From One Colonial Situation to Another: Politics, Universalism and the Crisis of the African Intellectual

by

Tracy Keith Flemming, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of African/African-American Studies,
International Area Studies Unit, Brooks College of Interdisciplinary Studies,
Grand Valley State University
Allendale, Michigan

Abstract

This essay explores circum-Atlantic emigrationism and its relationship to West Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The intellectual politics of this Atlantic traffic serve as a source for engaging Atlantic colonial situations that were created by powers in Europe, North America, the Caribbean, and West Africa, particularly the nuances associated with African Atlantic emigration to Africa and Black intellectuals’ negotiations of overlapping Atlantic colonial situations. This project contributes to African and African American studies, and it is particularly concerned with deepening understanding of the African Atlantic struggle against racism and, in regards to Liberia, enhancing appreciation of what the historian J.F.A. Ajayi referred to as “the internal development of African communities and of inter-group relations in African history.”

Colonialism tried to control the memory of the colonized ... Put another way, the colonizing presence sought to induce historical amnesia on the colonized by mutilating the memory of the colonized; and where that failed, it dismembered it, and then tried to re-member it to the colonizer’s memory—to his way of defining the world, including his take on the nature of the relations between colonizer and colonized .... This relation was primarily economic. The colonized as worker, as peasant, produces for another. His land and his labor benefit another. This arrangement was, of course, effected through power, political power, but it was also accomplished through cultural subjugation—for instance, through control of the education system. The ultimate goal was to establish psychic dominance on the part of the colonizer and psychic subservience on the part of the colonized .... But cultural subjugation is more dangerous, because it is more subtle and its effects longer lasting.

As the oldest independent Republic in Africa with long historical ties to the United States of America, which was instrumental in the founding of Liberia, it is the sincere desire of the Government of Liberia to engage and work closely with the United States Government and US Congress in addressing issues of common concern.

– William V.S. Bull, Liberian Ambassador to the Unites States of America

If settlers enslaved Nigerians, Ghanaians, Dahomeans, and Congolese in the 18th Century; if those black imperialists felt and still think they are more American than African, then the indigenous majority – like other African countries – should declare political and economic liberty from the clutches of Americo-Liberianism at once … The political idiom of the 21st Century is centered on technological proactivity, not dogged political subjugation and exploitation of one group by the other. No man in Liberia should ever be reduced to an indentured servant in the next millennium.

– Bodioh Siapoe, Chair and Cofounder of the Coalition of Progressive Liberians in the Americas

Introduction: The Other Colonialism

In the opening years of the twenty-first century and upon perusal of the official websites of the Embassy of the Republic of Liberia (Washington, District of Columbia) and the Coalition of Progressive Liberians in the Americas (COPLA), one quickly noticed differing discourses on America. COPLA Chair and Cofounder Bodioh Siapoe’s vehement denunciation of then President Charles Taylor’s (President, August 2, 1997 – August 11, 2003) Americo-centric, strong-arm rule of Liberia was in stark contrast to Ambassador William V.S. Bull’s “open letter” in opposition to pressure from the United States House Subcommittee on Africa regarding charges of Liberian state trafficking of “blood diamonds.” Siapoe’s contention was that there was a despicable continuity between President Taylor’s rule and Liberia’s historical domination by “alien African[s].” However, according to Siapoe,

[T]he fateful coup of April 12, 1980 … gave Liberia her first African Liberian president: Samuel Kanyon Doe. After 133 years of True Whig Party (TWP) subjugation, Doe nearly delivered freedom to his people.

It should be noted that Siapoe’s suggestion that the 1980 military coup and President Samuel Doe’s subsequent rule that “nearly delivered freedom to his people” was also a rule in which “he slaughtered 13 former TWP government functionaries in South Beach, Monrovia” – an occurrence that, to Siapoe, fueled future Amero-Liberian “revenge” tactics led by President Charles Taylor. Siapoe’s opinion somewhat captures the observations of Professor Amos Sawyer, former head of the provisional government (1990–1994) following Doe’s assassination in 1990. Sawyer maintains that not only did Doe’s ascension signal “a close to more than a century and a half of settler hegemonic control in the region known as Liberia,” but it “proved … to be essentially a reconstitution of autocracy with a heavier reliance on the threat and use of military force.” Nevertheless, this is a phenomenon that COPLA hailed. But this aberration in Liberia’s history proved short-lived – a significant aberration indeed, to Siapoe, it would seem, for he argued that “[c]oastal natives would have thrown the Americas into the sea, but America, British and other alien forces prevented that” from happening. According to him, President Taylor – with the assistance of “Americos” and “their former … [American] Slave masters,” as well as “ethnic dunces, clearly unaware of black imperialism in their backyard” – played a critical role in the reestablishment of an “Americo-Liberian aristocracy.”

Ambassador Bull’s appeal to the Subcommittee to “help … identify and establish goals which the international community could pursue under the United States leadership [in the] building of democratic institutions and in the promotion of peace, stability and economic development in West Africa and elsewhere on the continent” was precisely what COPLA was purportedly engaged in struggle against – the cohort of Liberians who acted in their own American colonial interests, to the peril of colonized African-Liberians. Indeed, some Liberians contended that it was not until the 1980 military coup that resulted in an African-Liberian’s victory that Liberia’s indigenous African population experienced any semblance of decolonization. Of course, according to Ambassador Bull, Liberia is Africa’s “oldest independent Republic.” But to Siapoe and COPLA, an important question remained:

Are they Africans or Americans? If they accept their Africanness, then “Americos” should act like Africans; but if they cherish their dark history as slaves in North America, then they should be encouraged to pack up and return home. Meanwhile, African-Liberians should learn how to be themselves. Being what they are not would further exacerbate and prolong the conflict.

