

LAST PLACE ANXIETY IN BLACK AMERICA

Stigma and Culture: Last Place Anxiety in Black America.

By J. Lorand Matory.

Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015. Pp. xii + 529. \$90.00, hardback (ISBN 9780226297873); \$30.00, paperback (ISBN 9780226297736).

doi:10.1017/S002185371800110X

Key Words: United States, race, migration, identity, class.

In his book, *Stigma and Culture: Last Place Anxiety in Black America*, Lorand Matory situates his discussion of social relations, aspirations, and conflicts between and among black immigrants and diverse black American communities using examples from the campus of Howard University in Washington, D.C. Howard, Matory posits, provides a valuable environment within which to explore issues of status, rank, and class among various people of African descent. Through the study of these individuals' histories and social positions, Matory presents his argument about 'last place anxiety' in Black America. He aims to demonstrate that people seek status and increased income by dishonoring others and by extreme avoidance of those on the bottom; it remains questionable whether or not this claim can be universally applied. The volume focuses much more on describing inter-black relations than on building a theoretical argument.

In his analysis of 'last place anxiety', Matory identifies several borderline or liminal identity categories that he critiques as unstable (and perhaps dishonest) because their members claim ethnic positions outside of the parameters of normative black American identity. These include Geetches, Louisiana Creoles of color, and 'Black Indians', whose identities build on Native American descent and culture as much as or more than African descent. These groups strive against an identity narrowly defined by African descent alone. Afro-Caribbean people, West Africans, and core black Americans make up the remaining ethnic categories that Matory examines through the lens of the academic community — mostly alumni — of Howard. He addresses two main issues in this investigation: the nexus of class and ethnicity, on the one hand, and, on the other, the strategies that people use to avoid racial stigma, such as code switching, which help 'black ethnics' to enter the American mainstream.

The author opines that 'black ethnics' of diverse backgrounds employ discourses of difference and cultural specificity in order to distance themselves from the black community's underdog status in mainstream America. He also includes the black middle class as another sub-group that undertakes various behavioral permutations in order to enhance their image as civilized, superior individuals. These behavioral nuances are meant to ease their entry into more secure mainstream American identities and social locations.

In an interesting writing approach, Matory includes himself in the picture he presents about the tensions of prestige and rank. Born into Washington, D.C.'s black middle class, Matory makes use of his own social positionality as another source for mining evidence of black complexity. He suggests that his own well-established sense of identity springs from a solid tradition of black bourgeois life in the capital. The author uses this discussion as an opportunity to lament, and rightfully so, the tragedy that such a diverse set of relatively comfortable blacks would strive so assiduously to avoid association with

the country's problem-laden black poor. In support of this argument, he enjoins us to reflect on the role of the media in continuously re-inventing and re-casting the black poor as inherently inferior, immoral, and crime-prone.

A book on this topic is long overdue. Since the rising influx of black immigrants that began some fifteen years ago, little scholarly reflection has emerged from black scholars about community relations for these new arrivals, and neither has there been much written — from any quarter — about how this wave of newcomers has affected the black community. This notable dearth stands in contrast to a growing volume of articles and novels written by black immigrants, particularly Haitians and West Africans, about what this experience of coercion to racial self-identification means to them. Matory should thus be commended for calling to our attention a difficult and contentious subject, and initiating scholarly discussion on the internal dynamics of these socio-cultural changes in America's black community.

Nevertheless, there are some worrying contradictions. Throughout the volume, Matory veers from describing the merits of core black middle-class upbringing to disparaging black ethnics for clinging to their own cultural specificity. But is black American culture reasonably a default position? Likewise, 'black ethnic' identity is written as a rejection of black positionality, perhaps reflecting the author's discussion of his early naïveté in searching for a spirit of Pan-Africanism on Howard's campus. Limiting ethnic identity to a sort of transactional materiality underestimates group history as a factor of identity. Problematically, Matory casts black strivings for superiority in relation to the larger white society. But forces of class and rank are at play everywhere, all the time, and certainly in all 'black' groups in Africa. One might argue that one-upmanship is universal and does not always equal disparagement of other groups. There are local, internal reasons for people to strive to be 'on top' and for which the existence of 'white people' or European civilization serves only as a backdrop to more immediate concerns and strivings.

Matory is right in pointing out the intellectual, and maybe even moral, laziness of 'West Indian and African immigrants' who do not include a strong black middle class in their measure of who and what are historic core black Americans (2). He is also understandable in remarking that such superficial estimations are hurtful and unproductive, and that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) tend to reproduce hierarchies. But Matory is less effective in describing the social spaces between such immigrants and black Americans and ferreting out why those spaces exist. It appears Matory's Pan-Africanism requires immigrants to forego ethnicity in exchange for American blackness. Such a project would be a loss for America, which has much to learn from African logics of identity that do not stand on race alone, but also upon historical experience.

According to recent publications by African intellectuals Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr as well as numerous journalistic essays, Africa is the continent of the twenty-first century, and faces a contentious future that includes the next phase of world capitalist growth.¹⁵ As a geographic and political region, it will probably have the largest percentage of youth, most unexploited natural resources, and most countries with increasing growth rates. Thus, attention to the emerging leadership of the region is crucial, and this includes

15 A. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. by L. Dubois (Durham NC, 2017); F. Saar, *Afrotopia* (Paris, 2016).

following the itineraries of its diasporas. By design or by default, African immigrants are sometimes perceived simply as ‘blacks’ and sometimes grouped together with other U.S. communities of African descent. In this context, whether African immigrants in America have a positive, negative, or mostly bewildering experience — and why — is important. This key point is one that Matory makes. Recent events in Europe, in particular the experiences of southwest Asians and Arabs in Britain and France, have had much to do with the trajectory of radical movements in immigrants’ home countries. It is therefore critical for there to be reflections on the kinds of experiences Africans have in the United States. Matory’s book, while not necessarily directed at Africanist scholars in general, or Africanist historians in particular, nonetheless serves as a reminder that the history of the continent does not stop at its shoreline, and that African peoples and their mobility continue to produce significant and important global reverberations.

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