BLACK SEMIOSIS: YOUNG LIBERIAN TRANSNATIONALS MEDIATING BLACK SUBJECTIVITY AND BLACK HETEROGENEITY

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A DISSERTATION

in

Education and Africana Studies

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2015

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This work is dedicated to my exalted grandmas, Christine Smalls and Evelyn Mitchell, my dear aunts, Patricia Floyd and Barbara Paul, and to the beneficent (Mama) Faybiene Miranda.

Thank you for creating so many ways to connote and for continuing to watch over us.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I give thanks to and for Spirit, and for so many people, living and transcended, who have shared their love, time, encouragement, advice, critiques, and good wishes with me. I'm forever indebted to my gifted and long-suffering committee, John L. Jackson Jr., Betsy R. Rymes, Cheikh Anta Babou, H. Samy Alim, and Arthur K. Spears, for easing my growing pains and for being models of the kind of academic awesomeness I hope to replicate. I feel especially fortunate that my chairs, John and Betsy, have showed me how to produce work that comes from the heart as much as it does the mind. Thank you both for fully envisioning possibilities in me that I couldn't fathom, let alone catch sight of. And thank you, John, for being integral to my development as a scholar and human.

I'm most indebted to the young people who opened up their lives to me and allowed me to follow them around, bug them on Facebook, and text them for a couple of years ("Johnetta," "Victoria," and "Brian"). I'm honored and humbled that you trusted me enough to talk about you to strangers, to share your words and images, and to say what I think about your experiences. I'm thankful for all of the young people in the Philadelphia area and in Monrovia who were willing to sit with me moments after we met to tell me about their pasts and about their hopes for our collective future. Y'all represent Liberia well.

I'm especially grateful to people who made my stay in Monrovia professionally productive and spiritually restorative: Freida Ibiduni M'Cormack, John Monibah, and Cletus Noah come to mind immediately.

From my first days as a doctoral student at Penn, I felt valued and cared for and that was because of the way I was welcomed to the Graduate School of Education (GSE) by Mary Schleslinger, Lorraine Hightower, Suzanne Oh, Lois MacNamara, and Christine Lee; how I was technically supported and saved on many occasions by Zachary Nachsin and Rakeem Jeter; how I was patiently steered by Kristina Lewis, Penny Creedon, and Betty Deane; and the ways I was trained by extraordinary faculty like Nancy Hornberger, Betsy Rymes, Stanton Wortham, Kathy Howard, Vivian Gadsden, and the beautiful, late Teresa Pica at GSE.

At the start of my second year, I was lucky enough to find another academic home and a second family in the Africana Studies Department of the School of Arts and Sciences. Here I found astounding faculty like John Jackson, Barbara Savage, Deborah Thomas, Eve Troutt Powell, Tukufu Zuberi, Camille Charles, Herman Beavers, and compassionate and omniscient staff like Carol Davis, Michelle Houston, and Teya Campbell who would help carry me through the following five years and who would hold me accountable for doing work that was my truth and that was intended to honor the sacrifices of those who've made space for me in the academy and in the world.

Providence has also blessed me with mentors and motivators outside of my departments who graciously offered their time and feedback: people like Asif Agha, Mary Bucholtz (thank you, Mary, for everything you've done for me!), Salikoko

Mufwene, Norma Mendoza-Denton, Jemima Pierre, and Jonathan Rosa, to name a few.

When I needed it most, the faculty and staff in the Department of Black Studies at UC Santa Barbara provided the precious gift of writing time, a writing space, as well as consistent affirmation and inspiration. The department's radical spirit offered the ideal conditions for closing this circle and beginning a new season. I am especially grateful to Jeffrey Stewart, George Lipsitz, Gaye Thompson, Ingrid Banks, and Shana Redmond (who was visiting from USC Dornsife) who offered sage advice and comfort. I also thank my beautiful and brilliant Santa Barbara Sisters in Exile: Tracy Locke, Shayla Monroe, Dena Montague, Nathalie Pierre, Ashley Thompson, and Jennifer Thompson.

I'm enormously grateful to all of the precious friends I've made over the past seven years. My confidants Diana Burnett, Khwezi Mkhize, and Savannah Shange have to be mentioned first because, in their distinctly potent ways, they have each impelled my spiritual and intellectual growth over the past few years. I also thank the homies: Osei Alleyne, Venise Battle, Catrice Barrett, Layla Ben-Ali, Cameron Brickhouse, Sofia Chapparo, Gabriel Dattatreyan, Celina de Sa, Mariam Durrani, Cécile Evers, Ashley Freeman, Holly Link, Josslyn Luckett, Keon McGuire, Chike McLoyd, Katrina Morrison, Eziaku Nwokocha, Arjun Shankar, Brittany Webb, Audrey Winpenny, and many others. Thank you all for the life-saving laughter and unwavering grounding you provided. Looking forward to many years of friendship.

And last (but really first), I'm grateful to my family and friends who've been ride or die long before I started this leg of the journey and who've constantly encouraged me, all while patiently enduring my regular venting and worsened ability to maintain long-distance communication. My deepest thanks to Konie Smalls (Mommy) (my foundation and counselor), Silas Smalls (Daddy) (my motivator and financial savior), Davina Johnson (Sis) (my bestie by blood and choice), William Mitchell (Grandpa); all my beloved aunts, uncles, and cousins; and my family by choice: Folayan Crawford, Nayra Gad, and Naquan Ishman. You sustain me and I love you more than words can say.

ABSTRACT

BLACK SEMIOSIS: YOUNG LIBERIAN TRANSNATIONALS MEDIATING BLACK SUBJECTIVITY AND BLACK HETEROGENEITY

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John L. Jackson Jr.

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From the colonization of the "Dark Continent," to the global industry that turned black bodies into chattel, to the total absence of modern Africa from most American public school curricula, to superfluous representations of African primitivity in mainstream media, to the unflinching state-sanctioned murders of unarmed black people in the Americas, antiblackness and anti-black racism have been part and parcel to modernity, swathing centuries and continents, and seeping into the tiny spaces and moments that constitute social reality for most black-identified human beings. The daily living and theorizing of a small group of twenty-something young people from Liberia provide the marrow of this traditional and virtual ethnographic inquiry into everyday formulations of race via processes of "black semiosis." As the analytical keynote of the text, black semiosis points us to the processes through which meaning is made about blackness (i.e., how signs are inscribed with racialized meanings and how these signs are deployed on various scales), and it asks that we consider how meaning-making processes and strategies are conditioned by, or made through, blackness (i.e., how the experience of being raced as black codifies ways of making meaning). Specifically, the text uses cultural, linguistic, and semiotic anthropological approaches to examine young transnational Liberians' productions of verbal and visual "mashups" in face-to-face interactions and online; their theoretical and embodied constructions of gendered and classed models of "sincere" black personhood via hip hop and other globalized phenomena; and their comprehensive semiotic strategies for navigating racialized school structures and discourses in the United States. From their actions, abstractions, and aspirations, I assemble a rendering of black diasporic/transnational subject-formation that yields a keener understanding of the ways black pasts, presents, and futures are currently being made and unmade by a new generation.

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CHAPTER 1 – *MAKING SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING*

This is for my black soldiers
mack holders
strapped army greens
Snapped back, blast automatics
spray-your-body fiends
Rap addicts
mathematics
study how they map the projects
Lock hips in Targets
liquor stores, supermarkets
Peruse the artist covered with material riches
Just on the surface of the depth of the soul is the sickness
Biggest media murder
is most murdered
most hurted
toes furnaced
Smartest kids in special ed learning
ESL, the US fails the children
Fuck 'em
We excel then we copy, become the same corruptin
Bullets stuck in back wounds deep with trees
Raped, foot chopped, lynched, follow North Star, free

- Jean Grae "Black is the Color"

1.1 Introduction

I have to tell the truth; I felt like a proud auntie watching her down there, nailing every move, poppin' and lockin' like she grew up in the South Bronx in the 80s. As one of only three females in a high school dance group of about 10 – and inarguably, one of the best dancers in the whole crew – she was living out yet another one of my unfulfilled fantasies and I watched riveted. Before the lights had dimmed in the arena-style theater, I awkwardly held my purse and notebook in my lap, looking around among a sea of brown and tan and beige faces for familiar ones. Packed with parents, teachers, students, siblings, friends, and other folk from the rapidly

urbanizing suburban township that encamped the school, it felt to me like the theater was pulsating to a kind of chaotic rhythm, attempting to synchronize all the distinct somatic tempos crowded into the theater. Taking in the whole scene visually and vibrationally, the space appeared as some kind of disorderly, but congenial, meeting of the United Nations. All manner of humans seemed to be represented in the room and I was loath to admit that the optic did prompt the annoyingly apolitical "salad bowl" metaphor popular in multiculturalism discourses. While it was certainly dazzling, I was actually accustomed to this kind of "superdiversity" – from my own childhood as an Army brat – and from my four years doing observations at the high school. But, I had yet to see this kind of intimate *intergenerational* mixing in the Philadelphia township. It may have been my imagination, but many of the parental-types I spied seemed rather uncomfortable, or at the least, unfamiliar with the colorful scene. With the din of kids in after-school mode as the score, my mind's eye was making the film I didn't have the courage to make in real life, and I zoomed in on a middle-aged white couple whose bodies were practically motionless while their eyes moved around the room as if the show had already begun. I overheard one 40-something woman sitting behind me (who I surmised to be African American or Caribbean American) murmur in mild astonishment to no one in particular, "*Look at all these people*."

A few aspects about my visit that spring afternoon in 2012 were fairly unfamiliar for me too – namely, the transformation of the space itself. It certainly still felt like a school, with its distinct aroma and artificially-lit hallways, its key figures (all

ostensibly white) in business casual attire or similar kinds of enforcement uniform, "posted up" at various strategic positions throughout the building. But it also felt like someplace else for the first time since I had begun visiting a couple of years before. Some of those benign-looking authorities, in their button-ups and khakis or modest sweaters and slacks, weren't actually posted up but were milling around, smiling and teasing with the same students they wearily looked upon or barked at most days. These teachers were even chatting with their students' parents and cousins and significant others who went to another school, all while prudently surveilling the room and periodically tuning in to the performances on the cement-floored stage below.

Looking up at the yellowish beam that created a warm circle of light on the stage, I was reminded of the ways school theaters always kind of function as vestibules between schools, communities, and families – as spaces where students become artists (i.e., full-fledged humans), or potential artists at least, and where everyone orients to them in that way. Here, they weren't AP students or English Language Learners or "troublemakers." There were no "loud black girls" (Fordham 1993) or "quiet Asian students" (Liu 2001) or "serious trans kids" and if they were still being imagined in these ways, their loudness or quietness didn't seem to matter much. The teachers were still teachers, but they were much kinder, happier, and better. One good-naturedly dropped the f-bomb while laughing with a recent graduate. Perhaps this was why I had always found a refuge on the stage as a student and loved my cussing drama teachers best. So, on this Saturday afternoon, the entire

school had been converted into a similar kind of interstitial space, with many young people also finding refuge in a building recreated through their artistic energy, energy that had turned institutional walls, floors, and furniture, into galleries moderating all varieties of paintings, charcoals, sketches, collages, sculptures, digital art, and performance art. With administration and faculty cooperation, the students had spatially transformed their school into a space of community where their whole selves were welcome.

In front of me were sitting three young women of various shades of brown (but all with the same long, sleek, black hairstyle) and I recognized one from the hallway as an outstandingly vociferous type. I was seated in the center section, maybe five rows from the stage, but the row in front of the young women was actually the first for spectators and the two in front of it were unofficially reserved for the performers. From here I had somewhat of a birds-eye view of Victoria before and after she took the stage. I watched her whisper with classmates seated next to her and clap and cheer for people she knew who were dancing or reciting spoken word poetry on the stage, sometimes calling out their names or an encouraging "Get it!" in her strong Liberian accent. And, I saw her give one young woman the side-eye for reasons I couldn't decipher.

I had to suppress urges to whoop and holler when she took the stage because I didn't want to ruin the footage I was clumsily capturing on my little Flip® camera. And I really had to hold my tongue when I heard one of the young commentators in

front of me snarkily ask her friend "Who is *she*?" when Victoria performed a routine with five male teammates. This was research after all, I reminded myself. I summoned every bit of self-restraint to keep from leaning over and gently tapping young woman's shoulder to tell her that the dopeness she was witnessing was Victoria, a resoundingly flexible and fragile spirit who was in constant motion – and, a self-proclaimed "B-girl"… from Liberia.

If I had let my hypothetical "reading" of the young woman continue, I would have gone on to say that Victoria's layers and complexities were probably not very unlike her own. I'd whisper that although she loved dancing to hip hop, and did so with an undeniable fierceness, she would tell you in a minute that she didn't actually love the music – or more precisely, the ideologies she believed it represented and circulated. Her comments and behaviors denoting this always left me with one or both brows raised because so many of her behaviors fit well with my personal understandings of hip hop cultural practices and beliefs. But it was easy to see that at the end of the day, her heart was taken by the most syrupy of R&B and pop with powerhouse vocals lamenting or celebrating love.

I'd tell them that, as a young girl, she'd awakened one morning to her mother's weeping as they lie next to her baby brother's lifeless body, in the bed they all shared. I'd tell the industrious teen critics that she had grown up in a country ravaged by war, well-loved by a resilient mother and a troubled father. I'd say that same mother had made the heartbreaking decision to send her only daughter to the

United States to live with an ex-mother-in-law that Victoria barely knew, in order to save her life. I'd tell them that despite these trials, she had developed a wit so sharp and a laugh so boundless, she captivated anyone who took the time to speak with her.

More than being a dancer, I learned over the course of two years that Victoria envisioned herself a singer first and foremost and that she bravely posted self-made videos of herself on Facebook®, singing her heart out. Later that school year, I'd watch the petite 12th grader do the same thing – sing her heart out – (live) on the same stage in front of her classmates at the end-of-the-year senior talent show. (Yet another unlived fantasy of mine). And before that, Victoria would astonish me yet again on the very same stage – this time, transformed into a runway - when she sashayed before a critical audience of peers and parents in her 90s-themed attire. A little over a year later, I'd watch her become a generous and cautious mother to a bouncing baby boy.

Victoria modeling with a friend at home (from her Facebook® page), 2010 (*Photograph by unknown*)

By the time I stood whooping in the audience at the capstone senior talent show, I would be relatively liberated from my worries about subjective research and about my unabashed love and protective proclivities for this young woman and the other young people I would come to know through this journey. I wouldn't try to ignore my knotted stomach when she approached the mic or the catches in my own throat when her voice cracked on tricky high notes. At the end of that culminating performance, just like at a fashion show featuring an original design by Johnetta, I'd let the literal and metaphorical tears roll down my cheeks like any proud auntie would. By then, Victoria's candor and courageous vulnerability, like Johnetta's poised restraint and benevolent wisdom, Brian's gentleness and veiled turmoil, Ernie's stoic charm, and others' stunning idiosyncrasies, would have taught me that

this attempt to tell stories about and through their lives is patently fraught, and adorned, with all sorts of sentiment.

At that point in the journey, when I could easily put down my camera to holler when the spirit moved me, I was quite clear about the fact that along with an undeniable affective impetus that existed outside of the clutches of epistemology, this work was also prompted by a politics of love and rage that was nourished by a winding list of activists, scholars, artists, and healers who have mentored me literally or figuratively. By trying to read these young folks' experiences in Liberia and America through a transnational and transhistorical lens that I would clumsily, albeit strategically, assemble and position, I was consciously enlisting their stories in a rather grand narrative to which I desperately I wanted to contribute – a narrative about black transnationalism and black subjectivity in the midst of anti-blackness, or, as some would have it: the making of something out of nothing (Jackson 2005; Moten 2013). I was interpreting and re-presenting their words and/as actions through a collective kind of desperation, trauma, and audacity that was bred of a "denied ontology" (Sexton 2011; Wilderson 2010) lived out by their home nation's African American founders/colonizers, their indigenous ancestors, their African American peers, and themselves. After a few more months of sifting through and absorbing a huge corpus of images, recorded words, transcriptions, and typed-up notes, I would begin to interpret (or, "theorize," given my positionality) their lives through a notion of bi-fold and constituitive "black semiosis" – which is consummated by those modalities through which blackness is made *and* by those

modalities made through blackness. On a more meta level, I would come to realize that more than performing some kind of redemptive or restorative work, through my own epistemological project, I was actually kneading the pulp of this black semiosis by producing knowledge through my own experience of blackness.

This emphasis (or recalibration of, perhaps) on semiosis as a mode of production re-imagines these young students, rappers, singers, sculptors, and commentators as creators – as artists and architects, who, conditioned by anti-black structural processes, defiantly, fugitively, and sincerely make meaning of their bodies, minds, and social worlds (Harney and Moten 2013; Jackson 2005). All told, as makers of meanings about blackness and as makers of meanings through the experience of "being" black, I see them as not only the consummate producers of social theory, but also of a genuine social life even as they chase a blackness that "operates as the modality of life's constant escape and takes the form, the held and errant pattern, of flight" (Harney and Moten 2013; Moten 2013).

1.2 Theorizing Black Language

By intimately engaging with some of the words and actions of a small group of young Liberian transnationals and the people that fill their lives, I will try to tell a story about race and young African migrants (physical and virtual) that acknowledges past and present sociopolitical and cultural phenomena, and that contributes to understandings of "becoming" (Hall 1994; Ibrahim 2014) – further

exposing it as a politically and sentimentally fraught process that shirks paradigmatic frames and that usually inspires confounding simultaneity. Mimetic[1] "mashups" of various performative texts are my primary analytic and they provide a means for semiotically tracing how signifiers of different kinds of blacknesses, whitenesses, and other racialized constructs can be remixed and repurposed via old and new technologies of self-making. Along with addressing and exposing some of the surreptitious workings of anti-blackness and racism, I am also joining others who have been inclined to better understand how it is that individuals from all walks of life somehow bear the unbearable Franz Fanon's "facticity of blackness" (1967) or what Fred Moten had referred to as exhaustion as a mode of life (2013), and manage to piece together something that resembles a valid and valued selfhood (e.g., Cohen 2010; Gordon 2000; Jackson 2005; Moten 2013; Pierre 2014; Ralph 2006; Robinson [1983] 2000; Spillers 1987; Thomas 2011). In our various scholarly investigations and meditations, we surmise that they do so with their votes and purchases, protests and blogs, *hmmphs* and chit-chat, hard beats and soft melodies, booty shots and strategic selfies, silences and ringshouts, blonde sew-ins[2] and dreadlocks, seditious hip hop lyrics and canonical speeches, and countless other forms of communication.

---

[1] I am drawing from Homi Bhabha's account of the underpinnings and consequences of mimesis among (post)colonial subjects, in which he suggests that in compulsory cultural replications by a designated Other, some slippage is inevitable, or possibly strategic (on both the part of the subject and the overseer), so that what gets lost in translation/re-articulation ultimately helps to maintain difference. In this sense, some practices that appear to be unadulterated or failed mimicry can be reconceptualized as tactics of differentiation (1984).

[2] Sew-ins are a type hair weave (i.e., synthetic or human hair pieces that are added to a person's hair) featuring a "weft" (or track) that is literally sewed into a person's cornrowed (braided) hair.

By creating racialized "communicative repertoires" (Rymes 2010; 2014) rather than anatomizing "languages," they diligently make meaning *of* blackness, often rendering it something palpable and precious, and they make meaning *through* blackness, often by conscripting a distinctly black esotericism designed for protection and insurgence, and sometimes by applying a distinctly black aesthetic for more self-affirming or even hedonist inclinations (Makoni et. al 2003).

As a spongy speaker whose languaging absorbs features and practices from many varieties, I resist treating "languages" as discrete codes with determinable beginnings and endings, a practice that naturalizes them and obscures the fact that they are as socially constructed as race, gender, or class as scholars like Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook (2006) and Betsy Rymes (2014) have meticulously explored. This resistance means that I generally use the terms "language variety," "register," "languaging practices," or "communicative repertoires" to discuss dynamic assemblages of linguistic and other communicative forms and practices. When I do use terms like "French" or "Standard American English," I am referring to the constructed phenomena that most of us conventionally think of as "language" (much like my use of race terminology and my use of the words "America" and "American" to refer to the United States).

One of the many reasons I am invoking "black semiosis" is to re-conceptualize ways of communicating that were carefully crafted and courageously mobilized along the coasts of western Africa, in the villages of Oceania, on plantations in the American

South, and on the mountainsides of Caribbean isles not as apolitical derivatives of various kinds of "language contact" as some creolists suggest in their ahistorical, or thinly historicized, accounts of creole genesis (e.g., Bickerton 1975; 2008; McWhorter 2005; 2011). I hope to underscore how the evolutionary trajectories of these "ways of speaking" (with their various lexifiers and superstrate source languages) were not solely shaped by a need or desire to communicate in a European target language and an inability to acquire their more "complex" grammars as some creolists have asserted but were shaped by an ecology of white supremacist ideologies and systems, and very specifically by anti-black racism. Additionally, some creolists suggest that such trajectories were animated by agentive, strategic actors on all fronts (even if positioned quite differently). For example, Nicholas Faraclas's edited volume *Agency in the Emergence of Creole Languages* (2012) interrogates assumptions of forced language acquisition and unidirectional language development and Philip Baker's "medium for interethnic communication" re-conceptualized target languages in the development of varieties designated as creoles (1990; 1994). A close examination of the socio-political and sociocultural contexts of "non-indigenous" black language evolution (i.e., the development of pidgins, creoles, and dialects in the "old" and "new worlds", including Hip Hop Nation Language [Alim 2009]) reveals that although there is nothing structurally exceptional about these varieties to warrant a distinct typology (Alleyne 1971; 1980; Mufwene 2015b), the despotic nature of many of the germane events we refer to as "language contact" may have engendered particular discursive,

or pragmatic, practices (Makoni et. al. 2003; Morgan 1998; Spears 1999). Whether animated by the trade of human flesh or of poached natural resources, or by the sequestering of black bodies in under-resourced (i.e., ghettotization), the types of contact that have yielded the pidgins and jargons and slangs developed by black peoples throughout Africa, the Americas, Oceania, and parts of Asia, were and are invariably characterized by oppression, and often, terror (Winford 2003). Some might contend that we parse the indigenous language varieties of Africa and Oceania from "black languages" because such varieties emerged prior to the manifestation – or construction – of blackness as a relevant condition of being. This becomes especially applicable when we begin to survey the notion of "black semiosis."

That is to say, the hybridized language varieties of concern here are not only "black" because black-identified people speak them or created them, they are also effectively "black" in the sense that they were made through the ideological and material invention of blackness and through the psychic experience of living in black-identified body. From this posture, we can begin to speak of a bi-fold "black semiotics" that examines: (1) semiosis of blackness or making meaning *of* blackness; and (2) racialized semiosis, or a distinctly black way of making meaning, of which one iteration has already been identified as "signifying" (Caponi 1999; Gates 1988; Mitchell-Kernan 1972; Morgan 1998; Smitherman 2000; Rickford 2002).[3] This

[3] I should add here that they also do not constitute a veritable typological class of "language" and have only been constructed as such because of an ideological predisposition of black and brown alterity, which renders any form or practice created by black- or brown-identified peoples as categorically "other" (see DeGraff's explanation of "creole exceptionalism" [2003] and Spears' review of the theory in regards to African American English [2009])).

geminated conception of black semiosis emerges from Michael Silverstein's dialectic indexicality which demonstrates how signs not only index, or point to, phenomena in the world (macro, micro, or in between) but also *entail* such phenomena, and in doing so, help constitute social context, or social reality, in a sense (2003). In other similarly complex word, racialized subject-formation, as it plays out in infinitesimal interactional events, involves both the usage and reification (or re-racialization) of already-racialized indexical signs and the construction of new indices of race, or, the reconstruction of meanings of race. H. Samy Alim and company's examination of racialized and gendered meanings invoked and reconfigured during rap battles (Alim et. al 2013) and Norma Mendoza-Denton's ethnography of young Latina women's negotiations of nationality, gender, and race in the fashioning of Norteña and Sureña identities (2008) provide two cogent examples of dialectic (and dialogic) indexicality that "realizes situated meaning in real-time and reorganizes it over historical time" (paraphrased from Adrienne Lo and Angela Reyes's introduction to their exemplary edited volume *Beyond Yellow English: Toward a Linguistic Anthropology of Asian Pacific America* [2008]).

