

Rethinking the Liberian Predicament in Anti-Black Terms:
On Repatriation, Modernity, and the Ethno-Racial Choreographies of
Civil War



Ola Osman

Centre for Multi-Disciplinary Gender Studies
Department of Politics and International Studies

Newnham College
University of Cambridge

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Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted, for any degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

Abstract

Liberia's protracted civil war was sustained for a period of 14-years (1989-2003), killing approximately 250 000 Liberians and displacing half of the population. Liberia's war, like other contemporary African conflicts, has been persistently represented as an example of wanton violence, political tribalism, chaos, or an amalgamation of such elements. Founded in 1822, the Colony of Liberia was annexed by the American Colonization Society to expatriate and colonize 'free' negroes and their descendants on the coast of West Africa. 'Re-colonization', as it was called by the ruling U.S. Southern class, was rendered a compromise between the absolute abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and perpetual black servitude. Yet, repatriation was superficially crafted by abolitionists and their pro-slavery contemporaries, alike, as a fugitive project, an opportunity for 'free' blacks to experiment with emancipation and take refuge from the socio-political and economic conditions which amounted to what was effectively American slavery by another name. Formerly enslaved and free-born Africans imagined Liberia as a space unmarked by anti-black racial logics that possessed the North American continent. Indeed, the West African settlement was rhetorically propagated as a pre-racial site—of sorts—in which stolen peoples could escape the violence of American racialism. Such rhetoric has made articulable contemporary theorizations of the Liberian civil war as a paradigmatic example of the negro's irresponsible experimentations with freedom. This dissertation offers a re-contemplation of Liberian historiographical accounts, one that attends to the racialized global orders against which this national crisis has developed and limns the im/possibility of freedom in the afterlife of slavery, where anti-black terror is not only temporally unbounded but transgeographical.

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I want to begin by acknowledging my ancestors, the deepest source of my inspiration...always. Second, to my family my debt to you is unpayable.

ماما، بابا، لينه، سماح ، ميدو، محمد، نورهان
أحبكم جميعا أكثر من أي شيء

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For Erica Lawson,

Ubuntu.

I am, because you are.

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The love of liberty brought us here.

—*Liberia's National Motto*

Introduction

Postcolonial conflicts in Africa have been persistently represented as an example of wanton violence, ethnocentrism, political tribalism, chaos (Kaplan, 1994), or an amalgamation of such elements without any due attention to their historical context (Keen, 2008, p. 13). Though, since the end of the Cold War, a burgeoning body of international relations (IR) literature has affirmed and indexed European imperialism, particularly the colonial era ‘divide and rule’ *modi operandi*, as a pivotal aspect in the production of colonial difference and the proliferation of organised ‘ethnonationalist’ violence and political unrest in Africa (Fanon, 1968; Nkrumah 1965; Young 1986; Ranger 1996; Berman, 1998). And while it is recognized that the profits generated from transatlantic slavery were used for sponsoring Western European expansionism and the development of industrial-capitalist societies (Williams, 1944; Rodney, 1972; Mkandawire, 2001; Van de Walle, 2007), the catastrophic bearing of racial slavery on the socio-political topography of west-central Africa and its still-unfolding reverberations has not been fully reckoned with. Certainly, it is imperative to consider how the specter of the plantation economy is a constitutive aspect in the genealogy of modern forms of African governance, sovereignty, sociality (freedom), subjection, and insurrection. The transatlantic slave trade transcended its exposé as a mere incongruous economic phenomenon. As David Eltis (1993, p. 1407) polemically reminds us, western Europe, specifically England, was densely overpopulated during the time of slavery, suggesting (and provocatively so) that had Europeans enslaved other Europeans—such as war prisoners, convicts, vagrants, Irish, Scots, etc., as was routine in human history—labor demands would have been fulfilled at a considerably lower financial and human cost. The kidnapping of 12 million people from Africa, in contrast, constituted an act of genocide. The existential telos of the plantation laid not in a simple cost reduction and profit maximization economic calculation—albeit black labour power was paramount to the

development of the world economy and the accumulation of capital by Western Europe's ruling and mercantile classes (Robinson, 2000, p. 4). Rather, it was in the formation of a universalized symbolic syntax of ontological racial difference. This involved the deliberate invention of a nominal blackness and, by extension, the formulation of nominal whiteness or, more broadly, a structural non-blackness (Patterson, 1982; Spillers, 1987; Blackburn, 1997; Da Silva, 2007; Wilderson, 2010; McKittrick 2014; Marriott, 2018). Within this framework, the 'peculiar' institution of racial slavery would be singularly tethered to the blackened African. Definitively then, "slavery is and connotes an ontological status for Blackness" and therefore "the constituent elements of slavery are not exploitation and alienation but accumulation and fungibility" (Wilderson, 2010, p. 14). Racialization is a means of displacing "what *is* with something else, with another reality" (Mbembe and Dubois, 2017, p. 32). This modern matrix of race is simulacra, blackness is simulacra. I appropriate Wilderson and Mbembe's definitions of racism and slavery as the foundational departure point for the subsequent political and philosophical meditations on blackness and whiteness, within the context of this thesis.

Against this discursive scene, this dissertation raises questions about why, in the field of IR, the transatlantic slave economy and "post-colonial armed rebel movements in Africa" (Mkandawire, 2002, p. 181) have conventionally been treated as discrete phenomena. Surely, if war is a continuation of politics by other means (Clausewitz, 1918)—and politics is definitively a refraction between the concept of the individuated subject, the nation and by extension the globe—we should consider how the vestiges of colonialism and racial slavery persistently haunt systems, drive the ideologies held by political actors, orchestrate their manoeuvres, and shadow our methods for studying and analysing modern warfare and international relations at large. Such a consideration might unearth new insights from well-trodden discursive terrains. Articulated in this monograph is an epistemic intervention into discussions about Africa's 'unending' wars as a "puzzle" (Vasquez, 2009) for political thought. Echoing Robert Vitalis (2000, p. 337), white supremacy (anti-blackness) functioned as the most significant American cultural export of the early 20th century, molding, in its own image, the development and contours of racism in the subaltern regions of the globe. It remains disconcerting, then, that IR theory has yet to adequately account for the materialization of U.S. plantation racism beyond its own national borders. Within the specific context of the geopolitical Global South, Liberia emerges as a poignant locus for studying what Katherine McKittrick articulates as the "migratory" nature of plantation logics

(McKittrick, 2013, p. 3). Given its distinct history as a settlement for emancipated diasporic Africans, re-thinking Liberia's history, in this way, affords scholars an opportunity to grapple with the systemic sequela of the slave trade on continental African communities. While there exists, an extensive body of historical literature interrogating the impact of slavery on the African continent, providing insights into demographic shifts and community-level political impacts ascending from the trade, systemic analyses of race and racialization are exiguous. Such theoretical failings persist with few exceptions, as broached by Pierre (2020, p. 22).

Thinking with and through the Black radical and intellectual tradition, specifically its critical meditations on liberal humanism, white supremacy (and whiteness), anti-blackness, and (un)freedom in the "*afterlife of slavery*" (Hartman, 2006, p. 6; my emphasis), I aim to show how the invention of racial blackness not only constitutes the infrastructural foundation of the prevailing global capitalist global order, but choreographs the epistemic core of IR's hegemonic theoretical approaches (i.e., liberalism)—which are habitually expended to make sense of global political economy, state formation, ('ethnic') nationalisms, domestic and international conflicts and security. For elucidatory purposes, consider that the devastation of the Holocaust in Europe during WWII (1941 – 1945) augmented "some fundamental concepts of international human rights law and crimes against humanity" (Germain, 2022). Conversely, the concentration camps/death camps (Todeslager) of Nazi Germany are historically contiguous with "different forms of colonialism and genocide" (Weheliye, 2014, p. 35). That is to say, modern concentration camps find their conceptual pedigrees in the 'indian removal' camps of the 1830s, originally devised to detain 22,000 Cherokee (Weheliye, 2014, p. 35). Nazi-state death camps are also contiguous with the occurrence of the Atlantic crossing that ensued through the "door of no return," the "door out of which Africans were captured, loaded onto ships heading for the New World" (Brand, 2001, p. 3). The disembodied souls of those who did not survive the Middle Passage (also known as the 'Maafa' or the African Holocaust) endure; "those Africans thrown, jumped, dumped overboard" (Sharpe, 2012, p. 19), their atoms remain dispersed in the ocean, even today (Sharpe, 2012, p. 40). These are the spirits of the "lost ancestors whom Ghanaians mourn each year at sea when they mark the Maafa on their side of the Atlantic" (Wilderson, 2009, p. 119). Withal, concentration camps are inextricably linked to the 'contraband camps' that were established post-war period ensuing the American Civil War, designed to imprison fugitive slaves as out-lawed cargo/enemy property (Weheliye, 2014, p. 35). These cases are elucidated

merely to map the historical continuity of the ‘state of exception’ (Schmitt, 1921; Mbembe, 2003; Agamben, 2005). Of course, the examples of exorbitant violence in modern human history are many (for e.g., Palestine, South Africa etc.) and providing a comprehensive list within this thesis is untenable. In any case, are the enumerated examples above not commensurate with the magnitude of violence that would constitute the absolutely catastrophic? Did not the historical manifestations of such terrible brutality demand not only humanitarian action, but a moralistic repudiation of the injustice that permitted such pervasive terror and suffering to unfold? In posing this question, my intention is not necessarily to render extra-exceptional the conditions of black or indigenous life in modernity, but rather gesture to an ethico-political and epistemic dilemma concerning the “frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured” (Butler, 2010, p. 1). I echo Christina Sharpe’s apt observation that the “Holocaust is available as human tragedy in a way that slavery, revolution, and their afterlives are not” (2012, p. 34). As I write this, I am reminded that Black/African students in Ukraine were blocked from crossing European borders following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The European Union’s (EU) sponsoring of migrant prisons specifically designed to incarcerate asylum seekers of African descent sharply contrasts with the swift and urgent humanitarian aid extended to white Ukrainians. Even the US has proffered asylum offers to white Ukrainians, juxtaposed with the concurrent risk of deportation faced by Haitian and Cameroonian asylum seekers (Osei-Opare and Loyd, 2022). Black(ened) people are imagined as the “carriers of terror” (Sharpe, 2012, p. 15), that is to say, as a threat to security (Ibrahim, 2005), rather than bodies seeking refuge from the incessant terrors of war, systematic violence, and persecution.

In the following exposition, I endeavor to grapple with the central epistemic difficulty of how a nominal ‘we’ study African wars by way of using the Liberian predicament as a case for contemplation. The term predicament is from the Latin *praedicare*, meaning, “state of being” or “condition” (*Oxford Languages*). I utilize this hermeneutical approach to think about the Liberian civil war, examining its circumstances as a historicity of social relations wrought by the phenomenon of American racial slavery. The term ‘predicament’ is intended to encapsulate Liberia’s complicated situation, acknowledging that its problematic circumstances predated the outbreak of militarized spectacular violence—made spectacle—in 1989. Generally, I am hostile to the crude and moralistic accounts about how black countries come to be militarized precisely

because such accounts are often “predicated on the forgetting of the life that surrounds” scenes of extreme violence and sedition (Harney and Moten, 2013, p. 17). I orient my attention towards the matrix of political and social relations among different groups in early Liberia (circa 1822) to emphasize the simultaneous occurrences of the inauguration of the transatlantic slave trade and militarization along the west African coast.

This dissertation aims to contend with the following key questions: How did ‘ethnicity’ become a central organizing feature of Liberian social, political, and economic life? What limitations arise from adopting IR’s circular approaches to generally understanding and ending African wars, broadly? What are the assumptive anti-black racial logics that underwrite IR’s most basic theoretical claims about the nature of warfare in sub-Saharan Africa? And how can the theoretical protocols of Black Studies help us to make bare such presuppositions? Certainly, it is now generally accepted by scholars that “international relations emerged to provide intellectual support for the imperial and (settler) colonial ambitions of Western states” (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2020, p. 4). I build on this work from the vantage point of Black Studies (specifically Afro-Pessimism), to show that not only are the onto-epistemic premises of our social and political inquiries fundamentally anti-black, or even that structural racism is constitutive to social contract theory (Mills, 1997), but also that what scholars have conventionally believed to be internal ‘ethnic’ divisions and ‘fragmentations’ (Reilly, 2001) in post-colonial African societies should instead be explicated as a manifestation of transnational anti-black violence.

Overview of the Liberian Civil War (1989-2003)

Liberia’s *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (McKenzie and Prestholdt, 2009) found that constitutive to the eruption of the first civil conflict (1980) in that country was the historical arrangement of Liberia as an apartheid state—of sorts—due to the historical segregation indigenous Africans (‘natives’) and Americo-Liberians (‘settlers’) and the utilization of violent means to fortify and consolidate Americo-Liberian political and economic power for over a century (“Root Causes,” PeacebuildingData.org). The tensions that such divisions engendered helped establish the groundwork for the deadly ‘Rice Riots’ of 1979 and the subsequent coup

d'état, staged by military leader Samuel Doe, which brought William Tolbert's Americo-Liberian-inclined regime to a dénouement in 1980 (this year marked the onset of the first civil war). At first, the Doe stratocracy declared an uncompromising commitment to the formation of a cohesive Black national identity in Liberia and disavowed any divisions of the nation along ethnic lines (Outram, 1997, p. 360). However—and not surprisingly—rather than overturning the legacy of ethnonationalist/race-based systems of political patronage, maintained by all the preceding regimes, Doe conceded economic and educational privileges for the ethnic group to which he belonged—the Krahn. And to further fortify and entrench his political power (Outram, 1997, p. 360), he installed Krahn people in the most politically dominant seats. Such a nepotistic arrangement only exacerbated existing ethno-racial tensions and other complicated grievances concerning the unequal distribution of power and resources nationally, all grievances which had been hitherto subdued under Americo-Liberian hegemony (Conteh-Morgan and Kadivar, 1995, p. 9).

Liberia's second protracted civil conflict spanned 14 years (1989-2003), killing approximately 250 000 Liberians and internally displacing half of the population (Fuest, 2008 p. 205). The precise onset of the second civil war was Christmas Eve of 1989, when the National Patriotic Front (NPFL), under the leadership of Charles Taylor, launched a military incursion into Nimba County, infiltrating from Liberia's common border with Cote D'Ivoire. Samuel Doe, the sitting president, launched a counterinsurgency campaign which dispatched corps from the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), predominantly made-up of Krahn soldiers (Doe's own ethnic group). The AFL would specifically target members of the Gio and Mano ethnic groups under the conjecture that they were adversaries of the Doe stratocracy. Though, the antagonism that typified interactions between the Krahn, Mano, and Gio groups had preceded this fighting (Ellis, 1995).

However, it is not the tautological continuation of structural violence by way of the Doe regime (1980-1990) that I am concerned with in this thesis. Rather it is that liminal space, that racialized enclosure from which one seizes the opportunity to exercise power over others. What openings might surface if we probe deeply into this notion of power not as an object to be held but a structural orientation in a global context in which imbibing “the mystifications of the ruling class” (Wilderson, 2009, p. 122) becomes a strategy of survival (bracketing the problematics of

being motivated by greed)? In this way, we can regard the state as a “modern matrix of individualization” (Foucault, 1982, p. 783) or a dreadful womb that envelopes the flesh (Spillers, 1987) and gestates the universal individuated ‘human’ body-subject.

Americo-Liberians were enculturated in the “vagaries of the slave system and its caste-based social structure” (Kieh, 2004; Levitt, 2005, p. 60; Conteh-Morgan and Kadivar, 1995; Tamari 1991) and by way of internalizing these norms they committed to reproducing a plantocracy in Liberia. In such a context, the contest for political power between varying social groups “has become a way of life” (Sherman, 2006). Put otherwise, vying for authority transforms into a way of being, a mundane disposition, a habituation of sorts. ‘Ethnonationalism’ is always operating within the fold of a gratuitous anti-black world-making scheme where the manoeuvres of “corporate, state, individual, and institutional bodies are sometimes beyond the self-posessed will of the living” (Dillon, 2012, p. 114). The tension between the existing literature and what I am bringing to account resides partly in a feminist approach to agency. I am suggesting that totally implicating Liberian peoples in their predicament simply “encourages a militaristic and melodramatic view of agency in the spectacular temporality of the event of the decision; and, in linking and inflating consciousness, intention, and decision or event, it has provided an alibi for normative governmentality and justified moralizing against inconvenient human activity” (Berlant, 2007, p. 755). Put another way, we depress how power surveils, controls, and orders bodies in favour of a moral evaluation of the individuated subject. I am also thinking alongside Michel Foucault’s theorization of the panopticon, which he describes as an “architectural apparatus” that functions as a “machine for creating and sustaining power independent of the person who exercises it” (2008, p. 5). This can perhaps be understood as an incarceration of the psyche, referring to the individuated subject’s embodied habituation or self-surveillance. It constitutes a mode of control or governmentality that extends beyond the concrete management of bodies, that cannot be adequately encapsulated by the concepts of direct and indirect colonial rule, as it depends on the interpellation of a certain society’s normative values. Part of what we are struggling against can perhaps be best described as a “paradox of self-deception” (Berman, 1963). White supremacy provides the subtext for this relation with oneself. This thesis looks at how anti-blackness functions as a kind of absent presence that composes and propels the epistemological and ontological orderings of space and subjectivity and examines the historical evidence that it always already permeates Liberian people’s social and self-consciousness as well

as their political imaginations. Along these lines, it is my contention that the case of Liberia conspicuously demonstrates that anti-blackness as an ether (Carter and Cervenak, 2016), as an ontological atmosphere, has a “built in capacity to maintain itself” (Beckford, 2000, p. 46) such that the violent force of white supremacy self-extends through colonised and stolen people’s interpellation of its ideologies. Ultimately, ideas are constitutive of the world we inhabit and, as Hans J. Morgenthau reminds us, “the world of states is no exception” (qtd. in R. Jackson, 1991, p. 8). Any adequate study of international relations must pay sufficient attention to the ideas of the individuals who create and operate institutions rather than exclusively to the institutions themselves (R. Jackson, 1991, p. 8).

Theoretical Contributions

There exists an extensive body of scholarship that attends to how Liberian people participated in that country’s civil war, but writings on *why* they fought remain meagre. The conflict has been generally explicated as a problem of ‘ethnic’ antagonisms between varying ‘primordial’ social groups, imbuing it with an erroneous pretense of historical inevitability. The implicit suggestion, in such accounts, is that the provocation of the armed actors can be explained culturally or racially – through reference to a supposed cultural or moral pathology or intrinsic biological inferiority (Mamdani, 2007). By mapping the historical continuities between transatlantic slavery, its attendant racial logics, and their relation to the role ‘ethnicity’ played in the Liberian civil war, this thesis interrogates the discursive limits imposed by such unsophisticated diagnoses. Liberia presents a distinctive opening to interrogate these questions because it was founded by the American Colonization Society (ACS) and subsequently ‘settled’ by emancipated and free-born negroes during the antebellum period (1832-1860). Upon their arrival in Liberia in the mid-19th century, the repatriated groups, who would later be known as Americo-Liberians, reinstated a regime of violence based on racialist ideologies of sovereignty and commodity fetishism—that had previously haunted the state of their existence in the Western hemisphere—through which to subjugate indigenous inhabitants of the west African coastal region. In so doing, they ushered in discursive practices and material conditions related to the production of ‘ethnicity’ that continue to frame interpersonal and social relations in post-conflict Liberia. So, at its radical origin, the civil war had deep and complex roots in the transnational politics of racial

formation that came to structure social relations and tensions among Liberians during the ‘Back-to-Africa’ movement in the 19th and 20th centuries. Moreover, the nascent stages of the repatriation project not only set the foundation for 20th-century Black/African, anti-imperial/anti-colonial, liberation movements but was constitutive to the emergence of ideological movements such as Négritude, Garveyism, and Pan-Africanism. The concurrent formation of the Liberian state and conception of Pan-Negro and Pan-African nationalisms marked a crucial historical juncture, underscoring Liberia's deep significance to the global struggle for black liberation. Moreover, the ideals of Pan-African consciousness originated from the intellectual contributions of the black intelligentsia during the 19th and 20th centuries, as documented by Appiah (1990, p. 389). Cedric Robinson characterized this group of middle-class intellectuals, which included figures such as Marcus Garvey, Edward Blyden, and Alexander Crummell, as "ideologists whose childhoods were grounded in the sweet toxin of assimilation" (1980, p. 148). Robinson further asserts that "their opposition to European power necessarily took the form of contempt for their own class" (1980, p. 148). This acumen is crucial for understanding how race becomes the foremost paradigm through which politics, economics, and Christian theology are interpreted in late-modernity.

The eclectic corpus of historically located literature that theorizes the ‘root causes’ of Liberia’s descent into a protracted civil conflict cites religion, economic inequality, ‘ethnic’ tensions, and political exclusion as triggers (Kieh, 2009, p. 17; Ellis 1995; Ellis, 2001; Specht, 2006; Atkinson 1997). However, as C.L.R. James reminds us, historians “wrote so well because they saw so little” (1938, p. x). Extant explanations falter in their failure to heed to the history of a complicated and volatile west African political milieu circa the 1600s to 1900s. It is difficult to fully grasp Liberia’s descent into violent conflict without attending to the institution of racial slavery in the circum-Atlantic world; the ‘Scramble for Africa’ and European colonial incursions into Liberia; reconstruction in America (1863-1877); the rise of Black/African nationalisms (Sawyer, 1998) and Liberia’s standing in the international sphere as the second independent Black republic in the world, after Haiti. Moreover, the enormous bearing the ACS had on Liberia cannot be adequately apprehended without proper regard being given to the plantation logics that animated the social, political, economic, and theological worldviews of the society’s founders—themselves members of the planter oligarchy. Indeed, many founders of the ACS are generally known as America’s founding fathers. Here, I am thinking with Katherine McKittrick’s

theorization of the plantation as a space of “racial surveillance, anti-black violence, sexual cruelty, and economic accumulation” (2013, p. 9). In my estimation, and as I will demonstrate in this thesis, anti-black violence and exclusion have always been not only normative to the idea of the ‘state’ in international politics but constitutive aspects of Liberian social, cultural, and political life, along with the establishment of the Republic (James and Vargas, 2012, p. 193). So, I echo Jared Sexton’s exhortation that politics is “something that we ought to strain against as it strains against us” (2016, p. 13). Unambiguously then, I am writing against an Arendtian concept of politics which posits that violence occurs solely at the “point of imbalance between public law and political fact” (Saint-Bonnet, 2001, p. 28). This idea is further elaborated by the distinguishing between power (*Macht*) and violence (*Gewalt*), a distinction that securitization theory reproduces by theoretically severing politicization from securitization (Howell and Richter-Monpetit, 2020, p. 8; Arendt, 1979). Hannah Arendt’s concept of the political finds its roots in “racist German anthropology that distinguished between (uncivilized) ‘nature people’ (*Naturvölker*) and (civilized) ‘cultured people’ (*Kulturvölker*)” (Howell and Richter-Monpetit, 2020, p. 8; Klausen, 2010; Owens, 2017). This mode of modern signification delineates communities based on criteria such as historical background, language, and the strength of their political institutions. It definitively distinguishes those possessing such attributes from those without. The discourse espouses the moral and political superiority of the ‘settler’ while cautioning against a perceived ‘primitivism’ of the ‘native’ and ‘other.’ This explicitly suggests that racialized communities, along with the commons, besiege ideals of political freedom and democracy (Howell and Richter-Monpetit, 2020, p. 8). It follows that “[p]olitics is an ongoing attack on the common—the general and generative antagonism—from within the surround” (Harney and Moten, 2013, p. 17). Ultimately, it is my contention that a critical revision of Liberian historiography is integral to mapping the transposing relations of domination between African and African descended peoples and to developing an analytic that describes the antagonisms that structure Black/African intersubjective relations at large. And, more specifically, how the interanimations between African and European philosophies of being radically bewitch Liberian ontologies. Writ large, the socio-cultural and political history that I am endeavoring to recount is one of “conflict through violence” (Krug, 2018, p. 2) and about the violent conditions that enclosed Black life in coastal west Africa during the Victorian Era.

Engaging with a range of theoretical, empirical, and historical perspectives as well as archival materials, this monograph chronicles how the global force of anti-blackness underwrote Liberia's trajectory of violence and fueled the hostilities that ultimately escalated into a protracted civil war. Founded in 1822, the Colony of Liberia was annexed by the American Colonization Society to expatriate and colonize 'free' negroes and their descendants on the coast of west Africa. 'Re-colonization', as it was called by the ruling U.S. Southern class, was rendered a compromise between the absolute abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and perpetual black servitude. Yet, repatriation was superficially crafted by abolitionists and their pro-slavery contemporaries, alike, as a fugitive project, an opportunity for 'free' blacks to experiment with emancipation and take refuge from the socio-political and economic conditions which amounted to what was effectively American racial slavery by another name. Essentially, I offer a re-contemplation of Liberian historiographical accounts, one that attends to the Liberian Republic's peculiar history of 'black settler colonialism' and limns the im/possibilities of freedom in the afterlife of slavery, where anti-black terror is not only temporally unbounded but transgeographical.

The colonial project necessitated the disciplinary compartmentalization of knowledge into seemingly unrelated fields of academic inquiry (Lowe, 2015, p. 1). On account of this and following Christina Sharpe's call for us to "become undisciplined" (2016, p. 13), I wander beyond the implicitly proposed (through the disciplinary separation of the study of international relations from other disciplines concerned with the study of race, colonialism, gender, and empire etc.) lack of commonality between the fields of Black Studies and IR and towards elaborating the racial configurations of war and transnational formations of modern African politics. By reading and writing across outwardly discrete disciplines—Black Studies being a "critique of Western civilization" (Robinson qtd. in Moten, 2008, p. 1743) and IR being a study of the global interstate system—I can more comprehensively theorise the international racial hierarchies that undergird Liberian people's investment in 'ethnonationalist' politics. Moving beyond ideas of the African continent as a discrete or insular political, social, and cultural unit, we must attempt to re-think Africa's history and predicaments vis-à-vis a broader history of the circum-Atlantic world. Political 'ethnicity' must be considered an effect of/enmeshed within an overarching and world-making racial apparatus that demands the taxonomic sorting of modern 'human' subjects. Additionally, by remapping the social, cultural, political, and economic history of Liberia in this way, I seek to foreground the hostile interanimations between blackness and

“homo modernus”—gesturing to the ways in which the signifying “weapons of reason, the tools of science, and history, institute both man and his others as global historical beings” (Da Silva, 2007, p. xix). And by focusing on race relations in Black Africa, I am trying to think about blackness outside of/beyond epidermalization (Fanon, 1968) and attend to the conceptual and material violence the category itself engenders. My overarching aim is to widen our lens to the various ways the political afterlife of slavery manifests in Black Africa by way of elaborating the continuities between anti-blackness and the politicization of cultural ethnicity. Withal, by describing how the anti-black makeup of civil society manifested on the other side of the Atlantic, this dissertation offers IR a transnational theory of civil and global “society’s dependence on anti-black violence” (Douglass et al., 2018). What sorts of breaks or conceptual spaces surface when we study the Liberian predicament from the vantage point of Black Studies and struggle with how anti-black hierarchies of ‘the human’ have always configured international affairs and order? Since the struggle for black liberation is border crossing and spatially unbounded, how might we liberate our queries in ways that confront the global machinations of racialized subjection and immiseration (Kummba, 2003)? This study attempts to do just that.

In a definitive way, the *raison d’être* for this monograph is to rethink those early encounters and relational dynamics, between indigenous Liberians and expatriated formerly enslaved Africans and their descendants, in racial terms. My objective is to broaden our lens to the various ways the political afterlife of slavery manifests in Liberia by way of elaborating the relationship between culture, labor, race, capitalist extraction, and ethnonationalism. More specifically, by conducting a genealogical tracing of Liberian social, political, and economic history circa the early 1800s to 1900s, I seek to elucidate how philosophies of race and ethnicity transformed in response to developing labor needs as well as in relation to modern conceptions of the liberated political subject in proprietorial terms. It is the historical occurrence of chattel slavery and its significance to the expansionist project of global racial capitalism that molded Liberian economic orientations, ethnonationalist commitments, conceptions of freedom, and, eventually, choreographies of armed insurgency. I situate my analysis against the milieu of the international consolidation of racial hierarchy and uneven trajectories of economic integration and development that were unfolding in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Getachew, 2019, p. 9).

The significance of my argument extends beyond the early historical period of Liberia's founding, as it implicitly impels us to rethink orthodox approaches to addressing the uneven distributions of political power across post-conflict African contexts. I urge that we broaden our post-conflict political objectives beyond solutions such as 'ethnic power sharing' to resolve wars because such approaches safeguard and defend the accretion of ideologies, discourses, imaginaries, and mythologies related to inherent racial and cultural differences (Bhabha, 1994, p. 68). Writ large, actors within an armed group often attribute their motivations for engaging in conflict to ethnic or nationalist dynamics. However, this does not inherently warrant a conflict analysis that speculates on, or a resolution that aligns strictly with such characterizations. Of course, we should take seriously the language and perspectives of armed actors, given that their ideas are the very objects of our study. However, we must be wary not to un/consciously and uncritically appropriate and legitimize those "categories of ethno-political practice as our categories of social analysis" (Brubaker, 2002, p. 166). Additionally, ethno-political categories are invested in settler-colonialism's logics and attendant brutal practices of racial classification and subjection and are therefore meticulously stitched into the structural stuff that makes-up liberal democratic societies. In this regard, post-conflict liberal remedies such as power-sharing, metabolize actors into hegemonic institutions and bring them into the fold of liberal (humanist) structures of governance. The problem with such approaches to making and building peace is that they obscure the fact that "modern liberalism defined the 'human' and universalized its attributes to European man" (Lowe, 2015, p. 6). What does it signify to conscript the subaltern to a liberal model of governance that not only fails to grant them equal rights and recognition but disavows their very humanity? As this thesis will demonstrate, the condition of possibility for modern freedom, self-possession and sovereignty is the unceasing development and consolidation of racial capitalism and empire. Overall, this manuscript contributes to ongoing discussions in the field of IR concerning the relationship between ethno-political violence and civil war. Moreover, it aims to offer insights that can inform policy making, specifically policies aimed at meaningfully understanding and ending civil wars in post-colonial African contexts. What follows in the subsequent chapters is an account of the liaison between racial thinking in the 19th century and 'ethnic' thinking in the 20th century. I move to demonstrate how colonial race-making processes fashioned the pretext for the 'ethnic' dynamics that shaped the 1989 conflict in Liberia.

Thesis Structure and Chapter Organization

My way into mapping the evolution of ‘ethnicity’ in early Liberia can be typified by a framework that encompasses three interdependent themes which also guide the organization of the overall dissertation: *cultural life and sociality*, *state formation*, and *political economy*. The chapters in this thesis are *not* organized in a chronological manner to implicitly gesture that things do not improve over time, despite Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s prophetic enunciation that the “arch of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (1968)¹. Hegel's philosophy of history, as elaborated in his lectures, posits that history unfolds as a continuous movement toward human freedom. While freedom may not be fully actualized, Hegel assures us of its imminent realization, proclaiming that the progressive accumulation of time inevitably leads to an improvement of societal conditions (Barnard Center for Research on Women, 2019). And that subjectivity is always-becoming since it involves persistent movement with historical time. Conversely, this notion that the trajectory of history instinctively moves towards (racial) vindication is “no more than a humanist fantasy of resolution and movement” (Warren, 2018, p. 24). Rather, violence becomes more established, obfuscated, and perfected with the accumulation of modern time. Therefore, this monograph disavows any teleological explication of crisis and contends with the cyclicity of the structural and existential violence which continues to possess black life in Liberia; or, as Toni Morrison articulates it in *Beloved*, “all of it is now [...] it is always now” (Morrison, 2019). Likely, as you progress through the chapters, you will perceive conditions to be fixedly unendurable at a structural level. But, and most crucially here, it is my position that the Liberian predicament cannot be approached as one of political gains and mismanagement or a failure to modernize. Although such elaborations are not historically inaccurate, they must be taken with the fact that triumph was never meant to be a possibility for black folks existing in the new world. To the critical eye, this reality is readily discernible at

¹ “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution.” Speech given at the National Cathedral, March 31, 1968.

every juncture throughout Liberia's modern history and that of many post-colonial African societies. Part of what is necessary is the materialization of a comprehensive analytic that remarks on and spectacularizes those existential modes of violence that have been rendered cultural and therefore normative and unremarkable. By enacting a praxis of "defamiliarizing the familiar" (Hartman, 1997, p. 4), we can place the Liberian predicament along a continuum of structural violence that is symptomatic of a larger racialized world-making project of imperial expansion sustained by anti-black racism. This thesis maps how a theorization of anti-blackness forges a way to clearly identify and respond to commonsensical racism in IR theory and practice. It places the discipline's "cultural disregard and disgust with blackness" (Dumas, 2016, p. 11) at the center of the discussion.

Chapter III critically examines the scholarly preoccupation with and over-elaboration of cultural differences within the field of IR (i.e., ethnic, linguistic, or regional), especially concerning the interpretations of post-Cold War African conflicts. Our understanding of African politics is overdetermined by an invented iteration of 'traditional' African culture, which broaches from the provincialized experiences of European peoples, is arbitrated through their civilization, social structures, and culture, and is therefore always already undergirded by a particular set of assumptions (Robinson and Kelley, 2000, p. 2). Studying the Liberian predicament through the critical lens of Black Studies counteracts the tendency to pathologize black Africans while simultaneously obscuring the enduring impacts of racial slavery on politics in post-colonial African societies. To elucidate alternative epistemologies, this chapter endeavors to unearth the metaphysical suppositions underpinning IR's core conceptual paradigms. These paradigms, rooted in scientific racism or what I refer to as racial anthropology throughout this thesis, rely on spatializing and temporalizing discourses about Africa and its inhabitants. To proffer a more nuanced understanding of conflict and the role 'ethnicity' performs within it, we must heed critical attention to the social and structural dynamics engendered by racial capitalism, slavery, and colonialism, as these dynamics are pivotal to the consolidation of global white supremacy and its attendant claims of definitive ontological difference between humans. This chapter lays the theoretical foundations for the subsequent chapters encompassed in this thesis

Chapter IV begins by providing an overview of the American Colonization Society (ACS) and its involvement in establishing Liberia. It then examines the broader discourses surrounding the

desire to repatriate free(d) black Americans back to Africa, as viewed by slaveholders, abolitionists, and enslaved individuals themselves. In part, the goal of this chapter is to highlight the various meanings and visions of freedom that were circulating during this historical moment and highlight their grounding in a certain racial logic. In the subsequent sections, the narrative briefly outlines the early ACS settlements in Liberia and examines the impact of repatriated individuals on Liberia's socio-political landscape to map how 'ethnicity' became a dominant organizing principle of Liberian society. The overarching objective of this chapter is to offer an overview of the of the socio-political terrain that constituted early Liberia (beginning in 1822) to demonstrate how colonial encounters and confrontations, entangled regional and trans-Atlantic cosmologies, economies, political ideologies, migration, identity formations and particularly the resettlement of descendants of forcibly displaced Africans, would, in part, upend pre-contact modes of organizing social and political life and eventually trigger a concatenation of rebellions against the emergent nation-state in Monrovia.

In Chapter V, my analytical gaze shifts from the world of states to the world of individuals. My goal is to understand local transformations in Liberian political processes together with individual identity formations—within the broader global-historical context of economic, political, and sociocultural systems. This mode of analysis considers how the interior lives of select historical figures to understand how the desires, aspirations, and everyday encounters informed their self-perception as racialized subjects. The chapter is structured around an analysis of personal narratives, particularly the Skipwith family epistles. Peyton Skipwith, born enslaved to John Hartwell Cocke in Virginia circa the late 1700s/early 1800s, secured his freedom in 1833 (and later that of his family) and repatriated to Liberia. Over 30 years, the Skipwiths penned a series of letters to the Cockes, detailing the “conditions confronting the early colonists, the setbacks and the gradual improvements they experienced” (Nicholls, 1977, p. 65) while living in Liberia. These papers allow for a deeper meditation on local processes of self-constitution during this early period, setting the stage for subsequent chapters that reconnoitre why repatriated peoples made particular decisions about governance and social life. Ruminating on the *why* can aid in an investigation of how racialized configurations of power persisted and transmogrified on the other side of the Atlantic waters, bringing about the “resubordination of the emancipated” (Hartman, 1997, p. 16).

By excavating the genealogy of Liberian state formation, the overall objective of Chapter VI is to underscore the occurrence of trans-Atlantic slavery as constitutive aspect in the development of modern humanist orders of governance and trenchantly setting forth the organization of Liberian civil society along ethnic/racial and identitarian lines. Liberia's formation transpired during "the era when the notion of "equality and liberty" had become the standard rhetoric in the Atlantic basin—in the United States, Britain, and France, for example. Liberia's immigrants, the Americo-Liberians, articulated the paradox of emancipation without freedom in their 1847 Declaration of Independence" (Allen, 2010, p. 19). They adhered to the reparative vernaculars of freedom and responsibility, with sovereign statehood as a crucial manifestation (R. Jackson, 1990, p. 6), devoted to a "politics [that] proposes to make us better" (Harney and Moten, 2013, p. 20) through its correctional determinacy to regulate the commons via totalizing institutions. My central point of argument is that émigré interpretations of freedom and their re-elaboration of the injurious institution known as the modern state (and Africa's first Westphalian state system) contributed to the burgeoning of 'ethnic' antagonisms and the constitution of Liberian subjectivities, at large. The contemporary ethnonationalist and exclusionary policies and practices in Liberia are a direct manifestation of these liberal proceedings, liberating only the subjects that cohere to the physiognomies of the definitive 'human' delineated within its precincts, thereby putting "other subjects, practices, and geographies" (Lowe, 2015, p. 3) *outdoors*.

Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition [...] Our peripheral existence, however, was something we had learned to deal with—probably because it was abstract. But the concreteness of being outdoors was another matter—like the difference between the concept of death and being, in fact, dead. Dead doesn't change, and outdoors is here to stay (Morrison, 2007, p. 33).

We, as blackened African people, continue to live outdoors under conditions of unfreedom. True freedom, in part, would constitute "an individual and a collective desire to be *in common* and *in difference* in a world that is nonhierarchical and nonviolent" (Walcott, 2022, p. 2, my emphasis).

Chapter VII elucidates the relationship between capitalism, slavery, and Liberia's economic trajectory, tracing its resurgence and deterioration from 1860 to the 1930s. W.E.B. Du Bois' early call for meditation on Liberia's political circumstances, governed by Euro-American oversight and regulation of the country's domestic market and resource industry, sets the stage. Notwithstanding the formal recognition of Liberia's national sovereignty and membership in the international state system, economic dependency, and unequal access to political power between states—definitive to the structures of the global political economy—meant that the same system that guaranteed sovereignty also justified external interference in Liberia's internal affairs. Americo-Liberians, vulnerable to these agential forces, were compelled to reprise those brutal proceedings of the Atlantic World. They instrumentally subscribed to the covenants of racial capitalism and hegemonic nationalisms to effectively occupy Liberia and its peoples, foreclosing any possibilities of foreign encroachment through militarized means (Putnam, 2006, p. 238). In the post-WWI period, Liberia encountered economic recession and faced suspicion of forced exploitation of indigenous labor (Akingbade, 1997, p. 261), including the trafficking of enslaved indigenous Liberians to the Spanish colony of Fernando Po (Mackenzie, 1934, p. 375; Sundiata, 1974). The League of Nations initiated an inquiry between 1929 and 1930, which ostensibly confirmed “conditions of criminal compulsion scarcely distinguishable from slave raiding” and trafficking (“The 1930 Enquiry Commission to Liberia”, 1931, p. 375). Despite Liberia's resistance, supported by Portugal, citing an infringement on the country's sovereignty (Redman, 1994, p. 783), the inquiry persisted. By examining the conditions and decisions made prior to arriving at this juncture, this chapter maps how labour became another racialized category that separated Americo-Liberians from indigenous Africans.

Reflexivity and Research Limitations

Originally, this project aimed to investigate the reintegration and participation of ex-combatant Liberian women in Liberian society fifteen years after the end of the civil war from 1989-2003. The plan was to conduct in-person, life history interviews with Liberian ex-combatant women in three interior counties – Nimba, Lofa, and Montserrado— where these women resettled at the end of the war. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to conduct fieldwork for the project because of international travel restrictions. Subsequently, I reframed the project to

focus on the social and historical experiences of Liberian women, seeking a more contextualized understanding of the circumstances that led up to their armed resistance and assuming that the planned ethnographic interviews would eventually be conducted. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Consequently, I reframed the project once again, focusing on how ethnic and racial considerations influenced historical tensions between indigenous and repatriated Liberians in the 19th and 20th centuries.

I am a Sudani-Canadian black feminist scholar with an interest in IR. My parents immigrated to Canada as refugees after I was born (circa the late 1990s). Questions of home and belonging have naturally shaped my personal and academic interests. My scholarship seeks to put IR in conversation with Black Studies, with a specific focus on Liberia. This interest stems from the country's 'founding' by previously enslaved individuals under the American Colonization Society (ACS), its civil wars, and the limitations of the 'ethnic' discourses employed by IR, specifically in relating and addressing the origins of these wars. By and large, the project interrogates how global anti-blackness and racial formations in the aftermath of colonial slavery persist, ensuring that Liberia remains a stronghold for Euro-American capitalist interests. This perspective underscores that post-colonial African warfare is often attributed to biological and cultural 'ethnicity' rather than rooted in the structural violence against continental and diasporic Africans that contributed to the formation of America and a global economic and political order, from which white people continue to benefit.

