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The Quiet Violence of Ethnogenesis

James H. Sweet

JAMES Sidbury and Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra offer a provocative set of thinking tools for understanding ethnogenesis in the early modern Atlantic world. Their intervention is a model of integrative thinking, recognizing the Atlantic as a broad palette on which Africans, Amerindians and Europeans shared many overlapping similarities in the processes of making new peoples. According to Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra, the socioeconomic and political forces that came to bear on identity formation differed significantly across space and time. Thus ethnic identities were almost always in a state of flux. Nevertheless fully realized peoples emerged and endured. A detailed charting of these histories shifts our focus away from Atlantic emphases on institutions and empires toward groups and even individuals, a true people's history. The overall effect is a much clearer vision of African and Amerindian histories in the Atlantic world, many of which contest the very imperial assumptions on which so much Atlantic scholarship rests.

There is little with which to disagree in Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra's approach, particularly at the level of comparative cultural interaction and exchange. Questions of violence and power nevertheless loom large over ethnogenesis, questions that go mostly unanswered in their piece. Logically, it makes sense to emphasize the creative and integrative aspects of Atlantic history. This is how the Atlantic was made. But, by muting violence in these histories, Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra miss opportunities to explain what was elided, lost, or consciously erased. My comments are less critiques of Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra than refinements and elaborations of their arguments, an attempt to balance the remarkable histories of ethnogenesis with the histories of lost possibilities. A sharper focus on the violence of ethnogenesis offers us a chance to move even further beyond the normative narratives of Atlantic history toward ones that capture a broader poetics of resistance and loss in the lives of Africans and Amerindians.

First, I would like to push Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra on their ideas about African cultural adaptability and the implications for creolization in Africa and the Atlantic world. Though I agree that there is a certain amount of irony in Africanist historians' embrace of cultural change in Africa that is strikingly similar to the creolization posited by Sidney W. Mintz and

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Richard Price, I think it is important to recognize that Americanist scholars, Price among them, stubbornly cling to the idea that there was something singular about African American creativity. Price's polemics on "the miracle of creolization" are the best example of this trend.[1] As Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra rightfully point out, this creativity was ubiquitous across the Atlantic world. Indeed, one might argue that cultural flexibility and adaptability are rather ordinary human traits. Yet their idea that Africans possessed a "deeply ingrained cultural willingness to incorporate ethnic outsiders" still seems to suggest a sort of innate, creative cosmopolitanism rather than a backward-reeling grasp for social cohesion in the face of systematic alienation.[2] This emphasis on cultural ingenuity and willingness to integrate outsiders largely ignores the primary impetus for the creation of new peoples in Africa: political upheaval and violence.

Given the histories of warfare and slaving, it should come as no surprise that ethnogenesis unfolded in West Africa in much the same fashion as it did in the Americas. In their efforts to reconstitute social connections, dislocated peoples often found themselves searching for the broadest expressions of cultural sameness. These cultural ties became the basis for an expanding ethnic consciousness that was at first translocal and then regional in flavor. Thus Ngangela and Ndembu (themselves "ethnic" constructions that emanated largely from slaving) could become "Angolan" through a Kimbundu lingua franca, commonly held beliefs about health and healing through ancestors (*kilundu*), shared acquiescence to judicial institutions such as the tribunal of *mucanos*, and so on. Likewise, Allada, Dahomey, and Savalu could become "Mina" through a common *lingua geral*, broad embrace of *vodun*, and common regional history centered at Tado.[3] Just as in the Americas,

[1] Richard Price, "The Miracle of Creolization: A Retrospective," *New West Indian Guide* 75, nos. 1–2 (2001): 35–64; Price, "On the Miracle of Creolization," in *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues: Anthropology in the Diaspora*, ed. Kevin A. Yelvington (Santa Fe, N.Mex., 2006), 115–47; Price, "African Diaspora and Anthropology," in *The African Diaspora and the Disciplines*, ed. Tejumola Olaniyan and James H. Sweet (Bloomington, Ind., 2010), 53–74.

[2] James Sidbury and Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, "Mapping Ethnogenesis in the Early Modern Atlantic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 68, no. 2 (April 2011): 181–208 (quotation, 185).

[3] On the expanding cultural identifications of West Central Africans, see James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003); Joseph C. Miller, "Retention, Reinvention, and Remembering: Restoring Identities through Enslavement in Africa and under Slavery in Brazil," in *Enslaving Connections: Changing Cultures of Africa and Brazil during the Era of Slavery*, ed. José C. Curto and Paul E. Lovejoy (Amherst, N.Y., 2004), 81–121; Roquinaldo Ferreira, *Atlantic Microhistory: Slaving, Transatlantic Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Angola (ca. 1700–ca. 1830)* (Cambridge, forthcoming). On expanding cultural identifications in the Bight of Benin and its diasporas, see Luis Nicolau Parés, *A formação do candomblé: História e ritual da nação jeje na Bahia* (Campinas, Brazil, 2006); Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2011).