Often, big, or "macro," articulations of blackness (e.g., discourses and economies), as well as those anchored to a specific time and place (e.g., conversations and texts), tend to capture most of our analytical and theoretical attention, as they seem to possess the most might as far as shaping the structures of meaning that make up lived experience. But while we are attending to these tangible conditions of meaning-making, it is also vital to address the constantly moving minutiae (or,

micro-sociological processes) that, over time and space, actually constitute and articulate meaning, such as the actual construction of "survival codes" (i.e., black language). Stuart Hall was among the first to hip us to the idea that representation – visual and verbal – is constitutive of meaning, and that the process of experiencing/decoding a sign is a fraught and contingent one that is always remaking and reconfiguring social realities ([1973] 1980). Asif Agha more recently expanded this concept by distancing us from notions of "reception" or "decoding" (that suggest a singular moment of construal) through his re-conceptualization of "uptake" that situates fragmented encounters with a "mediatized object" within a multiscalar chain of semiotic events (e.g., experiencing life as an African transnational, encountering an "Africans be like" meme on Facebook, posting the meme with a comment, talking about the meme with friends at school) (2011). By directing our attention to the contingent, dialogic, and indeterminable qualities of uptake processes (of a range of semiotic objects) in the lives of young black transnationals, and to the conceptual frames that prop them up, we have the opportunity to glimpse how selves, others, and relationships are discursively constructed as meanings are ascribed extemporaneously, but never arbitrarily.

1.3 Antiblackness and Fugitive Black Subjectivity

This text "zooms in" on the tiny moments that compose black subjectivity, black sociality (e.g., black diaspora, black transnationalism), and various formations of blackness as structure and process (Fanon 1967; Moten 2013; Wilderson 2010) among a small group of Liberian transnationals. I attempt to contextualize their disses, spiels, eye rolls, staged performances, Facebook ® posts, and photographed hairstyles and sartorial choices as comprehensively as possible by regularly expanding the "focal length" of my analytic field of vision to include the myriad historical and contemporary social structural processes that help condition how one attempts to make meaning of one's self and others, namely antiblackness. By pulling back and looking at the semiotic and sentimental contours of the various political economies and "structures of feeling" (Williams 1977; Hall 1980) around blackness that have shaped Liberian-US relations, I hope to foster a closer acquaintance with the ways transnational blacknesses function as both structures and processes that are always in flux, yet are always and undeniably present.

Raymond Williams original account of "structure of feeling" states that it is "as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible part of our activities" (1977: 64) and when applied to antiblackness, helps us parse it from anti-black racism and the latter's more material manifestations. In his endorsement of Frank B. Wilderson's *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010), Jared Sexton illuminates this distinction, stating: "Anti-Blackness, which is carefully distinguished here from White supremacy, is not only an ideology and an institutional practice; it is also a structure

of feeling with pervasive effects. This last, crucial point is glossed over by too many authors in their haste to provide rational analyses of and challenges to racism." Heeding Wilderson's and Sexton's counsel to consider the psychic and libidinal expressions of anti-black racism, I attempt to interpret signs as constituitive and constituted by embodied subjectivity and not only conceptualize antiblackness as structure of feeling, but blackness as well. From the perspective of antiblackness as a structure of feeling, blackness becomes an ontological archive – or, an archive of pre-ontology, that marks a timespace before and outside of modern ontologies (Moten 2013; Wilderson 2010). In this way, it often operates as the very vault of pastness in the making of modern subjects no matter their corporal schemas.

With the help of scholars like Nell Painter, Cedric Robinson, Frank Wilderson, and many others, it has become plain that in the absence of blackness, there is no whiteness (i.e., no epitomal modern subject) and effectively, no modernity, no present, and no future. From there, "authentic" blackness becomes a proxy for pastness and vice versa, and futurity becomes a surrogate for whiteness. Beyond scholarly discourse, this is well evidenced in social evolutionary discourses and their many vines (development discourse and many human rights discourses, for example), especially in contemporary liberal and progressive discourses in the United States that mark progress among black and brown people according to their rising proximity to structures and practices of whiteness. From Dubois's "racial uplift" theory (1903), to the "civilizing" aspirations of many 20th century black colonizationists, to the "Moving Forward" campaign for President Barack Obama's

second election, many prominent black bellwethers have advocated a notion of progress that was/is saturated with normalizations and valorizations of whiteness via a politics of respectability (Higginbotham 1993) and a notion of socioeconomic "upward mobility." From the purview of the raced, it may be argued that under antiblackness (as a structure of feeling), blackness itself is rendered a *process* through which bodies suffer and survive in opposition to, and/or in pursuit of, whiteness.

In some sense, we are all moving toward or away from blackness in the daily making of selves, regardless of our racial identities and our levels of racial consciousness. That is to say, as a process, blackness, to all intents and purposes, becomes the means through which and from which all social meaning is made (Sexton 2008). As this text and many others remind us, when occupying a black-identified body, making meaning *of* blackness and making meaning *through* blackness are both wearisome work and liberating labor that have long been carried out through quiet prayers and resounding ring shouts, tight cornrows and wanton curls, peaceful marches and bloody coups, winding hips and verbal flows, and these days, through selfies and social media statuses as well.

I explore the communicative practices and social theorizing of indigenous Liberian-born young people in the Philadelphia and Monrovia areas as they go about constructing contemporary subjectivities by working with and around racialized subject categories that have historically conditioned settler colonial relationships in

"the New World" (i.e., the social categories, or "figures of personhood" [Agha 2007]): "savage," "settler," and "slave" (Wilderson 2010). These useful categories have not been thoroughly considered in relation to Liberia's peculiar colonial history or its postcolonial present nor have these, or other, racialized models of personhood been applied when considering relationships between displaced Liberian transnationals and black people from other parts of the world. In these various contexts, specific modes of production and memory, circulations of cultural forms and practices, political economies of race, and other phenomena have helped shape an intricate yet dynamic racial-ethnic structure in which constructions of black indigeneity ("savage") and the "slave-settler" have never permitted any variants of savage, settler, or slave to function as discrete social categories.

For many young, indigenous, Liberian transnationals, the meeting of these already blurred racialized structures with emergent and/or changing technologies of intersubjectivity – which allow for different kinds of contact and self-making (e.g., new media, transportation innovations, immigration policies) – has meant that the social terrains of their new schools and neighborhoods in the United States present themselves as rather rocky spaces in which racial and ethnic categories, and the meanings associated with them, become sites of confusion, collaboration, and contestation. To note, those who have remained in Liberia, but who engage with Black America and "the world" writ large in the digital, are not sheltered from the tumult of black heterogeneity as they fashion selves. This study suggests that when considered alongside young people's daily interactions with friends, family,

neighbors, and various institutions like mass and social media and school – along with the converging sociopolitical and economic histories of relevant nation-states – these kinds of contests (and my participants' discourses about blackness, difference, and belonging) may speak to something we haven't quite grasped about the intricate ontological and social labor that goes into the everyday making and living of race and racialized networks in this moment. Very specifically, they speak to the vexatious spirit and tenacity of assembling fugitive black subjectivities that manage to evade (or, at times, taunt) anti-blackness and other ontological enclosures.

1.4 Black Semiosis and Historico-Racial Semiotics

The many language varieties composing Liberia's sonic landscape include more than 15 indigenous varieties, grouped into three language families, and also several varieties of English and English-related "creoles" (Singler 1977; 1981; 1997), which Salikoko Mufwene explained are mega-hybridized language varieties designated by the "particular sociohistorical ecology of {their} development, rather than because of {their} structural peculiarities" (2006: 316). Linguists have come up with many different names for the Liberian varieties that some say exist on a "post-creole continuum" (DeCamp 1971) per Derek Bickerton's acrolect, mesolect, basilect stratification (1975). These names describe ways of speaking that have different relationships with the local standardized variety of the European lexifier (i.e., the primary source language for the variety's lexicon). This imagining of creoles and

hybrid language varieties assumes a pure form and degrees of "decreolization" as it moves closer to the standard. The primary issue with this conception is that it does not take into account the sizeable "communicative repertoires" most speakers acquire and use throughout their lives, particularly if they are socially positioned on the margins of a given society. The necessity to linguistically adapt and accommodate the dominant sector, even if in a "truncated" manner, as Jan Blommaert describes partial language competence (2010), is amplified when one's life, or access to fundamental "human rights," depends upon linguistic agility.

Regarding enslaved persons in the United States, Marcyliena Morgan introduces the concept of "counterlanguage," which she describes as "a conscious attempt on the part of U.S. slaves and their descendants to represent an alternative reality through a communication system based on ambiguity, irony, and satire" (1993: 423 as cited in Spears 2008: 531).

Morgan's, and others', accounts deeply consider the contexts of oppression and danger in which "non-indigenous" black languages were developed, demonstrating how indirectness not only allowed for creative and covert expression of thought and affect, but also how it derived from particular, though overlapping, histories of subjugation and terror that required quick-witted practices of resistance and sometimes, insurgence. Or, as Arthur Spears tendered:

> ""Indirection" appears to have developed as a life-preserving, soul-saving, means of resistance - particularly to the workings of white supremacist racial hatred and internalized oppression during slavery and after, for example, during the Reign of

> Terror in the U.S. (Often euphemized by the term Jim Crow Era, it lasted from the mid-1870s to the mid-1960s.)." (2008: 531)

Saidiya Hartman vigilantly explores this very history – slavery and post-slavery in the Americas – and documents some of the performative and interactional strategies of resistance enslaved black people used to salvage and reconstitute their humanity (1997). She explains that "clandestine acts of resistance" often occurred under the guise of "fun and frolic" (50) and helps us understand the context through which this agentive, but forced, indirectness, emerged. With her historiography and theory in mind, I would like to recalibrate the sociolinguistic concept of "indirectness" as "black esotericism," one of many modes of black semiosis, in an effort to designate a specific practice that was born of material dehumanization and a pervasive threat of death and that was not only indirect and double-articulated, but that included layers of meaning intended to only be construable to particular others (i.e., others in the same precarious state). In this sense, it was often meant to counter, discredit, or plot against entities that undermined the speakers' and intended audiences' humanity.

The substantial body of sociolinguistic literature on signifying, and other forms of indirectness, encourages us to consider the practice as an integral part of black "ways of speaking" (Hymes 1974) into which individuals are socialized, and an expansion on the phenomenon from scholars like Saidiya Hartman, Marcyliena Morgan, and Arthur Spears encourages us to re-imagine practices like signifying as integral parts of black "ways of being" in the world. And, like most ingrained cultural

practices of survival, meta-awareness is not common among users nor is such awareness necessary to do specific interactional work.

Interventions by black language scholars like the gamechanging volume *Black Linguistics* by Sinfree Makoni, Geneva Smitherman, Arnetha Ball and Arthur Spears, and new methodologies and concepts like H. Samy Alim's critical hip hop ethnography or Marcyliena Morgan's "counterlanguage" were crucial for adjusting the paradigms and tools we use to explore black languaging. From their work, we learn that not only must we renovate dominant theory, but we have to exhume our own predispositions – to deeply consider Theresa Perry's observation that "Black language is the last uncontested arena of black shame" (Perry and Delpit 1998: 6) and try to purge antiblackness from our own understandings of what language, humanity are or should be. In this dissertation, I contend that for a better understanding of black semiosis, or meaning-making through signs, we also need recalibrated theory, analytical tools, and more uncomfortable reflection (see Hodge and Kress 1998 for a detailed discussion of expanding inquiry frames from linguistics to semiotics when exploring communication, culture, and society).

My own socialization into and deep investment in black semiosis makes the task of performing black semiotics, or studying this variety of semiosis, even more formidable and fulfilling. Paul Thibault's text on "social semiotics" interprets the field of study as an intervention that "starts from the praxis-oriented view that our practice as analysts and theorists of social meaning making practices and their

textual products in our own and other social semiotic systems is itself a set of social meaning making practices just like those we study and analyze" (1991: 4). His admonishment against "totalization" (per Derrida) allows for a consideration of the semiosis of semiotics by preventing "metatheoretical contextual foreclosure that acts as if it were above or outside of the social meaning making practices it studies" (1991: 4). This kind of reflexive stance is central to "decolonizing" linguistic and semiotic anthropology, an enduring project in which the field (despite Thibault's farsighted intercession) seems to have fallen far behind her sister field, cultural anthropology, which got a comparable call from Faye Harrison around the same time (Harrison 1991).

From here, I am imagining and formulating a theoretical framework of black semiotics that "is always constituted in and through a given ensemble of" black semiosis practices (Thibault 1991: 5). I take Thibault's insistence that semiotic theory not just be a "science of signs" that disarticulates and deconstructs, but that it actively rearticulate and reconstruct something as well very seriously, and I consider this kind of impetus a vital artery connecting semiotics and Africana Studies and other modes of knowledge production that are actually constituted through reflexivity and praxis. Such an approach also sympathizes with Africana Studies, Critical Ethnic Studies, Gender Studies, and kindred vocations in the ways it repositions the theorist as one who rearticulates (but doesn't axiomatically confirm, he stresses) everyday meaning making (and/or "folk theories" about meaning making), underscoring: (1) how our theories are always already there in some form,

are always "immanent" (Bateson 1972), in people's daily activities as well as in their metapragmatic and metalinguistic commentaries; and (2) how we must rearticulate these activities and metacommentaries to make new, relevant, and "critical" meaning of them (Thibault 1991: 5).

Metatheoretically, black semiotics is a precise Peircian interpretant, or translation, that helps re-articulate the connection between a class of referent/meaning/ signified/object and a class of sign/signifier/sign-vehicle/ representamen: in this case, blackness (or meanings of blackness) and particular signifiers. That is to say, it is effectively a "function" (Hjelmslev 1961 as cited in Thibault 1991: 15) (delivered through myself, semiotic theory, and race theory) that takes various functives (signified meanings and sign vehicles) and makes sense of them in terms of constructions of race and intersubjectivity.

The necessity for a distinct theory about meaning of and through the construction of blackness derives from the oft-cited Peircian principle that greater the degree to which a sign-vehicle intends (or, denotes) a particular meaning, the fewer meanings there are available that it can intend. Simply put, the more specific the meaning of a sign, the fewer the things it can be used to denote in the world (e.g, "bird" → "fowl" → "chicken" → "hen"). Concerning black semiotics, the theoretical specificity of "black semiosis" only extends to meaning-making articulated through black bodies and consciousness(es), or, the experiences of being socially raced as black and developing a functional subjectivity through that designation. This specificity, which

can be extrapolated to attend to any pertinent "historico-racial schema" (Fanon 1967), requires attendance to human actors in semiotic mediation. Franz Fanon's "historic-racial schema" was one part of his two-part reformation of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological model of the corporeal schema, a corrective that Dilan Mahendran has described in the following way: "The 'historico-racial schema' are the sedimented and knotted fabric of self experiences of anti-black racism and its interpellating discourses, sort of the prereflective consciousness memory of lived experiences of racist violence" (2007: 192).

In keeping with Peircian tenets, meanings always entail the signs through which they are expressed and those signs entail the method or means of translation that make meaning of the two Saussurean constituents (Parmentier 1994). Along with Paul Thibault, Jaye Lemke, Theo van Leeuwen and others have expanded Peircian semiotics to emphasize the role of a sentient interpreter (a social actor) who performs or makes/uses the interpretant in processes of semiosis. For the sentient interpreter, the interpretant becomes a sign of other additional referents and the process of signification is never ending. All of this means that we must seriously consider human interpreters in semiosis and therefore must take into account conditions around defining the Human and experiencing humanity; specific and historicized attendance to race, class, gender, and religion are necessary starts.

In many ways, black semiotics attempts to answer Stuart Hall's reverberating question "What is this 'black' in black popular culture? (Rethinking Race)" (1993),

and Michelle Stephens' recasted question "What is this 'Black' in Black Diaspora?" (2009), by considering how it is that an abstraction, or sociocultural political economic construction, like "blackness" predicates "black bodies," "black personhood," and other black entities and thereby constitutes a mode of a specifically black "being in the world" (Peirce in Hoopes 1991).

Parsing black semiosis also becomes a helpful project when we consider indexicality and processes of enregisterment in more politically and historically *specific* ways. The sociogenic and ontogenic conditions around what is possible for black, and other non-white-raced, individuals and "racialized assemblages" have to be considered when theorizing how sense is made of referents and signs relating to social identity (Weheliye 2013). In the almost universal context of white supremacy, making meaning about humans is strikingly different for individuals whose selfhood and notion of personhood were steeped in a rubric that located him/her/them, and those she/he/they were bracketed with, in the center or at the top. For those who customarily find themselves "up against whiteness" (Lee 2005) (the carefully-crafted construct, that is) as they conceptualize beauty, intelligence, democracy, modernity, and civility, race and "affective racial economies," as Shirley Anne Tate put it (2014), cannot be tangential theoretical concerns but must reconfigure theory altogether. The bodies of work produced by scholars like H. Samy Alim, Mary Bucholtz, Elaine Chun, Cecilia Cutler, Michel Degraff, Nelson Flores, Jane Hill, Awad Ibrahim, Adrienne Lo, Salikoko Mufwene, Angela Reyes, Jonathan Rosa, Geneva Smitherman, Arthur Spears, Donald Winford, and others have directly or indirectly

pierced the "contextual foreclosure" (Thibault 1991: 4) that studies of language and semiotics frequently erect around their own racialized epistemes, inferences, and contingencies; I hope to help dilate these punctures to some degree.

1.4.1 Diasporic Mashups

I also hope to contribute to the "disinvention and reconstitution of language" (per Makoni and Pennycook 2007) by importing the concept of "mashup" to semiotic and cultural anthropology. Until recently, "creolization" has been the central analytic for exploring cultural (re)production among black peoples outside of Africa and traditionally, this approach has been preoccupied with parsing cultural rupture and synthesis – often by assessing "authentic" African retentions in a given "creole culture" (Frazier 1957; Herskovits 1941; Mintz and Price 1992). In sociology, a comparable focus on levying degrees and rates of assimilation among black migrants is also concerned with the borders of cultural identity and subjectivity (Waters 2001). While the concepts of "creolization" and "segmented assimilation" (2001) have been theoretically generative and could readily be applied to kind of synthesizing practice I am exploring here, expanding our understandings of cultural translation and hybridization to attend to new technologies of intersubjectivity and new frames of networking seems constructive. The back-and-forth-and-back of hip hop's constituent elements via migrations spurred by slavery, more recent histories of economic exploitation, conflict, repatriation or other causes, as well as

advancements in telecommunications and transportation technologies certainly help urge us to take such phenomena into consideration.

For example, there is a great deal to be garnered from Trouillot's concerns about some of the problematic proclivities creole studies' has inherited from its epistemological predecessor: creole linguistics - namely, its tendencies to "infer the past from the present" and to construct "all-encompassing explanations" (Trouillot 2006:194). Thankfully, recent expansions of creolization reconfigure it as the means through which difference and belonging are realized in Black (or "African") Diasporic relations in real time, and these expansions have helped yield new conceptualizations of contemporary Black Diaspora that heed Trouillot's cautions (see Clarke 2010; Copeland-Carson 2004; Diawara 1998; Edwards 2003; Gilroy 1993; Hall 1990; Rahier 2010; Scott 1991; Stephens 2009). Additionally, these new theories of diaspora render it a "rhizomatic" (or nomadic) mapping of cultural multiplicity (Deleuze and Guatarri 1980) that schleps across time and space.

Of particular utility is Brent Hayes Edwards' theoretical expansion of *décalage* (2001), which emphasizes how the production of difference is integral to the ways Black Diaspora is made and used. The concept points to a kind of lag between one conceptual location and another that is created when prosthetic fillers, like race or Africa, fail to fully reconcile the differences created by distinct, albeit similar, historical-political conditions – differences that young people like Adima and Poady feel the moment they touch ground in significantly Black American cities like

Philadelphia. As the gap that brings difference into stark relief, *décalage,* in many ways, reminds us of classic notions of liminality (Turner 1967). Cultural liminality is often thought to yield one of two kinds of possibility: "rupture" and discontinuity on one hand (e.g., Bateson's "schismogenesis" [1935], Turner's "schism" [1968], Deleuze and Guatarri's "*bricolage"* [2004]), or "fusion" and some kind of complex continuity on the other hand (e.g., creolization; cosmopolitanism [Appiah 2006; Appadurai 1996]; translocalism [Copeland-Carson 2004]; transnationalism [Roudometof 2005]; "glocalization" [Pennycook 2003; Roudometof 2005]; and "*métissage"* [Ibrahim 2009]).

As an updated analogue to *décalage,* a "mashup" is a largely artistic, or stylistic, phenomenon that also troubles a neat parsing of continuity and discontinuity. The concept originally referred to the merging of programming texts and/or digital data sources but has migrated from web design (Wong and Hong 2007) to a wide range of (con)texts including music and music video production, areas where it has roused substantial controversy over copyright and the definition of "composing" (Lamb 2007). Mashups beautifully blur boundaries and offer no easy way to determine where one text ends and another begins – thereby making the business of discerning when something has been changed enough to become something else a nearly impossible feat. Perhaps more useful than concepts like creolization or hybridity, mashups name and emphasize the finished entity and may discourage any fetishization of origins in processes of "becoming" (Hall 1993). Recently, an undergraduate student in a course I was teaching on the racial experiences of

African transnationals in the United States explained that for her a legitimate mash-up must contain identifiable components from all source texts. This emphasis on accurate construal speaks directly to the potential effectiveness of Poady's linguistic and discursive performance in the above excerpts. Her use of highly-marked (i.e., distinctive and salient) features from AAE and from a snarky register indicate a keen understanding of the criteria of legitimate mash-ups.

The practice of combining two or more musical texts to create new works has a long history in "underground" music subcultures but surfaced to the mainstream via the immensely popular (and internet-circulated) 2004 mashup album, *The Grey Album,* by New York artist, Brian Joseph Burton (better know by his stage name, Danger Mouse). The album combined The Beatles' informally-named *The White Album* (1968) with Jay-Z's equally iconic *The Black Album* (2003). Expertise around the production of musical mashups and music video mashups has been significantly democratized in very recent years as software like Garageband®, iMovie®, and Massh!®, web software like HitnMix® and MixedinKey®, and social media websites like Youtube® and Facebook® have become more widely accessible. With Web 2.0, technologically savvy laypersons of any almost age can create and disseminate new music and music videos by recycling existing work, rendering existing texts the fodder for new creations and thoroughly interrupting notions of originality and creative property (Lamb 2007).

Beyond mashups of sound, the merging of visual "texts" via fashion, graphic art, and photography have emerged as popular modes of self-making and cultural production. Quickly following *The Grey Album*, The Grey Video was created and began circulating on the internet. The video mashup provided a visual representation of one track from the album, visually illuminating the possiblity of unexpected synchronocities. Another major offshoot of *The Grey Album* was "Grey Tuesday," a day of "electronic civil disobedience" in which nearly 200 websites offered the album for free download and more than 100,000 people were reported to have downloaded it in protest to EMI Music's cease-and-desist order to Danger Mouse (Patel 2004). The thousands of downloads and the "greying" of more 250 websites in soldarity with the digital dissent movement have been understood as a collective condemnation of an increasingly facist music industry as a whole. The popularity of *The Grey Album*, as evidenced by "Grey Tuesday" and countless online hits, tells us that despite an incredibly egregious "culture industry" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944), some form of "counter culture" is always possible. Similarly, the young people in this study did not appear to unwittingly consume popular culture, tradition, or other forms of dominant discourse but repeatedly bring together incongruent visual and verbal texts from various sources as they produced and lived a rather subersive form of *décalage.*

Using "mashup" as a methodological stance and analytic to examine cultural production does not wholly circumvent anxieties about change, however – as all forms of mashups routinely engender conversations about the sacredness of and

rights to original texts. Mashup's unique contribution, however, is the ways in which it makes such fetishizations of origins and originality transparent and inarguably problematic. Mashups manage to expose the irrelevance of preoccupations with origins and originality because while these worries are transpiring amongst purists, mashups are fervently being produced and taken up by young people like Poady and are helping to yield new understandings and interpretations that may not have accompanied individual source texts, thereby exemplifying mashups' fecundity and verifying them as veritably new phenomena. Perhaps more importantly, makers of mashups seem to operate from a sensibility that all creations are already composite formations featuring recycled bits and pieces.