Certainly, the project has its limitations. I do not adequately attend to the series of violent struggles that took place between indigenous peoples and Americo-Liberians since Liberia's founding, as this has been extensively examined in *The Evolution of Deadly Conflict in Liberia* (Levitt, 2005). In my view, examining the causes of these conflicts might reveal additional insights about how race came to be politicized in ethnic terms in the country. By not exploring these conflicts in the thesis, my intention is not to render them of miniscule significance or to suggest that indigenous Liberians did not resist Americo-Liberian hegemony. Nor does it signify a complete abandonment of the resistance/agency or power/resistance paradigm. Rather, it signals the recognition that the paradigm is itself astringent in this historical situation. The relationship between Americo-Liberians and indigenous groups was so precarious, mercurial and at times ambiguous. In place of adhering to a victim/perpetrator dichotomy, I attempt to think

about agency as a tactical (Utas, 2005) and transient sort of machination operating within the fold of a given political (or plantation) economy to contend with the conceptual meagreness of essentialist approaches (such as victim/perpetrator). This approach helps demarcate the material and corporeal realities of living under enormous constraint, violence, and distress. Likewise, I interpret these conflicts as predicated on and coextensive with the global project of white supremacy. Finally, I acknowledge my own limitations in the critical process, as I often find myself fortuitously relying on the same frameworks I am attempting to problematize. This is because I can only describe and distend the “organization of the inside” (Chandler, 2008, p. 351) from the inside. The language and disciplines at my disposal are inherently antagonistic to blackness and the black experience. So how can “the being of language appear for itself?” Only the “disappearance of the subject” (Foucault and Blanchot, 1987, p. 15).

*Black archives and archival practices testify to the complexity of how Black life is lived,
documented, and remembered*

—*The Black Scholar*²

I Black Study, Black Archives

In crafting a historically contextualized study of Liberia's challenges, I employed a methodology that combined primary and secondary sources. This thesis draws on colonial-era archives, official documents, firsthand historical narratives, personal letters, and scholarly works. By comparing firsthand accounts with historical literature, the approach sought a comprehensive understanding of the early Liberian Republic's difficulties. Primary materials were sourced mainly from the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and the Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City, which holds about 190,000 documents, including periodicals, newspapers, mission notes, and educational materials. However, due to time and funding constraints, only a few hundred documents were analyzed.

Archival Omissions, Epistemic Erasures, and General Notes on Method

To clarify, my work is not about historical restoration but rather involves conjuring or agitating a ghostly presence. I aim to agitate, as Mbembe (2002) articulates, to “restore it to life precisely in order to better silence it by transforming it from autonomous words into a prop on which [I] can lean in in order to speak and write beyond an originary text” (p. 25). Furthermore, I focus on materials that, in my view, address questions of nation, culture, class, and politics through racial/ethnic lenses at specific historical junctures. These include the early stages of the American Colonization Society (ACS), Liberia’s 1847 independence, the American Civil War, economic impacts of World War II, the establishment of rubber plantation slavery in Liberia, and

² (“The Black Scholar”, 2021).

the lead-up to the first Liberian civil war (1989-1996). As Lisa Baraitser (2017) aptly reminds us in *Enduring Time*, the processes...

by which we notice and choose one thing over another is always conditioned by a process of repression within the archive and within ourselves as researchers, and failures of resuscitation of what cannot come to light. This failure can be worked with, worked through, but cannot be overcome. (p. 21)

Archives and historical records frequently bear witness to intentional omissions, especially concerning the historical continuity of Africa and the African diaspora. Hartman (2008) describes the archive as "a death sentence, a tomb, a display of a violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise...an asterisk in the grand narrative of history" (p. 2). In the ancient world context, so-called 'enlightened' European scholars devoted considerable effort to expunge the cultural and intellectual contributions of ancient Egypt from Europe's developmental history, aiming to "whiten" the Western hemisphere and assert the supposed purity of the European race. This epistemic maneuver functioned to strip Africa of any semblance of evolutionary progression (Robinson, 2000). Also, the archives of slavery are positioned as repositories that narrate the origin story of blackness and the African diaspora in the New World. In accordance with McKittrick's articulation, the genesis of blackness unfolds at the juncture of archival investigation: "This is where we begin, this is where historic blackness comes from: the list, the breathless numbers, the absolutely economic, the mathematics of the unliving" (2014, p. 17). For diasporic Africans, available records such as the captain's ledger merely list purchasers and reduce the existence of stolen Africans to terms like "negroe man," "negroe woman," or more impersonally, 'ditto man,' 'ditto woman' with occasional notes like 'Negroe girl (meagre)—curiously, boys are not described as meagre (Philip, 2008, p.194). The task of tracking and chronicling the past is always encumbered by our dependence on sources and methodologies that are fundamentally enclosed by various epistemes or ways of knowing born from the violence of enslavement and the commodification of "stolen life" (Moten, 2018), war, genocide, rape, and incarceration. The sources and methodologies within our reach are inextricably linked to the very violence that the subjects of this study—that is the people whose lives and ideas that are integral to the story being enunciated—were and continue to be imperiled in (Krug, 2018, p. 5).

Eurocentric Historiography and the Discursive Construction of the ‘Dark Continent’

Eurocentric historiography has delineated two distinct peripheries in world history: one overt and one obscured. Within this obscured periphery, Africa was notably sidelined. The same political forces that crafted an insular narrative of Western history concurrently shaped a separate narrative for Africa. Analogous to the concept of the West, the idea of Africa was infused with racial implications. Yet, Africa was not celebrated but denigrated; it was specifically defined as the region south of the Sahara—aligning, of course, with the expanse most devastated by the transatlantic slave trade (Mamdani, 2014, p. 31). Moreover, the institution of colonial racial slavery not only made and maintained a regime of racial stratification that continues to urgently inform how black bodies inhabit and orient themselves on both sides of the Atlantic; but the historical erasure that accompanied these proceedings enabled the organization of a racist episteme in which the ontological crafting of ‘the human’ was and continues to be fundamentally rooted in the abjuration of black being. Moreover, black people who did try to document the conditions of their lives encountered with numerous impediments. For instance, the Skipwiths—discussed in further detail below—struggled with meagre resources, habitually writing about a want for paper, writing instruments, and time. They also wrote about a want for books (i.e., *Webster’s Dictionary*) which perhaps indexed a longing for language. The endurance of the archive constitutes an imminent danger to the modern state. The state’s power not only hinges on its ability to craft a national public history but also on its ability to devour time by erasing the archiver and sedating the past. This is a radical act, as obliterating history enables freedom obligation and restitution: “The constitutive violence of the state rests, in the end, on the possibility, which can never be dismissed, of refusing to recognise (or to settle) one or another debt” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 23). A complete archive would unveil the enormity of wanton violence (and resistance) that historically enabled the West as a geohistorical entity. The debt incurred are irreparable...

Source Materials, Research Location, and Challenges in Pandemic Times

Accessing the archives was significantly complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. U.S. national libraries were closed for an extended period, and it wasn't until October 2021, a year into the

pandemic, that I was able to access them. Prior to my visit, I coordinated with a reference librarian from the Schomburg Center who authorized my access to their extensive archival materials. This pre-visit communication proved crucial, as she offered insights that helped me prepare to navigate their online catalog and order relevant collections from the offsite storage facility before my arrival. During my three-week stay at the NYPL, I was limited to one appointment per week but managed to review documents from the *Alexander Crummell Papers*, the *Lester Walton Papers*, and the *New York Colonization Society Records*, covering 1849 to 1968.

The records of the NYSCS primarily emphasised the everyday operations of the Society, which was not of concern to my research questions. However, they included the Society's charter, constitution and by-laws dating back to 1891, Supreme Court records from 1959, minutes from annual meetings. More relevant were the insights into the educational landscape of early Liberia, with reports spanning 1918 to 1928. The collection also encompassed a petition for the exploration of Liberia, an agreement forged between the NYSCS and the Methodist Episcopal Church in the U.S., and materials from the Advisory Committee on Education in Liberia, specifically sourced from The Booker T. Washington Institute in Kakata. Reflecting a shift in focus, the Society's later years prioritized educational and missionary efforts in Liberia instead of emigration (LOC, n.d.). The collection was rounded off with documents chronicling the formal dissolution of the Society in 1964.

While conducting research at the Schomburg, a librarian directed me to an important dissertation titled "The Missionary Career of Alexander Crummell," authored by Ejodfodomi Luckson in 1974. The work documented the missionary vocation of Alexander Crummell and his role as a minister in the Protestant Episcopal Church in Liberia from 1853 to 1873 (Luckson, 1974, p. vii). Crummell was interested in Liberia for its potential as a site to experiment with Black nation-building rather than merely a base for American capitalist corporations. He aimed to maximize the productivity of the local 'native' population by imparting skills necessary for establishing an industrial and Christian society. Crummell placed a strong importance on fulfilling the nuclear family model, which he regarded as essential to the development of civilized and devoted citizens. He viewed the family as the "primal society of human beings," divinely entrusted to glorify God. Of course, the family is a microcosmic expression of the broader patriarchal

organization of society, wherein superiority was ‘naturally’ ascribed to the man of the household. Ultimately, “his mission was to ‘to nullify and uproot’ a gross heathen domesticity by elevating women and introducing the idea of family and home” (Oldfield, 1990, pp. 99-100).

American Colonization Society Records

In 1913, and later at its dissolution in 1964, the American Colonization Society (ACS) donated its papers to the Library of Congress, revealing rare and underexplored particulars of Liberia’s history. These records span from 1792 to 1964, with a focus on the period from 1823 to 1912, reflecting the adoption of Western administrative models. Specifically, the state in Monrovia maintained written accounts on the political dynamics of that period (as pointed out by Ellis, 2007). The materials include political correspondence, reports, minutes, financial documents, speeches, and missionary records. The archives shed light on ACS’ critical role in Liberia’s founding, its governance efforts, recruitment strategies, and the nation-building aspirations of its Black emigrants. Additionally, the archives expose the U.S. imperial and racial ideologies integrated into Liberia’s political infrastructure and the different stakes that several of America’s ‘founding fathers’ had in Liberia’s realisation. My primary motivation was to understand the context in which the idea of Liberia was conceived, examining how Euro-American racial dialectics, foundational to the Western onto-episteme, shaped Liberia's governance, social organization, and labor divisions. This intellectual endeavor is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Black Studies, particularly the concept of the 'afterlife of slavery' (Hartman, 2006), which informs my analysis of archival materials and relevant scholarly literature on African conflicts from International Relations and its sub-disciplines. Additionally, the work draws on acumens from Gender Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Decolonial Studies to interrogate the reproduction of empire and global white supremacy.

State Power and the Archive(s)

The administrative records kept by the ACS tended to be sparse and inadequate in their ability to offer insight into the affective dimensions and interiority (Morrison, 1998) of black social life—

the sort of stuff that speaks to what W.E.B. Du Bois described as a peculiar experience of *being* “a problem” (Du Bois, 1903). And to be rendered a problem is to be rendered unarchivable.

The archive is primarily the product of judgement, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded. The archive, therefore, is fundamentally a matter of discrimination and of selection, which, in the end, results in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged ‘unarchivable’. The archive is, therefore, not a piece of data, but a status (Mbembe, 2002, p. 20).

I wanted to forge a methodological approach that proffered intellectual precedence to the knowledge gained through those platitudinous, subjective experiences and experimentations with (un)freedom³ as sovereignty together with inexorable concessions, refusals, and adaptations (Wilder, 2017). This method, which can be articulated as writing against conventional logic, reason, and singular truths, and “trust[ing] the lies” (McKittrick, 2013 p. 19). By virtue of turning to the epistolary writings of the Skipwith family—compiled by Randall Miller (1978) in *Dear Master, Letters of a Slave Family*—by taking seriously how black folks *felt* about repatriation and daily life in Liberia. By examining over 200 letters from the Skipwiths to their former owners, written between 1834 and 1865, I explored the nuances of their social relationships, including marital choices, dress, desires, religious beliefs, and the impact of social class. This focus on personal narratives and letters serves as a methodological intervention creating an opening for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Black social life under the ACS’s repatriation program and begins to plug the affective apertures left by administrative records.

Each document was analysed not only for its content but for the historical context within which it was written, its authorship, intended audience, and basic suppositions. As I read the materials, I grappled with the following questions: In what ways did the specter of the plantation hold authority over native-settler intersubjective relations? How did the experience of racial slavery distort or animate black emigres aspirations for and conceptions of freedom? To structure my

³ This is a play on what Hartman describes as “experimentations with freedom.”

inquiry clearly, I focused on the most foundational hegemonic systems that were either created or transformed by transatlantic slavery (of course this is contested). Racial capitalism fundamentally transfigured our conceptions of subjectivity, ordaining worthiness for personhood and has irrevocably altered our perceptions of kinship, community, and the essence of being in relation (Glissant and Wing, 1997). Defined as “the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person” (Leong, 2013, p. 2152), racial capitalism offers a paradigm beyond unsophisticated designations of Liberia as ‘underdeveloped’ or ‘resource-cursed’. Instead, I examine the nation’s economic history to map out the influence of racial slavery on its developmental trajectory. Colonial slavery introduced militaristic views of agency and sovereignty. It made sense to me that if indeed anti-blackness expressed itself in Liberia, the domains of personhood, kinship, labor and economy, and sovereignty would be the most revealing terrains to study.

Why were some people invested in sustaining slavery's harmful ideas and practices, and who gained or suffered from this system? Could they envision freedom without referencing of slavery as requisite? Peyton Skipwith noted that in Liberia, wealth was often associated with enslaving indigenous Africans. To what extent was the "normatively framed general good life of a society" (Berlant, 2007, p.756) defined through racial capitalist terms? In Liberia, the dialectics of hereditary racial slavery were expressed in similar and distinctive ways. How did colonial slavery's shaping of family and kinship influence perceptions of familial structures in Liberia? Was reproductive labor gendered and racialized? Why did children of Americo-Liberian women automatically inherit 'settler' status, while those of indigenous women inherited 'native' status? These questions probe the deep-seated racial hierarchies transplanted and modified in Liberia.

Epistolary Archives of the Skipwith Family

Chapter IV of this thesis explores some of the early transatlantic encounters in Liberia, focusing on Randall Miller’s *Dear Master: Letters of a Slave Family* (1978). These letters, spanning from 1834 to 1865, provide valuable insights into the values, self-perceptions, and private lives of black American emigrants in Liberia, particularly the Skipwith Family. Emancipated by Virginia planter John Hartwell Cocke, the Skipwiths missives offer a firsthand account of their experiences in Liberia. By means of the information disclosed in the communiqués, my aim is to

represent the complexities of those initial encounters between continental and diasporic Africans in Liberia, alongside the master-slave dialectic between the Skipwiths and their former owners.

The majority of the Skipwith correspondence, addressed to their former owners, raises questions about the authenticity of the sentiments and experiences described. The fact that even occasional letters to their kin—enslaved and free—across America could be intercepted by whites suggests that personal details or radical thoughts might have been intentionally omitted (R. Miller, 1978, p. 43). Therefore, simply uncovering evidence of existence and political identity from an archive marked by immense fear and humiliation (Cesaire, 2000) is inadequate for thoroughly understanding and representing Liberia's history and its people (Krug, 2018, p. 5).

The Skipwith letters, sent across the Atlantic via merchants, colonial agents, or friends travelling back to the Americas, offer a glimpse into the “slave attitudes, values, and skills” (Miller, 1978, p. 43) that endured in the context of a nominal emancipation as well as their efforts to carve out space and place for themselves on the west coast of Africa. Enslaved in Virginia by the John Hartwell Cocke line, the Skipwith family resettled in Liberia upon purchasing their freedom. Their writings describe their attempts to establish a new life on the west coast of Africa as free people.

The narratives contained within the collection encapsulated a broad range of themes such as death, grief, love, and fear. The writings also often described the mundane and unremarkable events of daily life, specifically matters such as lack of sustenance, declining health, the weather, marriage, gossip, worship and the hereafter, financial uncertainties, trade politics, and settler-native affairs. The Skipwiths sometimes wrote about yearning for ‘home’—home being the Cocke estate. Generally, such matters were described as ‘dull’ by the Skipwiths but the monotonous is revealing of how insufferable conditions are incarcerated within the quotidian lives of black folks everywhere. As Fanon would describe it, in whatever space or place, “the Negro remains a Negro” (Fanon, 1968, p. 173). These accounts of systemic and social denigration belong as much to the sphere of the routine as they do to the sphere of the obscene, calamitous, and uninhabitable. So, I am betrothed in a critical revisiting and revising of dull life in Liberia’s early social history, read vis-à-vis the theoretical protocols of the black radical

tradition, that calls attention to a history of poetics, aesthetics, and community practices (Karavanta, 2013, p. 44) generated out of necessity and longings for authentic freedom.

Archive(s) as Meaning Making Entities

Before detailing my theoretical framework, it is imperative to acknowledge the substantial challenges that inhere in archival research. It is critical to recall that the concept of the archive comes into being alongside the expansion and consolidation of the modern nation-state. Specifically, colonial repositories were created to compile empirically measurable data on the constituency and geographical expanse within a given settler or metropolitan state's sphere of influence. This data was crucial for the state to substantiate—or perhaps more accurately, fabricate—its historical existence and establish a collective identity among its citizens, a matter I will explore further in subsequent chapters on the myth of the white nation-state. And it is only by way of such proceedings that the archive becomes the substratum of the nation-state form and etches its authority, influence, and legitimacy (Adams-Cambell et al., 2014, p.109). In this regard, colonial repositories are archives of unequal power relations and therefore must be regarded as sophisticated instruments of governance (Stoler, 2002, p. 87) and nation-building projects. They index which individuals and events are adjudicated as relevant to national identity and memory. Moreover, archives reveal how objects and subjects are constituted, shaping their conditions of possibility. Viewing archives as part of a fundamental epistemic foundation, they "establish statements as events and things" (Foucault and Sheridan, 1972, p. 128) and influence the discursive field, determining what can and cannot be enunciated or even contemplated. Put simply, archives are meaning-making entities. Of course, "we cannot evade writing from some social or discursive location" (Smith, 1997, p. 114). Therefore, it is essential to formulate an analytical approach that ascertains the conceptual, terminological, and discursive syntax of possibility for the present monograph. The question is how to comprehend/speak/represent/re/member the life of the 'Other', 'the black' without reperforming an epistemic violence is a constant challenge. By setting forth these limits from the onset, a framework is provided for the subsequent analysis of the scholarship in IR in the subsequent

chapter. Ultimately, I am proposing a shift in emphasis to reframe the ways we think about ethnically-driven conflict to emphasise a relation between the ‘ethnic’ and the ‘racial’.

Along with that, the archive wields influence over and often eclipses our historical imagination, this most apparent in that struggle to recount radical political ideologies forged by those living as fugitives—because Liberia was imagined by some as a haven for the escaped. In part, this is due to the fact that those on the run leave minimal traces of inhabitation, both physically and in their communications. Moreover, radical thinkers must often evade detection and consequently encode their ideas inconspicuously. Perhaps, as Nourbese Philip would discern, these are stories “that can only be told by not telling” (Philip and Boateng, 2008, p. 191). However, the accrued silences, strategic omissions (as noted about the Skipwith letters above), and interpolated fabulations that animate the inadequate annals are inexorably encountered by every scholar attempting to do historical work on “the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved” (Hartman, 2019, p. xiii). By “interpolated fabulations,” I refer to how, similar to my experience within the constraining framework of double consciousness—which Du Bois describes as a shame-laden awareness of “always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 194)—the historical figures under study were also embedded. Double consciousness involves an unceasing cognizance of one’s identity being bifurcated: one’s self-perception and the identity imposed by a society viewing them through an anti-black racial lens. Du Bois describes this as a feeling of “two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body” (p. 194).

A Genealogy of Anti-Blackness

By grounding my argument in Black Studies and using *black study* as a method of inquiry to read the archives, my general aim is to demonstrate how structural racial blackness, as opposed to cultural ethnicity, serves as the semiotic realm through which the politics of ethnicity, nationalism, culture, religion, gender, and class converge and are persistently reconfigured. For indeed, ethnicity has been generally regarded as a cultural identity or a cultural mode of self-identification under neoliberal multicultural regimes when it should be (as I will argue)

recalibrated as a question of ontology in slavery's afterlife. This method of reading enabled me to interrogate the shortcomings of both IR and Africanist, post-colonial, feminist, etc. scholarship in addressing the complexity of Liberia's current predicament and to more accurately depict the embedded racial institutions which govern that country's broader historical trajectory and most significant events. And it also allowed me to read the desires of the repatriated communities through the interface of slavery's afterlife.

George Beckford asserts that institutions, shaped by distinct historical circumstances, regulate human activity. Reasonably then, our critical analyses must be historical in nature. This indicates that our focus is on political economy, where all aspects of human activity are integrated into a comprehensive analysis (Beckford, 1999, pp. xvi-vi). This manuscript examines the political economy of anti-blackness in Liberia. I am endeavouring to read the archives anew, through a lens that accounts for the authority anti-blackness held over the black psyche and intersubjective relations in a sphere of life that was haunted by power. I think of it more as a genealogy of social and political consciousness in a historical milieu circumscribed by racial slavery and colonialism. Genealogy imparts a way to investigate how power has metamorphosed in response to evolving historical situations (Carter, 2008, p. 45) and their impact on individuals and communities. I endeavour to conjure the evolution of people's ideas—that is map their evolution—and bring to the fore the limitations they levy upon us (Foucault qtd. in Simon, 1971, p. 201). This sort of analytic practice will lay bare the ways in which the exceptional violence of racial slavery, and its accompanying anti-black notions of 'the human', have been normalized with the accumulation of time and weaved into ordinary life—unveiling just how interconnected and pervasive the workings of power are in black (Liberian) social, cultural, and political life.

Overall, my method of analysis interweaves relevant historical literature focusing on 19th-century racialist ideas to expand current understanding of the early settlement period. Reading the archives in this way revealed that what is contemporarily referred to and expressed as ethnopitics was explicitly expressed in racial terms throughout the 19th century. This also speaks to my reasoning for choosing to analyze older materials where Americo-Liberians explicitly described indigenous Africans and themselves in racial terms. It is my argument that only with the accumulation of time did these things become folded into the rhetoric of ethnicity. By drawing out these discursive continuities the goal is to show how this mode of thought has

remained only its expression has changed under the rubrics of neoliberalism. It is my attempt to “formulate a story that acquires its coherence through the ability to craft links between the beginning and the end” (Mbembe, 2002, p. 21).

In the chapter that follows, I question the injurious methodologies, biases and assumptions deeply ingrained within governing research paradigms. It seems to me that the problematic of “Europhone intellectualism” (Appiah, 1993) pervades the modern episteme. I specifically focus on describing the roots that international relations has in racial anthropology (or scientific racism in palaeoanthropology). These fields circumscribe our understandings of the economic, cultural, political, and psychic dimensions of colonial and post-colonial life. However, my critique goes beyond merely recognising these challenges; it seeks to break free from these paradigms, aiming to postulate not only a deeper understanding of the Liberian situation but also to sketch a new methodological approach for studying conflict in Africa. This study is written from the “undercommons of enlightenment” (Harney and Moten, 2013, p. 26), and explicitly refuses positivist epistemological frames of inquiry. My writing and research practice is one that transcends the capitalist notion of the concept as property (“Duke Franklin Humanities Institute”, 2016, 49:54). By engaging with and alongside scholars, I hope we can shift from theorizing to be 'first' to theorizing for the purpose of communal understanding and futurity.

I begin from a position of extreme distrust of language and do not believe that English—or any European language, for that matter—can truly speak our truths without the language in question being put through some sort of transformative process. A decontaminating process is probably more accurate, since a language as deeply implicated in imperialism as English has been cannot but be contaminated by such a history and experience.

—M. NourbeSe Philip ⁴

There is a point in which methods devour themselves.

—Frantz Fanon ⁵

II Epistemic, Conceptual and Discursive Limits

The main arguments in this chapter, and the thesis as a whole, are grounded in the foundational concepts of Afro-Pessimism, a critical sub-field of Black Studies deeply beholden to Black feminist thought. Afro-Pessimism takes as its fundamental inquiry the emergence of the *ethnos*. Black Studies represents the intellectual culmination of the long and enduring struggle for Black freedom. It critiques Western civilization, shaped by African methods of refusal and resistance, which are rooted in a collective acquaintance with the uncompleted history slavery and colonialism (Robinson, 2000). By unveiling the unfixed nature of blackness, it conceptualises blackness as a transnational phenomenon with context specific articulations and workings. Blackness is inherently resistant to disciplined, rigid accounts of its unfolding (Gordon, 2010, p. 195). The study of blackness places particular emphasis on the construction of black existence as an ontological problem for whiteness, affecting both the public and private sphere, the nation-state, and even the neoliberal multi-cultural jubilees of racial diversity (Dumas, 2016, p. 12) that materialized with the New World Order. The provocative question that frames Black Studies is,

⁴ (2017, p. 55)

⁵ (1986, p. 14)

as articulated by Jean Genet in *Les Negres*, “What exactly is a black?” (Genet and Frechtman, 1969)

On the Enduring Afterlife of Slavery in Liberia

The exploitation of slave labor and commercial trade by the Spanish and Portuguese was integral to the colonization of the Canary Islands, Azores, and Madeira (Robinson, 2000, p. 110). Now, it is true that all ancient civilizations relied on some form of enslavement and therefore the exploitation of enslaved individuals as a labor force in the New World was perhaps a ‘logical’ historical development. However, what Afro-pessimism does for us is emphasize a definitive difference between “the experience of slavery (which anyone can be subjected to) and the ontology of slavery, which in modernity ... becomes the singular purview of the Black” (Wilderson, 2010, p. 18). What made Atlantic slavery idiosyncratic, as Toni Morrison reminds us in *A Mercy*, was its mooring of slavery to blackness (“New York Public Radio”, 2008). It was a peculiar construction of the “Human as not a slave” (Walcott, 2015, p. 94) and a tethering of black skin to perpetual slavery (commodification of human life) and freedom to whiteness. Moreover, racial slavery cannot be limited to the temporal and spatial finitude of the plantation or be regarded as “a political economy organizing the accumulation of surplus value” (Woods, 2019, p. 40). Slavery is also appropriately conceptualized as an occurrence that schematized the modern semiotic cosmos according to its rubrics and brought into being an edifice of humanity in which blackness always represents nonexistence/being (Woods, 2019, p. 40). Put another way, slavery introduced and maintained an ontological and phenomenological global order in which the black represents the antithesis of what it means to be human. Significantly then, it is crucial to understand that the lingering effects of racial slavery extend beyond a mere historical episode; slavery’s disastrous sequel is “deeply impressed upon Black flesh, in the embodiment of the Black person as slave” (Dumas, 2016, p. 14). So, the contemporary state of blackness in the Atlantic world can be thought of as an existence after death; an afterlife of hues (hue is the “external appearance of the face and skin, complexion” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2023)); or what Saidiya Hartman (2006) articulates as the “afterlife of slavery”:

Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life changes, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery. (p. 6)

In Liberia, the pervasive legacy of slavery is markedly visible, with a significant portion of the population, specifically 40% being under the age of 15, attributed to premature mortality rates (Kweme, 2020). Additionally, over half of the population experiences multidimensional poverty, which includes not only financial destitution but also limited access to healthcare, education, and essential services (2023 Multidimensional Poverty Index). This is the essence of my argument: I aim to complicate the concept of blackness on both sides of the Atlantic by highlighting the need for expanded critical spaces to reassess the context of the Liberian civil war's emergence. Furthermore, the purpose of theorizing anti-blackness in this manner is not to provide a “prescription for repair” for racial injustice (Halberstam, 2013, p. 5); rather I seek to cultivate a more meticulous perspicacity of the conditions that enclose black life within a carefully orchestrated worldly context calculatedly intent on their expulsion. This sort of radical (where radicality pertains to or impacts the fundamental nature of something) practice is one of the first principles of black intellectual tradition and is what Malcom X urgently called upon us to take part in when he stated, “*We have to go to the root. We have to go to the cause. Dealing with the condition itself is not enough*” (2018).

Withal, afro-pessimism as an analytic, makes way for an exegetic elaboration of how the very being of the African becomes marked as the ultimate representation of lack of civilization, culture, historical movement, place, and humanity (Robinson, 2000, p. 81). Along these lines, and notwithstanding the fluidity and ever-shifting temperament of black identity across transnational space, I am not interested in deploying blackness as a “biological or cultural descriptor” (Weheliye, 2014, p. 3). But rather as a structural locality, a non-human location, one that is subject to gratuitous suffering anterior to any crime (Wilderson, 2010). In the afterlife of slavery, the African body becomes a surrogate of sorts, its fungibility or denied idiosyncrasy makes it “an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values” (Hartman, 1997, p. 21). What has been intimated about ‘the black’ or the negro, also prefigures conceptions of the ethnic (read blackened) 'native' insofar as all of these

racial markers can be gathered under the “the grammar of animality” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 236). The configuration of the animal as a different figuration of blackness, and the blackened African as the human-subject’s discursive integument or what sets the limits of the intelligible subject position from without, is precisely the invention and “mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious and give a public account of its subjectivity” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 3).

The Problem of European Languages

The study of ethnic divisions, patronage networks, and state-sanctioned regimes of violence in sub-Saharan Africa has been contingent on an assemblage of tautological methods that are fundamentally invested in modern paradigms of state, society, sovereignty, and subjectivity, introduced through Europe’s globalization (Berman, 1998, p. 306). On that account, the basic concepts of politico-historical analysis—space, time, personhood, and subjectivity—are not objective universal codes, nor do they precede modern politics, as IR theory would suggest. Providing an adequate and comprehensive narration of the social and political processes that culminated in the Liberian crisis would entail abandoning the epistemic ground upon which we narrate ‘human’ histories (Krug, 2018, p. 5). Consequently, this theoretical meditation is inescapably delimited by the discursive apparatuses within my reach. Indeed, I already find myself at that juncture in which my methods have “devoured themselves” (Fanon, 1968, p. 5). Thus, we must critically examine the adequacy of existing concepts—such as 'sovereignty', 'under/developed', 'un/civilized', and 'pre/modern'—particularly 'sovereignty', in this work, as it pertains to both national sovereignty and self-sovereignty in our study of blackness.

Sovereignty is described as the foundation of individual autonomy (represented and secured, for some, by the General Will) over identifies the similarity of self-control to sovereign performativity and state control over geographical boundaries. It thereby encourages a militaristic and melodramatic view of agency in the spectacle of the event of the decision; and, in linking and inflating consciousness, intention, and decision or event, it has provided an alibi for normative governmentality (Berlant, 2007, p. 755).

Additionally, the prescriptive and opaque indicators of progress—normative concepts such as 'self-determination', 'freedom', 'democracy', 'culture', 'citizen', 'nation-state', 'settler', and 'native' (Pillay, 2018, p. 35)—are articulated within the precincts of the same discursive space that makes anticolonial nationalism and critiques of alien rule conceivable and legible (Getachew, 2019, p.15). Further, the concept of modernity is itself the product of an epistemic scheme within which the ontological imaginings of blackness have been callously restricted; rendering black life forms legible only by virtue of “negative interpretation” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 1).

Moreover, the historical continuity between traditional and modern conceptual frameworks is of importance to African intellectuals who absorb external ideas to think and write about Africa’s past, present, and future. Acknowledging that truth is not the stuff of any one culture and that the notion of a singular truth is obsolete, the acceptance of new truths—as foundations for the implementation of national policies and social life—hinges on effectively managing the affairs between indigenous and modern epistemology (Appiah, 1990).

This linguistic situation is of most importance in the cultural lives of African intellectuals. It is, of course of immense consequence to the citizens of African states generally that their ruling elites are advised by and in many cases constituted europhone intellectuals. But a concern with the relations of “traditional” and “modern” conceptual worlds, with the integration of inherited modes of understanding and newly acquired theories, concepts, and beliefs, is bound to be of special importance in the lives of those of us who think and write about the future of Africa in terms that are largely borrowed from elsewhere. We may acknowledge that the truth is the property of no culture, that we should take truths we need for our lives wherever we find them; but for truths to become the basis of national policy, and more widely, of national life, they must be believed; and whether or not new truths we take from the West will be believed depends in large part on how we are able to manage the relations between our conceptual heritage and the ideas that rush at us from worlds elsewhere (Appiah, 1990, p. 387)

So how does one attend to and contend with this conceptual impasse? Generally, I remain unsure about the specific method or approach necessary to undertake such an enormous and formidable task. And still, I want to intervene in these debates. What I do know is that we must

diachronically evaluate the discursive repertoires and abstract tenets we are beholden to, as we must be intimately acquainted with the historical circumstances that underlie our methodologies and conceptual dispositions (Foucault, 1982, p. 778). So, as George Jackson asked us to do in *Blood in My Eye* (1971), behind the “permitted words”, please “listen for the others!”

Afro-Pessimism as an Analytic

To navigate these perspectives and their inherent limitations, I employ an Afro-pessimist lens—a sub-discipline of Black Studies. The materialization of Afro-pessimism is linked to a growing apprehension about the shared violent political circumstances that theme the black experience (including the diaspora), albeit without asserting total commensurability. This concern relates to struggles for freedom through, around, and under the racializing institutions of neoliberal modernity. This shared distress is inextricably tied to the daunting recognition of not only the interlocking and enduring material and political-symbolic conditions that haunt the historical trajectories of post-slavery societies transnationally, but also—and perhaps more fundamentally—the immeasurable and pervasive impact of the world-altering transformation that marked the inception of racial slavery itself and shaped its intractable substructure (Sexton, 2016). Thus far, I’ve mapped out the productive tensions that underpin this thesis by addressing the limits of the conceptual frames at our disposal for discussing Liberia, Africa, and Blackness, acknowledging that these frames cannot be fully abandoned. So then, what language do Black Studies, and Afro-Pessimism in particular, offer for navigating such treacherous conceptual spaces?

It is insufficient to adopt the analytical paraphernalia of the systems within which the degradation unfolds and then use them to assess its operational culpability. Instead, we must catechize the underlying structural makeup of the general apparatus that creates the conditions of consent for such egregious operations in the first place (Sexton, 2016, pp. 10-11). Thus, my approach is grounded in an unwavering commitment to take flight from “that contested space we claim as intellectual home” (Berry et al., 2017, p. 324) and to phenomenologically advance the limiting concepts and terminologies as part of my object of analysis. In practice, this means re-working the same language to convey new meanings. Indeed, this is one of the fundamental

preoccupations of Black Studies, as reflected throughout the chapters of this dissertation. I grapple with these complexities by engaging with—and at times, critiquing—the very terms and concepts central to my analysis. For instance, while I utilize the linguistic dichotomy and paradigms of ‘settler’ and ‘native’ (I elaborate on this below) only to trouble their historical encumbrance and implications and shed light on both their usefulness and limitations. Similarly, while I consciously avoid using some terms that may perpetuate oppressive paradigms, their very absence from my discourse is a political statement—an intentional vacuum that invites scrutiny and possibly fosters new and different kinds of conversation and meaning-making.

The theoretical tools of Black Studies provide a valuable lens through which I can critically engage with the normative assumptions in IR literature, allowing me to interpret ethnicity in a non-conventional way. Much of the scholarship within Black Studies focuses on Liberia’s early history, given its profound significance to discussions on enslavement, freedom, the “Back-to-Africa” movement, and post-Civil War Reconstruction. On the other hand, African Studies literature often focuses on the quasi-colonial power dynamics that arose in Liberia, normally relating the repatriated blacks as 'settlers' who participated in a form of indirect governance or "sub-imperialism" injurious to the local Africans (Hargreaves, 1971, p. 197; Akpan, 1973). Part of the problem here is that the study of international relations in Africa is lacking due to excessively focusing on Africa’s political development from the 15th century onwards, particularly in relation to Westphalian models. Similarly, Conflict Studies commonly label Liberia as a ‘failed state’—a term used for government apparatuses that are perceived to be so shrunken that they cannot dispense fundamental services such as territorial management, education, healthcare, and legitimate institutions to their citizens. Deliberations on failed states generally focus on the 'decline of state capacity' or their failure to maintain peace, stability, and security; exercise control over the territory under their jurisdiction; and generate economic growth (Wyler, 2007). Of interest to me in this work is that these terms are derived from a racially inflected lexicon of underdevelopment that has its origins in cultural anthropology. Through the space opened by Hartman’s concept of the afterlife of slavery, I offer a different and more nuanced way that helps us to draw out the problems of viewing Liberia through the lens of failure and mismanagement.

Theoretically, I am interested in how diverse fields such as the humanities, political theory, post-colonial studies, African studies, feminism, and cultural anthropology have interpreted Liberia's political and economic trajectory. These mainstream theorizations significantly influence how Africa is centered and interpreted in international politics. I deliberately chose these epistemic locations because they often, likely unintentionally, draw from existentialist philosophical thought, which is implicitly privileged in disputes over the meaning and truth about the fundamental nature of human existence (Jackson, 2020). I am not suggesting there is absolute theoretical harmony across the texts and theories I engage with; rather, I argue that despite a variety of thoughts and levels of criticality, these regularly draw on the onto-epistemic conventions "that seek to define blackness through the prism of abject animality" (Jackson, 2020, p. 34), both historically and currently.

'Natives,' 'Settlers,' and the Problematic of Perpetual Placeless-ness

In trying to theorise Americo-Indigenous/'native'-'settler' relations, the language of criticism at one's disposal "like 'settler',' 'native' and 'freedom'" (Woods, 2019, p. 38) becomes inoperable when theorizing about the socially, civically, and politically dead (Patterson, 1982). Moreover, descendants of enslaved Africans should not (though they oftentimes are) be collapsed into the category of 'settlers' even if they have been involved in a process of settlement. But one cannot theorise maritime slavery native-settler relations by way of incommensurability either, insofar as we are not contending with an instance of Euro-American settler-colonialism because repatriation signified a return to an ancestral homeland. The analytical distinction, between white and black settler-nationalist governance schemes, serves not to efface the role of Americo-Liberians in the perpetuation of colonial violence (for lack of a better term). Euro-American settler-colonialism is distinctive because it begins with the coming of strangers who disembark on their journey with the deliberate goal of dwelling or taking root on stolen lands and demand "settler sovereignty over all things" (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 5). What is more, the settler's identity is beholden to this dwelling, for the 'settler' likens the disciplined performance of 'civilized' subjectivity with a capacity to reproduce those intemperate modes of capital production that can only be sustained through a parasitic and exploitative relationship with earth and its inhabitants. Furthermore, settler-colonialism, as a conceptual apparatus, forwards a set of

political and ethical demands that are bound to humanist iterations of sovereignty and optimistic resolutions (in the form of political recognition recognition) that Native Studies and Black Studies would generally push back against. Nonetheless, by means of the exhaustible terms and concepts available to us (such as settler, native, and freedom), I endeavour to genealogically reconnoitre the political sequelae of these veiled proceedings of “racisms and colonialisms” (King et al., 2020, p. 6) as they were expressed in Liberia. My intention is to trouble the argument of black imperialism by drawing attention to the multifaceted and ever-evolving sociopolitical topography within and surrounding Monrovia during this epoch to refrain from implicating black folks in their own oppression. I am more interested in situating them as a people confronted with some of the most erudite and convoluted schemes of “repression and exploitation” in modern history (Robinson, 1990, p. 150).

Historians of Liberia have described Americo-Liberian rule as a form of European settler-colonialism or an imperialist project in blackface (Akpan, 1973). Indeed, "it was not then (nor is it today) unusual to hear 'tribal' people refer to the Americo-Liberians as 'White' people" (Mgbeoji, 2003, p. 5). However, this interpretation is challenged by the fact that the 'settlers' did not assume dominance over the country until 1841, despite having arrived in 1822, and they did not hold the monopoly on violence during those first two decades (Levitt, 2005, p. 85). The notion of complete settler-colonial power is further contradicted by multiple defeats of the Americo-Liberian military by indigenous Liberians in the late 19th century, indicating that the 'settler' state did not fully control violence in the interior or coastal areas until at least 1915 (Levitt, 2005, p. 123). Levitt has also critiqued this theoretical conjecture, noting that commercial relations between the republic and influential seaside chiefdoms suggest that the localized political structures of the Bassa, Kru, and Grebo were comparably robust in political, economic, and military terms (Levitt, 2005, p. 123).

Following Levitt, I argue that the suggestion that the repatriate elite were reproducing a settler-colonial project not only fails to critically account for that problem of perpetual placelessness, that “definitive person-displaced” (Woods, 2019, p. 45) conditionality that contours deracinated black diasporic life but for the common ancestry that makes Americo-Liberians and indigenous Africans kindred. More precisely, the 'settler' and 'native' are beholden to one another by flesh, bone, and blood, and so, they “cannot deny [one another], nor can they ever be divorced”

(Baldwin, 1963, p. 89). And yet, despite this beholding, there exists a peculiar and deep-rooted loss that specifically emerges from the experience with American slavery and our analyses must urgently contend with it. Thinking with James Baldwin (1963), while the uncaptured African endured dispossession, injustice, and the brutalities of feudalism, they did not endure total estrangement from their lineage and their “mother did not sing ‘sometimes I feel like a motherless child’” (p. 89). The enslaved person was forcibly displaced, severed from kin, and subsequently definitively constructed as alien, outsider, or refugee in the new domains they were emplaced (Hartman, 2006, p. 5). Centuries later, this same ordeal would repeat itself for their descendants, as America sought to expunge blackness from its midst. Perhaps it is more appropriate to refer to Americo-Liberians as “*forcibly dismantled Africans*” (Morgan, 2019, my emphasis). Displant (verb) as in to dislodge, displace or transplant in a new place (*Collins Dictionary*, n.d.).

Africa(ns) as Onto-Epistemic Negation

One may inquire about the applicability of an analytical framework that emerged from the institution of racial slavery to study a continental African context. However, I believe that query itself warrants interrogation. Firstly, the recognition of the body as a site for analysis in political thought logically extends to the raced body as a focal point for phenomenological theorization, specifically the theorizing of African non-being. Secondly, “blackness does not originate from Africa. Rather, Africa and its diaspora become black at a specific point in their history” (Warren, 2018, p. 222). Even the status of the ostensibly ‘free’ or ‘uncaptured’ African is entangled with the logics of slavery.

Even the African that was not captured was a slave in relation to the rest of the world, his or her freedom from chains and distance from the middle passage notwithstanding.

Though this free African may know him/herself through coherent cultural accoutrements unavailable to black Americans and Caribbeans, he is positioned, paradigmatically as someone unable to attain to immanent differentiation or to the clarity of self-knowledge. She is recast as an object in a world of subjects (Wilderson, 2009, p. 122).