The ideological conflicts between descendants of both Amero-Liberians and indigenous groups were fueled by the specter of violence in Liberia during the decades preceding and following the turn of the twenty-first century. Liberia’s recent history is often described as a melancholy one that was marred by civil war and its chaotic effects. With large numbers of migrants in search of economic opportunity and political exiles leaving Liberia – especially with significant numbers traveling to the United States – these circum-Atlantic dynamics remain important phenomena.
Due to the Taylor government’s restriction of freedom of speech, organizations such as the one led by Siapoe, as well as academic scholars, created alternative information sites to disseminate knowledge – practices and information that escaped the censorship of the Liberian state.\textsuperscript{11} Contemporary relationships between Americo-Liberians, African-Liberians, African Americans, and other African people in the United States and in the Atlantic world are interlaced in a conundrum whose origins can be traced back to the nineteenth-century formation of the Liberian colony (est. 1822) and the Liberia state (est. 1847).\textsuperscript{12}

Even after this recent political crisis and ensuing human carnage in Liberia, discourses on coloniality continue to emerge from conflicts between factions vying for power in a country reeling from the effects of global capitalism and underdevelopment.\textsuperscript{13} These discourses are preaced on contemporary assumptions about nineteenth-century Liberia, which was as one of the two countries that remained relatively independent of Western European partition\textsuperscript{14} and formal colonization of the continent following the Berlin Conference (1884–1885). Liberia was a source of pride for many African Americans and other Atlantic and indigenous figures in West Africa. But the “repatriation” of African Atlantic figures to West Africa also caused heated debates in North America, and it was at the root of African American Christian settler versus indigenous African conflicts since the establishment of the Liberian colony by the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color (American Colonization Society) and thereafter. Liberia’s history remains highly contested within contemporary imaginaries on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, as many Liberians, in efforts to escape the immediate dangers of the recent civil conflict and violence, relocated to the United States. From Americo-Liberians’ insistence that they, too, are Liberians to the descendants of indigenous groups’ condemnation of Americo-Liberian modes of colonization, popular concerns about Liberia continue to be very much informed by imaginings of the past.

The historical certainties, inaccuracies, and erasures entailed in the rhetorical strategies of descendants of both Americo-Liberians and the indigenous populations clearly attest to the necessity of re-envisioning nineteenth-century Liberian politics, universalism, and the crisis of the African intellectual. According to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, “There is no region, no culture, no nation today that has not been affected by colonialism and its aftermath. Indeed, modernity can be considered a product of colonialism”\textsuperscript{15} Of course, a significant number of historians have already chronicled varying aspects of this period in Atlantic history, usually focusing on the North American episode and then on the subsequent adjustments to West Africa by formerly enslaved African Americans in Liberia; moreover, analyses of emigrationism, African nationalism, and Pan Africanism have also figured largely within the most authoritative studies. The historians Yekutiel Gershoni and Monday B. Akpan argued that Americo-Liberians were essentially colonizers or imperialists, respectively.\textsuperscript{16} Yet, a void within the widely acknowledged ambivalence of transplanted African Americans and their negotiations of African realities, remains — namely over the subject of American baggage. Assessments of specific aspects of American acculturation, such as religion (Protestantism) and language (English), considered Americanization as a key issue that shaped African American emigrants’ assumptions and expectations.
This methodological approach was not wholly inaccurate (e.g., analyses of religion and language), especially in regards to Southern, formerly enslaved emigrants. Considerations of Black nationalistic intellectuals who supported Liberia – usually, but not always, characterized as quasi-free-born Northerners – reflect this trend. Yet, explanations of American acculturation that ultimately focus on religion and language do not fully explain the cultural complexities associated with Black intellectuals in nineteenth-century Liberia whose circum-Atlantic shifts across colonial situations were reflected in their nationalistic discourses.

This essay explores circum-Atlantic emigrationism and its relationship to West Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The intellectual politics of this Atlantic traffic serve as a source for engaging Atlantic colonial situations that were created by powers in Europe, North America, the Caribbean, and West Africa, particularly the nuances associated with African Atlantic emigration to Africa and Black intellectuals’ negotiations of overlapping Atlantic colonial situations. This project contributes to African and African American studies, and it is particularly concerned with deepening understanding of the African Atlantic struggle against racism and, in regards to Liberia, enhancing appreciation of what the historian J.F.A. Ajayi referred to as “the internal development of African communities and of inter-group relations in African history.”

Transnational approaches to the study of persons of African descent throughout the African diaspora have a long history, especially within African American historiography. Robin D. G. Kelley, in his discussion of historians and international approaches to Black history, persuasively argued that “black historians, many of whom operated relatively independent of the mainstream historical profession, had already developed an international or transnational approach to history by the early part of the twentieth century.” As part of a larger, popular trend of “globalization,” other scholars have taken heed to the interpretative benefits of looking past national boundaries within intellectual analyses. Studies of the “Black Atlantic” have been the recent vogue within varying scholarly inquiries since Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, in which he makes exceptional contributions to combating provincial, nationalistic approaches to the study of Black people in the Western and Northern Atlantic region of the African diaspora, as well as disrupting narrow definitions of modernity and history. According to Gilroy, “The history of the black Atlantic yields a course of lessons as to the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade.” Of course, it is generally acknowledged that Gilroy’s focus did not concentrate on Africa within this “Black Atlantic grid.”

