

Reflections on the “Brown Babies” in Germany: the Black Press and the NAACP

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Between 1945 and 1955, an estimated 67,770 children were born to soldiers of the occupying forces and German women in the Federal Republic of Germany. Of these children, 4,776 children were the children of African American and Moroccan soldiers. The fate of this generation of Afro-German children (or "brown babies" as they were called in the U.S.) was the focus of public interest both in West Germany and the U.S.

During the 1940s and 50s, popular and scholarly publications in both countries printed detailed reports on these “brown babies” (“Mischlingskinder”) who were the subject of intense political and pedagogical debates and controversies. Indeed, both state institutions and private organizations in Germany and in the U.S. devoted considerable time and effort to planning out their lives. What underlay the public debate on the fate of Afro-German children both in postwar Germany and the U.S. was a very specific construction of their heritage—one that defined them as essentially "fremd" (both in the sense of “strange” and “Other” and, at the same time, “foreign” or “alien”), “not belonging and at risk in Germany.” Their German nationality and their socialization in the country of their birth were, thus, only of secondary interest. In other words, their national and cultural heritage were regarded as contrasting directly with their race. Consequently, an ambivalent and contradictory attitude developed toward them both in hypothetical discussions and in the concrete actions taken in their name. The debate around these Afro-German children reveals a paradoxical and shifting dynamic of caretaking and marginalization, inclusion and exclusion.

The significance of the debates surrounding the Afro-German children in the U.S. context can best be illustrated by examining the response articulated in two of the most prevalent forums of African American public life and popular opinion of the time: the black press (in particular, four of the most widely read newspapers: The Pittsburgh Courier, The Afro-American, The Chicago Defender, and Ebony) and the African American civil rights organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The black press and the NAACP comprised voices that spoke out vehemently against the social exclusion of Afro-German children in Germany between 1947 and 1960. In the course of this debate, two opposing positions emerged. One side argued that these children should be integrated into German society and be given the opportunity of a secure life with equal rights in their homeland. The other maintained that the children could not be guaranteed a secure future in Germany and should, thus, be immediately removed (i.e., rescued) and brought to the United States. Clearly, both positions—the integration of the children into German society, and their adoption by African Americans—were not only expressed in political and pedagogical debates but were later followed by practical measures of social intervention.