

Introduction

“Who Is This Man and from Whence Comes He to Rule?”

Liberia was not prepared to accommodate the fullness of blackness. At its founding in the 1820s by the American Colonization Society (ACS), the colony only attended to one group of blacks – African Americans. However, with independence, internal pressures, and global developments, the nation progressively opened itself to others. The black nationalist Alexander Crummell then issued a call for all blacks in the diaspora to come to Liberia: “For myself I cordially invite Barbadians, Jamaicans, Sierra Leoneans as well as Americans to this common heritage of the Negro – as the Emigrant Commissioner of New York greet[s] the Germans, Italians, Swedes, English and Irish, who arrive at the port in the hundreds and thousands; and thus, every year swell the already vast population of the great Republic of America.”¹ With such invitations framed in the language of black unity and equality, black migrants of different backgrounds and circumstances came to view migration to Liberia as an escape from white supremacist and colonial oppression, and made their way there expecting to be welcomed and embraced under a national canopy of blackness. The Liberian republic thus became a national receptacle for the deeply held aspirations of the African diaspora and a prescription for their historical traumas.

With the desires within and scrutiny from without, Liberia gradually came to be viewed as a state held together by blackness. But even with this racial guarantee, black nationalist migrants who had dreamt of escaping to a black Zion were haunted by the possibility of Liberia collapsing into

¹ Wilson Jeremiah Moses, ed. *Destiny and Race Selected Writings, 1840–1898* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 190.

a gaggle of fractious tribes. The piercing gaze of whites that had seemingly sealed Liberia's fate *a priori* made the anxieties all the worse. Given the elevated stakes, the republic could accept ordinary migrants. However, uneasy was the head who was chosen to wear the crown of the Negro Republic. Indeed, defining blackness at the level of the presidency required a level of exceptionality that unavoidably set in motion a revelatory process.

In an editorial published in the aftermath of the 1903 presidential election campaign, J. A. Tuning, a teacher in the Cape Palmas Methodist Episcopal Church common school, exposed the realities behind the feelings that had settled into the idea of Liberia: "The next important event that shall claim the undivided attention of the entire nation is the induction into the office of the newly elected president." But then Tuning inquired, "Who is this man and from whence comes he to rule?" It was his confident assessment that "this is the query going on in the circles, rounds, and claiming the attention of the most thoughtful Liberians whose interest in Liberia is most absorbing."² Such queries were to be expected as a part of the grandiosity of the occasion. But as Tuning gathered in the chatter about the president-elect, what many found newsworthy had little to do with either his past misdeeds or a previous appointment as the "head of the financial department." Instead, what was deemed odd was that the newly elected leader had "come *not* from the land of our forefather's nativity to fill that exalted post of the executive chair."³ Through subjection to scrutiny in gossip and chatter, the primacy of the new president's heritage highlighted electoral expectations and indexed the terms of his othering.

Tuning was right. Up until the turn of the century, all of Liberia's leaders were of American heritage. White American colonizationists who created the colony governed until independence in 1847. Though all subsequent Liberian presidents had been African American migrants, the ACS maintained its hegemony in a nominally independent Liberia that co-opted rather than transformed the previous power dynamics. In the aftermath of the 1903 election campaign, Arthur Barclay, a migrant from the British Caribbean colony of Barbados, who emerged as the winner, became the first variance in Liberia's then fifty-year presidential history. Given the magnitude of changes wrought by the election, the inquiries of the pioneering Americo-Liberian community – and its gatekeepers like Tuning – might have been borne out of sheer curiosity. After all, Afro-

² *The Liberian Recorder*, December 1903. Liberia Collections, at Indiana University-Bloomington.

³ *Ibid.*

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Barbadians had arrived at the political negotiating table in Liberia with little more than the charm of being “Victorian Negroes.” Yet, the inquiries also acted as a referendum that would unwittingly reveal emerging Liberian political ethics. Indeed, if Barclay, as a black migrant himself, was elected president of a country created for blacks, why was his impending presidency perceived as strange?