The historian Philip S. Zachernuk augments this void within the Black Atlantic model that is oft ignored by those working within the Atlantic framework, where, occasionally implicit, Africa is simply the background for an external diasporic show. In the midst of an increasingly imposing new imperial order, colonial domination, and nationalistic politics, Zachernuk argued, “African thinkers responded not only with their own resources but also with the resources of the modern Atlantic world.”

293

This essay specifically addresses two fundamental problems: colonialism and its relationship to African Atlantic emigrationism. What were the implications of shifting from a terrain of overwhelming domination to one of contextually unprecedented possibility? Two of the most prominent nineteenth-century Black nationalistic theorists and African Atlantic figures, Alexander Crummell (1819–1898) and Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832–1912) 24, for example, navigated an ideological world in which republican and Victorian universalistic claims were in contradistinction to Anglo-hegemony and oppression. Upon emigrating to the Republic of Liberia during the early 1850s – a setting in which they were more than ever self-avowedly, self-determining men – Crummell and Blyden viewed their tasks as twofold: to facilitate the “return” of all of Africa’s progeny and to civilize the “nation.” This altered spatial terrain entailed a shift of the roles of these intellectuals to ones of potential power. With Liberia’s existing indigenous communities already being affected by Americo-Liberian state power, Crummell and Blyden viewed the State as the only earthly sovereignty. This was also a time when initially British and later Western European theoretical contributions to the colonial archive about the missionizing and civilizing benefits of colonization and colonialism were prevalent. Crummell and Blyden viewed colonization as a civilizing process that entailed a higher purpose than imperial exploitation of colonized natural and human resources for profit. Crummell, for example, in an address delivered at an 1870 event in observance of Liberia’s Independence Day (July 26), 25 proclaimed:

As a people we were “ferried over,” in a month, or little more, from a state of degradation to a position of independence and superiority. In a little more than a monthly change of moon, we were metamorphosed from the position of underlings to one of mastery; with a vast population of degraded subjects around us.26

Earlier in 1862, Blyden combated anti-emigrationist sentiment in the United States and charges of Americo-Liberian xenophobia by pointing out that “the case of the Americo-Liberians and the aborigines is quite different.”

We are all descendants of Africa. In Liberia there may be found persons of almost every tribe in West-Africa, from Senegal to Congo. And not only do we and the natives belong to the same race, but we are also of the same family … The policy of Liberia is to diffuse among them as rapidly as possible the principles of Christianity and civilization, to prepare them to take an active part in the duties of the nationality which we are endeavoring to erect. Whence, then, comes the slander which represents Liberians as “maintaining a distance from the aborigines—a constant and uniform separation”?27
Assessments of these African Atlantic figures usually point out the unmistakable religious, hierarchical conceptions of time, space, and race, but Crummell’s and Blyden’s discourses on settler and indigenous relations were both discourses on coloniality. They addressed the reality and the myth of nineteenth-century Liberia. Liberia was and remained an interesting case of an Atlantic colonial situation – only with Black agents operating as colonizers in Africa. This position, then, undoubtedly addresses postcolonial Liberia. In this analysis of Black nationalistic intellectuals and their relationships to Liberia, it is not my intention to conflate “imperialist expansion with colonial dependence,” project a “moral construct,” or merely attract “interest,” as J. Jorge Klor de Alva warned against.28 Rather, the aim of this essay centers on the centrality of location in history, its relationship to “self-fashioning”29 among circum-Atlantic figures, and the politics of intellectual productivity.

Establishing a Theoretical Framework: Deconstructing American Baggage

Nineteenth-century Black nationalism and Pan Africanism, two intertwined projects, are important templates for assessing circum-Atlantic intellectual discourses. The varying manifestations of these discourses were largely in response to colonial situations across the Atlantic world, from South Carolina to Jamaica to Nigeria – from David Walker to maroons to the colonial educated elite. These colonial situations, of course, were contextually specific, but they were also interconnected systems of governance within the Atlantic world, a region that has been a site of constant transformations of political economies and identities within both the metropolitan centers of the Western world and the colonial peripheries of the Americas and Africa since the commencement of the Western European “age of exploration” at the end of the fifteenth-century. Most considerations of these interwoven specific locations point out the systems of domination devised by Britain, France, Spain and other Western powers.30

Within the Atlantic world, the nineteenth-century development of varying colonialisms took place not only within, most notably, the British and French spheres, but also within the United States and Liberia.31 The United States, technically a postcolonial32 state that rapidly developed into an empire, was also a sphere in which a majority of persons of African descent remained legally enslaved after the American Revolution – they remained internally colonized subjects. The failures of national Reconstruction after the Civil War and the ensuing developments in industrial capitalism during the second-half of the nineteenth century were specific indicators of the subjugated positions of African Americans during this period, an era that the historian Rayford Logan deemed “the nadir” (or the lowest point) in African American history.33 Other scholars argued that Black people were the victims of internal colonialism, and a powerful argument was forwarded in Harold Cruse’s reference to “The American Negro: A Subject of Domestic Colonialism,” in an essay titled “Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American” that was first published in Studies on the Left (Volume 2, Number 3, 1962) and was republished in his collection of essays, Rebellion or Revolution? (1968):

