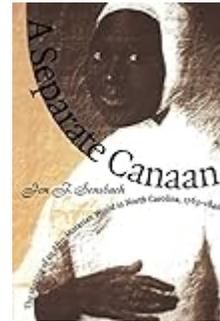


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Jon F. Sensbach.** *A Separate Canaan: The Making of an Afro-Moravian World in North Carolina 1763-1840.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xxiii + 342. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4698-8; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2394-1.



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When Moravians confronted a difficult and controversial decision, they turned to the lot to discover God's wishes. Placing the possible answers in a bowl—usually “yes,” “no,” or “blank” (for try later)—they would draw one and thus witness God's direct interest and intervention in their lives. In the red hills of the North Carolina Piedmont in 1769, the Moravians turned to the lot to ask the question “Does slavery fit with our purpose here?” The query had arisen because the Moravians had been given the option to purchase Sam, a young slave they had rented to work in the stock yard for nearly four years. A “yes” lot was drawn, Sam was purchased, and the precedent set for future slave acquisitions. Sam was not only the first slave owned by Moravians in North Carolina; he also, in 1771, became the first African-American convert to Moravian religion in the province. With conversion came a new name, Johann Samuel, as well as new possibilities. Johann Samuel worshiped alongside white Moravians and they washed each others' feet and kissed one another in a religious fellowship of equals before Christ. As a believer, even though a slave, Samuel also found his work relations altered and he supervised both white men and slaves on the communal farm. When Johann Samuel died in 1821, however, he was poor and marginalized from the Moravian community and his life served as a tangible representation of the dwindling commitment among Moravians to the equality of all believers. His

children, however, lived to tell another story as leaders within a new black church sponsored by the Moravians.

The stories of people like Johann Samuel, and their multiple transformations from inclusion to exclusion, form the backbone of Jon F. Sensbach's evocative work, *A Separate Canaan: The Making of an Afro-Moravian World in North Carolina, 1763-1840*. Sensbach brings to life a largely ignored presence in early American history: the Africans and their descendants who made a life in the German Moravian settlements in the western Piedmont of North Carolina. Placing the Moravian settlements of Bethabara, Wachovia, Salem, and Hope firmly within the context of the Atlantic world, Sensbach travels to Africa, Germany, and the Caribbean to track both the movement of peoples and of radical Protestantism. Ultimately focusing on North Carolina, Sensbach traces the history of Afro-Moravians from small numbers of spiritually-equal Moravian slaves like Johann Samuel to large numbers of African Americans worshiping in a separate “Christian” church overseen by Moravian elders but given strength and inspiration by African-American sponsors, godparents, and worshipers like Johann Samuel's children. Relying mostly on Moravian records, Sensbach has found a gold mine of material: Moravian diaries, church minutes, memoirs (composed by ministers) of black Moravians, and a journal (begun in 1822) of the white pastors

of Salem's black congregation. [1]

Sensbach's reconstruction of this evidence adds a new dimension to our understandings of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. As Sensbach rightly points out, Germans have been largely ignored in the history of the early republic, the western Piedmont has been neglected in studies of slavery, Moravians have been absent from studies of Afro-Christianity, and religion has been given short shift in studies of slave work and family. This work ably begins to fill these historiographical gaps. Yet the work's significance lies beyond new connections and information within the existing historical literature. Blessed with an extraordinary source base, Sensbach creates a rich portrait of the Afro-Moravians of North Carolina and in the process demands that we take seriously the presence and world-view of Africans and their descendants in the American South.