If Americo-Liberians were surprised and alarmed it was because Barclay’s presidency announced not only a shift in the content of blackness in Liberia but also the ways in which it would be signified. Barclay’s impending presidency signaled Liberia as no longer an African American fiefdom. Casting himself as a true patriot with a heritage supposedly traceable to the African American founding of Liberia with the arrival of the ship *Elizabeth* – the black *Mayflower* – Tuning positioned himself as a part of a group who could authorize what was good and respectable for the republic. By questioning Barclay’s ascendance in the language of an inherited American colonial nationalism, it became clear that black ethnic divides had intervened to mark actions and attitudes as they heightened tensions that framed decisions. This revealed the Liberian pecking order and unwittingly laid bare the boundaries and hierarchies within blackness. Showing people like Barclay as foreign to the seat of the Liberian presidency was one thing. The implication of his foreignness to normative views of blackness in the idea of Liberian was quite another. By suggesting that Barclay lacked the requisite heritage and pedigree of past presidents, Tuning’s fears about a non-American black leader revealed blackness in Liberia as hinging on the origin of certain blacks. Beyond its intended political formalities, Barclay’s election and the hysteria it created served also to unsettle Liberia’s dynamics as a black nationality by muddying the power relationships and processes that defined blackness. Thus, the suspicions and whispers about Barclay’s impending presidency not only exposed the burden of intra-black power sharing but also how efforts to signify and represent the full spectrum of blackness became one of Liberia’s biggest challenges.

Reflecting black migrant efforts to realize their dreams against clashing intra-racial and insider interests, the response to Barclay’s election forces a reckoning with the kinds of provincialism that spurred ethnic biases within nineteenth century black spaces. What did it say about blackness and opportunity in Liberia when West Indian migrants like Barclay were viewed as strangers? White abolitionists and colonizationists as well as black nationalists and pan-Africanists had insisted that existence alongside whites was key to understanding the oppressive forces that created

inequality for blacks. It was partly on account of this implicit concession that the black nationality of Liberia had been created. Revealing Liberia's vulnerabilities under a global gaze as the long arm of white supremacist and colonial forces were extended through blacks' internalization and embodiment of them, Barclay's rise to a position of power and visibility and his election controversy presents a counterpoint. Some black migrants had not rejected oppression but rather showed a predilection for the sort of black particularity and ethnocentrism imbued with the kinds of authoritarianism that benefited them. Indeed, if Liberia was supposed to represent a blow to racial oppression, it had instead become yet another site for it: its maintenance of previous power structures only benefited and valorized some groups of blacks, and forced others to assimilate or be excluded. As black migrants were pushed to discard some unsuitable parts of themselves, they probably pondered their reasons for going to Liberia in the first place. As some would discover, blackness was as much a color as it was an unsteady idea. And so was Liberia.

"A SPIRIT OF EMIGRATION TO LIBERIA"

Arthur Barclay's presidential controversy played out on the Liberian national stage, but it recalled decisions put in motion years before. They had not only altered the Barclay family path but provided the scaffolding for Arthur Barclay's rise to power in 1903. Only four years old in 1865 when his father, Anthony Barclay, made up his mind to leave Barbados with his family of thirteen and nearly 333 others, Arthur Barclay had yet to imagine a future as president of a nation. If anyone harbored those dreams, it was his father. Going against the public feelings of an era when black oppression seemed absolute and unchallengeable, the elder Barclay had imagined himself as a future ruler of a "Negro" nation. Given the nature of the circumstances under which he went to Liberia and the journey to get there, Barclay would without a doubt have been proud of his son's achievements. For Barbadian families who had journeyed to Liberia, the Barclays stood as the archetype of achievement and success. Yet, with the elder Barclay's own motives for leaving the Caribbean forming the beginning of his son's election dilemma, he would have also been shocked at the bitterness of the debate surrounding his election. Occurring nearly half a century later, Barclay's presidential election stood out of step with the underlying imperatives and circumstances that brought his family to Liberia.