From the very beginning, the American Negro has existed as a colonial being. His enslavement coincided with the colonial expansion of European powers and was nothing more or less than a condition of domestic colonialism. Instead of the United States establishing a colonial empire in Africa, it brought the colonial system home and installed it in the Southern states. When the Civil War broke up the slave system and the Negro was emancipated, he gained only partial freedom. Emancipation elevated him only to the position of a semi-dependent man, not to that of an equal or independent being.34

Scholars such as Jürgen Osterhammel (Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview, 1997 English translation; 1995 German edition) would, perhaps, insist that suggestions of American domestic colonialism were plagued by the “value judgments” of “cultural critics and political polemicians.” Yet, his assertion that “colonialism is not just any relationship between masters and servants, but one in which an entire society is robbed of its historical line of development, externally manipulated and transformed according to the needs and interests of colonial rulers,” invites us to reconsider the functionalism of the classical premises that analyses of colonial situations have been prefaced upon. In the case of Osterhammel, Cuba, a Spanish colony until 1898, was noted as a “semi-sovereign region of exploitation of the United States, a classic case of ‘informal empire’.” It is particularly interesting that he did not view African Americans as colonized “little brothers” of an imperial order.35 E. Franklin Frazier’s observation that African Americans were “shut out from all serious participation in American [civic] life,” as well as Cruse’s insistence that “[t]he only factor which differentiates the Negro’s status from that of a pure colonial status is that his position is maintained in a ‘home’ country,” illustrated the past voices that have not been constrained within the metropole-periphery binary or focus on “actual colonialism.”36 The Tunisian Jewish writer and essayist Albert Memmi’s dedication of the American edition of his classic text titled The Colonized and the Colonizer (1967 English translation; 1957 French edition) to the “American Negro, also colonized,” captured the fundamental essence of arguments that focus on domestic colonialism in the United States: “The fact is that the colonized does not govern” – they are absolutely administered.37

These respective arguments about domestic colonialism in the United States contended that the varying (i.e., structural, ideological, etc.) constraints on African Americans’ participation in the American political arena – and the impact of “racial capitalism”38 – accounted for the colonial situation of African Americans. The philosopher Valentin Y. Mudimbe’s two works on the “invention” and the “idea” of “Africa”39 prompted discussions of colonial situations in the African Atlantic world, and in an insightful engagement with Mudimbe’s findings, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o argues that
V.Y. Mudimbe describes the idea of Africa as a product of the West’s system of self-representation, which included creation of an otherness conceived and conveyed through conflicting systems of knowledge. But I prefer to think of the idea of Africa—or, more appropriately, the “African idea,” as African self-representation. To distinguish it from the Mudimbeist formula according to which Europe is finding itself through its invention of Africa, I see the African idea as that which was forged in the diaspora and traveled back to the continent .... In the diaspora, Africans could see the whole continent as the home they were forced to leave no matter how they viewed their exile—as mercy in the case of Phyllis Wheatley, or as tragic loss in the case of Equiano and those who sang of feeling like motherless children a long way from home. The African idea in the diaspora finds its most dramatic self-realization in the independence of Haiti in the eighteenth century.40

The dominant ideology of the United States certainly did not declare nineteenth-century African Americans to be colonial subjects. To be sure, as Mudimbe and the historian Michel Foucault have both argued, analyses of what is actually said can never result in the (complete) history of what is not said (i.e., “the history of silence”). However, it is possible, “at least theoretically,” to conceive of a map of its (silence) locations.41 Hence, if one considers the governmental attitude to the “Negro problem” during this era – and in many instances one need only consider what the federal government (and by extension state and local governments) actually said – it is possible to perceive the position of African Americans as one of other overlapping Atlantic colonial situations, especially when we consider the contextual Western epistemological order in which “Africa” and “the Negro” represented the absolute other.

Negotiating Colonial Situations: Imagining an African Nation

The Liberian colony was founded in 1822 under the auspices of the American Colonization Society and attained independence in 1847. The idea of African American colonization in Africa was a controversial issue among American abolitionists and free African Americans from its inception. The main debates centered on whether such schemes would lead to the removal of the small number of free Black people in the United States, in effect diminishing all African American claims to citizenship and civil rights. With only an enslaved African American mass remaining in the United States, it was quite reasonable that anti-emigrationists, such as Frederick Douglass, viewed colonization abroad as a major concession to the American slavocracy. Slavery, then, would become a permanent institution according to this logic. Its “peculiar” characteristics would even dissolve, for the African Americans’ (especially those of the strongly nationalistic ilk) menacing presence, according to slavery’s defenders, would no longer potentially expose the contradictions of White supremacy and the Southern paternalistic order.
Enslaved African Americans were characterized in the dominant American ideology as “happy” and, at times, dangerous without proper surveillance; they would no longer become distracted by their atypical, quasi-free brothers and sisters. Indeed, the antebellum Southern order of things could not exist without African bodies in bondage.\textsuperscript{42}

