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### Title

Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identity in the Colonial and Antebellum South by Michael Gomez

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Peer reviewed

Gomez, Michael; *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identity in the Colonial and Antebellum South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

*Exchanging Our Country Marks* explores the evolution of the African American identity in the United States from the colonial period until 1830. Gomez argues that the African American identity formed as a composite of various African identities that somewhat fused as slaves turned from ethnicity to race as a source of identity.

The first chapter notes the complex extent of the different influences on Proto African American Culture, noting that slaves in the early period were more polycultural than syncretic, thus preserved their heritage in spite of white opposition.

The second chapter discusses the role of space and cultural interaction between blacks and whites played in the development of black identity. He notes that slaves were concentrated in the South, especially South Carolina and were further concentrated on farms and plantations, which provided opportunities for inter-African cultural exchange. This chapter also analyzes the imports of slaves based on region of origin as well as briefly discussing age and gender ratios.

Chapter three explores the role of Senegambians in developing the basic colonial economy of the Deep South especially in rice cultivation and skilled labor. Senegambians were relatively culturally homogenous, with few notable exceptions. The author especially notes the role the Bambara played in forming Louisiana creole culture. The author also asserts that the Fon-Ewe-Yoruba belief system directly led to voodoo.

Chapter four demonstrates there was a considerable portion of Muslim slaves who practiced their religion. While Muslims had

difficulty in transmitting their religion in a non-Muslim environment, their faith separated them from other slaves and played a role in how their descendants would practice Christianity.

Chapter five discusses the role of Sierra Leoneans in impacting the culture of secret societies and the Akan (from modern day Ghana) were notable in their extreme veneration of ancestors.

In chapter six the author discusses the Igbo (a group from south eastern Nigeria) reputation for suicide, linking it to the intense connection the Igbo had for the land. This chapter also discusses the natives from the Congo and Angola.

Chapter seven asserts that Africans used language as a means of resistance. It also studies the escape attempts of slaves and theorizes that common language played a key role in their execution.

Chapter eight discusses the relationship between blacks born in the colonies as opposed to those born in Africa, noting their relationship tended to be dominated by the majority group at the time. The author also notes, however, the commonality between stories of enslavement indicating intergenerational exchange and revision, which demonstrates the formation of an African American identity. The tales of enslavement further demonstrate the formation of a common identity by demonizing both whites and the Africans that sold other Africans as slaves, disregarding the complex set of identities that were present in Africa at the time. Gomez also argues that there were divisions within the black community based on labor division.

Chapter nine explores the role of Christianity in the formation of black identity, noting that widespread adoption was slow and only possible after revivals swept through the south. Gomez asserts that a larger segment of the black population was

not Christian prior to the Civil War and that the elements of Christianity were similar enough to native African religion to aid in conversions and syncretism.

Chapter ten summarizes Gomez's main argument and very briefly elaborates how black identity evolved after 1830 until the civil rights movement.

*Exchanging our Country Marks* is ambitious in its attempt to study the origins of African American identity, however it has a few detracting features. For example Gomez uses highly symbolic language and metaphor and tends to use unnecessary repetition for emphasis.

Joshua Lourence<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The author, being also an editor, recused himself from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.