This conception of production and reproduction is especially germane to a study of significations of diaspora and diasporic selfhood, and to practices related to diasporic phenomena like hip hop, or blackness for that matter, because it presumes rhizomatic flows of ideas, practices, and peoples and shirks notions of purity/authenticity and discrete beginnings and endings. Concerned with the cultural melees and mashups that constitute contemporary diaspora (and transpatial and transhistorical), I'm not concerned with parsing or historicizing particular African, Liberian, American, or Black American cultural practices in an effort to discern the origins or originality of ideas of such practices, nor do I operate from a presumption that hegemony is immalleable and impermeable, but instead focus on the conditions around and contents of emerging practices and modes of meaning-making being used in these young Liberian transnationals' daily lives.

1.4 Chapter Overview

This text synthesizes, or "mashes up," four distinct chapters to tell a multifaceted story about black semiosis – focusing on the conditions it that engenders, the various shapes it can take, and the different kinds of labor it can perform. The chapters do this by making sweeping strokes over germane historical and political economic landscapes, interpreting collective imaginaries, and closely coveting individual lives and moments. The individual lives that compose the core of this variegated inquiry are those of people who are quite young but who have already begun to astutely assess the unbearableness of blackness - in the country in which they were born and spent some or all of their lives, Liberia – and, for some, in their new country, "America." And, as these accounts suggest, they have begun marshaling various strategies to make it somewhat bearable (and at times, pleasurable) - some tried-and-true strategies, such as spirituality via "the church" and artistic expression via hip hop music - and others that enlist new technologies that are reshaping structures of subjectivity, such as social media. Above all, by (re)making and using signs that already are, or become, indexical of various kinds of blackness, these young people not only help us make out a semiosis of blackness(es) but, because they often enlisted communicative practices that one may consider racialized (or made through race), they also manifested what we may consider a kind of "black semiosis." That is to say, they made evident specifically and historically black modes of meaning-making as they went about co-constructing various models of blackness. In effect, this text explores the multi-tiered production

of a black semiotic field across two continents and over three centuries. Specifically, it illuminates how a group of peculiarly-positioned young people take very seriously the implications of making different kinds of blackness in different moments and spaces.

Chapter 2 explores the methodological practices and concerns involved in producing a trans-spatial and transhistorical semiotic ethnography of race, and pays close attention to issues around using nontraditional methods like virtual (digital) ethnography and non-traditional archives like song lyrics. In this chapter, I explain how and why I meld semiotic anthropological, discourse analysis, and interactional analysis methods to interpret and connect the various scales of discourse produced through and around these young people's lives.

Chapter 3 foregrounds the successive analyses with a brief historiography of Liberia's ethnoracial and political economic landscape from its colonization in the 1820s to its instantiation as a nation-state in 1847 and then scans a century of the afterlife of settler colonialism. This chapter provides some partially historicizes different models of blackness that have been (re)configured in Liberia and the Liberian diaspora and that bear upon meaning-making.

Chapters 4 and 5 zoom in on some specific verbal discursive practices and content and, by applying an "interdiscursive" (Silverstein 2003) lens, contextualize these practices in relevant semiotic chains.

Chapter 4 targets oral productions of verbal language that "mash up" seemingly contrastive performative verbal scripts, or "linguistic registers" (including an American hip hop register, or Hip Hop Nation Language [Alim 2004]) linked to specific "figures of personhood" (Agha 2007), with content expressing a transnational African subjectivity. As an updated analogue to décalage, "mashup" troubles many assumptions about authenticity, property, and cultural reproduction, and is explored extensively in this chapter.

In Chapter 5, I consider the impact of multiscalar discourses that exceptionalize and pathologize black sociality in the everyday interactions between Liberian transnationals and American-born black peers. This analysis emphasizes metapragmatic commentaries from young Liberian transnationals about the wide-ranging troubles that await them around every corner and in every classroom.

Chapter 6 shifts our focus from Liberian transnationals in the United States to transnationals in Monrovia, Liberia's capital city, as they realize a transnational, or diasporic, subjectivity via material circulations of capital and digital circulations of cultural ideas and practice. In particular, the young men featured in this chapter draw from, and contribute to, gendered and classed models of black personhood that circulate on a global scale via the mediatization (or, interconnected commoditization and mediation [Agha 2013]) of certain signs, contributing to a possible "digital migrant" subjectivity. The chapter questions how, in dissimilar

ways, signs and practices that index masculinized "niggas," feminized "African ladies," and gender-neutral and polyclassed "hustlas" implicate a pervasive and untenable neoliberalism. Chapter 7 concludes the text by considering the potential advantages and harms of black heterogeneity, particularly the ways it discursively – and recursively – re-imagines the past to compose bearable presents and desirable futures.

CHAPTER 2 – *METHODS AND METHODOLOGY: DOING AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF RACE*

2.1 Introduction

"*So, umm… I'm exploring the ways young Liberian transnationals make selves and signify those selves in the US and I'm going to do that by looking at what they say, how they say it, and also what they listen to and watch and eat and wear and I will contextualize all this "meaning-making" within the colonial and post-colonial history of Liberia and the history of race politics in the US, as well as with contemporary discourses about blackness, Africa and Africans, and African Americans in pop culture, schools, and government… so I'll be doing kind of a discourse narrative analysis and virtual ethnography that considers these young people's social lives in and out of school and online using semiotic anthropological concepts like, you know, indexicality and intertextuality, and that kind of frames everything under this theoretical umbrella of antiblackness and semiotic strategies for surviving it*," I breathlessly spewed onto the fellow conference attendee who made the mistake of asking me what my dissertation concerned. Even though I had resorted to using air quotes more than once, my sincerity was so palpable the patient woman could only nod and smile a sad kind of smile in reply. Her eyes had glazed over by the first set of air quotes and although my words usually fade into a barely audible murmur when I sense that someone is not really hearing me, for some reason, I decided to push on and work it out with her in that crowded grand foyer. I knew she felt sorry

for me and I felt sorry for myself as well, because after my first season of rejections from potential granting institutions who had read even more grandiose and erratic descriptions in the research proposals I sent them – proposals into which I poured all of my ideas and hopes and dreams (despite my advisors' gentle scolding) – I still couldn't whittle my project down into something feasible-sounding, let alone comprehensible. I hadn't yet learned how to distill the major points of my vast project into the ever-elusive "elevator pitch."

The reason I couldn't do this was because I had already conducted the bulk of my field work and all of these analytic concerns came from what I had actually observed as not just relevant, but also crucial, elements in the story that I thought needed to be told (or, co-narrated, as I imagined the project). With three informal years and one formal year in the field under my belt, I had more than enough "data" and theory to fill every inch of the sprawling scope of which I spoke. How could I speak of "my baby" and not mention its potential contributions to pragmatic semiotics? Its attention to the unexamined contemporary relationship between Liberia and Black America? Its tackling of racialized digital personhood? How it put linguistic anthropology and antiblackness in conversation with one another? Its potential impact on teaching and learning? What it might help us understand about transnationalism? Diaspora? Creolization? How could I leave any of this out?

It was not until I began penning proposals for writing fellowships that my advisors' judicious words finally made sense and I understood that I would have to privilege

themes from this story and front them when describing it. And, I realized that this particular story would have to be told in painstaking pieces, as most great epics (or pedantic dissertations) were told. It also became clear that I would have to decide what to tell first, and how. I had to pin down a point of convergence and efficient methodologies for analyzing all that I'd amassed (from the kind of fieldwork that doesn't offer any kind closure). While the conceptual point of convergence ("black semiosis") and the actual procedure was laid out in Chapter 1, this chapter provides a kind of anatomical and physiological description of the project, specifying its many parts and their intended functions.

2.2 Methods // Fieldwork

I conducted a traditional and virtual ethnography over the course of four years that bridges semiotic (linguistic and visual) and cultural anthropologies to Africana Studies theory by inductively interpreting the words and actions of Liberian-born young people in the United States and Liberia and situating them in broader public discourses. Those broader discourses came specifically from popular culture, news media, schools, and the Liberian and United States across a wide timespan.

The central participants ("research subjects" or "informants") were indigenous Liberian-born young people between 18 and 30-years-old who lived in the Philadelphia area. My secondary participants were Liberian young people in the

Monrovia area (also in the same age range) and African American peers in the Philadelphia area (also in the same age range).

My primary means for gathering information, or "data," which Clifford Geertz famously called out as "our constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (1973:9) included: (1) conducting participant-observation at school, home, and other social spaces with the participants; (2) conducting ethnographic interviews; (3) performing virtual ethnography via social media sites like Facebook© and Instagram© (i.e., interacting with participants via these sites and taking screenshots of participants' postings and comments and downloading participants' images); (4) audio and video recording interviews and participant-observation sessions whenever fitting and feasible; (5) periodically photographing participants, their friends, their belongings, and their surroundings; (6) handwriting and typing written field notes and audio recording "audio field notes" after spending time with participants; and (7) conducting archival research in various libraries and online. The fieldwork sites included: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the United States and surrounding suburban communities; Monrovia, Liberia and some of its immediate surrounding areas; and digital space.

Painted wood section of a residential cement block wall in the Sinkor neighborhood of Monrovia, 2011 (*Photograph by author*)

The central phase of this ethnography spanned just over two and half years, from the fall of 2011 to the summer of 2014, but the overall project began taking form in 2008 and trickles into this very moment. The main data comes from face-to-face participant-observation and digital/virtual participant-observation that centered on a small group of young people as they attended high school and college, went to work, interacted with family, and socialized with peers in the Philadelphia area. For one academic year (2011 to 2012), I spent between five and ten hours each week "hanging out" with each participant.

Victoria hard at work in English class her senior year of high school, 2012 (*Photograph by author)*

During this time, I tried to pay close attention to various aspects of their multimodal communicative practices (e.g., how they talked; who they talked to; what they talked about [especially regarding race, ethnicity, language, gender, sex, or hip hop]; how they dressed; how they wore their hair; what music they listened to, created, or danced to; who they dated; etc.). Much of my time with them was spent talking with them and hanging out with them and their friends (i.e., eating, running errands, or sitting somewhere and talking). I also visited one participant at work (helping a colleague document his work day on film), attended church with one, and spent time with the family of another on a number of occasions.

After that academic year (their senior year of high school), I visited with each person intermittently, sometimes hanging out at the community college they all attended, or meeting up for lunch or dinner, or hanging out with them in their

neighborhood (a neighborhood with a large Liberian immigrant population). From the summer of 2012 until the summer of 2014, I interacted with them via text, Facebook messaging, or in person at least once every two weeks, approximately. The key male participant, Brian, I saw considerably less often than the two women but I observed his online interactions diligently, as his subjectivity and lifestyle seemed to be undergoing drastic changes in this space (which I explore in depth in Chapter 4).

Awad Ibrahim formalized "hanging out methodology" – a theoretically-driven method of experiencing evidence – in his critical ethnography *The Rhizome of Blackness: A Critical Ethnography of Hip-Hop Culture, Language, Identity, and the Politics of Becoming* (2014). Ibrahim's framework upholds anthropology's most fundamental precept and desire that bearing witness to a phenomenon in context and over time provides an invaluable brand of insight, a kind of vision that yields more truth, knowledge, or mere understanding. I work from that same precept and desire and imagine my interpretations of the words and actions of the young people who participated in the project are actually representative of how they wanted to position themselves in relation to present and absent others (i.e., of their dynamic co-constructed intersubjectivities). In other words, I imagine that my time with them and the varying intimacies I developed in some way deputizes me to tell their stories as seen through my eyes.

My secondary group of participants lived in Monrovia and I met and began getting to know while visiting the city in the fall of 2012. I spent one month in Sinkor, a bustling neighborhood in central Monrovia, observing and talking with young people in the area and visiting 10 surrounding schools. I spent most of my time with five individuals during my stay, two of whom were not research participants. The other three I met up with at least five times to sit and talk on the beach or a porch in the neighborhood, have a meal or snack at a local eatery, go for a long walk on the beach, shop at the open-air Waterside market, listen to live and recorded music, or some other activity. We also passed and greeted each other frequently on the street in the small community. I would usually spend 1-3 hours during these get-togethers and on six occasions, spent the entire day with the participant. Upon returning to the US, I would start new relationships with some individuals who I either met briefly while in Monrovia or was introduced to virtually through a mutual acquaintance. Those relationships have developed virtually over the past three years and differ from and correspond with those that began in "real life" in significant ways.

The ethnographic interviews (or conversations, given the symmetric questioning that usually occurred) I conducted were generally semi-structured in that they were initiated by my asking one or two open-ended, minimally-directive questions and went on to generate questions and comments (by all participants) on themes that emerged dynamically in the interaction (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Because my relationship with the participants was a methodological and analytical

concern throughout this project, I often shared my own experiences and ideas in these interviews, and invited questions from participants. They were plainly aware of my personal investment in the project (which I described as a study about their experiences and ideas so that educators and others could better understand Liberian young people and black youth relationships today) and they also knew my views about blackness, transnationalism, racism, and black diaspora. Most of these ethnographic interviews were one-on-one but group interviews were also conducted at different points in the project.

My focus on multimodal semiotics required analysis of sign usage beyond verbal language (i.e., beyond word-based communication), therefore interviews and conversations were audio or video-recorded, logged, and transcribed whenever possible so that I could attend to non-verbal signs that comprised the context and co-text of verbal content (e.g., intonation, pauses, laughter, gesture, facial expression, dress, hair style, body comportment, etc.). I also noted non-verbal signs in my field notes.

The early stages of analyzing my data included: (1) transcribing selections of audio and video recordings; (2) logging all audio and video recordings; and, (3) recursively analyzing field notes and carrying out discourse analysis of online communication and transcripts.

2.2 Methodology // Working the Field

Many of the methods in this project were rather straightforward, actually, and initially abided by the core tenets of "traditional" ethnography as defined by the discipline of anthropology. With others, Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (2007) and Michael Agar (1996) all note in their canonical methods texts that ethnography is both product and process that generally attempts to locate and describe connections between the practices of everyday life and ascendant (and/or descendant) social meanings, structures, and processes. The process portion is generally carried out via participant observation (which is imagined and performed in myriad ways but customarily involves participating in daily activities with subjects while maintaining a degree of objective distance, or "defamiliarizing the familiar"), interviews of varying structure, and collecting or considering relevant artifacts and documents. As product, ethnography is an interpretive writing venture that employs social theory to decode and re-encode observed and experienced phenomena and historical events, infused with "poetics and politics" that expose its fraught nature (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

I certainly set out with such projections of ethnography in mind. I imagined an adventure that would put me in the field documenting fascinating social activities over a requisite year and then returning to my office (or a table at a local café) to sip tea while I laboriously theorized a "pile" of meticulous field notes and well-organized images and documents using theory provided by Africana Studies,

various anthropologies, and cultural studies, primarily. In the very beginning of my fieldwork, I scribbled shorthand field notes diligently in between conversing with informants (who I would consider "participants" because of their constant feedback about the project and its processes) and fleshed them out within a day of the encounter. When I couldn't muster writing out notes, or when doing so was simply inopportune, I would leave an encounter and sit in my car for upwards of an hour recording audio field notes ("voice memos") on my trusty iPhone. I spent the early months of my official fieldwork worrying over the "thickness" of my notes and early analyses, wanting the richness of the experiences to jump off the page (or from my iPhone's tinny speakers), but I also felt compelled to somehow mark the bias in my fleshy interpretations. Following the advice of one of my professors who was a model for thorough and systematic documentation, I attempted to graphically represent two layers of description in my written and typed notes – objective notes documenting the smallest of details in regular text and "thickening" notes describing the tones and textures of events and individuals in parentheses or italics. By making the thickening descriptions parenthetical to the more "factual" text, or by symbolically "personalizing" these words with italicized fonts that remind one of handwriting, I was unknowingly making an epistemological decision about anthropological authority and the value (and illustration) of objectivity that would become more conscientious and more problematic as time went on (Jackson 2013).

As the project developed, I also amassed many photographs of and by my participants and quickly came to consider these visual artifacts/narratives more telling and more "true" than the stories I could cull from my copious field notes and transcripts. Or, at least they seemed to demand attention and a conversation of which they were the center, perhaps revealing this ethnographic venture as one of many "tales in search of an excuse for their telling" (Van Maanen 1988). I would find that "excuse" easily and early when I acknowledged the physical and psychological perils of under-examined blackness and when I took to heart John Jackson's declaration that "everything is ethnography" (2013; 53). And I would come to treasure the particular kind of co-text that images (especially when shot by subjects of study) provided to my dominant narrative. As I composed the subsequent analyses, I would also think about how such visual co-text would be positioned alongside more orthodox textual signs (i.e., within the text or in a separate section) relating the unspeakable in complementary or converse ways (Dominguez 2000). The still images throughout this text were charily chosen, positioned, and captioned to: help physically situate certain events (e.g., maps); visually represent statistical information about relevant locations; include self representations (self portraits or "selfies") of participants; and to provide visual accounts of certain places, people, or events that were temporally grounded in a specific "photographic moment" as Sarah Pink describes it (2013:169).

Gradually, I began moving toward an orientation that no level of triangulation or thickness could help me see or say what was "really" happening in any of the events

that I witnessed, analyzed, and would later try to recreate in academic prose and thoughtfully placed images (Jackson 2013). Like others, I became more concerned with my own "ethnographic sincerity," than with my legitimacy as a "good" ethnographer who could skillfully report on the real (2005; 2010; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). In summary, John Jackson describes such sincerity as an ethnographer's genuineness and transparency with her subjects and with her professional peers and, for me, this kind of sincerity specifically meant that I would deliberately privilege, and expose, my ethnographic relationships and my objectives for doing this work. I would purposefully divulge my gaffes and improprieties, and those of my participants. In his 2010 article expounding on ethnographic sincerity, Jackson suggests that an absence of humor may indicate some ethnographic disingenuousness, as the process of creating ethnographic rapport is almost never without humorous missteps. In effect, he elucidates the harm and conceits in talking of Life, a life, or kinds of lives – no matter how somber or even tragic – in a manner that reduces its dimensions to unadulterated suffering. The inclusion of humor at the expense of oneself and others in the writing portion of ethnography also forces humility as an epistemological stance rather acutely and implores a deeper level of reflexivity. At the time of this writing, I have relinquished a desire to locate and report the "real" in regards to these young people's racial subjectivity, or even in regards to their observable behaviors.

My project would further depart from other traditional notions and practices in linguistic anthropology and education anthropology when my online relationships

with my participants became pertinent and I needed to find ways to account for our interactions in that space and, increasingly, for their important and profuse interactions with others in that space. As referenced above, I found their constant postings of digital self-portraits (or "selfies") to be imperative in, and sometimes significantly oppositional to, the stories about their lives that I wanted to tell. In particular, the ethnographic relationships that emerged from this kind of digital sociality (and from living in the same geographic area as my participants) obliterated any kind of "backstage" to the ethnographic project (Jackson 2013) that I may have anticipated, as my participants regularly liked my photos of nights out with friends, or of family members and me in embrace. They left empathetic comments on my status updates about bad dates with trifling men and generously complimented my own peacocking or pensive selfies. As my own digital life melded with theirs, I began to feel that conceptualizations of the field as "porous" – especially when research is conducted in one's city of residence – to be a vast understatement. Jackson's following consideration of an unprecedented collapse of time and space in relation to a notion of "the field" better denoted my experience: "Ethnographers find themselves exiled to "the field," and there is no going home anymore" (52). This noticing helps constitute one aspect of the "everything is ethnography" "mode of being in the world" (52), but it also speaks to another side of this posture that suggests that (almost) everyone is an ethnographer (58). He explains that among those for whom survival (individually or collectively, physically or philosophically) is at stake, surveilling and theorizing the world and

others are obligatory tasks. I honestly found this to be the case with Brian, Victoria, Johnetta, and the others, as they demonstrated the same vim and dexterity for unloading and examining themselves, others, and "the world" writ large as myself or anyone I've read who have taken on the same kind of labor as a formal vocation.

2.3 Field Sites//Here and There

2.3.1 Philadelphia Metro

When this ethnography was conducted (2011 – 2014), recent migrations of peoples from western Africa, eastern Africa, East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Central America, the Caribbean, and other parts of the United States to the Philadelphia area had not only altered the already mottled demographic landscape of the city, but had also transformed many predominately European American (and white) surrounding communities and schools into exceptionally diverse spaces - along racial, ethnic, linguistic, and class dimensions. The high school that my participants attended was located in a suburban township west of Philadelphia and boasted more than 3,500 students who represented over 120 "nationalities" (school district website). North Abbey, the township they lived in, featured a small, bustling downtown area where abandoned department stores like Gimbles and Woolworths (Hoffner 1986) were eventually replaced by mega-chain stores like H&M and Lane Bryant as well as with immigrant-owned businesses and establishments

specifically catering to a lower-income clientele (e.g., Conway, Rainbow, Easy Pickins). The downtown area was also home to a major public transportation hub where commuters could connect to buses, trolleys, and commuter trains going to various locations in Philadelphia and the surrounding townships, allowing them quick access to the whole metro area.

In 2010, Philadelphia proper, where many of the participants and their family members worked, worshipped, socialized, and/or lived, had the third largest black population in the United States, a higher than 30% poverty rate for those black residents,[4] and a black unemployment rate of 14.4% (Austin 2011) compared to a national average of 9.6% the same year (Bureau of Labor Statistics). Dubbed the "poorest big city in America" (Lubrano 2014), and one of the most racially segregated (Young 2014), contemporary Philadelphia serves as the primary backdrop for this story of young people living in this moment, but its aura of discontent, its racial inequities and economic distress, can be understood as the sediments of structures that span centuries and continents, as the following discussion explores.

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[4] The 2010 American Community Survey by the US Census Bureau reported that roughly 31% of Philadelphia's black population lived below the poverty line (Shaw 2011).

Figure 2.3.1.1 Philadelphia Area Map

(Image from http://www.visitphilly.com/directions-maps/ ©1998-2015 VisitPhiladelphia®)

Particularly germane to this ethnography of racialized intersubjectivity are Philadelphia's racial geopolitics and the ways they have influenced interracial and intraracial relationships in and around the city (Jackson 2005; 2008). Long before the city's illustrious industrial zenith (from the Reconstruction Era to the Great Depression) marked it as the "Workshop of the World" (Scranton 1990) and a keen resettlement site for African American southerners during the Great Migration, free blacks began steadily migrating to the city and surrounding areas soon after "An Act of Gradual Abolition of Slavery" was passed by the commonwealth in 1780 (and amended in 1788 to close a few of its many loopholes) (Turner 1912). By the end of the 1830, 17 years before Pennsylvania would abolish slavery outright, it is estimated that a community of nearly 14,500 free black people lived in Philadelphia ("Africans in America"). Before the start of the Civil War, Philadelphia would

become home to one of the nation's first black "ghettos" when increasing underemployment resulting from a preference for European immigrant laborers and other forms of systemic racism forced black residents to crowd into a small economically-impoverished section of the city (Weigley 1982).

From the 1842 Riot in which black men, women, and children participating in a parade led by the Negro Young Men's Vigilant Association were brutally attacked by white residents, to a four-day race riot of 1918 that also targeted black families, to the razing of Black Bottom in the 50s (a black West Philadelphia community), to the 1964 race riots that ignited in response to decades of police brutality, to the 1985 bombing of the M.O.V.E. commune and more than 60 surrounding West Philadelphia homes (that killed five children and six adults) (Yuhas 2015), to ongoing "Stop-and-Frisk" laws that target black youth (White 2013), black people have long had a precarious relationship with the City of Brotherly Love that extends beyond structural subjugation. When W.E.B. DuBois wrote about the city's race relations in the final years of the 19th century ([1899] 1996), he explained that the city's white residents generally saw no clear correlation between their compatriots' "aversion" to black people and the desperate conditions in which most black people were living at that time.

When we fast forward 120 years to an article titled "Being White in Philly" written by Robert Huber in March of 2013, we see the same kind of heartbreaking and tenacious ignorance, or presumed innocence, about correlations between

structural and interactional racism and dire conditions in Philadelphia's predominantly black communities. After surveying a number of white residents' and documenting their blatantly racist accounts of black suffering, Huber's nostalgia for a pre-Civil Rights Philadelphia is exposed when he implies that the city's troubled race relations leave its white residents as oppressed as its darker ones (2013). The article stirred great remonstration from many residents, including the city's black mayor, Michael Nutter, but its significance as a very accurate representation of many white residents' perceptions of their black neighbors and of racism writ large cannot be overlooked. Today, Philadelphia remains one of the nation's most segregated cities (Webb 2013), with its black and brown and migrant residents occupying its poorest communities, and public discourse around systemic racism continues to be lacking.

