

5 The Lack of Liberty Drove Us There

Spatialized Instantiations of Hope and Contested Diasporan Identity in the Liberian–American Transnational Field (1810–2010)

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Empirical and Conceptual Re-Orientations to ‘Hope’ and ‘Diaspora’

This chapter examines two episodes in the long history of transatlantic movements between America and Liberia in an effort to posit that hope may be spatially, rather than only temporally, constituted, and to explore how a spatialized constitution of hope factors into the production of at least some forms of diasporan identity. More specifically, I want to suggest that, under conditions of extreme social exclusion, diasporicity might be usefully conceived as a particular instantiation of hope which is constructed through processes of social imagination that rely upon spatialization.

In introducing spatialization as potentially the lead ingredient in the constitution of a variant of hope—and through my discussion of how that variant compares to, and may even be brought into contention with, other variants of this form of social imaginary (Taylor 2004)—I aim to extend and complicate contemporary theoretical formulations of hope. These formulations have tended to presume that temporalization factors as the primary requisite imaginary mechanism in the social construction of hope. Thus, foundational references for the new theorists of hope, including Jurgen Moltmann (1967) and Ernst Bloch (1986), cast hope as a form of temporalized difference—namely that between (currently) lived experience and the promise of a potential (hence future) alternative to that experience. Other theorists who have more recently grappled with the concept (Browne 2005; Crapanzano 2003; Miyazaki 2004; 2006) have generally followed suit in presuming temporality to be the central axis along which are drawn the key contrasts that are signified in—and ultimately constitutive of—hope as a particular form of sentiment or social imaginary.¹ Zigon (2009, 267), for example, describes hope as a social process in which ‘the intentional and creative uses of the past and the future—allows for intentional and ethical action’.

Here, I propose that temporalization need not be the primary—and under certain conditions may even prove to be an entirely insufficient—mechanism for producing and sustaining credible alternative social imaginaries to those currently being experienced, and thus for constituting hope. In particular,

when conditions of structural violence (such as those of racially violent nineteenth-century North America which I examine in the first part of this chapter) are so extreme and historically sustained, I argue that notions that the passage of time alone might bring better alternatives into being may become increasingly implausible—and eventually even come to be deemed (at least for some) entirely impossible.

Under such circumstances, temporalization alone may prove incapable of constituting hope—in the sense defined by Jarrett Zigon as ‘[the temporal structure of] the background attitude that allows for living a sane life in a specific social world . . . [of moral breakdown]’ (2009, 267) . . . that is ‘born out of the socio-historic-cultural, as well as the personal, conditions of struggle’ (2009, 262). Zigon’s formulation is somewhat distinct in conceptualizing ‘hope’ not so much as a map for future action but as a form of social imaginary that allows those under duress to contend with, and in, the here-and-now. Following Zigon’s focus on hope as a posture for navigating the present as ‘an active agent in the attempt to live acceptably for oneself and for others . . . within the world in which one finds herself . . .’ (2009, 259), I depart from him, however, to argue that the ‘creative use of the past and present’ alone (i.e., a social imaginary constituted primarily through temporalization) may prove incapable of underwriting and sustaining a ‘sane life’ in the most extreme situations of ‘moral breakdown’ (as Zigon terms it) or of ‘structural violence’ (as I term it).

I develop this part of my argument through a discussion of the emergence of the nineteenth-century ‘back-to-Africa’ movement which ultimately gave birth to Liberia. I demonstrate that, for those for whom no light seems to beckon at the end of the temporal tunnel, the spatialization of an aspirational alternative to the lived here-and-now may more aptly sustain faith in the possibility of its eventual realization. In such cases spatialization, rather than temporalization, thus becomes the central—and indeed an indispensable—narrative mechanism through which a variant of hope comes to be socially imagined.

In the course of this discussion I further posit that one particular form of identity narrative—‘diasporicity’—may represent an embodiment of this variant of hope in that it relies upon spatializing strategies for rendering alternative social imaginaries credible under conditions of structural violence. Diasporicity—as a form of identity narrative—relies upon and is organized around origin mythologies that locate the source of group- and self-authentication in a social milieu that is different to that in which protagonists currently live (Lubkemann 2015). This alternative milieu, from which attributes originate in the past, may exist in the ‘now’, but is most certainly not the ‘here’ in which protagonists live.