The very essence of freedom for the African, irrespective of the continental African's experience with the middle passage, is compromised on a global scale. Despite possessing a distinct cultural identity not accessible to black Americans, Caribbeans, and other diasporic Africans the free African is paradigmatically positioned as incapable of achieving immanent differentiation or self-awareness. The African is relegated to the status of objecthood. Thus, we must attempt to reorient our critical paradigms to attend to the transformative impact the insidious inoculation of racial blackness had on Africa's western seaboard, a process that coincided with the second wave of imperial expansion and recalibration of 'the human' in essentialized biological terms.

Biological essentialism/determinism ("biological essentialism," 2024) can be understood as:

The belief that 'human nature', an individual's personality, or some specific quality (such as intelligence, creativity, homosexuality, masculinity, femininity, or a male propensity to aggression) is an innate and natural 'essence' (rather than a product of circumstances, upbringing, and culture).

The reorganization of global geopolitical commerce relations, beginning in the 15th century, and the subsequent exploitation of the Global South accelerated the development of Atlantic economies. This was historically framed as the natural outcome of evolutionary processes. Such temporalization of human differences explicitly positioned industrialized societies and the white populations they encompassed as further along the universal trajectory toward ontological coherence. More specifically, it was the blackened African that would be ungendered (Spillers, 1987) and made a referent object and cast as the quintessential embodiment of cultural inferiority and negative difference in colonial discourse (Bhabha, 1994, p. 75). Consequently, blackness performs a necessary and constitutive function for Darwin's "dysselected by evolution until proven otherwise" (Wynter, 2003, p. 267) anthropology of social evolution, nature, and chronological time (McClintock, 1995, p. 36; Darwin, 1876).⁶ As McClintock puts it, social Darwinism applied the taxonomic project, hitherto used only in the study of nature, to the province of cultural histories of the human (1995, p. 37). Time transformed into temporality and was used to elaborate various cartographies of social power as well as to interpret and construct a

⁶ This happened in aggregation with a continuum of other colonized persons of darker hues, all categorised as 'native's, who were being absorbed into biological anthropology's systems of classification and apprehended as the corporeal manifestation of archaic, immutable Others.

“global allegory of ‘natural’ social difference” (1995, p. 37). Writing during the same period G.W.F. Hegel, in symbiotic relation to Darwin, discussed history as the progressive movement of the human race towards freedom, but his formulations did not apply to Africa. Indeed, he proclaimed that “Africa is no historical part of the world, it has no movement or development to exhibit” (Hegel, 1956, p. 99). I will return to Hegel’s philosophical thought in later chapters. Additionally, the classification of the blackened (native) African with reference to myths of barbarity, abjection, and atemporality—as being destitute of any relationship to unfixed time (Wynter, 2003, p. 267)—is an unremarkable exercise that constitutes the condition of possibility for the geopolitical West and the European, European American, or eventually 'white' subjects it claims (Chandler, 2008, p. 348).

The point I am trying to make here is that the historical and discursive reproduction of Black Africa and its people as ontological nothingness coincides with a universalized symbolic schema of representation. This schema is contingent upon "political-ideological intention" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 71) and is rooted in both coloniality and chattel slavery. This system of representation was instrumental in facilitating the project of globalizing Europe and constructing 'the human' in racial terms. The modern world, which fabricated the concepts of 'negro,' 'black,' and 'native,' did not emerge accidentally but was deliberately created through the violence of dislocation, deprivation, and abjection (Warren, 2018, p. 29), along with enormous the "expenditures of psychic and intellectual energies" (Robinson, 2000, p. 4) by europhone intellectuals. On the underside of this historical threshold was a world in which blackness took form as “available equipment” or paraphernalia— Heidegger describes availableness as the “*the way or category of being* of the entities” (Cerbone, 2021; emphasis in original)—onto which countless interpretations (interpretations which would constantly exceed logic) could be registered (onto equipment). The function of the blackened African body is to act as a conceptual lynchpin for the metaphysics of white presence (Heidegger, 2014). Which essentially means supporting the existential journey of the social abstraction called ‘the human’ (Warren, 2018, p. 27).

Furthermore, Africa, as a blackened geography, represents a break or fracture between the West's perceived and actual identity. It is not merely a relic of Western philosophical imagination but, paradoxically, remains a fundamental element of the world it has created, justifying its brutalities against the rest of the world that extend its perverse existence (Mbembe, 2001, p. 2). Indeed, "No status-quo power can long maintain itself without some claim to moral integrity unless it does so

by use of naked force, and history illustrates that force alone is insufficient to maintain and hold power" (Bin Wahad et al., 1999, p. 59).

The “freedom drive that animates black performances” (Moten, 2003, p. 12) is thus directly tied to a counter-politics committed to the subversion and unmaking of narratives that temporally fix black Africa and its inhabitants to the genesis of developmental-historical time and social evolution (Ferguson, 2006, pp. 177-179). Therefore, the geographic and temporal emancipation of black Africa and its people is beholden to the very anti-black coordinates of ethno-state formations and the global capitalist circuits of accumulation that require the phenomenological existence of the ‘dark continent’ and different figurations of the slave (in this case the native) to be the constitutive metaphysical perimeter that brings the human in its free form (whiteness) and European nationhood into being and relation.

Returning to the topic of war in Africa, the notion of black cultural pathology serves as the overarching theoretical apparatus animating inquiries into the root causes of fighting. This concept has historically visited an enormous amount of violence on the black psyche (Fanon, 1968). Pathology holds both a social significance—as seen in medicine and disciplinary practices à la Foucault—and a psychoanalytic importance. Research on the proliferation of African conflicts in the 1990s suggests that violence became a prevalent aspect of social and political behavior, potentially serving as an end goal rather than a means to an end. This phenomenon, widely termed “a culture of war” (Vigdis Broch-Due, 2005, p. 16), situates violence and war as self-perpetuating with no foreseeable conclusion (Allen, 1999, p. 369). Moreover, this problematic cannot be effectively countered by way of recourse to what is commonly perceived as a ‘traditional’ African culture, which is replete with colonial fabrications and mythical elements (Ranger, 2012, p. 212). The study of culture itself has a history and genealogy that we must contend with—one that begins to reveal how “violence precedes and exceeds blacks” (Wilderson, 2010, p. 76). I am building an argument about how racial ideologies—as they relate to processes of subject formation and the embodiment of coherent humanity, specifically, “the subject's desire for a pure [racial] origin” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 75)—haunt contemporary iterations of ‘ethnicity’. Avery Gordon notes that “haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with” (2008, p. xvi). The next chapter extends the discussions of Afro-

pessimism from this chapter, applying its acumens to critique the constrictions of global political thought. It specifically examines how the enduring significations that propel anti-blackness in political theory are rooted in what I term racial anthropology—that is the coming to *be* of “Man,” (Wynter, 2003), the “patriarch-form” (Da Silva, 2018), or ‘the human’ (Carter, 2023 p. 12).

*Our purpose here is to understand the essence of this living, moving thing so that we will
understand how to move against it.*

—George Jackson⁷

III Black Studies in Conversation with International Relations Theory

The categorization of post-colonial African conflicts as merely ethnic in nature distorts their underlying sequelae—that is their complexities and forerunning histories (do Céu Pinto Arena, 2022) and consequently forecloses several critical affordances. Although, a subset of the critical writings on Africa’s ‘forever wars’—that is the idea that Africa’s wars are without cause and ideology and are therefore unassumingly motivated by a backwards desire to perform grotesque acts of violence (Gettleman, 2010)—has countered such nonsensical ideas. This chapter puts forth a relatively deeper engagement on the interactions, intersections, and interdependencies between ‘ethnicity’, class, gender, globalization, nationalism, political violence, neocolonialism, geopolitical histories, and the elaborate mechanisms of political patronage and associated “shadow economies” (Schneider, 2000). Still, much of the work engenders a general conceptual problematic insofar as it regards ethnicity as having inherent explanatory power, as a cultural given, when ethnicity is itself a category that should engender interrogation (David Turton qtd. in Keen, 2008, p. 14). The assemblage of cultural inheritances in what has been apprehended as ‘ethnic’ identity, in Liberia, assembled itself through an amalgamation of different political conditions, struggles for space and place, different registers of spirituality (Alexander, 2006), nomadic interactions, and sporadic episodes of migration. Many indigenous Liberians came from the Old Sudanic Kingdoms. As well, migration not only ruptures borders but shows that cosmologies are in fact flowing and unsolidified. All of these dynamics contributed to the materialization of different iterations of cultural consciousness and outsider constructed tropes. Prior to analysing the ideas, power dynamics, contestations, and conflicts surrounding ‘racial’ and ‘ethnic’ significance, it is crucial to question their context of emergence. Simply stating that

⁷ (1971, p. 43)

certain societal elements exacerbate ‘ethnic’ tensions is inadequate, as it implies that ethnicity, in its modern racialized formation, is a pre-existing concept. Racism and the perception of inherent human differences regularly manifest in contexts where diverse ethnic groups interact; however, this observation alone fails to elucidate the varied practices involved in constructing ethnic distinctions. Both race and ethnicity are not a natural occurrence, but rather temporally fluctuating, constructed, and utilized phenomenological concepts.

This project takes a different approach. I am making the claim that the quotidian socio-historical elaborations of ethnopolitical subjection, immiseration and exclusionary politics are unworkable or not up to the task of drawing attention to the specific ways the ethnically-apprehended body is normatively mobilized to serve the post 1945 project of racio-cultural imperialism or “Eurocentric culturalism” (Hobson qtd. in Anievas et al., 2015, p. 81). While critical scholarship in IR (Hobson, 2007; Hobson, 2012; Sabaratnam, 2011; Shilliam, 2010; Barkawi, 2006) has accomplished many goals in getting us closer to understanding post-colonial conflicts in Africa, it has ultimately fallen short with respect to transforming our conceptualization of social and historical processes of ethnic formations outside of the cultural and has not helped us to reorient our visions of the political in non-liberal terms (Thomas, 2011). To critique the “stereotyped image on the basis of a prior political normativity is not to dislocate it but to dismiss it” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 67). Dislocation is a movement which can only be made a conceptual possibility by way of grappling with the ‘effectivity’ of a concept. “That is with the repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependence that constructs the colonial identification of the subject (both colonizer and colonized)” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 67).

The peculiar problem we are grappling with is the abandonment of the racial by mainstream scholars of IR—despite the fact that race and racism were vital to IR’s conception, gestation, and birth. Indeed, “IR discourse is predicated on a systematic politics of forgetting, an abstraction from the role of racialized violence in the construction of nation states and the system they inhabit” (Freeman et al., 2022). Through a theoretical parsing of anti-blackness and anti-black attitudes in civil and global society, this chapter interrogates the limits of cultural ethnicity, particularly in its premature anthropological iterations and contemporary liberal iterations. Culture, as the designated epistemic foundation for the critical development of international relations theory and its connection to cognate disciplinary formations that recourse to IR’s

foundational concepts (e.g., Critical Peace and Conflict Studies, African and feminist perspectives on war, post-colonial scholarship etc.) is inadequate for addressing the lives and experiences of African diasporic people everywhere. I echo Du Bois' prophetic diagnosis that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color- line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea" (1903, p. 15). Certainly, "Du Bois' discourses broaches an investigation of the terms by which we would attempt to render a theoretical disposition on the constitution of social and historical identification, as such" (Chandler, 2013, p. 69). Overall, it is my position that the occurrence of slavery and its enduring afterlives must be included in our accounts of historical and contemporary African affairs on both sides of the Atlantic. A growing body of scholarship has troubled the epistemic erasure of IR's racial and imperial origins in order to effectively engage questions of race and racism in global politics (Anievas et al., 2015). I am extending such critiques. Because, as noted in the epigraph of this chapter, our purpose here is to comprehensively understand this living moving thing called 'politics' so that we can understand how we can move against it.

This chapter serves as a conjectural exercise primarily devoted to elaborating the ethno-cultural concept of 'ethnicity' as congruent with or beholden to the ideational category that has come to be described as 'race' (Chandler, 2008, p. 346). I locate ethnicity's modern recapitulations as an extension of racial slavery's attendant global-historical modus operandi of typologizing human bodies which is epistemologically sustained by myths originating in the 'primal scene' and European phantasmagorias for a pure racial origin (Bhabha, 1994, p. 76). And Mythmaking has been observed in every instance of prolonged conflict in the modern era (Busumtwi-Sam, 2002, pp. 99). These imaginaries may be said to belong to the province of culture—to which the concept of ethnicity is wedded—as culture is usually enclosed by legends, desires, and assemblages of social relations that construct a world in which the human-being can feel a sense of belonging or feel 'at home'. However, as Sara Ahmed aptly reminds us, "if the world is made white then a body-at-home is one that can inhabit whiteness" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 153). Myths facilitate the abatement of internal differences within a particular group, while emphasising distinctions in relation to other groups. For example, Americo-Liberians exaggerate cultural differences to clearly distinguish themselves from indigenous Africans. The need for belonging

is the central issue that repatriated peoples were struggling against, and the problem that is at the heart of this chapter.

Conceptual Aporia between ‘Race’ and ‘Ethnicity’

My first concern is the conceptual aporia between the concept of ‘ethnicity’ and the concept of ‘race’. The scenic arrangement of Liberia’s political trajectory, as a story about colonial era configurations and manipulations of primordial ethnicities, implicitly supposes that race and ethnicity, as categories of difference, operate on independent and incompatible registers. Ethnicity and race are sometimes conflated because of a conceptual and linguistic imprecision. Other times, ethnicity is understood to belong to the realm of the cultural and primordial, while race is understood to belong to the inventories of socio-scientific construction. I am interested in drawing out the discourses that work to disguise race *as* ethnicity.

Ethnicity Beyond Linguistic Distinctions

In the Liberian context, ethnographers like Fulton (1972) and McEvoy (1977) classify ethnic groups primarily by language; a method critiqued by Ellis (2007) for its inaccuracies and arbitrariness insofar as not all ethnic groups exhibit unique linguistic traits and their compositions are often unsolidified (pp. 36, 198; see also Schwab’s study in *Tribes of the Liberian Hinterland*). Additionally, ‘ethnicity’, as a discursive qualifier, fails to account for the on-going endurance of West-Central Africans’ by way of assimilation, discontent and aversion, adaptability, and transformation under the precarious circumstances of imperial rule. Ellis argues that the labels ‘tribal’ and ‘ethnic’, as applied by officials in Monrovia or by foreign ethnographers, supplement but do not supplant historical identities (Ellis, 2007, p. 198). He further asserts that notions of ‘tribe’, ‘sub-tribe’, and ‘ethnic group’ are not remnants of a premodern past but are contemporary governance tools that often support national interests and control adversaries (Ellis, 2007, p. 198). Specifically, the designation ‘Krahn’ demonstrates that modern categories often do not reflect ancient lineages but are, in fact, recent constructs (Ellis, 2007, p. 33).

In colonial African societies, capitalism catalysed a general reorganization of the moral economy, recalibrating ‘ethnicity’ as a determinant of social belonging and property ownership. Berman (1998) maps how colonialism disrupted existing social structures, introducing new divisions that restructured indigenous community experiences through conflict and the renegotiation of customs and identity. This disruption resulted in the introduction of new sources of division, shaping diverse and contingent patterns in the experiences of individual ethnic communities. The advent of monetary income, migrant labor, and cash cropping, coupled with efforts by chiefs to control land and labor, undermined traditional generational and gender relations. Berman also discusses the challenges posed by widening disparities in wealth, evolving economic values, and the effects of capitalist social relations on traditional patron/client dynamics.

This shift was exacerbated by Christian converts who, rejecting indigenous beliefs, embraced Anglo-Saxon modernity—signified by literacy in European languages, sartorial choices, and occupation (Berman, 1998, pp. 324-325). Indeed, “only those with recognized ties of kinship and ethnicity could legitimately negotiate the property rights and relations of obligation and reciprocity” (1998, p. 325). This is just one example of how ethnographic processes were essential to the politicization of ‘ethnicity’ in Africa along with the ‘reification’ and sedimentation of affective attachments within communities (Brubaker, 2002, p. 167). In Liberia, the Constitution’s Articles 27(a) and 22(b) restrict citizenship and property ownership to individuals of ‘negro descent’, underlining ethnic considerations in legal and cultural frameworks (Kollehlon, 2008).

Etymology and Conceptual Evolution of Modern ‘Ethnicity’

The term 'ethnicity' derives etymologically from the ancient Greek word 'ethnos,' which corresponds to the modern French linguistic counterpart 'ethnie' (meaning ethnic group) and the congruent adjective 'ethnique.' These terms initially referred to a "company" and later expanded to denote "a people or nation, heathens" (New World Encyclopedia, n.d.)⁸. In the English

⁸ Definition: Ethnicity, <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Definition:Ethnicity&oldid=1131766> (last visited January 16, 2024).

lexicon, the term 'ethnic' evolves into 'ethnicity' through postfixing. In classical Greek usage, 'genos' narrowly defined kin relationships, whereas 'ethnos' branded the 'Other'—often derogatorily, such as for wild animals, foreign or barbarous nations, or husband-killing women (Shahabuddin, 2012). The Homeric texts use 'ethnos' to describe large, undifferentiated groups, whether animals or warriors. In later texts, like those of the New Testament, 'ethnos' signified religious Otherness, branding non-Christian and non-Jewish groups. The derivative adjective 'ethnikos' carried connotations nearly synonymous with barbarity, describing those seen as uncivilized and whose languages were deemed incoherent and unintelligible (Shahabuddin, 2012). These groups were considered the constitutive outside of structured meaning, social order, and acceptable behavior.

Ethnicity as a concept, is complicated and difficult to define insofar as it is intimately linked to both race and culture. Paradoxically, the concept arrives at a historical moment that coincides with the beginning of a discursive estrangement between race and culture in international politics, thereby making it challenging to reductively synthesize both concepts. During the moment of ethnicity's conceptual unfolding, the international political sphere was engrossed in a project of outwardly representing the international playing field as having abandoned the totalizing global structure of racialized geopolitical hierarchy. In this way, ethnicity's onset seemingly marks the extinction of nationalisms and racisms, and a 'levelling' of the global terrain for all sovereign nation-states. Toward this end, the racial is recalibrated in 'ethnic' terms, and racial injustice is rendered a domestic, rather than transnational, problem of latent and lingering 'culturally' rooted pathologies (Heiskanen, 2020, unpublished thesis, p. 2).

Ethnicity is a socio-cultural phenomenon that has accrued its own racial features and connotations over the time of modernity, and as a mode of colonial identification, is implicitly animated by the post-Enlightenment modernist forces of reason, science, and rationality (Da Silva, 2007). Ethnic identification, like most identitarian identifications, is "relational, contingent, and contextual. The identity of the subject is not fashioned in a vacuum but constructed and reconstructed, [with difference], through historical practice and within specific institutional contexts" (Asiedu, 2004, p. 39). Furthermore, the same contextually contingent connotations that construct and reconstruct 'ethnicity' also make semantically intelligible the spatio-temporal logics, ideologies, and practices that postulate African people and cultures as

static, ahistorical, ante political and aberrational. For example, the given terminologies of ‘capacity building’, ‘corruption’, ‘resource curse’ and ‘(bad) governance’ within the context of contemporary ‘development’ initiatives (Pierre, 2020, p. 87)—are imbued with anti-black and anti-African ontologies of ‘the human’—all part of a discourse of civilization often buried beneath the term ‘culture’ and the disciplining discourses of global racial capitalism in their production, reception, and circulation. Of course, there exists an implicit presumption that the state is the primary site in which the political can be/is grounded. This assumption was made only after the wedding of sovereignty to the concept of ‘the human’. In the 17th century scholars acknowledged the political legitimacy of non-Western and non-Christian societies, albeit still characterizing them as ‘savage’ nations. The expansionist imperial goals pursued by the United States Republic and European powers during the 19th century aligned with the materialization of theories that sought to epistemically institute a definite distinction between the Western state-form and other political formations (Vitalis, 2000, p. 341). It is at this historical juncture that international relations theory was dreamed-up as a “a policy science designed to solve the dilemmas posed by empire-building and colonial administration facing the white Western powers expanding into and occupying the so-called ‘waste places of the earth’, as the Global South was commonly referred to by contemporaries” (Anievas et al., 2015, p. 2).

Politicization of Tradition in Africa

The naturalization and propagation of ‘ethnic’ divisions is peculiar given that despite purporting to denote a natural and self-evident phenomenon, the modern notion of ethnicity is relatively recent. The concept term only first surfaces in 1920 and gains rhetorical traction, in Africa, toward the 1950s. Crawford Young explains that the colonial classification system that was imposed on certain African populations was totally imprecise and did not reflect reality (1986). For instance, during the ‘voyages of discovery,’ colonial agents searched for aggregates of indigenous peoples who spoke the same language and discursively produced them as ‘ethnic’ subgroups or ‘tribes’ (Ellis, 2007, p. 198). Indeed, language was the means through which “land, territories, and entire geographical regions were rendered as colonial possessions” (Bhandar, 2018, p. 1). While ‘ethnic’ consciousness existed prior to the 1920s, its meaning differed significantly from contemporary iterations and this meaning is now almost impossible to

reconstruct. We know that ‘ethnicity’ was not typically expressed in political terms and was not connected to the formation and dissolution of centralized power (Pella Jr., 2015). Even more significantly, “post-colonial mobilizing issues of ethnic ‘domination’ and resource distribution were not present” (Young, 1986, pp. 442- 443). Colonial powers essentially projected their own ideas about ‘tribes’ onto a disparate population and anthropologists inaugurated a more disciplined iteration of this process and called it ethnography (Young, 1986, p. 443).

In this thesis, I take ‘ethnic’ identities to be constituted by their mutability and fluidity. I am writing against the colonial discourse that regards cultural, racial, and historical differences (Bhabha, 1994, p. 66) as fixed and determined from without. In the post-colonial regions of the globe. Reason, as a scientific tool, invents “mentally (morally and intellectually) distinct kinds of ‘human’ beings, namely the self-determined subject and its outer-determined Others, the ones whose minds are subjected to their *natural* conditions” (Da Silva, 2007, p. xiii; emphasis in original). In colonial discourse, the supposed immutability of "cultural/historical/racial differences" paradoxically symbolizes both an unchanging order and disorder, decay, and repetitive chaos (Bhabha, 1994, p. 66). Our understanding of African politics is configured and ruptured by these invented projections of ‘traditional’ African cultures, which are rooted in the provincialized experiences of European peoples and arbitrated through their civilization, social structures, and a particular set of cultural assumptions (Robinson, 2000, p. 2). In such formulations, African cosmologies are often reckoned with as ancillary to the European worldview and therefore immaterial to the archives of modernity (Alexander, 2006, p. 296).

African based cosmological systems become subordinated to the European cosmos, not usually expected to accord any significance to modernity’s itinerary, their provenance of little value in the constitution and formation of the very categories on which we have relied (Alexander, 2006, p. 296).

European cosmologies position ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ in the Global South as essentially unintelligible, aberrational, and irreconcilable with the rubrics of modernity. This is part of the analytical problem we are confronted with. IR’s dependence on culture as the problematic focal point for developing an understanding of ethno-politics, only serves to obscure how the cultural politics of the domestic are always already translocal, transregional and transnational.

In the humanist social sciences, the study of 'ethnicity' normally follows three theoretical approaches: primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism. Primordialists view ethnic identities as essentialist, emerging directly from ancient ancestral ties. Instrumentalists, on the other hand, emphasize the strategic manipulation of ethnic markers by political actors or groups. Most contemporary Africanist scholars adopt a constructivist perspective, focusing on the interactions between colonial boundaries and indigenous perceptions in shaping modern ethnic identity. Advancing the argument that colonial powers imposed an external structural framework through categorical definitions and nomenclature, effectively transmogrifying what were hitherto fluid and negotiable group affiliations. Concurrently, indigenous Africans actively engaged with this process, infusing it with the stuff of their own imaginations, inherited memories of the pre-colonial past, and their lived experiences under the brutal realities of direct and indirect colonial governance (Antwi-Ansorge, 2014, p. 66). Antwi-Ansorge's fieldwork on 'ethnic' mobilization during Liberia's civil war reveals that former combatants perceive 'ethnicity' in Liberia as an effect of the interanimations between tradition and political fabrication (2014, p. 66). The affective resonance of 'ethnic' identity is not solely applicable to indigenous groups in the Liberian context. For instance, Americo-Liberians also express primordial dogmas, valuing non-instrumental and emotional aspects that differentiate 'ethnic' identity from other bases for political mobilization and group formation. Americo-Liberians think of themselves as a distinct collective, unified by a lineage that can be traced back to the Americas (Antwi-Ansorge, 2014, p. 68). Obviously, this perception is not predicated on an empirically verifiable and 'primitive' genealogy, it just operates along the same affective registers.

In the current international milieu, liberal individualism holds a dominant position, casting conservative interpretations of 'ethnicity' as archaic or primordial—a point I will further elaborate on later. However, it is a mistake to overlook the importance of 'ethnicity,' especially when dealing with phenomena labeled as 'primitive,' such as the issue of 'ethnic minorities.' Viewing ethnic minorities through the prism of primordial attributes "not only constructs the distinct identities of both minorities and majorities through juxtaposition but also shapes discourse on minority allegiance, particularly when the nation-state's political organization is perceived through the lens of ethnicity, or post-ethnicity as a liberal counter to this primitive notion" (Shahabuddin, 2014, p. 2). This political ontology presents a paradox: reconciling the perceived 'irrational' or affective aspects of 'ethnicity' with a framework rooted in the

Enlightenment principles of 'reason' and 'rationality.' This framework, fundamentally racist, is invested in what Berlant (2007) describes as the "reproduction of ordinary life."

Identity-Based Warfare in the Global South

Post-Cold War, the imagined international community—where "nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in our time" (Anderson, 2006, p. 3)—has seen a surge in identity-based conflicts across the geopolitical Global South, characterized by enormous brutality and prolonged repercussions. The term 'international community' often misleadingly suggests a world of equal nation states, whereas it actually refers to a handful of powerful states predominantly in the Northern Hemisphere (Pillay, 2011). Important conflicts include the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, and the crises in Somalia, South Sudan, South Africa, Sierra Leone, and Liberia (Kaplan, 1994; Kaldor, 2013; Jones and Steadman, 2017). Many still-unfolding or resolved inter-ethnic conflicts are rooted in colonial inheritances or interference by external forces in local economies and politics (Njoroge, 2021, p. 86). Addressing the devastating reverberations of colonialism, post-Cold War militarism, globalization, external debt, and skewed international integration is fundamental for understanding ethno-politics in post-conflict African settings. Liberia is subject to the inequalities and harms mentioned above and that is precisely why I am interested in mapping Liberia as part of the story of American imperial expansionism.

Liberal Peace and the Notion of 'Good Governance'

In the scholarship on post-Cold War dynamics, a central preoccupation was with the concept of the 'failing' or 'fragile' state. Scholars have long contended with what appeared to be "new sorts" (Call, 2010, p. 305) of armed upheavals and political challenges emerging in the aftermath of the Cold War. Particularly, attention has been oriented towards the function of 'ethnic' antagonisms as a source of conflict, generally registering these conflicts as radically different from the conflicts that preceded them (Kalyvas, 2001, p. 99). Generally, new civil wars are depicted as fundamentally apolitical, lawless, and driven by denationalised objectives (Kalyvas, 2001, p. 100). Feminist scholars concerned with militarisation have highlighted the fact that "civilians make up the vast majority of the casualties of contemporary warfare, and that massive

numbers of people are displaced—90% of them women and children" (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey, 2000, p. 1). This is in juxtaposition to old civil wars, which are professed as motivated by ideology, politics, and combined ideological interests (Kalyvas, 2001, p. 100). The Liberian civil war, like other African conflicts, has largely been posited as the sequel of a capacity, security, and legitimacy aperture at the level of the state (Call, 2010). This scholarly discourse has been further influenced by the notion of liberal peace, which finds its genesis in the early-Modern era of European Enlightenment, which has significantly shaped peacebuilding efforts, especially within the United Nations context (Curtis, 2012, p. 10).

What concerns me here is the formulation of ideas of ‘good governance’ within this discursive realm. A “multiparty electoral democracy and a market economy are seen as inherently peaceful and desirable” (Curtis, 2012, p. 10). And schemas for systemic reform are premised on “that self-referential notion that modern, Western, ‘liberal market democracies’ are the normative goal, and that mimicking their structures is the only viable option to overcome the decrepitude that enables criminality, terrorism, and poverty to flourish” (Boas and Jennings, 2007, p. 477). Critical for the functioning of liberal market democracies and their unethical multinationals is the predictability of the political conditions in the poor nations they exploit. This is why they invest in the production of a robust security apparatus to repress any form of “popular resistance to exploitative working conditions, to structural adjustment programs, or the privatization of resources in aid of profit accumulation” (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey, 2000, p. 3). For example, the Liberian state habitually employed coercive force to suppress labor strikes aimed at multinational corporations, such as the Firestone Rubber Plantations—the largest transnational rubber operation in the world. These corporations have historically been, and continue to be, governed by the Jim Crow/anti-black logics of the antebellum U.S. South. (I offer more thoughts along this line in the final chapter of this thesis). My point here is that the globalised multiple jeopardies of neo-colonialism, neo-liberal militarism, nationalism, biopolitical surveillance, securitization (Puar, 2007, p. xxvii), democracy, patriarchy, and racial capitalism form an interlocking and symbiotic system of subjectification. Moreover, liberalism as a technology of governance postulates the responsible (white) subject, “with rights and obligations ensured by the legal apparatus of the state” (Krug, 2018, p. 5), as coaxial with and definitive of the modern ‘human’ (Weheliye, 2014, p. 22). It is against this framework that the African being-made-object must evidence a capacity to *be* a ‘civilized’ ‘human subject’ to be incorporated into the structures that

confer rights. Contemporary social inequalities are a direct manifestation of these liberal proceedings which liberate only the subjects that cohere to the physiognomies of the definitive ‘human’ delineated within its precincts. What is required, then, is something beyond the politics of recognition and outside of the discursive apparatuses proposed by liberal humanisms, because we are dealing with an ontological problem that cannot be remedied via liberal treaties (Sithole, 2015). Such techniques of democratic inclusion not only propagate the fiction of the autonomous liberated subject, but also obscure unequal power relations through processes of assimilating non-normative bodies into hegemonic institutions. Overall, the contemporary concept of ‘good governance’ (as one iteration of that *thing* called race) is moored to opaque tropes which have been rendered trans-normative and commonsensical and operate within the ethical-conceptual machinery that “governs the ways that international aid organizations, Western governments, and academics, including anthropologists, engage in contemporary resource extraction and the overall idea of development in Africa” (Pierre, 2020, p. 87). This conceptual vernacular, deeply embedded in liberal international institutions that define ‘good governance’ globally, obscures the politics and practices of the anti-black neo-colonial lucidities underlying state formation in Africa. It also masks the violence of imperialism, slavery, racial capitalism, privatization, resource extraction, and environmental destruction.

Mainstream Theorizations of War

Mainstream theorizations of war take for granted the war/peace bifurcation and argue that war is fundamentally an occlusion in the process of development—a recourse to primordial behaviors of sorts—and once security is generated, development and ‘real’ politics can recommence (Duffield, 2013; Keen, 2008). Such an analysis overlooks the fact that colonial concepts of sovereignty, state, security, and historical time formulate the conceptual apparatuses at our disposal to study the phenomenon that is politics, and by extension war (Barkawi, 2016, p. 2). For instance, liberal universal conceptions of time are grounded in the idea that blackness constitutes atemporal stillness and depict Africa as a fixed ahistorical scene. This view of Africa as a uniform entity without a history exerts significant influence over nearly all international conflict institutions and the government bodies that sustain them. As a result, they often offer

generic solutions and policy treatments for distinct conflicts, overlooking the idiosyncratic causes of each ‘ethnic conflict’ that they aim to resolve (Asiedu, 2004). Paradoxically, this approach also retains a teleological view, insisting that under controlled biopolitical conditions blackness can be reformed, redeemed, or developed (Bhabha, 1994, p. 83).

Feminist Perspectives on the ‘War Puzzle’

Scholars have been meditating on the ‘war puzzle’ (Vasquez, 2009), arguing that elaborating the logics of contemporary warfare and making sense of rebel comportment necessitates an inquiry into the regimes of structural violence that occasion such “complex emergencies” (Keen, 2008, p. 1) in the first instance. Pursuing these lines of critical investigation, “whether at the level of the individual or the state, came to be seen as an appropriate objective for peacebuilders” (Curtis, 2013, p. 82) and featured as a crucial aspect in any efforts towards making liberal peace. However, there are certain conceptual limitations to consider.

Firstly, conceptualizing post-cold-war conflicts as novel, in any capacity, implicitly suggests that they signify a disjunction from the broader historical terrain context within which they unfold (Reno, 2017, p. 266). In view of this problem, feminist literature on war has posited that it “is essential to understand the underlying social structures—how a society is organized—before a war in order to understand war’s impact on people during and after” (Raven-Roberts, 2013, p. 37). Specifically proffering the critique that much of the literature looking to construct constitutive or causal explanations of war does not regard gender inequality as a potential constituent or cause of a war or security threat (Sjoberg, 2013, p. 3). Gender analysis cannot be tangential to making sense of such complex human emergencies (Keen, 2008). A feminist political economy approach unearths the ways in which “patriarchal gender relations predispose our societies to war” (Cockburn, 2010, p. 140). Much of this research is informed by Hansen’s (2000) seminal oeuvre, specifically her article “The Little Mermaid’s Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School” which confronts the gendered methodological predispositions which inhere in securitization theory. Turning to the more critical work coming out of postcolonial theory, Feminist anti-imperialist and post-colonial critiques have labored to make obvious the ways in which “the USA has gendered, racialized, and

sexualized its practice of imperialist wars—that is wars being waged through military and economic policy to advance and consolidate the profit-driven system of capitalism” (Riley et al, 2008, p. 3). Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007) maps how “discourses of counterterrorism are intrinsically gendered, raced, and sexualized and that they illuminate the production of imbricated normative patriot and terrorist corporeality that cohere against and through each other” (p. xxxiii).

UN Resolution 1325 and Developmental Feminism

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council sanctioned Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) which mandates gender-mainstreaming in all aspects of peacebuilding and reconstruction in post-conflict settings. The basic premise of this resolution is recognizing women’s autonomy and the multitude of roles they play in war and peace such that its provisions are intended to ensure their inclusion in all decision-making processes (Basini, 2013, p. 536). It should also be recognized that although gender mainstreaming was intended to be expansive, its application has frequently been limited to primarily attending to the experiences of cisgender women. African feminist thinker, Amina Mama, would describe this process as “developmental feminism” which can be understood as the symbiotic, imbricated relationship between the development industry and neo-liberal feminism (Mama, 2011, p. 8). Such techniques of democratic inclusion not only propagate the fiction of the autonomous liberated subject but also obscure unequal power relations through processes of assimilating women into hegemonic institutions. The disparity is addressed by integrating women into local and global politics—through initiatives like Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), and gender mainstreaming policies. Such approaches “frequent currency in national and international policy arenas that remain largely hostile to [more radical] feminism” (Mama, 2011, p. 8).

Feminist critiques on the nature and study of conflict have not taken up the question of anti-blackness as it relates to gendered constructions of war and global politics. Like gender, race, is not an alternative explanation to economic factors, religio-political affiliations/tensions, or ‘ethnic’ antagonisms, but rather a constitutive aspect of militarization and is a critical factor in how men, women, and queer people experience war. Further, Western onto-political

conceptualizations of gender disappear queer subjects in hegemonic accounts of war and shape the cissexist and heteronormative structuring of the peacebuilding industry. Therefore, the institutions that are constitutive of the broader “economic, political, social, and environmental processes formative of war” (Cohn, 2013, pp. 3-4), are themselves grammared in ways that generate and are contingent upon gendered ideologies that depend on gendered bodies to operate and exist within a gendered symbolic schema that saturates their actions and how they apprehend their missions. My issue here, echoing Alexander Weheliye, is that any feminist theoretical practice that does not endeavour to notate a “different code for what it means to be human merely sketches a different map of Man’s territorializing assemblages” (2014, p. 22).

African Politics in the Global Sphere

Modern representations of African politics, by Western nations, strongly criticize the overall legitimacy of the African state, to the degree that it can be said to be represented as one of the most denigrated and criminalized institutions. This criminalization revolves around the state’s perceived failing in its capacity and its scope to perform civil services, its alleged failure to execute normative social functions, and its disinclination to effectively manage resources and initiate economic growth (Pierre, 2020, p. 90)—despite receiving foreign aid. In reality...

More wealth leaves Africa every year than enters it—by more \$40bn (£31bn) – according to research that challenges ‘misleading’ perceptions of foreign aid...It is said African countries received 162bn in 2015, mainly in loans, aid and personal remittances. But in the same year, 203bn was taken from the continent, either directly through multinationals repatriating profits and illegally moving money into tax havens, or by costs imposed by the rest of the world through climate change adaptation and mitigation (McVeigh, 2017).

Petitions for governance reforms in Africa, along with critiques of the African state form, are steeped in racialized beliefs about Africa and its people. The habitual negative depiction of African politics serves to hyper-criminalize and infantilize its population. Notably, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has been criticized for disproportionately high conviction rates of Black men, exemplifying a bias that amplifies the culpability associated with blackness while minimizing that of others (Lopez, 2022). This pattern not only reinforces harmful

stereotypes linking blackness with malevolence but also impedes a thorough understanding of the origins of atrocities, thereby subverting the ICC's mission to foster global peace and security (Lopez, 2022). Historical narratives, tracing back to medieval Christian depictions of the devil as a Black Ethiopian, perpetuate these distorted perceptions; these themes are explored further in subsequent chapters. Additionally, the portrayal of 'African issues' internationally tends to obscure the real issues of how Western epistemology has described Africa, often as a continent overwhelmed by horror and savagery. This representation not only isolates Africa but also veils its historical experiences of inequality and exploitation under colonial and neo-colonial regimes (Pierre, 2020, p. 90). Consequently, NGOs, humanitarian aid workers, academics, and policymakers are prone to view Africanity through a lens of depravity, reinforcing age-old stereotypes that cast Africans as fundamentally different from the so-called evolved 'human' subject. This expose frames corruption in Africa as inherent and biologically entrenched, while also censuring its leaders for economic mismanagement and theft. Such narratives not only localize the perception of corruption to the Global South, particularly Africa, but also divert attention from the roles played by Western multinational corporations, donor governments, financial institutions, and NGOs in perpetuating global inequalities (Pierre, 2020, p. 90). These entities are integral to the global development framework, deeply rooted in evolutionary anthropology and the dichotomous views of 'us' versus 'them'. This perspective, which gained traction with the rise of social Darwinism in the late 19th century, is further explored in the following section, providing an overview of this historical emergence.

Development's Roots in Evolutionary Anthropology

As an onto-epistemic field of investigation into the ongoing processes of cultural production, anthropology has had an enduring complicity in the production of colonial politics, specifically vis-à-vis its disciplinary investment in typologizing living species (Stoler, 2002, p. 88). The discipline initially comes into existence as part of the necessary ground of a general metaphysics that is unable to utterly unfetter itself from a philosophy of being that "organizes ontological imaginings around differences of race and skin complexion" (Warren, 2018, p. 33). This hinges on evolutionary thought and is inextricably linked to and sculpted by the legacies of empire, colonialism, and a fetishistic preoccupation with representing and elaborating racial difference.

At its root then, anthropology is the “raciological” (Gilroy, 2002) study of what makes one ‘human’, a scientific investigation and exegesis of the ethnos. Ultimately, through epistemically violent disciplinary formations such as anthropology and phrenology, non-white geographies and people were entirely framed through discourses of primordialism to substantiate a grander scheme motivated by an insatiable desire for power and wealth (Saunders, 2008, p. 67). Further, ethnography, as a subfield of anthropology, deals with fundamental questions about the nature and modalities of being. Although ethnographic practices stem from anthropology, ethnographic research is used across a variety of disciplinary formations, making anthropology the epistemic bedrock for knowledge and canon formation (McClaurin, 2001, p. 1). At the same time, more contemporary ethnographic accounts serve as a critical reminder that the world we collectively inhabit “is one of irreducible heterogeneity, not of homogenous and totalitarian certainty” (Carrithers, 2010, p. 160). Conversely, as Lewis Gordon contends, the philosophy of culture is methodical and simultaneously contradictory to the extent that it offers a systematic deciphering of “open systems, of modes of being whose formalization always collapses or results in failures of formalization or systematization—in other words, a systematic account of that which resists systematic accounts” (2010, p. 195). The point I am trying to elucidate is that anthropology, with its centuries-old hierarchization of humans, forms the foundational basis for the “set of epistemological tropes, locations, assumptions, and commitments that naturalize racialized accounts of world politics” (Sabaratnam, 2020, p. 5).

The concept of ‘development’ finds its ideological roots in evolutionary anthropology and continues to serve as a vehicle for perpetuating a specific onto-epistemic scaffold that manufactures subjects and objects within a rigidly defined social order (Escobar qtd. in Pierre, 1995). The discipline of IR emerged as an intellectual venture to justify imperialism, emphasizing the intimate relationship between the discipline’s theoretical protocols and the foundational myths of white supremacy. This relationship is explicitly clear in the foundational writings of figures such as Paul Reinsch. In his 1905 work, “The Negro Race and European Civilization”, Reinsch links racialized notions of biological determinism to societal capabilities, asserting that the alleged incapacity of black(ened) people for civilization is biologically predetermined by the “the fact that the cranial sutures of the negro close at a very early age” (p. 154). However, for Reinsch, under the disciplinary and paternalistic power of white supremacy, or an American iteration of a policy of ‘indirect rule’, blackness had the potential to be inducted

into the so-called realm of civilization (Vitalis 2010, p. 932; Henderson, 2013, p.p. 73; Olson and Groom, 1991, p. 47). Therefore, it seems to me that anthropology serves as the epistemic foundation on which all discursive representations of blackness and political discourses on black pathology (Moten, 2008, p. 177) are developed, and it is the epistemic ground on which IR stands. The modern tools of the pseudo-scientific and pseudo-historical continue to be constitutive to the discursive arsenals that rationalize the subjection of sub-Saharan black Africa and its inhabitants. Simultaneously normalizing the West's abandonment of any ethical responsibility for the chaos it has created. It is within this discursive interstellar that cultural and political discourses on black cultural and biological pathology are composed against and for the avowal of that normative and universal mode of being-human that is assumingly epitomised and embodied by the people made white via a set of neocolonial geopolitical operations (Wynter, 2003, p. 266). So, what does this mean for the ontological figurations and imaginings of blackness? I would echo "Othman Sullivan in *Drylongso*: 'I think this anthropology is just another way to call me a nigger'" (qtd. in McClaurin, 2001, p. 4).⁹ My argument contends that anthropology, both in its traditional and decolonial forms, is irredeemable. Its frameworks and methodologies, even when incorporated into decolonial rhetoric that advocates for a pluriverse of coexisting cosmologies, fail to dismantle the deeply ingrained liberal modernist assumptions of the field (Chipato and Chandler, 2022, p. 1783). When anthropology does address the matter of structural subject positions, at its best, it "assumes that it can do so in an un-raced manner." However, at its worst, it promotes a type of multiculturalism that "assumes we all have analogous identities that can be put into a basket of stories, and then that basket of stories can lead to similar interests" (Hartman and Wilderson, 2003, p. 184). Best practices in post-conflict reconstruction often rely on this logic of prioritizing "local" cultures and perspectives as if they are uncontaminated by coloniality and anti-blackness.