Figure 2.3.1.2 2003 Racial Segregation Map of Philadelphia by Zip Code

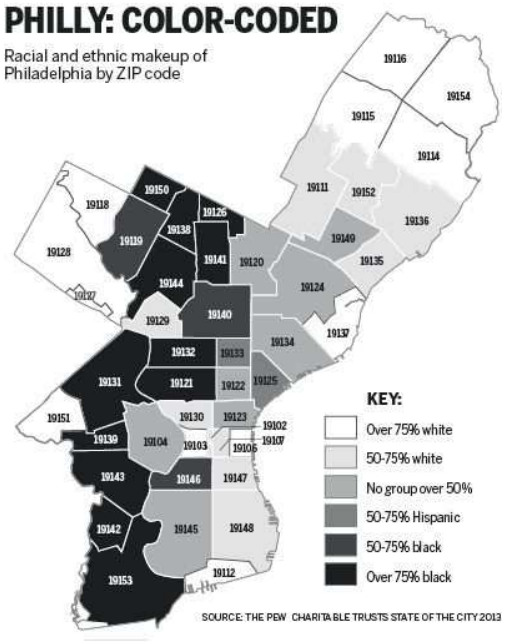
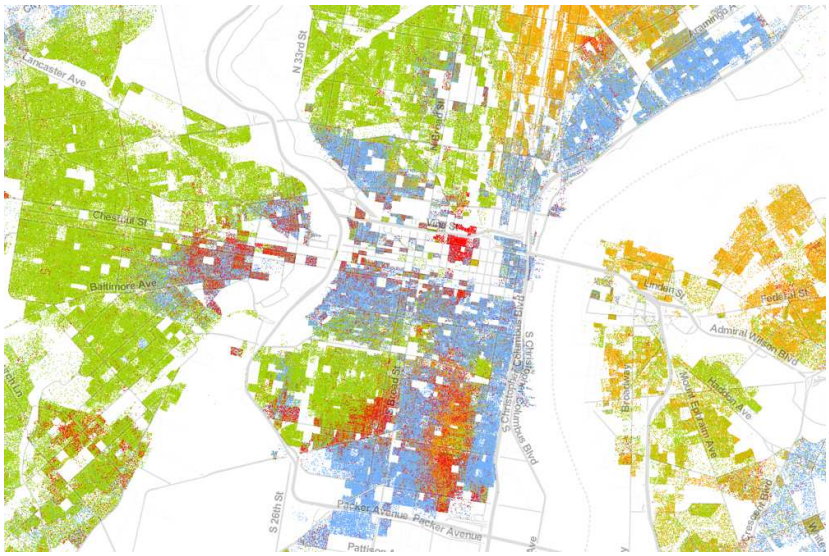


Figure 2.3.1.3 Racial Segregation Map of Philadelphia



Created by Dustin Cable of the University of Virginia (in Vanhemert 2013). Note: green represents black residents (referred to as African American), blue represents white residents, red represents Asian residents, orange represents Latinos and all others are represented by brown.

Like many urban centers throughout the United States, over the past decade, Philadelphia has been "hemorraghing" its black residents (see Shange's discussion of gentrification in California's Bay Area [2012]) out to nearby suburbs and townships.

Conversations about a slightly updated form of "urban renewal" – especially regarding Philadelphia's poor and working class black neighborhoods like West Philadelphia and parts of North Philadelphia, and its working class white neighborhoods like Fishtown and Northern Liberties – are increasingly being countered by discussions of forced physical and cultural displacement, as they were in the earlier iteration of the 1950s and 60s. However, rather than "white

flight" and the prohibition of property ownership being the main impetuses behind the syncopation of black people into overcrowded and under-resourced residential spaces, the gentrification of black and brown neighborhoods by largely white middle class residents is what currently kindles the forced relocation of black people (and other communities overrepresented in the city's lowest economic stratus) into undesirable conditions, this time in suburbs undergoing a new version of "white flight." Historically white and black low-income and working-class neighborhoods like many in South Philadelphia, with their large (and recent) Asian and Central American immigrant communities, are also seeing, as John Jackson deftly described the affective reality of gentrification: "…many suburbanites salivating, many grassroots activists agitating, and more than few low-income tenants quaking in their boots" (Jackson 2006; 192). He might have also added the problematic presence of marauding developers and cowering local politicians. By now, gentrification's shady modi operandi have become common-knowledge among most socially and economically savvy people: the barefaced courting of middle-class or "upwardly-mobile" tenants and buyers; the strategic eschewing of low-income tenants; the tax-breaks for new owners; the predatory buy-outs of and penalties for long-time homeowners; the changes in policing; and so on (Lipsitz 2011). Despite these awarenesses, however, responsible and effectual responses to this new/old chapter in black oppression has yet to take tangible form in Philadelphia and other urban spaces.

Attending to Philadelphia's ongoing gentrification is pertinent to this ethnography for a number of reasons. Not only does it help to explain the socioeconomic and racial landscape of the broader metropolitan area, but it also speaks to the transnational nature of local sociality. Specifically, Jackson's concept of "georaciality" helps us understand that as people move around the world, they move in and out of different localities and negotiate these place's sociocultural and political-historical specificities while they continue to contend with a ubiquitous (global) racial framework, or, as he describes it: "an overly coherent organizing principle for planetary inequality mappable along a selfsame epidermal ladder from light to dark bodies" (2006; 193). That is, whether folks are migrating from one nation to another, one region to another, or one part of town to another, they are not only moving as classed, nationalized, and ethnicized persons, but also as racialized bodies who are being read, and who are reading others, through a pervasive racial schema.

This makes particularly keen sense when we review the ways black bodies have been moved around the United States, whether they're confined to plantations, detained in ghettos or other redlined communities, or incarcerated in prisons. It also adds up when we examine the broad geographic settlement patterns of many African and Afro-Caribbean migrants as they gravitate to states where US-born black people are most concentrated (Capps, McCabe, Fix 2011) and on a smaller scale, to cities that boast a substantial black (historically, African American) population. Almost without exception, these migrants rest their bags in black

neighborhoods, even when there are alternative affordable neighborhoods nearby (Tesfai 2013). For numerous reasons that have been actively debated by demographers and race theorists, transnational black migrants overwhelmingly "end up" in already-black neighborhoods (Friedman, Singer et al. 2005 in Tesfai 2013), adding new tones to a seemingly monochromatic scene. Although these predominantly black neighborhoods are typically parched for resources, black migrants frequently situate themselves within black parts of town and then form "ethnic enclaves" within these communities (e.g., "Le Petit Senegal" in Harlem [Babou 2002], New York; "Little Liberia" in Park Hill in Staten Island, New York [Steinbeck 2011]; Woodland Avenue in Southwest Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), where, some argue, they maintain "higher average socioeconomic characteristics" than their US-born black counterparts (i.e., higher levels of formal education, higher rates of employment, higher incomes, lower crime rates, etc.) (Tesfai 2013).

These enclaves may sound reclusive, but they often function as crucial intermediary spaces between old and new social worlds. Cheikh Babou's study of *dahiras* (close-knit Murid muslim communities) in New York City (2002) demonstrates how these kinds of cultural institutions travel with people and help migrants calibrate their lives to American urbanity. Babou's examination of the community's practices, their sources and processes of development, remind one of Farah Jasmine Griffin's account of spatiality and safety in the urban landscape after "The Great Migration" of African Americans from the South to northern and midwestern cities at the start of the 20th century (1995). She and Babou both speak

to the spiritual, social, economic, and literal sustenance provided by informal community institutions and theorize their ideological foundations in resistance and survival. Both accounts also emphasize the proficiency with which many migrants coordinated efforts towards economic solvency or prosperity, via kitchenettes and street markets, for example.

In her dissertation on "the economic lives of black immigrants," Rebbeca Tesfai explains that, despite the effects of "spatial assimilation," which should see black migrants moving away from poor black neighborhoods as their socioeconomic statuses change and their acquisition of Standard American English (SAE) increases, many African migrants remain in black neighborhoods years after migration (2013). A similar "voluntary" segregation among African Americans has been well-documented (Darden and Kamel 2000 in Tesfai 2013), but recent findings on black migrants really help emphasize the ways in which spaces are profoundly raced - ways that secede from, or at least supersede, class. Theories like "place stratification" compliment georaciality by helping to explain how racial hierarchies frequently map rather impeccably onto physical space and suggest that the structural "push" – or shove – into black spaces African migrants experience (i.e., structural anti-black racism and racist attitudes vis-à-vis antiblackness) may be more salient than any "pull" factors that draw these folks to same-raced associates (Tesfai 2013). Other theories note simultaneous divergent phenomena, such as some black migrants choosing to racially de-segregate upon achieving a certain socioeconomic statuses or SAE proficiency, and suggest that the national

and ethnic make-up of the pre-existing black communities in a given space largely determines levels of segregation (Tesfai 2013). In particular, Tesfai's findings suggest that black migrants who migrate to locations where the "foreign-born black population is predominantly African" are more likely to move away when their statuses change whereas those newcomers who settle into communities largely inhabited by Caribbean- and other-born black migrants tend to stay.

Clearly, there is still a great deal of ethnographic work to be done to gain a better sense of the range and degree of the various "push and pull" factors at play in African migrants' residential patterns. In any case, the recurring pattern of newcomers from Africa situating themselves within or in close proximity to already-established black spaces is typified in the Philadelphia area, especially among Liberian immigrants. In Philadelphia proper, the southwest section of the city saw its first African American community during World War II and experienced a sizeable increase in throughout the 1980s and 90s, three decades after large sections of the area had been deemed "slums" by the city. Less than two decades after the African American community was settled in the area, certain neighborhoods would again be marked as blighted (Kingsessing in 2002 and Eastwick in 2006) under the same "urban renewal" initiatives that gutted the communities in the 50s (Krulikowski 2014). These neighborhoods would continue to struggle economically and yet, would also become the site of relocation for numerous African migrants.

The resettlement of thousands of Liberian refugees (the earliest group included a large number of people from the Mandinke ethnic group targeted by Charles Taylor's regime) to the Philadelphia area in the 1990's gave birth to its large Liberian community which now makes up about one-third of the African immigrant population in the area (Associated Press 2014). Commonly referred to as "Little Africa" (Associated Press 2014), or "Little Liberia" by some, a large portion of Southwest Philadelphia (the blocks surrounding Woodland Avenue between 57th and Island Avenue, approximately) has become a kind of "ethnic enclave" for Liberian and Sierra Leonean transnationals among their mostly African American neighbors. A mural on 57th street titled "Bridging the Gap" visualizes and celebrates the meeting of two connected but distinctly different communities (see image) and was created in 2008 by the collective efforts of African and African American community members in response to ongoing tensions that culminated ten blocks away at John Bartram High School where a "riot" between African and African Americans occurred earlier that year (http://muralarts.org/collections/projects/bridging-gap).

"Bridging the Gap" mural in Southwest Philadelphia, 2008.
http://muralarts.org/collections/projects/bridging-gap (*Photograph by Jack Ramsdale*)

Following the more recent exodus of low-income and working class African American families from West Philadelphia (a principal site of gentrification), many members of African and other migrant communities have resettled in North Abby (Jones 2011). Between 2000 and 2010, the township's white population decreased by 21% while the black population (which included African migrants) increased by 17% (Jones 2011), marking it a prime relocation site for newly arriving Liberians.

The Philadelphia area's georaciality can usefully be conceptualized in terms of a "racioscape," a tributary concept Jackson (2005) offered up to expand Arjun Appadurai's prolific *scapes* theory (1996). He explains that, in racioscapes, quintessentially represented by areas like Woodland Avenue in Southwest

Philadelphia where individuals from "far-flung corners of the African diaspora" find themselves intimately engaging with one another on a daily basis (Jackson 2005: 56), Appadurai's transnational flows are effectively jammed by racial roadblocks that reorganize social orders according to a continental American racial politics. As numerous scholars and artists have well-theorized, the process of "becoming" black (see Hall 1990; Ibrahim 2014; 2008; 2009) among African and Afro-Caribbean migrants (especially, but not exclusively) troubles notions of perspectival race and helps us sense the comprehensive nature of the globalization of race and the racialization of the globe (see Clarke and Thomas 2006). It also helps us glimpse the highly affective and political nature of intra-racial relations among US-born black folk and their African-born counterparts.

Where African migrants, especially Liberian migrants, choose (or are externally compelled) to physically place their bodies, homes, and families in Philadelphia and its surrounds may tell us a great deal about their sense of perceived and/or desired proximity to Black America. Whatever the specific combination of factors at play in each individual's decision-making process, an overarching pattern of black migrants physically sticking close to Black Americans is undeniably purposeful and strategic. And while such close proximity creates and fuels tensions by bringing difference and the pressures of surviving in a white supremacist world into stark relief, it also creates complexes of intimacy and may point to an underlying sense of shared/overlapping/competing fates between various groups.

2.3.1.1 Philly Through My Eyes

Indeed, Philadelphia's recognition as a rough, vibrant, and significantly *black* city is largely due to the scores of African American migrants (which included many of my own family members) who made their way from the Jim Crow South to its turbulent streets of promise and forever changed the tempo. Not very unlike the Americo-Liberian settlers who arrived in Liberia weighted down by the experience of normalized dehumanization and buoyed by the hope of another kind of existence, these migrants arrived in Philadelphia with little else in tow. A "ravaged neighborhood" in 1950s West Philadelphia would produce one half of one of the most prolific music producing duos in history, Kenny Gamble, who would help found the phenomenon known as "Philadelphia Soul," or "the Philadelphia Sound" (Jackson 2004).

In the 1990s, we would see Philadelphia help incubate another avant-garde black musical genre, neo-soul, by putting out artists like Jill Scott, Musiq Soulchild, Floetry, The Roots, Bilal, Maxwell, and others. With monikers like "Illy Philly" and "the Illadelph," Philadelphia's reputation as one of the *illest* cities in the black diaspora speaks in many ways to the inexplicable appeal of black suffering and the strategies of survival it generates. With an economic history and current state not very unlike Detroit, Philadelphia is a struggling major city that the mayor's office estimated to have had a 28% poverty rate across racial groups in 2015 (the highest of any major city in the US) ("The Crisis" 2015). Despite, or because of, a

disproportionate representation among the area's poorest, many black Philadelphians and locals have fashioned a way of being in the world that some outsiders (myself included) experience as poignantly hard-hitting, somber, hardy, and ingenious. Finding the pulse of this city over 6 years of residency was a difficult task for me, personally, and the inability to blend in often left me nonplussed and frustrated. In my transient childhood across the United States, Germany, and Panama, and throughout my adulthood living in New York, Richmond, and the Washington DC metro area, I had always managed to blend in and to quickly consider my place of residence "home." Philadelphia, and the Philadelphians I interacted with, did not seem keen on adopting me however, and as a perpetually homeless person, I found this hurtful. Although I felt a heaviness in the city and its people, I wanted to be a part of it because it felt familiar and because I also recognized it as a wellspring of productive rage and transformative (re)action. Mostly because of the giant visual stories splashed against walls that always manage to catch me unawares, the countless streetcorner preachers and political pundits, and the exquisite hip hop that comes out of this city, I wanted to be connected to it and to add these creations to my own story. These things, very precisely, made up the blackness I felt and loved in this "black city" and they were the things that made it feel like home to me even when its natives seemed to feel otherwise.

2.3.2 Monrovia, Liberia

Figure 2.3.2 Map of Liberia and border nations

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Located on its northern coast, Monrovia is the Republic of Liberia's most populated city, with a population of just under one million in a country of four million. The official language is English and most people in Monrovia speak Liberian English, an English-related (or Anglophone) "creolized" variety. Throughout the small western African country, roughly 20 languages are spoken but Liberian English is the operative lingua franca (Olukoju 2006; Singler 1981). Among the country's small but significant Lebanese community (estimated at around 4,000), most live in Monrovia and speak Lebanese Arabic along with Liberian English (Paye-Layleh 2005). These shopkeepers, hoteliers, restaurateurs, and importers constitute one of the largest groups of "foreigners" in the country, and appear to be followed by European and American expats working for NGOs and churches (or former missionaries or businesspersons who settled in Liberia), and immigrants from

neighboring countries like Mali and Cote D'Ivoire. Of these foreigners, only those "who {are} a Negro or of Negro descent" can apply for citizenship, per Article 27 of the nation's 1847 constitution.[5]

Liberia's ethnic demography has been the focus of political and scholarly discourse for centuries due to its peculiar naissance as a nation-state and its infamous civil war. Officially founded by free-born and formerly enslaved African Americans (with the help of the American Colonization Society and the United States government), the nation (or republic, to be precise) eventually granted citizenship to members of 16 indigenous ethnic groups living in the region (including: Bassa, Bella, Dei, Gbande, Gio (Dan), Gola, Grebo, Kissi, Kpelle, Krahn, Kru, Loma, Mandingo (Mandike, Malinke), Mende, Mano (Mah), Vai) (Nyanseor 2013; Olukoju 2006).

While the nation was still rebuilding after nearly 14 years of civil war (from 1989 to 1996 and 1999 to 2003), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) reported in 2008 that half of Liberia's citizens earned less than US$1.00 per day and almost the same number were undernourished (Greenbaum et. al 2008). Or, as Mary (a white American NGO-worker from the Midwest who worked on an agricultural project in rural Bomi County) characterized the fragile nation over a communal breakfast at the hotel/boarding

[5] The original 1847 document used the language "persons of colour" and this was changed to "any person who is Negro, or of Negro descent, born in Liberia and subject to the jurisdiction thereof" in a 1955 amendment (American Bar Association 2009).

house I shared with her and others during my 2012 visit: "Ten years later and they're still stuck in 'crisis mode' and just can't move into a 'development phase." Over our breakfast of roasted yellow yams, fried hot dogs, and mini cornbread muffins, she and another NGO worker commiserated with one another about the challenging work they faced dealing with Liberians, who they agreed were exceptionally dependent on aid and resistant to self-reliance. They seemed comfortable sharing this denigrating characterization with me, an African American woman who was there for reasons they did not seem to really grasp, because they stressed that this was the consensus among NGO workers. "Ask anyone who really works with these people," Mary said when I pushed back against the homogenizing and infantilizing conversation, and she suggested that these were not ideologically-shaped opinions but simply facts based on experiences of "those who should know" (i.e., people doing transparent and important work unlike myself).

Mary and our fellow dweller's self-stylings as experts on Liberians (and all Africans and Pakistanis, as it were) appeared to be a direct derivative of a long tradition of concurrently homogenizing and exceptionalizing African people (and other Others) without any attention to the specificities of sociopolitical histories, cultural phenomena, or current global politics (see Deborah Thomas's analysis of the ways violence in black communities is exceptionalized discursively and structurally [2011]). It also fit snugly into a genealogy of white paternalism on the continent and in other "dark" corners of the world. In an astounding five-minute narrative,

the man who had enthusiastically corroborated Mary's account of overly-dependent Liberians (after having been in the country for less than a week), matter-of-factly explained the congenital "cold nature" of Pakistani people and why this had made his agency's work in Pakistan so difficult. He compared the challenges there to those he anticipated facing in Liberia and they all turned on the troubles these various, but interrelated, "kinds of people" presented and not on the exigencies engendered by recent imperialism.

The complicated distance and subtle tension I observed between white European and American expats and black Liberian locals may have been a consequence of patronizing and pejorative perceptions like Mary's and also of local constructions of whiteness that imagined white-identified people as fundamentally different and problematic - even if economically constructive - reminding one of Jemima Pierre's painstaking account of white models of personhood in contemporary Ghana (2013). Among many other crucial interventions, Pierre's groundbreaking analysis of the complicated and variable constructions of whiteness in Ghana speaks to the ways many white expats – whether "Peace Corps whites" (or *muzungus*) or "development whites" – strategically or unwittingly cash in on their respective "possessive investment[s] in whiteness" (Lipsitz 1998) as they move about the country (Pierre 2013; 89-90). The commentaries by and about white expats that I heard during my short stay in Liberia (one month) certainly substantiated (and perhaps amplified, given Liberia's status as an "aid state") the account I would come upon a year later in Pierre's extensive ethnography about nearby Ghana.

While most of the Liberia's poorest live beyond the city limits, Monrovia, like many African urban centers, was packed with individuals struggling to survive the day-to-day. Market women were largely responsible for maintaining a bustling market on Water Street, selling locally-raised produce, homemade goods, and imported second-hand goods until the recent Ebola outbreak, which resulted in a government barricade around the West Point slum where the main market is located. Young men who made a living transporting commuters on small motorcycles (and who provided an efficient surrogate for public transportation) have also been affected by the Ebola outbreak, as many are residents of West Point or equally scanty housing and are considered "high-risk." Meanwhile, a small middle class, made up of college students from middle class families, industry professionals, government officials, and retirees helped "top off" the city's social landscape.

A motorbike taxi with two patrons zooming down Tubman Boulevard towards downtown, 2011 (*Photograph by author)*

During my time in the city, I found that its infrastructure told its history and precarious present quite well. My long walks around the city's center and around neighborhoods in Mamba Point, West Point, Gardnersville, Barnesville, Sinkor, Congotown, and Paynesville presented a vivid visual tale about a paralyzing series of events. Clean water and sanitation were enjoyed by a small percentage of Monrovia's residents (Boley 2012) at the time of this writing. In 2012, *current* (electricity) was supplied to only 0.58% of Monrovians and cost a whopping $0.43US per kilowatt hour, leaving the vast majority of businesses and middle and upper-class residents to rely on oil-run generators to power electronics and poorer families to use kerosene lamps and Chinese-manufactured LED lanterns, or "China lights," to light their homes (Lupick 2012).

The generally slow progress being made in rebuilding Liberia's infrastructure left some mystified, while others envisioned the return/recirculation of stolen capital by American corporations like Firestone and Americo-Liberian landowners and businessowners a promising start. The latter did not seem to be interested in more foreign "aid," and one older gentleman recalled that United States congresswoman Nancy's Pelosi's pledge to "turn on the lights" during her 2006 visit (Lupick 2012) echoed the emptiness of promises made by a chummy United States throughout the Cold War, as well as the devastating silence that met his and others' cries for American military assistance during the civil war. He said that what Liberia needed was foreign investment that did not stop at the "big men" but that made its way into regular folks' pockets.

As I strolled city streets or sped around in cabs (usually sandwiched between four other adults in the backseat of a midsize sedan), I was always struck when I passed charred and bullet-hole riddled "ruins" which felt like a big festering wounds demanding constant remembrance of a recent hell by every passerby, much like the skeletons of unfinished structures (see image) that scattered the beach or that sat awkwardly alongside freshly cemented cubed buildings, well-preserved stately homes with gated walls, and edifices of ornate Chinese architecture.

Donald, a 23-year-old participant, leading me around a dilapidated cement frame for an unfinished house on the beach in Sinkor, 2011 (*Photograph by author).*

2.3.2.1 Monrovia Through My Eyes

Even as people in Monrovia often spoke of the unspeakable – like watching, hearing, and smelling all of their children being murdered one after another – and even as costly water, kerosene lamps, and scattered shell-casings insisted on a "living history" that relentlessly spoke the trauma of the recent past into the present (Abu-Lughod 2010), I kept hearing about the goodness of God and the

goodness of people, along with frequent fervent testimonies to infinite possibility. Like so many nations caught between centuries of exploitation and questionable attempts at development (by local leaders and various interlopers), the unbounded sense of hope that welled up out of buoyant barefoot children while they played hard, like the drinking water that gushed from rusty communal pumps, was a genuine wonder and a consistent source of motivation for me and other others who imagine themselves change-makers - local, foreign, self-appointed or otherwise.

Many would say that it is this concomitant sense of hope and hopelessness that constitutes "urbanity" in the staunchest sense, that yields the grit and grace only cities can produce. Black urban ingenuity, easily characteristic of both Monrovia and Philadelphia – cities unequally ravished by black poverty and all that comes with it (under-resourced schools and communities, neighborhood crime, the psychological stress of deprivation, the systemic onslaught by the criminal justice system, naturalized racial microaggressions, etc.) – seems to have been a holdover from the vibrancy of a grand "yesteryear" (i.e., in the 1960s and 70s when Monrovia was a repository of Pan-African political and intellectual thought and when Philadelphia was a thumping capitol of soul music and a site of black "upward mobility"). Like Philadelphia, relentless reinventions and signs of resilience effectively rival (although, do not neutralize) the material and social effects of war and economic exploitation one constantly encounters in Monrovian life. Although an ocean apart, the varied connections between young people in Monrovia and in black urban spaces in America are substantial and such connections become the

basis for the fraught and fervent interactions that occur when Liberians and Black Americans reunite in the streets of Philadelphia and the sidewalks of its surrounds.