With emancipation, it was generally conceded that African American nationalism, which thrived during the 1850s, experienced a low point. African Americans were eagerly seeking to take advantage of the new opportunities that the reconstructing nation was beginning to offer.\textsuperscript{43} This seeming national restructuring was not to endure, at least for African Americans, as the nation turned its attention to industrialization and economic imperial interests.\textsuperscript{44} By 1877 Reconstruction was dead, and African Americans were beginning to experience an existence that was certainly, to many Black people, reminiscent of the era of legal enslavement. Thus, efforts to escape post-Reconstruction nightmares entailed a resurgence of migratory sentiment. According to the historian August Meier,

\begin{quote}
[M]igration activity was especially strong between 1878 and 1881 and between 1888 and about 1890 … The migrants and would-be migrants uniformly cited oppressive conditions in the South — economic exploitation, political intimidation, injustice in the courts, and mob violence — as reasons for their desire to move.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

The southwest migration patterns of African American Southerners also coincided with the reemergence of heightened efforts to emigrate to Liberia, Haiti, and Canada, and impoverished African Americans from the South, most of them illiterate (79.9\% in 1870; 70.0\% in 1880; 56.8\% in 1890; 44.5\% in 1900),\textsuperscript{46} constituted the largest cross-section of individuals desiring to migrate. Their decisions to acquire the means to migrate ranged from racial sentiments about Africa to economic motivations. Among the central findings of the literature focused on emigration to Liberia during the nineteenth century are the following: “Liberia fever” was highest during periods in which the prospects of African American social mobility in the United States appeared grimmest; emigration was never a popular option for African Americans; and the realities of settling in Liberia reflected arduous social, economic, and environmental adjustments for African Americans emigrants.\textsuperscript{47} Black nationalistic intellectuals, particularly those who were emigrationists, were acutely aware of the dire situation of African Americans before and after the American Civil War.

African American emigrationism and its relationship to Africa was the subject of many scholarly debates, and the ambivalence of the most articulate nineteenth-century proponents of emigration out of the United States was both praised and “ruthlessly assailed.”\textsuperscript{48} The content of these debates and other factors also resulted in the problematic – occasionally outright distorted – perceptions and treatments of Black nationalistic intellectuals.
Over four decades have passed since the burgeoning of scholarly interest in the intellectual development of what was frequently and, at times, erroneously referred to as Black nationalism. Much of the recent attention devoted to this ideological tradition of dissent is indebted to the emergence of radical segments of the Civil Rights and Black Power political movements in the 1960s and 1970s. From the mass movement fomented by Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL) to Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam’s militant efforts to ameliorate the psychological and material oppression of African Americans in the “wilderness of America” to the well-known advocacy of “Black Power!” by Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Willie Ricks (Mukasa Dada), twentieth-century constructions of Black nationalism dominate the ways that scholars approach Black nationalistic discourse. In other words, “modern” Black nationalistic rhetoric holds an enormous sway over the popular and scholarly imaginations, as opposed to the literary, conservative, bourgeois ideological roots of Black nationalism.

An understanding of the early stages of Black nationalistic social and political thought enables one to appreciate the complexities of Black nationalism, a political tradition that can be identified, ironically, within the ideologies of several distinct Black thinkers with opposing worldviews. This understanding can potentially move us beyond both the simplistic perceptions of Black nationalism as unsophisticated appeals to group identity – such as the positions held by liberal cultural critics about the frequently xenophobic rhetoric of the late Khalid Muhammad – and the contemporary pundits who would have us believe that their proclamations are definitive characteristics of the Black nationalistic tradition – rhetoric that is commonly marred with biological determinism, varying forms and articulations of xenophobia, and clearly undemocratic attitudes that are totally unrelated to solving social problems and addressing material conditions. The main point, here, is that efforts to explain the antecedents of twentieth-century Black nationalism must necessarily engage the contemporary attitudes of advocates of cultural nationalism, on the one hand, and anti-essentialism on the other. The contours of the conflicting imaginaries regarding nineteenth-century Liberia are more clearly explained through analysis of some of the circum-Atlantic negotiations of colonial situations by Edward Blyden, an intellectual and emigrant to Liberia who, unlike Crummell, remained in West Africa until the end of his life.

Blyden’s Dialectics

A little over a decade had passed since Edward Blyden, denied admission to Rutgers Theological Seminary in 1850, delivered “The Call of Providence” in the United States as an ambassador of Liberia and on behalf of the young nation’s efforts to encourage further emigration to West Africa. Born in St. Thomas and a short-time resident of Venezuela, Blyden resided in the United States for only seven months before emigrating to Liberia at the age of eighteen, largely in response to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.
Noted by his most authoritative biographers as having devoted the rest of his life to African development, Blyden sought to garner African American support for Liberia in this speech during a series of summer of 1862 addresses that were delivered in Washington, District of Columbia, Portland, Maine, and other New England cities as part of a Liberian diplomatic envoy. He chastised African Americans who were either unconcerned or unaware of their “special duty to their forefathers.”

Among the descendants of Africa in this country the persuasion seems to prevail ... that they owe no special duty to the land of their forefathers ... [M]any of the descendants of Africa ... speak disparagingly of their country ... and would turn indignantly upon any who bid them go up and take possession of the land of their fathers ... It is theirs to betake themselves to injured Africa, and bless those outraged shores, and quiet those distracted families with the blessings of Christianity and civilization.52

Blyden envisioned Africa as a “country,” indicating a nineteenth-century nationalistic construction or imagination of continental Africa and its people. The Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey later articulated a similar vision of the African continent. The historian Claire Corbould notes that

