

Lucy Bland, *Britain's "Brown Babies": The Stories of Children Born to Black GIs and White Women in the Second World War*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2019, xi + 271 pp.

Reviewed by Julia Roos

Lucy Bland's engagingly written and often surprising book about the British descendants of African-American US soldiers (GIs) born during and immediately after the Second World War admirably succeeds in its stated goal: to help debunk the myth that black history in the United Kingdom began in 1948, when roughly eight hundred West Indian immigrants arrived in Tilbury, Essex, on board of Her Majesty's Transport (HMT) *Empire Windrush*. The life stories retrieved by Bland greatly deepen our appreciation of the complicated ways in which the war against Nazi Germany potentially challenged established American and British racial hierarchies. African-American troops made up around eight percent of the approximately three million United States troops passing through Britain between 1942 and 1945 (p.14). Many Black American soldiers had romantic relationships with white British women; they and their female partners defied taboos in both countries against interracial love and sex. Roughly two thousand out-of-wedlock biracial babies were born to these relationships, a significant addition to Britain's prewar black population of 7,000-10,000 (p.3). As Bland shows, especially the mothers and their children paid a high price, frequently becoming pariahs in their own families and local communities. Along with heartbreaking experiences of abandonment and discrimination, the author highlights hopeful aspects of courage and solidarity, as well. Her study is "*testimony to the difficulties and the resilience of the 'brown babies' (...). It is both a celebration of their lives and a reminder of the failings of official policy and society*" (p.248).

The book consists of an Introduction, six substantive chapters, an appendix listing the first names of individuals interviewed, a bibliography, and an index. Footnotes follow at the end of each chapter, a convenient organization for readers interested in further pursuing specific aspects. Numerous photographs of Bland's interlocutors and their families accompany the text. The author's own interviews with forty-five descendants of Black GIs born in the 1940s form the core of the oral history sources. These are supplemented by interviews with descendants of West Indian fathers (p.2) and children of African-American GIs born in the 1950s (p.6), respectively. In addition, the book draws on substantial research in private and public archives in Britain (e.g., the National Archives in Kew, British Library, and the archives of the Barnardo children's charity) and the United States (the records of the NAACP in the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, and the St. Clair Drake Archives in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York City). For her larger analytical framework, Bland draws on a rich array of secondary literature from the fields of the history and theory of race, gender history, (post)colonial studies, adoption policy, and British and American military history.

The Introduction lays out the methodology and key terms. Bland concurs with scholars who have defined oral history as “*the study and investigation of the past by means of personal recollections, memories, evocations, or life stories, where the individuals talk about their experiences, life-styles, attitudes and values to a researcher*” (p.5). The author highlights the potentials of oral history to “*access information and memories about events and emotions that are not documented elsewhere*” (*ibid.*) and strives to retrieve the voices of individuals and groups traditionally excluded from the official historical record. She cites cultural critic Stuart Hall, according to whom “*race is both a socio-economic ‘fact’ and a social construct*” (pp.5-6 ; emphasis in the original). Bland acknowledges that personal memories often are contradictory and inaccurate, yet argues that many types of historical sources share similar risks. By reading individual interviews in the context of her conversations with dozens of other eyewitnesses, Bland is able to distinguish between more unique and more widely-shared experiences. She does an excellent job situating personal recollections within broader structures of wartime and postwar society.

Chapter 1 provides background on World War II Britain and the specific circumstances of social encounters between African-American GIs and white British women. Given England’s historical status as one of Europe’s largest colonial empires, one of the book’s most surprising findings pertains to the relatively limited number of people of colour living in Britain around mid-century. This may have facilitated the spread of rather demeaning racist myths about African-Americans, some of which apparently originated with white US soldiers. For instance, Cynthia, one of Bland’s interlocutors whose father was a Black GI, remembered that “*my mother told me once they went to Scotland (...) and he got off the train (...) and somebody said, ‘Where’s your tail?’ Like he was a monkey*” (p.19). The wartime British government unsuccessfully sought to prevent the stationing of Black GIs. Internal government memoranda underlined the perceived “dangers” of interracial romantic relationships, and especially the ensuing “problem” of the “half caste” children. Unlike many US states at the time, Britain did not have formal “anti-miscegenation” laws. Instead, the Defense of the Realm Act frequently provided grounds for arresting women found in the company of Black soldiers for loitering and trespass. Female personnel in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) received instructions to minimize interaction with Black American servicemen, and semi-official “whispering campaigns” tried to dissuade British women by insinuating that all Black soldiers suffered from sexually transmitted diseases. The United States military’s reluctance (and often, flat-out refusal) to grant permission to black soldiers wishing to marry a white British woman posed another formidable obstacle to interracial couples.

