In the spirit of Amin Maalouf, he describes a reality to be seen and witnessed, life paths based on tolerance and respect for the other, worlds whose histories intersect and cross fertilize without the parties always knowing or recognizing each other.

*Notes from a Black Europe*, therefore, can also be seen as an important step in the revitalization of European discourse, and perhaps also of European dreams. We are grateful to you for shedding this sensitive and passionate light on a black world which, for many of us, would have remained invisible. At a time where world leaders are forfeiting the multilateralism and calling for remorselessly privileging national boundaries, the moderate disruption brought about by your book is the best that can happen to Europe. We celebrate *Afropean* as your personal journey, the scene upon which you staged your play, but we also read it as a proxy for our hope to navigate

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the path to Europe's uncertain future. Our jury is very honored to unanimously award you the 43<sup>rd</sup> European Essay Award.