In suggesting that hope’s spatialization—and its enshrinement in a particular social identity form (‘diasporicity’)—may emerge primarily in reaction to structurally violent conditions in the ‘here-and-now’, this argument turns at least one conventional theoretical notion about the production and reproduction of diasporan identity somewhat on its head. Although differing in other

respects, predominant theories about diasporas presume that the retention of social attachments to others who remain in the place of imputed origin are either a requisite or a primary determinant in the social production and reproduction of diasporan identity. Demonstrating how a diasporan identity emerged and gained social subscription when no such social attachments had been retained, I argue that this form of identity narrative—and the very myths of origin around which it is organized—may be generated as a reaction to particularly extreme experiences of social exclusion and discrimination in the lived ‘here’. As a form of identity in which a spatialized variant of hope is expressed, diasporicity is particularly likely to be ‘invented’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) in this fashion under circumstances in which entitlements believed to be legitimate have not only been denied in the past and in the present of a lived in social milieu but are also seen as certain to continue being denied in its foreseeable future. In such instances, diasporan mythologies of social origin may garner social subscription because they sustain a belief in the realizability of aspirations in the face of evidence—past, present and, in future, foreseeable—by locating that realizability elsewhere. In so doing they sustain a belief that a more desirable alternative to the currently lived experience and a more entitled self are still possible—even if not so in either the ‘now’ or the foreseeable future of the lived ‘here.’

I grapple with the re-theorization of both of these concepts—‘hope’ and ‘diasporicity’—through a comparative examination of diasporan identity formation across historical time within the transnational field that has linked Liberia and the United States for over 250 years. Originating in the transatlantic slave trade that brought Africans to North American shores throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, and reproduced most recently by refugees fleeing Liberia’s long civil war (1990–2003), this transnational ‘social world’ (Marx 1990) currently links residents of Liberia with relatives and compatriots dispersed throughout Africa, Europe, and North America. My discussion draws upon both the work of several prominent scholars of nineteenth-century Liberia and African-America and my own ethnographic, historical, and demographic research conducted since 1999 in multiple locations (the United States, Ghana, and Liberia) within that social field.

As a point of departure I take the specific theoretical formulation for ‘diaspora’ that Klimt and I proposed in earlier work (Klimt and Lubkemann 2002) and that I have elaborated upon further more recently (Lubkemann 2015). This approach posits that ‘diasporicity’ should be considered as a particular form of identity discourse in which the social self is ‘imagined’ (Anderson 1983) and publicly ‘presented’ (Goffman 1959) through particular types of claim² about group origins.

What is the most distinctive about diasporicity as a form of identity narrative is that, whereas it always makes reference to a history of population dispersal, from an analytical perspective such histories are the most usefully viewed as mythological. From this perspective, the critical question about

how diasporan identities are produced or sustained is not about population dispersal *per se* but, rather, about how, under what conditions, and for whom particular narratives that define group boundaries in relation to a narrative of dispersal emerge and gain (or, alternatively, lose) social subscribers. This approach insists that any relationship between mobility (as a social process) and diasporicity (as a social identity) must be empirically ascertained rather than theoretically assumed. Thus, rather than being the self-evident product of mobility, this form of identity is merely a possibility—one that can be, and often is, contested or even rejected, even amongst those who share similar migratory experiences.

In the course of this chapter I discuss two specific examples—one historical and another contemporary—of migrants and their descendants in the Liberian–American transnational field who pursued self-identification strategies that varied immensely in this regard, ranging from those who publicly proclaimed themselves to be sojourners from an African homeland of origin, to others who chose—sometimes quietly and privately but at times publicly and vociferously—to de-emphasize any African connections imputed to them and who, in this sense, can be viewed as having ‘opted out of diaspora’ altogether.

By exploring how various forms of social difference influenced subscription to (or, conversely, rejection of) diasporan identity at these two different historical moments of social disagreement, I bring into sharper relief those conditions that tend to underwrite the spatialized constitution of hope, while also exploring the sorts of choice which such spatialization implies. I suggest that, in contrast to variants of hope that rely solely upon temporalization, strategies that also focus centrally upon spatialization cleave the past, the present, and the future in two and then assign social potentiality to one side of that spatialized divide while precluding it from the other.

I then examine the consequences of embodying such a spatial distribution of hope in (diasporan) identity narratives in which the social milieu that authenticates the self and to which potentiality is assigned is located elsewhere, and in which potentiality is precluded from the present as well as the future of the social milieu of lived experience. I suggest that, in some cases, diasporan identity narratives thus come to imply that the journey of the self from an undesirable condition of structural violence to a desirable alternative in which authenticity is realized cannot occur without spatial relocation. My discussion of social differentiation in subscription to diasporan identity in both the historical and the contemporary Liberian transnational field demonstrates how such a proposition may threaten and undermine other variants of hope that remain predicated on temporalization.

The Historic Back-to-Africa Movement: The Spatialized Instantiation of Hope

Liberia was one of the very earliest and has certainly served as the most historically sustained symbolic rallying point for the idea of black ‘return’ to

an 'Africa-of-origin' from North America. The Liberian Republic came into being as a result of three major waves of black migration from the United States and resettlement in West Africa that spanned much of the nineteenth century, and which ultimately led, in 1847, to the declaration of Liberian independence (Beyan 1991).