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In the 1840s, Anthony Barclay had suffered years of failure in advocating for post-slavery reforms in Barbados before he even considered leaving. He had hoped to convince the British monarchy that he and members of his class were loyal subjects who were fit for and deserving of their rights. In the midst of increasing white backlash against post-emancipation reforms, an anonymous writer, working under the pen name Africanus, wrote to the editor of *The Liberal*, a local newspaper, to suggest that Afro-Barbadians should broaden their horizons. The mysterious Africanus might have even outed himself as Barclay when he posed this question: “If political equality is denied to us in that land which gave us birth by those in whom rests the power to bestow it – how are we to obtain it?”⁴ On one hand, Africanus suggested that Afro-Barbadians fight their way “as the braver spirits among us are doing – bringing all our moral energies to the good work.” In another breath, however, he demanded that they seek it “on other and more auspicious shores, leaving behind the land of our birth – that land which is dear to our hearts, to be tilled by the tyrants who claim it as their own.”⁵ As Africanus’s refrain of finding a “more auspicious shore” animated post-slavery life, it increasingly functioned to reset the limits placed on the desires and imaginative horizons of Barclay and other like-minded Barbadians.

Reacting to his discontent with a determination to fulfill his dreams, Barclay set his sights directly across the ocean to Liberia. Though on a distant shore, Liberia felt much closer to Barbadians. The Atlantic, the once shark-filled gulf that had swallowed up the bodies of chained Africans, did not appear so horrifying as to render chancing a crossing foolish. With the abolition of slavery and the emergence of Liberia as a possible alternative, the ocean appeared as a bridge drawn across two shorelines united by shared concerns about the future of blackness. Barclay’s vision of life across the Atlantic was not as much about distance from Barbados as it was about envisioning his full and all-encompassing freedom. Staring across the vast ocean filled Barclay with the belief that he too could one day become governor of a Negro Republic. Having made up his mind to move there, Barclay and others began selling their cottages and giving up rented lands. But with no ships running between Barbados and Liberia and little or no financial resources, “sad disappointment” came over “the poor but well-meaning” group. The realization that their dreams of emigration could not “be achieved without foreign aid”

⁴ *The Liberal*, February 17, 1841. Accessed at the Barbados National Archives, St. Michaels, Barbados.

⁵ Ibid.

brought the Barbadians to the American Colonization Society (ACS), the very organization in the United States that had created the Liberia colony for blacks.⁶

Barbadians' longstanding interest in Africa proved valuable in approaching the ACS. Through institutions such as the Barbados Colonization Society for Assisting in the Suppression of the Slave Trade and the Introduction of Civilization into Africa, Barbadians had for a long time supported missionary ventures in hopes of serving as colonial agents of British abolitionism, civilizing, and imperial efforts. Due to their own experiences shaped from personal pathologies, British royalism appealed to many Afro-Barbadians after emancipation. Having enjoyed years of post-emancipation freedom, they were also most of all seduced by the possibilities of serving as representatives in the British imperial bureaucracy in Sierra Leone and other colonies in Africa. An awareness of imperial post-emancipation possibilities also mapped out "more auspicious shores," where Afro-Barbadians like Barclay could envision a future.

From Barbadians' early interests in Africa, two emigration movements had emerged. Anthony Barclay Jr. steered one group, serving as the chairman of the Fatherland Union – Barbados Emigration Society for Liberia (FUBES), while James T. Wiles served as secretary for the Barbados Company for Liberia (BCL). Unlike African Americans who had ready access to Liberia through the ACS, the Barbadians were forced to take a different route in order to make their emigration a reality. As Barbadians' interest in African emigration turned to an eagerness to flee the island in the 1860s, Wiles turned to Joseph Attwell, who he described as "not just a friend but a leading committee member and a fellow worker in a Scheme for officiating an Emigration to Liberia."⁷ Attwell had left Barbados to study divinity at the Institute for Colored Youths (ICY) in Philadelphia, but due to the desperation of his friends, he quickly became their Liberia emigration agent.

Jolted into action in December 1864, Attwell, in a letter to the ACS, communicated the Barbadians' interests and concerns. "Invoking aid on behalf of the Company," he conveyed their "Urgent Appeal in Aid of Emigration . . . from Barbados to Liberia."⁸ He noted, "Were a free passage provided, several hundreds of worthy and industrious Barbadians

⁶ *The African Repository*, Vol. 41 (1865): 19.

⁷ James J. Wiles to George L. Armstrong Esquire, November 1, 1864. Svend Holsoe Collection, Indiana University, Bloomington.

⁸ *The African Repository*, Vol. 41 (1865): 18.

