H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Heide Fehrenbach. *Race after Hitler: Black Occupation Children in Postwar Germany and America.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. xiii + 263 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-11906-9.

Reviewed by Robbie Aitken (SOCLAS, University of Liverpool)
Published on H-German (February, 2006)

Afro-German Occupation Children and Reformulations of Race in Postwar Germany

In the introduction to her new study, Heide Fehrenbach stresses that although this work contributes to the growing literature on Germany's Black diaspora, it should not be seen as a social history of Black Germans in the postwar period. Rather, Fehrenbach is more interested in investigating the heterogeneous political, social and cultural responses in Germany and the United States to the growth of a dual-descent population of Afro-German children born in the aftermath of World War Two as well as the relationships out of which they were born. In carrying out her study she builds upon elements of her previous research and provides an invaluable investigation into transnational dialogues of race as well as an examination of the continuities and transformations in articulations of race and difference in post-1945 Germany.[1] In the course of the book Fehrenbach persuasively argues that despite the banning of discrimination on the basis of race by both German states in 1949, these children would play a central and symbolic role in the devolution and reformulations of race in postwar Germany. These transformations resulted in the replacement of antisemitism by a preoccupation with blackness and the gradual construction of a black/white binary of difference, mirroring such distinctions prevalent in the United States.

Comprised of six chapters, the book concentrates on West Germany during the period of occupation through to the 1960s. The author confines herself to a discussion of children born to German mothers and Afro-American GI fathers, who comprised the large majority of these Afro-German children. Thus, as Fehrenbach points out, there is no room for mention of children whose fathers were French colonial occupation soldiers. Fehrenbach relates her investigation to the larger history of German racism in the nineteenth century, German colonialism and the Third Reich. In addition, she sets her investigation within a much broader and changing context: the humiliation of defeat and occupation; the political transformation of Germany from a National Socialist to a democratic system; and the transnational dialogue of race stemming from U.S. occupation and the presence of Afro-American troops among the occupying forces. Given the importance of the representation of blacks and blackness to Fehrenbach's study, it is perhaps surprising that aside from a discussion of the French occupation of the Rhineland and the Rhineland children, there is little or no mention of pre-1945 representations of blackness. Equally, no mention is made of the small but visible African population that developed in Germany from the colonial period onwards. Thus, there is little indication as to whether pre-1945 social policy towards blacks and images of blacks and blackness were consistent with post-1945 representations. Little sense comes from the book as to what role, marginal or otherwise, blackness played in a larger construction of German racism prior to the Second World War.

In terms of its subject matter and material consulted, *Race after Hitler* has much in common with Yara-Colette Lemke Muniz de Faria's recently published master's thesis *Zwischen Fürsorge und Ausgrenzung Afrodeutsche 'Besatzungskinder' im Nachkriegsdeutschland*, which succinctly examines the situation of occupation children in the aftermath of World War Two. [2] Like Lemke Muniz de Faria, Fehrenbach also utilizes an impressive array of popular and archival U.S. and German sources–ranging from administrative, educational and welfare reports, newspaper articles, and anthropological studies to cinema films and popular cartoons. Particularly impressive is Fehrenbach's reading of the Toxi films as cultural expressions of race in chapter 4. In situating her investigation within a larger transnational discussion of gender and race, Fehrenbach builds upon Lemke Muniz de Faria's work. Doing so allows her to more fully illustrate the complex postwar relationship between Germany and the United States as well as German postwar reconstructions and articulations of race, difference and citizenship.

It is clear that the presence of American troops in West Germany was central to a period of "mutual transformation for both countries" (p. 4).

While Lemke Muniz de Faria concentrates mainly on Afro-German children themselves, Fehrenbach's initial chapters revolve around the parents of such children–especially the reception and role of Afro-American fathers and the image, social environment and role of German mothers. The author then turns to representations of the children of these unions and discussions over their future. For many Afro-American soldiers, Germany was seen as a place of liberation in contrast to the segregation experienced in the United States and within the U.S. army. Such an experience provided them with a new frame of reference with which to confront and contrast the social and political realities of life for Afro-Americans in the United States. At the same time, the inequalities within the U.S. army proved a foreign policy embarrassment to a government actively promoting democracy abroad. This gap left it open to international criticism and criticism at home from Afro-American pressure groups. U.S. military authorities would eventually come out in favor of fraternization between soldiers and local populations. Yet, both they and German local government authorities (which were influenced by prevailing racial ideas) opposed sexual relationships between German women and Afro-American GIs. An entire range of means was employed to break up these relationships, such as changing the posting of soldiers and or using police pressure to discourage German women. Competing images developed of the women involved. On the one hand, they were frequently represented as victims of rape and the carnal desires of occupying troops, while on the other they were seen as willing sexual partners displaying disloyalty to German men.