However, it is important to understand that, from the very outset, subscription to an identity that mythologized Africa as an original and yearned-for homeland was never a foregone conclusion for the black Americans to whom this notion was proposed. In fact, the very idea of Liberia required a great act of social imagination and a re-forging of identity that ran against broader currents of thought and opinion—not least of all the mainstream of thought amongst black Americans themselves. At the time, most black Americans firmly believed that Africa was part of North America's black population's past rather than its future—and felicitously so. This belief had been nurtured by the actual apologists of American slavery themselves, who had long labored in the public forum to re-cast the relationship between slave-owner and slave as one of familial patronage rather than of mere bondage, de-emphasizing the abuses of power and the slave's legal status as mere (and, in fact, easily alienable) property. Central to that argument was a perverse recasting of enslavement itself as a form of divine redemption through which 'savage Africans' had been ushered out of the heathen dark and into the civilizing benefits of Christian light. This discourse left no question that African slaves 'belonged'—not just by might but by divine right—in the Americas and thus proposed that any and all black attachments to Africa itself had been severed by the grace of God—and, of course, the legal rights of property-owners (Barnes 2004; Clegg 2004; Tyler-McGraw 2007).

The fact that black Americans often reworked Christian allusions to recast slavery as a social journey through trial and tribulation did not mean that a return to Africa was envisioned by most of them as the way forward, nor did many harbor an attachment to Africa as a 'homeland'. In fact the overwhelming majority of the American black leaders of the day vociferously opposed the American Colonization Society (ACS)—the organization that was founded at the beginning of the nineteenth century and that propagated and financed 'return voyages' to Liberia—and publicly decried the idea of the back-to-Africa movement that it represented. In dozens of meetings that brought together hundreds and, in some cases, even thousands of freed blacks, the objectives of the American Colonization Society were publicly denounced and resolutions were passed which explicitly rejected any idea that blacks in America naturally belonged back in Africa. Convening many of the leaders and notables of the free black community, the 1848 Colored National Convention minced no words in denouncing Liberia in the year after it had declared itself an independent republic:

That among the many oppressive schemes against the colored people in the United States we view the American Colonization Society as the

most deceptive and hypocritical—clothed with the very livery of heaven to serve the devil himself in. . . .

(Clegg 2004, 16)

Many of these critics were well aware of the objectives that animated some of the most prominent founders and ardent supporters of the ACS—amongst *whom were featured several well-known slaveholders and some of the most prominent public defenders of the institution of slavery!* These included the prominent U.S. Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky, who saw in the Liberia project an opportunity to strengthen the institution of slavery by ridding the South of the growing number of emancipated blacks, who were loathed and feared by Southern whites. Similarly, Bushrod Washington (The first U.S. president's nephew and a major slaveholder in his own right) served as the ACS's first president. Even many of the white abolitionist Quakers, who also figured prominently in the ACS, are documented to have been as motivated by segregationist impulses as by religious conviction. Thus, for example, the Quaker stronghold of Philadelphia was amongst the strongest financial backers of the colonization-to-Liberia movement largely because they were reluctant to have freed black co-religionists resettle in their midst (Clegg 2004).

Ultimately, only a very small minority of black Americans subscribed to the idea of Liberia or migrated there (Beyan 1991; Campbell 2006; McDaniels 1995). However, the motivations of that small minority may be explained by any interest in maintaining or preserving already existing social attachments in Africa, given that almost all were generations removed from the experience of the Middle Passage. Instead, the choice to migrate to Liberia had far more to do with the social and political struggles and racial violence of Antebellum America than it did with long-atrophied social attachments to Africa. Notably, patterns of interest in, and ultimately subscription to, this identity narrative thus tended to correlate with and—to a certain extent, reflect—greater degrees of exposure to structural violence. Thus, whereas most free blacks in the North vociferously opposed the 'back-to-Africa movement', the idea of returning to Africa found much greater resonance amongst blacks who were still enslaved in the Southern United States—such as the Hillsboro, North Carolina slave Cledwell Whitted, who asserted that 'There is no place in the World I should like to go as much as to Leberra' (Clegg 2004, 183). Similarly, in his study of the development of the Negro Spiritual genre—which evolved amongst the enslaved in the South (and only later migrated to free black congregations in the North)—Fisher noted that many of the referents that have been interpreted to refer to heavenly transcendence (such as the referent to 'home' in the famous song *Swing Lo Sweet Chariot*) may have been veiled referents to Liberia and Africa more generally. The possibility of claiming a form of identity emphasizing attachment to Africa also resonated more strongly within free black communities in Southern slaveholding states, which were particularly besieged by racial

violence which was always far more overt than was the case in Northern states³ (Barnes 2004; Clegg 2004; Tyler-McGraw 2007).

