

More Auspicious Shores

More Auspicious Shores chronicles the migration of Afro-Barbadians to Liberia. In 1865, 346 Afro-Barbadians fled a failed post-emancipation Caribbean for the independent black republic of Liberia. They saw Liberia as a means of achieving their post-emancipation goals and promoting a pan-Africanist agenda while simultaneously fulfilling their “civilizing” and “Christianizing” duties. Through a close examination of the Afro-Barbadians, Caree A. Banton provides a transatlantic approach to understanding the political and sociocultural consequences of their migration and settlement in Africa. Banton reveals how, as former British subjects, Afro-Barbadians navigated an inherent tension between ideas of pan-Africanism and colonial superiority. Upon their arrival in Liberia, an English imperial identity distinguished the Barbadians from African Americans and secured them privileges in the republic’s hierarchy above the other group of blacks. By fracturing assumptions of a homogeneous black identity, Banton ultimately demonstrates how Afro-Barbadian settlement in Liberia influenced ideas of blackness in the Atlantic World.

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*Barbadian Migration to Liberia, Blackness,
and the Making of an African Republic*

CAREE A. BANTON

University of Arkansas



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For Mama

Hilda Salmon and Isolyn Banton

For Papa

Joe Gayle and Claude Banton

*“We are our grandmother’s prayers.
We are our grandfather’s dreamings.”*

“We Are,” Sacred Ground, Sweet Honey in the Rock (1995)

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Preface

This book began in a Latin American Studies Research course at Vanderbilt University. I had gone to Vanderbilt fully intending to write about the intersection of Jamaican music and politics. However, acting upon advice to change my research focus, I started to use the Latin American Studies course to explore an old interest in diplomatic history that had culminated in a curiosity about nineteenth-century Liberia. It was then that I discovered Gerard Ralston, a white Philadelphian colonizationist who served as Liberia's consul general in the mid-nineteenth century. I had started to write about Ralston and his efforts to negotiate trade and diplomacy on behalf of the imperiled black nation when I found a letter he wrote responding to a group of Barbadians who had expressed interest in emigrating to Liberia. Liberia's location just next door to Sierra Leone dramatized the Barbadians' odd interest. Overcome with curiosity, I found myself going down a rabbit hole: Why were British colonial Barbadians interested in migrating to Liberia? What made some emigrate to Liberia as others went elsewhere? What happened after they arrived?

An even more complex and fascinating story unfolded in my subsequent research. The story I uncovered brought together West Indians, African Americans, and Africans in ways that piqued my interest and encapsulated my passions. It struck me that while the Barbadians' story resembled that of other nineteenth-century migrants, theirs neither shared the common set of tropes nor the sense of narrative inevitability. My initial questions about Liberian diplomacy evolved to black colonization and emigration and were further complicated by the added layers of identity, which were also shaped by the ghosts of race and colonialism. Throughout the story, it became evident that as black migrants navigated

the different structures in which they found themselves, they walked the tightrope that often revealed their conflicting human tendencies. Just as early African American black nationalists dreamt of creating an African utopia that often centered around American republican political ideals and Christianity, Afro-Barbadians were pan-Africanists whose ideas tended towards pro-royalist Anglophilia. These human contradictions became even clearer as black migrants increasingly slipped into more sanctimonious and oppressive positions as they took on the posture of white supremacy from which they sought to escape, and as the veneer of consanguinity and congeniality faded away.

One question loomed large throughout the research: why would previously oppressed blacks migrate to a new place to participate in acts that oppressed other blacks. I attempted to trace the path through which persons reeling from white supremacist abuse turned into its proponent and outline the ways in which blacks moved from the position of the dominated to the dominant. What became clear beyond the fact of white supremacy's global presence was also the seeming impossibility of escaping its ideals. As it permeated the social and discursive landscape, white supremacy shaped how black migrants thought about and approached certain issues. Consequently, its ideas would often be weaponized by blacks in their quest for racial uplift. As such, alongside the hopes of creating respectability for the black race, which was often at the heart of the migrants' redemption story arc, was also a desire to wield a kind of white power that had always felt physiologically distant.

