

EMISFÉRICA

Sidbury, James. *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 304 pages. \$29.95 hardcover, \$19.95 paper.

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James Sidbury's impressive study, *Becoming African in America*, is an account of the history of the identity category "African" as it took shape in relation to slavery and diaspora in the Americas. Sidbury's persuasive thesis is succinctly set forth in his title: the concept of a collective "African" identity only emerged outside of Africa, namely, in America. Only in the wake of diaspora did the term "African" become an over-arching category of identity that placed such diverse peoples as Yorubans and Igbo in the same group. On the one hand, Sidbury explains, African identity was a construct of European racism, based on the assumption "that residents of Africa shared a 'racial' essence" (6-7). But on the other hand—and this is where the heart of Sidbury's scholarly interest and labor lies—Africanness was a discourse developed in complex and varying ways by blacks in the Americas. Importantly, then, this is not a book about the transmission of African culture to America: rather, Sidbury argues that African identity in the US is as much about creative invention as cultural retention. For Sidbury, then, "Africa" is in some sense the retroactive effect of the diaspora caused by the slave trade. Accordingly, creating Africanness in America was not a matter of resuscitating or recovering Africa and its culture, but of inventing it as well.

Sidbury's work is thus premised on a provocative theoretical claim about the constructed nature of racial and national identity. Yet the substance of the book is not engaged in theoretical meditations but in meticulous exploration of the primary locations where African identity was publicly articulated by New World Africans between the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. The narrative of the creation, flowering, and decline of African identity among blacks in America begins with an analysis of early black Atlantic writers such as Ignatius Sancho, Phillis Wheatley, and Olaudah Equiano; follows with an analysis of the rise of the early black church; dwells substantially on the various colonization movements of blacks and whites which aimed at founding colonies of African Americans in locations such as Sierra Leone and Liberia; and ends with the abrupt turn of many African Americans away from the language of African nationalism in favor of a language asserting a black American identity as a means of opposing the virulent racism of the ante-bellum period in the U.S.

A number of points seem worth underscoring about this narrative. First, it is a narrative that has not been told in this form before. While scholars have looked separately at each of the components of this narrative, placing these materials together in this form generates a new understanding of the political, cultural, religious, and literary community of New World Africans in early America. Second, in his unfolding of the development of

African identity in America, Sidbury draws upon materials that are often sequestered into separate disciplinary categories (literature, religion, history): placing these materials together offers a far richer account of the African American world in early America and makes sense of the strategies used by individual writers, ministers, and community leaders as part of a larger conversation in which they were all engaged. Third, Sidbury breaks new ground with his in-depth accounts of the multiple African colonization movements, beginning with founding efforts of Nova Scotians in Sierra Leone, and including later work by Paul Cuffe, and finally the divisive work of the American Colonization Society.

Early colonizing movements, most particularly that of Nova Scotians in Sierra Leone, were motivated by an interest in founding an African nation. Thus the notion of Africa that developed in America was, in effect, exported to Africa in the form of a colonizing movement. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, the American Colonization Society—founded in 1816 by whites and supported by southern slaveholders—generated tremendous opposition among African Americans and caused a fundamental shift in the discourse of African identity in the US. While the ACS seemed to be engaged in the same project of African colonization that had been supported by black leaders such as Cuffe, Absalom Jones, James Forten, and Richard Allen, the racial politics of the ACS were fundamentally different: black communities in the US viewed the ACS as a concerted effort to dispossess free blacks of property and rights in the US by exiling them to Africa. As a result, black leaders fought against ACS colonization plans, arguing in favor of the American (rather than African) identity of free blacks in the US. A rhetorical turn away from Africanness in the discourse of black identity was thus a turn away from the white appropriation and racist use of African essentialism. The discourse of Africanness thus “went underground” by 1820 and did not see the light again until later articulations of African nationalism were framed.

Given its provocative thesis, compelling narrative, and careful research, this is an important book for the history of early America, Atlantic studies, and African American history, in no small part because it offers a pre-history to the story of African nationalism that looms large in twentieth-century racial politics and social movements. But Sidbury’s thesis concerning the retroactive construction (with respect to diaspora) of African identity is one that has additional implications for race and performance that are not fully explored in the book. To be fair, performance theory is not on Sidbury’s agenda, thus it is more to his credit than not that the book as a whole is so richly suggestive with respect to the field of race and performance. Intriguingly, the book opens with a brief meditation on the false biography of the nineteenth century’s most famous black actor, Ira Aldridge. The biography identifies Aldridge as the direct descendant of an African prince, and Sidbury cites this material as an indication of the cache of Africanness for New World Africans in this period. The African prince, however, is a key character in the history of Atlantic theatre—from Othello to Oroonoko—suggesting to my mind that an analysis of the history of the performance of Africanness offers much in the way of additional material to help scholars understand the dynamics of Africanness in the Atlantic world. And one might consider, as well, the performative dimensions of the sermons delivered by black ministers as well as the speeches delivered by a black leader such as Prince

Hall—all of which serve as key evidential material in Sidbury's study. Sidbury's book, then, opens a window for scholars of performance and race onto a set of materials, the importance and promise of which has been made abundantly clear.