Despite such powerful disincentives, many British women did enter into romantic and/or sexual relationships with Black GIs. In the eyes of many Britons, Bland suggests, African-American soldiers appeared more polite than their white colleagues, partly because Black Americans displayed less of a sense of their own cultural and economic superiority. This attitude of respect towards their host country may have rendered Black soldiers attractive to some women. Additionally, the prominence of African-Americans in

1940s popular culture may have enhanced Black GIs' erotic appeal. Women who had out-of-wedlock children with Black GIs, however, often faced severe ostracism. Only 24 of the 45 biracial "GI war babies" interviewed by Bland grew up with their birth mothers or in their mother's extended family; in almost half of the cases, the mothers relinquished their children. Unfortunately, it has to remain unclear whether this statistical finding is representative of all biracial out-of-wedlock children born in wartime and postwar Britain (1,700 to 2,000), since no official census of this demographic exists.

Chapter 2 looks at the children who grew up with their mothers. Their experiences were far from uniform. While some "brown babies" gratefully remembered their mothers', grandparents', and/or stepfathers' unconditional love, many others grew up in birth families where their presence seemed to cause division and strife, especially between the spouses. Bland presents a fascinating spectrum of intra-familial responses to the "brown babies." External conditions were far from favorable to the children's successful integration. Before the 1948 Children's Act, the British State did not provide material support to single mothers and their children. Meanwhile, postwar proposals by the British League of Coloured Peoples (LCP) to classify all biracial out-of-wedlock "GI war babies" as "casualties of war" remained unsuccessful, due to the United States government's refusal to pay any compensation in such cases (destruction of British crop or livestock, by comparison, was generously compensated). Families thus were left on their own to juggle the financial and social pressures associated with raising a biracial child in a predominantly white society. One of the most fascinating sections of this chapter traces the evolution of a subjective sense of "difference." Many of Bland's interlocutors initially did not know about their Black American fathers and remained unaware of their own minority status. This changed when they started school. In a story related by Gillian, "*these pretty little white girls put us up against a wall in the playground (...) and stood in front of us, discussing us, to decide who was the prettiest*" (p.79). Eventually, the white girls ranked Gillian above her friend Irene, who was more dark-skinned. The scene conveys powerfully Gillian's sense of humiliation; it captures the insidiousness of everyday racism, which seeped into children's games.

Chapter 3 traces the lives of "brown babies" growing up in children's homes. With passage of the 1948 Children's Act, all children's homes came under the authority of the Home Office Children's Department. Official policy favoured adoption over fostering; an approach of "race matching" (i.e., placing children with families whose perceived racial identity matched the child's) long dominated in the selection of foster families as well as adoptive parents. Similar to contemporaneous debates in West Germany, British child experts were somewhat divided over what was more conducive to the welfare of the biracial children: living in racially-mixed children's homes alongside white children, or growing up in institutions focused specifically on the care for "brown babies." Though the British League of Coloured Peoples protested against segregated homes for the biracial children of Black GIs, quite a few such institutions existed, "*not because they necessarily took a segregationist stand so much as that they saw these children as being in greatest*

need” (p.97). Some of Bland’s interview partners who grew up in homes had fond memories of their caregivers. Overall, however, her research points to important gaps between post-1948 official policy guidelines and actual practices on the ground. Physical punishment and overcrowding were, though technically illegal, still common in the 1950s. Many “brown babies” experienced racial discrimination in the homes, including, for instance, racial stereotyping and slurs.

As chapter 4 shows, adoption rates of “brown babies” remained strikingly low – especially if one considers the marked postwar increase in adoptions in England and Wales (roughly, 17,000 per year). Partly, this was due to official policies discouraging transracial adoptions. The British government’s position vis-à-vis international adoptions of the biracial descendants of Black GIs remained highly ambivalent. During the war, the United States First Lady at the time, Eleanor Roosevelt (but not her husband) had expressed cautious support for schooling some of Britain’s “brown babies” in the United States. In an article about the October 1946 meeting of the Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester, W.E.B. DuBois mentioned feeling “*a strange pity for a thousand babies whom I left there facing distress*” (p.55). That same year, the Chicago “Brown Babies Organizing Committee” identified 500 individuals interested in adopting a biracial British child. British government officials initially opposed such plans, since they were eager to demonstrate that Britain was fully capable of tackling its own social problems. And indeed, in the United States, false newspaper reports that 5,000 British “brown babies” were about to arrive by ship led to intense racist backlash. Beginning in January of 1948, the British government formally cooperated with the International Social Service and the Family Welfare Association in an effort to reunite British descendants of Black GIs with their fathers. By March of 1949, however, the Home Office reversed its position yet again, blocking adoptions by US citizens who were not blood relatives. One major reason for this about-face, Bland suggests, was that the “deportation” of biracial British children to foreign countries contradicted the spirit of the 1948 Nationality Act, which granted citizenship “*to citizens of British colonies and former colonies, giving them the right to come to Britain and stay indefinitely*” (p.171). By 1951, only 20 to 30 “brown babies” had been adopted by US couples.