"deep-level cultural rules and principles" coalesced in various African regional settings, resulting in the formation of new peoples.[4] The meanings of "Angola" and "Mina" gained even greater urgency in the Atlantic because these core cultures became collective rallying points for enslaved Africans from those regions. Specific African "ethnic" identities, and even village and kinship identities, remained nested inside these broader regional affinities. Meanwhile broad regional expressions were themselves being transformed as they accommodated one another, as well as European and Amerindian cultures, in new American environments. Whatever the varied processes of ethnogenesis, we must remember that cultural flexibility and adaptation did not imply cosmopolitanism so much as a buffer from social chaos and alienation. If Africans appeared more creative than Europeans and Amerindians, it was only because the violence of warfare, slaving, and slavery persistently left them seeking new and more expansive ways of forging social connections.

My second minor quibble is with the idea that capitalism disembedded and reembedded individuals in the Atlantic world. Building on Robin Blackburn and Anthony Giddens, Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra embrace the notion that an increasingly monetarized, capitalist Atlantic world had the effect of "'disembedding' . . . individuals and institutions" from their natal homelands. They acknowledge that "money worked its magic differently in different places among different peoples."[5] Thus the influences of the market caused epidemic diseases among Amerindians, war and slaving among Africans, and overseas opportunities for Europeans. Whatever the impetus, Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra suggest that Atlantic actors persistently sought to reembed themselves into new communities. These were the sparks for ethnogenesis.

[4] See Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston, 1992), 14 (quotation). By recognizing the African regional variants of these principles, we not only move away from the teleology of American exceptionalism but also begin to see the possibilities for distinct African cultural expressions in the Americas. Thus we find *kilundu* practiced widely in Brazil, Saint Domingue, and colonial North America. Likewise we find the general language of the Mina coast widely spoken in eighteenth-century Brazil, Louisiana, and the French Caribbean. On *kilundu*, see James H. Sweet, "The Evolution of Ritual in the African Diaspora: Central African *Kilundu* in Brazil, St. Domingue, and the United States, Seventeenth–Nineteenth Centuries," in *Diasporic Africa: A Reader*, ed. Michael A. Gomez (New York, 2006), 64–80. On the Mina language, see the eighteenth-century Portuguese language dictionary of Luís Silveira, ed., *Obra nova de lingua geral de Mina de António da Costa Peixoto* (Lisbon, Portugal, 1944); Olabiyi Yai, "Texts of Enslavement: Fon and Yoruba Vocabularies from Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Brazil," in *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy (New York, 2000), 102–12; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, La., 1992). See also [Jean Baptiste Labat], *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l'Amerique* . . . (Paris, 1722), 4: 148.

[5] Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra, *WMQ* 68: 184.

Though I agree with the basic thrust of this argument, the idea of disembedding and reembedding "individuals" may be a bit too rigid to accommodate the different ways of being among peoples of the Atlantic. Such a formulation presupposes notions of the individual that in many instances only emerged as a result of colonial expansion. Behind the seeming neutrality of the disembed-reembed formula lies profound violence that often created individuals against their will. For Africans and Amerindians, the violence of forced removal became serialized in the Atlantic world, always looming and threatening, often fully realized. Individuation was the greatest enemy. To that end I would agree with Vincent Brown that the totalizing effects of alienation and "social death" were precisely what people fought against to live.[6] In many instances Africans and Amerindians did not so much reembed as make threadbare connections. Under ideal conditions these meager strands could multiply and become stronger, resulting in a common web of relationships that we might define as ethnogenesis. In other instances, however, the lines of connection were so tenuous, so precarious, that they amounted to mere survival. For me these histories are just as integral to Atlantic history as those of collective regeneration. To be fair Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra acknowledge that violence was part of ethnogenesis, yet they do so only in a footnote on the exploitation of women. My question is whether violence should be a mere footnote to histories of ethnogenesis or directly at the center of such inquiries.

This brings me to the real crux of my frustration with much of the literature on the Atlantic world. To put it bluntly, social and cultural histories of the Atlantic too easily obscure the politics of power and violence that spawned hybrid, creole, cosmopolitan (choose your own feel-good term) new peoples. Cultural mixture and ethnogenesis were rarely neutral exchanges among peoples of equal power, and it was through these hierarchies of power that collective identities emerged and evolved. Such processes imply the erasure, or at least the significant transformation, of old peoples and their cultural categories. In this way the Atlantic was as much an unrelenting exclusionary space as a progressive and inclusionary one. Yet the stories we tell about the Atlantic draw almost exclusively on those aspects of cross-cultural connection and inclusion. Implicit in such an approach is an affirmation, even celebration, of contemporary ideas about pluralism and cultural mixture in the making of modern democratic society. Was it just a coincidence that Africans and Amerindians were seemingly the most culturally flexible and willing to adapt? Did they really have a choice? We rarely imagine the Atlantic as a space in which Europeans embraced the precolonial institutions and social structures of Africans and Amerindians. Power simply did not flow in such atavistic directions. Rather, it moved inexorably toward European-style enlightenment, especially toward the "constitutional or mer-

[6] Vincent Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (December 2009): 1231–49.

cantile innovations" to which Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra refer.[7] This historiographical emphasis on European institutions and forms of knowledge skews our understanding toward a teleological inevitability in which Africans and Amerindians became Atlantic through their embrace of capitalism, Christianity, science, European legal systems, and revolutionary movements. No doubt Africans and Amerindians contributed mightily to these categories, often making them their own. But if we want to avoid anachronism, we must expand our Atlantic inquiries beyond the boundaries of history as liberal triumphalism, recognizing that the Atlantic world killed the creativity and cultures of Africans and Amerindians as much as it promoted them.