2.4 Participants//Young Liberians in the World

Johnetta's self-made collage of photos of herself leaving for church that she posted on Facebook, 2014 (*Photographs by unknown, collage by Johnetta*)

This project's original focus on the experiences of indigenous Liberian youth in America (as a means to explore semiotic constructions of diaspora and ethnoracial intersubjectivity) was prompted by the considerably privileged vantage point that the subject position "Liberian in America" provides to begin disentangling the multiscalar processes that produce diasporic subjectivities and transnational racialized publics like "Black Diaspora." Given the multifarious circulations of

people, ideas, and social structures that make Liberia, it is, in many ways, an archetype of Black or African Diaspora, as it came into being and persists today by way of simultaneously bloody/redemptive, traditional/newfangled, and local/global phenomena. And while people are not essentially linked to nation or place, this study presupposes that political histories do get mapped onto bodies and subjectivities in meaningful ways, making those who understand themselves as indigenous Liberians particularly invaluable pedagogues of racialized, ethnicized, nationalized, and classed notions of difference and belonging.

The young people who are at the core of this study had lived in the United States between two and seven years at the start of the project. Before selecting the main participants, I had observed classrooms and generally "hung out" (see Ibrahim's "hanging out methodology" in 2014: 18-23) at a large local high school for two years, hovering close to English Language Learners and their teachers. Throughout my time in the school, certain individuals demonstrated a willingness to tell their stories and share their lives with my colleagues and me – inside and beyond the walls of the school. The three young people around whom this project centers - Victoria, Johnetta and Brian - along with the other participants who I met at different points in my four-year tenure at the school, were selected because they seemed eager to talk with me and together, they represented a wide range of backgrounds, interests, hobbies, and talents, and also illustrated diverse views on and experiences with blackness in the United States and/or in Africa. Their socioeconomic situations and family dynamics did not vary drastically, however.

Most were from working class and lower middle class families (post-migration) and most resided in "non-nuclear" families, primarily female headed (i.e., with one or no biological parents, an aunt, or grandmother). Altogether, they appeared to provide a reasonable representation of young indigenous Liberian young people in the area and, more broadly, of young people from western Africa in cities around the world who are co-constructing and situating selves within particular colonial histories and an ecumenically globalized present.

The 10-15 other young people who participated in the study came to do so through organic meeting on the streets and sidewalks of Philadelphia and Monrovia, or via shared networks on social media. I would tell them about my project and ask if I could interview them or hang out with them a bit. With the exception of one young woman, who I only met briefly and then relayed the interview request to through a mutual acquaintance, no one ever refused my request and most went out of their way to meet with me, introduce me to friends, and to stay in contact.

2.5 Digging in the Crates // Alternative Artifacts and Archives

As I have mentioned, such "traditional" ethnographic methods were triangulated by approximately three years of virtual ethnography that focused on the participants' interactions via social media (Facebook, primarily and Instagram, as well). These virtual ethnographic methods attended to their verbal and visual discursive

practices and required regular reviews of the participants' Facebook timelines. Effectively, taking on this space and the interactions that transpired in (and around) meant that a remarkable kind of "archive" was being laid at my feet: a multimodal, illimitable and living and breathing archive that was being *partially* curated by the research subjects themselves.

To regard Facebook likes and Instagram posts and Vine or Youtube viewing histories as archival, I have to borrow a bit from Derrida's deconstruction of the archive and consider the private publicness and complex permanence of online interactions (1995). As the English for ELLs teacher of my primary participants once shared during a class discussion, he was shocked and unsettled to find that when he returned to Facebook in 2008 after having "deleted" his account almost five years prior, all of his photographs, posts, and comments were immediately restored. He shared the story as a caveat for taking care when posting things online because "they never go away" and become a permanent part of a digital archive that we will never have the authority to fully erase, even if we maintain some control over who can see them. The veritable "public records" created by individuals' social media pages document the past (often, the very, very recent past) in ways that problematize notions of "history" and "public." For example, Facebook immediately chronicalizes new posts/status updates and any comments on them, providing a constantly-updated time-stamp that counts back from the present (e.g., "Posted 10 hours ago").

Derrida's dense deliberations on the archive posit it as a thing that cannot exist without an external entity to acknowledge it and place it in conversation with other phenomena, that is to say, something must be there to gather it up and collect it. This helps us distinguish between internalized memories and the materialization, and publicization, of memory. He states, "There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside" (11). So, from Derrida's deconstruction, there's no institutionalization of an archive, or formal historicity, if it can't be re-presented (or provide an assured "possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression" [11]). When it was announced in 2011 that the Library of Congress was attempting to archive Twitter for posterity, some began to look at the social media site through new eyes: as a veritable depository of (American-centered) popular culture. For many of us, social media as an archive was obvious from the moment it began taking form. As an early and eager participant in social media life (who joined the social network site CollegeClub in 1996 and was among the first members of Facebook in 2004), I sensed that the new technologies of sociality and subject-formation that it was introducing would be pretty important. MySpace's highly-customizable interface of self-designed pages, complete with soundtracks that welcomed guests when they "entered" your space, was not only advantageous for emerging artists, it provided a very satisfying way of multimodally representing an idealized self. While Facebook's capacity for personalization is not structural and is only content-based, it still appears to be a

rather fulfilling way to communicate and self-project for many people. Because its users are aware of their publics (which they have cultivated with various degrees of care and effort), we can assume that postings are meant to be co-signed (read, "liked," or commented on), or possibly repeated or reproduced in some way ("shared" on Facebook or mentioned in a later conversation). In some way, these posts are meant to be experienced by another and are meant to be remembered. As Facebook users like myself and my participants archive our lives online textually, visually, musically, and filmically (selecting what is we want to be remembered as or as related to, even if only for the next few minutes or days), we engage in a kind of self-memorialization that constantly acknowledges our physical mortality and the passing of time and that provides a kind of fail-safe immortality.

While I did not track all of the participants' responses to others' postings, I did consider their responses to comments on their own postings to see how they reacted to others' assessments of their selected representations. To capture verbal exchanges, I took screenshots of postings and subsequent comments and designed a naming schema for these newly fashioned artifacts based on the participant's name, date of posting, and general content. In truth, many posts that colored my interpretations of other interactions were not documented but were applied to generalizations I make about participants (like if I say she or he cusses or is very religious). Many of these postings were images of the participants shot by participants (i.e., "selfies") and I paid especially close attention to these,

downloading and logging ones almost every one posted.[6] The participants also posted many images and short videos that had been widely circulated on numerous social media and media sharing sites ("memes") and the stillshots often contained verbal language embedded in the image (see Figure 2:5:1). As I plan to explore in a later project, the selection of memes and the commentaries that followed are a major analytic point of interest as they appeared, overwhelmingly, to address ethnic or racial issues.

2.5.1 Virtual ethnography and visual texts

As I mentioned, such "traditional" ethnographic methods were braced by approximately three years of virtual ethnography that focused on the participants' digital lives. These virtual ethnographic methods attended to their verbal and visual discursive practices and required regular reviews of the participants' Facebook timelines. I did not track their responses to others' postings but did analyze their responses to comments on their own postings. To capture verbal exchanges, I took screenshots of postings and subsequent comments and designed a naming schema based on participant's name, date of posting, and general content. Many of these postings were images of the participants shot by participants (i.e., "selfies") and I paid especially close attention to these, downloading and logging ones almost every one posted.[7] The participants also posted many images and short

[6] I also did not capture or archive many images that I deemed redundant.

[7] I excluded images that I deemed redundant.

videos that had been widely circulated on numerous social media and media sharing sites ("memes") and the still shots often contained verbal language embedded in the image (see Figure 3.5.1). These textually mediated and visually mediated objects were collected (via screenshots and downloads when possible) and organized according to poster and thematic content.

As I explore in later chapters, the selection of memes and the commentaries that followed became a major analytic matter of interest and they appeared to overwhelmingly address ethnic or racial issues. Naming, storing, and sorting the thousand-plus images generated from this virtual ethnography was a daunting task that generated approaches I found myself modifying every few months. In the end, I stored the images in digital folders on my desktop and backed up the files on an external hard drive. The images were organized by the participant featured in it or by the participant who created it (only two images required double storage because they featured one key participant and were shot by another). To analyze this data, I would visually scan the photos in each folder for relevant recurrent themes (e.g., despondency, silliness/quirkiness, sexiness, piousness, etc.) and copy and paste corresponding images into a new folder identified by the theme. As one would expect, the themes and the images associated with them were repeatedly modified throughout the writing and analysis process. Also, the consistent production of images was difficult to ignore, making the boundaries around "fieldwork" conspicuously, and at times, irritatingly, porous. As I write this sentence, at least one of the prolific young people who headlines this study is

posting a noteworthy image of him/herself or is circulating a telling meme that flags the historical moment and their (his/her) relationship to it.

Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T. L. Taylor (2012) explain that virtual ethnographic methods are fundamentally no different than traditional ethnography except that the field sites are "virtual worlds." The expectation that an ethnographer engage these worlds as they would any other "lifeworld" of subjects (e.g., participating in daily practices, spending an extended amount of time in the field site, being transparent about one's intent, etc.) guides most virtual ethnography and certainly guided this one. For me, digital space was just another social space in which my participants lived. Boellstorff and crew also note that adaptations of methodology according to unique field sites occur in ways comparable to ethnography in non-virtual spaces and this was surely the case in my study. For example, I initially began the research with a self-imposed stipulation that I would not develop relationships with individuals who I had not met in "real" life, but the patent relevance of one Monrovia-based hip hop artist's work in my overall project compelled me to reach out to him and to begin a Facebook-mediated ethnographic relationship (Pochano from Chapter 6). I did not know if I would be returning to Monrovia before the completion of my dissertation but I decided to reach out to him and after more than a year of interacting with him online, have come to consider him a valuable participant.

Many have also noted that while "the digital" may present new technologies for accomplishing various interactional, social, cultural, political, and economic projects, the actual projects themselves may not be particularly novel (Niezen 2005; Reyes 2014). In Chapter 6, I consider the ways a digitally-mediated racialized transnationalism urges us to re-imagine many "stay behind" individuals in the African/Black Diaspora (i.e., Africans who have not left the continent) as transnational subjects, or "digital migrants" as I refer to them. Not only do transnational political economic structures and processes help shape their material lives and the ways they understand themselves in the world, many Africans' constant engagement with transnational discourses via social media and traditional "mass media" (TV, radio, and newsprint) also nurture transnational subjectivities.

For many members of younger generations in urban centers like Monrovia, social media often functions as a veritable and salient social space through which they are enculturated and through which they contribute to various cultural forms and practices. Because many of the Monrovia-based participants in this project had actually lived in the United States or other nations at some point in their lives (one had just returned to Liberia from the very neighborhood in which the study was rooted), they were unequivocally, transnational subjects. I posit that many of the others (but not all), were effectively "transnationalized" via their frequent engagements with transnational media and individuals.

As an inquiry into the making and conditioning of transnational/diasporic intersubjectivity, a phenomenon that is partially inaccessible to spectators and that is insufficiently depicted in words, visual texts, in the form of autobiographical images circulated via social media (i.e., "selfies) and other visually-mediated texts, deeply informed the epistemological structure of this study. As a prevalent mode of self-representation, the creation and circulation of memes and selfies by my participants allowed me to put my own written interpretations of the participants' activities in conversation with their own visual narratives, helping to create what Faye Ginsburg called a "parallax effect" (1995). The strategic self-styling and self-positioning realized through the digital components of their lifeworlds often rendered their bodies semiotic texts that they carefully wrote and edited in selfies and videos. And while the full range of these digital narratives did not fully democratize the ethnographic project, their inclusion attempts to address age-old disciplinary concerns about representation, reflexivity, and ethnographic authority (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

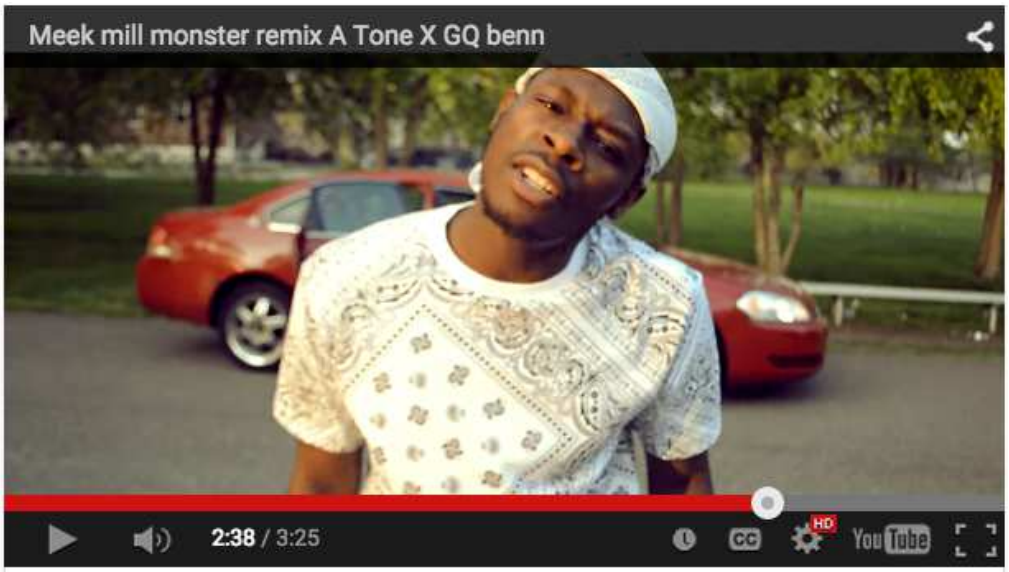
Facebook® collage made by Johnetta of her outfit, 2012 (*Photographs by Johnetta and unknown)*

2.5.2 Lyrical texts

Throughout the course of this project, numerous songs have presented themselves as relevant texts that intermittently served as context, co-text, and/or central text, and that appeared integral to understanding the words and actions of important figures. For example, one of my primary participants, Brian, became a rapper a year or so into the project so I treated his songs lyrics as performed speech and it figured into the ways I read his other actions and words.

Throughout this text, I integrate musical texts (almost exclusively hip hop) as not only relevant, but crucial, narratives and *theoretical* contributions. I place these

texts in nonsymmetrical conversation with formal scholarly texts (at the apex and center), official state texts, personal written and oral narratives, and many other kinds of text. Because of their overlapping artistic and didactic natures, some of my interpretations and applications of pertinent hip hop lyrics throughout the text may feel a bit gauche, but I believe that these analyses provide access to facets of affect and theory that scholarly and state discourse and everyday talk cannot.



Screenshot of a music vide featuring and posted by Brian on Facebook on numerous occassions via Youtube, 2015 (*Video shot by unknown*)

2.6 Analysis and Writing//Hybrid Hermenuetics

2.6.1 Discussing Discourse and Sussing Signs: Semiotic Anthropological Analysis

Analyzing the vast amounts of data garnered from this study began while I was conducting fieldwork and seeps into this very moment of writing. Because the

boundaries of "the field" were particularly ambiguous in this study, as I lived near my participants for a full year after the proposed end of field work and our lives remain interconnected via social media and texting, specific dates for field work are equally muddled. Puncturing the boundary between the field and writing (Kisliuk 1997) was also a methodological effort to create a space in which some well-developed analyses could be evaluated by participants and allow for a more collaborative project. As I developed theories about what was happening in their lives – and about how those events related to larger and older events – I would informally present them to my three primary participants (Johnetta, Brian, and Victoria) for feedback (via Facebook messaging or in person). Johnetta and Victoria were usually the only ones to respond and when Brian did, it was often a cursory "Sounds good" or "Yeah, that makes sense.[8]"

All information gathered from the field (e.g., field notes; transcripts of recorded data, video logs, phone texts; emails; screenshots and transcripts of social media messaging and posts; along with other relevant texts and artifacts such as news stories, participants' personal writing, state documents, school documents, school work, and historical documents) were logged, dated, and briefly annotated for easy identification. Much of this annotation also contained constantly-evolving codes (or themes) that marked re-occurring and/or relevant terms, topics, or behaviors. Through a process of reviewing and recursively coding data (in data log,

[8] This was in response to my frequent concluding query "Does that make sense?"

transcripts, and field notes), I was able to collocate data that related to core and subsidiary themes as I wrote (e.g., race [blackness, whiteness, Latinidad]; ethnicity [African Americans, Liberians] gender [masculinity, femininity] etc.).

Concerned primarily with the ways social context helps condition, and is partially conditioned by, meaning-making in interaction (i.e., pragmatic semiotics), this dissertation integrates theoretical and analytical concepts semiotic anthropology, discourse analysis, interactional analysis, Africana Studies theory and other social theory, to produce analyses modeled after Michael Silverstein's "semiotics of culture," which posits signification as conceptualization and communication, and therefore as the basis of cultural production (Silverstein 2004).[9]

In Mary Bucholtz's groundbreaking ethnography on the racialized linguistic styles of white students in a diverse California high school, *White Kids: Language, Race, and Styles of Youth Identity* (2011), she explains that examining how people co-construct identities demands attention to the linguistic and discursive structure of a speech event (via methods from interactional analysis) *and* to the ways structures function as "symbols of social meaning" via the semiotic analytic concept "indexicality" (8). Silverstein's semiotics of culture reintroduces Charles Sanders Peirce's "indexicality" (Jakobson et. al 1990; Agha 2007) to help illustrate how ideology and linguistic forms become tethered, or how we come to imbue forms

[9] My approach has also been influenced in a general sense by Umberto Eco's "pragmatic semiotics" (Hong, Lurie, and Tanaka 1993).

with meaning extending beyond their referential capacity, making them serves as indices for other "contextually specific meaning{s}" (Bucholtz 2011: 8) such as social personae and characteristics, chronotopes, social ideologies, etc. Silverstein suggests that we "listen to language" in order to "hear culture" (2004: 621) and explains how metapragmatic commentary (talk about behavior) and indexicality serve as helpful hermeneutics for examining the ways meaning is dialogically made in interaction (by both presupposing and producing social realities large and small [Silverstein 2005]).

In the following analyses, this approach entailed marking (or "coding") verbal, paraverbal, and visual signs or whole interactions that directly and indirectly index phenomena related to race, difference, and belonging: Johnetta sitting with other African-born students in the cafeteria; Aaliyah saying that Jamaicans speak "African English;" Brandon posting a series of photos of new Puma® sneakers on Facebook and Instagram; Victoria telling she is dating a Korean American classmate; Tamba winking at me while he lists his favorite American rappers; or, Adima asking me if she is African or American.

Examining metapragmatic talk and other analyses of indexicality make "interdiscursivity" a necessary analytic for understanding how a discursive event marshals in various scales of meaning by integrating itself (or its certain relevant parts) into a larger semiotic schema (Fairclough 1989; Silverstein 2005). Rather than emphasize the relationship between structures across texts as intertextuality

emphasizes (e.g., the use of a lexeme or syntactical configuration), or focus on text-internal or discourse-internal relationships (i.e., intratextual or intradiscursive), interdiscursivity is concerned with the discursive (interactional) work performed by individuals to imbue particular forms/structures with social meanings by rendering them indexical of (or possibly iconic of) other discursive event(s) (Silverstein 2005). In a sense, interdiscursivity speaks to the ways through which signs become indexical of some social meaning in a given domain by drawing meaning from discourses beyond a specific communicative event (Wortham and Reyes 2015). And, as some of the following analyses will demonstrate, interdiscursivity is also the process through which a signs becomes indexical of a particular human kind, or social persona (in our case, a model of black personhood), allowing for its "enregisterment", or, its incorporation into a way of speaking (or "linguistic repertoire") indexical of a figure or model of personhood (i.e., a "register") (Agha 2003; 2007).

Because social inferences are frequently (but not always) linked to linguistic forms and practices, they are constituted by, and simultaneously constituitive of, "language ideology" (Woolard and Scheiffelin 1994). Functioning as both an unconscious system of signals and as a set of conscious discursive practices, language ideology encompasses underlying predispositions and conscious attitudes about language (whole systems and individual features) and speakers (Woolard and Scheiffelin 1994). One way to think about the ways in which these two spheres are operationalized is through Silverstein's first-order and second-order

indexicality (1976) and Ochs's direct and indirect indexicality (1990). First-order indexicality is closely related to one's attitudes towards different linguistic forms and involves an uninterrupted correlation between a language form and a specific social group, social role, or characterization (Silverstein 1976). Similarly, direct indexicality is "visible to discursive consciousness" (Hill 2007:271) and involves a rationalization for one's own language practices and assessment of others' practices (Ochs 1996; Ochs and Schieffelin 1990). Second-order and indirect indexicality depict a more circuitous relationship between the linguistic practice and the social group/role or characterization that it indexes. The act of mocking a dialect illustrates both forms by functioning on a direct or first-order level as a way of identifying with the social group or role being simulated (e.g., when asked about instances of mocking Spanish, participants in Hill's study explained that it was an inclusive practice showing that they were familiar with Spanish-speakers) and on an indirect or second-order level, as an unconscious way of emphasizing difference and distance (Hill 2007). Silverstein explains that analysts of ideology should concern themselves with second-order indexicality (1976) to get at broader beliefs about social groups, requiring diligent discourse and interactional analysis strategies (Blommaert 2005; Fairclough 1989; Gumperz 1982; Wodak and Meyer 2001). Wassink and Dyer (2004) expound on this suggestion in their discussion of how looking at second-order indexicality can bring to the surface underlying class and gender ideologies. To carry out such a project, they collected and analyzed speakers' metadiscursive (and therefore, metapragmatic) commentaries about

particular language practices and mined this meta-talk for its subtexts and its interactional, or lived, implications. In parts of this text, I employ a similar strategy for stratifying meaning in the layers of participants' discourses about language, race, and ethnicity that I examine. The multimodal analyses performed in some of the following chapters consider production and uses of salient linguistic practices, fashion choices, and foodways as ways of pointing to relevant social phenomena (that is to say, phenomena related to ethnoracial difference and belonging).

Silverstein's and others' theorizing of "interdiscursivity" and "intertextuality" (2005; Scollon and Scollon 2003; Scollon 2014) are also central to my analyses because they allow me to begin connecting the dots between discourses of varying scale and between the varying roles of participants and texts (or text tokens) in these discursive events. Distinct from intertextuality, which attends to connections between individual "texts" (i.e., utterances, speech events, songs, images, etc.) or within a given text, interdiscursivity addresses relationships between "genres, situations, registers, social practices or communities of practice" (Scollon 2014: 253). This means, for example, that I can trace and analyze an invocation of a mass-mediated "Save the Children" development discourse as a layer of a broader social Darwinist discourse than has been "entextualized" (via television commercials, namely) and subsequently recontextualized in a young Liberian's talk about a peer's misperceptions about Africa.

Another important way that meaning travels across discourses and texts via indexicality is through the process of "entextualization" (Bauman and Briggs 1990; 2009; Silverstein and Urban 1996) which converts a sign into a discrete and bounded unit of indexical meaning that can be extracted from its original context and recontextualized to do wide-ranging semantic labor (Park and Bucholtz 2009). For example, when the extemporaneous verbal stylings of a Chicago teen were circulated via a Vine[10] she posted that quickly went viral, the phrase *on fleek* was effectively entextualized when it was extracted from Peaches Monroee's raving review of her freshly-groomed eyebrows and used by Nicki Minaj to describe her vagina ("Kitty on fleek" [Minaj and Knowles 2014]) and by IHOP® to describe their signature offerings ("Pancakes on fleek[11]") (Kutner 2015). Similarly, when a female Liberian transnational student called out "She gotta donk!" as her friend (also a Liberian young woman) was walking across the classroom, she was recontextualizing the already entextualized US-hip hop-originated term *donk* from a popular Soulja Boy lyric at the time to call favorable attention to her friend's derriere (Way 2008).

Although I privilege verbal language in some of the analyses, I also apply a phenomenology-oriented interactional analysis to distill phenomena that seemed to speak directly to subject-formation or "identity work" (Goffman 1981), or more

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[10] Vine® is a social media website where members post short, looping videos. The Google® meta tag reads: "Vine is the best way to see and share life in motion. Create short, beautiful, looping videos in a simple and fun way for your friends and family to see."

[11] https://twitter.com/ihop/status/524606157110120448

broadly, constructions of "intersubjectivity" (Jackson 2005). Informed by Irving Goffman's interactional analysis, I attended to some paraverbal and nonverbal cues (like body comportment, turn-taking, pauses, repairs, intonation, gaze, laughter, and gesture), especially those that appeared to significantly impact "participation frameworks" (how interlocutors positioned themselves and one another in an interaction) and manipulations of "footing" and "stance" (or how one cues changes in they are positioning oneself in relation to interlocutors and utterances) (Goffman 1981; Agha 2007). Together, these methods helped me "read" the complex ways participants related to the content of their words, their interlocutors, and to events beyond the time and space in which the conversations occurred (i.e., macrosocial "orders of interactionality" [Silverstein 2004: 623]).

