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Review Of "A Separate Canaan: The Making Of An Afro-Moravian World In North Carolina, 1763-1840" By J. Sensbach

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Jon J. Sensbach, *A Separate Canaan: The Making of an Afro-Moravian World in North Carolina, 1763-1840*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. 342 pp.

In this carefully-researched book, Jon Sensbach explores a subject that is at once unusual and timely. It is unusual in that it concerns a population that has been heretofore overlooked or ignored in African American religion--the black Moravians. It is timely because it engages some of the most fashionable themes in Southern history, such as race, culture, and religion, using a fresh and nuanced approach.

"Indeed, as Sensbach shows, they resolved their ambivalence over the questionable morality of purchasing human property by drawing lots, securing a positive sign from God that He would bless their endeavors."

The Renewed Unity of Brethren, more commonly known as the Moravians, were a sect of radical German pietists who settled in the Piedmont of North Carolina in 1753 with the hopes of creating a self-sufficient religious enclave. The Moravians were well acquainted with the harsh realities of human servitude--they had organized one of the earliest Protestant missions to Africans in the Caribbean--and yet their sympathies toward the spiritual plight of slaves did not automatically confer an abolitionist stance. Indeed, as Sensbach shows, they resolved their ambivalence over the questionable morality of purchasing human property by drawing lots, securing a positive sign from God that He would bless their endeavors. By the last quarter of the eighteenth century the Moravian church in North Carolina would corporately acquire a small number of bondspersons as hired hands, construction workers, livestock managers, craftspersons, and small-scale farmers. Carving out a niche in the colonial frontier, the Moravians forged settlements in which blacks and whites, slaves and freedpersons existed in a kind of "rough social parity." (63) Yet over time, social and racial distinctions became more fixed as the community grew, and white Moravians were faced with the dilemma of an increasing population of blacks in their midst, not only as unfree laborers, but as fellow Christians.

In examining the lives of those Africans and African Americans who were immersed in the web of spiritual, familial and economic relations that structured this interracial community, Sensbach situates his study within the context of the shifting configurations of race and slavery between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He utilizes a vast compilation of documents that includes diaries, church minutes and conference proceedings from the Moravian archives in North Carolina, as well as a rare collection of short memoirs called *Lebenslauf*, third-person autobiographical testimonies that were solicited from all converts. Sensbach is most successful when he relates the life-histories of his Afro-Moravian subjects by creating a sub-narrative with these sources, as he does in a chapter that follows an African soldier who is taken captive as a slave to the French West Indies, Virginia, and eventually to North Carolina in the 1770s. At the heart of his study, Sensbach details the motives and methods by which African Americans entered into the redeemed Christian community, a process that was replicated in biracial Protestant congregations throughout the South. Furthermore, he highlights dimensions of the cultural and religious assimilation of Africans and African-Americans as they adopted the language, beliefs and values of their German-Moravian brethren. Most intriguing is Sensbach's treatment of

potential areas of black-white religious syncretism, the African-based practices and traditions which may have facilitated the slaves' embrace of Moravian Christianity.

The Moravian church offered black members an opportunity to form enhanced kinship networks that allowed for greater family cohesion, as well as the protection of converted spouses and their children from sale and forced separation. Church rituals, also, afforded Afro-Moravians a measure of equality in the spiritual arena which offset their social subordination. Sensbach characterizes the Moravians' relationship to African Americans as "fraternalistic;" they were "nominal spiritual equals" who each "owed allegiance to a higher authority, Christ." (120) Within the bounds of their spiritual association, at least for a time, black and white church members existed upon common ground. Much would change, however, with the third generation of Moravians in the nineteenth century, who were committed to acquiring even greater numbers of slaves, money, and land. As the region shifted to a more labor-intensive plantation economy, work relations became more stratified, racial hierarchies became more inflexible, and the relative egalitarianism that had characterized black and white religious life in the earlier period eroded.

A Separate Canaan is a study that will reward general readers in American religious history. Jon Sensbach provides us with a glimpse into the world in which Africans and African Americans and German immigrants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries lived, worked, worshiped, and struggled together to realize their respective visions of religious freedom and spiritual equality. Ultimately, the failure of both groups to effect those visions was a sad consequence of both the inevitable expansion of racial slavery, and the limits of Christian fellowship.

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