It is equally notable that, once migration to Liberia did begin to occur, those contacts and social attachments that were retained between blacks in America and the initial black settlers to Liberia tended to dissuade rather than encourage further return migration and the accompanying identity claims that expressed such aspirations. The discouraging news sent by the earliest settlers in Liberia to friends and relatives back in America about the insalubrious and harsh conditions that prevailed in that colony and that produced its atrocious mortality rates (Clegg 2004; McDaniels 1995) played a significant role in the subsiding of the first wave of black-American migration to Liberia. Certainly, startling cases such as that documented in A Bill for the Relief of Emily Hooper of Liberia 1858, a young woman who sought to re-enter bondage back in America rather than remain 'free' in Liberia, must thus have proved potentially dissuasive:

That Emily Hooper, a negro and citizen of Liberia, be and she is hereby permitted, voluntarily, to return into a state of slavery, as slave of her former owner, Miss Sarah Mallet of Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

(quoted in Clegg 2004, 187)

In fact, the overall trend in both the private and public reports from the first settlers was deemed so damaging to the ACS's objective of fostering black interest in migration to Liberia that the organization felt compelled to commission and disseminate its own (unsurprisingly favorable) 'independent' account in 1853, drawn up by the Reverend Peterson in order to counter this threat. In short, even when it became possible to realize (rather than merely imagine) social attachments to Africa, these tended to undermine subscription to diasporan identity narratives.

After the initial settlement wave subsided, black migration from the United States to Liberia occurred again only in small numbers and brief bursts—each one driven by particularly horrifying surges in the white brutalization of blacks, particularly throughout the American South—rather than by any developments in Liberia itself. The earliest of these waves occurred prior to the American Civil War, when free blacks throughout the slaveholding South were murderously targeted by frenzied whites after the 1831 Turner rebellion. Two decades later, in 1850, the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act facilitated the process whereby whites could claim ownership and sue for the possession of blacks they claimed had once been their slaves, even within states that had abolished slavery. The fear occasioned by this law motivated a modest revitalization of interest in the Liberian option over the decade that preceded the American Civil War. Short-lived interest in migration to Liberia re-emerged yet again a quarter of a century later, when anti-black violence peaked during southern reconstruction after the Civil War and slavery's abolishment, when whites in the South mobilized violently to oppose

the perceived threat of black enfranchisement (Barnes 2004; Clegg 2004; Tyler-McGraw 2007).

What is most noteworthy is that, in each of these historical instances, the primary factors underwriting renewed subscription to this 'diasporan identity' (and, by extension, interest in the 'return-to-Africa' project) were always the deepening problematics of racial exclusion confronted in America, rather than pre-existing social attachments in Africa. In this sense, rather than being the producers of diasporan identity formation, sentiments of attachment to Africa were very much the products of deepening despair at the accentuation of structural violence in America.

The emergence of diasporan identity narratives in this historical case is thus not well explained by prevailing theories⁴ which tend to identify and/or privilege (the preservation of) 'social attachment' as the primary 'independent/causal variable' in the formation, persistence, (and even demise) of diasporan identity. The decisions of those nineteenth-century black Americans who opted to embrace Africa as their homeland and to migrate 'back' cannot be attributed to such social attachments—for no such prior social attachments had been retained. Rather, it was the strength and nature of historically specific forms of social exclusion and discrimination that were confronted by slaves, former slaves, and free-born blacks in their everyday lives in nineteenth-century America that underwrote the emergence of this form of identity, in which origin was aspirationally claimed elsewhere (in Africa).

The sentiments of deprivation engendered by these experiences can be described as the products of structural violence. Against an array of competing 'objectivist' definitions of 'structural violence' (Farmer 1997; Galtung 1969; Uvin 1998), I have argued elsewhere (Lubkemann 2008a) for a definition that emphasizes the sentiments of frustration that are generated by the gap between subjective expectations about one's entitlements and the capacity to realize these as dictated by structural conditions. It is precisely this type of gap that, I would argue, underwrote the interest in the original Liberian option—as a mechanism for achieving an emancipated status to which so many of those who confronted racial violence and exclusion aspired but saw little prospects for ever realizing in America. In short, under conditions of extreme social exclusion that belie the possibility for future change in the lived in 'here', I want to suggest that diasporicity might be usefully conceived of as a particular instantiation of hope—however, as a variant of that form of social imaginary that relies first and foremost on spatialization, rather than only, or primarily, upon the processes of temporalization that tend to be emphasized by the leading contemporary theorists of hope. Stripped down to its analytical essence, I would thus suggest that we can think (analytically) of hope as the *sustenance of the possibility of a (desired)*⁵ *alternative to a (currently lived) reality*. A differentiation between an undesirable experienced state and a desired/aspirational one may, in fact, be constituted through the forms of temporalization that tend to be emphasized as the central mechanism in the production of hope (Crapanzano 2003; Miyazaki

2006; Moltmann 1967; Yurchak 2003); however, in other cases I would suggest that this differentiation may be more effectively constituted through other processes such as spatialization.