The following inquiries amplify a rather hushed dialogue between semiotic and interactional theory/analysis and Africana Studies (Black Studies) theory that speaks of the making, meaning, and materiality of "blackness" as the life of black signs (i.e., black as a racial category, black bodies, and black subject(ivitie)s).

2.7 Black Like Me: A note on hyper-reflexive, semi-native anthropology

For me, this project is more than the quarrying of some social and ontological facets of "racecraft" (Fields and Fields 2012) (although it is that, faithfully) and it is not just an audit of, or verdict against, white supremacy. It is, in all intents and purposes, a move towards healing (myself and others) by adding a small

component in the ongoing collective effort to "prove" the ubiquity and iniquity of antiblackness and anti-black racism - an old hat project that is as lamentable and imperative today as it was when folks like Phyllis Wheatley ([1773] in Wheatley 1989), Olaudah Equiano ([1789] in Equiano and Sollors 2001), and David Walker ([1830] 1997) offered up their fraught poetic and political treatises on black humanity in the 18th and 19th centuries. Moreover, I see fugitively cultivating a construable and possibly, cherished, Self amidst categorical assertions of one's inferiority as an equally doleful and astonishing project - especially when such assertions are constantly and concretely made with shackles, billboards, nooses, laws, curricula, epithets, misrepresentations, and bullets. Making a self in a black body amid insidious subtexts and side glances that "speak" your insufferability without sound or form makes one's yearning for and aversion to darkness not only figurative but literal as well. By routinely sharing with my participants my own experiences, my interpretations of their actions, and my theories about the world in general, I relentlessly invited my participants to (re)turn the ethnographic gaze onto me and onto their social worlds to contribute to this telling of the ways we make and inhabit black subjectivity in this moment. This practice of inviting them to "study back" (Jackson 2013: 55), along with treating their words, selfies, and actions as primary texts to be read and interpreted, provided a means to charter their theories and orientations (or, my construals of them, in any case) into the overall narrative. These methodological practices also served as the primary means

through which I conducted an "embodied ethnography" and resisted the rapidly dissipating expectation of producing a master narrative about a distanced other.

Far from presenting itself as an empirical project, this inquiry transparently presupposes love and bias and a longing for social justice in every act of perception and representation. The ethnography utilizes real life "data" (i.e., the observed and reported events of real people's lives) that have been re-experienced (and therefore, filtered) through my sensory organs, predispositions, sedimented pain, ego, and professional objectives. Beyond that, the aspects of their lives about which I'm most concerned, intersect directly with my own life and subjectivity, making this project *almost* as much an "auto-ethnography" as an ethnography about how fellow black-bodied people navigate an anti-black world. As literary scholar Emma Rees cogently stated in an article for the *Times Higher Education,* "Auto-ethnography goes quite beyond a process merely of inscribing the "I" into the research. It is also – crucially – about how that research comes to inscribe itself into us" (2015: para 3). Beyond the intentions and resultant analyses, the actual ethnographic experience was a veritable "intersubjective collision" (Jackson 2010) in which a delicate dance of orienting to one another and consequently, re-orienting to ourselves, became something that mattered more and more to me as time progressed. While I don't use a great deal of words (or images) to speak explicitly or specifically to the auto-ethnographic aspects of the project, this sensibility is interwoven throughout my descriptions and interpretations.

Crastal P, a 20-something-year-old rapper and entrepreneur in Monrovia, and me in his home on the beach in Sinkor, 2011 *(Photographs by Donald)*

Because I had come to terms with the subjective nature of scientific research (social science research, especially) early on, I shared as many of the predispositions and objectives as I could cognitively access with my participants. That swift acceptance of the unavoidable subjective nature of research was thanks to an introduction to ethnography through a course designed by highly reflexive and uber-critical scholars at the New School for Social Research and to the modeling of reflexive and rigorous scholarship of my advisors at the University of Pennsylvania (although their applications of this orientation may not have been as heavy-handedly "mesearchy" as my own).

Towards conducting a sincere ethnography (Jackson 2005; 2010), I did not hesitate to tell my participants the "real" reasons why I wanted to do this research. I told

them what I thought was unjust and toxic in the world and what I found useful and hopeful. Many of these things changed shape over the course of our relationships and I would share their countless permutations. I also shared the questions that plagued me (like whether or not equity would ever be possible in America for black and brown people). They offered constructive responses or sincerely shared my nescience. Sometimes they treated my convictions and summaries of others' scholarship like lessons and other times, they corrected me or explained to me what I (or the scholar) did not get right. They knew that I understood myself to be connected to them through race and culture and that I also understood myself (and other African Americans) as significantly different from them. We talked about these things quite a bit and together, got a better sense of my quasi-nativeness (Jacobs-Huey 2002; Narayan 1993; Jackson 2005) and what that might mean for this project.

I think they like(d) and respect(ed) me and I know I do them. Sometimes I annoyed them and embarrassed them. I am older than them (just a little younger than their parents) and am considered "well-educated" and these two factors alone seemed to warrant a high level of respect (on principal) according to them. However, such enculturated and institutionalized criteria of respect/honor quickly wither when a certain kind of intimacy is cultivated and the veneer of social roles is removed. They rode in my dirty car and experienced my mediocre driving, ate at my cute and cluttered apartment, heard my constant dating woes, laughed at my "baby crazy" talk (and one charitably, and teasingly, offered to share her newborn son with me).

In general, they bore witness to my constant suturing of wounds. As I conducted this ethnography on their experiences of becoming, they saw me very much in the throes of my own becoming.

Meanwhile, I watched them hold down demanding jobs and graduate from high school, successfully manage long-term relationships, matriculate into community college and plan their futures, launch music careers, become parents, among many other impressive and respect-worthy things. So while the balance of power was usually in my favor (as far as intellectual authority), changing conditions consistently re-syncopated any student-teacher or elder-youth dynamic that would structurally grant me authority in many contexts. The most pertinent example is when Victoria gave birth to a beautiful baby boy and was repositioned as "mother" while I was "childless" and openly impatient about my own transition to parenthood. In addition to the social meanings assigned these positions ("mother" and "childless woman") by the patriarchal gender norms that inform both American and Liberian societies, this shift significantly changed our relationship because it allowed her to become one of my many supporters and guides as I prepare for parenthood. Johnetta frequently made me question my maturity as well, with her unshakeable sensibleness. To avoid her admonishment, I put as much effort into hiding my smoking from her as I did hiding it from my own mom. Brian's infallible and effortless "coolness" often had me emphasizing my own coolness (via my vast, but somewhat antiquated, hip hop literacy) in the hopes that

he would affirm it. I relied heavily upon him and his friends to tutor me on Liberian hip hop and hip hop by Liberian artists.

And, sometimes, I told them that I loved them. Or, maybe I didn't "tell" them explicitly, but I acted like I love them because I did (do). I have not been conflicted about feeling the love I feel for them, as years of working with young people and loving most of them after a short time prepared me to expect the same with Johnetta, Victoria, Brian, Ernie, Frankie, and others, but I did force myself to mine the possible motivations for this love. I was concerned that I pitied these young people or that I thought them children and myself a parent. When I realized that I was fully present to their complete personhood and adulthood, and that I actually felt more deferent to them than parental, I began to worry that I was romanticizing them, and young people in general. After some time, I settled down with the belief (i.e., hope) that my reasons for loving them, and my reasons for wanting to do this work, were not about saving anyone, nor were they as motivated by my own self-making and identity politics as I had suspected, but they seemed to be driven by a "politics of correction" (Dominguez 2000: 362) rooted in a "politics of love" (2000; Jackson 2005:225).

Virginia Dominguez has said, "Whatever the case, even when we reflect on our positions as researchers and contemplate the epistemological and ethical dilemmas of our work, we tend to mute the real expression of love when we do feel it" (368). While I tried to examine my love throughout this journey, I tried not to mute it in

the following chapters. Following this politics of correction, I see my (and Betsy Rymes' and Cathy Cohen's and H. Samy Alim's and others') more generous and deferent leanings towards young people as moves to expand and unsettle prevalent discourses about adolescents and "new adults" that tend to patronize, chide, or ignore (via a kind of denial of validity) their beliefs and practices [Rymes 2011]).

My personal experience as a dark-skinned black little girl and young woman growing up in the United States, Germany, and Panama, along with those shared by and observed of the countless young black people of all hues whom I have had the blessing of teaching, mentoring, and friending over the past fifteen years, compound the memories and visions passed along by my parents, grandparents, and generational peers. My participants' experiences and those of their ancestors and current family members are also crucial media and I like to imagine the inevitably of some shared ancestors (given my family's lineage from the "Rice Coast" region of western Africa of which present-day Liberia is the center) (Carney 2001; Littlefield 1991)).

These first and second-hand experiences, bolstered by the theorizing of great thinkers past and present, collectively testify to the perpetual exigency of unpacking and legitimizing black suffering. It is through this kind of undertaking that the threadbare concept of "unpacking" finds a precise congruity, as blackness has historically functioned as a kind of ontological baggage that bows the backs to which it is strapped, even as individuals brilliantly repurpose it as a repository of

the past and an infinite and ever-changing wellspring of self-making. This was certainly the case in colonial and early Liberia, when settlers emphasized blackness[12] as a stratified ontogenetic possibility. We exploit these heavy loads to anchor us to being and to fuel us in becoming. Because of this shared labor, regardless of which stories we choose to tell ourselves of what has happened before, most of us come to understand the past as the primary mechanism through which we experience the present and imagine possible futures (dystopic, utopic, or other).

2.8 Circulation and Outreach

While this text earnestly engages with theory around historical and contemporary meanings and uses of blackness and with abstractions around subjectivity, at the end of the day, the project attempts to dissect and historicize the very real tensions and ties that characterize Liberian-Black American relations in schools and communities across the country. It is vitally important to me that this work not be confined to scholarly conversations and that it also circulates among community members and organizers, educators, and policymakers.

[12] I find it necessary to stress that I am not suggesting that Liberia's black settlers imported the concept of race or blackness because indigenous Liberians' encounters with European traders were unquestionably entrenched in, and expressed through, European and American racial logics (Guannu 1985).

In addition to frequently sharing epigrammatic analyses with my participants, I have been fortunate enough to informally share my findings (and newly generated questions and concerns) with members of the Liberian immigrant community in the Philadelphia area. In the near future, I hope to begin formally sharing findings with community members and organizers, educators, and policymakers through talks, workshops, and possibly, a co-curated digital photographic exhibition. While I acknowledge some didactic value in sharing work that facilitates a more nuanced understanding of tensions and ties that make Black Diaspora, my motivation for sharing the project mainly derives from a desire to collaboratively develop research-informed programming and curricula with community members and educators that will address these issues in material ways.

CHAPTER 3 – THE POT AND THE KETTLE: BLACK SETTLER COLONIALISM AND LIBERIAN MODELS OF PERSONHOOD

Straight from the bottom
this the belly of the beast
From a peasant to a prince to a motherfuckin' king

- Kendrick Lamar "King Kunta"

3.1 Introduction

As the only official colony in United States history, and one of few veritable examples of same-race settler colonialism in the modern world, Liberia's relationship with the United States has been long and tumultuous. Not long after the first ships (headed by white American Colonization Society members and loaded with members of the free black gentry and recently emancipated Black Americans) landed on its shores in the early 19th century, the seeds of an imminent caste system were planted with the instantiation of the first Black American-cum-Americo-Liberian governor in 1841, and were later sowed when Liberia declared itself an independent nation in 1848 (Clegg 2004; Dunn 2009).

Conditioned agents themselves, Americo-Liberians drew from chronotopes of modernity (and inexorably, primitivity) for their own self-(re)making (Hall 1990) in the new land and maintained political and economic dominance by constructing a de facto caste system which relegated indigenous Liberians to the lowest strata of agricultural, industrial, and domestic labor until the 1980 coup led by Samuel Doe

(Sesay 1992). In 1926, a globalizing Firestone Tire and Rubber Company® would start one of the world's largest rubber plantations in Liberia and subject its indigenous workers to decades of underpayment and unsafe work conditions (Sirleaf 2009), thereby playing a pivotal role in binding relations of production to ethnic-based social relations and creating salient ethnoclasses.

Through late capital, a theatrical and tragic Cold War, 14 years of civil war, and many other phenomena, the peculiar "intimacies" (Stoler 2002) of settler colonialism have surreptitiously intertwined the lives of the colonizer and colonized in Liberia and in the metropole. In earlier times, the linkages were transparent: the importation of a U.S.-based political structure; Americo-Liberian dominance; syncretized languages, religious practices, foodways, and kinships (e.g., well-to-do Americo-Liberian families raising indigenous children as "wards" (Cooper 2009; Sirleaf 2009). But in the past three decades, such connections have manifested more ambiguously: e.g., the United States' fickle intermingling in Liberia's political and economic activities; mass migrations of Liberians to the United States; and the conviviality and contention that arise when the colonizer's kinfolk (Black Americans and Americo-Liberians) and the formerly colonized (indigenous Liberians) live together in a new context and must re-imagine and re-position themselves in relation to what Barnor Hesse has called "racialized modernity" (2007). This project should provide valuable clarity on this peculiar brand of postcolonial conviviality and contention through an ethnographic look at how young indigenous Liberians situate themselves in the metropole.

3.2 Back to Africa: The Black Settler Colonial Imagination

My country shitted on me
She wants to get rid of me
Cause of the things I've seen
Cause of the things I've seen
-Nas

3.2.1 Pre-migration Politics

Claude Clegg's fascinating chronicle of the colonization of Liberia, titled *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and The Making of Liberia* (2004), begins with a single figure: a 22-year-old woman named Charity Hunter, who has just been emancipated from slavery and is taking her three children from their North Carolina home to Norfolk, Virginia – where they will board a ship called the *Hunter* and sail to Africa. It was 1825 and Clegg says the "free-black removal" conversation was already hundreds of years old when this young sojourner and her 64 companions set sail. The conversation was, he notes, "as old as the republic itself" (3).

In fact, around the same time that the forefathers were penning the Constitution, Clegg states that Thomas Jefferson, then a Virginia commonwealth legislator, began reciting his homilies on the advantages of black colonization somewhere beyond United States borders (2004:21). His first formalized attempt to help establish a black colony occurred in 1805, when he and fellow state legislators proposed that Virginia's United States Senators compel Congress to reserve a portion of the

recently acquired Louisiana territory for a black colony. Eleven years after the proposal failed to be of consequence, a group of high-ranking federal officials did gather in Washington DC to reflect on the future of African Americans. In their debates about slavery, the topic of African colonization arose and inspired passionate petitions from the likes of convener Henry Clay (Clegg 2004), "The Great Pacificator" (and regular legislative collaborator of staunch anti-abolitionist John C. Calhoun) who deemed slavery immoral saw aggressive abolitionists as slanderers of the "rights of property" (Remini 2011; Seager 2015: 278). Particularly wary of free blacks, the slave-owning Clay declared at the 1816 summit that colonization would help purge the nation of "a useless and pernicious, if not dangerous, portion of the population" (Clegg 2004: 30).

Clay's address was followed by a commentary from the clerk of the Supreme Court, Elias B. Caldwell, whose more empathetic and justice-oriented rationale was very likely influenced by his gradual abolitionist brother-in-law, Reverend Robert Finley ("American Colonization Society"; Clegg 2004: 30). Caldwell voiced the need for some kind of social redress for the violence America had inflicted on Africa and its people and advocated colonization not only as way of bringing the gift of salvation and civilization to Africans, but also as the only way for African Americans to truly experience an autonomous existence (Clegg 2004: 30).

Congressman and wealthy planter and slaveholder, John Randolph, is said to have spoken next and Clegg tells us that his statement asserted that colonization "could

both be abolitionist, albeit gradual and voluntary, and proslavery" by encouraging slave owners to free themselves of the burden of slaveholding (or "caring" for slaves) and protecting the interests of committed slavers who would not have to worry about disruptive free-black activists (30).

On New Years Day of 1817, a few weeks after the Clay (et. al) meeting a motley crew of prominent "white patricians" (31) formally established the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States, which would soon become the American Colonization Society (ACS). Meanwhile, throughout the country, a handful of black colonizationists and a larger cluster of white state legislators and religious institutions were also strategizing African colonization and immediately hopped on board, so to speak, when the ACS was formed. Most notably, Black and Native American Quaker and successful sea captain, the free-born Paul Cuffe was pivotal in galvanizing American colonization in western Africa (Thomas 1988) and understood the fruit of the movement to be threefold: stymieing a still thriving slave trade at its source, providing a place of solace for subjugated African Americans, and bringing the light of civilization to his benighted brethren. Soon after transporting nine African American families to Sierra Leone, his second trip to the almost 30-year-old British colony, Cuffe passed away in the fall of 1817 and with him went what may have been a largely black-led movement, anchored in a desire for liberation of oppressed people rather than a yearning to cork prospective civil liberties for free black people in the United States (Clegg 2004: 24-25; Tomek 2011).

The ACS, with its slaveholding forefathers and their regular characterizations of black people, was the principal organizing body of the African colonization movement and for these reasons and others, it was hardly beguiling to most free-black folks, especially those in the north. For example, founder of the African Methodist Episcopalian church, the Reverend Richard Allen, openly and repeatedly denounced the "scheme" based on his concerns about the movement being in the interests of slaveholders. He, and other AME leaders, initially supported the venture, when it was being spearheaded by Cuffe (Ciment 2013; Tomek 2011).

Before and after the first ships left American docks full up of migrants, Allen would also voice more upsetting concerns about the competencies of his fellow black folk: sentiments that were mimeod in many others' expressions of a kind of black elitism. A letter he wrote to the first black newspaper in the United States, *The Freedom Journal,* was cited in *David Walker's Appeal* (Walker and Turner [1830] 1993): "It is said by the Southern slave-holders, that the more ignorant they can bring up the Africans, the better slaves they make, ('go and come.') Is there any fitness for such people to be colonized in a far country to be their own rulers?" (64).

Perhaps Allen's, Walker's, and others' most compelling lines of reasoning against "repatriation," speak to the mutability of indigeneity. Allen's letter to *The Freedom Journal* editor says:

> "See the thousands of foreigners emigrating to America every year: and if there be ground sufficient for them to cultivate, and bread for them to eat, why would they wish to send the first tillers of the land away? Africans have made fortunes for thousands, who are yet unwilling to part with their services; but the free must be sent away, and those who remain,

> must be slaves. I have no doubt that there are many good men who do not see as I do, and who are for sending us to Liberia; but they have not duly considered the subject--they are not men of colour.--This land which we have watered with our tears and our blood, is now our mother country, and we are well satisfied to stay where wisdom abounds and the gospel is free" (64-65).

Here, Allen's indigeneity locates the nation-state as the touchstone of historical belonging, effectively erasing Native Americans and making African Americans the "first tillers" of the soil and our tears and blood the nourishment from which the nation sprang forth. In this vision of African American historicity, we hear Frank Wilderson (2010), Alexander Weheliye (2014), Patrick Wolfe (1999; 2006), and others who explain how the slave (and her descendents) are birthed through the birthing of the nation-state. Despite his prohibition from full citizenship and a bona fide political life, and therefore from an actualizable social life according to Orlando Patterson (1985), Allen's nationalism remains fervent.

Reflected in the "Three-Fifths Compromise" of 1787 (Bardes, Shelley, Schmidt 2008), portions of Allen's being and the being of other black folks were integral to the nation: their unrecompensed labor and their value as property, certainly, but for some, also their entertaining folk arts, their companionship, and their loyalty. Like colonial subjects the world over, his cleaving to a "mother country" that has "shitted" on him, as the epigraph from Nas put it, results from years of ingesting a European commons saturated in white supremacy – an ideological diet that transmuted the tongues, gods, and bodies of colonial subjects and enslaved objects. He bemoans the very idea of departing from a land where "wisdom abounds" and "the Gospel is free"– a land where he was not pragmatically human and not deemed

capable of understanding or producing such wisdom and a land that was made through sacrilege of the Gospels.

Toggling between a desire to realize the possibilities of emigration and circumspection around the white leadership of the movement, John Forten, a financially solvent black freeman from Philadelphia, was appealed to by both sides in the early years (Tomek 2011). Unlike Allen and others concerned with the feasibility of colonization, his primary quarrel with the movement was that it appeared to be a digression from ardent abolition efforts and a ploy by slaveholders to do away with freed blacks who might agitate their property (147).

Among those who saw African civilization as opportunity and duty, who seemed to understand themselves as both persecuted Israelites and provident shepherds (Barnes 2004), was Daniel H. Peterson, a Protestant clergyman, who provides a blistering critique of Allen and the AME church for their opposition to colonization (Moses 2010). He, along with more prominent black colonizationists who took up the Cuffe's cause like John B. Pinney, Elliot Cresson, and later, AME bishop, Henry McNeal Turner (Moses 2010; Redkey 1967) seemed less concerned with slaveowners' unsavory interests in the movement than they were with the promise of true liberation.

3.2.2 Settling the Score

A ripe apple of discord for the next century, African colonization, which would develop into the African American repatriation movement to existing colonies and nations (Liberia and Ethiopia), would come to pass in ebbs and flows but would begin in 1820 with 86 black sojourners, three white "chaperones," and a handful of white crew members (McDaniel [Zuberi] 1995; Ciment 2013; Clegg 2004). In settler colonial kinship, the first ship of émigrés to Liberia, the *Elizabeth*, is commonly referred to as the *Mayflower* of Liberia, and departed on an icy February day from New York City. The merchant vessel was accompanied by the USS *Cyane*, courtesy of the United States Navy (Dunn, Beyan, and Burrowes 2000; Yarema 2006).

The ship and its battered lot would reach the shores of Sierra Leone (the chosen destination for scoping out neighboring territory for a new colony) about one month later, only to be disallowed from docking at Freetown by British colonial authorities who were not in support of an American outpost in their freshly appropriated neighborhood (Ciment 2013). The white chaperones, Samuel Bacon, Samuel Crozer (a physician), and John Bankson (Bacon's assistant), were appointed by the ACS and the United States government[13] to ensure the venture's victory and to carry out a "recaptive" program similar to Britain's (Burin 2008; McDaniel [Zuberi] 1995; Ciment 2013).

[13] Bacon was appointed as leader of the expedition by US President James Monroe based on a recommendation by the ACS (Yarema 2006).

These white convoys and the other *Elizabeth* passengers found harbor on nearby Sherbro Island at a busy trading post, that some denote as a small colony, run by a man with a fascinating biography, John Kizell. Kizell was a comrade of Cuffe's who met the American visionary during one of his expeditions (Ciment 2013). Surely, Cuffe's mission, and that articulated by the ACS's 1818 emissaries Samuel Mills and Ebenzer Burgess when they came to visit Britain's colony for liberated African American slaves and Africans rescued from slave ships (Sidbury 2007), resonated with Kizell (even if it caused some friction with the British colonial officials he worked for) because of his own back-and-forth-and-back journey. After being captured from his native Sherbro Island as a child and sold into slavery, he was liberated from a South Carolina slaveholder when the British took Charleston during the Revolutionary War, lived in Nova Scotia, Canada and London, England, and eventually emigrated to Settler Town (the oldest section of the capitol city of Freetown) along with 1,200 other Black Loyalists under the auspices of Britain's Sierra Leone Company in 1792 (Clifford 1999).

Although most of the black migrants and all three of the white stewards would succumb to malaria within a few months of arriving in western Africa (McDaniel [Zuberi] 1995), a second convoy of about 30 migrant, two more ACS agents, and two government officials would disembark in 1821 and secure a land deal with a Grand Bassa chief on the coast of present-day Liberia. The ACS rejected the treaty, fired the remaining agent who was responsible for it, and sent another agent, Dr. Eli Ayres, to clean things up (McDaniel [Zuberi] 1995: 53). Ayres and his counterpart,

Robert Stockton, participated in number of *palavers* (community meeting) with King Peter Zolu Duma of the Dei (Dey) ethnic group and after Stockton purportedly put a pistol to the king's head, got the headland they desired and the remaining settlers planned their move to Cape Mesurado (or, Monserrado) (Ciment 2013; McDaniel [Zuberi] 1995; Sidbury 2007). However, when other local leaders caught wind of King Peter's deal, a bounty was placed on his head and he was forced to nullify the treaty. A distant, but powerful, leader named Sao Boso (but remembered as Boatswain) heard of the peculiar strangers and their conflict with locals and traveled to the coast to ascertain the situation. To the pleasant surprise of Ayers, he decreed that the deal was valid and would be upheld (and that King Peter's neck would be saved). His confederacy of tribal armies would provide insurance of the decree for a while but eventually the Dei and other local groups would grow tired of the settlers planting flags and building homes on land of which they were not regarded as rightful. Indeed, the treaty was a rather raw deal of some $300 worth of rum, guns, and other goods for a 40-plus mile plot of coastal land and many locals claimed that the settlers had only been ceded the tiny low-lying island abutting Cape Mesurado where they had resided in relative misery until Boatswain's intervention (Burin 2008; Ciment 2013).