Garvey looked to unite the black world through black-run and supported enterprises, such as the Black Star Line, and a migration scheme that would eventually pave the way for the formation of a single nation on the African continent under his leadership. In 1920-1921 and again in 1924, Garvey made concerted overtures to convince officials in Liberia to accept the first of a convoy of black migrants from the United States. A small republic in West Africa, Liberia was ruled by a handful of Americo-Liberian elite, descended from free black settlers who began moving there in 1820. None of these efforts of Garvey’s resulted in the mass migration for which he hoped, but these failures were not for a lack of enthusiasm among his supporters.53

Critical to Blyden’s thoughts about African Americans’ “repatriation” to the “land of their forefathers” was his conceptualization of race. Blyden’s racial chauvinism cannot be divorced from either the utter oppression experienced by Africans or from contextual conceptualizations of humanity.54

In a private correspondence during the same summer to British Chancellor of the Exchequer William Ewart Gladstone, Blyden wrote from New York City:
I am very glad of the position which England maintains with reference to this [American Civil] war. It has not yet assumed a moral aspect; it is purely political – the leading men excepting such noble spirits as Mr. [Charles] Sumner – having no idea of freeing the slaves. They are desirous of restoring the Union on its former basis. The oppression seems to be intensifying.

After allegedly, and certainly quite possibly, witnessing African Americans being captured in Washington, District of Columbia, in compliance with the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act during a visit to the United States capital, as well as being denied entrance to a session of the Congressional House of Representatives and having to have a White American man confirm that he was a free person, Blyden (“a citizen of Liberia”) went on to note that

Both sections of the country are [N]egro-hating and [N]egro-crushing – intending and doing justice to five millions oppressed people among them only as they are driven to it by European sentiment. And I think that your speech though denounced has had some driving influence.\(^{55}\)

Blyden’s letter is highly informative. It is a primary source of evidence on Pan African intellectuals’ cognizance of colonial situations in the Atlantic world, particularly in the United States. His colleague in Liberia, Alexander Crummell, also lamented, “Alas! [F]or us, all along through this reign of terror, our afflicted people have been at sea! We have no coherence of race, we have had no unity of policy! We have shewn [sic] no resistance to outrage! We have no organized maintenance of our rights!”\(^{56}\)

Blyden utilized several resources of the modern Atlantic world. In November 1875 he contributed a scholarly paper titled “Mohammedanism and the Negro Race” to the London-based *Fraser’s Magazine* and in May of the following year, he contributed a complementary scholarly paper titled “Christianity and the Negro Race” to the same prominent journal.\(^{57}\) These two essays are powerful examples of Blyden’s maneuvers in an ideological world that was dominated by a Western epistemological framework. Blyden relied not only on the White colonial archive, but also upon Muslim contributions (composed in English) to this library, such as Syed Ahmed Khan Bahador’s collection of writings titled “A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammed” (1870), which was reviewed in the *British Quarterly Review*, January, 1872, and Syed Ameer Ali Moulvi’s book titled *A Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Mohammed* published in 1873.\(^{58}\) One of the prominent themes of these texts is the dialectic between Christianity and Islam – two universalistic creeds – and their relationship to the “Negro Race.” It has been widely observed that for most of his life Blyden considered Christianity as ultimately ranked higher than Islam as a religious creed, which was in accordance to dominant hierarchical conceptions of civilization.

301

Blyden considered most persons of African descent as lacking civilization, as divinely created beings in desperate need of transformative missionary conversion. However, as he came to consider neither one of these creeds as originally African in origin, Blyden contended that the most effective civilizing mission would have to be one in which racial difference – and not racial hierarchy – was taken into account.59

Effective conversion entailed negotiations with what Blyden perceived as differing racial characteristics or “instincts.” For most of his life, Blyden shared the then widely held disdain for “folk” culture – be it the religious expression and culture of the enslaved or the religious and cultural traditions of indigenous Africans – a worldview that was articulated by most early Black nationalists.60 Indeed, for most of his life Blyden believed that successful cultural and religious negotiations could not be accomplished through “a degrading compromise with the Pagan superstitions, but by shaping many of its traditional customs to suit the milder and more conciliatory disposition of the Negro.” Christian missionaries could learn a lot from the history of the dissemination of Islam in West and Central Africa according to Blyden:

Their local institutions were not destroyed by the Arab influence introduced. They only assumed new forms, and adapted themselves to the new teachings. In all thriving Mohammedan communities, in West and Central Africa, it may be noticed that the Arab superstructure has been superimposed on a permanent indigenous substructure; so that what really took place, when the Arab met the Negro in his own home, was a healthy amalgamation, and not an absorption or undue repression.61

Blyden exhibited a profound, if occasionally imperfect, understanding of Islam in West Africa and its empirical characteristics in an African setting south of the Sahara. Although Hollis Lynch provided a necessary complication of Blyden’s, at times, romantic depiction of the spread of Islam in West Africa,62 Blyden’s effort to exploit the universalistic and “civilizing” aspects of Islam – a religion that a “pan-Negro patriot” could not ignore, as Lynch pointed out – was instrumental to his “racial nationalist imagination.”63

Just as the Christian Bible was central to establishing an earthly spiritual kingdom for believers, Blyden viewed the Muslim Qur’an, with its egalitarian, transnational principles, as paving the way for African unity.

The Koran is, in its measure, an important educator. It exerts among a primitive people a wonderful influence. It has furnished to the adherents of its teachings in Africa a ground of union which has contributed vastly to their progress. Hausas, Foulahs, Mandingoes, Soosoos, Akus, can all read the same books and mingle in worship together, and there is to all one common authority and one ultimate umpirage.64

302

This peaceful dimension of Blyden’s approach to Islam as a peaceful factor in West Africa offers a significant window into understanding his central literary and political contributions and negotiations of colonial situations.