Indeed, in certain societal situations in which oppressive structural violence is particularly virulent and profoundly entrenched, spatialization may provide a degree of potency for underwriting the credibility of alternative possibilities—and thus for ‘a sane life’ (Zigon 2009)—which temporalization alone is incapable of providing. In the historical Liberian case, it is precisely such forms of spatialization of an aspirational alternative that located the authentic and potential self in an ‘elsewhere’—in reaction to a structurally violent ‘here’ in which lived experience was realized—that I suggest was the central dynamic informing the production of the nineteenth-century diasporan identity and that led some black Americans to claim attachments with Africa—and to migrate to Liberia.

Disputing Diasporicity in the Historical Past: Spatial Versus Temporal Strategies for Constituting Hope

A theoretical understanding of some of the implications of reliance upon spatial—rather than temporal—instantiation in the constitution of hope may help to explain socially differentiated interests, reactions, and subscription to diasporan identity narratives that we witness in both the historical and the contemporary Liberian transnational field. As I have already briefly alluded to, in the historical case a diasporan identity that embodied and expressed spatialized variants of hope ultimately appealed to only a small minority of nineteenth-century black Americans—most particularly to those who found themselves the most oppressed.

By way of contrast, free black communities and their leaders—particularly those in the northern states where slavery had been abolished—were the most active and publicly vociferous in rejecting this new form of identity that emphasized their African origins. They rejected this identity because they realized that, hand-in-hand with its explicit claims that their natural entitlement to Africa should be recognized, yet another idea was also implied: that they were not entitled to stay in America. For this reason, leading black intellectuals of the time, despite pursuing often quite different social and political projects and goals, tended to find common ground against the ACS and the notion that blacks were ‘really African’ (and therefore not ‘American’) and should return (or be returned) to Africa. Thus, the early black separatist Martin Delaney decried Liberia as an unwelcome scheme to ‘exterminate the free colored of the American continent’ (Clegg 2004, 181–182), whereas others such as the abolitionist Frederick Douglass fervently denounced the ACS as the ‘arch enemy of the free colored citizens of the United States’ that aimed to ultimately strengthen and insulate slavery by hauling away its most glaring contradiction—the free black man.

In short, whereas a diasporan identity may have offered an effective strategy for sustaining the credibility in the possibility of a better alternative for those nineteenth-century black Americans who saw no possible improvement in America—by spatially assigning all the potential for that realizability to an ‘elsewhere’—that very same assignment also implied the preclusion of any such potentiality in the lived ‘here’. The denial of any potentiality for imagining improvement in the lived ‘here’ constituted a profound affront and violation of the expectations, social projects, and ambitions of those nineteenth-century black Americans who continued to envision, and strive for, change and betterment in America itself. Their focus on the possibility of improving lives in America itself was readily evident in the many resolutions (such as that passed at a Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church of Philadelphia in 1817 and quoted below) that were passed in city after city by free blacks during their efforts to denounce the ACS and discredit the deportation ambitions of its white leadership:

Relieved from the miseries of slavery, many of us by your aid, possessing the benefits which industry and integrity in this prosperous country assures to all its inhabitants, enjoying the blessings of religion, opportunities of worshipping the only true God, under the light of Christianity, each of us according to his own understanding; and having afforded us and our children the means of education and improvement; we have no wish to separate from our present home, for any purposes whatever. Content with our present situation and condition, we are desirous of increasing the prosperity by honest efforts, and by the use of the opportunities, for their improvement, which the Constitution and laws allow . . . Any measure or system of measure, having a tendency to banish us would not only be cruel, but in direct violation of those principles which have been the boast of this republic.

(Mehlinger 1916, 278, quoted in Sawyer 1992, 35)

To those invested in the project of changing racial inequality in America, the very idea of ‘Liberia’ galvanized a sense of indignant entitlement to America itself and a vociferous rejection of black resettlement to Africa—which most leading black intellectuals decried as nothing more than a nefarious new strategy aimed at depriving them, through deportation, of the right to participate in a country that was, in the most literal of senses, the fruit of their labor. For those for whom social conditions had not overwhelmed the credibility of the claim that social change was possible in America, hope continued to operate in a predominantly temporal register. They therefore rejected an identity that embodied a distinctively spatial instantiation of hope, because that instantiation precluded and denied the possibility of believing in or pursuing improvement in the social milieu in which they lived.