Now under the official leadership of ACS agent, Jehudi Ashmun, and unofficial leadership of black settler, Lott Carey, the newly settled colonists engaged in regular skirmishes with indigenous Liberians that culminated in a bloody battle in November of 1822. The "Battle at Crown Hill," or the "Battle at Fort Hill," would

become a linchpin in the Liberian nationalist memory and would be commemorated through a legendary figure, Matilda Newport, whose fabled lighting of a cannon with her cigar would be re-enacted by Americo-Liberian and other "civilized" schoolchildren for decades to come (Ciment 2013; Cooper 2008; Nyanseor 2009). While "Matilda Newport Day" (celebrated on December 1st) was done away with by President William Tolbert in 1974, "Pioneer's Day," though controversial, remains a nationally observed holiday that commemorates the gallantry of the American settlers (Martin and Carlisle 1975; van der Kraajj 2008).

Two years after that battle on the coast, along with many others in which indigenous locals resisted the colonization of their land (and of themselves as well) (Boahen 1985; Dunn, Beyan, and Burrowes 2000: 5), Liberia and its capitol, Monrovia, were officially named by the ACS: the colony for its orientation towards liberty and the capitol for then United States President, James Monroe. Although it is often described as one of only two African nations that were never colonized, from 1822 until 1847 Liberia was a cluster of official colonies of the American Colonization Society and its affiliated state-level organizations (Pennsylvania Colonization Society, Maryland State Colonization Society, Mississippi State Colonization Society, Virginia Colonization Society, Colonization Society of New York State, among others) (Burin 2008). When we acknowledge that the ACS and many of these organizations were partially funded and largely supervised by the United States government, re-conceptualizing Liberia as a former American colony seems quite constructive, particularly when are able to re-examine the political,

economic, and cultural historical relationship between the American settlers and their descendents and the regions' indigenous peoples (Ciment 2013; McDaniel [Zuberi] 1995; Clegg 2004).

There is another important lamina of complexity to consider when looking at these early years of ferment: the peculiar institution of slavery and its roots in western African soil (Sundiata 2003). According to some historians, the heart of conflict between settlers and some coastal indigenous groups was their active participation in the procurement of slaves, capturing individuals or transferring locally-enslaved persons to European slavers (e.g., Sundiata 2003). As Basil Davidson (1961; 1966), Ibrahim Sundiata (2003), Amos Beyan (1991; 1985; 2005), Ali Mazrui (1994), and others have prudently warned, the possible impetuses and conclusions related to discourses emphasizing African complicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade[14] demand a gingerly and reflective approach. They also concede that attendance to it, and a meticulous historical examination of it, are nonetheless necessary, especially when trying to better understand the particles that compose a social order.[15] Bayo Holsey's insight that "memory is a political act" (2008) also goads us to sit with varying accounts of the past and prod them for better understandings of what people do with history.

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[14] Perhaps one most divisive representations of Africans' role in the slave trade is Henry Louis Gates' recurring reference to it in his PBS© television series *Wonders of the African World* (Henry 2007).

[15] The issue of slavery became a catalyst of further discord in the first three decades of the 20th century when Liberia's Americo-Liberian-run government began exporting labor to a Spanish Guinea colony on its Fernando Po island and was found guilty of practicing slavery by the League of Nations (Dunn, Beyan, and Burrowes 2000; Sundiata 2003).

Throughout the official colonial period, a series of United States government-approved white governors were dispatched by the ACS and in 1847, Liberia's first black governor, John Jenkins Roberts, ushered the commonwealth into independence. The next year he was elected its first president and in 1862, 15 years after it was declared a sovereign state, the United States government recognized it as such and signs a commerce and navigation treat with the new nation formally beginning its long and temperamental relationship with the tender republic (Malloy 1910; McDaniel [Zuberi] 1995; Pham 2004).

For example, before Liberia's independence in 1847, the United States would help fund the inaugural 1821 expedition (roughly $100,000 appropriated by James Monroe from the Slave Trade Act of 1819), offer military assistance in early 1822, and facilitate the transport of the second group of 37 settlers along with food stores for the struggling settlers also in 1822 (Burin 2008; Hodge and Nolan 2006; Pham 2004). It would also deploy its Africa Squadron in 1843, several hundred Marines under the command of Commodore Matthew Perry, to police Liberia's waters for slave ships and to safeguard American merchant ships (which were rumored to have been attacked by indigenous locals) (Schroeder 2001). Later, the United States would dispatch the USS *Alaska* in the Liberian government's war with the Grebo (or, Glebo [Moran 2006]) in the 1870s (Olukoju 2006), but it would also freeze its

arcane funding stream to the ACS and its state ancillaries when Andrew Jackson vetoed the Bank Recharter Bill of 1832[16] (Everill 2012; Yarema 2006).

The rest of the century would deliver tens of thousands of American newcomers to Liberia, with notable increases after Nat Turner led fellow slaves in the historic 1831 Virginia rebellion, after the passing of the terroristic Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, and after the 1877 Compromise that withdrew federal troops from many southern states and left black people there even more vulnerable (Barnes 2004:5; Kremer 1991). These three events, along with other antebellum and Reconstruction policies, made an already insufferable existence America even less bearable for free blacks and for those dreaming of freedom. Later antebellum migrations would also bring more folks who were tasting freedom for the first time by means of the Quakers' and other abolitionist supporters' manumission efforts. Émigrés would arrive in small numbers until 1892, when the ACS discontinued transport. Despite the "Liberia fever" that was spreading through the South at the time as a result of the mounting miasma of lynchings, without ACS support, only a few migrants trickled into Liberia through the end of the 19th century and ironically, most came through the AME church (Barnes 2004). Three decades later, Marcus Garvey's "Back-to-Africa" movement and the founding of his Black Star Line merchant fleet augured a surge of expansion in the erstwhile struggling nation but due to a number of factors (including DuBois's competing influence in Liberia;

[16] In a January 19, 1841 speech given by U.S. Congressman Joseph White before the U.S. Senate, it was clearly stated that certain funds received by the government were to be allocated to particular projects, "the colonization of free blacks" among them (1843: 59).

logistical and political quandaries around implementation, among others), the campaign was never effectuated (Sundiata 2003)

Before 1867 alone, the ACS (with the financial and logistical assistance of the United States government) would help transport somewhere close to 19,000 people to Liberia, of which roughly 4,500 were free-born and about 7,000 were manumitted or purchased their own freedom (Olukoju 2006; Moran 2006). More than 5,500 of these new residents would be recaptives rescued from slave vessels headed for the Americas (Olukoju 2006; Moran 2006), accentuating the spellbinding shuttling of black bodies back and forth across the Atlantic that helps limn the thing we call "African Diaspora."

3.4 Making Civilized People and Natives: the Pan-Africanism–Black Elitism Paradox

In many ways, the African Americans who not only supported African colonization back home, but who also became its primary participants did not veer far from Richard Allen's and many others' theocentric understandings of the human (Wynter 2003). In a manner of speaking, the theology of many free-black people and enslaved black people of the time, preached the "adaptive" provisions of whiteness/ Christian/Humanity that was only partially accessible to black bodies. Wynter's "adaptive truth-for terms" (269) are effectively the epistemes that

buttress the discursive structures through which one conceptualizes a self, Other, and "the world." These adaptive terms are the gaps through which Others slide themselves into the normative schema of humanity and either fundamentally unsettle it, or fractionally reproduce it. In one of many instances of bitter irony that typifies black settler colonialism, Allen's and others' doubts about ordinary, oppressed black folk's competence in occupying or reproducing this schema, and their concerns about the impending dysgeny that would result from the attempts of colonized people colonizing like Others, are refracted in the ideologies animating the African colonization movement, as it protagonists also doubted the inherent capacities of "uncivilized" Africans to germinate valid culture and imagined certain black "human kinds" (Hacking 1996) as more human than others.

The theocentric sorting of "civilized" and "native" (or "country") people easily bled into the socioeconomic parsing of people that wontedly pivoted around the conception of the modern nation-state, beginning with proscriptions around citizenship. Invariably, citizens were "civilized" folk and unofficially citizens were "originally inhabitants of the United States of North America" (Richardson 1959: 64), as the preamble to the 1848 constitution conveyed. Barred from citizenship were indigenous Liberians and "congos" (the conflated and eponymous term for captured individuals rescued from salve vessels) despite the fact that the former lived within Liberia's interior annexed territories (and a few in the colonized coastal region) and outnumbered the settlers 50 to 1 (Ciment 2013: 97). Carl Patrick Burrows has noted that roughly 500 indigenous Liberians who had

sufficiently "adopted settler ways" were eligible to vote in the elections, but he did not specify their citizenship status (1989: 65).

Burrows' reflection on the constitutional convention, in which 12 delegates conferred on and composed the historical text, attempts to provide more sociocultural context for the event by providing short biographies and a précis of the social milieu. Just as many indigenous Liberians' may have found the settlers' national motto professing a "love of liberty" bitterly ironic, they may have also been dismayed to learn that one delegate spoke passionately of the settlers' entitlement to Liberia as "an inheritance from their forefathers," as Burrows cites.[17] As other scholars have noted, it seems that the settlers' love of liberty was hardly catholic and their understandings of kinship rather sinuous (Ciment 2014; Clegg 2004), but as Sundiata reminds us, there is nothing exceptionally appalling about the Americo-Liberians' ideologies or practices when placed alongside other settler colonizing projects (2003: 60-61). In fact, I would argue that in comparison to many settler colonial undertakings, it was significantly less bloody and as Sundiata also notes, there seemed to be a higher degree of intermarriage and absorption of indigenous people into the settler "caste-cum-class" (Kieh 2008) than we typically see in settler colonial contexts (Sundiata 2003: 61). He ticks a sociality of "competition and collaboration" (61) in which the "Pan-Negro folk community emanating from the African Personality proved a chimera" (62), illuminating the chasm between

[17] Burrows cites Charles Henry Huberich's *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia (2 Vols)* published in 1947 by the Central Book Co.

many pan-Africanist notions at the time and the reality of intimate and protracted diasporic contact.[18]

Teshale Tibebu introduces us to a "brilliant intellect of incurable contradictions" (2012: 37) in his nuanced biography on Edward Wilmont Blyden, the "father of Pan-Africanism" who would migrate to Liberia in 1850 and become an authoritative role in the shaping of a Liberian social imaginary. The Blyden he fastidiously depicts at once supports Christianity's (re)introduction to Africa, which he called "a moral desert" (1862: 24), and rebukes Europe's "audacity to bring his teachings to Africa," in Tibebu's words (2012: 37), when he locates Judaism, Christianity, and Islam on the continent long before the European encounter. Tibebu also notes Blyden's calling to task the paternalist ideologies rousing missionary efforts on the continent (presumably, regardless of the protagonists' racial designation) in the following excerpt from his collected work *West Africa Before Europe* published in 1905:

> "It was imagined throughout the nineteenth century by many of the best friends of the African, even among those who were most strenuous in their efforts to deliver him from physical bondage, that he had in his native home no social organization of his own, that he was destitute of any religious ideas and entirely without foundations of morality. Therefore, it was said, "Let us give him a religion to save his soul and a morality to save his body." (Blyden 1905: 131 as cited in Tibebu 2012)

Blyden, a Christian clergyman who believed Islam was more congruous and beneficial to Africa and who avidly supported the Jewish occupation of Muslim

[18] The nature of this kind of diasporic sociality is also examined in John L. Jackson's work in Harlem (2005; 2008).

Palestine, displayed similarly entangled engagements with various structures of blackness throughout his life. For example, he would promote the teaching of western African indigenous languages while soliciting more British involvement in Sierra Leone and other African colonies (Adi and Sherwood 2003). Verily, his seemingly incongruent stances are brilliant illustrations of black diaspora and its relentless subterfuge. Because he was a consummate intellectual who had "the opportunity" to experience white supremacy as well as black conviviality and conflict in different parts of the world (including St. Thomas, the United States, England, Liberia, and Sierra Leone [where he would spend the greater portion of his golden years]), Blyden would eventually see every face of blackness.

While Blyden's conceptions of modernity and blackness and civilization were rather tenebrous, fraught as they were with a dissonance, or "double-consciousness" (DuBois [1903] 1994), customary among subaltern subjects and disenfranchised citizens, his stance on African "civilizing missions" led by Africans from the Americas and Europe was quite clear. Contrary to Allen's concerns about the ineptitude of enslaved and oppressed peoples spreading civilization, Blyden insisted that the cruel and unique grooming experienced by Africans in the Americas ultimately engendered a higher consciousness that could benefit their forsaken African brethren. Tibebu quotes Blyden's estimation that, despite "the expense of his manhood" (2012: 77), the African's "residence in America has conferred upon him numerous advantages. It has quickened him in the direction of progress. It has predisposed him in favor of civilisation, and given him a knowledge

of revealed truth in its highest and purest form" (77). His uplift philosophy mirrored W.E.B. DuBois's and many of his contemporaries, but, as a Caribbean-born intellectual who spied United States race relations from a short distance (and as someone who was rejected from American universities before departing to Liberia), his uplift was recalibrated through a particular kind of antipathy of the white America that deemed it a father who could never love its bastard children.

Tibebu neatly designates Blyden's guiding paradigm as the "discourse of the three Rs: reclaim, rescue, and rehabilitate" (2012: 83). Inspirited by the reclamation gospel of Ethiopianism and his own illustrious account of Africa as the font of the Abrahamic religions (Blyden [1888] 1994), Blyden's pan-Africanism, while paternalist in many ways, ultimately avers African humanity and makes him one of few Liberian elites to cast a critical gaze upon the nation's emerging autocracy and its subjugation of indigenous Liberians. In fact, the Caribbean-born intellectual not only censured the ruling class discursively (which he married into and had an ambivalent relationship with), but also welcomed the first indigenous students (along with the first women) to Liberia College (now the University of Liberia) during his tenure as the college's president from 1881 to 1884.

A journalist as well, Blyden was known for being particularly disapproving of the republic's "mulattoes," who dominated the Liberian political and economic sphere until the True Whig Party, said to be composed primarily of darker-skinned Americo-Liberians, took the presidency in 1877 (Kaydor 2014: 18). Ciment

references some of Blyden's more scathing critiques of his mulatto countrymen in his text *Another America: The Story of Liberia and the Former Slaves Who Ruled It* (2013), including his declaration that "there is more Negro hate in those men than they are aware of…" (99) but like many others, does not examine the actual labor of colorism, or "colorstruction" as Arthur Spears reconceptualized it (1999), in interaction. By the time he would make an unsuccessful run for the presidency in 1885, a number of darker-hued men had occupied the office but his distaste for mulattoes was still quite strong (Adi and Sherwood 2003) and the remnants of a social pigmentocracy linger today in the Liberian diaspora, as they do in every black community.

However, as Ciment and others have discussed, while colorism tainted the republic's early social structure, the settler-cum-Liberian-cum-Americo-Liberian autocracy over indigenous and recaptive/rescued subjects was far more sullied and enduring (e.g., Ciment 2013; Clegg 2004; Kieh 2008). Blyden's complicated pan-Africanism was reflected in the black settler colonial imaginary and undergirded that of their Americo-Liberian descendants, helping to fuel the hearth of Liberian society through its many permutations.

The ardent inculcation of settler-cum-Americo-Liberian cultural mores and suppression of indigenous people and practices manifested structurally and discursively, giving way to material inequities that offended indigenous bodies and to discursive violences that wounded indigenous sensibilities. The linguistic,

religious, alimentary, sartorial, and other cultural hoops indigenous (and recaptive) residents were required to jump through in order to be recognized as civilized, and therefore deserving of veritable citizenship, were many and varied, but some elected to pass through them (or were pushed through them by parents who handed over guardianship to Americo-Liberians) and successfully procured themselves a place in Liberian society. Some of these same folks were also permitted to cast their ballot long before their fellow "indigents" were legally guaranteed the right to do so in 1946, 99 years after the official forming of the republic (Ciment 2013; Dunn, Beyan, and Burrowes 2000; Olukoju 2006).

Many of those who were relegated to "native" or "country" status and entered into economic relationships with the aristocracy found their labor systemically exploited, especially in the case of the thousands who worked for Liberia's largest employer, Firestone Natural Rubber Company. Still in possession of the largest rubber plantation in the world, Firestone leased one million acres of Liberian land at $.06US per acre (after the initial year at $1Us per acre) under a 99-year contract in 1926. Along with the ethically questionable land contract, Firestone lent the struggling nation $5 million US (Pham 2004). Since indigenous citizens of the interior began working on the plantation in the 20s, they have doggedly complained about physical abuse, unsafe working conditions, child labor violations, and unattainable work quotas (Newman and Lawson 2006). An investigation by the International Labor Rights Fund in 2005 concluded that Firestone's policies encouraged child labor (Baue 2005) and a report from the United Nations Mission

in Liberia in 2006 concluded that Firestone was guilty of forced labor (Newman and Lawson 2006). However, the company won its case in United States federal appeals court in 2011 (Stemple 2011).

While there was some stratification among the ruling class, separating the descendants of free persons who migrated with some capital and material goods from those whose ancestors were formerly enslaved and migrated with the shirts on their backs, the broader pecking order located settlers and their descendents at the meridian, "congos" (or, recaptives) at the median, and the indigenous at the base. Although some scholars and websites still maintain this demographic trinity, many ethnographic, biographic, and other sociocultural accounts by Liberian authors suggest that "congos" have largely been absorbed into the settler class and that the term became an emic designation for Americo-Liberians at some point (e.g., Cooper 2009; Dunn, Beyan, and Burrowes 2000; Mongrue 2011; Williams 2002).[19] And, like many of my research participants, Liberian educator and author Jesse Mongrue contends that "congo" encompasses any "who is a 'civilized person' or lives like a civilized person" (2011: 18).

It seems that this "open-door" orientation regarding civilization was affixed to, or helped usher in, an economic open-door policy that was specifically and uniquely open to American and European ventures (Pham 2004; Okonkwo and van der

[19] In my canvassing of historical texts, only those by Liberian scholars explain that the term "congo" expanded at some point to describe Americo-Liberians. My own introduction to the word, by Liberian-born people, tallied with these accounts and I found the repeated delineation between recaptives and American settlers in many texts confusing to say the least.

Kraaij 1986). The increase of foreign capital and private sector investment in Liberia began with a boom in the 1940's under President William V. S. Tubman and as a result, he and his gradualist pan-Africanist peers would meet in Monrovia in 1961 to discuss strategies (Bakpetu Thompson 1977; Falola and Essien 2013). The somewhat conservative and capitalist-driven black nationalism that characterized the Americo-Liberian autocracy (and oligarchy, effectively) takes us back to Blyden and his complicated cataloguing of peoples and ideas.

3.5 Talking *Cullor*: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and Conflict

There are more than 15 indigenous language varieties (the number varies along with their disputed designations as dialects or languages) spoken in Liberia and they are generally grouped into three language families: Mel, Kru, and Mande. In addition to Arabic (mostly Lebanese Arabic spoken by the substantial Lebanese foreign community) and other languages spoken by foreign residents, a variety of Englishes and English –related varieties are spoken by a majority of the population, often in addition to one or more indigenous varieties (Dunn, Beyan, and Burrowes 2000; Singler 1981).

Of the many English and English-related varieties, there is a general consensus among linguists and other scholars that there is local standardized variety usually called "Liberian English" or "Liberian Standard English" by scholars and "English"

by Liberians, as well as a host of more hybridized, or "indigenized" varieties (Mufwene 2015a) (Mongrue 2011; Singler 1981; 1997; 2004; Sheppard 2012). The lingua franca of Liberia is considered a mesolectal variety that is referred to by a host of names, including: Liberian Vernacular English, Liberian Pidgin English, Liberian Kreyol, or Liberian English.[20] In Liberia, this strain of languaging has been called "clear English," "Plain English," "Colloqua," "Colloquial," "Waterside," *kwasai,* or simply "English" (Singler 2004; Sheppard 2012).[21] With relatively small numbers of "dominant speakers" (for whom the variety is their primary language or one of the varieties in which they have the strongest fluency), there are also more basilectal varieties that have more features distinctive from the standard than does the mesolect:

Table 3.5 Liberian English-Related Creoles

Appellation(s)	Description	Emic appellation(s)
Kru Pidgin English	A basilectal variety that was spoken by coastal indigenous groups	Krumen
Liberian Interior Pidgin English	A basilectal variety that was spoken by residents of the interior region of Liberia	Firestone English Soldier English
Liberian Settler English	An acrolectal or mesolectal variety that was spoken by early settlers	Congo English

(Information from Singler 2004 and Sheppard 2012)

[20] "Liberian English" is variably used to refer to the standard variety or the more creolized lingua franca by scholars and locals.
[21] Some of these terms are from the author's ethnographic research.

American Englishes (usually Standard American English or African American English) were and are also a part of many Liberians' communicative repertoires and, at different points in history, have been locally called *cullor* (Cooper 2008), or *sireese* (Sheppard 2012).

Alexander Crummell, an African American missionary and scholar, and comrade of Blyden, spent 20 years in Liberian and was among the most vocal of the settler class about the necessity of civilizing native Liberians. In addition to encouraging settler families to take guardianship over as many indigenous children as they could, he spoke often about the pivotal role of the English language in this civilizing process. His Independence Day exposition on the virtues of the English included the following statement about one of the consolation prizes African Americans had received as a result of four centuries of "conquest and subjugation" (Desai and Nair 2005: 137).

> "I pointed out among other providential events the fact, that the exile of our fathers from their African homes to America, had given us, their children, at least this one item of compensation, namely, the possession of the Anglo-Saxon tongue: that this language put us in a position which none other on the globe could give us: and that it was impossible to estimate too highly the prerogatives and the elevation the Almighty has bestowed upon us, in having as our own." (Desai and Nair 2005: 132)

He goes on to extol English as a consummate instrument of nationalization by listing the many backgrounds composing the Atlantic negro assemblage whom he was addressing. In so doing, he elucidated the very pan-Africanist/ black nationalist ethos that prompted his own exodus to Liberia in 1853. He states:

> This Anglo-Saxon language, which is the only language ninety-nine hundredths of us emigrants have ever known, is not the speech of our ancestors. We are here a motley group, composed, without doubt, of persons of almost every tribe in West Africa, from Goree to the Congo. Here are descendents of Jalofs, Fulahs, Mandingoes, Sussus, Timmanees, Veys, Congos – a slight mingling of the Malayan, and a dash, every now and then, of American Indian." (Desai and Nair 2005: 132)

For many who endorse monolingual nationalism, Crummell's argument is as compelling now as it was in 1861. Its conceivably redeeming qualities are soon overshadowed, however, by his categorical disparagement of indigenous African languages that follows:

> But how great soever may be their differences, there are, nevertheless, definite marks of inferiority connected with them all, which place them at the widest distance from civilized languages. Of this whole class of languages, it may be said, in the aggregate that (a) "They are," to use the words of Dr. Leighton Wilson, "harsh abrupt, energetic, indistinct in enunciation, meager in point of words, abound with inarticulate nasal and guttural sounds, possess but few inflections and grammatical forms, and are withal exceedingly difficult of acquisition."[2] This is his description of Grebo, but it may be taken, I think, as on the whole, a correct description of the whole class of dialects which are entitled "Negro." (Desai and Nair 2005: 137)

Although the quoted description of the Grebo/Glebo language variety by John Leighton Wilson may sound archaic and expectedly racist,[22] save for an updated and slightly less disparaging terminology, it actually persists as a customary description of African indigenous languages and of creolized varieties in western Africa and the Americas among many linguists.[23] Unlike Leighton Wilson and others' metalinguistic and metapragmatic statements, Crummell saves us the

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[22] It is important to note that, ironically, Leighton Wilson, upon visiting Liberia, deemed the black settler colonization he witnessed as problematic as white imperialism (Erskine Clarke 2013), unlike Crummell whose circumspection about colonization was obliterated when he arrived.