Blyden held detractors to this sentiment in Liberia to be a major impediment to the spread of Christianity. Indeed, he noted that “before the Gospel can take root in ‘all the world’, and become the spiritual life of ‘every creature’,” the hegemonic cultural influences of “one race – the Indo-European” – must come to an end before the universality of Christianity will become manifest. While providing an account of various aspects of the Atlantic Slave Trade and particularly slavery in the United States – with references to Bartolomé de las Casas’s endorsement of African enslavement in lieu of indigenous inhabitants in the Americas (as well as his “tardy, though commendable, repentance”); the Assiento contract between Britain and Spain (1713-1743) regarding shipment of enslaved Africans to Spanish possessions; John Wesley’s Thoughts Upon Slavery (1774); and George Bancroft’s History of the United States, From the Discovery of the American Continent (1834 followed by additional volumes) – Blyden engaged in a continued critique of Christianity’s dissemination in the Atlantic world and its impact on Africans. In “Mohammedanism and the Negro Race,” Blyden had already noted that “Christianity … came to the Negro as a slave, or at least as a subject race in a foreign land … In their condition as outcasts and pariahs, it directed their aspirations to a heavenly and external citizenship.” Blyden’s polemic against American slavery, particularly his one-sided analysis of the dissemination and characteristics of Christianity among enslaved African Americans, should be read as a conceptual attack against systemic and religious rationalizations of slavery. He argued that Africans in “Christians lands” were inferior to African Muslims and could learn from Muslims in Africa how to coexist with indigenous communities in order to develop African nationalism and Pan Africanism. He contended that African American Christians were the progeny of “Africans who were carried to the Western world [who] were, as a general rule, of the lowest of the people in their own country” with “traditions” that were “carried away in the most distorted form,” and, he argued,

It will be a long time before the intelligent Negro will be able to forget the injustice done to the moral instincts of his race, while he has access to the thrilling “narratives” of such heroic and eloquent fugitives from slavery as Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, [Moses] Roper &c.

For an African Atlantic figure like Blyden, Liberia offered an alternative to the Western world, and he was among the early intellectuals in a modern African nation who must be understood as central to the legacies that produced contemporary crises like the recent civil conflict and violence in Liberia.

303

Notes


4 Usage of information from these two online sources engages the discourses that are pertinent to this essay; it is also recognition of the malleable nature that public performances and popular discourses entail (i.e., the Liberian Embassy’s and COPLA’s defunct URLs), which have varying implications for contemporary intellectual historians. I agree with the historian Wilson J. Moses’s invocation of “a tradition that insists that historical consciousness is neither the independent creation nor the exclusive property of professional scholars.” Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History*, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture Series (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 17.

5 Siapoe, “Gunboat Democracy.”


8 Siapoe, “Gunboat Democracy.”

9 Ibid.

11 It is obvious that Liberian government representatives in Washington, District of Columbia, consistently performed their allegiance to the Republic of Liberia.

12 Ethnic conflict is certainly not in any respect normative for only persons of African descent, wherever they are located. Rather, due to the fact that all of these groups imagine Africa in varying ways and because these groups are conflated and interact in the United States – where it is common for certain geopolitical spaces to be systemically relegated to Black bodies – an analysis of these inter-group relations contributes to our understanding of African Atlantic subjectivities.


Applying the metaphor of war to systems of domination, we see that colonialism attacks and completely distorts a peoples’ relationship to their natural, bodily, economic, political, and cultural base. And with this base destroyed, the wholeness of the African subject, the subject in active engagement with his environment, is fragmented.” Further,

Re-membering the continent and the diaspora, the core themes of Pan-Africanism in general, was central to [Marcus] Garvey’s [and others’] vision of black people as active players in the world …. The problem of language and memory presents itself differently for the writers of the diaspora and the continent. In the diaspora, the question is this: How do you raise buried memory from the grave when the means of raising it are themselves buried in the grave or suffocated to the level of whispering ghosts? And on the continent: Did the death intended for one’s means of memory actually materialize? It is my view that while the diasporic writer may in some way have responded to the former question, those on the continent, at least the visible majority, did not even argue about the question confronting them: that of the availability or effectiveness of their native means of memory. Acting as if their native means of memory were dead, or at least unavailable, the continental African chose to use the languages that buried theirs so as to connect with their own memory—a choice that has hobbled their re-membering literary visions and practices.

wa Thion’o, *Something Torn and New*, xi. Indeed, he notes, “Applying the metaphor of war to systems of domination, we see that colonialism attacks and completely distorts a peoples’ relationship to their natural, bodily, economic, political, and cultural base. And with this base destroyed, the wholeness of the African subject, the subject in active engagement with his environment, is fragmented.” Further,

The majority of the formerly enslaved emigrants were never granted the time or resources to cultivate more intellectually grounded (i.e., literary) constructions of nationalism.