Race in 20th Century International Relations Scholarship

The significance of race to the study of international relations is axiomatic when we trace the varying titles the journal contemporarily known as *Foreign Affairs* has had over historical time.

⁹ Othman Sullivan as cited in McClaurin, 2001, p. 4

Specifically, this widely read journal on international affairs was initially called the *Journal of Race and Development* and in 1919 (post WWI) it would be renamed as the *Journal of International Relations*. This illustrates that the pioneering scholars in the discipline apprehended race to be the most pressing issue in world politics. That is to say that the study of politics was the study of race relations, through its association with a “racialized and biological understanding of development” (Henderson, 2013, p. 74). Irrespective of the operative title, scholarly attention was consistently proffered towards that peculiar transnational problem of how to rule racialized populations, which became (circa 1905) co-extensive with anxieties about an immanent ‘race war’ “between the white West and its colonized darker minions” (Henderson, 2013, p. 74). Accordingly, at the turn of the 20th century this white anxiety gave form to the “intellectual rationalization of the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine of apartheid and Jim Crow” (Henderson, 2013, p. 74; Furedi, 1998, p. 79). In this new formulation, race became that *thing* that “already lives around and below the forts, the police stations, the patrolled highways and the prison towers” (Harney and Moten, 2013, p. 18).

Displacement of ‘Racial Superiority’ with ‘Cultural Superiority’

The displacement of ‘racial superiority’ with ‘cultural superiority’ in the international sphere is a recent political maneuver. Ethnicity was invented between 1890s and the 1940s as an integral part of a...

comprehensive conceptual reshuffling whereby the concept of race was displaced from the international plane [...] the concept of ethnicity emerges in the historical juncture in which race and culture are coming apart...In the second half of the nineteenth century, the terms ‘ethnic’ and ‘ethnical’ came to be used with reference to race (Heiskanen, 2020, p. 64, unpublished manuscript).

Anthropologist Franz Boas developed a cultural analysis that challenged biological interpretations of difference, enabling social sciences to evolve in what appeared to be an unraced orientation. Many IR theorists saw this shift as enabling a positivist analysis of the international system. It was during the decolonization era (1945-1989) that this multiculturalist discourse initially began to undergird IR theory. Unlike scientific racism, which attributed

differences to biology and environment, Eurocentric institutionalism primarily focused on culture (as biologically determined) and still preserved the dichotomy between the West and the 'Rest'. As George Stocking (1982) articulates...

It explained all the same phenomena, but it did so in strictly non-biological terms, and its full efficiency as an explanatory concept depended on the rejection of the inheritance of acquired characteristics ... All that was necessary to make the adjustment was the substitution of a word. For 'race' read 'culture' or 'civilisation', for 'racial hierarchy' read 'cultural heritage', and the change had taken place. From the implicitly Lamarckian 'racial instincts' to an ambiguous 'century of racial experience' to a purely cultural 'centuries of tradition' was a fairly easy transition – especially when the notion of 'racial instincts' had in fact been largely based on centuries of experience and tradition (pp. 265-266).

The displacement of 'race' with terms like 'ethnicity', 'tribe', and 'culture' in international politics has failed to disrupt the inadequate ways of thinking about Africa and its peoples. Instead, it has merely resuscitated and obfuscated the inescapability white supremacy, as race re-emerges through liberal universalism and "state-aspirational politics" (Krug, 2018, p.14). This shift also integrates 'cultural difference' into the scientific tools of reason (Da Silva, 2007, p. xxii) and relies heavily "on our acquiescence to a false opposition between progress and custom, between reason and tradition" (Scott, 2013, p. 2). Furthermore, the principles of the scientific method, which abstractly define land, life, and people in economic terms, depend on culturally ingrained notions of white supremacy and philosophical concepts of the ideal person capable of appropriation, both internally and externally (Bhandar, 2018, p. 6).

Post-WWII Liberalism and 'Minority' Protections

In the wake of WWII (1939), the ascendancy of liberalism as the prevailing lexicon in the international political sphere, specifically international law, ushered in a renewed conceptualization of 'minority' protection. The focus shifted from merely transcending ethnic 'primitiveness' to safeguarding rights for minoritized individuals and groups. This development was congruent with an underlying presupposition that the West had already successfully severed

itself and people from such ‘primitive’ predispositions by adopting liberal democratic tenets— principles deemed universally applicable and appropriate for universal fortification (Shahabuddin, 2014, p. 5). Consequently, in post-war legal instruments such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, the question of protection was generally approached through the lens of “prevention of discrimination”, situated in the context of a wider jurisprudential scaffolding of individual human rights. Within this restructured paradigm, coercive assimilation of minority communities was expressly proscribed, while the voluntary integration of individual members of these minorities into the larger societal fabric was implicitly, if not explicitly, reinvigorated (Shahabuddin, 2014, p. 5). In the post WWII era, racial stereotypes, and imaginings of a ‘New World Order’ have been generally discredited in the mainstream debates. However, race and racism endure and continue to configure world politics “in both material and ideological ways” (Anievas, 2015, p. 3). For example, ideas from postcolonial theory have been critical in explicating the entanglements between orientalist and racial discourses and conflict/war (Barkawi and Stanski, 2012) as well as neo-colonial relations in post-colonial contexts. For instance, the European Union (EU) has sustained significant economic and political ties with Africa, frequently exerting influence over decision-making processes. Academic literature concerned with the economic, and geopolitical factors that have historically underpinned and shaped the trajectory of the power dynamics between the African Union (AU) and the EU, suggest that such relations exist along a continuum of colonial encounters between Europe and Africa. Expanding on this assertion, some researchers contend that the founding of the EU was essentially aimed at preserving colonial ties with Africa following its independence. Nshimi (2020) argues that “the European countries could only efficiently exploit Africa by combining their political and economic capacities” (p. 1).

This was the culture from which I sprang. This was the terror from which I fled.

—Richard Wright ¹⁰

IV Early Encounters and the American Colonization Society

This chapter opens with an overview of the American Colonization Society (ACS) and its role in the formation of Liberia. It interrogates the broader discourses surrounding the contentious matter of repatriating ‘free’ blacks to Africa, as viewed by slaveholders, abolitionists, and enslaved individuals themselves. The aim of this chapter is to elucidate the different conceptions and visions of freedom that were circulating during the early 19th century, as underpinned by a certain racial logic. It then gives a brief overview of the early ACS settlements in Liberia and examines the impact of repatriated individuals on Liberia’s socio-political landscape to map how cultural ethnicity became the dominant organizing principle of Liberian politics and civil society. The chapter then maps the socio-political terrain of early Liberia, starting in 1822, to atlas how colonial encounters and confrontations, along with entangled regional and trans-Atlantic cosmologies, economies, political ideologies, migration, and identity formations, all contributed to upending pre-contact modes of organizing social and political life. This upheaval eventually triggered a concatenation of rebellions against the emergent nation-state in Monrovia. To this end, the chapter seeks to evince how black ‘settlers’ envisioned freedom as a political negotiation or a *settling for* politics (Harney and Moten, 2013); a settling for sovereignty against all forms of relationality, a settling for the hope that performance will reconcile the interstice between the structural place of ‘the black’ and that of all other humans (Wilderson, 2009).

Transatlantic Encounters on the Pre-Liberian Coast

The first transoceanic interactions between southern Europe and what would later become Liberia date back to 1441, more than half a century before 1492. These early contacts involved

¹⁰ (1945, p. 237)

transporting African captives and cargo, including grains, pepper, and rice across the Atlantic. Pepper cultivation spanned the area now known as Sierra Leone to Liberia, while rice was extensively grown from Senegal to Western Ivory Coast. This period marked the inaugural direct trade between West Africa and southern European nations like Portugal and Spain, significantly featuring the transport of African slaves to Iberia. By the mid-1700s, trafficked Africans had become the most crucial commodity for Europeans (Holsoe, 1971, p. 17). From 1441 to 1492, Portugal imported at least 100 Africans annually, a number that steadily increased (Allen, 2010, p. 17). Trading posts proliferated along the West African coast from the early 19th century up to the 1822 resettlement of repatriated individuals, covering the area from the Lofa River to Cape Mesurado (Holsoe, 1971, p. 331). Out of the 12 million African captives that endured the brutal proceedings of the Atlantic Crossing, an estimated 300 000 of them were trafficked from Liberia (Beyan, 1995, p. 765).

By the 1600s, interactions between European merchants and Liberian coastal communities were recurrent. Groups like the Dei, who, along with others, were later coerced by the American Colonization Society (ACS) to cede their lands, lacked a state system or centralized political authority. Additionally, their capacity for self-governance was not evaluated through the lens of liberal subjectivity. Nevertheless, the Poro Secret Society had already established a centralized political structure by unifying eleven distinct ‘ethnic’ groups, encircling over half of what is now Liberia (Khafre, 1978, p. 106). Eventually, these transatlantic encounters displaced indigenous African “metaphysical and material relations to land, culture, spirit, and each other,” (Kelley, 2017, p. 269) and subsequently supplanted such relations with settler-colonial, proprietorial modes of being. Under the conscripts of legal-political emancipation, the enduring coalition between racial capitalism and modern formations of ‘the human’ made it impossible to imagine non “proprietorial notions of the self” (Hartman, 1997, p. 115).

During this era, many West African societies, particularly those inhabiting the coastal regions, were embroiled in often fatal disputes over the acquisition of African captives, trade, territory, and political legitimacy. These conflicts destabilized existing social arrangements among the Vai, Gola, Dei, and Condo groups, disrupting social equilibrium. The transatlantic trade made these groups enormously susceptible to the vagaries of external influences, impelling them to adopt new customs, practices, and political desires. I say more about this in the ensuing section.

Socio-Political Economy of Pre-Liberia

Before detailing the impact of the repatriation project on the region now cartographed as Liberia, it is critical to annotate that pre-encounter social geographies along the Atlantic littoral cannot be apprehended as ‘indigenous’ insofar as they were shaped by their material conditions and cultural exchanges with neighboring groups, nomadic tribes, and European traders (Beyan, 1995). Meaning, the societies of different ‘ethnic’ groups in pre-Liberia, specifically in the context of the 15th and 16th centuries, coalesced elements of both European and indigenous cultures. I am not implying that indigenous Liberians did not have a language to talk about themselves prior to the ever-enduring episode of Euro-American imperialism. Indeed, not all ‘ethnic’ labels are colonial contraptions. Some like Mandingo and Vai are old labels with meanings that have transformed over time. What I am suggesting, however, is that the language of indigeneity denotes only a geographic nativity, since that originary colonial encounter (referring to the invasion of Africa by European colonists and enslavers in the 15th century) had inexhaustibly ruptured and made irrecoverable Liberian traditional ways of being. Put another way, the imposition of a foreign culture on indigenous communities disrupted existing pre-encounter cosmologies and by extension ‘ethnic’ relations. And the task here is not to enact a praxis of recovering pre-colonial and thus pre-ontological indigenous ways of being, as that constitutes an impossibility since indigeneity “does not travel away from colonial modernity” (Lugones, 2010, p. 746).

Pending the arrival of the ACS, most groups were governed by hereditary social and educational societies known as the Poro for men and the Sande for women. These societies, which upheld social norms and values, had stricter regulations in the interior regions compared to those among coastal groups like the Vai and Gola (Beyan, 1995). Despite these differences, these social groups shared many cohesions. Before their initial encounters with European traders and conquerors, all relied on gathering and hunting for subsistence. Their spiritual belief systems acknowledged a higher power together with minor deities such as ancestral spirits. Additionally, all groups practiced agriculture, utilized iron, and engaged in polygamy before European arrival. Coastal communities primarily relied on bartering for economic exchange—a system where goods or services are directly traded without the use of currency. Unlike capitalism, which is a

market-based system using money as a medium of exchange and a store of value, bartering is underpinned by an epistemology of the commons and being-in-relation rather than individualized modes of being in the world (Beyan, 1995). Since the arrival of the Americo-Liberians,

[Liberia] has been characterised by dual systems of education, governance, law, and cultural practice. Indigenous systems of education (such as the Poro and Sande bush schools), customary law using traditional methods of trial by ordeal, reconciliation under the palaver hut, traditional punishment, and chieftaincy system of governance are prominent in the interior areas of Liberia. In contrast, a more Western-styled system of education, courts, and governance is found in Monrovia and other larger cities (McKenzie and Prestholdt, 2009, p. 53).

Liberia represents a convergence where “many strands of the African diaspora—threads woven through West Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States” (Mitman, 2021, p. 46) coalesced to take flight from the hemispheric racial violence that animated the Americas and Europe. Flight culminated in new relations of being, “political fragmentation, changes in identity, and the reorganization of ritual and social patterns” (Green, 2011, pp. i-viii). In this nascent social topography, cultural dynamics should be interpreted in terms of negotiation, refusal, assimilation convergence, and continuity among American colonists, repatriated blacks, and indigenous Africans, giving rise to creolized cultural forms. The history of modern Liberia—and by extension, Africa—must be narrated with a caveat, acknowledging its inseparability from Euro-American existential philosophies. Understanding these obtruse and paradoxically sophisticated processes is essential before we can come to some sort of theoretical consensus about the “particularity of Africa” (Ranger, 2012, p. 212) prior to colonial contact. Especially given the challenge of releasing the study of Africa from “false models of colonial codified African ‘tradition’” (Ranger, 2012, p. 212). The ensuing section analyses the colonial writings of cultural anthropologist George Schwab, whose problematic analyses has significantly influenced subsequent interpretations of ethnicity in Liberia.

Inaccurate Histories of Ethnic Group Formations in Liberia

This section of the text should be read with a sense of abysmal mistrust, as the categories iterated here are distended with made-up categories and derive from writings by American missionaries and ethnologists, sedimented with the accumulation of time. Specifically, George W. Schwab (1876-1955), a Harvard-educated scientist and missionary, acted as an 'amateur' anthropologist and zoologist. Along with his non-academic wife, he studied Liberia's 'tribes' and authored *Tribes of the Liberian Hinterland* (Claessens, 2014). The preface of this monograph discloses that the notes forming the manuscript were "very incomplete" and mostly sourced from other missionaries in the region (Schwab, 1947, p. ix). It also critiques the use of Liberian pidgin English as a significant impediment, maintaining that it was "a great handicap" (Schwab, 1947, p. ix). Additionally, the Schwabs documented resistance from the indigenous African people who refused to participate in their 'study'—that is they refused to be objectified. Despite these challenges, they managed to produce a 600-page monograph. This book is cited because it is part of a series of ethnographic studies that subtly influence our understanding of Liberian politics alongside the names through which Liberians have come to apprehend themselves. The point is that "the development of these different names can only be explained by the history of Western contact" (Holsoe and Lauer, 1976, p. 143) with various indigenous languages, rendering historical and analytic precision about these 'ethnic' groups impossible. Accordingly, this next part of the chapter offers an overview of more recent literature concerning the historical development of cultural and ethnic groups in Liberia. Determining the extent to which these studies are underwritten by colonial ethnographies is difficult; nonetheless, these frameworks seem to underpin much of the current political analysis of ethno-political conflict in Liberia.

According to the literature at our disposal, in pre-1800s Liberia, sixteen indigenous groups existed, classified under three ethno-linguistic polities: the Mande (including the Mandingo, Vai, Gbandi, Kpelle, Loma, Mende, Gio, and Mano), the Mel (comprising the Gola and Kissi), and the Kwa (including the Bassa, Dei, Grebo, Kru, Belle, and Krahn) (Antwi-Ansorge, 2014, p. 64). In the northern coastal regions, the Bandi, Mende, Loma, Kpelle, and Vai predominated (Antwi-Ansorge, 2014). The formation of the Mandingo group originated from the networks that formed among disparate groups that migrated to Liberia following the dissolution of the Medieval empires in Western Sudan (Rodney et al., 1982). These groups developed specific skills refined for long-distance and international commerce. As these traders settled in pre-Liberia, they adapted to and transformed the economic landscapes they inhabited. Their worldview was

infused with "possessive individualism"—the idea that "the individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them" (Macpherson, 1964). However, what distinguishes this worldview from the values that underpin racial capitalism is that this mercantile drive was not fundamentally exploitative or extractivist at its core and was nuanced by Islamic ethical frameworks, which clearly differentiated between 'good' and 'bad' profit. Both the Gio/Mano and Mandingo communities were invested in the accumulation of "wealth-in-people," albeit with divergent imperatives. This practice involved an assemblage of operations, from polygyny and procreation to clientship and servitude—all aimed at acquiring wives, progeny, clients, and dependents. Indeed, a man's societal position (or social capital) and influence were, to a significant extent, gauged by his ability to accumulate human capital. It is important to note that these two communities diverged in their motivations for such accumulation. While the Gio/Mano community highly valued the amassment of 'wealth-in-people' primarily as a labor force to enhance agricultural yields, the Mandingo emphasized wealth-in-people as converts to Islam, as well as skills/competencies to increase 'profit' (Antwi-Ansorge, 2014, p. 98).

As mentioned earlier, the introduction of racial slavery and the arrival of Americo-Liberians in the early 1800s caused a significant rupture in the established socio-economic practices among the Gio, Mano, and Mandingo communities. Previously, these groups had a cohesive identity, unified by shared economic activities and moral imperatives. However, burgeoning economic developments along the pre-Liberian coast prompted changes in their ethical obligations due to the shifting external contexts that fueled the triangular trade and sparked inter-group rivalry. These changes led to internal fissures within these communities. The once-prevailing ethical frameworks and moral codes that organized societal relations were becoming obsolete or entirely supplanted (often ensuing in violence) as new economic opportunities and social configurations disrupted the fabric of shared community values (Antwi-Ansorge, 2014, p. 97). Moreover, Liberia's current ethnic classifications and local political organizations have been influenced by Americo-Liberian exercises and experiments with governing the indigenous population (Ellis, 2007, p. 197). Also, the ways in which French, British, and Liberian officials have described and classified ethnic groups—often based on linguistic speech sequences—demonstrate remarkable consistency. For example, the group known as Gio in Liberia is referred to as Yacouba or Dan in Côte d'Ivoire, while the Liberian Krahn are known as Wee by the Gio and as Guere in Côte

d'Ivoire. The reasoning behind this slippage in nomenclature is not clear to cultural historians but it seems that the European 'exploration' literature of the 19th and 20th centuries was central to the production of such confusion and incertitude (Holsoe and Lauer, 1976, p. 141).

The 'Question of Slavery'

From 1820 to 1847, the coastal regions of Liberia experienced ongoing conflicts and shifting alliances between 'settlers' and 'natives' (Levitt, 2005, p. 86). These tensions arose from disputes over resources like camwood, gold, ivory, rice, and water, and were exacerbated by disagreements over land ownership and the allocation of political power. These unresolved early disputes contributed to the 1989 civil war, as indigenous communities felt that political exclusion hindered their leaders (referred to as 'big men') from protecting their resources, exacerbating land inequalities (Antwi-Ansorge, 2014, p. 93). Over time these conflicts might have eroded 'state capacity' and the unremitting military expenditures probably gave way to the economic stagnation of the country beginning as early as 1877.

It is necessary to recognize that as Americo-Liberians were establishing their presence and carving out space for themselves, the slave trade continued unabated. Slavery was not legally abolished in the U.S. until 1865, so the 'question of slavery' thoroughly influenced the conflicts unfolding along the coast of West Africa. The trade in enslaved Africans intensified post-1640s in the Cape Mesurado area—a major trading center named by an early Portuguese sailor (Allen, 2010; Holsoe, 1971, p. 331). Militarized slave raiding was a common practice among Mandingo merchants, who captured Africans for domestic use or trade with European and Spanish-Cuban slavers. The Southern Gola, residing inland between 1822 and 1905, also participated in the slave trade, capturing bodies during their civil wars or from raids on neighboring Dei and Kpelle communities, whom they sold to Europeans on the coast (Akpan, 1981-1982, p. 2). Local chiefs were consistently engaged in negotiating emulous dynamics among the Mandingo, other local African merchants, settlers, and Europeans, all vying to expand their sphere of influence over the trade in stolen African bodies (Ellis, 2007, pp. 194-195).

While the abolition of slavery was a fundamental objective for many formerly enslaved individuals and their descendants who resettled in Liberia, their initial efforts to eradicate the

trade were not immediately successful. The 1830s witnessed a marked intensification in the trafficking of Africans, persisting despite collaborative efforts between the Liberian colony and the British Navy. Peyton Skipwith encapsulated this period in his letters, writing, “it took concerted efforts by the colony and the British navy to drive the slavers away, but the problem nagged Liberian relations with the natives throughout the 1830s and 1840s” (Miller, 1978, p. 48), he wrote. In response, the emerging Liberian government orchestrated military expeditions aimed explicitly at dismantling the barracoons of slave traders (Akingbade, 1983, p. 357), specifically pursuing those foreign occupants engrossed in trading in geographic proximity to the ‘colony’. As tensions escalated between the settlers residing on the coast and the neighboring indigenous communities, the colonial government broadened its military engagements beyond the confines of Monrovia. Originally formulated to suppress the slave trade, these policies adapted to manage the behavior of local African populations perceived as antagonistic, thereby institutionalizing the use of force in settler-native relations that persisted into the 20th century (Holsoe, 1971, p. 346). It is critical to index that European and American slavers, including those from Spain, Portugal, Britain, and France, armed indigenous groups like the Dei, Gola, and Kru and encouraged them to assault the ACS settlements. The policy of repatriating formerly enslaved blacks to Africa was ostensibly conceived to control slave uprisings and reconcile the problem of the ‘free’ black in colonial America. This maneuver, however, ironically situated the repatriates close proximity to the genesis of the system/where historic blackness comes from and perhaps afforded them an opportunity to cultivate a more formidable resistance against it. Now, it is important to retain this history alongside the fact that approximately a century later, when the state in Monrovia acquired increased power and legitimacy, initiated the systematic trading and enslavement of indigenous Africans. Indeed, moving toward the 1900s, specifically between 1929 and 1930, the League of Nations initiated an inquiry into the Americo-Liberian state for the transportation and enslavement of Africans, particularly from the Kru and Grebo ethnic groups, to the Spanish colony of Fernando Po and the French colony of Gabon (Akingbade, 1997, p. 261; Sundiata, 1997). The investigation would confirm the extant “conditions of criminal compulsion scarcely distinguishable from slave raiding and slave trad[ing]” (“The 1930 Enquiry Commission to Liberia”, 1931, p. 280). While international attention was largely centered on Liberia’s role in the scandal, the abhorrent labor conditions in the Spanish Colony should have warranted just as much censure. What is more, “the charges of slavery and political corruption that were levied

against Liberia negatively impacted many Black American's view of the nation. In the aftermath of the scandals, many black Americans lost faith in Liberia as a potential haven for black people" (Blain, 2019, p. 107).

'Kru' as Middlemen

As with other coastal West African 'ethnic' groups, the Kru also experienced a series of disruptions as a result of the introduction of new trading systems. Historians are not sure how they came to be called Kru, but this name has been hypothesised as a derivative of 'crew', as in boat crew. The Kru people lived in the coastal region of Southeastern Liberia. It should be indexed that I am implicitly referring to the maritime Kru men, Kru women remained in the interior regions of the country. The Kru were more alike among themselves than other Liberian 'ethnic' groups. They were recognized for their maritime capacities, such as oceanic navigation and fishing, which distinguished them from other groups. The Kru's expertise in sailing would make them exceedingly valuable to the mundane operations of the triangular trade (Beyan, 1995). When strong currents made it difficult for the Portuguese ships to navigate to the shoreline, they recruited Kru 'canoe men' to transport goods between the ships and the coastline. Producers of pepper in the area would bring their crop to the coast, where it was placed on Kru canoes that transported the spices to the Portuguese ships (Beyan, 1995). Moreover, seduced by the exigency of deferring their own enslavement, some indigenous Liberians endeavoured to unmark their bodies as property by way of aesthetically and performatively hyperbolizing ethnological peculiarities. For instance, the Kru marked themselves with "a dark blue tattoo one-half inch in width, which made them ethnically recognizable to others" (Clegg, 2004, p. 78). The tattoos stretched from their hairline to the tip of their nose. Since the Kru people, as African go-betweens (middlemen), were indispensable to European slave traffickers, such fleshly markings encouraged alliances and established a sort of visual treaty that recognized certain obligations between Europeans and the Kru people. Put another way, "it became a line of protection and demarcation from the potential threat of commodification" (Harris, 1993, p. 1721).

The Kru were not only mariners and stevedores for material goods, but they also acted as intermediaries between cultures. They interacted with the diverse and competing economies of

the circum-Atlantic world and their identities were influenced as a result. Some Kru even learned European languages, such as English, to better communicate with potential employers and integrate themselves. Others went so far as to adopt nicknames that made them memorable and easier for Europeans to pronounce, such as "John T. Chew Tobacco" or "Sam Coffee." The way in which labor was organized in coastal pre-Liberia also had an impact on the political and social institutions of the Kru ethnic group. Despite the belief that these groups viewed their newfound wealth in terms of economics, the Krus actually used it to gain leadership positions. Young men from the Kru ethnic group who aspired to the position of 'Krogba' or 'father of the town,' would give gifts to the 'Pantonnyefue' or elders of their town (at least prior to the arrival of Europeans). However, the new wealth and power these young Kru labourers gained through their commercial relations with the Europeans, weakened the authority of the elders within their community traditional governance structures. Additionally, the new coastal elites had access to guns and gunpowder, which they used to further their own interests at the expense of 'traditional' leaders (Beyan, 1995). The role of the 'Gbaubi', which was a 'military' (for lack of a better term) position before Europeans arrived, was adapted to oversee the new labor force that carried out tasks related to Atlantic trade, such as loading and unloading of European merchant ships. This also changed in the early 19th century and a Kru headman, usually one who had successfully adopted some European customs and practices, would be appointed to maintain order, and encourage 'peaceful' working relations.

Additionally, the of impact chattel slavery on political and social structures was not limited to the Kru group. The social subgroups of the Glebo also merged into a larger political entity towards the end of the 18th century, as they believed that centralizing power would give them a stronger bargaining position with Europeans (in the context of the slave trade). The leaders of this new political confederation were mostly Glebo. These new relations of commerce and exchange undermined traditional systems of barter and the notion of profit was introduced to the interior by the groups inhabiting the coastal regions (Beyan, 1995). For instance, King Freeman, who was a leader of the coastal Glebo from the 1830s to the 1840s, gained power because of his commercial activities with American and European merchants, as well as with the black 'settlers' around the Cape Palamas region. Overall, the success of merchant groups, specifically the Vai, Kissi, Kru, Bassa, and Glebo, was closely tied to their involvement in trans-Atlantic commerce. They used a combination of European languages and Creole (which is a blend of European and

African languages) and their trading system incorporated new methods of measurement. For instance, Kru traders of pepper and their European clients used the Portuguese terms ‘cess’ or ‘cesto’ to measure spices. Additionally, the use of an iron bar as a unit of currency, which was a new development among ‘ethnic’ groups such as the Mande, Gola, Loma, Kpelle, and others (Beyan, 1995).

Establishment of Americo-Liberian Rule Over the Hinterland

Social groups, whether in Liberia or elsewhere in Africa, were not centralized entities when they were subjected to ‘settler’ colonial administration by officials who sought to create a certain kind of order out of local politics and assert control over local processes of government. ‘Alien’ rule in colonial Africa established systems of political control through the use of bureaucratic institutions, such as the prefectural field apparatus, which were intended to oversee and dominate agricultural populations living in ‘remote’ areas. These institutions were predicated on similar systems that were used in ancient absolutist regimes and are widely known by scholars of post-colonial Africa and Asia as systems of indirect rule. Indirect rule mirrored European conventions of nation-building, consummated through the combined efforts of missionaries, religious groups, and colonial officers. Customary education systems were displaced by those of the colonizers, irrespective of whether it was the British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, or the Americans in the context of the occupation of Turtle Island, the fundamental structural directives of all these colonial projects were the same. The terms of occupation include the institution of the colonizers’ dispensation alongside the cooptation of local customs pertaining to religion, language, matrimony, inheritance, and land relations. Rather than trying to change the entire colonized population, colonizers used locals in positions of influence as intermediaries and assigned them tasks to help rule. Making “permanent divisions in the service of hierarchy” (Sexton, 2021, p. 97) endogenous to indigenous systems. This system of indirect rule demanded an ongoing and infantilizing relation between the colonizer and the newly constructed ‘native’ bourgeoisie class (Robinson and Kelley, 2000, p. xiv). Afterall, “the Negro is just a child” (Fanon, 1968, p. 27). While Steve Biko’s overture primarily pertains to the South African context, his discernments, in *I Write What I Like*, hold relevance within this context as well.

We can immediately see the logic of planting missionaries in the forefront of the colonization process. A man who succeeds in making a group of people accept a foreign concept in which he is an expert must make them perpetual students whose progress in the particular field can only be evaluated by him; the student must constantly turn to him for guidance and promotion...The blacks have allowed themselves to be at the mercy of the white man and to have him as their eternal supervisor. Only he can tell us how good our performance is and instinctively each of us pains to please this powerful all-knowing master (Biko and C.R., 1987, pp. 94-95).

The members of the bourgeoisie class existed in a peculiar liminal space in which they experienced racism from Europeans and simultaneously a sense of estrangement from their own culture (Kelley, 2000; Robinson, 2000, p. xiv).

With the formal establishment of Americo-Liberian indirect rule circa 1904, Liberia's interior domains were segregated into five administrative districts and then later cartographed into three distinct provinces, circa 1931. Initially, these districts were hierarchically organized as chiefdoms and then subsequently re-branded as 'paramount' chiefdoms. These 'paramount' chiefdoms were constituted by a set of auxiliary units termed 'clans', each ruled over by a designated 'clan' chief (chiefs would be designated by Americo-Liberian officials). In this context, 'clans' were composed of another set of relatively smaller, geographically determined, political units, generally denoted as zones or sections. Each zone was constituted by towns and villages which were governed by a zone chief (Antwi-Ansorge, 2014, p. 95). Through this process, communities that were hitherto organized around kinship networks, rather than a central political authority, came to be classified as distinct 'tribes' each containing sub-tribes known as 'clans'. During this time, the Americo-Liberian state also pursued a policy of liberalism which emphasised individual freedom and the protection of private property, and restricted economic opportunities for much of the population (mostly comprised of indigenous Africans; Ellis, 2007, p. 32). This transformation evinces that international, national, and local politics cannot be disentangled.

Brief History of the American Colonization Society

The ‘negro question’, referring to the matter of addressing the growing problem of ‘free’ blacks within the American colonies, emerged as a critical preoccupation during the antebellum period (1832 - 1860) and evolved into a broader “transnational problem of how to rule large [free] black populations” (Getachew, 2019, p. 21). Influential political figures, such as James Munroe and Thomas Jefferson, depicted the ‘free’ (i.e., manumitted from bondage) black America population as a “class of very dangerous people” (Moses, 1998, p. xxii). Consequently, in the wake of gradual slave manumission in the North (1780-1846), American slaveholders—wary of the possibility of insurgent political coalition between the emancipated and those still in bondage—formed the American Colonization Society to uphold American plantocracy by expatriating free-born and manumitted blacks back to Africa. This was explicitly outlined in the ACS’s 1816 constitution: the objective was to “exclusively colonize the free people of color residing in [the United States] ...in Africa” (Banton, 2018, p. 122). From its inception, the colonization movement comprised a faction advocating for liberal ethics, who pronounced reservations vis-à-vis the compulsory expulsion of blacks, and espoused a more ‘benevolent’ doctrine based on the idea that resettlement might serve as a stimulus towards progressive emancipation, at least this was Jefferson’s position. Consider this 1826 excerpt from a letter written by Reverend Robert Finley of New Jersey to John P. Mumford, Esq. of New York City, on the matter of repatriating the free black population:

On this subject, the state of *free blacks* has very much occupied my mind. Their number increases greatly, and their wretchedness too, as appears to me. Everything connected with their condition, including their color, is against them; nor is there much prospect that their state can ever be greatly meliorated, while they shall continue among us. *Could not the rich and benevolent devise a means to form a colony on some part of the coast of Africa, similar to the one at Sierra Leone, which might gradually induce many free blacks to go and settle, devising for them the means of getting there, and of protection and support till they were established?* Should they be sent back to Africa, a three-fold benefit would arise. We should send to Africa a population partly civilised and Christianized for its benefit. And our blacks themselves, would be put in a better situation. (“American Colonisation Society”, 1826, p. 2; emphasis in original)

This advocacy echoed British colonial policy and the calls made by prominent British abolitionists, like Granville Sharp (Chairman of the Abolition Committee of 1787), who supported the establishment of a “‘province of freedom’ in Africa to provide a new home for the poor negroes of London and elsewhere” (Turner, 1997, p. 326). Accordingly, ‘re-colonization’, as it was called by the slaveholding gentry, was extolled as benevolent compromise between the absolute abolition of chattel slavery and unceasing racial subjection and exploitation. In effect, the ACS conspired to consolidate American imperial power, inculcate indigenous Africans with Western pedagogical, military, and ecclesiastical customs, as well as exploit Liberia’s natural resources (e.g., palm oil, camwood) (Kieh, 2012, p. 171)—all while upholding the institution of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

But the public rhetoric on determining the fate of emancipated blacks, which served as the driving force of the repatriation/Back-to-Africa Movement, obscured the profound ontological implications this verdict would have. The limits of ontology, that is the limit space between *being* human and *being* property or *being* free or unfree, “are thrown into crisis with the presence of the free black” (Warren, 2015, p. 27). In this way, the presence of the free black fundamentally embodied a threat to the humanist structural order that whiteness represented. Colonization was about holding the emancipated black body captive in an alternative geographical setting.

The Contested Matter of Repatriating Free(d) Blacks to Africa

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2020) provides the following definitions for the act of righting: “The action of doing justice or making reparations to a person or group of people, or of restoring them to their rightful status; vindication” (righting, n.); or the “Restoration or return of a ship, etc., to the proper, upright, or vertical position” (right, v.). Etymologically, “liber” is the Latin root for the English term liberty and Liberia translates to “the free land” (Library of Congress, n.d.). The Liberian colonisation scheme was largely denoted as an approach to righting, an attempted reversal of the transatlantic crossing, and an “instance in the modern era’s correctable violence” (Woods, 2019, p. 38) in a space where blackness/African-ness and modernity may finally become open to one another.

However, as observed by the Colored National Convention (and other vocal black leaders of the time) in 1848, repatriation was a treacherous scheme “‘clothed with the livery of heaven to serve the devil in,’ with President Roberts of Liberia, a coloured man, for its leader” (Moses, 1998, p. xxii). Moreover, the United States Congress’ sanctioning of the 1850 *Fugitive Slave Act* would fundamentally transform African American perspectives on emigration. The Act created a legal context in which whites could continue to claim ownership of runaway, fugitive and outlaw blacks and sue for possession in court, while simultaneously denying the latter the right to testify on their own behalf (Moses, 1998, p. xxiii). Again, the black body is “transformed into a thing by the law” (Philip, 2008, p. 196). Writing from Liberia in the early 1850s, Reverend Daniel H. Peterson, talks about two coloured men from Charleston South Carolina who had contemplated participating in the emigration scheme. Upon observing the conditions of blacks living in the northern American states, described them as living in a state of being “half free and half slave, in a country that they cannot travel without being stopped and examined as though they were thieves and robbers” (Moses, 1998, p. 49). We must remember that the majority of those emigrating to Liberia were of the black working classes trying to escape the hardships they faced under the “counter-reconstruction regimes” (Tillery, 2011, p. 15). Meaning, they did not necessarily conceive of themselves as displaced peoples returning to their homeland. The heart of the matter is that the repatriation movement was subject to considerable debate and disagreement within the black community, primarily due to the acuity among many ‘free’ blacks that they had been instrumental in building the America that now sought to exile them.

This fact comes across quite clearly when we examine the documents that emerged from the mass demonstrations where free blacks registered their disapprobation with the ACS. For example, the resolutions passed by the gathering of 3,000 free blacks who met at the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church rebuked the ACS for attempting to deny them their ‘birth rights’ as descendants of the ‘first successful cultivators of the wilds of America...The free black community also demonstrated an equal commitment to defending the rights of enslaved blacks. Written in the Philadelphia resolutions is the following: “Nor do we view the colonization of those who may become emancipated by the ACS operation among our southern brethren...as capable to produce their happiness (Tillery, 2011, p. 19).

Conversely, other black folks held the belief that they would never feel a sense of belonging, in a land where they had been forcibly transplanted and were always already domestically exiled. So, they hoped colonization was an opportunity to return to a place in which their hue and phenotype was not inherently “against them” (Mumford puts it) and a place where their quality of life would be contingent upon their personal capacity for diligent labor—a concept deeply rooted in American liberal ideals. Ultimately, for those who did repatriate, their objective was to establish a prosperous colony in Africa that would serve as a testament to the capacity of blacks for self-improvement and self-governance, thereby affirming their overall fitness for freedom (Moses, 1998, p. xvii). Leaders such as Alexander Crummell, Edward Blyden, W.E.B Du Bois were essential in planting these beliefs that would become the seedlings for the spread of Pan-Africanism and the movement for the global racial solidarity of the ‘negro race.’

Arrival and Settlement of the ACS

In 1822, the ACS annexed a narrow coastal region of Cape Mesurado in Liberia, which was subsequently named Monrovia after James Monroe (Banton, 2018, p. 122). This annexation necessitated the forced dispossession and displacement of the Dei peoples, who were the historical inhabitants of that territory. The ACS acquired its initial lands in western Africa from ‘native’ chiefs, specifically King Peter¹¹, using ‘fee-simple’ treaties (this type of treaty under English Law indicates that land is owned outright). These agreements had competing interpretations for the involved parties. For the ACS, the treaties signified buying land with a single payment of cash and goods (Kazanjian, 2011, p. 864). In other iterations of this historical narrative, the treaties included provisions wherein the local leaders apparently relinquished their political sovereignty to the state in Monrovia (Akpan, 1981-1982, p. 3), the transfer of land ownership was formalized through a treaty between the Monrovia government and local chiefs and entailed the exchange of goods. However, for the indigenous people of Liberia, who did not hold a view of large areas of land as private assets—especially because land was abundant, and people were few—the agreements only granted the ACS agents permission to reside and trade on this shared land. That is why, when the agents and colonists returned to take possession of their

¹¹ King Peter is an Indigenous Liberian, but I don’t think his name is actually King Peter...I think this was a name that the Europeans gave him

recently procured territory, they were met with resistance (Holsoe, 1971), and this would be the first of many conflicts between indigenous communities and Americo-Liberians for centuries to come.¹² Subsequently, similar treaties were made with the Dei, Gola, Condo, Grebo, and Kru. Other lands would also be taken without any formal treaty agreements (Kazanjian, 2011, p. 864).

Liberia was placed under the jurisdiction of white American Governors, who were elected internally by the ACS, from 1822 to 1841. Nevertheless, the ultimate influence rested with the Board of Managers based in Washington D.C. This board had the power to endorse, alter, or nullify laws created for the colony by the Governor and Legislative Council (Akpan, 1973, p. 218). The emigres eventually came to the realization that the ACS had deceived them inasmuch as they were not granted jurisdiction to govern themselves and manage their own political affairs. Due to insufficient funding for the colonization project, many emigrants relied on financial aid from their former masters to establish trades, farms, or businesses upon arrival (Everill, 2012, p. 67). The ACS struggled to establish a plantation economy because of poor soil and dense jungle around Monrovia, leading them to relocate to more favorable locations along the St. Paul River and the coast, forming communities named after American locales like New Georgia (Miller, 1978, p. 41). By the late 1820s, when North Carolinians began arriving, the settlement already featured structures reminiscent of certain towns in the American South. The settlement had undergone extensive clearance, removing undergrowth across an area of one square mile. For the first two decades, the settler economy prospered using a plantation system similar to those in the Caribbean and U.S. South, the land was toiled by indentured or enslaved Africans (Khafre, 1978, p. 106). In an 1861 work, Alexander Crummell wrote about the benefits of African American emigration to Liberia, including economic opportunities in the sugar and cotton sectors, access to education, and the pursuit of liberty (Oldfield, 1990, p. 129).

¹² Chief Peter was adamant in his denial of the society's entitlements based on their understanding of the treaty's stipulations. Concurrently, as these disputes underwent resolution, the emigres relocated to Dozoe Island (now called Providence Island) and began building houses there. Not long after they began doing this, a British naval vessel carrying thirty captured Africans was stranded close to this region. So, adhering to their customary beliefs, indigenous Liberians of the region attempted to lay claim over the vessel since it was within their territory. Upon aggression, the British retaliated, prompting the settlers to come to their defence. Indigenous Liberians would then destroy the initial settlement built by the emigres on their land.

Declaration of Liberian National Independence

Eventually, with the high death toll of white political actors and Governor Thomas Buchanan in 1841 along with a scarcity of funding for the colonisation project, the ACS came to an (unofficial) dissolution. However, “there still were several active missionary groups which continued to send to Liberia thousands of dollars each year which kept the country financially solvent” (Mower, 1947, p.269). Buchanan was replaced by the first African American (free-born) head-of-state, Joseph Jenkins Roberts in 1842. Pursuing autonomy from the ACS, in 1847, Liberia became the first African Republic to declare independence. The Republic’s sovereignty, however, was not recognized by the U.S. until 15 years after by President Abraham Lincoln who, same as his predecessors, envisaged a “black exodus that would purge the [United States] of African Americans once and for all” (Clegg, 2004, p. 3). In an 1855 letter addressed to Fredrick Douglass’ Newspaper (March 16, 1855), the following was written:

The Negro-hating, disposition of the General Government is also seen in its ungenerous, dishonorable and despicable conduct toward Liberia...The United States has steadily and persistently refused to acknowledge their independence (qtd. in Tillery, 2011, p. 14).