In black colonizing and civilizing missions, indigenous Africans came to represent the depraved parts of what is perceived to be the "riven consciousness" of black people. They manifested the kinds of haunting abjection black migrants sought to redeem.¹ Diasporic migrants were thus willing to use them as collateral in the quest for black redemption. These initial research interests were further fueled by observations of a contemporary moment in which black migrants to the United States from the Caribbean, Africa, and Latin America have had to grapple with racism in the United States. They often find interesting ways to navigate the American racial landscape by pushing against and distancing themselves from historical constructs of blackness established relative to the native African Americans. Those who were not engaging in these kinds of gymnastics carefully sought other ways to overcorrect their behavior to offset the stereotypes associated with blackness. Naturally, as these

¹ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1993), XXI.

various migrants wrestled with black history and identity, the past eerily continued to haunt the present.

Telling the story of Barbadian migration to Liberia required a wide array of documents. In Barbados, London, and Indiana, I discovered letters the Barbadians had written to Ralston, the American Colonization Society (ACS), and the Liberian government, as well as their numerous signed petitions to the British king. I also found the Barbadians' birth and church records, ship manifests, photographs, observations of colonizationists, missionary records, travel diaries, diplomatic records, African American news reports, Liberian presidential records, political and ethnographic databases, and maps at the various archives in Liberia, the University of Indiana, Bloomington, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and the United States National Archives. When pieced together, these sources brought the story of the Barbadians into the larger discussion of nineteenth century black migration, thus enabling us to appreciate more deeply the contours of transatlantic black freedom movements, Liberian colonization, and ideas of blackness.

In archival documents, emigrants were often subsumed in numbers and represented as masses rather than as individuals and families with specific agendas. In recording the migrants in the ship's manifest, the ACS delineated the Barbadians by family unit, age, labor, and religion. Baptismal registers and ship manifests recorded the migrants' names, professions, and addresses in a way that catered to reconstructing the organizational structure of their households, family and kinship networks, work and religious affiliations, and community and class ties. What further gave the Barbadian emigrants significance were the meanings the ACS and the Liberian officials attached to these categories of classification. The Barbadian emigrants' locations within identifiable labor groups, communities, and institutions dictated their ambitions. Yet the 346 Barbadians who expressed interest in emigrating to Liberia were by no means homogeneous. They were a heterogeneous group whose identity as British subjects and Africans in the colonies were mediated by a myriad of differences surrounding gender, age, skill, education, religious affiliation, and social and political status.

Though the ACS had their own system of organizing the Barbadian migrants in its ship manifest (by name, age, occupation, and religious affiliation), it was necessary to be mindful of the silences. Demystifying the Barbadian emigrants and rendering them visible required disinterring their narrative from an archive as thorny as the racial and cultural *mélange* in which they found themselves. By listing the occupation of only the male

passengers, the ACS ship's manifest rendered women's work invisible. Corroborating birth records, tax information, newspaper reports, and census data in Barbados often turned up differences. Religious ascriptions had to be considered within institutional, societal, religious, and cultural distinctions in which they were archived. For instance, the ACS designated the Barbadian emigrants as Episcopalian, which is the American term for their branch of Anglicans. Such designations and differentiations reflected the changing nature of cultural entanglements in which the migrants found themselves in their journey from British colonial Barbados to American colonial Liberia.

The archive, by unleashing a trail of designations and nomenclature in reference to the subjects of this study, shows the different ways in which black people were bound up in the records of the state. This fueled questions about how meanings changed not only in different archives but also across time and space. The absence of a racial category in the ship's manifest swept Afro-Barbadians up within the ACS's and African American ideas of blackness. This book, however, strives to give complexity to racial identity in numerous ways. I used letters, settlement patterns, architecture, labor, and nomenclature to tease out and trace transformations in the symbolic expressions of racial, cultural, and ethnic identity. In discussing the period before the end of slavery in 1834, I use terms such as enslaved Africans and free coloreds to denote Barbadians of both African and European ancestry who were free before the legal end of slavery and free blacks to denote Barbadians of African ancestry who were free during slavery. The members of the Barbados Company for Liberia (BCL) referred to themselves as "middle class," and so I refer to them accordingly. At times, I use Afro-Barbadians to specifically denote a link between African-ness and British-ness, both capturing complicated and challenged forms of identity, and social creations that have their own specific entangled lineages.² Such usage further served as a marker of difference to distinguish identity politics based on hegemonic views of race and nationality.