For me the promise of early modern Atlantic history lies in the stories that do not fit so neatly into the normative historical narrative. These histories tease us with the possibility of ethnogenesis, but, precisely because they challenged European power and history making, they were often crushed, dismissed, or forgotten. Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra nod in this direction when they argue for a thoroughly mestizo British Atlantic. Here they draw our attention to processes of ethnogenesis that are alleged not to have existed. They correctly point to the well-known cases from the American Southeast, the Hudson Bay, and Sierra Leone. By examining these cases collectively, Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra force us to reconsider long-held beliefs that racial and cultural mixing were mostly absent from the British Atlantic. Such careful mapping of ethnogenesis might also push us toward more fully realized histories of North American groups that have been classified as "triracial isolates."[8] Here I am thinking of Brass Ankles, Lumbees, Melungeons, Redbones, and other groups, mostly in the American South, that have essentially been relegated to a status as peoples without history.[9] The perception of these groups as racial isolates and their contemporary struggles for recognition affirm Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra's contention that many scholars simply refuse to acknowledge the history of cross-racial mixture in North America, let alone the distinct histories of the peoples this mixture created.

[7] Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra, *WMQ* 68: 208.

[8] The phrase "triracial isolate" first appeared in the work of sociologist Calvin L. Beale, "American Triracial Isolates: Their Status and Pertinence to Genetic Research," *Eugenics Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (December 1957): 187–96. In a 1980 encyclopedia entry on "Tri-Racial Isolates," the author wrote that these groups "are surrounded by myth and mystery, not the least of which is how they have maintained their continuity and cohesiveness over the years." See Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 991.

[9] Though these groups have long been the subject of local historians and a few anthropologists, they generally have not merited attention from professional historians. For an exception, see Malinda Maynor Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South: Race, Identity, and the Making of a Nation* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2010). On the Melungeons, see John Shelton Reed, "Mixing in the Mountains," *Minding the South* (Columbia, Mo., 2003), 253–62. More generally on the legal status of Lumbees and Melungeons, see Ariela Gross, "Of Portuguese Origin: Litigating Identity and Citizenship among the 'Little Races' in Nineteenth-Century America," *Law and History Review* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 467–512.

The erasure of these groups from American history might be the greatest testament to the ways their histories challenge larger narratives centered on race.

In other instances the histories of incipient ethnogenesis are not so much erased as rendered opaque by narrative ontologies that defy the familiar modernist narratives of the Atlantic. Again, some of Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra's examples are instructive. The Brazilian runaway community of Palmares, for instance, was continually under siege by the Dutch and Portuguese before effectively being destroyed in the 1690s. The constantly shifting cultural configurations of the community could never really congeal into something we might call ethnogenesis, but the corporate ethos of integrating newcomers on the basis of their ability to contribute to a community that was constantly on a war footing suggests a very different set of historical values than those implied by constitutionalism or mercantilism. Likewise, for Domingos Álvares the construction of a *vodun* community in Rio de Janeiro implied a fluidity that included not only people of various ethnic and racial stripes but also long-dead ancestors and spirits from his West African homeland. Such a world transcended history as chronologically ordered and temporally bound. Time and space collapsed, as Álvares called African ancestors to Brazil to generate stability and power in his fledgling community of marginal folk. This community ultimately fell apart when the Inquisition dispatched Álvares to Portugal, depriving his followers of his intellectual leadership and skills. Similarly, the North American millenarian movements of Pontiac and Tecumseh, as well as those of the Antonians in Kongo and Santidade in Brazil, projected the overthrow of colonialism and the rise of indigenous utopias even as they held onto elements of Christian eschatology.[10] These millenarian movements relied on the promise of radical new political orders: alternate histories that mostly perished in the imaginations of their followers. Yet their imaginings were often recorded, offering us insights into worlds where suffering disappeared and collective well-being was always assured.

Whether we accept the radical poetics of these various collective imaginings, they offer us important glimpses of alternate histories of the Atlantic. These alternate histories were often extinguished in the march toward modernity, but their influences survive in socialism, black nationalism, *indigenismo*, evangelical spirituality, and so on. Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra provide the tools to uncover these often-hidden histories. Their approach is especially useful in forcing us to recognize the importance of African and Amerindian contributions in the forging of the modern Atlantic world. A stronger emphasis on the violence and erasures of ethnogenesis might reveal ever more radical critiques of the Atlantic world, ones that might even question our very conception of history.

[10] John K. Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684–1706* (Cambridge, 1998); Alida C. Metcalf, "Millenarian Slaves? The Santidade de Jaguaripe and Slave Resistance in the Americas," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 5 (December 1999): 1531–59.