In 1862, the United States Congress established official diplomatic relations with Liberia (Tillery, 2011, p. 14). By 1867, the American Colonization Society (ACS) had relocated over 13,000 emigrants to Liberia. The Republic of Liberia adopted a republican constitution modeled after the U.S. Constitution to sever legal ties with the ACS and assert its sovereignty on the international stage (Levitt, 2005, p. 90). Part of the 1847 version of constitution reads as follows:

We recognize in all men certain inalienable rights; among these are life, liberty, and the right to acquire, possess, enjoy, and defend property. By the practice and consent of men in all ages, some system or form of government is proved to be necessary to exercise, enjoy, and secure their rights, and every people have a right to institute a government, and to choose and adopt that system, or form of it, which in their opinion will most effectively accomplish these objects, and secure their happiness, which does not interfere with the just rights of others. The right, therefore, to institute government and powers necessary to conduct it is an inalienable right and cannot be resisted without the grossest injustice (written by Hilary Teague, AfrikaDU).

The 1847 constitutional convention indexed a significant turning point in Liberia's political history, transitioning from a colonial outpost to an independent nation. During this transformation, the constitution granted citizenship to 'negro' emigrants over 21 who owned property, and these individuals directly voted on the constitution's adoption (Levitt, 2005, p. 90). Americo-Liberians, concerned about the racial inequalities resulting from slavery in the U.S., incorporated a 'Negro Clause' into the Liberian Constitution, preventing non-black (read indigenous Africans, whites etc.) individuals from attaining Liberian citizenship. This framework was modeled after the initial conferral of citizenship in the U.S., which favoured white male landowners (Bhandar, 2018, p. 5)—the ultimate individuated citizen-subject. Proprietorship is central to the construction of the racialized and gendered 'human' subject. Liberia's citizenship criteria, determining national belonging, mirrored a settler-colonial mindset rooted in white supremacy and patriarchy, excluding most indigenous people, non-Christians, and women from both indigenous and Americo-Liberian communities. The recognition of indigenous Liberians as citizens only came about when President William Tubman introduced the *Unification and Integration Policy*, which incorporated non-American blacks (such as West African, West Indian/Caribbean, Central African, and North American) into body politic, exactly one century later, in 1946 (Pailey, 2021, p. 6). However, such constitutional amendments only granted voting rights to indigenous groups and women who owned property, maintaining substantial barriers to their full integration and democratic participation. This sustained the Americo-Liberian elite's political hegemony and any demonstrations in contradiction of the Liberian state were cursorily subdued (Conteh-Morgan and Kadivar, 1995).

Individual and Collective Identity

According to archival records from the New York State Colonization Society (NYSCS), by 1833, Liberia's coastal region had three established churches with "regularly organized congregations" (New-York State Colonization Society, 1849-1968). These were the Protestant Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Rev. Isaiah B. Scott, D.D., Bishop, 1833). It is worth quoting in length the following excerpt from the report, which provides a comprehensive depiction of the organization of civil society and public life during that time.

Foreigners as missionaries, men, 9, women, 12: 'native' ordained preachers 32, unordained 15: churches and chapels 35, valued at \$68, 320; parsonages 7, value \$9, 500: communicants 2538, and probationers 517, total 3055: Sunday schools 46 with 1926 scholars: College of West Africa, Rev. A. P. Camphor, President, with 8 teachers, 203 students, property valued at \$10, 000.: High School, with 5 teachers, 165 pupils, property valued at \$10, 000: St. Paul Industrial School, twenty-five miles up the St. Paul River, where industries such as carpentry, blacksmithing, and cabinetmaking are taught with a successful coffee plantation, property valued at \$10, 000: Cape Palms Seminary, property valued at \$5, 000" other elementary and day schools 19, with 791 pupils: total under instruction 1159. In all the mission stations gardening, general agriculture, and home industries are taught. It is the purpose of the Methodist Missionary movement in Liberia to advance steadily toward the less 'civilized' peoples of the frontier regions, and toward the savage millions beyond (New-York State Colonization Society, 1849-1968).

During the formative period of Liberia, there existed a closely intertwined association between the church and state. The ACS viewed the dissemination of Christianity as a means to 'civilize' the 'natives'. The inaugural constitution of the colony, ratified in 1847, also proclaimed Christian faith as the recognized and endorsed religion of the Republic, stating that "the Christian religion shall be recognized, established, and affirmed as the official religion of this nation" (New York State Colonization Society, 1849-1968). The churches also played a crucial role in community life by offering social connections, educational resources, intellectual nourishment, and a connection to a relative past. The church also presented opportunities for individuals to take on leadership roles. Churches were central to community life, providing social connections, educational resources, intellectual stimulation, and a link to ancestral pasts. They also offered leadership opportunities. However, American mission boards-controlled church policies and assets, limiting the autonomy desired by many settlers in their religious practices.

Prior to emigrating to Liberia, manumitted blacks received pedagogic instructions on freedom or how to become suited for freedom (Everill, 2012). Specifically, in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1832) Jefferson proposed a repatriation plan in which the American government would educate enslaved black boys in agriculture, arts, or sciences, according to their respective aptitudes. Upon adulthood, they would be declared "free and independent," equipped with resources like

weapons, household and handicraft tools, seeds, and pairs of domestic animals. Later, when Samuel A. Crozier was appointed as an agent for the ACS, secretary E.B. Caldwell provided him with specific guidelines in a letter.

Next to the peace, harmony, and safety of the Colony, as well as to insure and promote these, you will pay particular attention to the instruction of the colonists. There should not be a single member of the Colony, of proper age, who shall not in a short time be instructed to read, write, and in the common rules of arithmetic at least. Habits of industry should be particularly inculcated, and if necessary, enforced by authority (American Colonization Society, 1792).

Education specifically mattered because in the ‘new world’, enslaved peoples were legally prohibited from accessing any form of education because an ability to read was fixed to the exercising of citizenship rights, such as voting (Morrison, 1998, p. 89). The American Constitution defined ‘the black’ as “three-fifths” of a human being and literacy was an ability that differentiated the human from the beast. As Davis and Gates (1991) aptly articulate it, “learning to read and write meant that [persons] of African descent took one giant step up the great chain of being; the ‘thing’ became a human being” (p. xxix).

Liberia’s Place in the International Sphere

Liberia’s inclusion in the international state-system as a legitimate sovereign constituency was fraught with precariousness, lacking adequate safeguards (under 19th century international law) to counter the imminent threat of the Republic’s dissection during the partitioning of Africa. The incursion by European powers into Liberian territory instilled significant concern, which prompted the adoption of a more tyrannical approach towards managing the indigenous Africans, beginning in the mid 1840s. Writing to the members of the Legislative Council in January of 1843, President Roberts emphasised the urgent need for the colony to expand the Republic’s territory, citing concerns over immigration, agricultural endeavors, and increasing encroachments by foreign traders. He noted these traders not only threatened colonial commerce but also heightened tensions between the ‘natives’ and the colonial government. Without intervention, Roberts feared future conflicts with foreign powers and neighboring groups. The

debate on territorial expansion was split; some favored Christian settlements along the coast, while others supported inland expansion. Roberts recommended reaching out to the governments of Great Britain and the United States through the American Colonization Society, believing their support for the colony's anti-slavery and Christianizing mission would help them expand and that both powers would protect Liberia's land. Consider the following excerpt from the letter and note the racialized or anti-African language that Roberts uses:

I believe that just as soon as those governments can be made satisfied of the importance of settling Christian colonies along this coast for the more effectual suppression of the slave trade and for the extension of Christianity, among a heathen and barbarous people. They will not only grant us the privilege of acquiring jurisdiction over the territory named, but will protect us from the improper interference of those who are doing all they can to injure and retard the progress of the Colony (Huberich, 1947, p. 748)

By 1846, President Roberts initiated the fortification of the colonial militia to subdue the 'natives', expand Liberia's territory, and increase its regional influence. This marked the first official policy, independent of the ACS, where repatriates adopted a violent approach toward the indigenous population. During the fourth session of the legislative council, President Roberts shared his reflections on the colony's status:

We find great occasion to rejoice in the general welfare of the Colony: we are in the enjoyment of the blessings of peace; civil and religious harmony exist, and future prospects are opening before us: through the past year, and up to the present time, peace has been in our borders. Our civil and religious institutions are exerting a most happy influence over the natives around us, they acknowledge our superiority, and are daily adopting our customs. (Huberich, 1947, p. 737)

Henceforth, the deployment of coercive force became a standard policy for the colonial government in its dealings with the indigenous population throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The colonial militia emerged as the most enduring 'modern' institution in Liberia, providing the institutional stability needed to maintain law and order. Civil administration and military service became closely intertwined, exerting mutual influence (Levitt, 2005, p. 56). The militia evolved into the Liberian Frontier Force (LFF), and in 1908, under the Barclay Administration, it became

the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). The Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) served both military and policing functions, gaining a reputation among indigenous Africans as a criminally corrupt organization. It was tasked to “maintain law and order throughout the republic, prevent and detect crime in the interior, and build roads from the coast to the hinterland” (Levitt, 2005, p. 142).

Overtime, these policies produced the settler-native divide, which continues to shape the socio-political organization of the country to this day (Levitt, 2005, p. 84). For the remainder of the 19th century, Liberia’s political trajectory would be shaped by, if not definitive of, the conventional exclusionary ideals of nationality, citizenship, and state formation. In any case, throughout the latter part of the 19th century, Liberia constantly encountered challenges. The United States occasionally intervened, assisting Liberia in resolving territorial disputes with Great Britain and France and suppressing ‘native’ uprisings. And according to J.H. Mower, writing in 1947, “the country made little if any social or technical progress” (Mower, 1947, p. 270). Only in the 20th century, did Liberia become a republic with a government based in Monrovia, following the suppression of uprisings in 1910, 1915, 1918, and 1920, the central government was able to gain the monopoly on legitimate violence in the interior regions. Since 1911, Liberia maintained its influence through a system of indirect rule, where district commissioners appointed by Monrovia's central authority managed the interior regions. Their responsibilities included tax collection for housing, polling, and education, as well as overseeing labor (Younis, 2017, p. 275; unpublished manuscript). However, until the 1940s, indigenous people were required to fulfill these citizenship duties without being granted actual citizenship (Kieh, 2004, p. 61).

Some of the earliest writings on Americo-Liberian ‘colonialism’ is Gershoni’s (1985) *Black Colonialism: The Americo-Liberian Scramble for the Hinterland*, which posits that the subjugation of indigenous Africans was simply reflective of a mode of improvisatory governance. This is because such governing practices are rooted in an implicit understanding of political norms or, they signify a sort of onto-political common sense as part of the “modern political unconscious” (Carter, 2008, p. 40). I say more about the subsequent chapters.

I am talking of millions of men who have been skillfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, and abasement.

—Aime Cesaire ¹³

It is and always has been the custom for Liberians to speak of themselves as 'white men,' while they have considered the 'natives' 'bush niggers'.

—Starr ¹⁴

V The Politics and Production of the Ethno-Racial

In 19th century Liberia, ethno-cultural absolutism became the brutal modality through which race was preserved and hegemony was extended over black people struggling to ameliorate or flee uninhabitable conditions of unfreedom and indigenous peoples that had been subjected to the violence of British colonial mercantilism and the globalisation of exchange, for centuries prior. The central argument, in this chapter, is that the incarnation of politicised ‘ethnicity’ in Liberia merely signified the composition of a new kind of vernacular to elaborate perceived cultural distinctions in racial terms. Plantation logics have played a constitutive role in configuring the historical and discursive pretext for the governance and regulation of social life in this country. This chapter is concerned with the ways in which perceived ethnological distinctions were reconfigured and how this reconfiguration engendered the emergence of particular social identities and choreographed their performances—because “social life has a politics as well” (Moten, 2008, p. 199). I want to think about politics *through* black social life. By way of musing on the intersubjective relations that characterized the sphere of black social existence in Liberia’s early history (circa 1830s-1860s), this part of the thesis endeavours to recount how the force of anti-blackness subtended native-settler relations of recognition—although “not only known to [themselves] and to each other through and by that force” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 16). I attend to the

¹³ (2000, p. 43; translated from French)

¹⁴ (1913, p. 481)

role of slavery in establishing a threshold or basis for intergroup relations and social norms by drawing forth a history of discriminatory deportments, “devaluing epithets,” and systemic alienations (Ochonu, 2021, p. 10). This mode of analysis regards intersubjectivity as a microcosmic representation of Liberia’s broader relation to the global historical racialized orders against which the country’s national crisis ultimately developed (Pierre, 2012, p. 5). So, echoing C.L.R. James, “to say it’s some kind of ethnic problem is a lot of nonsense” (James, 1938, p. 397).

The literature on Liberia’s past indicates that people often assumed different identities for different, often strategic, and inherently political reasons. In *The Price of Liberty* (2004), Claude Clegg documents the emigration of 2030 emancipated black people from North Carolina to Liberia between 1825 and 1893. By attending to the perspectives from both the American and African contexts, Clegg traces a significant episode in the historical development of Liberia in the Atlantic World. Clegg tells us that over fleeting intervals of time, individuals could conceivably assume a multitude of social identities, going from being a “Temne, Akan, or Congolese, farmer one week, an anonymous bondsman on a Spanish slaver bound for the Americas the next week, a ‘Recaptured African’ on a U.S. naval cruiser the following week, and finally a New Georgian with an English name by month’s end” (Clegg, 2004, p. 98). What is needed is a more meticulous elaboration of the history of Liberian social relations that attends to how being free and/or “being human...signals not a noun but a verb” (McKittrick, 2013, p. 3). By following this trajectory of verbing, one can begin to unlock the ever-shifting and fluid nature of ethnicity and race and limn how it becomes possible “to move from *native to colonized*, to dispossessed, to proletarian, to unfree labourer, to settler...*and from black to white*” (Kelley, 2017, p. 278; my emphasis). I argue that the reason one can go from being a farmer to “being for the captor” (Spillers, 1987, p. 67) is precisely because of the reduction of the black body to a thing, its fungibility, the black body constitutes the very limits of ontology from without. Instead, this ability to transform brings into focus the fact of blackness as matter without definite shape or structure, or what Zakkiyah Iman Jackson would describe as “plasticity”; “in such a matter as to produce blackness as sub/super/human at once, a form where form shall not hold; potentially ‘everything and nothing’ at the register of ontology” (2020, p. 3). This conceptual move also helps us catalogue the inexorable impacts that racial and postcolonial onto-epistemologies have

had on subjectivity in the post 1492 world and/or how the force of ‘the human subject’ (Da Silva, 2007) was brought to bear on us and became the baggage that we dragged with us.

In Liberia, distinct social groups did emerge and endure. A close consideration of the history of their transmogrification redirects our attention from an Atlantic-centric emphasis on institutions and empires (Sweet, 2011). Instead, it steers us toward an analytic that is concerned with indexing life worlds, generating a cartography of quotidian maneuvers in and through power and mapping the ‘why’ that motivated armed rebellions. Afterall, the notion of states and their interactions is not a system that is independent of human wills and desires (Jackson, 1991, p. 7). Meaning the condition of black life in Liberia is a direct result of a chorus of collective comportments that put in operation our modernity (Wynter, 2003, p. 270). The comportment of the subject, in turn, cannot be divorced from the affectability of the subject. Affectability is “the condition of being subjected to both natural (in the scientific and lay sense) conditions and to others’ power” (Da Silva, 2007, p. xv). Part of what is necessary then, is the materialization of a comprehensive analytic that remarks on and spectacularized those existential modes of violence that have been rendered normative and unremarkable. This is what Fanon (1968) and Neil Roberts (2015) name as a sociogenic method, one that “would examine actors’ lived experience, paying equal attention to the psychic, existential and material conditions that shape opportunities, choices, and imaginaries. It would privilege ordinary people over the lawgiver, the government, or the legal order” (Wilder, 2017).

In this chapter, I confer focus on the Skipwith family, engaging their epistles as my point of departure for comprehending the early experiences of repatriated people in Liberia. Through an examination of their encounters with the challenges posed by a new environment, its inhabitants, constrained resources, and the pursuit of freedom and self-determination. The epistolary archive of the Skipwiths is amassed in *Dear Master: Letters of a Slave Family* by Randall Miller is one of the most comprehensive known documentations left by an enslaved family. The compilation includes over two hundred letters, written from 1834-1865, and seven additional letters have been recovered since its initial publication. Through these correspondences, the collection maps the relationship between two generations of the Skipwith family and the Virginian planter, John Hartwell Cocke. My argument is that the narratives presented by the Skipwiths offer valuable insights about black temporalities, the intimate relationship between slavery and emancipation

and the pervasive sense of racial melancholia (Cheng, 2000)—a yearning for a freedom as-yet unrealized. Significantly, the Skipwiths’ desire to subjugate other Africans (by using them as indentured servants), akin to their ‘free-born’ counterparts, expresses their own conceptualization of freedom. Of particular interest, in this chapter, is how repatriated individuals navigated the process of forging a sense of community and belonging in Liberia. This question attends to the complexities of self-fashioning and the establishment of roots in a geography marked both by precarities, promise, and possibilities.

As noted above, the analysis in this chapter is largely centered on the viewpoints of the emigrants, specifically those of the Skipwith family. Hence, the perspectives of indigenous Liberians during the early historical period of the country’s existence have not been extensively explored. However, I meditate briefly on their perspectives in relation to their encounters with colonial agents and merchants to comprehend the potential impact those encounters had on their interactions with the Americo-Liberian emigrants. The overarching objective of my thesis is to reconnoitre the historical ramifications of the Atlantic slave trade on intergroup tensions in Liberia, particularly in regard to the persistence and interpolation of anti-black modes of thought by the repatriated. An inquiry into how indigenous peoples perceived race prior to African-American emigration would be a useful, especially because the “invented traditions” (Ranger, 2012) introduced through European interactions exposed indigenous peoples to the embodiment of ‘modern’ comportment. However, that is beyond the scope of this thesis. These made-up traditions, which were probably incessantly made and remade by Europeans and Africans alike in response to unpredictable social circumstances and needs, became concrete realities that served as the primary modes of expression for a substantial deal of colonial encounters (Ranger, 2012, p. 212). Uncovering how race was perceived prior to centuries of intercontinental intimacy (Lowe, 2015) would require us to “strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess over time, assigned a particular historical order and there [would] await whatever marvels of [our] own inventiveness” (Spillers, 1987, p. 65). And such a philosophical undertaking is beyond the scope of this manuscript.

On Freedom and Property

Emigrants constructed their perceptions of freedom in proprietorial terms. Freedom was inextricably linked to economic prosperity and the attainment of property as well as social and political class mobility (Miller, 1978, p. 42)—the American dream, if you will. By this I mean, repatriation signified a possibility for emigrants to realize their full potential, what they could perhaps accomplish living out from under conditions of extreme duress—a form of grand redress. The process of conquest and domination itself figured into their ideas and “processes of self-actualization” (King, 2016, p. 5). Claude Clegg (2004) writes that “for ex-slaves, freedom meant legalized personhood, civil rights, and a documented existence. In essence, it was the unfettered ability to create one's own familial, communal, and civic relations in a land beyond the overbearing control of white people” (p. 247). Their vision of freedom, in part, was informed by a liberal politics that prioritized self-determination, self-reliance, and self-rule (Gerrity, 2021, p.70). This elucidates the rationale behind Peyton Skipwith’s profound disillusionment with the arduous and uncertain economic conditions that he and his family encountered upon their settlement in Monrovia. In a letter addressed to John Hartwell Cocke, dated February 10, 1834, about a month after settling in Liberia, Peyton Skipwith conveyed the following sentiments:

My-self and wife are dissatisfied in this place. There are some [emigrants] that have come to this place that have got rich and a number that are suffering. Those that are well off do have the natives as slaves and poor [black] people that come from America have no chance to make a living [because] the natives do all the work (Miller, 1978, p. 58)¹⁵.

The predicament of Peyton Skipwith and his family captures the enduring afterlives of slavery that transcended transnational boundaries. Despite taking flight from the physical space of the plantation, their lives were still circumscribed by the institution's exploitative logics. The irony lies in the fact that, even in a purportedly Liberated country, the logics of the plantation persist because of this global structure that devalues black lives. That free-born African Americans exploited the labor of indigenous Liberians, evidence how deeply ingrained the logic of slavery was. Moreover, the reason freedmen and women were able to own indigenous peoples in Liberia is because their previous status as ‘free’ people in the antebellum South allowed them to increase their human capital and economic status after slavery was abolished. “Before the Civil War, as

¹⁵ Edited for grammar and punctuation.

Freedmen, they could pursue businesses, own land, and some owned slaves of their own. Other factors also helped them improve their economic status compared to their slave counterparts, such as being literate and in better health, slavery was an institution that taxed the health status of slaves” (Verdugo, 2014, p. 17). Moving beyond spatial considerations and property ownership, I grapple with the ways in which formerly enslaved people experienced time, challenging ideas about freedom’s linear trajectory.

Black Time-Space

The epistolary exchanges of the Skipwiths are concurrently melancholic and optimistic. There are moments within most of the letters where the Skipwiths reminisce on their past—that is their life on the plantation and the time of slavery. In this letter, addressed to Mrs. Sally F. Brent, daughter of John Hartwell Cocke, from Monrovia in 1858, Matilda Richardson, formerly known as Matilda Skipwith and Peyton’s daughter, writes of her current state, modulated by both acquiescence and optimism:

I am getting on as well as I can expect, but not as well as I should like to do. But I still look forward to better times and hope that time is not far off. I hope to live to see the day when Africa, our dark country shall rise, bud and blossom as the rose of the garden of life (Miller, 1978, p. 119)¹⁶.

The concept of hope can be neatly emplaced within a chronological narrative. However, what about those instances where the Skipwiths yearn for ‘home’? For example, writing to John Cocke on March 6, 1835, Peyton Skipwith says, “I [once] had a notion of going home and still have a notion” (Miller, 1978, p. 59). Years later, in 1851, Peyton’s daughter Matilda similarly confesses to Genl. John H. Cocke, saying, “nothing could afford me more pleasure than to visit again the scenes of childhood and look upon those faces which were once familiar to me. But the hope of this is forbidden by circumstances over which I have no control” (Miller, 1978, p. 106).

How could someone who had experienced the violence and brutality of bondage reminisce about returning to a life on the plantation? Of course, this raises questions about the disillusionment of

¹⁶ I edited the original texts for grammar and punctuation.

emancipation and shows how deeply intertwined the concepts of freedom and slavery are. But it also suggests that freedom does not necessarily chronologically follow from slavery. The only thing that follows the emancipation from slavery is the experience of haunting in its afterlife. As Avery Gordon aptly reminds us, “haunting alters the experience of being in time” (2008, p. xvi). So maybe what the Skipwiths’ were trying to account for is an experience that does not fit within the temporal structures afforded to us by the narrative form. “The act of describing would involve some notion of the passage of time. Narrating would imply at least a hint of ‘and then’ and ‘after that’. Any written or spoken sentence would naturally lean forward towards its development and conclusion, unlike [black] paralysed time” (Riley, 2019, p. 57). The writings in these letters distort our sense of proper sequence and invite us to think differently about the past, present, slavery, and freedom. The writings also foreground how the discourses of return and restitution, so central to the African diasporic experience, is fraught with the tension between the physical and metaphorical conceptions of home.

Hue, Phenotype, Freedom, and Captivity

In the New World it was *hue*, referring to the “external appearance of the face and skin, complexion” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2023) and phenotype that acquired a profound significance, serving as the decisive criterion in distinguishing between being and its negation (non-being), which is to say distinguishing between being marked for freedom or being marked for captivity (Spillers, 1987). According to this logic, a racial caste system divided Liberians into three core categories: a minor assembly of light-skinned, free-born, African Americans governed all national matters. Formerly enslaved blacks clung to the “middle rungs of society” (Burin, 2003, p. 142) and were incorporated into Americo-Liberian society as second-class citizens (Miller, 1978, p. 49). Indigenous Africans were homogeneously categorized as ‘natives’ and occupied the lowermost limits of this order and were definitively cast as unfree (insofar as they were thought to be incapable of self-governance which is part of the responsibilities enumerated under the rubrics of liberal freedom). These identity markers were important to emigres insofar as they indexed “one's previous status as a free person” (Clegg, 2004, p. 97).

This is evidenced by the following questions addressed to Mr. Thomas C. Brown, a free colored citizen of South Carolina who recently returned from a ‘discouraging’ time in Liberia, by a committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1834. Founded in 1833 by William Lloyd Garrison and associates, the American Anti-Slavery Society was resolute in its mission to eradicate slavery. Their interrogation focused on the conditions of ‘recaptured Africans’—individuals who were illegally enslaved and transported to the U.S., apprehended by American naval forces, and subsequently resettled in Liberia. This incident elucidates the internal conflicts within the 19th-century abolitionist movement, particularly among prominent Quaker members of the Anti-Slavery Society. While Quakers like Elliot Cresson endorsed colonization efforts, figures such as Garrison vehemently opposed them.

Do the 'native's call the colonists white men, as a term of distinction?

They do.

Do the colonists feel as much above the natives as the whites do here above the colored people? Or do they associate together in terms of equality?

Kings, coming to that place, and chief men are taken into their houses. The lower order are not. They are employed as servants for the purpose of toting burdens, as there are no animals there, or very few.

Is there any more pains taken to educate and improve the natives than is made here by the white population generally to elevate the colored?

There is not (T. Brown, 1834, p. 51).

In the formation of the Republic of Liberia, the Americo-Liberians emerged as a distinct ethnic/racial group. This group, primarily characterized by their creolized identity, had not possessed a cohesive group identity prior to resettling in Liberia. Their shared experiences of slavery or racial violence in the U.S. served as their primary unifying connection. Horowitz (1985) argues that American-Liberians can be compared to prominent and cohesive ethnic groups in modern politics such as the Ibo in Nigeria and the Malays in Malaysia. Moreover, the literature on Liberia has generally described the country’s social order as a class system

underpinned by features of ethnicity, or the other way around, “as a system based on ethnicity and kinship considerations but also possessing class-like features” (Sawyer, 1998, p. 1). Other historians of Liberia have cursorily defined the Liberian social order as a paradigmatic example of a colonial caste system (Akpan, 1973). But to me, these modes of organization are more reminiscent of Northern American states where ‘free-born’, lighter-skinned blacks forged discriminative social and fraternal organizations that segregated them from formerly enslaved and darker-skinned, poor, blacks. Multiplicity within the Americo-Liberian community lead to intragroup conflicts emerging from colorism/shadeism, social class, occupation, and geographic origins. Particularly concerning differences in hue, those with lighter complexions among the Americo-Liberians regarded themselves as inherently superior to their darker-skinned counterparts. This belief found support in the practices of the ACS, which appointed darker-skinned groups to lower-level positions within the colonial administration. Consequently, the lighter-skinned faction would accumulate political and economic power. In terms of social class, the lighter-skinned segment included lawyers, wealthy merchants, and junior administrators within the state bureaucracy. Initially, they occupied the middle level in the caste and class structure established by the ACS. Between 1839 and 1926, they advanced to the middle tiers of this caste-class system. Significantly, these internal class distinctions among Americo-Liberians were also reflected in the dominance of the lighter-skinned Americo-Liberians across all aspects of national life. Regionally, the Americo-Liberians were categorized as part of the ‘Monrovia Club,’ and/or the ‘up the river settlement groups,’ and/or the ‘outer Monrovia Group.’ During the first century, the ‘Monrovia Club’ controlled the political and economic spheres (Kieh, 2004, p. 63). The “repressed or unresolved social violence” (A. Gordon, 2008, p. xvi) of racial slavery revealed itself anew in Liberia, where darker-skinned and destitute emancipated enslaved people (such as the Skipwiths) did not have access to capital, skills, education, or networks to lay claim to a formal equality with free-born blacks (Miller, 1978, p. 49) – an intragroup stratification that further complicated the social topography. The Liberian political, economic, and socio-cultural landscape was re-ordered to facilitate the systemic segregation of the country’s inhabitants not based on hue or phenotype but along two principal dimensions, ‘civilised’ and ‘uncivilised’:

‘Civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ or ‘tribal’ as the terms are used in Liberia, are not distinct and mutually exclusive statuses, but two ends of a continuum which... is really an embryonic social class structure. The most important component of ‘civilization’ is

education, but while to the outsider the question immediately arises of how much education a man needs in order to be regarded as 'civilized', to the Monrovia it does not occur in quite these terms, since 'civilized' has a much wider connotation than 'educated'. More generally 'civilized' status involves the adoption of the outward signs of 'civilized' life - Western dress (more especially by the women), house type and furniture (Fraenkel, 1964, pp. 67-68).

Americo-Liberians overdetermined and translated regional, cultural and class distinctions into ethno-racial ones. Native-settler conflicts were undergirded by a separatist philosophy—one held by Americo-Liberians—that their geopolitical origination, engrossment in American cultural systems, and responsibility to certain conceptions of political subjectivity, inferred implicit value to a 'previously' ontologically negated/blackened diasporic subjectivity. Maybe "it now [occurred to them] that in this need to establish [themselves] in relation to [their] past [they are] most American [because that] depthless alienation from oneself and one's people is, in sum, the American experience" (Baldwin, 1963, p. 89). They assumed civilizational superiority over indigenous Liberians. Like those "people made White by a voyage" (Baldwin, 1995, p. 44) they persistently re-enacted those "initiating moments" (Spillers, 1987, p. 67) by discursively marking the African life form as onto-political negation and "unaccommodated *bios*" (Moten, 2013, p. 740; emphasis in original), to avow their own ambivalent status as coherent 'human subjects'. Underlying this axiological disposition is an understanding of Africanity as representative of everything that remains inchoate and disfigured (Mbembe, 2001, p. 1), a mode of thought that is inextricably bound up with the idea of the ontological persistence of blackness as negation or "material continuation of blackness as lack" (Proglione et al., 2021, p. 14). Generally, Americo-Liberians sought through sartorial practices, education, culture, religion, language, and housing to "maintain a 'rule of difference' from the 'native' population" (Whyte, 2016, p. 79). They actively practised their Protestant faith and thought as 'free' individuals they were obligated to "uplift Africa through Christianity, commerce, and civilisation material welfare and moral progress" (Mitman, 2021, p. 49).

However, the strategy of segregating persons based on this criterion lacked durability and there existed no political forethought in its operations. It became increasingly difficult to segregate the population based on different shades of black due to the lack of control over the degree of

pigmentation in the skin of one's offspring. Thus, there was a need for the rules to bend. I speculate that Americo-Liberians were conscious of this and for that reason they sought to focus only on differentiating themselves from the 'native' population by drawing out perceived cultural distinctions and leaving colorism behind to instead fix the ('unknown'/nontransparent) 'native' African to something that was familiar, orthodox, and habituated (Bhabha, 1994, p. 73) that is to say, "common sense ethnic and racial categories" (Brubaker, 2002, p. 166).

In the context of ethno-cultural dynamics, the historical division between Americo-Liberians and the various indigenous groups has often been framed as a distinction between the 'civilized' and the 'country' (read rural/native/uncivilized) populations (Kieh, 2004, p. 64). The political-symbolic veracity of the term 'civilized' is embedded in a "bizarre axiological ground" (Spillers, 1987, p. 65), a time-place in the afterlife of slavery where plantation logics—and by extension hierarchized ideations of 'the human'— govern and possess black political life and sociality. Americo-Liberians, like Europeans, now imagined themselves and the nation to represent an embodied identitarian articulation of American whiteness by way of discursively constituting themselves in antagonistic relation to the blackened 'native'.

Despite the absence of any explicit legal title, the term 'civilized' is widely used across all social strata, including not only the coastal regions dominated by Americo-Liberians but also in the hinterland inhabited by indigenous Liberians. The pervasive influence of this term as a tool for social stratification and a measure of moral value is readily discernible to anyone who has lived in that country. This is discussed by David Brown in his work on the concept of 'civilized' in Liberia and other contexts (Brown, 1982, p. 288). Legislated in the 1847 constitution was a provision stipulating that 'natives' could only access citizenship and participate in national politics, if they could demonstrate successful acculturation into 'civilised' life (Whyte, 2017, p. 27). In what follows, I try to explain how African descended people construct one another other in racial terms.

Racialized Perception and Illicit Seeing

The *longue durée* of enslavement generated an anti-black sensorial episteme in which "the 'native' and 'settler' cannot recognize each other as they are, let alone understand that they are

products of the same gratuitous violence” (Woods, 2019, p. 51). Indigenous Liberians perceived the black ‘settlers’ to be “culturally white” (Clegg, 2004, p. 97) while the ‘settlers’ apprehended ‘natives’ as “bush niggers” (Starr, 1913, p. 481). The encounter was saturated with antinomies (Baldwin, 1963). This obverse mode of seeing is what Spillers might pronounce as a “cultural seeing by skin color” (Spillers, 1987, p. 67) insofar as it is a discernment about a subject’s physiology, cognitive propensity, sentience, and capacity to self-govern. Structures of consciousness are enclosed by a certain set of discursive and linguistic grammars as well as by the sensorial (which can evoke certain affects), insofar as the self-making or the social configuration of the “African self as a reflexive subject also involves doing, seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling, and touching” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 6).

Immanuel Kant (1983) cautions us not to overlook the fact that our sensory perception, that is how we give meaning to certain phenomena, “is subjectively conditioned and must not be regarded as identical with the phenomena perceived but never really discerned” (Freud, 1963). Taking seriously this caveat, I posit that it is *not* a question of direct perception that we are contending with, or even a question of what was observed or invented (Jackson, 2020, pp. 7-8) but rather the anti-black epistemic foundations that animated the visual and social topography in and of itself. The visual field is a racialized epistemic location haunted by the optics of transatlantic slavery, and in its wake necessitates an otherwise conceptualization of veracity and ‘human’ value. At the epicenter of such complicated and paradoxical social and affective dynamics, exists a “form of illicit seeing,” (Gordon, 2010, p. 197) a fugitive or outlawed perceptual orientation through which the being of blackness may be witnessed; a witnessing made impossible through the constellations of modern representation (Foucault and Blanchot, 1987). The representational systems to which I am referring here, are the different regnant mediums by which we construct and negotiate meanings or “make sense of things” (Hall, 2003, p. 1), enabling the ongoing production and exchange of signification. For example, language, as a system of representation, is central to processes of meaning-making. Culture functions as a receptacle for shared societal values and meanings (Hall, 2003, p.1). In this monograph, the culture of modernity refers to a spatio-temporal locale where whiteness *can* (a verb expressing possibility) be a “state of mind” and the ultimate moral choice and thus a sovereign choice (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). Mbembe tells us that “[t]o exercise sovereignty is to exercise

control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.” (2003, p. 12).

Deracinated Life and Homemaking

Given the cyclical nature of the exorbitant and irreparable loss—a general dishonoring engendered by slavery—or what Orlando Patterson (1982) articulates as the "natal alienation" of the slave, it is not unforeseen that the repatriated would deeply value sociality. Upon their settlement in Liberia, they attempted to forge community, continuity, and a sense of belonging. Patterson describes natal alienation as a "sociopsychological aspect of this unusual power relationship," which constitutes one element of slavery:

The slave could have no honor because of the origin of his status, the indignity and all-pervasiveness of his indebtedness, his absence of any independent social existence, but most of all because he was without power except through another (p. 10).

Displaced, place-less and dispossessed peoples are often left to dig, to plant roots, and to configure a collective identity through “the broadest expressions of cultural sameness” (Sweet, 2011, p. 210), using the disparate resources at their disposal (Gilroy, 2002, p. 15). Homemaking is, in part, inextricably tied to the cultivation of a civil society and affective economy that is disgusted by blackness. Allow me to provide a contemporary example to illustrate my point regarding the Western world's disdain for African bodies, particularly marked during times of crisis. In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, European countries and the U.S. questioned why Africa was not the focal point of this global health emergency. There seemed to be a profound sense of perplexity as Africa demonstrated a higher level of preparedness for outbreaks compared to some 'first-world' countries—because, in the Western imagination, Africa is often perceived as a disease-ridden continent—or inaccurately as a 'country'—incapable of managing a public health crisis (Samanga, 2022).

I am also making a claim about how black bodies can and cannot extend into space or inhabit the world. This peculiar problem has also compelled me to pause and engage the historical process by which black(ened) subjects rearticulate their social, political, and embodied modes of

existence to enact a hegemonic performance of personhood and sovereignty that is politically legible and valued. Taking a broader view momentarily, the present study is a broad attempt to place in historical and cultural perspective the constitution of the black political body-subject not only through nationalist, state/extra-state driven discourses, but the axiomatic treatment of ontologies, the very ground of liberal humanism's racial enclosure. Formerly enslaved blacks exerted considerable efforts into differentiating themselves from West Africans by repudiating any kind of social connections or relationships with them. They intermarried within their social group to people of similar geographic, religious, and vocational backgrounds. This stands in stark contrast to the attitudes of 'free-born' blacks who felt secure in their social situation (Miller, 1978, p. 49). However, these boundaries were not fixed and "posed no barrier to ambitious, successful former slaves who might watch their children pass into the dominant free-born society via marriage" (Miller, 1978, p. 49). Over time, the ability to socially transgress made the one's previous status as 'freed' or 'free-born' increasingly less relevant.

Black Christian Nationalism

In Liberia, the substructure for an elaborate racial/ethnic consciousness was constituted by American cultural values, collective memories of enslavement and life on the plantation, and the shared uncharted experiences of repatriation. Randall Miller observes that cultural ties exhibited more resiliency than racial ones, to the extent that the repatriated proclaimed no affiliation with the indigenous Africans. Miller points out that "their perceptions of West Africa and her inhabitants were [entirely] framed in the antebellum south" (Miller, 1978, p. 47). This is the juncture at which things become problematic. Americo-Liberians strategically deployed Christianity, "classical black nationalism," and republicanism to unite the inherently antagonistic concepts of acculturation and "geopolitical separatism" (Burrowes, 2001, p. 40). According to Merran Frenkel:

They identified themselves closely with the way of life of the 'New World,' despite their repudiation of the role in which they had been cast in it... They were expatriates rather than repatriated: they were not buoyed up... by the idea that they were returning to their ancestral continent. Indeed, the entire Declaration contains no mention whatsoever of

Africa as the land of their forefathers, despite the fact that for some of them, Africa may have been only one or two generations back...Africa was a strange and barbarous continent; their 'native' land was America (qtd. in Mgbeoji, 2003, pp. 5-6).

Ethnic identities coalesce around a constellation of symbols or signifiers, with a particular emphasis on visual markers, often those associated with physical attributes, owing to their inherent reliability and relative modern unchangingness (Bhabha, 1994). However, social identity markers might not always be manifest corporeally especially because (ethnic) group distinctions are typically conspicuous, tied to traditions, myths, symbols, and feelings of belonging (Asiedu, 2004, p. 47). In view of this, “tradition is first of all a socially embodied and historically extended discursive terrain on which the identity of a community is *argued* out” (Scott, 2013, p. 3; emphasis in original).

Carl Patrick Burrowes (2001), in his article “Black Christian Republicanism: A Southern Ideology in Early Liberia, 1822 to 1847,” examines the literature on black nationalism, African American Christianity, cultural formations of enslaved peoples, and republicanism in the antebellum passé to contextualize the socio-political thought of early Liberians. Black nationalism is defined as a system of beliefs that views people of African descent as united by ties of kinship, history, and heritage, which sets them apart from others through their shared beliefs and ways of thinking. Republicanism, on the other hand, is an ideology that advocates for representative democracy based on an informed, land-owning, and politically active citizenry. It is important to note that the present study does not treat Black Nationalism, Christianity, and Republicanism as separate domains. Reverend Daniel H. Peterson, a coloured clergyman writing from Liberia in the early 1850s, describes his vision for the sorts of ‘settlers’ Liberia should conscript:

We want no drunkards in our land, nor fiddlers, nor dancers nor gamblers, nor idlers of any kind. We want good men and good women; upright, honest, sober, industrious, moral and religious persons, economical in their habits and setting good examples to those who come after. These are the kind of people we want laying the foundation of a great nation, like unto that which is about to be laid in Western Africa... I say that we want farmers,

which are the bone and sinew of a country, and mark the only path which leads to prosperity, wealth and plenty (Moses, 1998, p. 51).

By staging the good (rights-bearing/deserving) social subject in religious terms, Peterson is drawing on the “onto-theological opposition between the profane and the sacred” (Carter, 2020, p. 160) which has historically been a constitutive aspect of Western European power formations. State secularism is ostensibly guaranteed under the provisions of the United States and Liberian Constitutions, which ensure the “free exercise” of religion and prohibit a “religious test” for public office—the influence of religious frameworks persists. These provisions appear in Section 3 of the Liberian Constitution and in Article VI of the United States Constitution, which specifically forbids Congress from sanctioning a religion (Hill, 2007, p. 467).

I am not primarily concerned with the “variegated expressions of white supremacy” necessarily but instead I am interested in the emergence of the idea of ethno-racial superiority within the “epistemological field of modern discourse” (Cornel West qtd. in Carter, 2008, p. 44) in Liberia. I ask that we meditate on the position of the subject—and its relationship to modes of modern representation and state building— in Peterson’s imagination of national ‘prosperity’. It is thought that the ontological redemption of black flesh is done by way of transforming oneself from object commodity to social body (bringing blackness closer to God). Following Spillers (1987), I am making a distinction between the flesh and the body “...before the ‘body’ there is ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography” (p. 67). It is the body that becomes a site of “cultural and political maneuver,” as well as the site in which the state publicly displays its power (Kant, 1983). This is also “where and when ‘the human’ emerges as a religio-political construct or as a construct of political theology meant to cohere or bind certain groups of people together over against others even as the former are in exploitative dependence on the latter” (Carter, 2023, p. 16).

