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Diasporas and Their Discontents: Return without Homecoming in the Forging of Liberian and African-American Identity

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The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia.
Claude A. Clegg III. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,
2004.

The Price of Liberty is an engaging and thoroughly researched account of how just over 2,000 North Carolinian blacks left for Africa between 1820 and 1893 and of the role they played in the establishment of the nascent state of Liberia. In the best traditions of social history, Claude Clegg III traces the emigration and colonization process as the product of interaction among actors with very different and sometimes quite contradictory interests, shaped as much by inadvertent outcomes and unforeseeable shifts in broader political and economic currents as by actor agency or intentionality. What results is a detailed picture of Liberia's conflicted founding and its effects on both sides of the Atlantic. A model of considered and transparent historiography, Clegg's work makes careful use of both quantitative evidence and case history to weave a compelling account, marred only at times by a somewhat over-tedious and repetitive use of some of the statistical material.

This is undoubtedly the most significant study of the origins of Liberia since Amos Sawyer's landmark book *The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia*. While reiterating many of the arguments and historical findings of that work, Clegg's book is more nuanced in its treatment of the conflicted, often mutually contradictory currents of public interest that informed the "colonization movement." That movement marshaled a remarkable variety of actors that one would hardly expect to find under one tent. While the famous black Quaker Paul Cuffe was energized by the idea of African potential and a deep hatred of the slave trade, many of those who propelled the American Colonization Society (ACS) into existence and provided its leadership were sustained by other, less noble designs. No lesser figure than the infamous champion of southern slaveholding, Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky, served a term as president of the ACS because he saw in Liberia an opportunity to rid the US South of the growing number of free blacks whose very existence invited the loathing of whites,

fearful of the alternative that a “free black” presence implicitly suggested to their enslaved brethren. Many free blacks, especially in the North, immediately recognized and resisted the movement as an attempt to dispossess and disenfranchise them. Some of the most ardent abolitionists resisted the movement for the same reasons that those in slaveholding states supported it: as a scheme that would ultimately strengthen and insulate slavery by hauling away its most glaring contradiction.

Clegg’s contribution to our understanding of this paradoxical dynamic is strongest in its fine-grained treatment of the many sub-currents that constituted the movement and, most particularly, in his careful deconstruction of the celebrated but often misunderstood “emancipatory impulse” among the Quakers. Through a careful reconstruction of the evolving activism of different communities of North Carolina Friends and their interactions with their co-religionists in other states, Clegg insists on an unsanitized treatment of their involvement that re-roots their thinking in specific sociohistorical context. Clegg traces the emergence of emancipatory politics within the Society of Friends as an evolutionary process, riven with argumentation and schism, often motivated by segregationist impulses, and as informed by economic convenience and grounded pragmatism as by religious conviction. Notably, Quaker communities in Midwestern states proved highly reluctant to receive blacks from North Carolina, even as those in the Quaker stronghold of Philadelphia were among the strongest financial backers of the colonization to Liberia movement because they were reluctant to have black co-religionists resettle in their midst.

One of the great strengths of this study is its careful attention to how different influences and interests waxed and waned in their influence on the movement over time. Rather than describing *the* process of emigration to Liberia, Clegg details four distinct migratory waves, each grounded in its own very different socially and politically configured moment. He traces the early influence of the North Carolina Friends in generating the first wave, as well as the role of transatlantic feedback in making it subside. The early settlers maintained contact with informal African American information networks, which rapidly spread the news of the insalubrious and harsh conditions that belied the picture of promise painted by the ACS. Clegg’s documentation of demographic and epidemiological trends among the settlers in Liberia is particularly noteworthy.

However, other subsequent waves were driven by different concerns particular to other historical moments. These included the pervasive, horrifying brutalization of free blacks in the wake of the Turner rebellion and the mounting anti-black violence during Reconstruction. Many free-born or emancipated African Americans who left at these times overcame a long-standing reluctance to

The Forging of Liberian and African-American Identity

pursue any option outside America only after violence “at home” became so deadly as to make the refugee’s travails the least unattractive option.

Throughout this study, Clegg continually analyzes the various migratory waves to Liberia in relation to their counterfactuals. These include the overwhelming majority of black North Carolinians who chose not to leave (after the Civil War), as well as those who eventually joined the great migratory flows to the North and the Midwest. However, Clegg also attends to other envisioned possibilities and failed experiments, including the briefly explored option of a “black homeland” in the newly acquired territories of the Louisiana Purchase and the ultimately unsuccessful effort to direct free and emancipated blacks to Haiti.

Clegg also documents the problematic and complex role that Liberia first came to play in the African American imagination. Not least, he notes the part Liberia as an idea played in the forging of a diasporic consciousness and sense of identity among African Americans—a treatment all the more fascinating because of its focus on a much earlier time period than the better-known episode that would center on Marcus Garvey in the next century. Like a lightning rod, the emergent republic served from the very beginning to channel arguments among free blacks and slaves about who they were and who they should be. However, Liberia energized this debate in ways that discharged in many different directions at once.

Liberia galvanized a sense of indignant entitlement to America itself among many of the free-born black intellectuals, who saw it as a new strategy to deprive them from participating in a country that was, in the most literal of senses, the fruit of their labor. As Clegg notes, Frederick Douglass campaigned ardently against the ACS, calling it the “arch enemy of the free colored citizens of the United States” (Clegg 181), while the early black separatist Martin Delaney railed against Liberia as a scheme “to exterminate the free colored of the American continent” (181–2).