Nomenclature also reflected temporal and migratory changes. Identities did not always supersede prejudices. During slavery, some free Afro-Barbadians were referred to as "Congoes" as a means of denoting their darker color and proximity of African-ness. In Liberia, however, Afro-Barbadian colonial British identity became dominant. As a consequence,

² Agustin Lao, "Decolonial Moves: Trans-Locating African Diasporic Spaces," *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 21, Nos. 2–3 (2007), 320.

the Barbadians were often referred to as West Indians or Islanders. In the nineteenth century, African Americans were often politically referenced as “American Negroes,” on one side of the Atlantic. Their designation as “Americo-Liberians” reflected the transatlantic shift in their citizenship status in Liberia and the ever-changing politics of nomenclature. In Liberia, African recaptives, also referred to as liberated Africans, received the designation “Congoes,” which reflected not only their place of origin in Angola but also their rank in the Liberian caste. Native and indigenous ethnic Africans were sometimes identified by their distinct ethnic groups but were often simply referred to as “indigenes,” and at other times “heathens.” Other terms were used to represent different groups of blacks across class, ethnicity, and nationality.

Given the number of intersecting areas in the book, it took a long time, a lot of traveling, and assistance to come together. I am indebted to more people than there is space available for adequate acknowledgment. My husband, Roderick Stakley, who did extra chores and exercised the patience of Job throughout this process, is deserving of the heartiest gratitude. From time to time, he would enquire, how’s the book coming along. The answers were already evident with the books, newspapers, and other documents that had begun to take over our house. Nonetheless, once he had seen my face, he would have had his answer. My parents, Prince Banton and Joan Gayle, family and friends, especially my cousins, have always been my source of determination and strength. My sincere appreciation also goes to my supervisor, Professor Richard Blackett, for the time he spent in directing, guiding, reading, editing my work, and answering my frantic panicked calls. At times, it tested his patience, sanity, and will to live. But he persevered. I thank him for his words of caution and advice and for being a role model through his research and scholarship. Occasionally, I would get emails from him, ranging from, “Look, I think this might be one of your Bajan people,” to ribbings about the rivalry between Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica to West Indies cricket and Premier League Football. Professor B paved the path before me, calling friends to host me on research trips at the University of Indiana and elsewhere. Mrs. Blackett, who always fed me and made sure my treat supply was never low, was like a surrogate mother during my time at Vanderbilt. The Blacketts’ generosity and kind spirit have shaped not only my academic pursuits but also my life outside the walls of academy.

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I am indebted to Verlon Stone at the Liberia Collection at the University of Indiana, Bloomington, who went above and beyond to digitize and share archival materials that were necessary for the start and completion of the manuscript. He was the one who pointed me in the direction of the Svend Holsoe Collection. I am deeply indebted to Holsoe, who over the course of his life worked in a variety of capacities in Liberia. He knew the book needed to be written and gathered many letters from the United States National Archives and gave copies to both the Liberia Collection at the University of Indiana and the Barbados Museum and Historical Society. Those documents helped me to forge the kinds of transatlantic connections in the story I had been trying to tell. Thanks to archivists and staff at the archives at the University of the West Indies at Cave Hill, the Barbados National Archives, the Barbados History and Museum Society, the Albert Porte Memorial Library in Liberia, the Historical Preservation Society of Liberia, and the University of Liberia. Kenneth Best at the *Liberia Observer* also directed me towards critical newspaper sources. I am grateful to Aren Ramirez, his grandmother Mai Barclay Roberts, and other family members of Barbadian migrants such as Tony Barclay Morgan, who gave their time and resources to this project.

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Abbreviations

AASS	American Antislavery Society
ACS	American Colonization Society
AME	African Methodist Episcopal Church
BCL	Barbados Company for Liberia
BCS	Barbados Colonization Society, also Barbados Colonization Society for Assisting in the Suppression of the Slave Trade and the Introduction of Christianity into Africa
BFASS	British and Foreign Antislavery Society
BMHS	Barbados Museum and Historical Society
CMS	Church Missionary Society
CO	Colonial Office
FUBES, also BES	Fatherland Union – Barbados Emigration Society
ICY	Institute for Colored Youth
PCS	Pennsylvania Colonization Society
TWP	True Whig Party

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