When we examine the “relations of ruling” in Western Europe and North America (Smith, 1997, p. 114), we recognize that these structures of power are not sequestered phenomena. Our critical investigations must focus on the “complex of objectified relations, coordinating the activities of many people, whose consciousness” and subjectivities are shaped within these scaffolds (Smith,

1997, p. 116). Integral to this is the transfiguration of power into a potent force that seeks to govern, optimize, and multiply life, imposing the body to exacting regulations. In modern contexts, wars are no more fought solely to secure a sovereign figure; instead, they are instigated in the name of nations. Entire populaces are militarised for mass murder discursively postured as inescapable. It is under the pretence of managing life, and ensuring its persistence, and the well-being of certain (white) bodies that many regimes have vindicated numerous wars (Foucault, 1990, p. 137). My point, which I will clarify further, is that nationalism remains dangerous even when reclaimed by the historically marginalised.

[E]ven those Afro-Americans like Crummell, who initiated the nationalist discourse on Africans in Africa inherited a set of conceptual blinders that made them unable to see virtue in Africa, even though they needed Africa, above all else, as a source of validation. Since they conceived of the African in racial terms, their low opinion of Africa was not easily distinguished from their low opinion of the Negro; and they left us, through the linking of race and Pan-Africanism, with a burdensome legacy[...]The centrality of race in the history of African nationalism is both widely assumed and often ignored...they were able to articulate a common vision of [the] post-colonial African through a discourse inherited from pre-War Pan-Africanism and that discourse was the product of black citizens of the new world (Appiah, 1990, pp. 388- 389).

Along the same lines, Edward Blyden believed that “Africa could not rise... Its prosperous future, its salvation...awaited the return of its descendants, ‘who have learned the arts of civilization’” (qtd. in Mitman, 2021, p. 49). Implicitly then, the violent dispersion of stolen Africans across the Americas was re-imagined by Americo-Liberians as a necessary precondition for redemption from the evolutionary fixity that consumes the spatiotemporal void that we call continental Africa. They demonstrated a noticeable proclivity towards the adoption of American cultural practices, as evidenced by their inclination to put on American sartorial items such as frock coats and top hats—undeterred by the tropical African climate. Indeed, in her personal memoir, *House at Sugar Beach: In Search of a Lost African Childhood* (2008), writing on her experience with the Liberian civil war, Helene Cooper describes about how meaningful ostentatious displays of property were when she was growing up as a ‘Congo’ girl at her family

manor. ‘Congo’ serves as an alternative name for Americo-Liberians, historically, this nomenclature was used to refer to ‘recaptured’ Africans.

Our house at Sugar Beach was a source of pride and of pain. It was a testament to the stature of my family in a country where stature mattered, sometimes above all else. Liberian society rivaled Victorian England when it came to matters of social correctness. In Liberia, we cared far more about how we looked on the outside than who we were inside (Cooper, 2008, p. 11).

I call for what J. Kameron Carter articulates as a “nonrepresentational approach to race” (2008, p. 46) as it “commits us to reckoning with both the changing cultures and historical sites within which ideas about race traffic and with the structure or rule-governed grammar, the micro logics, according to which racial ideas and practices shift and mutate” (Carter, 2008, p. 46). A nonrepresentational method, one that moves beyond a preoccupation with the complicity of individual subjects, fosters a more lucid observation of what appears to be ordinary comportment as a disciplined exercise in the normative re-inscription of one’s own annihilation. That’s how “the colonial episteme (and register of consciousness) maintains and reproduces the coloniser and the colonised as categories of racial difference and maintains the populations in that state” (Sexton, 2016, p. 585). This point is important to my larger goal of postulating ‘ethnic’ violence along this sort of continuum.

The ‘Black Man’s Republic’: Race and Gender-Making

Racialized conceptions of gender inflected the categories of ‘native’ and ‘civilized’. Colonization was envisaged as a masculine endeavor and white abolitionists argued that the peculiar institution emasculated the black man. The Republic of Liberia was not only a space for black fugitivity, but also became known as the ‘black man’s republic’, a zone in which black men could perform a hegemonic, patriarchal masculinity unshackled from the captivity of bondage and Atlantic conditions of unfreedom. This sort of gendered discourse was deployed by the enthusiasts of the ‘Back-to-Africa’ movement and ostensibly “once migrants reached Liberia, a new familial and gender identity became available to them” (Whyte, 2016, p. 77). What concerns me here is that gender is not an apolitical idea about anatomically distinctive bodies “and their

proper relations to each other” (Cohn, 2013, p. 3). Rather, it is a modality that systemically orders different categories of ‘the human’ and “a way of structuring relationships among different categories of people, and different human activities symbolically associated with masculinity or femininity” (Cohn, 2013, p. 3).

Mary Moran’s seminal ethnography, *Civilized Women: Gender and Prestige in Southeastern Liberia* (1990), on the Glebo (Glebo means to live in a European fashion) people of Southeastern Liberia traces cultural interpretations and formations of gender and other hierarchical systems of social management in the Cape Palmas region. Moran demarcates the ways in which ‘civility’, as an identity category, becomes a point of arrival, an earned socio-political currency. Moran tells us that ‘native’ women could achieve ‘civilised’ status by way of emulating Western sartorial practices, performing Victorian womanhood and acquiring an education. Inheriting Americo-Liberian privilege constituted an impossibility for ‘native’ women and their offspring, who are affixed to malignancy, constricted to incivility and are always already outside the precincts of first-class citizenship. Only through procreating with a ‘civilised’ man, can ‘native’ women secure ‘civilised’ status for their children (Moran, 1990). In Americo-Liberian communities, women were traditionally relegated to the domestic sphere and were economically dependent on men, such societal orderings originated from the “nineteenth-century settler and missionary tradition and reinforced through the Christian churches, it resembled “the essentialist Victorian-derived gender constructions of the ‘modern’ West” (Abramowitz and Moran, 2012, p. 125). For Americo-Liberian women, ‘civility’ is a predisposition, an inherited form of social capital and this racial endowment is intergenerationally transmitted. ‘Civilized’ stature, however, restricts women’s economic self-sufficiency and always results in an underperformance of those obligations demanded by neo-liberal citizenship in the context of late capitalism and a gender-coded labor market. Further, women could lose their ‘civilized’ status if they were forced to labor in the informal economy—that is, if they “tie lappa and make market” (Moran, 1990, p. 5) out of necessity like the majority of ‘native’ women did. I am interested in how the precarious politico-ontological categories of ‘civilized’ and ‘native’ generate two competing forms of patriarchy characterized by their transience, while men inherit or obtain an unconditionally eternal ‘civilized’ status. I am interested in how women can slip in and out of an imagined structural humanity.

The Paradox of Black Freedom

This predicament that has been generally explained away as a manifestation of black(ened) peoples' intrinsic affinity toward anarchy, to substantiate the territorial conquest and its attendant instantiation of systems of regulation and control (Bhabha, 1994, p. 70), began as a desperate yearning to negate that “peculiarly inhuman condition” (Patterson qtd. in Roberts, 2015, p. 3). Historical iterations of the Liberian project are not enunciating the ways in which slavery produced the world as a racialized matrix where the black is always a fugitive and marronage becomes an incompletable yet inexorable physical and psychic activity. Marronage refers to the “attempts at actualization of flight, of the ability of individuals to become free and to exit from that condition, and perpetual acts of attainment and restructuring [that] are part and parcel of what it means to be human” (Roberts qtd. in Wilder, 2017, p. 116). These radical prophets refused the state and its sovereign authoritarianism by way of conducting an underground or off-the-grid “series of hidden transcripts in opposition to the zones of governance and appropriation intrinsic to existing state regimes of slavery” (Roberts, 2015, p. 9).

But what if we mused on the stillness and the happenings taking place in that temporal zone? To be clear, I mean that what the dominant colonial episteme might account for as failure, is a generative space constituted by the different ways black people have been living that is incongruent with European life forms. Being that blackness operates as the “constitutive outside” (Wilderson, 2010) or the beyond of the fiction of pure being, a different constitution of black being comes into existence in the outdoors—with and through the “paraontological ghosting of purity” (Carter, 2013, p. 591). This suggests that the black life modes, unfolding beneath the surface, diverge from the teleological endpoint evolving along the chrono-typical trajectory of the great chain-of-being. Black folks, I argue, inhabit two realms and temporalities simultaneously, cultivating freedom on their own terms. This is evident in the realm of sociality through “subversive speech acts, gestures, and social practices” (Roberts, 2015, p. 9), coexisting with performances that align with anti-black ideals of subjectivity.

The thesis, however, only reveals a fraction of the narrative surrounding black sociality, in Liberia — a narrative that is more readily observed, one that fits within the structural and political frameworks. My intention is to complicate notions surrounding Liberia's failure to

establish a robust and secure state. Rather than solely examining the political aspect, I think a more intriguing approach would be one that grapples with modes of being not tethered to politics but rather embodying fugitivity and a desire to run from politics.

This chapter doesn't speculate on these different figurations of being, necessarily. Rather, I spend this section of the chapter thinking about Americo-Liberian people's attempts at moving *with* political ontology and speculating on why they failed... Perhaps then, marronage constitutes "a situation of precarious autonomy under conditions of asymmetrical interdependence. It created a legacy of freedom-dreams and practices; [like blackness] it was also a predicament to be overcome" (Wilder, 2017). How can such an approach urge us to think otherwise about the concept of modern freedom? Does this mode of freedom-struggle undermine or instantiate the notion of blackness with the violence of its constitution? Consider another excerpt from the speeches of President Joseph Jenkin Roberts (1848-1856):

The subject of common schools gentlemen is one that deserves your attention. Its importance is well known to you, and I believe will have your consideration. For if we expect as I have no doubt all of you do-that Liberia is destined at some future day to take a stand among the nations of the earth we must educate our children, the rising generation must be informed, for on them depend the erection of the fabric the foundation of which you are now commencing, a right education alone can raise man to his true and proper dignity, and without it we must ever remain cast out and degraded. Our peculiar situation demands that we too should make a strong and vigorous effort to improve our own minds, if we expect to maintain and hand down to posterity unimpaired the purity of our republican institutions. You know gentlemen that in an *ignorant community republicanism will soon regenerate into a wretched democracy which must end in anarchy*. The condition of our race too in other parts of the world and especially of the inhabitants of this heathen country should be motives to rouse us to greater diligence, that we may show to the world that the African race is as susceptible of *mental improvement* as any other (Huberich, 1947, p. 752; my emphasis).

Generally, I suggest that the adherents of modernity coerced black folks into becoming complicit in the recapitulation of their own subjugation in the name of progress and the promise of

imminent arrival or overcoming the ‘natural’ temporalized developmental differences which, in effect, means the overcoming of blackness over progressive historical time. Which is to say that to be recognized and have their suffering recognized by national and global legal bodies, black(ened) people must present their identity and grievances in a way that adheres to a particular philosophy of injurable (Butler, 2010) ‘the human’. However, this philosophy is often rooted in anti-African epistemologies and ontologies, even though it purports to be universal (Jackson, 2020, p. 32). It is thus imperative to contend with the ways in which subjection is subjectivity’s attendant conditionality (Moten, 2003, p. 2), or what Wendy Brown (1993) would articulate as a “wounded attachment” to the political. Put another way, “the exercise of sovereignty, in turn, consists in society’s capacity for self-creation through recourse to institutions inspired by specific social and imaginary significations” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 13). Politics will infinitely loop and run back the condition again. By way of Foucault (1982), we know that complicity or a co-compositional relationality between power and resistance is atmospheric and thus a struggle that operates outside of the matrices of power constitutes an impossibility. The systemic tools at our disposal do not have the potential to create new conditions of life but instead our coerced participation in this global matrix of anti-blackness which also facilitates the resumption of this structural arrangement in its originary and premeditated form. That is the *paradox of black freedom*. Meaning that, Americo-Liberian commitments to the politics of recognition and by extension consummating and embodying the obligations of colonial modernity must also be reckoned with as a pledge to the production of the individuated-self through violence. This problem engenders a kind of “wake work” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 16), a parsing and apprehension of the ways in which the force of anti-blackness not only registers on the flesh (Spillers, 1987, p. 67) but also “shapes how bodies surface” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 154). For the possibility of black freedom unyieldingly depends on the permanent rupture of this modern structure of humanity.

On the contrary, with regards to Americo-Liberians, it can be argued that the enactment of a certain social identity pertains to a strategic aspect of the apparatus of this order. The apparatus, as Foucault names it, operates on a strategic level, meaning that it involves manipulating relations of power in various ways and redirecting them, encumbering them, stabilizing them, and exploiting them. It is innately part of a power struggle, but also fixed to specific forms of knowledge that emerge from it and contour it. In essence, the apparatus comprises strategies for

managing power relations, which are informed and sustained by particular types of knowledge (Foucault and Sheridan, 1972). Manipulating relations of power does not shift the onto-epistemic ground on which the emancipated black stands.

This is where the performance of civility encounters that omnipresent problem of ontology (meaning no matter how well blackness performs civilization...or the individual manipulations of the forces of power the problem of black being does not go away). In general terms, this means that Americo-Liberian commitments to struggle against this totalizing structural misrecognition of their humanity by way of consummating and embodying the obligations of colonial modernity must also be reckoned with as a pledge to the production of the individuated-self through the reproduction of violence (Fanon, 1968). Violence is radioactive, in a figurative sense, meaning "of a person, place, etc.: emitting or associated with the emission of intense energy, especially of a dangerous and unstable kind; also characterized by gradual self-destruction" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2023).

Agency, Resistance, and Something In-between

Early conflicts suggest that indigenous Africans did not passively acquiesce to this state of subjection and their position as “bush niggers” in this newly introduced racial schema. They resisted the violence of ‘settler colonialism’ and its attendant privatisation of the commons. However, it should be noted that notions of resistance and agency are always already invested in structural notions of ‘the human’ in their privileging of the absolutely “self-present, and coherent [subject] working against something or someone” (Weheliye, 2014, p. 2). I am not suggesting that questions of resistance are utterly extraneous here, but that we might arrive at more a nuanced and extemporised comprehension of how people navigated situations of great duress if we do not prefigure what constitutes proper forms of refusal (Weheliye, 2014, p. 2). For instance, maroons were marked as fugitive slaves and their survival was incessantly contingent upon navigating relationships, encounters, and exchanges within the context of the broader plantation society in which they lived (illicit, official, secret, violent, peaceful, military, or commercial relationships). But bearing witness to the “peculiar forms of freedom” found and forged by maroons requires that we abandon linear understandings of freedom as a condition that comes

after slavery. Freedom and slavery exist in relation— “overtly or covertly, within the broader territorial perimeters of that slave society and under perpetual threat of discovery, social destruction, and re-enslavement” (Wilder, 2017).

In the early period of repatriation, native-settler relations were complex, nuanced and context dependent. They defy meagre binary categories as either passive or antagonistic. At times, ‘natives’ resisted against the ‘settler’ state and other times they assimilated to it and proffered it as legitimate. These exchanges encompassed a range of dependencies, including those related to survival and protection, as well as the making of multiple treaties that were frequently transgressed. Moreover, the theoretical predisposition of “representing the intentional subject, a manifest lack of self-cultivating attention can easily become recast as irresponsibility, shallowness, resistance, refusal, or incapacity; and habit itself can begin to look deeply over meaningful” (Berlant, 2007, p. 757). Unbounded agency or real ‘freedom’ will only ever become possible with the annihilation of the subject (Foucault and Blanchot, 1987, p. 15). Therefore, it stands to reason that these lexes themselves should be reconsidered as objects of study that necessitate deconstruction. I suggest we rethink agency as a tactical (Utas, 2005), transient sort of machination operating within the fold of a given political economy to contend with the conceptual meagreness of essentialist approaches and demarcate the material and corporeal realities of living under enormous constraint, violence, and trepidation.

To be freed from slavery was to be encumbered with the burdens, obligations and responsibilities used to gauge one’s suitability for freedom (Hartman, 1997, p. 125). Attaining freedom necessitates the perception of one's rational capacity to navigate the obligations associated with freedom, encompassing the rationale of state, capital, and historicity. Proving your responsibility was tantamount to affirming your humanity and your right to an autonomous existence. As Hartman asseverates, "responsibility made man an end in himself" (1997, p. 125). Articulations of rationality as a prerequisite for freedom underlie certain constructions of what constitutes proper politics, community, and subjectivity or put plainly “what the good life is all about, how to achieve it, and in the process to become a fully moral agent” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 13). Within the space of this semiotic enclosure, reason constitutes the veracity of the subject and politics as indexed by the capacity to be reasonable in the context of public social life, meaning the performance of rationality is a necessary labor and fundamental to the political exercise of

freedom and sovereignty (Mbembe, 2003). Sovereignty can be thought of as having two parts, the first being “*self-institution*” and the second being “*self-limitation*” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 13; emphasis in original). Beyond the government of oneself, at the level of society, the exertion of sovereign authority resides in a collective capacity for self-constitution by way of reproducing those “institutions inspired by specific social and imaginary specifications” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 13). I think of them as moving against and with a politics that registers Africa and its people as exhibiting a kind of temporal stillness, “because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom they come into contact” (Ellison, 2001, p. 3). Ellison gestures toward the “imposition of race in black life, where one’s being is experienced through others” (Browne, 2015, p. 7). I return to this need for demonstrating a collective capacity to be free in a later chapter. For now, the “burden of consciousness” (Nietzsche et al., 2012) as concomitant to the emergence of the sovereign individuated subject, is my concern. Specifically, I am interested in the ways the burden of consciousness eases the process of regulating the individual insofar as this interior moral sensibility (a small white voice) incites a mode of self-regulation by the individual and stimulates antipathy and violence in/toward those who fall beneath “the threshold of responsibility” (Hartman, 1997, p. 125).

Between Marronage and Mimicry

This is a story that vacillates between reckoning with flight *as* freedom and flight as a journey *towards* freedom (Gerrity, 2021), in an “era marked by unprecedented forms and scales of aggression against individuals and communities” (Krug, 2018, p. 2). What unfolded in the early social history of Liberia was a rehearsal of something between marronage and mimicry.

Mimicry—a practice in which the colonized enacts or ‘mimics’ the colonisers cultural and linguistic practices—is not merely a passive copying but involves gradations of insurrection and appropriation that both refuse and reinforce the governing power relations (Bhabha, 1994).

Bhabha (1994) tells us that mimicry is always hesitant, suspended in that liminal space between a longing for recognition and a need for difference. The mimetic subject wishes to be recognized as akin to the colonizer but also wants to avow their own agency and identity resulting in a “double articulation” of sorts. This exercise is what Fred Moten (2008) would articulate as the “strife between normativity and the deconstruction of norms” (p. 178)—the problematic which

erodes and exhausts black social life. The autonomy that ‘free-born’ and formerly enslaved people experienced was precarious and intimately contingent on the very systems from which they sought flight. Hence, the systemic tools at their disposal did not have the potential to create new conditions of life but instead our compulsory participation in this global matrix of anti-blackness which enables the resumption of this structural arrangement in its originary and premeditated forms.

I am interested in tracing the habituation of modern raciological thinking in Liberia and determining the material, social and ideological foundations of such thought rather than calling for historical subjects to be held accountable for complicity in the reproduction of violence. These subjects are replaceable to an extent insofar as the global systems of power will persist with or without them. Meaning, the utilization of racial vernaculars, mythologies, taxonomies as well as racialized modes of thought and perception are real with material and political sequels. Nonetheless, the corporality of race, even in its potent and coercive power, is not contingent upon the tangible presence of the raced body as a distinct and objectifiable body. As Fanon aptly puts it, “the object, naturally, need not be there, it is enough that somewhere it *exists*: It is a possibility. The object is endowed with evil intentions and with all the attributes of a malefic power” (1968, p. 155; emphasis in original). Analogously, the materiality of ‘ethnicity’ and nationhood, and the enormous power of ethnonational identifications in many contexts, does not necessarily presuppose or depend on the existence of ‘ethnic’ groups or nations as concrete entities, each with an inimitable historicity (Brubaker, 2002, p. 168). Imperialism and slavery brought into being a thought system that decreed “human reproduction’s devaluation and extraction” (Weinbaum, 2019, p. 2). I am interested not in the corporeal devaluation itself per se, but the perspective from which that devaluation makes sense (Harney and Moten, 2013). I mean that, once you are put outdoors, there exists no “stable sphere outside of domination” (Wilder, 2017). The outdoors can be thought of as an atmosphere or ether: “the distinctive quality or character that seems to surround or be generated by a person, thing, or place; aura, ambience, atmosphere” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2023). Lauren Berlant (2007) tells us that the word environment signifies...

a dialectical scene where the interaction reified as structure and agency is manifest in predictable repetitions; an environment is made via spatial practices and can absorb how

time ordinarily passes, how forgettable most events are, and overall, how people's ordinary preservations fluctuate in patterns of undramatic attachment and identification (p. 760).

Ontological blackness constitutes the backdrop against which the dialectic scene unfolds. Ontological blackness can be understood as constitutive of a set of symbols and signifiers (i.e., skin color) that aim to generate enduring affective dispositions and motivations in people by constructing ideas about the nature of reality in a way that seems very real and convincing. These symbols and signifiers, in turn, shape people's perceptions of the world and influence their behaviors accordingly (Carrithers, 2010, p. 161). Ontology is almost self-organizing, insofar as it has accumulated an ability to enact or exert influence in ways that are, in part, beyond human control, as ontology shapes that set of desires/thoughts/urges that "exist in the unconscious" (Freud, 1963), and eventually manifest in the form of certain conscious acts/affective dispositions reified as agentic. These habituated-ness unfolds within a zone where "life building, and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable, and where it is hard to distinguish modes of incoherence and distractedness, and habituation from deliberate and deliberative activity, as they are all involved in the reproduction of predictable life" (Berlant, 2007, p. 754). Still, following Berlant, I "presume nothing about the meaning of decision or the impact of an act without attending to the varieties of constraint and unconsciousness that condition ordinary activity" (2007, p. 757). Toward this end, to apprehend the colonial subject as a manifestation of power one must perceive the "surveillance of colonial power" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 76) as an intangible and almost spectral operation of the administration. Foucault's oeuvre on surveillance and its permanent reverberations, is instructive here:

[T]he major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers (Foucault et al., 2008, p. 6).

The “mimetic subject” can concurrently be a subject in flight, one that lives in the wake of the catastrophe (which have conceptual, psychic, and material manifestations), alongside it and despite it. For our purposes, I want to consider ‘living alongside’ it as a “discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). That is the paradox of black freedom—the enactment of contradictory concessions (Bhabha, 1994, p. 860). Taking flight from the uninhabitable also necessitates a recapitulation of the very conditions that produce black exclusion (in some form for the folks left behind). As a world-making scheme, anti-blackness produced a planetary condition in which the pursuit of a culturally-produced coherent human subjectivity (Douglass et al., 2018)—that is being restored as ‘good’ object (Bhabha, 1994, p. 68)—demands the discursive objectification and material subjection of a collective other to assuage one’s own dispossession, degradation, evisceration and escape the jeopardies of “centralized despotism” (Mamdani, 1999, p. 868). Perhaps then, the matter is not merely the ethnic/racial exclusion from hegemonic institutions but the state-sanctioned processes of “deadly inclusion” (Haritaworn et al., 2014, p. 2). In the ensuing chapter, I trace the genealogy of the Liberian state. I am occupied with the problems that political ontology, at its most fundamental level, has generated for black people struggling for freedom vis-a-vis the system of political sovereignty.

Sovereign states are the equivalent of free individuals.

—Robert Jackson ¹⁷

It is very common now-a-days to hear this little republic referred to as evidencing the incapacity of the Negro for free government, and nothing is more constant, nothing is more frequent than the declaration that ‘Liberia is a failure!’ Nothing can be more ignorant; nothing can be more stupid than these utterances.

—Alexander Crummell ¹⁸

VI Sovereignty as Freedom: Black Nationalism and the Struggle for Political Recognition

This chapter is occupied with tracing how the Democratic Republic of Liberia, often dubbed ‘America’s stepchild’, is mimicking the emergence of a state structure that “has never known a democracy severed from captivity” (James, 2009, p. 474). Up until 1848, Liberia existed as neither an American protectorate nor an independent nation. Instead, the nation was managed as a private company, the ACS, that did not have to report to the American government or its citizens. Subsequently, the early settlements that eventually came together to form what would become known as the Commonwealth of Liberia, all occupied a peculiar and precarious position in the international world (Azikiwe, 1935, p. 58). By way of excavating the genealogy of Liberian state formation in the 19th and 20th centuries, the overall objective of this chapter is to underscore the occurrence of trans-Atlantic slavery as a constitutive aspect in the development of modern humanist orders of governance and trenchantly setting forth the organization of Liberian civil society along ethnopolitical and identitarian lines.

¹⁷ (1991, p. 10)

¹⁸ (qtd. in Robinson, 2017)

The racialist architecture of the sovereign state emerges from the time-space coordinates of the 1492 Iberian Peninsula, wherein "the Castilian monarchs sought to create a homogeneous national homeland for Spaniards" by exiling the Moors and converting those considered outsiders to Christianity, marking the genesis of a Western "racial cosmogony" that for centuries would consider black people as aberrations of the divine (Mamdani, 2020, p. 1; Hucks, 2012, p. 23). 1492 signifies the advent of the project of European modernity, initiating the conquest and colonization of the Americas and establishing imperial Europe as the center of the world and the telos of civilization (Maldonado-Torres, 2008, p. 3). The Moors, black Ethiopian peoples, were theologically portrayed as manifestations of the devil by the Medieval Church—the epistemic foundation of all European knowledge formations (Robinson, 2000, p. 4). Transitioning to a different historical perspective, the ideological terrain of the modern nation-state and its lexical cognates can be traced back to the late 16th and beginning of the 17th century (Skinner, 2009, p. 326). Moving forward, toward the end of the 18th century, theological elaborations would steadily be superseded by scientific reason, the rise of industrial capitalism, and the modern secularized state form (Lowe, 2015), marking an assurgent historical interval. The modern form of the nation-state had its foundation in a nascent anthropological "discourse of race (replete with a logic of racism) that was itself tied to how Christianity came to be 'rationally' repositioned within the framework of modernity's political economy (Carter, 2008, p. 80). Emphasizing the continuities, the Medieval Church is a necessary condition for the existence of the modern state and constitutive to Latin-Christian Europe's ideations of 'the human' as "primarily the religious subject of the Church" (Wynter, 2003, p. 265) Consequently, racial blackness, theocentricism, and the modern state are co-conspirators, bringing one another into being. The proper national subject was historically composed in antagonistic relation to the black Moors and Iberian Jews. Furthermore, the rise of the modern theological-secular state and its political subject (homo politicus) was commensurate with imperialism's expansionist goals of modernizing the Occident and consolidating colonial whiteness. At its genesis, "European civilization, containing racial, tribal, linguistic, and regional particularities, was constructed on antagonistic differences" (Robinson, 2000, p. 10).

I also map the development of Americo-Liberian identity and its rise to political prominence, alongside the ascendancy of the True Whig Party (TWP), established in 1869, which sustained hegemony for over a century. The TWP, notorious for its power abuses and reliance on forced

and indentured labor to amass power and wealth, secured its position through the backing of the 'settler' community and the church. TWP remained in power until the 1980 coup d'état (Ellis, 2007, pp. 45-46). Ellis posits that, even when elements of indigenous ethnic groups were incorporated into the power structure, they had to be attached to dominant Americo-Liberian families (Kieh, 2004, p. 60). This monopolization of the polity constituted the root of ethnic antagonisms between Americo and indigenous Liberians (Kieh, 2009, p. 60). State formation was both colonial and racial, occurring at the intersection of gender, class, and specific forms of ethnicity that continue to undergird the political economy of the Liberian state. Gus Liebenow (1969) outlined historical features of governing institutions in Liberia that have been and continue to be used to maintain political systems, enabling the ruling class to preserve their hegemony and access to material resources. Similarly, writing about the Charles Taylor administration, Reno (1995) offers an analysis that looks beyond the concept of the 'failing state' and suggests that state actors govern through elite networks rather than bureaucracy, paying little attention to traditional ideas of state power relying increasingly on bureaucratic power and administrative independence. In a similar vein, Lowenkopf depicted the Liberian political process as an "institutional adaptation to modernity" (1972, p. 99). I am interested in generatively extending such historical and political lines of argumentation.

The teleological narrative, asserting nationhood's ontological precedence over the jurisdictional institution of the modern state, essentializes the nation-state as an entity inherently predicated upon the racial—seen as a biological given. The placement of the ontological gendered invention of 'racial purity,' where whiteness equates to pure being (Chandler, 2008; Bey, 2020), at the center of the modern state was crucial for choreographing and naturalizing modern orders of sovereignty, along with their accompanying spatial cartographies and embodied temporalities (historical subjects must belong to a past and an ongoing temporality). Thus, confabulations of national origin and historical continuity describe the portal between the materiality of the body and the socio-political discourses that produce the 'human subject'. It should be noted that the ontological formation of pure racial being is unequivocally a gendered formation. The profession of embodying pure being and the epistemic foundations of pure being are intertwined with discursive maneuvers aimed at registering trans and gender nonnormative life as non-life (Bey, 2020, p. 11). The standard configuration of institutions and the "rules and offices of which they consist of do not have the ontological status of natural facts, they are made and manipulated by

men” (Jackson, 1991, p. 3). I do not consider ‘given objects’ such as the “sovereign, sovereignty, the people, subjects, the state, and civil society” (Foucault, 2008, p. 2) as preconditions of coherence. These universals have been the preoccupation of critical theories and political actors. By echoing Hartman’s crucial question— “Can the dominated be liberated by universalist assertions?” (1997, p. 123)—I engage with the complexities surrounding the potential for liberation through universalist claims. Rather than use the colonial binaries that frame modernity as my analytical point of departure, I offer a cogent critique of universal nomos by tracing how such formations come into being as the normative transnational paradigms that shape our beliefs about humanity, civilization, progress, equal rights, and liberty (Lowe, 2015, p. 2). In its place, I don’t engage with deducing tangible phenomena from proffered universals or start with the modern state “as an obligatory grid of intelligibility” for certain concrete political practices. I start by parsing the tenors that figure the objectives and practices of statecraft. By not accepting the state as a priori, I am able to analytically move through the different conceptions of sovereignty, legitimacy and social organization that are circulating during the period from 1822 to 1970—the period in which this chapter is focused. This way, I can account for maneuvers against the Liberian ‘settler-state’ and different forms of existence that refuse incorporation into the vernaculars and operations of Western modernity and pay attention to what transcends mere politics—what is ‘more than settled, more than democratic’ (Harney and Moten, 2013, p.19). The black intellectual tradition troubles Western universalism, urging us to move beyond the conventional obsession with ‘Man’ (‘the human’ subject in its current ontological formation) (Wynter, 2003). By doing so, it directs our gaze towards a broader perspective that holds worlds beyond the political realm.

Liberia's formation occurred during an epoch when the "notion of 'equality and liberty' had become standard rhetoric in the Atlantic basin, including the United States, Britain, and France" (Allen, 2010, 19). The paradox of emancipation without freedom was articulated by Liberia's immigrants, the Americo-Liberians, in their 1847 Declaration of Independence. This parallelism with the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation marked a legal end to slavery. However, some argue, and I concur, that true freedom continues to elude all continental Africans and descendants of enslaved Africans in the diaspora (Walcott, 2021; Hartman, 2008; Walker, 2022). As discussed in earlier sections, emigrants were dedicated to the seemingly reparative vernaculars of freedom and responsibility— "of which sovereign statehood is a particularly

important manifestation" (Jackson, 1991, p. 7). They were devoted to a "politics [that] proposes to make us better" (Harney and Moten, 2013, p. 20) in its correctional determinacy to regulate the commons through its totalizing institutions. Therefore, this chapter also explores how ideas about citizenship and the nation-state evolved against the early-modern Atlantic world's history, using key Americo-Liberian figures and their ethical-political and ideological commitments as a case for thought. My central argument posits that emigre interpretations of freedom and their re-elaboration of the injurious institution of the modern state (Liberia is considered Africa's first Westphalian-style state) contributed to the burgeoning of 'ethnic' antagonisms and the constitution of Liberian subjectivities at large.

Conversely, the task here is not to lament the shortcomings of black nation-building projects or those failed experimentations with liberal freedom, but instead to situate the project of self-government along a trajectory of historically generated beliefs and ironies (Getachew, 2019, p. 28). The Liberian predicament cannot be reduced to a problem of primordial 'ethnic' antagonisms delaying the development of 'real' politics, because politicized 'ethnicity' develops within the fold of 'real' politics. The problem of Liberian politics is one of inheriting an anti-black Euro-American political ontology, coupled with the "psychological peculiarity" (Robinson, 1980) of the petite-bourgeoisie. Modern politics are always already interned within "the ontological grounds governing existence: the ground of being within the dictates of racial distinction governing others and oneself by their constitutive requisites" (Bey, 2020, p. 72). This chapter is a meditation on the anti-black philosophical and material parameters within which the Liberian state comes into formation and the international system that sets the conditions of its operations.

State-Building and Political Liminality

I begin by locating the abstract concept called into being as the 'state' in its ever-changing constitutive historical setting, to demonstrate how racial blackness and the modern nation-state are co-conspirators, insofar as the proper national subject was historically constituted in antagonistic relation to blackness. I index the onset of European modernity as a critical juncture in the vicissitude and extension of racialized power into the 19th-century. The incarnation of

European liberal modernity, and its attendant universalizing syntaxes of rights, reason, civilization, freedom, (Lowe, 2015, p. 6) and self-determination, was a world-making scheme anchored in the coalescence of ethnicism, racism and the unequal (hierarchical) political and economic integration (Getachew, 2019) of former colonies into the international system of states (granted by the League of Nations). Fundamental to this schematic was the incarnation of international law as an “operation of ordering and policing the world’s hierarchy of being” (Kline, 2017, p. 52). Within this politico-juridical realm, Liberia was suspended in a liminal space between being a state and being a colony (Getachew, 2019, p. 42)—between a suspended animation of freedom and intransigent material reality of captivity.

Contemporary ideas about good governance and capacity building emerge out of the historical moment in which developmentalist and racist thinking became intimate and “have become naturalized and operate within the ideological apparatus that governs the ways that international aid organizations, Western governments, and academics, including anthropologists” contend with the problem of resource mining and the broad idea of development in relation to continental Africa (Pierre, 2019, p. 87). Thus, questions regarding Liberian constitutional provisions and citizenship must be thought of in relation to modern global formations of the nation-state and the assemblage of democratic multi-party electoral systems which have always been about “building boundaries” (James, 2009, p. 43) that necessitate a recursive ousting of blackness from national citizen-subjecthood. Here, I am thinking with Nikole Hannah-Jone’s (2019) who ascertains that even after the abolition of slavery, the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision (1857) declared Black people fundamentally irreconcilable with American democratic ideals. This ruling maintained that Black individuals were a discrete class without any rights acknowledged by white citizens, thus excluding them from the rights and privileges afforded to Americans. More importantly, these systems must be thought of in relation to the bodies through which they are mediated, that is, the black middle-class/national bourgeoisie, or the African prince and chief that act as conduits for empire. For indeed, and “perhaps most paradoxically, this is the strata through which the ideological, moral, and philosophical traditions of western civilization have been transferred, at least superficially, to non-western societies” (Robinson, 1990, p. 148). The black intellectual tradition consistently critiques the globalization of the liberal state, which Charles W. Mills identifies as “global white supremacy,” vexing the presuppositions that inhere in Western political philosophy. White supremacy operates as a political system, defined by a

precise power structure that includes legal and extra-legal governance, socioeconomic privileges, and norms dictating the hierarchical distribution of capital and opportunities, along with the assignment of benefits, encumbrances, entitlements, and responsibilities. Mills offers a definition for global white supremacy:

[White supremacy] is itself a political system, a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties...What is needed is a global theoretical framework for situating discussions of race and white racism, and thereby challenging the assumptions of white political philosophy, which would correspond to feminist theorists' articulation of the centrality of gender, patriarchy, and sexism to traditional moral and political theory. What is needed, in other words, is a recognition that racism is itself a political system, a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties (Mills and Shelby, 2022, p. 3).

White supremacy and the racial identities it invents are fortified through the ratification of definite human differences labeled as the races we identify with and refer to ourselves as. This phenomenon must be apprehended as an onto-epistemic orthography that unceasingly brings into being systematic and militarised formations of individuated, "hierarchized 'human' difference" (Weheliye, 2014, p. 3). As part of white supremacy's taxonomic subterfuges, "these categorical imperatives—which is part of white supremacist taxonomizing logics, that in order to be understood as a valid subject, we must inhabit one of the existential options it has fashioned" (Bey, 2020, p. 73). Congruently, part of the trouble too is that Western notions of state formation are entrenched in property/ownership relations. Considering that Americo-Liberians were embodied flesh made property, and they brought ideas about property ownership to their encounters with indigenous Africans, it prompts a reevaluation of how we understand the relationship between subject formation and state formation. Moreover, it raises the question of whether their intention was to enslave indigenous people, thereby reducing them to mere cargo, as a means to overcome their own collective reduction to objecthood.

Convergence of Mercantilism, Statehood, and National Identity

In its historical intonation, the sovereign state was preoccupied with its people, implicitly suggesting that these bodies were dependent on a sovereign head for direction (Skinner, 2009, p. 327). Attendant with the rise of the modern state and international law, the doctrine of *Raison d'Etat* (reason of state/national interests) developed to substantiate the logics shaping the practices of governmentality within modern secular-state systems. Foucault referred to this as “the rationalization of practice,” positioning itself in the liminal space between a given state and one perceived as needing improvement (Foucault et al., 2008, p. 4). To this end, the operative assumptions and key objectives that undergirded and fashioned this nascent political economy included the development of a mercantile capitalist, carceral police state fortified by “a permanent military-diplomatic apparatus of states free from imperial absorption” (Foucault, 2008, p. 5). In this context, the police functioned to regulate the “country according to a model of a tight-knit urban organization” (Foucault, 2008, p. 5).

During the 16th and 17th centuries, people’s sense of collective identity was not based on shared race, language, or customs, but rather on their membership in a particular state. Preceding the French revolution, mercantilism was the doctrine that upheld the prevailing ideas that discursively tethered the concept of the state to the concept of the nation (Robinson, 2000, p. 21). Mercantilism, as a manifestation of economic nationalism, explicates the liaison between economic policies, collective identity, and the genesis of the nation-state. For our purposes, a general understanding of these historical antecedents helps us trace the links between the nation-state and evolution of nationalist ideologies. Moreover, nationalism as a mode of regulation eventually required that a people be bound together by common interests or some sort of social-historical relation that would generate affective psychological bonds between the state and its subjects. The object of nationalism thus shifted towards presenting the combined operations of the state as a geopolitical entity, and the nation as homogenous cultural and ‘ethnic’ formation, appear as an apolitical, natural phenomenon. Simultaneously and paradoxically, the maneuvers of nationalism depended on and gained legitimacy through the consolidation of the logical impasse between nation and state. In other words, nationalism required that the "nation must possess a separate existence from the state and originate from somewhere other than the legal-

political realm—the nation must be regarded as the 'natural' product of history, culture, lineage" (Heiskanen, 2020, p. 22; unpublished manuscript). This exigency brought into being the earliest political usage of 'nation' in 'ethnic' terms:

In its first stages, nationalism was usually ethnic in content, when it took form around historic European states whose name bore the imprint of a dominant group (France, Spain, England, Sweden, and Russia). Subsequently, as a doctrine for national unification movements (Germany, Italy), or as an ideology for self-determination movements amongst subject ethnonationalities of the Hapsburg, Ottoman or Russian empires, the fusion of ethnicity and nationalism was complete. However, in the Western hemisphere settler-led independence movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a *territorial version* of the idea of nationalism appeared. Subsequently, the notion emerged that the shared attachment to a common set of political ideals – civic nationalism – could be constitutive of nationhood (Young, 2001, p. 7; my emphasis).

Following the French Revolution (1787-1799), the explicit coalition between European liberalism, nationalism, and statehood materialized through the pursuit of economic freedom, the practice of national and individual sovereignty, and the assertion of 'rights of man.' C.L.R. James tells us that “the fortunes created by the slavery-based societies in the Americas, gave rise to the French bourgeoisie, producing the conditions for the ‘rights of man’ demanded in the Revolution of 1789” (Lowe qtd. in Stoler, 2006, p. 191). Around this time, the concept of ‘natural rights’ was embraced by American revolutionaries and later reflected in Liberia’s 1847 Declaration of Independence and widely circulated throughout the circum-Atlantic world. The intimate relationship between bondage and liberty animated the “liberal imagination of freedom” (Hartman, 1997, p. 115) and brought into being individualized conceptions of the self. One group that was instrumental in spreading these ideas was sailors, referred to as the ‘motley crew,’ who held radical views on the ‘fundamental rights of man’ and were an influence on Samuel Adams, a key figure in the American revolution. Cities that had trading ports along the Atlantic, such as Boston, Baltimore, and Charlestown, were key locations for the spread of these revolutionary ideas. As a result, emigrants from these regions, particularly free-born blacks who resided in urban centers, would have been familiar with this political rhetoric prior to emigration. Indeed,

by the twentieth century, three of Liberia's Presidents were free-born blacks that emigrated from the state of Maryland (Allen, 2010, p. 13).

In the first half of the 19th century, the nation was conceptualized through what Eric Hobsbawm would come to adduce as the 'threshold principle'— "the idea that only nations of a certain size should become states—and the belief that the building of nations was a process of expansion, at the expense of smaller units" (Hoffman, 1990). Under the orders of modern liberalism, "the nation-state was meant to be 'a stage in the [social and political] development of human society'" toward freedom as an end—freedom became politics (Hoffman, 1990). In the history of Western liberal political thought, negative-freedom is interpreted as liberty from interference and domination and positive-freedom is taken as self-government and self-realization under conditions in which external structural limitations do not exist (Roberts, 2017). Moreover, European historians and philosophers writing during the Enlightenment era worked to erase the cultural and intellectual contributions of Egypt and Nubia from European history to uphold the supposed purity and insularity of the European race and its civilizational development. These actions were taken to maintain the idea of European superiority and an attendant set of legal and political practices. They also epistemically cemented Africa as 'uncivilized' in world history, using printed materials to distort and denigrate African history and represent the continent's inhabitants as inherently abject (Kelley forward in Robinson, 2000). For instance, writing in 1817, Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind*, fixes nationhood to statehood and their telos to the civilization of 'Man' (Wynter, 2003). Hegel wrote Africa into political philosophy as a "nation with no state formation . . . [and] strictly speaking, no history—like the nations which existed before the rise of states and others which still exist in a condition of savagery" (qtd. in Chastain, 2004). Carved out of the metaphysical axioms guiding Hegel, was Darwin's evolutionary theory:

From Darwin has descended the language of error, a language that has locked up historical thinking and imposed slovenly and imprecise conclusions even upon scholarly and sensible researchers. Words like "growth," "decline," "development," "evolution," "decay," may have started as servants but they have ended as masters: they have brought us to the edge of historical inevitability (Davies, 1962, p. 79).

