



Anette Dietrich. *Weisse Weiblichkeiten: Konstruktion von "Rasse" und Geschlecht im deutschen Kolonialismus.* Bielefeld: Transcript - Verlag für Kommunikation, Kultur und soziale Praxis, 2007. 432 pp. EUR 29.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-89942-807-0.



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Published on H-German (February, 2009)

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Colonial Politics between Discourses of Race, Gender, and Nationality

It may have become a commonplace to begin any inquiry—including Anette Dietrich’s—into German colonial topics with an explanation of their previous wallflower existence and their belated eventual beginnings. Fortunately, such an introduction no longer needs to serve as a justification for the author’s project. Germany’s short colonial history has proven to be a subject not only worthy of study, but also one revealing far-reaching insights. Nonetheless, it is true that, as Dietrich stresses, European and German colonialism had traditionally been viewed as a male enterprise. Thus an inquiry into its gender perspective is certainly most welcome, in particular one as encompassing as Dietrich promises: she sets out to analyze German colonialism from a critical perspective as far as gender, race, and racism are concerned, and wishes to discuss the participation of German women in colonial politics, in particular, that of bourgeois women’s organizations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, in the face of a growing body of research on the connections between gender and colonialism in the Anglo-

American room, Dietrich’s study is somewhat less pioneering than she suggests. Names and topics that come to mind here are Susanne Zantop’s groundbreaking study *Colonial Fantasies* (1997), *The Imperialist Imagination* edited by Sara Lennox, Sara Friedrichsmeyer, and Susanne Zantop (1998), and studies of Frieda von Böhlow’s life and works, among others. And, of course, Lora Wildenthal’s excellent and comprehensive study, *German Women for Empire* (2001), examines precisely the intersection between German women’s movements and colonialism that Dietrich claims has not yet been studied (p. 8).

Nevertheless, *Weisse Weiblichkeiten* sets its ground thoroughly. Dietrich begins by providing detailed introductions into all theories and approaches she later draws on in her study, including postcolonial theory and/or Critical Whiteness Studies (chapter 1), and concepts of nation-building (chapter 2), both with a particular focus on the constructed nature of their concepts. She argues that such a perspective can “verdeutlichen..., in welchem Maße die Konstruktion nationaler Identität von der

Geschichte des Rassismus und Kolonialismus beeinflusst und durchzogen ist und ... zugleich diese historischen Konstruktionen von Weiß-Sein [dezentrieren]" (p. 49). The author reviews the development of the concept of race in connection with modern ideas of nationhood and explores the interdependencies between racism and nationalism. In close connection with biologist discourses, the development of bourgeois capitalist society with its gendered spheres serves as a further example of the constructedness of commonly employed categories. Dietrich also reviews the shaping of the female role in the process of nation-building and the expression it found in different voices in the first women's movement in Germany. As she explains, the understanding of women's role of mother of/in the nation, her cultural mission, and her *geistige Mütterlichkeit* are at the core of the generally traditional, nationalistic, and not necessarily emancipated discourses of the first women's movements in Germany.

The chapter on German colonialists that attempts to contextualize the German project within the bigger picture of colonial studies appears somewhat disjointed. Dietrich begins by sketching out ideas of German colonialism in the European context. Then she explains the concept of colonial fantasies and representations as they existed in fictional and nonfictional texts even before Germany's acquisition of colonies, elaborating on the gendered nature of fantasies of conquest and colonial rule. After this, the author jumps to a short discussion of German Orientalism, arguing that it shaped the racial discourse so important for German colonialism in general (p. 107), before she briefly outlines various colonial enterprises that predated the age of German colonialism *per se* (for example, the Welser enterprise in South America in the 1500s). This material is followed by an overview of Germany's *Drang nach Osten* up to the time of the Third Reich before she finally provides a brief history of the age of German colonialism, beginning with colonial sentiments in the 1840s and ending with colonial propaganda under National Socialism, long after the loss of German colonies.