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would gladly and immediately seek the attractive shores of the African Republic.”⁹ As chairperson of the Fatherland Union, Barclay knew of over three hundred other Barbadians who were interested in emigrating to Liberia.¹⁰ With concerns about respectability, he had largely chosen the potential migrants from artisans and professionals like himself who came from the political elite and socially mobile Afro-Barbadian middle class.¹¹ Single individuals formed the minority interest in a group of over fifty couples with large families. Though Barclay came from an older generation born during slavery, the majority members of his migrant group were young people and children born after slavery. Of the 346 total emigrants, 81 (23 percent) were between the ages of thirty and sixty-five, and 31 were born before slavery ended in 1834; 244 (70 percent) were born after slavery, and 24 (7 percent) were born during the period of apprenticeship (1834–1838). Despite divisions by age, the commonalities of class, religious affiliation, profession, and ambition forged in the crucible of their Caribbean post-emancipation experiences, formed a cohesive force that brought the group together as potential emigrants to Liberia.

For the ACS, a letter from the Barbadians was uncommon but not entirely surprising. Since launching in 1816, they had shuffled through piles of requests begging for some kind of assistance to emigrate to Liberia, but almost exclusively from African Americans. Hardly any letters were from black people outside of the United States, let alone from British colonial Barbadians, widely thought to be the most loyal of all West Indians. Having earned the reputation as the “gem of all the British Isles,” travelers throughout the Atlantic world regularly mocked Barbados’s loyalty by referring to the island as a “little London” and the provincial county of “*Bimshire*.” Given this standing, the Barbadians’ letter was truly an audacious move. Clearly, expectations of loyalty could not blunt the imagination of British subjects like Barclay when geographic pressure, familial aspirations, political goals, and racial consciousness helped him to conceptualize opportunities across multiple landscapes. Yet, surely, the ACS must have wondered: why were Barbadians who were treasured members of the British Empire interested

⁹ Ibid. Also see reprint in the *Journal of the Barbados Historical and Museum Society* (Hereafter *BMHS*), Vol. 27 (1959): 76.

¹⁰ “Emigration to Liberia,” *The Times*, March 31, 1865; *BMHS*, Vol. 30 (1959): 199.

¹¹ See Jerome S. Handler, Frederick W. Lange, and Robert V. Riordan, *Plantation Slavery in Barbados: An Archaeological and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

in migrating to Liberia (an American colony turned independent republic) instead of the British colony of Sierra Leone next door?

The Barbadians were new migrant terrain for the ACS. However, by the time their letter was received, it would become useful as propaganda to attract more blacks to Liberia. Printing the letter in bold headlines in *The African Repository*, the ACS boasted that “a spirit of emigration to Liberia is reportedly in existence in St. Kitts, Demerara, St. Thomas, and other islands of the West Indies.”¹² Through their published letter, the Barbadians explained that they desired to emigrate to Liberia for two specific reasons: “One being the improvement of their condition by diligent labor, and two, the noble desire of assisting to elevate their fatherland, or building up a nationality, without which they consider their race can never attain their proper position in the family of nations.”¹³ With their letter, the Barbadians appeared to be both the typical and unusual prospective Liberian emigrants. Unlike many African Americans still enslaved in the United States, Barbadians who were already free were able to sketch out a future where they imagined using their labor to build a republic for the purpose of increasing black racial respectability. Drawing together the commonalities of a black racial identity that elevated the goals of the race, the Barbadians proposed a black freedom that included advancement for themselves, Liberia, and other blacks.

Though the Barbadians initially struggled in their quest to emigrate to Liberia, their interest boded well in the heady 1860s. The American Civil War had not only created a decline in financial support for the ACS but also caused waning African American interest in Liberian emigration. Yet, all the while concerns grew that “Liberia needs an intelligent and producing population.”¹⁴ Gripped with the fear of a possible failure of their colonization scheme, the ACS had begun to look for possible solutions when Edward Wilmot Blyden, a Liberian migrant from the British Virgin Islands, suggested that West Indians might fill the emigration void. In 1862, when Blyden returned to the Caribbean to circulate a pamphlet addressed to the “Descendants of Africa throughout the West Indian Islands,” Liberian officials began to lure West Indians across the Atlantic, viewing their interest as mutually beneficial.¹⁵ In a period in which a geographically fractured African diaspora began to see Liberia

¹² *The African Repository*, Vol. 41 (1865): 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴ *The African Repository*, Vol. 51, July (1875): 65.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