Disputing Diaspora in the Present: Gender and Class Differentiation

Problematics of social exclusion have played no less a role in shaping the constitution of, and socially differentiated patterns of subscription to, diasporicity within the contemporary Liberian transnational field. Over the last 30 years, that field has been dramatically transformed by political upheaval and civil war. Exclusion from meaningful participation in the political process and educational opportunity, as well as from the economic benefits of the nation, were significant factors which allowed student protests to converge with popular outrage at price increases and spark a military coup in 1979. The assassination of President Tolbert, the subsequent military trial and public execution of prominent Americo-Liberian government officials, and the assumption of power of Liberia's first 'indigenous' president (and coup co-leader), Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, signaled the demise of over a century of Americo-Liberian privilege and dominance.

These events also generated the first contemporary wave of migrants—mostly of Americo-Liberians—back across the Atlantic to the United States. Successive waves of different social composition followed over the next quarter of a century. A second wave arrived in the mid-1980s after Doe's violent crackdown against the Gio and Mano ethnic groups in the wake of a failed putsch. A third outflow followed Doe's overthrow and assassination in 1990 and continued throughout the country's notorious descent into seven years of brutal civil war (Adebajo 2002; Ellis 1999; Levitt 2005). Out-migration peaked again at the turn of the millennium, as new insurgencies challenged the warlord-turned-president, Charles Taylor, until an UN-brokered peace settlement resulted in his exile in 2003 (Levitt 2005; Moran 2006).

Liberia has since undergone a challenging transition to democratic governance, safeguarded by one of the UN's largest armed missions in Africa and creating the possibility of return for the hundreds of thousands of Liberians displaced throughout West Africa and further afield in North America and Europe. Yet not everyone who left Liberia has chosen to return. Much as blacks in Antebellum America confronted alternative identity choices, so, too, did Liberians in the United States confront a similar question: ['Will I be] "Liberian" or "[African] American"']?

For some, the answer to that question is clearly an affirmation of a diasporicity that simultaneously locates their origin and displaces their aspirations elsewhere: locating their self-potentiality in Liberia. Much as in the historical epoch during which Liberia emerged, experiences of social exclusion and frustrated expectations in contemporary America have underwritten and sustained this new diasporicity. For many Liberians who arrived after 1980, America did not turn out to be the promised land which they once envisaged. Thus, whereas some have obtained permanent residency or U.S. citizenship, a significant number are technically illegal immigrants who overstayed their visitor visas. Many others have Temporary Protective

(TPS) or Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) status, which is subject to annual renewal by executive order and could end at any time (as has already befallen Salvadoreños and Sierra Leoneans). This insecure status tends to limit employment prospects for many—forcing them to work multiple shifts at menial jobs even if they have professional training or backgrounds. These conditions are accentuated by the challenges that confront most Liberians who made it to the United States during the war, who generally struggle to pay bills while also supporting relatives back in Liberia. Such conditions only accentuate the discriminating effects of racism that powerfully shape the American socio-economic landscape. Moreover, Liberians in the United States also often experience additional exclusion and hostility from an African-American community that sometimes interprets their disinterest in locally oriented civic and political activism as evidence of a deficient commitment to anti-racist agendas in the United States (Habecker 2009; Lubkemann 2008b; Waters 2001).

The convergence of these different strands of social exclusion has played a significant role in motivating subscription to a new Liberian-oriented identity narrative amongst many of those who found wartime refuge in the United States. Many emphasize their ‘Liberianness’ in pointed distinction to other (potential) social identities (particularly ‘African American’) which are often assigned to them by a broader American public, who take their phenotype (rather than their nationality) as the primary indicator of ethnic identity. Ascriptions as ‘African Americans’ are often challenged in multiple ways by those who think of themselves as ‘Liberian diasporans’, including explicit pre-emptions or corrections in everyday social interaction (‘No, you see, I am Liberian [not African American] . . .’) or a preference for social fora with large Liberian membership, such as Liberian associations, churches, etc.

The performance of ‘Liberianness’ to internal audiences within the Liberian immigrant community is particularly important for those who claim a diasporan identity, and takes place in socially and culturally specific registers. Thus, as I have documented elsewhere (Lubkemann 2008b), sending remittances and maintaining contact with relatives in Liberia—and making this known publicly to other Liberians—can be as much about maintaining status and performing Liberian identity in U.S. compatriot social circles as it is about maintaining attachments with the recipients of funds or of phone calls to those who reside back in Liberia.