The dual-descent Afro-German children born from 1946 onwards were the embodiment of these relationships. Although they composed a tiny minority of the occupation children born in Germany (a mere 3,000 of 94,000 children born between 1945 and 1949 were considered to be *Mischlinge*), these Afro-German children attracted an undue amount of attention and investigation (p. 2). U.S. and German authorities clashed over issues of paternity and women (who were deemed to have been raped) could receive abortions on the grounds of miscegenation. Much as the dual-descent children born in the German colonies or those born during French occupation of the Rhineland in the early 1920s, this new generation of Afro-German children brought into question notions of an exclusive Germanness perceived as being intimately connected to whiteness. Grudgingly recognized as German citizens, the children became the focus of a drawn-out discussion concerning their place in German society. Politicians, academics, welfare organizations, church groups, education authorities and private individuals in both Germany and the United States debated the future of the children. At the same time, German anthropologists conducted studies of the children that were at pains to avoid accusations of racism and the use of racial language, but continued to use biological models of society and forms of investigation heavily influenced by pre-war German antecedents. Significantly, such scholars were also interested in the social environment of the children. This discussion was part of an expanding analysis of race defined less exclusively in terms of biological traits, but which now focused increasingly on social factors. Here a gendered discourse developed as difference was frequently explained with reference to the children's mothers; their children's behavioral problems were explained in terms of maternal failings.

Much of the debate centered not on the welfare of the children, but instead on their function as a means by which German society could be racially reeducated and distance could be established from the horrors of the National Socialist past. In part, the children and their treatment were envisaged as a yardstick by which German progression towards democracy could be measured. At key moments in their development (after their birth, as they entered the education system and then later as they joined the labor force), these children became the subject of debates concerning their integration, segregation or even their emigration. The finer points of these various solutions are described in detail in later chapters. Thus, amongst other things Fehrenbach discusses the ambiguous school policies aimed at easing the integration of children into German schools, Afro-American organizations and individuals who worked for the adoption of the children by Afro-American families, and the Albert Schweitzer children's home in North Rhine-Westphalia run for Afro-German children.

In concluding her study, Fehrenbach relates the legacy of the children and the position and representations of Afro-Germans in present day Germany. After fulfilling their function in Germany's process of democratization, Afro-Germans were rendered increasingly invisible within German society (p.185). In the 1980s and 90s, this marginalization led to a quest for self-definition influenced by the transnational dialogue carried out with Afro-American intellectuals. Fehrenbach ends by remarking that ultimately the consequences of German racial reconstruction in the form of prejudice are personal (p. 188). Although there is little sense of this

personal dimension within the book, such discussions clearly lie outside the remit of *Race after Hitler*. It does, however, open up the intriguing possibility of a case study that would investigate the concrete workings of these representations and the effects of these social policies not only on individuals, but on the wider Afro-German community and its identity formation as well.

As an expertly argued and eloquently written study, *Race after Hitler* will certainly be of interest to a broad audience. The book has much to say about transnational constructions and articulations of race, gender and ethnicity as well as about the postwar democratization and transformation of West Germany.

Notes

[1]. Heide Fehrenbach, "Rehabilitating Fatherland: Race and German Remasculinization," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 24 (1998): pp. 107-127.

[2]. Yara-Colette Lemke Muniz de Faria, *Zwischen Fürsorge und Ausgrenzung: Afrodeutsche Besatzungskinder im Nachkriegsdeutschland* (Berlin: Metropol, 2002). See also Patrice G. Poutrus's review of the book in HSK (March 6, 2003), available at <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de:80/rezensionen/id=1148&count=1
.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Robbie Aitken. Review of Fehrenbach, Heide, *Race after Hitler: Black Occupation Children in Postwar Germany and America*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2006.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11440

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.