Black Encounters on the African Coast: Settlement, Identity, and Stratification in Liberia

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Abstract

Using the settlement of the Barbadians in Liberia in 1865, this essay examines the ways in which the social relationships between the different groups of black migrants transformed the ethnocultural identity of the Liberian nationality away from its African American pioneers. By acquiring and working their land, Barbadians began to fulfill their dreams of emancipation and fashioned themselves as Liberians. Liberia’s transformation from space to place through land acquisition and settlement patterns that displaced indigenes from the coastal areas and points of contact with Europeans, locating “civilized” diasporic migrants in them and newly formed cities became a means of resolving the crisis of nationally representing a modernized black identity. Through these processes, blackness marked and redefined the environment, landscape, and urban architecture in Liberia. Implicit in migrants’ civilizationist doctrine was an assumption of a dichotomy between the diaspora and Africa where the Atlantic functioned to fragment meanings of race and blackness. New ideas of blackness in Liberia correlated with one’s ability to dissimulate “African-ness,” purportedly embodied in certain ethnocultural practices. The African diaspora presented themselves in Liberia as demonstrative of Africans’ capacity to overcome their Africanisms or recast them in ways that appeared civilized. In the tensions of encounter and settlement, social ascriptions and nomenclature became a mode of establishing group differences. These kinds of references suggest that migrants did not so much abandon the basic tenets of the life they had left behind; they merely subsumed them into behaviors no longer bounded by white racism.