Ultimately, more than merely affirming attachments elsewhere, such performances of ‘Liberianness’, whether to internal or to external audiences, often signal a form of detachment from, and a critique of, the (often disappointing) here, and the now that is lived through every day in America. In affirming their ‘Liberianness’ these migrants actively claim (and ultimately privilege) their stake in a social reality alternative to the one in which the identity is being invoked. This identity thus signposts a possible different world in which an individual’s true social worth is recognized, talents are fully utilized, and legitimate social standing is acknowledged. By deploying

this identity narrative, a former government official in Minneapolis thus reasserts a 'rightful' status that is not recognized by his current degrading menial job, whereas a nursing assistant in Maryland signals her potential to be a county health department director 'back home' and an adjunct college instructor harbors hopes of recognition as a major national political leader and contender for political office in Liberia.

However, subscription to this contemporary diasporic identity is no more universal amongst Liberian migrants at the dawn of the twenty-first century than was the case amongst black Americans who considered and bitterly argued about the merits of the initial Liberia option throughout the nineteenth century. Notwithstanding the status of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (Liberia's and Africa's first elected female president) as an icon for progress in gender equality, many Liberian women whom I have interviewed in the United States remain deeply ambivalent about the prospect of returning to Liberia because they fear the loss of the forms of autonomy, power, and opportunity many have come to enjoy in the United States. Such fears are particularly pronounced amongst women whose higher-education credentials and professional experience would suggest that they might be attractive recruits for government posts or NGOs back in the 'New Liberia', where gender equality is one of the most trumpeted refrains of the international donor community. Many of these women are well aware, however, that, whereas education may afford them access to status, maintaining that status in culturally prescribed ways is likely to place enormous pressure on them to eventually forgo the professional activities which they currently pursue.

Thus, much as documented by Moran (1990) over three decades ago, status for women at the highest social levels in Liberia is still largely mediated by marriage. Whereas their education may open the door for professional Liberian women to marriages with men of higher social status, Liberian social conventions about how that status is to be maintained and enacted often highly constrain or preclude women from certain forms of professional, economic, and political activity. Confronted with a Liberian social ideology that continues to render social status antithetical to, or at the very least highly restrictive of, certain forms of professional activity and personal autonomy, many educated Liberian women resettled in the United States thus prefer to remain abroad, where many social objectives are more mutually conducive rather than socially contradictory.

By way of contrast, men—and particularly those who once held elite status in Liberia—are arguably amongst the most eager to return to post-war Liberia and the most vocal in claiming and performing their Liberian identity. In part, this eagerness may be explained by the fact that sentiments of abjection are particularly pronounced within this group, in light of the fact that their educational qualifications have often failed to be recognized in the United States, nor has political or socio-economic status once held in Liberia translated into commensurate standing in their country of refuge. Many also angrily decry the presumptions of the institutional refugee resettlement

system that requires them, nevertheless, to seek employment but only offers them positions for which they feel overqualified and that fail to offer pay or status commensurate with that which they once enjoyed and feel entitled to. The predominance of such individuals in the myriad Liberian community associations throughout the country—and particularly in the fierce politicking therein—is readily noticeable, as is the extent to which they voice much greater interest in returning ‘home’ than is the case for many others.

Conclusion: The Differentiation of Discontentment in Social Subscription to Spatialized Instantiations of Hope

I have argued elsewhere (Lubkemann 2015) that diasporicity is an identity frame that relies upon an implicit invocation, juxtaposition, and comparison of alternative possible contexts of social experience that are differentiated in space. Lived experiences in one location are implicitly compared with experiences in an ‘elsewhere’—one to which links are claimed through a social process of memory about migration and displacement that comes to be enshrined as a charter myth for social-group identity. Through an explicit claim about the self’s most genuine attachment to a ‘social elsewhere’ (of an individual’s claimed origin), diasporicity is capable of providing a powerful critique of degrading social conditions that are confronted in the lived here-and-now. Thus, embedded within the central diasporan claim of ‘Elsewhere is a place to which I most truly belong’ lurks the unstated critical recognition that ‘Here is a place in which I am not allowed to fully/satisfactorily belong’.

In this case study, I have suggested that conditions of extreme social alienation may underwrite the production of and subscription to—and sometimes even the outright social invention of—those narratives and notions of social attachment and orientation to the ‘elsewhere’ (i.e., an imputed homeland of origin) that features as the central organizing referent for diasporan identities. In this vein, the diasporicity that emerged in Antebellum America and that underwrote the initial back-to-Africa movement can be seen as a desperate social effort to sustain the credibility of alternatives in a context of extreme structural violence in which, at least for some, temporal projection alone was insufficient to that task of social imagination. For those so oppressed in this particular context of ‘moral breakdown’ that the future of the social milieu in which they lived looked unchangeable, the perseverance of a ‘sane life’ (Zigon 2009) required a spatialized strategy for differentiating and protecting aspirational potentiality from experienced reality.