As we see in chapter 5, a number of individuals interviewed by Bland actively searched for the fathers and mothers who had relinquished them. These are stories of great resilience, some of which ended in happy family reunions. In the 1980s, several organizations emerged whose goal it was to help the “GI war babies” find their fathers. The book mentions War Babes, founded by Shirley McGlade, the British daughter of a white American soldier, and TRACE, whose founder is Pamela Winfield, the British-born widow of an American GI. To the out-of-wedlock foreign descendants of American GIs, such organizations offer an important resource for retrieving a sense of their own paternal heritage and extended family. The concluding chapter, “After the War and Beyond,” discusses the adult lives and careers of Bland’s interviewees, offers brief comparative observations on the fate of WWII “brown babies” elsewhere in the world, and takes stock

of what it means to be black and British today. During the 2011 census for England and Wales, 1.2 million people (or, 2 percent of the population) identified as mixed-race, up from 672,000 individuals in 2001. Public awareness that Britain's citizenry includes many people of colour has grown significantly since 1945, yet Black British individuals still sometimes are queried, "Where do you come from?". Presumably, Bland's study was concluded before she could have incorporated more substantial reflection on the possible impacts of Britain's exit from the European Union on changing notions of British citizenship and national identity.

This is an impressive example of thoughtful and rigorous scholarship. Bland demonstrates convincingly that the history of the biracial "war babies" is an important aspect of World War II, with profound consequences for policies on military-civilian relations, and for international diplomacy between the United States and its European allies. Sexual relationships between black GIs and white British women challenged the "colour line" in both countries. Bland's study sheds fresh light on the similarities as well as differences between American and British attitudes towards race and racial "mixing." The book also adds valuable new facets to our understanding of major conflicts over the desegregation of the United States Army.

At times, comparative and transnational perspectives could have received more sustained attention.¹ The section (in chapter 6) on biracial "GI war babies" in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and the South Pacific is brief and raises a number of intriguing questions that might have warranted further exploration. For instance, how do we explain that the percentage of biracial British children relinquished by their mothers (almost 50 percent of Bland's sample) appears to have been significantly higher than comparable German figures?² British and West German debates over US adoptions of European "brown babies" may have been less dissimilar than Bland suggests: while a larger number of German "occupation children" of colour ended up in North America, the German government remained deeply ambivalent. Not unlike the British Home Office, German administrators somewhat disingenuously voiced concern about anti-black racism in the United States, deriving a (highly dubious, especially in the German case) sense of moral superiority from "*casting white Americans as the 'true' racists*" (p.20). For readers not as familiar with the history of British colonialism and decolonization, more information on the context and substance of the 1948 Nationality Act would have been helpful. These, however, are minor criticisms. They do not diminish in any way the very substantial

¹ For instance, Silke Satjukow & Rainer Gries, *Bankerte: Besatzungskinder in Deutschland nach 1945* (Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 2015); Barbara Stelzl-Marx & S. Satjukow (eds.), *Besatzungskinder: Die Nachkommen alliierter Soldaten in Österreich und Deutschland* (Cologne, Böhlau, 2015); Yves Denéchére, "Des adoptions d'État: Les enfants de l'occupation française en Allemagne, 1945-1952", *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, vol.57, n°2, April-June 2010, pp.159-179; and Robert S. McKelvey, *The Dust of Life: America's Children Abandoned in Vietnam* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1999).

² According to a 1956 West German census of "occupation children", only about 15 percent of the roughly 4,800 biracial children listed were available for adoption. See Julia Roos, "The Race to Forget? Bi-racial Descendants of the First Rhineland Occupation in 1950s West German Debates about the Children of African American GIs", *German History*, vol.37, n°4, 2019, pp.517-539.

achievements of Bland's book, which marks an important advancement of the historiography and, due to its clear style and unique source material, is ideally suited for use in the classroom, as well. Graduate students will benefit in particular from Bland's careful discussion of her methodology ; for undergraduates and graduate students alike, Bland's skillful use of oral history and biographical material makes her book highly accessible and engaging.

Dr. Julia Roos

Associate Professor of History,
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana, USA