Ultimately, under the proscriptions of modern international law, the *nation-state* (in Europe) was sanctioned as a collective entity unified by factors such as shared ancestral relations, linguistic practices, cultures, histories, or traditional occupation of the same geographic locales “so as to form a distinct people” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2023) of a “fictive historical entity” (Robinson, 2000, p. 4). In this political configuration, the legitimacy of the state is interned inside a specific ethnocultural community to ease the state’s predicament of “ontological insecurity” (Heiskanen, 2020, p. 22; unpublished manuscript). The phenomenon of the liberal nation-state forms as a racialized, secularized, theological onto-political configuration “within which were born racially valorized and racially abjected identities” (Carter, 2013, p. 598). To this end, the modern state only emerges through facilitating the development of intimate relations between Christendom, nationalism, the “racism/ethnicism complex,” (Quijano, 2000) militarism, coloniality and mercantile capitalism. Thus, the peculiarity of the modern nation state rests in its paradoxical call for freedom while facilitating captivity through its regulatory techniques-- a carceral sort of emancipation, if you will. From the onset “the liberal public sphere excluded certain kinds of people: women, subjects without property, and members of religious minorities” (Asad, 2018, p. 183). Ultimately, I am not interested in drawing grandis conclusions about liberalism as a political and moral philosophy; rather, I am interested in thinking about the violence that liberalism necessitates but effaces (Dillon, 2012).

Race came into view as a solution to the paradox between “liberal aspirations to universality” (Lowe, 2015, p. 36) and the exigencies of colonial administrations to manage the social life, reproduction, and labor of colonized peoples. The latter half of the nineteenth century, the period of new imperialism/second wave of imperial expansion, brought into being a new iteration of ‘the human’ in biologized terms, instituted racial difference as an empirical object, and homogenized and othered all African descended peoples (Wynter, 2003, p. 266). Indeed, this notion of ‘the human’ prefigured the writings of white social scientists working on issues concerning global politics and “offered their expertise to the new imperial state” (Vitalis, 2016, p. 46) and naturalized racial subjection by employing and ordaining abstractions such, as higher/lower, civilized/uncivilized races to institute a global taxonomy of being.

Moreover, non-European nations did not freely consent to the imposition of European conventions of statehood and nationhood, as IR scholarship often intimates. Indeed,

“‘independence’ (like ‘integration’) merely set in motion a complex legal and political machinery designed to camouflage and maintain the *status quo*” (Baldwin, 1995, p. 28; emphasis in original). I call for a critical reading practice that connects the ethos and regulatory techniques of Liberian institutions to the same structure “that broke the world in half, broke it in every way” (Gilroy, 2002, p. 221). This epoch of new imperialism separated ‘modern ‘civilized’ states from the ‘pre-modern’ world. Accordingly, Europe took possession of any territorial state indicted as unfit for sovereignty and membership in the international system (Zvobgo and Loken, 2020). And we are etched onto the governing historical archives in a particular way in order to exist under the limitations of the “ontological project that curtails how and even that we exist in any particular way” (Bey, 2020, p. 76).

The unremitting efforts of the ACS to exert control over the formation of Liberia’s Constitution and gain economic and land advantages during and after the country’s first Constitutional Convention and free elections ultimately hindered the success of those proceedings (Levitt, 2005, p. 121). That being the case, a despotic regime was ushered in by the American Colonization Society (ACS) and subsequently inherited by a ruling stratum of repatriates after the country declared its independence in 1847. The Roberts administration made no effort to transform the autocratic political system inherited from the ACS. Consequently, the Constitution brought no significant changes, just a distribution of political influence among the Americo-Liberian elite (Levitt, 2005, p. 122). This nascent social and political class was fortified by a system of patronage that continues to endure (Levitt, 2005, p. 76). The relationship between Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians became tense as the government embraced the policies and political structure originally put forward by the ACS.

During this period of political transitioning, ‘native’ Liberians were aware of the government’s efforts to control the coast and the interior and would often rebel against it, which may have led to some of the most brutal wars in Liberia during this time. Despite this, an economic boom in the late 1850s led to 18 years of peace and stability (1857-1875), starting with the rise of the True Whig Party in 1870 and the overthrow of the Edward James Roye regime the following year (the first dark-skinned president). In Liberia, Afro-Americans who were denied access to state revenues turned to farming and industry, and after two decades of economic prosperity, a group of wealthy dark-skinned merchants, shippers and plantation owners emerged. As the

Liberian economy began to experience a crisis, a national bourgeoisie group led by James Roye and guided by Edward Wilmot Blyden, both Americo-Liberians, decided to seize control of the state machinery. Often referred to as the 'father of Pan-Africanism,' Blyden's writings significantly influenced the ideological orientations of figures like Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, and Kwame Nkrumah (Khafre, 1978, p. 107). By 1857, Blyden had started to vocalize his opposition to the increasing European influence in Africa. He criticized the leadership of mulattos (mixed-race) individuals and advocated for an alliance between the black 'settlers' and the indigenous ruling class to establish their own capitalist system. These ideas resonated with the inchoate dark-skinned merchants and industrialists who, competing against both mulattos and Europeans, aimed to dominate markets and production (Khafre, 1978, p.107). On the whole, these ideas did little to break from the fundamental principles of the racialist (quasi) colonial state and only further entrenched racial capitalism.

The actions of the 'settlers', specifically their encroachment into the established trade practices of the African people, heightened native-settler tensions. To augment their income, 'settlers' engaged in petit trade with European and American traders, undercutting the profits of 'native' intermediaries. This shift toward trade was disproved by the American Colonization Society (ACS), which favored agricultural development (for their own interests). The Skipwith family letters reveal their initial foray into small-scale trade before transitioning to farming for sustenance. Their hesitation toward farming was likely grounded in an implicit association of agriculture with plantation slavery or from a lack of experience with cultivating crops in tropical environments (Miller, 1978, p. 48-51).

The shifts in politics and economy increased the government's inclination to acquire land, wealth, and legitimacy in the region. Notwithstanding efforts to unify Liberia under a single national identity, in 1875, the Grebo peoples fiercely resisted Liberian nationalism and state expansion (Levitt, 2005, p. 122). The state, originally organized by the American Colonization Society (ACS), was incessantly defending itself against indigenous rebellions and foreign encroachments. Perpetual conflict exacerbated the competition for resources and underhandedly shifted culpability to African actors for the state's criminal practices, while concurrently neglecting to denunciate America for its foundational and on-going role in reproducing these conditions. The Liberian assembly was symptomatic of a "highly centralized and personalized

political system” (Lowenkopf, 1972, p. 101). Within this system, the True Whig Party (TWP) served as a medium in which newly sanctioned elites could be inducted into the existing power structure. At the same time, the TWP provided a platform for both established elites and those aspiring to ascend in power to conspire in upholding the entrenched kleptocracy (Lowenkopf, 1972, p.101).

Upon arriving in Liberia, emigrants perceived the country as a 'stateless' society, judging by their own Eurocentric standards of statehood. Before the American Colonization Society (ACS) intervened in Liberia’s politics, social relations were governed by an ethics of intersubjectivity, with identities and moral obligations deeply grounded in family and kinship ties. Political authority was diffused, built on the linguistic, cultural, religious, and historical nuances of the region (Mgbeoji, 2003, p. 8; Asiedu, 2004). The domestic political structures in Liberia were miscellaneous and defy any form of grandiose categorization. Mgbeoji (2003) suggests that many indigenous groups developed political frameworks with state-like characteristics that differed from the traditional Westphalian model (p. 8). The notion that 'Americanized' Africans were civilizing 'uncivilized' Liberians was both erroneous and complacent. Furthermore, local chiefs viewed the 'settlers' as outsiders who had severed their ties to their homeland by seeking protection from white men rather than from their traditional (fictive) kin. They believed the colonists were estranged, having forgotten their roots; otherwise, they would have aligned with local kings rather than with white men (Holsoe, 1971, p. 338).

It was thought that solely by way of procuring economic capital from this ‘unpopulated’ and meagrely utilized African acreage, could the Republic’s sovereignty be inoculated (Mitman, 2021, p. 43). It is a contradiction insofar as “the sovereignty of [the indigenous nation] was vitiated by a colonial vision of space as lacking in 'civilized' inhabitants, and therefore empty and ripe for appropriation” (Bhandar, 2018, p. 4). Slavery as “a dimension of the colonial juridic-economic architecture—necessitated total violence for the extraction of the total value, that is, expropriation of the productive capacity of the conquered lands and enslaved bodies” (Da Silva, 2014, p. 83). Conjured through modern paradigms of tremendous responsibility, individuation, self-governance, and private property, the legal abolition of slavery domiciled the formerly enslaved in an atemporal condition of being-towards-freedom—as in moving towards an immanent freedom, "never earned and always yet to come" (Lowe, 2015, p. 26)—and anticipated

political futures, veiling the ways in which the regime of the plantation transformed and persisted.

More precisely, the triangular trade created an onto-epistemic totality that recalibrated the body to constitute a "specimen of homo modernus" and is thus ensnared by the discursive apparatus of "modern representation" because the body-subject is part of the nation (Da Silva, 2007, p. 179; emphasis in original). Under the metaphysical dictates of this modern world order, one's presumed inability to govern oneself and the nation is determined through racial typology. In this scenario of state formation, different races—varied types of humans—possess differing capacities for civilization, with 'the black' perceived as inherently lacking the capacity for self-governance and, by extension, civilization. This perception is influenced by the entente between the individuation of the subject and post-colonial sovereignty projects. The black bourgeois "were captives of a dialectic: on the one hand, their continued development was structurally implicated in the continued domination of their societies by the Atlantic metropolises; on the other, the historical destiny of their class was linked to nationalism" (Robinson, 1990, p. 40).

Politics is *the* site through which subjection is practiced but is also apprehended as a sort of vestibule that holds emancipation's unfettered possibilities, it generates the stuff of our optimism; it is here that if we toil habitually, we may find "the 'answer' to the ontological equation" (Warren, 2015, p. 216). Mbembe's definition of what constitutes proper politics in modernity is instructive here:

Politics, therefore, is defined as twofold: a project of autonomy and the achieving of agreement among a collectivity through communication and recognition. This, we are told, is what differentiates it from war...In other words, it is on the basis of a distinction between reason and unreason (passion, fantasy) that late-modern criticism has been able to articulate a certain idea of the political, the community, the subject—or, more fundamentally, of what the good life is all about, how to achieve it, and, in the process, to become a fully moral agent. Within this paradigm, reason is the truth of the subject and politics is the exercise of reason in the public sphere. The exercise of reason is tantamount to the exercise of freedom, a key element for individual autonomy. The romance of sovereignty, in this case, rests on the belief that the subject is the master and

the controlling author of his or her own meaning. Sovereignty is therefore defined as a twofold process of self-institution and self-limitation (including one's own limits for oneself). The exercise of sovereignty, in turn, consists in society's capacity for self-creation through recourse to institutions inspired by specific social and imaginary signatures" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 13)

Therefore, the possibility for modern freedom, and self-possession for the "Black American racial self" (Gilroy, 2002, p. 24) hinges on flight from the restraints of biological race and transcending a "primitive state of nature" (Hegel qtd. in Jackson, 2020, p. 30), or acceding to "the powers of the subject" (Da Silva, 2007, p. xix) and the social and political relations generated by developmentalist ideations of black liberation. The incorporation of subjects and geographies into a global political contract fashioned in racial terms means that the concept of progress is always already defined by a cartography of the racial (Shilliam, 2009). The normative "standard of civilization denied non-European societies sovereign membership in international society" (Getachew, 2019, p. 19). Hence, genuine "practical sovereignty would be better understood not to take the mimetic or referred shape of state or individual sovereignty" (Berlant, 2007, p. 757).

Proving a 'Fitness' for Freedom

Colonial 'international society' generated the estrangement between Europe and its array of 'racial Others,' reserving for Europeans the exclusive entitlement to freedom and absolute sovereignty. Europe's racial others were beheld as inherently unqualified and undeserving for such rights, obligated to exhibit their suitability for freedom according to the rubrics set by Western civilization (Jackson, 1991, p. 16). This relationship also introduced a gendered infantilization of blackness and black geographies, as seen in Harvey S. Firestone Jr.'s address at the 1946 Liberian Centennial Dinner in New York City, where Liberia was feminized as a territory to be exploited, violated, and controlled.

Courageously meeting amidst almost insurmountable difficulties and bravely facing the gravest dangers, Liberia's pioneers landed in 1822 on a hostile coast, founded a small colony and guided its development until 1847, when it became a sovereign state. For the

first seventy-five years, the struggle to eke out a bare national existence was constant and economic progress was slow. Land grabs and repeated efforts to restrict her sovereignty placed the young and struggling republic in a precarious position. She was the subject of abstract discussions between nations in much the same manner as that of an orphaned child whose future is debated by strangers. Fortunately, however, although the United States was preoccupied with its own economic development, there were those in this country who still had time to keep an eye on the new-born nation and to give it words of encouragement when they were needed most (New-York State Colonization Society, “Liberia’s Century of Progress Talk,” 1849-1968; MG 347, Box 12, Folder 32).

The metaphor of being childlike is employed to criticize, categorize as irrational and incapable, as lacking in mental capacity, rationalize governance and intervention on their behalf, label them as possessing animistic beliefs, as underdeveloped, less developed, or improperly developed (Mills, C. and LeFrançois, 2018). Such vernacular echo the antebellum South, where black men were derogatorily called ‘boy’ to undermine their autonomy and reinforce white authority (Abbe, 2022, p. 7).

Formerly enslaved people were discursively constructed as a “laboring, landless, homeless class, once slaves, now free; unpracticed in Liberty, unschooled in self-control, never sobered by the discipline of self-support, never established a habit of prudence; excited by a freedom they did not understand” (Getachew, 2019, p. 43). For some repatriates, the concept of Liberia held a more profound, intimate significance beyond the mere establishment of a jurisdictional state and its territory. To Black people outside Africa during this era, 'Africa' embodied monumental and malleable significance: it was a religious landmark cited in the Old Testament, a land of political and economic potential for many landless African Americans, and a place of ancestral historical importance (Burrowes, 2001). As the nation-state often represents an extension of the self, encapsulating the *populus universus* (the entire people), Africa also carried metaphysical weight as a potential space to "endow ontology to precisely that [i.e., 'the black'] which has been systematically deprived of the privilege of ontology" (Butler, 1998, p. 280). Echoing Neil Roberts, I am proffering a claim “that political theory must start from the fact that enslaved peoples were the first moderns to treat freedom as the highest human good” (Wilder, 2017).

Consider this excerpt from an 1846 speech given by Liberian politician Hilary Teague, who emigrated from the State of Virginia:

Fellow Citizens! We stand now on a ground never occupied by a people before—
However insignificant we may regard ourselves, the eyes of Europe and America are upon us, as a germ destined to burst from its enclosure in the earth...Rise fellow citizens! Rise to a clear and full perception of your tremendous responsibilities ...you are to give the answer, whether the African race is doomed to interminable degradation (qtd. in Mills and Lefrançois, 2014, p. 88).

Indeed, Hilary Teague's rhetoric reflects settler colonial logics, discursively disappearing indigenous communities such as the Basa, Dei, Gola, Dan, Kpelle, Kru, Mano, and Vai, who were internally displaced by the American Colonization Society's settlement (Mitman, 2021, p. 35). Likely unconsciously, Teague's language employs the concept of *populus universus*—the idea that all people belong to the state. This nationalist discourse merges diverse groups into a single national identity, homogenizing them to construct a new historicity and facilitating the consolidation and justification of state power and control over these displaced indigenous populations.

Moreover, produced through modern paradigms of tremendous responsibility, individuation, self-governance and private property, the legal abolition of slavery domiciled the formerly enslaved in an atemporal condition of being towards freedom, as in moving towards an immanent freedom, and anticipated political futures, veiling the ways in which the regime of the plantation transformed and persisted. More specifically, the triangular trade (Williams, 1994) engendered an onto-epistemic totality which recalibrated the body to constitute a “specimen of *homo modernus*” and is therefore possessed by the discursive apparatus of “modern representation”, because the body-subject belongs to the nation (Da Silva, 2007, p. 179; emphasis in original)—meaning the body remains property of the state (Can there be a body that is not the property of the state?).

As argued by more religious white abolitionists, supporters of emigration, and African American emigrants, the negro could only 'rise' through the salvation of the African continent and its people. Hollis Read, a white clergyman, was resolute on the idea that constructing one modern

city in Africa would bewilder the preachers of black inferiority and then “shake the institution of slavery to its roots” (Moses, 1998, p. xxiii). Read was perhaps devoted to a practice of what Catherine Malabou articulated as “deconstructing the idea of biological rigidity and showing...that there are no grounds for a concept of essence” (Bey, 2020, p. 75) ... Because of the entente between the individuation of the figure of the subject and post-colonial sovereignty projects, the black bourgeois, similar to...

...their European predecessors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and their contemporaries in the twentieth century all over the world, the Black middle classes—that is, the Intelligentsias of the United States, the Caribbean and Africa—were captives of a dialectic: on the one hand, their continued development was structurally implicated in the continued domination of their societies by the Atlantic metropolises; on the other, the historical destiny of their class was linked to nationalism (Robinson, 1990, p. 40).

Black emigrants forged conceptions of freedom that were wedded to a certain notion of sovereignty interned within “a national-humanist schema” (Marriott, 2018, p. 3). his view was bound up with late 19th and early 20th-century European ethnic nationalist ideas of sovereignty, as well as American ideals of patriarchal propertied individualism, the nuclear Christian family, the secularisation of state, and class mobility.

For slaves after both the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, ‘freedom’ was equated with the acquisition of new names and residences, and stabilization of families. Black control of churches, expansion of schools and benevolent societies, development of economic independence and the forging of a distinctive political culture. These specifics of “freedom” would also be sought in Liberia (Burrows, 2001, p. 32).

Even into the 1930s, black nationalists maintained an optimistic view of Liberia as an ultimate sanctuary for black diasporic people. For example, the African Reconstruction Association (ARA), a Harlem-based nationalist group founded in the early 1930s, sought to "promote and encourage immigration and colonization of undeveloped areas...of Negro nations" (Blain, 2019, pp. 106-108). The organization viewed emigration to Liberia as a principal strategy for advancing the black race. Within this framework, the group of nationalists posited that relocating to West Africa was the most viable way to achieve racial advancement on an international scale.

The ‘Scramble for Africa’ and its Impact on Liberia’s Governance Practices

By the 19th century, pervasive inequality existed amongst different social groups within Liberia and free-born African Americans became “demographically and politically dominant, constituting 4,963 out of 5,602 immigrants to Liberia and providing 11 out of 12 delegates to the Liberian Constitutional Convention” of 1847 (Burrows, 2001, p. 30). Whilst the ontological ordering of ‘human’ subjectivities remained, the obligations of self-determination became tethered to political horizons, in line with the nation-state form, and the teleological trajectories of civilization.

The newly formed Liberian state was expected to perform its capacity and legitimacy according to Western standards to secure its place in the international community of nations. Yet, paradoxically, it was presumed incapable of shouldering this responsibility. This created a temporalized deferral of absolute sovereignty that was supposedly surmountable only through 'civilization' via the empire's disciplining technologies and customs. This notion of unitary or linear/chronological time underpins nationalism—as a developmental stage in human society. Appositely, under the burdens of international jurisprudence and the doctrine of terra nullius, Liberia would formally organize its politics and society along ‘ethnic’ lines in the name of national security and development—fortifying an onto political configuration entrenched in the very same logics that brought blackness into non-being. IR’s unspoken grammar is predicated on this philosophy of the unraced sovereign state and figures to posit the valency of the state for whites and blacks alike.

As the Scramble for Africa continued to unfold, the legal doctrine of ‘effective occupation’ emerged from the Berlin Conference (1884-1885); a gathering of major European powers, coalescing with the purpose of negotiating and comprehensively regulating commerce and colonialism on the African continent. The provisions of this policy stipulated that the recognition of a state’s sovereignty and political legitimacy, rooted in John Locke’s theory of property, be contingent upon said political entity’s capacity to seize, sufficiently cultivate, and administer effective authority over the territory and bodies in question. John Locke, in his *The Second Treatise of Government* (1690), proposed a property rights theory based on natural law, asserting

that individuated subjects are permitted to appropriate and exert control over material things such as land through labour. This labor, Locke argued, establishes private property rights, and confers agency onto individuals as they become more independent and able to control their own actions (Tuckness, 2023). His theory helped justify the legitimacy of private property rights.

It should be noted that part of the rationalisation underlying the repatriation project was, in part, meant to lend moral legitimacy to European colonization efforts. Christopher Fyfe's explores how the British government appropriated the abolitionist movement as a strategy to conceal their imperialistic goals in Africa. Similarly, English economist Henry Thornton (1791) suggested that British capitalist interests would benefit from promoting humanitarianism, including an anti-slavery agenda, in Africa to facilitate trade relations between Britain and Africa (Turner, 1997, p. 321).

Contemporarily, Liberia's sovereignty was questioned based on its limited geography—a coastline of 300 miles—its small population of 2,247 by 1839, and its ties to the American Colonization Society (ACS) (Huberich, 1947, pp. 235-236). The nascent steps toward Liberian self-determination faced threats from the colonial ambitions of Germany, France, Portugal, Spain, and Italy. As these European powers encroached on Liberia's interior, alleging that the emigrants had only effectively occupied the coastal areas, military infrastructure became crucial to the operations of the 'settler-state'. Both the British and French empires refused to recognize Liberia as a legitimate sovereign state, disputing the legitimacy of both the Liberian government and the ACS due to its role as a civic entity. They argued that Liberia's authority was not acknowledged internationally, and that the Monrovia government did not effectively control its territory. Consequently, the British and French contended that neither the ACS nor Liberia had the right to impose taxes or make territorial claims (Levitt, 2005, p. 76). The Commonwealth's Constitution allowed the ACS to negotiate treaties and manage issues related to trade, commerce, extradition, and boundaries on Liberia's behalf, effectively leaving the government in Monrovia without any real power. To achieve its national objectives, the colony employed a variety of tactics including negotiations, commissions, trade restrictions, and ultimately force in its interactions with neighboring countries. These patterns remained largely unchanged until the early 20th century when President Barclay stationed resident commissioners and local military

garrisons in the interior regions to ensure compliance with central government policies (Holsoe, 1971, p. 356).

Arthur Barclay, Liberia's fourteenth President from 1904 to 1912, believed that "black people needed to prove their capacity for self-rule" (Lyon, 1980, p. 38). During the Barclay era, Western bureaucracies held authority over domestic political affairs, and administrative reform efforts marked the initial attempts by settlers to implement Western political and cultural governance models in the hinterland. "Successful European state development was characterized by deep connections between the cities—the core political areas—and the surrounding territories" (Herbst, 2014, p. 14). The government in Monrovia faced significant internal political pressure due to its inability to assert control over the entire country, despite engaging in numerous violent conflicts with indigenous Liberians (Levitt, 2005, p. 137). In response, during the 1904-1905 legislative session, Barclay introduced legislation to establish a system of indirect rule in the interior regions (Levitt, 2005, p. 137). This transition marked a shift from a protectorate arrangement with the hinterland to a colonialist paradigm characterized by conquest and indirect rule, facilitated by the implementation of a 'native' administration system (Akpan, 1982). This strategic change allowed the government to gain control over the Liberian hinterland while allowing indigenous communities to retain some autonomy and preserve cultural traditions. As a result, this approach emphasized the state's central role as the primary provider of 'advantages' related to modernization and development. Furthermore, the 'native' administration system entrenched unequal power dynamics inherent in patron-client relationships, becoming the predominant avenue for accessing state resources and the primary conduit through which ordinary citizens interacted with political authorities (Berman, 1998, p. 316). This institutional framework not only perpetuated existing power differentials but also shaped broader societal relations within the context of wealth and power acquisition.

Subsequent administrations were burdened by the legacy of Barclayan politics, characterized by increasingly harsh technologies of "coercion, control, and patronage" (Ellis, 2007, p. 197) that still configure modern Liberian politics. Liberian nationalists were committed to political strategies aimed at ensuring long-term non-interference and used 'development' as a pretext to aggressively enforce political control, attract investment from private multinationals and international government agencies, and annex land (Whyte, 2017, p. 24).

Political 'ethnicity' is partly a product of mobilizing the invention of blackness to facilitate "the expansion of capital through the colonization of bodies and lands" (Ghaddar and Caswell, 2019, p. 79). This underscores the connections between land exploitation, accumulation, and sovereignty, as manifested in the Americo-Liberian pursuit of freedom-as-self-government. In other words, settler-colonial and nation-state ideals invariably require dispossession, linking the predatory exploitation of land and the establishment of a militarized security apparatus to the right to self-determination for the global subaltern. It was against this backdrop of international politics and law that the Americo-Liberian pursuits of a notion of freedom materialized. The succeeding chapter is focused on how repatriated peoples' conceptualizations of freedom were inextricably linked to statist developmentalist ideologies and the anti-black underpinnings inherent in the plantation complex and capitalist desire for excessive accumulation.

To the little Republic of Liberia, Firestone has brought a new day of hope and advancement.

—Harvey Firestone Jr.¹⁹

We aspire to be modern, as if this were somehow a new position and as if blacks and nonwhites were not already clearly and uncomfortably modern, as if modernity were sustainable without the nigger and the fluid in/convenience that is blackness lying, albeit differently, both inside and outside its borders.

—Richard Iton²⁰

VII The Political Economy of the Planation: How the Firestone Rubber Company Underdeveloped Liberia²¹

This chapter adumbrates a mode of theoretical inquiry that emphasises the specificities of racial capitalism and anti-blackness within purportedly 'underdeveloped' plantation economies located in sub-Saharan Africa. Rather than redefining or critically reclaiming the conventional analytical formulation called 'underdevelopment', routinely expended to study the phenomena of 'human progress' under ostensibly non-modernized states—and for the purposes of this chapter I am mostly referring to economically stagnant states. Modern states and modernity, in general, “cannot be rigorously thought as something other than a historicity marked by the very idea of race” (Chander, 2013, p. 69, emphasis in original). We are thus led to bring into focus how the discursive and material production of the captive African body as property—its absolute objectification—figures into the racialization of Africa and its subjects within a transnational capitalist political economy (Leong, 2013, p. 2152). Acknowledging capitalism’s inherent racial and racializing nature as an “institutionalized societal order” (Fraser, 2023, p. 20; Robinson, 2000; Williams, 1994; Blackburn, 2010; Paton, 2022), allows for a better analysis of

¹⁹ (qtd. in C. Miller, 2014)

²⁰ (2008, p. 288)

²¹ This is a play on *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* written by Walter Rodney (1972).

infrastructural economic arrangements in black African societies in general and Liberia's economic structure in particular.

Capitalism is predicated on ecological devastation, gender domination, anti-black racism, and political despotism, and foregrounds the theft of labor from bodies rendered disposable. To fully grasp the complexities of Africa's modern political and economic arrangements, it is crucial to consider both peripheral neoliberal relations and the domestic consolidation of inequality. This analysis extends beyond Liberia to the broader context of Black Africa, as we exist in an “era whereby capitalist expansion has assumed an unquestionable role in influencing the growth and trajectory of Africa's policy development” (Phiri, 2020, p. 63). By retaining these specificities, this chapter aims to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing discourse on the intersection of race, ethnicity, capitalism, and economic dynamics in the African context. The nation-states of the geopolitical Global South, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, have inherited the anti-black logics of the plantation system, along with its accompanying relational bodily ontologies. Even though many of these countries achieved independence, the plantation system, characterized by its specific economic traits and necropolitical technologies, internal social hierarchies, governance schemes and vulnerability to external forces, still possesses the lives of African people inhabiting such a context (Beckford, 1999, p. xxvii).

Thinking about the plantation in paradigmatic terms admits an engagement with the “interlocking workings of modernity and blackness, which culminate in long-standing, uneven racial geographies while also centralizing that the *idea* of the plantation is migratory” (McKittrick, 2013, p. 3; emphasis in original). Liberia, functioning as a plantation economy, regulates and normalizes racialized divisions of labor, which can be squarely figured into a 'property-informed understanding of the world' (Carter, 2023, p. 14). These divisions are not exceptional phenomena but are integral to understanding the continuities between racial disparities transnationally. Such conditions have precipitated reactionary insurrections, such as armed uprisings. By foregrounding the racialized divisions of labor and the dynamics of plantation economies, the central concern of this chapter is to modulate and generatively extend the somewhat (now) commonplace assertion that war is propelled by economic immiseration vis-à-vis the unjust economic policies of Bretton Woods institutions, Western intervention, the

irreducible alliances among political, military, and economic actors responsible for state austerity and political patronage.

I am performing a different conceptual move by thinking beyond the traditional scope of political economy—the study of how the economy affects politics and vice versa—to concede attention to the psychic substructures of a modern globality regulated through anti-blackness (Thomas, 2019, p. 4). This theoretical shift departs from conventional discussions of underdevelopment, focusing instead on how anti-blackness forms the foundation of transnational extractive labor regimes. It posits the slave relation as exceeding time and space, “perpetuating the impossibility of Black Presence in a context where ‘whiteness is not only always Presence, but also absolute perspectivity’” (Thomas, 2019, p. 5). This methodological approach transcends the moral queries embedded in developmentalist theories, particularly because individualized indicators such as “increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility, and material well-being” are—practically speaking—difficult to measure (Rodney, 1982, p. 3). Moreover, these indicators often assess 'deservability,' determining which bodies are deemed deserving or undeserving based on their adherence to normative ethics. To be branded as undeserving is to be judged as pathological. Crucially, my argument rejects the notion of pathological moral or cultural underdevelopment. Instead, the institutional atmosphere of plantation economies reveals distinct structural characteristics, replete with anti-black logics, that permanently anchor black bodies and spaces to an initial stage of developmental time (Beckford, 1999, p. xxii). The problem is blackness *is and as underdevelopment*” (Sharpe, 2012, p. 34; emphasis in original). What we urgently need is a critical lens that, through its expansive inference, would urge the gestation of a “critical discourse that would delimit the possibility of knowledge, of the concept of the human, and the horizon of the human sciences” (Chandler, 2013, p. 71). My entire project is dedicated to this task.

Building on the reflections from the previous chapter about the entente between subject formation and state formation, this chapter investigates the presumptive logics and violent practices shaped by racialized, gendered individual separability and bodily ontological differences within capitalist democratic regimes. These logics sustain capitalist grammars that posit an inability to properly accumulate capital as an existential failure. As Christodoulou

(2021) movingly puts it: “I occupy, I possess, I own, therefore I am, therefore I exist. I own a body; therefore, I am a being; I also own a self, therefore I am.”

Further, I argue that the global capitalist economy, within which Liberia has emerged, is intrinsically incompatible with the objectives of African and diasporic emancipation. This misalignment is rooted in racial capitalism’s transformation of captive African “bodies into flesh and then into fungible commodities” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 30). While African nations may have accrued some economic resources through their unequal integration into the global capitalist framework (which pales in comparison to the capital that is extracted from the continent), this integration is inherently reliant on the exploitation of unfree (blackened/native) labour. The problem is that very “little emphasis is placed on how violence, racial capitalism, racism, White supremacy, and the institutionalization of power by groups of nation's cemented inequalities predicated on the unbridled fetishization of African societies and the body” (Phiri, 2020, p. 63). This matrix of economic relations did not emerge in isolation; it is situated within a historical continuum shaped by globalized capitalism (Bledsoe and Wright, 2018), anti-black violence, the policing of 'native' bodies through colonial and quasi-colonial administrations, and the continuation of unfree labor regimes.

In this work, I am undertaking two interconnected critiques: a structural critique of transnational circuits of racial exploitation and a focused critique examining how Liberia itself operates as a plantation economy that commodifies blackness. More specifically, the chapter elucidates the relationship between ‘ethnic’ divisions of labor, racial capitalism, and plantation chattel slavery in the temporal context of Liberia’s economic resurgence and deterioration from 1860 to the 1930s. The prevailing discursive pronouncements on the nature of antagonisms in Liberia often emphasizes the role of illicit economic pursuits in perpetuating both ethnic and political hostilities. Contributing to the conversation, I examine these economic activities through the lens of global racial capitalism, departing from the conventional focus on the nationalized integration of political and economic factors in our analyses of society. This shift facilitates a finer study of how political economy corresponds with the migratory anti-black logics constitutive of plantation economies, potentially ascertaining initial signs of imminent crises and premature deaths in Africa due to wars, famines, and other things.

My arguments, in this chapter, are also informed and complicated by W.E.B. Du Bois' early call to reassess Liberia's political circumstances and decisions especially as to account for European and American regulation of the country's domestic market and resource extraction industry. Even with the formal recognition of Liberia's national sovereignty and membership in the international state system, economic dependency, and unequal access to political power between states—constitutive of the structure of the global political economy—meant the same system that guaranteed sovereignty also justified external interference in Liberia's internal political affairs. Americo-Liberians, vulnerable to these agential forces, were compelled to reprise those brutal proceedings of the black Atlantic world—by instrumentalizing the covenants of racial capitalism, logics of the plantation, and hegemonic nationalisms—toward demonstrating their effective occupation and government of Liberia and its peoples as well as foreclosing any possibility of foreign encroachment (Putnam, 2006, p. 238).

Illicit Economies, Political Patronage, and Racial Capitalism (1860–1970)

As discussed in the previous chapter, during the first half of the 20th century, the Liberian nation-state expanded its influence into interior regions through coercive measures. Utilizing militarized force, it imposed taxes and compelled labor from indigenous Africans (Atkinson, 1997, p. 5). During the civil war, exploitative proceedings only deepened as combatants and government actors seized control over the economic output of civilian populations in occupied territories. The war economy, delimited by the illicit appropriation and exportation of Liberia's copious natural resources like timber, rubber, diamonds, and gold. Patrons—including combatants, factions, and government officials—wielded direct control over resource management at both local and national levels. Furthermore, any 'redistributive' activities ensued within the confines of this shadow economy (Atkinson, 1997, p. 5).

Prior to the civil war, Liberia's ruling class comprised both Americo-Liberians in government and private sector roles and powerful global finance capitalists who controlled the primary factors of production. These divisions of the ruling class colluded to uphold domination over the dispossessed classes of indigenous Liberians. For example, state actors habitually expended coercive force to suppress labor strikes targeting multinational corporations such as Firestone,

LAMCO, and Bong Mines (Kieh, 2004, p. 65; Qureshi et al., 1964). An important example of this dynamic is the Firestone Plantations, which make up the large part of the country's "enclave plantation economy" (Beckford, 1999, pp. 15-16). The Firestone Rubber Company played a pivotal role in demarcating indigenous Liberians from Americo-Liberians through a racially stratified labor system. This segregation was not only geographical, with most indigenous people living inland away from the economically concentrated coast but augmented by the epistemic, psychic, and ethnocultural difference that is essentially a "colonial and capitalist cosmology of separability" that exacerbated ethnic and territorial divisions (Carter, 2023, p.15). Divisions were 'ethnic' in practice and 'territorial' rhetorically, but essentially amounted to the same thing. Furthermore, through settler-colonial logics, Liberian land was repurposed as a space for capital accumulation, contributing to a broader political agenda. This agenda included creating "territorial divisions of labor" to foster an ecosystem of "cheaper" resources and to engender the perforation of anterior "social formations by capitalist social relations and institutional arrangements (such as rules of contract and private property arrangements)" (Harvey, 2004, p. 66).

Racial Capitalism as an Alternative Economic Paradigm

Cedric Robinson theorized racial capitalism against the grain of traditional Marxist discourses that situate capitalism and feudalism as historically discrete economic systems. Robinson's overture maps the ways in which medieval feudalism set the stage for the development of modern capitalist societies. In this formulation, Robinson adduces that race is a priori to capitalism. Fundamentally, the argument is one that specifically rejects the general pronouncement that the invention of race followed the European imperial encounter with continental Africa. By shifting focus to European feudalism, he identifies it as a crucial stage in the genealogy of contemporary racialization, marking an early transformation of human difference into ontological difference. This is why Calvin Warren succinctly proclaims that "Blackness does not come from Africa. Rather, Africa and its diaspora become black at a particular point in their history" (Warren, 2018, p. 222). Robinson also notes that the first European proletarians—Irish, Jews, Roma, Slavs, among others—were racialized within

Europe's borders, experiencing racialized dispossession. On account of this, Robinson rightfully asserts that capitalism is always already racial:

Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups—capitalists with the means of production/workers without the means of subsistence, creditors/debtors, conquerors of land made property/the dispossessed and removed. These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, *and the unequal differentiation of human value and racism* enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires (qtd. in Melamed, 2015, p. 77; my emphasis).

Furthermore, Robinson links Eurocentric and American nationalisms to racialist myths, such as the *Herrenvolk* ideology which justified the domination of certain Europeans over others and was central to German colonization efforts in Central Europe and "Slavic" territories.

Ultimately, the arch of European civilizational development compelled the exaggeration and discursive translation of human difference to racial difference (Kelley, 2017). This core European system was very much reminiscent of colonialism, manifestation of invasion, settlement and land appropriation, and the hierarchical organization of the body politic in racial terms that unfolded within the colonies (Melamed, 2015, p. 77). The point here is that capitalism and racialism are co-constitutive, but the Black body was not a prerequisite for the invention of such racialized economic operations.

The Race for Development

Racial capitalism became the dominant system organizing production and resource distribution within Liberia's coastal regions by the 1860s. Liberia is not alone in this regard, insofar as the late 1950s to the 1970s witnessed African leaders pursuing developmentalism to align with/catch up with the West's excessive economic growth, leading to substantial state investments in enterprises for growth, job creation, and revenue generation. However, the late 1970s brought a combination of internal and external challenges, leading to unfavorable macroeconomic conditions, the subsequent implementation of donor-induced structural adjustment programs

(Olorunfoba and Falola, 2020, p. vii), and the theoretical apprehension of Africa's political economy of under/development through neoliberal discourses (Phiri, 2020, p. 63). The data produced by World Development Indicators (WDI), UN data on the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), OECD data on development, etc., all contribute to configuring this discursive terrain and have acquired the status of a "scientific, proven, certified" empirical truism (McKittrick, 2014, p. 17). Moreover, "this contemporary lexicon of development discourse has found fertile ground in intellectual, cultural, and policy positions that champion conservative, ahistorical approaches to Africa's underdevelopment" (Phiri, 2020, p. 65).

The conventional analysis of economic challenges in 'third world' economies, lagging behind the West's industrialization, often revolves around the problematic concept of 'underdevelopment.' This theory, as Rodney (1982) aptly reminds us, "makes sense only as a means of comparing levels of development. It is very much tied to the fact that human social development has been uneven and from a strictly economic viewpoint some human groups have advanced further by producing more and becoming more wealthy" (Rodney, 1982, p. 13). Further, "all of the countries named as 'underdeveloped' in the world are exploited by others" (Rodney, 1982, p. 14). Consequently, the concept of underdevelopment performs a temporal function insofar as it erases the lingering and devastating structural legacies of conquest and colonial racial capitalist industrialization of the West and enduring relations of transnational neo-colonial economic dependency for most of the non-western world. All at once, it interferes with national and transnational memory, moves against historical speculation in its mathematical absoluteness, and sanctions our present episteme wherein the black body is positioned in a permanent state of being commodity-object. Underdevelopment operates on the very basic assumption that economic stagnation is a problem of capital, resource and labor scarcity (Pierre, 2019). More critical literature has complicated the concept of underdevelopment by focusing on various intersections of power and their impact on the integration of African nations into the global economy. "Indeed, the elaboration of the continuities between imperial and nationalist modalities of governance has been a critical focus for these scholars, including attention—in the case of New World societies—to the ongoing forms of violence that have been enacted against black bodies" (Thomas, 2019, p. 4). However, limiting the analysis to external neoliberal relations between Africa and the rest of the world is insufficient. This chapter demonstrates how relations of inequality are consolidated internally, as elaborated later. Rather than pursuing an

intersectional resignification or nuanced repurposing/reclamation of under/development as an analytic, the objective of this chapter is to provide a theoretical framework that retains the specificities of racial capitalism and anti-blackness within underdeveloped plantation economies in sub-Saharan Africa.

The concept of underdevelopment also reproduces unsophisticated racist ideas about “cultural difference, which is to say, to nonwhite or blackened, darkened difference as symbolized by skin color and violently grafted onto flesh as always already registering moral failure and culpability” (Carter, 2023, p. 10). Therefore, developmentalist ideology at its core is about escaping blackness insofar as it erects a structural antagonism of whiteness and non-whiteness (Pierre, 2019, p. 88). Colonial slavery is internal to the articulation of such an antagonism—meaning modernity is unsustainable without the nigger that it “extracts from and depends on precisely to produce itself” (Carter, 2023, p. 17). The bizarre contradiction that throws the idea of underdevelopment into crisis is the absolutely straightforward link between the tilling of cotton by enslaved people and the rapid economic development of United States and Great Britain:

The market relations between slave-cultivated cotton and the emerging world economy, especially the nexus between the United States and Great Britain, could not be more direct. Eighty percent of the cotton that enslaved people picked was exported to Europe, almost all to Britain. As the single most important raw material driving the Industrial Revolution, slave cultivated cotton created the capitalist world economy (Hart, 2018, p. 9).

The focus is not solely on Liberia, but on generatively linking these arguments to how particular bodies (black) are positioned in the global economy. Shifting critical attention to the discursive production of the dark body, tethered to unfree labor, as property, and as a site of consensual exploitation, reveals how Africa is racialized along the same terms. The concept of racial capitalism serves as my point of departure because it posits that capitalism is always already racial. Any serious examination of the processes through which 'ethnicity' is produced, politicized, and consolidated in post-colonial African societies must consider how racial capitalism is mobilized in service of 'settler' colonialism. It must explicitly reject the thesis that ethnicity merely expresses a refusal or atavistic inability to modernize.

