

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND AFRICA

African Americans and Africa: A New History.

By Nemata Amelia Ibitayo Blyden.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. Pp. xi + 266. \$28.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9780300198669).

doi:10.1017/S0021853720000286

Key words: Pan-Africanism, African diaspora, political, cultural, identity.

This highly readable book by Nemata Blyden will succeed as a textbook in multiple courses — African diaspora, Atlantic history, and black history. It is also a pleasurable read for those interested in how African Americans have engaged with Africa. Covering a long historical span, the book examines the links between African Americans (also labeled as black Americans) and Africa, first in relation to the concept of an African homeland, and more recently, within the United States itself, with continental Africans (also identified as ‘indigenous Africans’). Of course, Blyden is aware of the problems and politics of names and labels, which she successfully captures in the introductory chapter, for example, in her discussion of the now-abandoned use of ‘negro’.

As much as possible, the book avoids generalizations, opting instead to weave stories and analyses around notable figures such as Richard Wright, Kwame Nkrumah, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Some great ideas escape attention, notably the *négritude* movement, and some may be surprised that Malcolm X receives little notice.

The book captures various eras and their definitive impact, with events tied to political changes within the United States itself — changes that, in turn, created ebbs and flows of interest in Africa: the engagements of African American leadership in African affairs, broad efforts to identify with Africa, as well as the rejection of Africa by those who claim no affinity with the continent. The narratives are generous in speaking to the beauty and elegance of black humanity, the achievements of prominent figures, and the impact of cultural transfers, notably those of Christianity and commerce.

The findings and conclusions are complex and ambiguous, revealing that African Americans are not necessarily united in their ideas of Africa. While many have disconnected with their African past, many others embrace this heritage. Those engaged with Africa have sought to help the continent to develop, seeking the means to support its politics and economy. Many promote a sense of identification with the place, both by seeking to understand African history and by visiting the continent. In aggregate, the book’s narratives reveal a continuity of issues from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries around the African American opinions, ideas, and perceptions of Africa.

In developing her ideas, Blyden connects the history of her illustrious ancestor — the notable Wilmot Blyden of the nineteenth century — to the genesis of this book, opening the first chapter with the line from Countee Cullen’s over-cited poem ‘What is Africa to me?’. Cullen’s poem offered an ambiguous answer to that question in a way that combines stereotypes with reality. Cullen and his successors sought to be American first, while recognizing their African roots second, or last. Others, like the African American journalist Eddy Harris who traveled and worked in Africa, proclaimed in 1993 that ‘Africa is not home. I hardly know the place at all’ (quoted by Blyden, 15). Harris was even milder

than Keith Richburg, another prominent journalist, who was to say four years later, 'Thank God my ancestor got out, because, now I am not one of them. In short, Thank God that I am an American' (212n2). These statements reveal one contrarian end of a vast spectrum of interpretations that circulate in the United States about the continent, produced by individuals with different imaginaries, readings, presumptions, and contact.

Of course, the information on Africa that helped to produce many such negative opinions was neither consistent nor free of bias. Early understanding of Africa in the United States was shaped by European and white Americans' statements as recorded by explorers, missionaries, and in newspapers. The experiences and memories of enslaved Africans were shaped by processes of cultural retention and changes in religion, language, food, and festivals. A generation emerged in the eighteenth century who knew little about Africa. Blacks became creolized, forming a set of knowledge based on slavery, exploitation, and racism.

In subsequent years, as Blyden develops in various chapters, the book examines the contradictions opened up by Cullen: the belief that African Americans must play a leading role in preventing European domination of Africa, support for anticolonial nationalism in Africa, struggles for civil rights and equality in the United States, and the impact of the large-scale migrations of Africans to the United States.

Issues around contemporary migrations close the book. Present immigrants have deep connections with Africa, bringing a variety of African experiences in food, fashion, and values to American cities. The rise of Barack Obama as the president of the United States fused the various historical segments of the black population, offering various promises, many unfulfilled, as to the possibility of a post-racial age, the transformation of Africa, and the unity of blackness. Obama's era produced new questions: who is the authentic African American? Conflicts opened up around opportunities and access to resources among the new immigrants and the established black population, especially around admission to prominent colleges. Blyden recognizes the tensions in both communities, but she concludes in an optimistic tone that marks the overall tenor of her book: 'In a country still fraught with racial issues and where people of African descent are economically disadvantaged and constructed in negative ways, ties between African Americans and Africa are being created and strengthened in the United States on American soil' (210).

There is a need for a related book: Africa's engagements with African Americans. If this book has focused on the voices of African Americans speaking about Africa, it is necessary to know about African views on black people in the United States.

Blyden's book deserves to be read and shall surely generate an impact on college campuses and in various scholarly communities. It will encourage people of various identities to talk about their past and engage with the issues of race, blackness, and anti-immigration nationalism, particularly in the age of Donald Trump, one of the most divisive presidents in American history.

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