However, Clegg’s study is especially valuable because of his scrupulous effort to document the range of argument and sentiment outside of intellectual circles. If anything, Clegg bases his analysis more extensively on the letters and accounts of the historically unnoticed than on those of the historically noteworthy—and thus reveals the true complexity of African-American identity as it was re-forged throughout a critical period that spanned slavery’s apogee, its sudden demise, and the gathering of the long apartheid that would shadow it shortly thereafter. The full range of views that swirled around the idea of Liberia at this critical historical juncture is most fully revealed through Clegg’s rendition of voices as common as they were disparate: the Hillsboro slave Cledwell Whitted, who asserted that “there is no place in the World I should like to go as

much as to Leberra" (183); the Raleigh minister who felt called as an apostle to enlighten his African brethren (183); and the young emigrant Emily Hooper, who so disliked Liberia that she petitioned to be returned to America and to slavery under her former mistress (187).

Truly transnational in scope, this work not only traces the shifting social and political currents in very specific localities on both sides of the Atlantic but convincingly explores their mutual influence on one another. It is thus a work as indispensable to scholars of African-American and American social history as it is to scholars of Liberia itself. However, it is also a work that merits consideration from historiographers and theorists of diaspora and transnationalism, as well as those interested in the concrete manifestations of that new term that sometimes seems to mean everything at once and yet nothing at all: "globalization." In particular, Clegg provides meticulous and absolutely fascinating documentation of the continuous flow of information back and forth across the Atlantic and convincingly analyzes the ways in which this socially mediated feedback was received by abolitionists and free blacks in North Carolina, influencing their decisions about whether or not to participate in the Liberian venture. Here we see scholarship that documents, rather than merely and gesturally invokes, global flows in action and that, at a different historical moment but in a similarly detailed, empirical, and well-argued fashion, adds to works such as those of John Thornton and Paul Gilroy in forging our understanding of the historical emergence of an "Atlantic World."

Any invocation of the "Liberian diaspora" immediately invites the question of which particular historical process of diasporization one is referring to. The "original transatlantic sin" by which the Africans from areas that would later be known as Cape Palmas and Mensurado were brought to American shores as slaves? The movement by which free blacks and some emancipated slaves were driven from American shores back across the Atlantic by a combination of white violence, segregationist "benevolence," and their own visions of black pride and possibility? Or the migration of those who, in our own days, have once again crossed the Atlantic from Liberia to settle in Providence, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, New York, Atlanta, and Washington, DC, in the wake of the violence that in 1980 first decimated the entrenched power of the descendants of those free black colonists and has since degenerated into chronically resurgent violence, each producing its own vintage of transatlantic refugees, and a new Liberian presence in America estimated by some to number in the hundreds of thousands (Moran).

Works such as Clegg's begin to reveal the links between these different historical moments, showing how the contemporary Liberian diaspora is prefigured and structured by the diasporic

The Forging of Liberian and African-American Identity

experiences that preceded it. *The Price of Liberty* not only traces structural violence at work in the genesis of Liberia as one realization of a segregationist and racist American society but also traces the ways in which such ideologies were internalized and reproduced by the black settlers who arrived in Liberia themselves. Clegg's history of Liberia's early fortunes documents how these ideologies structured their relationships with one another, with the recaptured-at-sea slaves who became the "Congoes," and with the Dei, the Kru, and the other African groups whom the settlers encountered and eventually subjugated.

From the outset, color, education, and origin acted as sharp social differentiators. The historical moment also provided former American slaves with their own refugees to exploit, as British naval interdiction of slavers during the Middle Passage introduced a new group into this complex social equation. Originating from as many different locations as tendered by the intercepted ships that carried them, this culturally kaleidoscopic assemblage of people would become known as the "Congoes." The settlers would come to rely heavily on this group, both as a "buffer" that maintained distinction vis-à-vis African groups and as a mechanism for extending social and political power further into the hinterland.

In "returning" to Africa, these settlers remained oriented to an America that had sought to purge itself of them—ultimately organizing identity, social hierarchy, economic exploitation, and political power around many of the inequalities from which they themselves had once suffered. Not least, America provided a critical point of cultural orientation and differentiation between the settlers and the local groups they encountered. Clegg documents a settler mentality shaped by "pacification campaigns," "frontier narratives," and a sense of "civilizing mission" not dissimilar to those ideologies driving social conquest elsewhere in the world at the same time—across the Western American plains and along the Boer frontier in South Africa.

Liberia was thus, as Clegg notes, a realization of diasporic aspirations without a dissolution of diasporic identity—a return that never comes home. In many ways, therefore, the Liberian case invites consideration of diasporicity as a persistent social condition capable of defying even the terms of its own ideology. If, as Andrea Klimt and I have argued elsewhere, we take diaspora to be an identity discourse—a way of imagining, constructing, and presenting the self—rather than a process of population dispersion, works such as this remarkable history invite us to rethink the central elements that structure that discourse. Most specifically, such a work urges us to dig beneath the narratives of linkage, similarity, and attachment to consider characteristics that may be even more fundamental in the formation of diasporic consciousness. I would suggest that most

particularly they invite us to recenter our gaze and our theories on structural violence and the ways in which it problematizes and qualifies attachment and identity. Woven back and forth, and back again across the Middle Passage, *Liberian diasporicity has arguably become above all a matter of social dispossession breeding social dispossession—and not just a question of social dispersion.*

While a provocation for theorists of diasporas and transnationalisms the world over, this line of questioning could not be more relevant to a Liberia that, at this writing, is less than a month away from another “post-conflict” election in which almost all of the candidates have legal residence, business interests, and families in the United States and raise most of their campaign funds there, within the “new Liberian diaspora.” Even as this diaspora contemplates the possibility of yet another “return”—for some physical and definitive, for others merely virtual or partial—the question of how structural violence will qualify the enacted attachments of those who fled Monrovia to become navigators of an American racial economy that frustrates many of their expectations lurches to the front and center. I can think of no better place to begin thinking about that future than in this brilliant genealogy of its past.

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