From Exploitation to Stagnation: Tracing Liberia's Economic Trajectory

The contemporary global capitalist system evolved through the plunder and hyper-exploitation of Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, solidifying and expanding inequalities in the North Atlantic world. Plantations, pivotal in many subaltern African geographies, often stimulate local economic growth, yet they are predominantly owned and controlled by Western corporations (Beckford, 1999, p. xxi). Ironically so, “the plantation economies of the world have been left outside the current development and change that has swept many other countries along since the industrial revolution” (Beckford, 1999, p. xxvii). In Liberia, the means of production are dominated by multinational corporations established through unequal relations with the Americo-Liberian ruling class. This localized resource extraction, which serves as a conduit linking Liberia’s economy to the global market, predominantly involves the production of raw materials like rubber (Beckford, 1999, p.11). The collusion between Americo-Liberians and foreign capital, initiated by Tubman's 1944 *Open Door Policy*, aimed to facilitate the export of raw materials and reduce British economic and political influence, rather than bolster the local economy. Tubman actively promoted foreign corporate interests, embedding Liberia within a neo-colonial extractive framework (Marinelli, 1964, p. 92). The local working class, contesting these exploitative relations, faced both environmental degradation from industrial technologies and state suppression, often through militarized force, in response to community resistance (Yahmia, 2018).

Today, Liberia continues to lease land to multinational corporations, creating jobs but often resulting in "growth without development," a phenomenon identified by Northwestern University researchers in 1960.

That is, the observable growth is not complemented by structural changes in lines of production; by the adoption of more efficient techniques in the economy or government; by the significant involvement of domestic personnel in anything other than the unskilled labor category; or by new social achievements and new levels of economic aspiration. In fact, if the foreign entrepreneurs and investments were withdrawn tomorrow, the modern sector of the economy would virtually cease to function (Liebenow, 1967, p. 37).

Concession agreements with multinational corporations like BHP Billiton and Sime Darby, worth billions, replicate the historical plantation model by utilizing precarious labor for global market expansion (Hook, 2023, p. S97). Despite signs of economic growth, many Liberians remain deprived of basic necessities (food, water, shelter etc.). Additionally, during the war, a substantial portion of the proceeds from these resource activities primarily enriched factional leaders. Intermediaries, often linked to organized factions, and politicians typically leveraged these ventures to form lucrative partnerships with expatriates, capitalizing on their governmental roles during the export process (Atkinson, 1997, p.7).

Liberia's Enclave Plantation Economy

This part of the chapter puts forth an analysis of the impact exerted by the plantation on different spheres of human existence in Liberia and other tropical regions where slavery and the plantation system were pivotal to the development of social, political, and economic governance (Beckford, 1999, p. xxii). Liberia is one such locale. Plantation sensibilities were ushered into Liberia both material and conceptually—by way of imposing themselves on people's consciousness (McKittrick, 2013, p. 3). I am employing the following definition of a plantation:

A plantation is an economic unit producing agricultural commodities (field crops or horticultural products, but not livestock) for sale and employing a relatively large number of unskilled laborers whose activities are closely supervised. Plantations usually employ a year-round labor crew of some size, and they usually specialize in the production of only one or two marketable products. They differ from other kinds of farms in the way in which the factors of production, primarily management and labor, are combined" (qtd. in Beckford, 1999, p. 6).

At its genesis, the plantation as an enterprise was introduced as an authoritative entity, one that exercised absolute power over all aspects of production along with the individual autonomy of the laboring bodies enclosed within it. Given its complete contingency the labor of persons of wide-ranging ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the plantation was characterized by rigid hierarchies that dictated the terms of interaction between these distinct social groups. This mode of biopolitical governance that is constitutive of the plantation is akin to that of a smaller-scale

state, for example, including the grouping of laboring bodies into hierarchized social strata, accompanied by the formal delineation of their interrelations. Consequently, the concept of caste materialised as a central systematising feature within planter societies (Beckford, 1999, p. 9).

The plantation is an institution in just as real a sense as the Catholic Church. It arises to deal with certain seemingly eternal problems of an ordered society...It is made up of people but, like the church, it is an impersonal and implacable automatism having a set of norms which control all the people who constitute it, planter and laborer alike, who “belong” to the estate, as though the estate were something existing apart from its people: the plantation demands and dictates. The individual members acquire particular beliefs and ways of participating which become part of the very fibre of their lives. Further, they acquire from the plantation that firm element of assured behavior which all institutions give their members, and which contribute toward social order and stability (Thompson qtd. in Beckford, 1999, p. 11).

The plantation provides a unique conceptual framework for re-calibrating the crisis of endemic underdevelopment and the so-called primordial 'ethnic' conflicts, including those studies that explore the interlocking affairs between ethnic divisions, resource struggles, and political representation in persistently underdeveloped postcolonial states (Stavenhagen, 1996). Reducing the problem of post-colonial African conflicts as an artifact of the interface between ethnopolitical violence and economic alienation leaves a great deal to be desired. I mean that it is a weak theoretical locus from which to think of the elaboration of plantation economies in conflict-affected African geographies, such as Cameroon, DRC, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea, and Liberia. not if we are truly committed to elaborating a more historically accurate theory of structural underdevelopment and the transnational circuits of exploitation that produce (and reproduce) their conditions of possibility. The analytics of the plantation drive developmentalist ideology, capitalist accumulation, and modes of cultural erasure that brings into being the primordial/modern bifurcation. “The plantation was an instrument of modernization in the sense that it served to open previously undeveloped countries and regions. It brought roads, ports, water supplies, communications, health facilities, and so on” (Beckford, 1999, p. xxvii). In other words, the plantation is the threshold between antiquity and modernity, between blackness and whiteness.

Moreover, the plantation has a material and corporeal significance on the bodies who labor in it, but the plantation also holds theoretical importance for how we think about flesh made property or the conflation of race and property. By way of reducing only blacks to property (to be expended without end) a new form of property was brought into being that specifically depended on the invention of racial blackness (Harris, 1993, p. 1716). In this way, ownership over the black body has arranged colonial capitalist ways of accumulation (Bhandar, 2018, p. 4).

The theoretical importance of emphasising this is two-fold: first, the ‘socio-political order of the New World’ was kick-started by approaching a particular body (a black body) with direct relations for force...thus one could say that slavery—the ‘accumulation’ of black bodies regardless of their utility as labourers through an idiom of despotic power – is closer to capital’s primary desire than is waged oppression –the ‘exploitation’ of unraced bodies that labor through an idiom of rational/symbolic (the wage) power (Wilderson, 2003, p. 230).

The black body, reduced to property, is central in political philosophy's developmental narratives, where modernity's teleological orientation defines 'civilization.' Blackness was transformed into propertied life, while whiteness, through its association with property, became unraced (Harris, 1993). Racial slavery thus established a system where possessing whiteness equated to possessing freedom: “it became crucial to be ‘white,’ to be identified as white, to have the property of being white. Whiteness was the characteristic, the property of free human beings” (Harris, 1993, p. 1721). Colonial slavery instituted a "racial regime of ownership," where intelligible subjectivity depended on one’s capacity to appropriate (Bhandar, 2018, p. 4). This logic labeled Indigenous populations across the colonized world as premodern, tying modernity to specific agricultural practices and the reproduction of "the English common law of property" (Bhandar, 2018, p. 4). Within this discursive space, rationalisations for the possession of private property are shackled to a concept of ‘the human’ replete with an anti-black racial logic.

Liberian Ethno-Racial Divisions of Labor

According to a 1913 article by American anthropologist Frederick Starr, Americo-Liberians seldom engaged in any form of physical labor or land-cultivating work, manual labor was

reserved for the 'native' who had long been “considered the natural laborer of the country” (Starr 1913, p. 481). While the Liberian Constitution explicitly outlawed slavery, indentured servitude, and debt peonage (Murray, 2021, p. 113), the West African settlement inaugurated and espoused socio-political and economic conditions which amounted to what was effectively slavery by another name. I want to pause and consider how labor acquired an onto-epistemic function as “a civilizing and modernizing agent” (King et al., 2020, p. 5) and how one becomes considered a *natural* (as Starr put it) unfree laborer. I suggest that Liberia is a clear example where the performance of civility encounters that omnipresent problem of racial ontology. This is a question of (black) *matter*:

Within this imagination of matter, there are those who believe themselves to be the owners of the right to ownership and there are others who are on the underside of this believed right to ownership. The latter are in that group of things called *property*. The former are bodies of credit, the latter of debt, figures that are owned and the embodiment of what is owed (Carter, 2023, p. 17; emphasis in original).

The “door of no return” (Brand, 2001), “transformed us into bodies emptied of being, bodies emptied of self-interpretation, into which new interpretations could be placed” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 32). In Liberia, the African, *again*, becomes a body tethered to utility, transmuted into a vessel or “available equipment”—in the Heideggerian sense—against which Americo-Liberians can measure their humanity amid that impossible journey of escaping social death (Warren, 2018, p. 27). I propose that the institutionalization of slavery as a necessary part of the genealogy of capitalist modernity made race, as Robin Kelley puts it, “a modality in which class is lived” (“University of Washington”, 2017, 6:46), exemplifying that physiognomy and hue were not constitutive features of racism.

Liberia’s caste system, as detailed in previous chapters, is predicated on this general problematic dichotomy that disguises itself as a ‘civilized’ (read developed)/ ‘native’ separation. A dichotomy which fundamentally depends on the propagation of a “racialized patriarchal system of inheritance” (Paton, 2022, p. 727). In this system, inheriting Americo-Liberian privilege is an impossibility for 'native' women and their offspring, who are relegated to states of malignancy and incivility, perpetually excluded from the realm of first-class citizenship. 'Native' women can

only secure a denigrated form of 'civilized' status for their children through procreation with a 'civilized' man (Moran, 1990). The rapid expansion of Atlantic chattel slavery was accelerated through its integration into established European patriarchal power structures, which bifurcated women into two categories: the virtuous “feme covert”, seen as a “conduit for the transmission of property” (Paton, 2022, p. 17), and enslaved black women. For the latter, the legal doctrine of *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*, mandated their wombs, fixed “blackness to subjection, ensuring that the black perversely gendered body can *only* reproduce racial slavery and malignancy” (Osman, 2019, p. 9; unpublished manuscript).

Abolition of Slavery and the ‘New’ Imperialism

Liberia is essentially an alternative geography in which the interests of white supremacist global capitalism (specifically the interests of private foreign corporations) and the longings for Black sovereignty and self-government would become inextricable (Mitman, 2021, p. 31). Through the Americo-Liberian state’s consolidation of a politics of anti-colonial bourgeois nationalism, labor became another racialized category that separated Americo-Liberians from indigenous Africans. Thinking alongside the same line of argumentation as Cedric Robinson (2000), the most perilous miscalculation made by the black petit bourgeois—some of whom were enthusiasts of the Back-to-Africa Movement—was their supposition that black liberation could only be realized by way of investment in the hegemonic, militarized, state-centric, and developmentalist ideology of nation-building. This modus operandi cannot be uncoupled from the anti-black dialectics that govern the modern global political economy of commodity fetishism and unfree labor (Wolff and Leopold, 2021). There exists a fundamental and constitutive relation between enduring conditions of economic immiseration, centralized despotism, un/waged slavery and forced labor observed in such locales, and the pervasive influence exercised by the anti-black racial logics of the circum-Atlantic world—which continue to haunt their way into Liberia and other plantation economies (Beckford, 1999, p. xxii).

Liberia's political economy is fundamentally configured by its agricultural sector, with rubber cultivation serving as the predominant export. The national landscape is suffused by large-scale plantations, particularly those operated by Firestone. Beckford (1999, p. 7) identifies this as a structural pattern where foreign multinationals establish enclave economies within

‘underdeveloped’ nations, administered by decision-makers located in Western metropolises—also the regions where the economic surpluses generated are subsequently repatriated. In the contemporary Liberian context, the exploitation of the country’s natural resources and indigenous labor force by multinational corporations is pervasive and the profits accrued from these enterprises are not reinvested locally. Harvey (2004, p. 65) argues that this pattern of systematic extraction and lack of reinvestment immortalises ongoing fiscal crises and intensifies social conflicts. This scenario is indicative of a circular systemic pattern of economic exploitation and inequality, paralleled by similar conditions in other sub-Saharan African regions, such as mineral mining in the Great Lakes region or the challenges posed by foreign oil corporations in the Niger Delta.

A Century Before the Arrival of Firestone

The capitalist mode became dominant in the coastal areas of Liberia by the 1860s, with the black ‘settler’ class establishing trading houses and a local shipbuilding industry. However, the local bourgeoisie was still at a primitive level of accumulation when capitalism was maturing in Europe and the United States. The formation of Liberia in the 19th century coincided with the regression of the Atlantic slave trade, a transition largely impelled by Europe's economic shift during the 'New Imperialism' epoch. This era was characterized by an increased European demand for raw materials and food, which in turn, significantly altered global interactions. Alongside these changes, the abolition of slavery in colonial America and the shift from an agrarian to a manufacturing economy led to substantial labor shortages and challenges in sustaining large-scale agricultural operations. According to David Harvey, these developments resulted in a "rise of attempts to accumulate by dispossession" (2004, p. 64). At the same time, due to these competitive arrangements in the global market and the rising production of raw materials by competing nations, prices of Liberia’s major agricultural exports (such as coffee, camwood, palm oil and sugar) plummeted, devastating the local planter class (Khafre, 1978, p. 107).

As the 1870s commenced, the expansion of plantation labor emerged as a direct response to the burgeoning industrial and manufacturing economies in Europe and North America. This economic transformation reoriented the priorities of states governing external colonies toward

the utilization of surplus capital and labor to foster capital accumulation across diverse regions. Consequently, the transfer of capital, combined with the relocation of labor, operated inimitably, and had reverberating costs. This new mode of imperialism, which encouraged territorial expansion and economic growth, found conducive ground in regions like Liberia where capital and commodities could be efficiently exploited by Europeans (Lustig, 2020, pp. 30-31). In 1871, the President of Liberia negotiated a loan amounting to \$500,000, subject to a 30% discount and an annual interest rate of 7%, structured to be repaid over a fifteen-year period. This financial arrangement, secured against the nation's customs revenues, was facilitated by a British financial institution. Despite the exorbitant interest rates, substantial evidence suggested that a significant portion of these funds was misappropriated for personal enrichment by the President and his close associates, with only \$100,000 of the total loan actually reaching the Liberian government. By 1874, Liberia ceased its interest payments, prompting renegotiations that introduced British oversight of Liberian customs operations (Toe, 2020, p. 93). This economic predicament also precipitated political consequences. To mitigate the resultant economic immiseration, a uniform tax system was levied to generate national income. Non-compliance with this tax system was met with severe penalties, including compulsory labor, "which allowed a legal avenue for the impressment of young men into work on private plantations" (Whyte, 2017, p. 28).

Liberia's economic instability deepened post-WWI (1914-1918) after cutting ties with Germany, its main trading partner, to ally with the United States. From 1909 to 1925, British foreign policy fixated intensely on Liberia due to concerns about perceived loan mismanagement. During this time, Britain demanded loan repayments and imposed systemic reforms within the Liberian government. Albeit, the British-managed Liberian customs was ostensibly efficacious, it fomented discontent precisely because of its interference in the country's national politics. It should be indexed that by the turn of the 20th century, European powers conquered most African states through a politics of indirect rule (Lustig, 2020, p. 31). Furthermore, to counter British influence, the U.S. Congress authorized a presidential commission on March 4, 1901, to appraise Liberia's predicament. The commission advised and acted on multiple provisions, including resolving territorial disputes, acting as a guarantor for debt restructuring related to control over customs revenue, taking over fiscal management, aiding in the creation of a paramilitary force, establishing a research center, and re-evaluating the placement of a naval coaling station (Toe, 2020, pp. 91-94). Although these ascendancies ostensibly supported Liberia, they also

meaningfully circumscribed its sovereignty, shifting its status toward quasi-independence, especially when considered in the context of the geopolitical dynamics that made-up the early 20th century (Lustig, 2020, p. 31). Despite these restructurings, economic fragility endured into the 1920s, as Liberia's elite sought to salvage the economy through agricultural exports at the cost of further dispossessing, displacing, and enslaving indigenous Africans (Lustig, 2020, p. 31). It is against this global historical milieu that I explore the normative function of the plantation in the development of Liberia's political economy.

Arrival of the Firestone Rubber Company

In the 1920s, Liberia's "cheap land and labor, combined with a favorable climate and soil," caught the attention of Harvey Firestone Jr. of the Firestone Rubber Corporation as an ideal locale for erecting a rubber plantation comparable to those in the British Straits and the Dutch East Indies (Mitman, 2021, p. 31). In 1926, Firestone capitalized on an economically troubled Liberia, identifying a prime region along the equatorial belt for rubber cultivation. Subsequently, Liberia signed a 99-year concession agreement with Firestone Rubber Company, leasing one million acres at only 6 cents per acre annually. This agreement initiated an era of wage-based economy and a capitalist class system, where social standing was linked to one's proximity to the means of production and anti-blackness continued to have authority over the organization of civil society (Kieh, 2004, p. 64). Firestone's operations solidified the already prevailing racialized labour regimes, cleared forests, and grew cash crops for export under the pretext of 'developing' Liberia (Hook, 2023, p. 89). The planters superseded local flora with rubber trees laid out in 40-acre blocks where each tree was patented and documented (Mitman, 2021, p. 182). The strict adherence to uniform plans facilitated inspections and the controlled environment served as a 'laboratory' for pioneering new management and production techniques (Mitman, 2021). By the 1930s, the Firestone Corporation had established a transatlantic production and distribution chain for the raw materials extracted from Liberia (Lustig, 2020, p. 30). At the same time...

Low-cost shipping lines from Europe led to the demise of the local ship-building industry and Liberian merchants' fleets, as trading slipped from their hands to representatives of big European manufacturers. Competition from other primary producing countries and a

depression in the capitalist economy dealt a collective blow to the local capitalist class, which never fully recovered (Clegg, 2004, p. 81).

Rubber rapidly became Liberia's chief export, with the Firestone plantation somewhat improving the economy while exploiting thousands of indentured Africans. This exploitative labor regime (ironically) instigated international denunciation and the True Whig Party was singularly censured for 'pawning' Africans (Akingbade, 1997, p. 270).

Liberia's engagement with the Firestone Company thus provides an intriguing prelude to the incapacity of the emerging international legal order to abolish the enslavement of humans, and further demonstrates how this very limitation was able to facilitate the enslavement of political communities (Lustig, 2020, p. 31).

By the late 1940s, Firestone's plantations employed approximately 30,000 Liberians, mostly tappers who earned just 18 cents a day, under the supervision of about 125 white overseers. Racial segregation was standard practice, emulating the anti-black logic of the plantation system and the sharecropping system that supplanted it in the postbellum American South (Mitman, 2021). Within this rubber enclave, amenities and social hierarchies were segregated along racial lines, with 'management' positions filled by whites who enjoyed higher pay and better living conditions. In contrast, black tappers, considered 'unskilled,' faced a quota-driven, heavily surveilled, and uninhabitable work environment, earning only 1% of what their white American counterparts made (Mitman, 2021, p. 191). Furthermore, the 'Planters' Punch,' a newsletter intended for white overseas readers, featured minstrel-like caricature depictions of indigenous African workers, epitomizing the entrenched 'Jim Crow enclave' that lasted for approximately four decades (Mitman, 2021). In the 1950s, Firestone and the Americo-Liberian ruling class achieved significant economic prosperity. As Liberia's largest private employer and primary exporter, Firestone's profits in 1951 were three times greater than the national government's revenues, even after taxes. The corporation strengthened its ties with the ruling elite by assisting them in transitioning to rubber cultivation, providing free saplings and agricultural advice. Once production commenced, Firestone purchased the rubber. This clientelist relationship included former presidents Charles King, Edwin Barclay, William V.S. Tubman, and Tolbert, all of whom owned substantial rubber plantations (Miller, 2014).

Du Bois and Liberia

Du Bois is important to the discourse concerning ‘negro advancement’ unfolding in the early 20th century. Sent to Liberia in 1923 as a special envoy for U.S. President Calvin Coolidge, Du Bois saw Liberia as a symbol of Black independence, expressing in *The Crisis* (the most widely read publication by black folks at the time) that “Liberia may be poor...it may be underdeveloped...But for a hundred tremendous years...[Liberians] “have dared to be free.” (qtd. in Mitman, 2022). Du Bois figured that all Liberia needed American diplomatic and economic support (Chalk, 1967, p. 138), democracy, and industrialization to succeed as a nation-state (Mitman 2021, p. 31). Ultimately, Du Bois saw this as an opportunity to consolidate the industrial societies of the West to the ‘underdeveloped’ black countries of the world:

On Liberian soil, Du Bois believed Firestone had an opportunity to germinate a new relationship among the capital, land, and labor that comprised the plantation, one resting not on exploitation and extraction but on mutual dependence, growth, and prosperity” (Mitman qtd. in Janakiram, 2021).

However, Du Bois’ efforts to appeal to American investors and persuade the Firestone company to implement ethical labor practices were unsuccessful (bracketing the contradiction of demanding ethical operations in a fundamentally constituted through the negation of ‘ethics’ and the fact that any valuation of the ethical is ensnared within an anti-black metaphysical worlding apparatus). Nonetheless, the Firestone administration facilitated the exact unethical labor conditions that Du Bois had warned against in his 1933 assertion: “the one thing above all which he must avoid was taking capital into a small country and putting it under the control of officials who despised the natives and organized ruthless exploitation” (qtd. in Mitman, 2021, p. 59). This specific circumstance underwrote Du Bois' subsequent musings on how race figured into the international political order and his declaration that the color-line was, indeed, the *prima* problematic of the 20th century (Mitman, 2021, p. 59).

W. E. B. Du Bois situated Liberian labor regimes as domiciled in the economic circuits enclosing the circum-Atlantic Basin and bare to the imminence of invasion, contending that the excessive amount of international scrutiny heeded to the country did not account for the ways in which the

injunctions of capitalist interests and racist Western foreign policies shaped Liberian political economy. Du Bois called upon us to meditate on Liberia's political circumstances and decisions as constrained by the Euro-American regulation of the country's domestic market and resource industry. Americo-Liberians, vulnerable to these agential forces, were compelled to reprise those brutal proceedings of the Atlantic World—by instrumentalizing the covenants of racial capitalism and hegemonic nationalisms—toward demonstrating their effective occupation of Liberia and foreclosing any possibilities of foreign encroachment (Putnam, 2006, p. 238). Liberia's impasse can therefore be situated within this history of the relationship between modern Western culture *as* civilization and anti-black world-making. However, Cedric Robinson says that Du Bois' interactions revealed what he termed as 'petit-bourgeois nationalism':

Du Bois's encounters with Americo-Liberia in the 1920s and 1930s exposed a set of characterological weaknesses in his historical and social consciousness. These amounted to an envelope of petit- bourgeois nationalism—an ideology grounded in the presumption that the state occupied a unique, rationalizing position in human history. At the root of this ideological limit in Du Bois's imagination was the class arrogance exhibited repeatedly by intellectuals of Du Bois's class (1990, pp. 48–49).

By the mid-1960s, several significant shifts were occurring in the global economy and the political landscape of African nation's which were being decolonized. The plantation system, which had long been a staple of colonial economies, especially in the production of commodities like sugar, tea, and rubber, began to decline. The global shift from plantation systems to industrial capitalism was well-in-progress, and yet, Liberia remained under the subjection of foreign corporations which controlled its primary exports: rubber, iron ore, timber, and other minerals (Kieh, 2004, p. 65). This economic structure prompted some Liberians to venture into commerce, forming a significant merchant elite in Monrovia. Despite their efforts, they struggled against established European traders and ultimately could not sustain their enterprises, including their recently-acquired plantations (Antwi-Ansorge, 2014, p. 185, unpublished thesis).

General Conclusions

At its core, capitalism operates as a racialist system where “white people and predominantly white institutions derive value from nonwhiteness” (Leong, 2013, p. 2154). It engenders the slow death (Berlant, 2007) of “precarious life” (Butler, 2010) through the “phenomenon of mass physical attenuation under global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality” (Berlant, 2007, p. 754). Essentially, racial capitalism prioritizes profit over all forms of life. We, as critical scholars, must expand our understanding of the exploitation circuits that cartograph the circum-Atlantic world, predicated on and benefiting from the fungibility of black(ened) bodies. Through this historical lens, I have attended to the connections fostered by Atlantic slavery across the Americas, Europe, Africa, and the Indian Ocean, which have radically altered the economic, social, cultural, and ideological terrains of these regions (Paton, 2022, p. 728). And are ultimately instrumental in the post-Cold War upsurge of political violence in sub-Saharan Africa. An examination of these border-crossing economic relations is crucial for developing an understanding of how black bodies have been condemned to slow death under racial capitalist regimes of governance on both sides of the Atlantic. And specifically, how such transnational mechanisms of subjection are ultimately responsible for Liberia’s underdevelopment.

In the United States, the economic prosperity of the capitalist class is bound up with these global circuits of exploitation. As a global superpower, the U.S. leverages instability in Africa to bolster and consolidate wealth—reinforcing its global political hegemony. It also dictates the language, ideas, and institutional frameworks of which much of the world recurses to. Indeed, the United States is *the* conduit through which the world’s foremost military, political, economic, scientific, and cultural networks move through (Ikenberry, 2001, p. 192). Similarly, the racial wealth gap in the U.S. is part of a wider issue of economic disenfranchisement affecting Africa and its diaspora. These convoluted transnational contours resist simple redresses and reforms like the imposition of country-specific neoliberal Structural Adjustment Programs or the stigmatization of unemployed communities.

The financial exploitation of Africa is desolate, yet generally ascribed to the mismanagement of public resources and the endemic political corruption that constitutes politics in the Global South. In 2015, despite receiving \$162 billion through loans, aid, and remittances, Africa faced a net loss of over \$40 billion due to profits repatriated by multinationals, illicit financial flows to

tax havens, and the costs associated with global climate change initiatives (McVeigh, 2017). Similarly, while the racial wealth gap in the United States has narrowed from a 56:1 ratio in 1860 to 11:1 by 1900, thanks to post-emancipation economic efforts and rapid wealth accumulation by Black Americans, the disparity not only persists but has worsened since the post-Reconstruction era. Today, White Americans, who comprise 60% of the population, control 84% of the nation's wealth, whereas Black Americans, who make up 13% of the population, possess only 4% (McKay, 2022). The enduring racial wealth gap is frequently and paradoxically ascribed to the purported lethargy of blacks, a trope that is replete with the logics of racial slavery and historically used to justify the administration of corporal violence to subjugate and exhaust enslaved bodies (quite literally) to death. Indeed, “the continuous use of violence in the slave order was also made necessary by the low motivation of the slave to work—by the need to reinforce reward with the threat and actuality of punishment” (Patterson, 1982, p. 3). This is exemplified by 'Cousin Pookie,' a made-up figure President Obama used during his re-election to encourage voter turnout among African Americans, suggesting that electoral participation alone could address entrenched economic disparities (Ball, 2014).

This analysis of Liberia's plantation economy argues for the necessity of departing from traditional developmentalist theoretical orientations and proposes racial capitalism as an analytic. By examining the migratory role of plantation logic in reproducing structural violence within a Black African context, this study offers new insights that go beyond conventional analyses of how ethnicity and economics intersect in the current historical moment. The anti-black violence organizing the Firestone enclaves and the ethnic violence dividing civil society both exist along the same structural plane of white supremacist subjugation in the afterlife of slavery. This approach surpasses the limitations of solely relying on external relationships and underdevelopment vernaculars to elucidate the conditions of immiseration that African people live under globally.

Conclusion

The arguments presented, in this thesis, are not totalizing or exhaustive, they recognize that black life is not solely defined by melancholic affect inasmuch as black people navigate multiple, cyclical, and fragmented temporalities at the level of consciousness—this can also be apprehended as a form of psychic *petit marronage*. Although our resilience, or the ability to 'keep on keepin' on', to use Curtis Mayfield's aphorism, under duress is remarkable, it was not the primary concern of this work. Instead, the focus was firmly centered on the critical issue of ethno-political violence in sub-Saharan Africa, and particularly Liberia. This monograph decisively rethought the initial encounters and relational dynamics between indigenous Liberians and expatriated formerly-enslaved Africans and their descendants in anti-black terms. It significantly broadened our understanding of the interanimations between culture, labor, race, capitalist extraction, and ethnonationalism as manifestations of the political afterlife of slavery in Liberia. This analysis not only offered a unique perspective on existing literature but also established a manifesto that obligates us to study how anti-blackness permeates global affairs, political discourses, and the theoretical itineraries employed to deconstruct them.

This dissertation deliberated alongside and against the analytical orientations of scholarly fields— international relations, political theory, postcolonial studies, and security studies— towards the proliferation of ethno-political conflicts, insurgencies, and civil wars in post-independence African nations throughout the 20th century, with a focus on Liberia. I elaborated on the meagreness of the epistemic itineraries at our disposal for comprehending the racial genesis of the ethno-political conflicts devastating modern African societies. Traditional forms of thought proved inadequate as they have overlooked the constitutive role of Atlantic slavery in shaping the emergence of a global *mise-en-scène* defined by “scientific signifiers” (Da Silva, 1997, in Agathangelou and Killian, 2016). It is within this “globality” (Da Silva, 2007) that the modern concept of ethnicity is grounded. The thesis has therefore critiqued and expanded upon significant critical scholarship on the aftermath of imperialism and the colonality of power (Mignolo, 2007). It points to a substantial problem: the failure to recognize and grapple with how anti-blackness forms the epistemic substratum of political theory and thus (paradoxically) "the

slave occupies the position of the unthought" (Hartman and Wilderson, 2003, p. 185) in the literature.

Alongside my meditations on Liberia's specific historical predicament, I traced the genealogical evolution of racial blackness to examine how the emergence of modern ethnicity in the 20th century was couched in the racial. Indeed, race and ethnicity were not only contoured by, but also helped contour, scientific expeditions to decipher the essence of 'the human'. These constructs have been instrumental in regimenting a global ontological scaffold that has permanently affixed particular physical traits, social configurations, and geographies to immutable human capacities and differences, fortifying the tenacious barricades of racial-ethnic divisions (Da Silva, 2007, pp. xviii-xix). The central theoretical proposition of the work was that engaging with the experiences of the enslaved is indispensable for addressing the mechanisms of racial terror affecting Africa and its diaspora, and for accurately framing contemporary issues of ethno-political identity formations within the geohistorical context of sub-Saharan Africa. Ultimately, I have found the term 'ethnic conflict' to be an illusory misnomer, as both the 'slave' and the 'native' African exist in a mutually constitutive relation that renders blackness both a "theoretical possibility and phenomenological actuality" (Moten, 2017, p. 2). The scholarly disregard for such dynamics has distorted the representation of the present-day challenges confronting Africa and its diaspora—challenges such as health crises and low life expectancy, poverty, environmental disasters, and ongoing civil wars. Examples include Haiti's chronic impoverishment due to an 'independence debt' paid to former French colonists (Daut, 2022); and the disproportionately high incarceration rates of African Americans in the U.S. Both predicaments exemplify how the enduring afterlife of chattel slavery regenerates to decree its authority over the present (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi).

This dissertation has called for a reorientation in focus for those working on investigating the geneses of ethno-political violence and conflict in Africa. Even more precisely, my work has identified racial slavery as the foundational condition enabling the emergence of ethnically-demarcated regimes of violence in post-colonial Africa—"where a range of hues are named and experience uneven development as a consequence of that naming" (Douglass et al., 2018). With reference to Liberia, I have traced a genealogy of how these hues became modes of marking and naming bodies, while remaining critically attuned to the historical reality that, at a certain point

in *Europe's* past, ontological "blackness became the essence of that which orients" (Douglass et al., 2018) across multiple registers of abstraction. It was only subsequently, with the colonial encounter, that Africa and its diaspora were symbolically and singularly blackened (Warren, 2018, p. 222). What I have proffered, here, necessitates a serious engagement with how contemporary global forces coalesce with the afterlife of a "racial calculus and political arithmetic" (Hartman, 2006, p. 6) established several hundred years-ago. This legacy inexorably organizes the root causes and realities of violence in Africa and permeates our modern episteme. To frame such violence as merely a geographically particular ethnic issue of progressed cultural fragmentations (Reilly, 2001) is to misapprehend the situation, gravely and utterly.

By focusing on a predominantly black African context, I have therefore challenged the prevailing assumptions in most (humanist) political and cultural theory that the black experience in countries located north of the Atlantic is radically different from that in sub-Saharan African countries, with the exception of settler-colonial contexts like South Africa, for example. While writing this manuscript, I chose not to debate the factual accuracy of these claims or devote significant time to them, considering the tendency to overemphasize cultural explanations in many studies concerned with volatile political situations in Africa. Instead, I made a conceptual move that brought ontological blackness into sharp relief within the structural formation of ethnic politics in Liberia.

The case of Liberia, a zone inhabited by people of African descent from both sides of the Atlantic, luridly elucidates the existential angst and chaos that the very idea and invention of racial blackness engenders. This turmoil is perhaps more pronounced in 'conventional' settler-colonial contexts than in a predominantly black setting. But the anti-black metaphysical enclosure encircling both contexts is the same. This enclosure is defined by a pervasive anxiety over the ontological question of the negro—"as commodity, object, slave, putative backdrop, prisoner, refugee, and corpse" (Warren, 2018, p. 8)—and the tangible presence of the negro (Douglas et al., 2018). I proffered that anti-blackness as an ether (Carter and Cervenak, 2016), as an ontological atmosphere, has a "built in capacity to maintain itself" (Beckford, 2000, p. 46) such that the insidious force of white supremacy self-extends through both colonised and stolen people's interpellation of its ideologies. Liberia is just one example where this proposition holds true.

This situation also urges us to prioritize the often-ignored question of ontological being within debates on cultural difference in a 'post-racial' world. If ethnicity fundamentally relates to shared cultural histories, beliefs, and values, we must acknowledge how it became entangled with the protocols of white supremacy that continue to shape societal structures and interpersonal relations across the Atlantic world. Such protocols regard the epidermis as an indicator of an individual's physiology, cognitive abilities, sentience, and capacity for self-governance.

Furthermore, the implications of this research transcend the geographical boundaries of Liberia, offering an alternative framework for understanding the enduring global impact of slavery. Specifically, the project categorically rejects ascribing ethnic divisions solely to unambiguous geographic locales, an approach fraught with anthropological inaccuracies, erasures, and fabrications. For instance, the politicization of ethnicity under colonial rule in various African countries, such as South Africa and Rwanda, underscores the global legacy of "hierarchical power structures that apportion and delimit which members of the *Homo sapiens* species can claim full human status" (Weheliye, 2014, p. 19). More precisely, in Rwanda, the Belgian colonists' portrayal of the Tutsis as Hamitic or Nilotic institutionalized racial hierarchies, empowering the Tutsis and fostering resentment among the Hutus (Mamdani, 2014, p. 89). This historical analysis foregrounds the fundamental relation between ethnicity and the proliferation of plantation slavery alongside the emergence of colonial modernity.

More broadly, under the rubrics of global white supremacy, racial capitalism, and social ontologies of 'human' difference, ethnicity continues to be a major driver of civil wars in Africa. It has become the primary means for accessing neo-patrimonial states and for individuals to extricate themselves from these power structures to become body-subjects with rights and freedoms (Banton, 2019, p. 18). Indeed, in the context of Liberia, the research showed that a significant majority of Liberians "identify much more with their ethnic group than with the modern state of Liberia" (Mgbeoji, 2003, p. 330); and when traditional governance collapsed, ethnic affiliation emerged as the main form of political organization and a postern to state resources (Outram, 1997, p. 360). Crucially, the failure to address the anti-black onto-epistemologies that shape the grammars of coherent political subjectivity in modern neoliberal democracies pre-emptively undermines any possibility of envisioning nonhierarchical, nonviolent, and just political futures.

The thesis also joins in a broader academic dialogue that has mapped the ways in which international relations theory came into existence for the singular purpose of augmenting the imperial and colonial interest of the West (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2020, p. 4). It questions the appropriateness of using these same frameworks to critique the very purposes of their invention. To the extent that we read the interior and political lives, aspirations and desires of African and African-descended peoples through the lens of Eurocentric post-enlightenment political ethics that undergirds almost all political philosophy—embodied in concepts such as civilization, capitalism, and relations of ownership, hierarchized and individuated notions of 'the human' subject and self, nation and sovereignty, and teleological time—we abandon critical historical proceedings and their still enduring afterlives. That is, the vestiges of enslavement, relational ontologies, kinship, social belonging and home-making, refusal, and cumulative non-singular temporalities. In effect, modern power structures levy restrictions on our capacity to envision different futurities (Krug, 2018, p. 4; King et al., 2020) and to adequately engage "the relation of anti-blackness as an object of study" (Moten, 2017, p. viii), which is germane to the global existential condition of African and African-descended people.

I have traced the ontological evolution of both continental African and diasporic identity, discerning that, when regarded through the paradigms of our modern episteme, the black body is transnationally marked by fungibility and an inherent incapacity for self-knowledge. The experience of diasporic blacks, however, is distinctly marked by a profound sense of natal and cultural alienation. Moreover, within west-central African communities, the early practice of distinguishing Africans targeted for enslavement in the Americas from those allied with European enslavers served both as an identity marker and a survival strategy, contributing to the materialization of ethnic politics. Importantly, my work makes clear that this differentiation predated the era of indirect rule—a period when most critical analyses of ethnic politics start—during which European colonizers manipulated African political structures. This suggests that white supremacy began influencing West-Central African politics and social frameworks well before the Berlin Conference. Concurrently, the onset of racial slavery marked the inauguration of an anti-black emblematic order, placing all black bodies under a singular globalized axiological system of valuation that defined 'the black' as an inherently fungible object (Wilderson, 2009, p. 122). What is at stake is that “even the status of free blacks...is “shaped and compromised by . . . slavery” (Hartman, qtd. in Wilderson, 2009, p. 122). Rinaldo Walcott

(2021) offers us the concept of “global niggerdom” as a way to bridge the domestic and transnational anti-black logics that register all diasporic blacks as embodying the degradations inherent to slavery and “treating them as such regardless of their histories beyond the Americas” (p. 201). Furthermore, the metaphors of (human) value established during the era of imperialism and slavery not only effaced the identities of African people “under western eyes” (Mohanty, 1984), but expressed itself in the form of mass displacement, dispossession, criminalization, imprisonment, increased surveillance, expanded security measures, militarization, and the appropriation and exploitation of resources and peoples (Weheliye, 2014, p. 1). Furthermore, these practices also set in motion regulatory modes of governing human life that adhere to theologically animated hierarchies of race, gender, class, and nationality (Weheliye, 2014, p. 1), which also form the foundational terrains for the protocols of international relations theory.

Building on the ideas presented in the preceding paragraph, this dissertation has re-calibrated ethnonationalism as operating within the fold of a gratuitous anti-black world-making scheme where the manoeuvres of “corporate, state, individual, and institutional bodies” often transcend individual intentions (Dillon, 2012, p. 114). The paradigmatic fixation on preconscious provocations of individual political actors merely exaggerates the authority held by consciousness, deliberation and adjudication while concurrently affording tacit exoneration for “normative governmentality and justified moralizing against inconvenient human activity” (Berlant, 2007, p. 755). Our limited agency can be best understood through Scheper-Hughes and Lock’s (1987) concept of embodiment, which explains how “people come to inhabit their bodies so that they become in every sense of the term ‘habituated’” subjects (Nancy Scheper-Hughes qtd. in Alexander, 2006, p. 297). Indeed, at the heart of my critique is the observation that the on-going debates on the uneven allocation of political power in the cultivation of conflict often presuppose the existence of “a subject of consent” and a “subject of exploitation,” thereby abridging those interanimations between identity, subjectivity, and (militarized) political resistance. Consider the commonly accepted view that the Americo-Liberian quasi-settler-colonial administration acted as a stimulus for the evolution of ethnic antagonisms and eventually lead to a century of “irregular warfare” in Liberia (Kieh, 2004, p. 61). The more pressing question for me has been how the Doe administration’s favoritism toward the Krahn—a group historically marginalized under Americo-Liberian rule—complicates the calls for reparations and addressing past injustices within a system immersed in colonial and

ethnonationalist ideologies. Who is the exploiter, and who is the exploited in this context? The very organization of power, which is elusive, unfixed, and volatile, complicates the pursuit of rights and freedoms because the dichotomy of exploiter and exploited constitutes the systems very condition of possibility.

Grappling with the role of ideas, as emphasized by Hans J. Morgenthau, is indispensable for analyzing international relations. We must shift our conceptual focus to not only include institutions but also the individuated bodies that construct, occupy, and operate within them, as alongside the ghosts that possess them (R. Jackson, 1991). By examining the impact of anti-blackness on the formation of political identities and the ideological foundations of political communities, this thesis contends that anti-blackness influences our perceptions of what constitutes a desirable life, how to achieve it, and what our ethico-political, cultural, and moral obligations ought to be. Furthermore, it advocates for a reimagined and more comprehensive approach to global racial justice that recognizes the ubiquitous afterlife of slavery on both sides of the Atlantic. Moreover, reframing conflicts between racially/ethnically defined political communities—such as descendants of enslaved peoples and indigenous Liberians—as manifestations of a metaethical dilemma compels us to address the social significations imposed on the body in terms of an anti-black ontology, as "to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology" (Butler, 2010, p. 3). Certainly, the basis of all forms of oppression lies in the conceptual frameworks we use to "differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot" (Butler, 2010, p. 3). This differentiation transcends mere physical, epidermal, or phenotypical distinctions, probing into the very ontology that configures the intelligible political body-subject. Sylvia Wynter urges us to focus on the "genre of 'Man,'" the specific 'genre' that underpins all the '-isms'" (Thomas and Wynter, 2006, p. 24). By exploring the historical interconnections between different genres of 'the human' and politics, ethnonationalism, culture, patriarchy, social configurations, and the operations of racial capitalism, this thesis has expanded our understandings of these dynamics and their still-unfolding reverberations.

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