However, in relying on spatialized strategies for constituting hope, diasporan identity narratives implicitly assign spatial criteria to potentiality, requiring relocation as a requisite for the realization of aspirations while precluding any potential for realizing aspirations in the lived ‘here’. In this sense, spatialized strategies for constituting hope may be mutually exclusive of—or at least come into contention with—those that rely primarily upon social processes of temporalization. I would argue that it is precisely

this peculiar effect of hope's spatialized instantiation that renders diasporicity at once a particularly potent narrative for contending with seemingly hopelessly entrenched structural violence while, at the same time, making it a socially contested ascription. As illustrated by both the historical resistance to the back-to-Africa movement by most nineteenth-century free black Americans and by the highly gender-differentiated views and anxieties about the desirability of 'return' amongst contemporary Liberian refugees in America, the notion that relocation is an inherent pre-condition for realizing the aspirational self may thus be highly contested.

In short, if the social appeal of diasporicity as an identity option lies in its capacity to protect aspirational potentiality and self-authenticity by projecting these in space, social variation in the subscription to this identity is likely to depend on whether such spatial assignment is seen as offering social recourse or, conversely, as undermining it. Answers to this question may depend in large part on how exposure to structural violence in the here-and-now is mediated by socio-economic differences (such as those between free and enslaved black Americans in the nineteenth century). Responses may also depend on the forms of alternative structural violence which agents foresee as likely, should the spatial aspirations expressed in diasporan identity come to be realized (such as those foreseen by many educated Liberian women who are so reluctant to return to war-torn Liberia today). In short, the implications of hope's spatial instantiation rarely resonate in the same way for all social agents. Rather, subscription to (or rejection of) identities that instantiate hope and address discontent through spatial strategies that locate potentiality 'elsewhere' is likely to be mediated by how socio-economic and socio-political differences shape agents' views on the future possibilities for addressing that discontentment 'here.' In this sense, spatialized strategies for constituting hope are the most likely for those whose experiences with sustained moral breakdown and extreme structural violence underwrite mounting skepticism about the possibility of ever realizing positive social change within the social milieus which they subordinately inhabit.

Notes

1. For an important exception see Phillip Mar (2005), who discusses how migrants construct social imaginaries in which different aspects of the lives they aspire to are mapped onto different destinations. Inasmuch as such distributions present migrants with a zero-sum choice between the different types of aspiration (for example, social and economic objectives) when these can only be realized in different places, Mar's formulation implies a particularly powerful conundrum for migrants. In particular, it infuses the constitution of any aspirations for resolving this contradiction with enormous uncertainty, if not (I would argue) a certain sense of resignation and perhaps even 'hopelessness'. Mar does not delve into the conditions that potentially underwrite—or even require (as I suggest in this article)—the spatialization of aspirations in order to sustain hope, nor does he explore the implications of organizing social identities around such imaginaries—both central questions in this discussion.

2. More specifically, Klimt and I argued that identity narratives qualify analytically as 'diasporic' (rather than as 'ethnic', 'racial' or 'class') if they engage with a series of core propositions that include an orientation to a place of origin from which a dispersal was remembered, a sense of affinity with others dispersed from that place of origin to other locations, a sense of attachment to both the place of attributed origin and the current place of residence—but in which the former was recognized as the more authoritative source for the legitimization of social practice in determining the authenticity of cultural forms, in delimiting the boundaries of moral community, and in establishing boundaries for groupness (Klimt and Lubkemann 2002, 148). Other theorists who have offered conceptualizations of diaspora as a form of identity narrative include Axel (2002; 2004), Brah (1996), Kleist (2008; 2010) and Werbner (2002).
3. This is not to suggest that racist discrimination and violence were not also rampant in the North—notwithstanding the technical demise of the institution of slavery itself by the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. On this, see, for example, Anne Farrow *et al.* (2005).
4. Thus, while differing in many other respects, both assimilationist and transnational analytical frameworks emphasize the central role that social attachments between migrants and those in their claimed homelands of origin assume in sustaining diasporan identities and communities (Alba and Nee 2003; Basch *et al.* 1994; Fournon and Glick Schiller 2002; Gans 1992; Glick Schiller and Fournon 2001; Gordon 1964; Haines 1997; Levitt 2001; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Rapport and Dawson 1998; Rumbaut 2002; Sheffer 2003; Waters 1990). Assimilationist frameworks, in particular, go on to explain the demise of diasporan identity (i.e., 'assimilation' if and when it ultimately occurs) as a result of the atrophy of such ties and their replacement by others in the society of resettlement, whether over biographical or, more often, generational, time.
5. The opposite of 'hope' in this sense might be 'dread', thought of as the sustenance of the possibility of an *undesired* alternative.

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