The chapter titled "Rassismus und Kolonialismus" returns to some of the previously-mentioned concepts of racism that developed in connection with colonialism. The importance of a changing worldview in early modern times, the role of Christianity and the slavery discourse and various concepts of race, as well as the emergent perceptions of skin color, are discussed here. The author picks up Michel Foucault's concept of how biology begins

to influence perceptions of society and its ruling powers, drawing on examples from anthropology, medicine, and, later, Malthusianism, Social Darwinism, and so on. She explains how, in these discourses, national, racial, and cultural degeneration, for instance, were perceived in social as well as in racial terms, thus highlighting the dependencies between racial discourses in the colonies and social discourses at home. German attempts to legitimize colonial rule as well as particular colonial politics must be understood under these conditions. The German self image conceived of Germans as white, civilized, and superior to others. The author explains how this identity was perceived to be threatened by inferior internal others (such as Jews and proletarians) as well as by external ones, such as colonized subjects. The idea that the German colonies could represent a new, better German society added additional pressure to establish a clearly defined German settler society and maintain its "purity," free from threats of degeneration. As Dietrich further discusses, precisely the lack of a convincing definition of Germanness advanced debates about this identity and resulted in attempts to regulate the colonies through various, sometimes overlapping, often contradictory discourses. For instance, racial mixing was perceived as a threat, while, simultaneously, the discussion about colonial subjects' ability to "improve" on a cultural level raised the question of whether they could gain access to German society—an example that reveals an opposing idea. The issue of racial mixing emphasizes the important position the (white) woman enjoyed as bearer of the race and protector of the nation. However, the author demonstrates yet again that, with the inability to define what "race" (as well as "Germanness" or "culture") consists of, such arguments stood on shaky ground.

In the chapter on "Frauen und Kolonialismus," the author introduces several women's organizations and/or women's subchapters of other organizations that were involved in German colonial debates, and examines their contributions and standpoints. This section partly complements and partly reviews the research done by Wildenthal in examining contemporary debates about the position of German women as guardians of German culture, about female emancipation in the colonies, or about the discourse on *Verkafferung*, and male sexuality and violence at home and abroad. Such issues, in turn, were closely connected to the heated debate on racially mixed sexual relationships and on the position that white German women should take in the multifaceted power structures of German society at home and in the colonies. Here Dietrich shows the complex interplay of various

seemingly unrelated discourses; for instance, she discusses how the traditional female characterization of the woman as a nursing figure was then used to argue for white women's emigration to the colonies—sometimes in the hope of emancipation through entering the workforce, sometimes in asserting traditional gender roles. The situation of white women in the colonies between a rough environment and conservative role expectations, or the position of the bourgeois German women's movement and the question of white women as perpetrators or collaborators of colonial rule are some of the other aspects that are addressed in this chapter.

The final chapter is dedicated to specific debates regarding the bourgeois women's movement, which, although at first sight not necessarily relevant for colonial debates, were used to insert women into the colonial discourse. The section begins by examining the household as centerpiece of bourgeois ideology. After discussing the importance of flawless housekeeping, the author shows how lower-class women in Germany as well as non-white women in the colonies were positioned and judged based on their (lack of) housekeeping skills. Dietrich concludes this section by examining several articles addressing relevant topics—such as debates on morality, racial hygiene, prostitution, or sexual relationships (in particular in the context of racial mixing)—that appeared in *Mutterschutz*, the publication of the Bund für Mutterschutz und Sexualreform. The seemingly arbitrary arrangement and repetitive information on these topics here is based on the selection of available articles.

In conclusion, the author stresses how the great emancipatory potential of women's engagement with

the colonial enterprise often was not realized. In light of the multifaceted competing and intertwining discourses, the absence of a sweeping concluding statement makes sense, but Dietrich is certainly correct in asserting that her analysis of discourses of the bourgeois women's movement shows "wie emanzipative Diskurse an der Produktion gesellschaftlicher Ungleichheit beteiligt waren" (p. 373).

As much of this summary demonstrates, *Weißer Weiblichkeiten* might not provide many new insights for scholars familiar with the areas of colonial history, discourses of race, nationhood, or the history of the first German women's movement. For that, the volume is too much concerned with addressing all the bases of these topics. It also does so in a sometimes repetitive way and following a structure that is not always convincing (as seen in the chapter on German colonialism). The study's format betrays its origin as a dissertation and a revision of this original structure as well as the removal of some repetitive information would have made the book more reader friendly. However, the book makes an excellent introduction for anyone interested not only in the topics mentioned above, but also in their many subtle and not so subtle connections. Dietrich provides overviews of relevant tendencies, theories, and theoreticians, and she draws our attention to the complex interplay of contemporary race and gender discourses and their repercussions in colonial politics. By focusing on these connections, she adds to the growing body of research that seeks to portray German colonialism as the polyphonic project it is.

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Citation: Nicole Grewling. Review of Dietrich, Anette, *Weißer Weiblichkeiten: Konstruktion von "Rasse" und Geschlecht im deutschen Kolonialismus*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2009.

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