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with one vision, Blyden's black nationalist and pan-African motifs connected with the Barbadians' post-slavery frustrations and interest in efforts to civilize Africa. Barclay's subsequent appropriation of Liberian officials' rhetoric firmly planted Afro-Barbadians' desires in the very essence of colonizationists' goals. Thus, mutual pan-African desires to "build a nationality" brought together both parties into the cult of civilizing that had come to be regarded as central to the ACS's Liberia mission.¹⁶

Up to this point, all the stars were aligned to make Barbadians' emigration to Liberia a possibility. With the declining interest of African Americans and the Barbadians' growing interest, the ACS members were left with what appeared to be a simple decision. But they had yet another concern; the same one that Tuning would point out nearly forty years later during Arthur Barclay's presidential election. A clause in the ACS's 1816 constitution had outlined their objectives as an effort to "exclusively colonize ... the free people of color residing in our country [the United States]."¹⁷ As West Indians, the Barbadians clearly fell outside the purview and aims of the ACS. But by 1863, as the Emancipation Proclamation began to foster feelings of hopefulness about life in the United States among African Americans who had shifted their focus away from Liberian emigration to a post-civil war future in the United States, the ACS ultimately revised the clause in their constitution to secure the Barbadians as potential migrants. Ultimately, this change brought together the Barbadians' interest in fleeing the Caribbean with the ACS's mission to increase Liberia's "civilized and productive" population.¹⁸

By the early months of 1865 when the ACS's migrant ship had still not shown up in Barbados, desperation began to set in. It was as if almost everything had given up on the Barbadians. A drought two years before that severely damaged crops had continued to cause "peculiar suffering and deprivation to all classes of the community." Newspaper editors across the island lamented the "unprecedented increase of the numbers of naked and starving poor in the island."¹⁹ When it finally ended, James Walker – governor of Barbados and the Windward Islands – held

¹⁶ Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 176.

¹⁷ See constitution of the ACS at "American Colonization Society with Abridged Proceedings of the Annual Meeting, and of the Board of Directors at Washington," January 18, 1842. Annual Report of the American Colonization Society: With Minutes. Vol. 25. 1842.

¹⁸ *The African Repository*, Vol. 41 (1864): 150.

¹⁹ BMHS, Vol. 30 (1959): 189; Extracts from *The Times*, Vol. XXX, 65.

a meeting “to consider the question of the distress” and aimed to “suggest, if possible, some practical measures of relief.”²⁰ Walker’s plans might have soothed some, but not Barclay and his group, who had already weighed life under the British Empire against other possibilities across the Atlantic. With dreams of freedom deferred in the Caribbean, Barclay and members of the FUBES and BCL shunned the paths taken by their nineteenth-century compatriots. They instead kept their sights on the “Negro Republic” of Liberia, viewing their migration there as the beginning of their full freedom.

FORGOTTEN STORIES OF LIBERIAN COLONIZATION

More Auspicious Shores takes the story of Liberian emigration – familiar to many in the United States and Liberia – and broadens our understanding of it by asking questions about the motivations and dreams of some of Liberia’s migrants from a colonial Caribbean, post-emancipation, and African diaspora perspective. Barbadian migration to Liberia has been a lost but critical chapter of Liberian colonization, black freedom movements, and African diaspora history. Most studies on Liberian colonization and emigration have focused exclusively on the various facets of African American efforts. Claude Clegg’s *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (2004)²¹ and Kenneth C. Barnes’s *Journey of Hope: The Back-to-Africa Movement in Arkansas in the Late 1800s* (2004)²² represent two of the numerous works that explore the motivations of African American migrants to Liberia from different states in the USA. Eric Burin’s *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution* (2005) explores the Liberian colonization project as an antislavery policy.²³ Marie Tyler-McGraw’s *An African Republic: Black and White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* (2007) outlines the ways in which the politics of American Republicanism influenced Liberian nation building.

Even though these studies added much-needed nuance and richness to this complex subject, they altogether uniformly read Liberian emigration, colonization, and emergence as a black nationality strictly from an

²⁰ Ibid., 194. Extract from *The Times*, February 14, 1865.

²¹ Claude Andrew Clegg, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

²² Kenneth C. Barnes, *Journey of Hope: The Back-to-Africa Movement in Arkansas in the Late 1800s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

²³ Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).