Driving Sensbach's narrative is the movement from relative fluidity in race relations to a hardening of racial categories within the Moravians' worldview. The story is complicated by the fact that late eighteenth-century Moravians, as much as they cherished the spiritual equality of all believers, firmly believed that slavery was divinely ordained. Insofar as slavery signaled "social death," however, spiritual fellowship among slaves and masters could significantly alter the configuration of slavery among Moravians. As Sensbach rightly points out, "It is... difficult to pinpoint where temporal subordination ended and spiritual equality began (p. 137)." But, by allowing the details to emerge and speak for themselves—a slave believer supervising a free German man, the prohibition against whipping or beating Moravian slaves—Sensbach effectively demonstrates both the "temporal subordination" and the "spiritual equality." Increasingly, however, a growing reliance on black slave labor destroyed the vision of all Moravians, black or white, equal in Christ. Again, Sensbach's expert handling of the evidence reveals both the starkness and the complexity of this shift. The substitution of a handshake for the kiss of fellowship, the career of an African American potter, and the segregation of the Moravian graveyards all provide potent examples for understanding changing ideas about race, spiritual equality, and worldly servitude.

In fact, it is Sensbach's careful attention to detail that makes this book—and by extension the story of Africans and Moravians in North Carolina—memorable. The Prologue, for example, tells the haunting story of Sambo/Abraham from his life in Africa to his capture, enslavement, and journeys to the Caribbean and then

Bethabara, a Moravian village in North Carolina. This is Sensbach at his best: beautiful writing, rich analysis, and a superb exploration of a person—and world—that has been largely unexplored. Sensbach continues to use these biographies of Afro-Moravians (and also includes some in the appendixes) throughout the book, bringing a uniquely personal and vivid dimension to early African-American history.

While Sensbach's overall argument that the relatively fluid race relations of the eighteenth century were supplanted by hard and fast racism by the early nineteenth century is borne out in his evidence, at times he seems to be writing at cross-purposes to his argument. Sensbach occasionally relies on the dichotomies between black and white (when German, African, Moravian, and stranger would appear to capture more accurately their worldview) and between master and slave (when his evidence suggests that the relations between masters and slaves allowed "slaves" to wield significant power not only over their own lives but, occasionally, over the lives of others). To cite one example, Sensbach asserts a different worldview and religious sensibility among blacks and whites that jars against his assertions of shared fellowship and mediated slavery. He writes, "To white Moravians, time was a tool to be used in the service of God, whether in work or worship... For black worshipers, each hour spent in prayer was another not spent in work (p. 157)." Moments such as this in *A Separate Canaan* point to the difficulty in moving completely away from, in Sensbach's words, "the lens of hindsight that can narrow our focus to a bleak, seemingly undifferentiated historical sweep of racial oppression (p. xxi)." They also may signify the difficulties of maneuvering between demonstrating fluidity in race relations and avoiding charges of "romanticization" of an earlier age. Nonetheless, Sensbach's ability to successfully negotiate these pitfalls in other parts of the book makes his occasional stumbles all the more perplexing. [2]

In addition, because Sensbach is very attentive to historiographical trends and needs as he moves through his book, his failure to provide a substantive and sustained analysis of women and of gender is surprising. Women appear in the book as wives, sometimes as converts, and as key figures holding the Afro-Moravian community together. Given the relative strength of the evidence regarding the spiritual and secular lives of Afro-Moravians, more attention to gender differences in men and women's lives, the ways in which fears and desires to control sexuality structured the emerging racial order, and the different and overlapping roles of men and

women in this “separate Canaan” would not only have enriched and strengthened *A Separate Canaan*, but such an analysis would have been a valuable contribution to black women’s history for the much-neglected period before 1840.

Despite some shortcomings and missed opportunities, *A Separate Canaan* remains an important and imaginative book that asks us to rethink the American experiment in freedom and slavery in the context of diverse communities. It would probably be most easily integrated into courses on religious history, but teachers of African-American history, southern history, and the American Revolution all would profit from its inclusion (for conceptualizing lectures if not for inclusion on the syllabus). Beyond the classroom, Sensbach’s ability to

build a big story around a small place makes it worthy—and recommended—reading.

Notes:

[1]. The eleven volumes of translated records in Adelaide L. Fries, et al, *Records of the Moravians in North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC, 1922-1969) form only a small part of extant records, much of which must be translated from German.

[2]. For other examples, see Sensbach, *A Separate Canaan*, xviii, 154, 162, 190.

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