July 26th is an event that COPLA deems as an insult to the indigenous populations of Liberia. On July 26, 1847, Liberia was declared an independent republic. Siapoe contends that “To celebrate July 26 – as we know it – is a slap in the face of the African-Liberian, who has been unduly oppressed, suppressed, debased, depraved, misused, abused and manipulated for well over 150 years … July 26 is similar to [Matilda] Newport’s savagery against the natives.” Siapoe, “Why July 26 Should Not Be Celebrated,” Coalition of Progressive Liberians in the Americas, accessed April 21, 2002, http://www.copla.org/index2.htm. Siapoe’s reference to Matilda Newport, whose namesake was long associated with Independence Day (i.e., “Matilda Newport Day”), was due to her militaristic deeds during the “legendary Battle of Fort Hill on December 1, 1822.” As Tom W. Shick notes, Tradition maintains that the first settlers in Monrovia were outnumbered and on the verge of being overwhelmed by the attacking Africans. At that crucial moment a settler woman, Matilda Newport, fired a canon with her pipe. The blast is said to have killed and wounded many of the attackers, causing the rest to retreat in disarray. This early victory against great odds has become an important element in the settler ethos.


My reference to “self-fashioning” among circum-Atlantic figures is not to provide a reductionist account of the workings of colonial domination. As Guarav Desai emphasizes, “The ability to call the shots of ‘sameness’ (‘they are like us’) or ‘difference’ (‘they are not like us’) in differently motivated circumstances, and to call these shots forcefully, was the crux of the rhetorical game.” Guarav Desai, *Subject to Colonialism: African Self-Fashioning and the Colonial Library* (Durham, North Carolina and London, United Kingdom: Duke University Press, 2001), 20.

Of course, “formal” colonization, as noted above, occurred in Africa during the late-nineteenth century. However, Walter Rodney’s insistence that “underdevelopment” in Africa be considered along with encroachments on African “political sovereignty” by European Atlantic interests should be seriously taken into account, as the lineage of colonial domination in Africa (and elsewhere) predates the decisions at Berlin. Rodney’s thesis remains one of the most important early critical analyses of domination and its effects. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London, United Kingdom: Bogule-L’Ouverture Publications, 1972; Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers Ltd, 140). The historian Kevin Shillington notes that

Walter Rodney’s highly influential *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) argued that the roots of Africa’s current problems of underdevelopment could be traced back to the slave trade, upon which Europe’s industrial development was ultimately based. Although many historians of Africa did not subscribe to Rodney’s radical view, his work and that of others in this period turned the focus away from that of great empires of the past and on to the history of the peasantry, migrant workers, [and] domestic servants.

Shillington also observes that

[T]he Guyanese historian Walter Rodney argued that Africa’s chronic poverty and underdevelopment at the time of political independence in the mid-twentieth century was a direct result of European action. He argued that the European slave trade out of Africa so weakened the continent that it left it open to Europe’s mega-exploitation through colonisation in the nineteenth century and neo-colonialism in the twentieth …


46 “Percentage of persons 14 years old and over who were illiterate (unable to read or write in any language), by race and nativity: 1870 to 1979,” National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) – 120 Years of Literacy, Excerpt from “Chapter 1 of 120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait (Edited by Tom Snyder, National Center for Education Statistics, 1993),” accessed June 10, 2015, http://nces.ed.gov/naal/lit_history.asp.


48 Moses, Afrotopia, 95.


51 See note 13. Carla L. Peterson notes that “[a]fter graduating from Cambridge, Crummell moved to Liberia, where he labored as a missionary for the next 20 years … In Liberia, however, Crummell came into repeated conflict with indigenous Africans as well as white missionaries and educators …. Crummell returned to a changed United States in the early 1870s.” Carla L. Peterson, “Untangling Genealogy’s Tangled Skeins; Alexander Crummell, James McCune Smith, and Nineteenth-Century Black Literary Traditions,” in Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine, Editors, A Companion to American Literary Studies (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 504-505.


53 Corbould, Becoming African Americans, 24.


56 Alexander Crummell, “The Discipline of Freedom,” in Destiny and Race, 246; Philip S. Zachernuk, Colonial Subjects, 1.


58 Guarav Desai’s “five caveats—the constitution of the colonial library as essentially open; the reading of discourses as actions rather than reflections; a revised notion of subjectivity and agency; the central rather than marginal character of African texts in the colonial library; and the importance of gender as the often unspoken category of analysis” are critical to my readings of Blyden’s essays. Desai, Subject to Colonialism, 8.


According to Mabrouk Mansouri, after Islam gained ground in North Africa, indigenous societies witnessed social transformations and cultural metamorphosis due to the requirements of the new religion. The correlation between Arab-Islamic standards and the local Amazigh culture produced two opposing aspects of relations. The first was based on conflicts, containment, assimilation and total or partial adaptation. The second was determined by continuity. Despite the fact that they contradict the ethics of the new religion, some structures and values were preserved to express indigenous local meaning-systems and world view ….

The phenomenon echoes the controversy of official religious theory and the local social and cultural forms, a controversy between two different visions of the world: each of them stems from a specific meaning system …. It is clear that … [continuities of local] habits are not confined to sub-Saharan tribes. North-Saharan tribes have also maintained a lot of moral and sexual habits with only a partial assimilation to the necessities of the new religion …. It is important, in this context, to emphasise the distinction between religious creeds and social practices. An ethnic group may convert to a religion by uttering the verbal testimony and practicing some rituals, but this does not lead to an automatic adjustment of the running social and cultural systems according to the necessities of the new religion. Those systems remain alive despite the fact that they may totally contradict the religious dogmas …. The transgression of religious prohibitions or the creation of new irreligious prohibitions may express a cultural, social or existential need, a need that the new religious system could not have fulfilled without enriching its system with local indigenous components.

316


66 Blyden, Ibid., 32-34.