[23] Despite intentions to render African languages and black creoles as intricate and nuanced, the lexicon of linguistics often engenders a perpetual deficit framing that mark such varieties as having simple or simplified grammars, reduced lexicons, omissions, etc. (e.g., Bickerton 1975; 2008; McWhorter 2011).

trouble of mining his articulated ideologies about language to consider how they index related notions about the social types who speak these "negro dialects" (i.e., uncivilized negroes). He tells us plainly:

> "(b) These languages, moreover, are characterised by lowness of ideas. As the speech of rude barbarians, they are marked by brutal and vindictive sentiments, and those principles which show a predominance of animal propensities. (c) Again, they lack those ideas of virtue, of moral truth, and those distinctions of right and wrong with which we, all our life long, have been familiar. (d) Another marked feature of these languages is the absence of clear ideas of Justice, Law, Human Rights, and Governmental Order, which are so prominent and manifest in civilized countries; and (e) lastly – These supernal truths of a personal present Deity, of the moral Government of God, of man's Immortality, of the Judgment, and of the Everlasting Blessedness, which regulates the lives of Christians, are either entirely absent, or else exist, and are expressed in an obscure and distorted manner." (Desai and Nair 2005: 137)

For the next century, the correlation between language ideologies and attitudes and notions of "civilized" versus "native" or "country" people would remain close. Those who were not proficient speakers of American English, Settler English, and eventually, Liberian Standard English, would have a difficult time accessing government services and political representation, formal schooling, employment beyond menial and domestic labor, or even equality treatment in their day-to-day encounters with the Americo-Liberian ruling class and others who had been effectively civilized. Mary Moran's examination of the intertwining of nationalism and modernity in Liberian discourses and institutions attends to the ways gender brings the taught relationship between these two phenomena into stark relief (2006: 76-100). As a keen example, Moran explains that during her fieldwork in the 80s a woman's change in dress (from "western" attire to "traditional" attire – a *lappa*, specifically) was a salient signifier of her civilized status (82). Many have

noted that education, worship practices, language practices, and dress were the most significant markers of being civilized or country (e.g., Breitborde 1998; Mongrue 2011; Moran 2006; Williams 2009). The rules become especially blurry, Moran notes, when expressions of modernity clash with notions of respectability and authenticity – a detail that denoted the polyvalence and compound causations of "civilization" and other constructs uncritically attributed to European modernity in most accounts of the Global South.

Commencing with the establishment of the Liberian nation-state, Moran marks the first buds of nationalization with the arrival of the settler minority elite. Because of this, she and others (d'Azevedo 1969 as cited in 2006) have explained that it took the notion of "being Liberian," not unlike other nationalisms derived from colonization, a great deal of time to really compete with local identities that were typically organized around "multiethnic and multilingual chiefdoms" (79). This unhurried and reluctant nationalism among indigenous Liberians was also due in part to the fact that they excluded from full participation as subjects rather than citizens of the new nation until the 1940s and also to the fact that many indigenous groups had access to constructs of civility, intramural and foreign (2006).

With colonizers of the same race, infiltrating the ruling class through "marriage, adoption, and patronage" (Moran 2006: 79) was rather straightforward - but not fail-safe if the enculturation was not thoroughgoing - as would be evident in Samuel K. Doe's presidency. Doe would be the first president of indigenous heritage, from

the small and rural Krahn of interior Liberia, and as a twenty-something soldier who had not completed high school, the pressure for him to perform competency as head of state, and as a legitimate modern citizen even, was great.

Also, Doe's route to the Executive Mansion also made it difficult to shake a native or country demarcation by his indigenous and Americo-Liberian populace. Despite William V. S. Tubman's few and gradual efforts to address indigenous Liberians' tangential citizenship in the latter part of his extended presidency (mainly through government appointments of the indigenous allies and paving the way for indigenous suffrage), along with subsequent president William R. Tolbert's continued, but inadequate efforts to include indigenous citizens in political and economic decision-making (even learning Kpelle and becoming an honorary Kpelle [Williams 2009: 63]), more than a century of political exclusion and despotism, economic anguish, and cultural degradation, mounting frustrations crested in 1980 in a coup d'etat of the Tolbert administration led by Master Sergeant Doe (Adebajo 2002; Dunn, Beyan, and Burrowes 2000).

Many contend that the violent conclusion to settler minority rule in Liberia was also aided by Cold War politics and the United States' growing frustration with Tolbert's leftist leanings (and budding relationship with Russia). Doe's immediate and warm White House invitation from President Ronald Reagan in 1982 – before Doe was elected in a dubious democratic election in 1985 (Moran 2006) and while Liberian constitutional rights were under suspension – was curious given the

United States' general, public, disapproval of undemocratic rises to power (Reagan 1982). Some contend that the ready reception is only a small piece of a substantial body of evidence that the United States government, via the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), abetted the coup by providing a map of the Executive Mansion and possibly a white-handed "unnamed soldier" who carried out Tolbert's execution (Tolbert 1996). Although the accusations sound like a good movie plot, those well versed in African Cold War politics (Patrice Lumumba's execution as the consummate example), would find the account quite plausible (Fahnbulleh 2004).

President Reagan welcomes Samuel Doe in 1982 (©2002 WGBH Educational Foundation. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/liberia/essays/uspolicy/)

One of Moran's most intriguing remarks about the Doe era is that it marked more than a simple urban sophistication - village morality dichotomous conception of civilization, but parsed it along different and overlapping spheres. In some contexts, being a "civilized woman," for example, meant one thing, was signified by

a particular sign object, and carried a certain valence and in others, a wholly different model of female civility could be evoked. She explains, "Doe was unable to either dispense with or to productively modify the concept of civilization" because on one hand, he needed it as a nationalizing mechanism (lest he be revealed as one who was only interested in state power and the wealth it provided), and on the other, he could not reconcile all the varying theories of civilization in circulation (99).

Immediately following an attempted coup in 1985, Doe's Liberia became significantly less nation and more state, shirked the civilization-nationalism duo, and emphasized ethnic difference as meaningful – a difference that is best, and sometime *only*, marked by language. From the forced shift from Standard English to *colloqua*, or Liberian Vernacular English, in all public and private media, to Krahn becoming an unofficial second national language during Doe's presidency, to Charles Taylor adding the Gola name Ghankay as second middle name (Pham 2004; Williams 2009: 43), to the life or death consequences of being able to speak the right indigenous language at the right time (Barton 2012; Steinberg 2011), from the late 1980s until the resignation of Taylor in 2003, the 14 years of civil conflict that stain Liberian history were significantly impacted by language.

3.6 Conclusion: Colonial Chickens Coming Home to Roost

Primarily based in the neighborhoods and surrounding suburbs of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a formerly industrial city with a large and generally struggling black population in the United States (see Chapter 1), this ethnography ultimately attempts to burrow into the depths of interethnic relationships between Black Americans and Liberians amid structural conditions that share some jarringly similarities (and equally jarring dissimilarities) to those almost 200 years ago when oppressed and largely disenfranchised Black Americans landed on the shores of Liberia and began contentiously cohabitating with its indigenous inhabitants.

That is to say, young indigenous Liberians who migrate to the United States and encounter an extant Black America, or who virtually and vigorously engaged with some aspects of Black America in their daily lives in Liberia, must navigate a similar social milieu as that experienced by their forebears in pre-1980s Liberia in the sense that a group socially positioned above them were also the oppressed in a broader context. In this new space, however, being legible and visible to a white dominant society is vital for access to resources and for possible recourse for injustice (i.e., a politics of recognition [Taylor et. al 1994]). Among other things, Black America (as collective and culture) serves as a living, breathing, cussing and fussing monument to a reprehensible chapter in America's history that constantly demands recognition and, from time to time, atonement as well. If one must occupy the margins in a black body, and if one seeks a shot at the proverbial American

Dream, it makes a great deal of sense to align oneself with those who have historically been the most vocal about securing such opportunities for themselves - and who have done so with a modicum of success. But it can also be the kiss of death (quite literally in cases like the murder of Guinean immigrant Amadou Diallo by New York City police and the beating of Indian migrant, Sureshbhai Patel) to resemble or huddle too close to the most despised and disposable faction in American society.

In addition to Liberian community members' accounts of local tensions between Black Americans and indigenous Liberians in the Philadelphia area, teachers and school administrators also recount verbal and physical scuffles between the two groups. The current Liberian president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, suggests in her memoire that the residue of Americo-Liberian dominance and the stigma of slavery work together to project a complicated specter over the relationship between Liberia and the United States (2009) – a specter that may blur distinctions between Americo-Liberians and Black Americans in everyday encounters and that allow the United States to serve as a symbol and source of both domination and liberation in the Liberian social imaginary (for migrants and those in situ). President Sirleaf also intimates that a willful amnesia of a shared colonial past helps to maintain cultural and political distances between the Black Americans and Liberians of any ilk. My time with Liberian transnationals in America and with Liberians in Monrovia supports this sense that America, and the black people most commonly associated with it, occupy a curious space in the indigenous Liberian collective memory and

present imagination (see Bayo Holsey's groundbreaking examination of similar amnesias and tensions in Ghana [2008]).

Some scholars and writers have insisted that alongside Black American-Liberian tensions troubling Liberians' experiences in the "metropole," the Liberian diaspora has inherited the same Americo-Liberian-indigenous hierarchy that shaped Liberian society in the 19th and 20th centuries and that such tensions play out where earlier migrants to the United States, mostly Americo Liberians, live in the same communities as more recently arrived migrants, mostly refugees from the civil conflicts of the 1990s and millennium. Journalist and author, Jon Steinberg, explored these dynamics in his enthralling memoiresque ethnographic (or literary non-fiction) text, *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York* (2011), based in a Staten Island community where political and economic stratifications seem to be predicated on ethnoclasses mirroring those of pre-war and war-era Liberia.

In Liberia, collective memory seems to recall the United States and its black people as both oppressive and valiant entities while present conditions render their American counterparts beloved but "arrogant" cousins who don't write or visit – dualities not uncommon in (post)colonial relationships but unique because discussions of (post)coloniality are absent from most discourses about US-Liberian relations. Indeed, the "trope of the postcolony" (Williams 2000) - which alludes to the ways these states suffer "the disadvantages of the colony without its advantages" (179) - takes on new meanings in situations of "settler colonialism"

which Patrick Wolfe (1999) and Lorenzo Veracini (2010) define as a form of colonialism in which settlers found new nation-states by moving to new territories, reproducing families, acquiring land, and instituting new political orders. Clearly, in these socio-political formations a sense of "post-ness," whereby the colonized re-acquire political and cultural autonomy, is never wholly realized, even if the ruling minority class are ousted and "regimes of authenticity" are put in place (as we saw in Doe's and succeeding leaders' administrations). Such notions of postcoloniality, or decolonization, become even more fraught in these rare cases in which the colonizers were subjugated subjects and are marginalized citizens in their originating nations, making the metropole a highly confusing space to navigate for postcolonial actors.

Patrick Wolfe tells us that colonial settlers attempt to "bioculturally assimilate" indigenous peoples making their subjugation both visceral and enduring (2006: 102) and urging a diplegic self that cannot be articulated via body or mind. As we see from this glimpse into the past, his premise is well substantiated by the accounts of early colonial contact in Liberia and of social relations between settlers and indigenous Liberians since that period.

Liberia presents a uniquely rich site for interrogating settler colonialism because it is one of the few (or perhaps, only) cases of indisputable black settler colonialism and because its socio-political history clearly demonstrates how processes that effectively "other" indigenous peoples - processes that are requisite in settler

colonialism – become unspeakably complicated when the bodies of colonizers and the colonized look the same and share an uncomfortable location on "the lowest rung of humanity" (Wynter 2003). In such conditions, constructing markers of civility and modernity and imbuing these markers with essentialized meanings becomes indispensable social labor.

All told, this project investigates the overlap of racialized semiotic work performed by Black American settlers and indigenous Liberians in Liberia two centuries ago with that by Black American youth and Liberian transnational youth in the United States now, and it specifically examines the ontological stakes involved in producing different kinds of blacknesses in distinct moments and spaces but always under a piercing white gaze. That is to say, the following chapters consider how the complexly ethnicized/racialized and classed politics that have historically existed within Liberian national and diasporic communities may relate to the current politics of relating among Liberian and Black American communities and in this sense, connect the dots between the constructions of different models of blackness in the recent past and the kinds of meaning and meaning-making they condition in the present.

CHAPTER 4 – "SAY IT AGAIN": VERBAL MASH-UPS AND (RE)ENTEXTUALIZING THE LANGUAGE OF BLACK DIASPORA[24]

4.1 Introduction

Brian having a conversation with himself with the help of graphic editing (*Image by Brian*)

Inspired by concerns about the frequent misreading and "non-reading" (i.e., invisibility) of the subject-formation and social identification processes experienced by many African transnational youth in American schools, this chapter looks closely at some of the ways a small group of Liberian-born high school students (designated as English Language Learners) engaged in a range of semiotic practices to accomplish various social tasks - namely, using language to co-construct (inter)subjectivities and related identities that attempted to disrupt a pervasive

[24] This chapter is an edited version of an article titled "Flipping the Script: (Re)constructing Personhood through Hip Hop Languaging in a U.S. High School" published in *Working Papers in Educational Linguistics* 25(2): 35-54 (2011).

"primitive African" model of personhood (Agha 2007) that they encountered in the United States.

By focusing on these young people, whose cultures and languages are othered in particular ways in different scales of anti-black discourse, this inquiry encourages further study of African transnational students' social and academic experiences, in addition to work by Awad Ibrahim (1999; 2003; 2014), Rosemary Traoré (2004), and others. The critical discourse analysis and interactional analysis presented here examines excerpts from a conversation between two Liberian-born transnational students that contain: (1) metapragmatic commentary expressing how they understood their U.S.-born peers to be imagining them and, (2) examples of a particular discursive practice that I interpret as deeply consequential to their subject-formation and social identification processes: signifying via mimetic "mash ups" of two or more distinctive linguistic registers and other semiotic texts.

"Signifying" is a practice, rooted in African American discursive tradition, of manipulating signs to indirectly convey meaning(s) (e.g., troping, traditionally) and is usually done with the intention to confound, outsmart, or humble an interlocutor and/or to communicate with, or beyond, "over-hearers" in strategic ways (Caponi 1999; Gates 1988; Mitchell-Kernan 1972; Morgan 1993; 1998; Smitherman 2000; Spears 2008). By bringing together sociolinguistic scholarship on signifying and other kinds of indirectness in African American discursive practices with accounts from historians and literary scholars (e.g., Gates 1988; Edwards 2003; Hartman

1997), I look at usages of an unbound register considered hip hop languaging (or Hip Hop Nation Language per Alim 2009) and re-imagine the notion of "signifying" as an illustration of a kind of "black semiosis" that mimetically "mashes up" seemingly contrastive semiotic registers (or, recognizable and indexical ways of speaking or being) to construct meaning around different conceptualizations of blackness (i.e., to make meaning about blackness) and to make meaning via a modality that was created through the construction of blackness in Africa and the Americas.

I also suggest that, when viewed through an anthropological lens, these semiotic mash-ups appeared to function as cogent rhetorical devices for accomplishing critical social identification and subject-formation work among a small group of Liberian-born young adults (problematically designated as English language learners [ELLs] while attending high school) who were in the process of making sense of their itinerant social worlds and of selves contextualized by these new Habermasian "lifeworlds" (1985). Although its "rhizomatic" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980; Ibrahim 2014) roots traverse oceans and eons, the practice of signifying through hip hop languaging (as it was one of the most prominent registers of their peer-level social domain) performed by the young people in this study appears to have been accessed through more recent mass-mediated and localized figures of personhood (Agha 2007; Rymes 2008). As a powerful mode for expressing one's subjectivity, I offer this hypothesis of "flipping the script" (an American hip hop-originated term for subverting an established and/or expected paradigm or

procedure) by mashing up semiotic texts as a way to read signifying through hip hop languaging, and as a way of exploring the sentimental (and poetic) politics of performativity among black transnationals. Homi Bhabha's theoretical meditation on "mimicry" (1984; 1994) is applied to address some of the complexities of "mimesis," or "borrowing" (Ben Rampton's analogous concept, 1995), in the crafting of black heterogeneity. In sum, I offer this analytic ("mimetic mashups") as an illustration of how certain topos in discourses about blackness, Africa, and Black American hip hop cultures and associated figures conspired to help condition the available scripts for cultivating selfhood and signaling personhood, and to help us re-imagine "creolization" as a way of navigating such conditions in this moment.

To contextualize the "micro-social" events I am concerned with in this article, I begin by considering the role of some "macro-social" phenomena in ordering social relations, including the ways historic metadiscourses about language, race, and space help shape how individuals categorize and understand themselves and others, specifically by engendering notions of kinds of languages, other cultural practices, and their related figures of personhood (Agha 2007), and by framing schools as linguistic marketplaces (Bourdieu 1977b; 1991) where these meanings are taught, learned, and sometimes transfigured. With these ideas in tow, I analyze two short excerpts from a conversation between two Liberian American sisters whose prominent home language was Liberian English and who were formally designated as ELL students, "reading" them as discursive texts and conjecturing how they may have been negotiating the construction of a particularized Black subjectivity (which

I propose as the reflexive manifestation of a New African American identification) by pushing against a "primitive African" model of personhood (Agha 2007) that they identified as prevalent and problematic.

As an individual whose own subjectivity and social identification were (and still are) meaningfully informed and mediated by hip hop culture(s) and languaging (as tools for negotiating vastly different cultural realities during my youth), I am generally interested in the ways multilingual and multicultural black-identified young people employ different versions of cultural sampling in their own various ontological and social projects.

4.2 Race and Language

It is generally accepted that linguistic and racial categories are intricately linked by ideology, and have historically worked together to create oppressive binaries (e.g., us/them) that reify hegemonic notions and practices. As a social construction and product of ideology, race (as racialized thinking or race-thinking) is routinely expressed through language practices and beliefs. Ashcroft's 2003 essay on language and race explicates how philology and ethnology share an epistemic genealogy that easily traces its roots to 19th century evolution theory. His work highlights how the typification, or scientization, of languages was part and parcel of the scientization of race and helps sketch out the ways notions about language

actually helped shape the racialization of peoples by locating them in a "scheme of humanity" (Sapir 1921) that ranks kinds according to notions of "complexity" and "simplicity" (Mufwene 2013).

Almost invariably, "black languages" (i.e., those developed by black-identified people) fall near the bottom of this hierarchy, so that even as stratifications of race are gradually dismantled in the minds of many scholars and educators, a related stratification of languages (as a way of sorting human beings) remains intact and circuitously feeds the ideological underpinnings of language teaching and learning. Many argue that this mooring of black languages and black peoples to the very "bottom rung of humanity" (Wynter 2003) also surreptitiously seeps into foreign policies, law enforcement and criminal justice structures, popular culture, education policy and school curricula, and everyday interactions between individuals (Alexander 2010; Delpit and Dowdy 2002; Hartman 1997; Jackson 2006; Moten 2013; Pierre 2012; Sexton 2008; Wilderson 2010; Yancy 2008). Moreover, the ways that students go about constructing themselves and one another (in and outside of school) also appear to be informed by these academic-cum-folk, or vice versa, notions about kinds of languages (simple v. complex) and their speakers (Mufwene 2013).

Understanding that ideologies about language exist and examining what they look like are very different conceptual projects from gaining some sense of how they function in interaction. Functioning as both an unconscious system of signals and as

a set of conscious discursive practices (mostly, metapragmatic), I understand language ideology to encompass both underlying predispositions and conscious attitudes about language and consequently, to exist both in the mind and in practice (Woolard and Scheiffelin 1994). One way to think about the ways in which these two spheres are operationalized is through Michael Silverstein's first-order and second-order indexicality (1976; 2003) and Elinor Ochs's direct and indirect indexicality (1990). First-order indexicality is closely related to one's attitudes towards different linguistic forms and practices and involves an uninterrupted correlation between a language form and a specific social group, social role, or characterization (Silverstein 1976). Similarly, direct indexicality is "visible to discursive consciousness" (Hill 2007:271) and involves a rationalization for one's own language practices and assessment of others' practices (Ochs 1990; 1996). Second-order and indirect indexicality depict a more circuitous relationship between the linguistic practice and the social group/role or characterization that it indexes. The act of mocking a dialect illustrates both forms by functioning on a direct or first-order level as a way of identifying with the social group or role being simulated (i.e., when asked about instances of mocking Spanish, participants in a study by Jane Hill explained that it was an inclusive practice showing that they were familiar with Spanish-speakers) and on an indirect or second-order level as an unconscious way of emphasizing difference and distance (Hill 2007). Silverstein (1976) explains that analysts of ideology should concern themselves with second-

order indexicality, requiring diligent discourse analysis strategies (Blommaert 2005; Fairclough 1989; Gumperz 1982; Wodak and Meyer 2001).

Wassink and Dyer (2004) expound on this suggestion in their discussion of how looking at second-order indexicality reveals underlying class and gender ideologies. To carry out such a project, they collected and analyzed speakers' metadiscursive (and simultaneously, metapragmatic) commentaries about particular practices, a methodology that I have adapted in this analysis to look at specific interactions. H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman's important analysis of discursive race, *Articlate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S.*, is, in many ways, a compendium of the second-order indexical meanings that have underscored prevalent public and political discourses throughout Obama's presidential campaign and throughout the past few decades. I also look to their approach to analyzing a collection of macro-sociological, or "mass-mediated" public discourses as a way to sort through and connect multiple scales of discourse.

4.2.1 Race and language in school

Between the broadly mediated discourses of the state and "mass media," there are numerous "intermediate" scales of discourse (Wortham and Reyes 2015) that help link meaning-making in face-to-face or virtual interaction with semiotically entangled events and moments beyond a particular encounter (Wortham and Reyes 2015). School structures and discourses provide the most relevant intermediate context to consider in this inquiry and Pierre Bourdieu's linguistic marketplace, a

frame for understanding how the symbolic capital (1977a) of language is negotiated, serves as a helpful heuristic (1977b; 1991) for understanding the social landscape of schools and ELL classrooms, in particular.

Within this framework, we are reminded of Sapir's and others' similar observation that "a language is worth what those who speak it are worth" (1977b: 652), and vice versa, so that varieties associated with peripheral, undervalued, and/or unfamiliar social groups are generally marginalized as well. The marginalization that I observed in the ESL classrooms in this study generally appeared unintentional or well-intentioned, and never took the form of explicit deprecating statements about of any of the languages spoken by African students. Instead, it transpired implicitly - institutionalized through curricula or normalized in certain pedagogical practices. By and large, marginalization functioned as a kind of invisibility, and indexed an obscurity or unintelligibility around the languages many African-born students spoke at home. For example, many of the languages they spoke were unknown by their classmates and teachers, and sometimes could not even be named by the students who spoke them (e.g., World Englishes and "creoles"). Unlike their peers who entered the classroom with recognizable (and sometimes highly esteemed, in the case of Spanish) languages like Spanish, Arabic, Mandarin, or Hindi, Many African transnational students often assumed that their peers and teachers would not have any frame of reference for their home languages.

One recent graduate from a large South Philadelphia in high school informed me that telling someone that he spoke Bassa at home with his parents usually yielded a blank stare. " I just started telling them I speak "African" when they ask!" he told me, chuckling. As a result of this kind of widespread unfamiliarity, most of the Liberian students I spoke with during my first year of research in the school (2008-2009) initially declined or evaded inquiries from their teacher and myself about what languages they spoke at home. On one occasion, their exceptionally dedicated and reflexive ESL teacher made a very overt attempt to render the home language of two Liberian students visible and relevant in a classroom discussion, but he was met with giggle-laden refusals. Throughout my one-on-one interviews with African transnational students that year, common responses to requests to name their first or home languages were "a language from my country" or "the language they speak in my village," and one student reported that Liberian English was "just a messed up English."

Returning to the notion of the classroom as a linguistic marketplace, we should note that Bourdieu and Passeron recognized that creating and maintaining a dominant code's power is largely dependent on formal schooling (1970) because "[it] has a monopoly over the production of the mass of producers and consumers, and hence over the reproduction of the market on which the value of linguistic competency depends…" (Bourdieu 1977:652). Bourdieu also notes that the socialization that occurs through formal schooling is the major purveyor of one's language habitus, which he describes as "a permanent disposition towards a language" (655). For

Bourdieu, language habitus also serves as the source of a kind of linguistic insecurity (Labov 1966) in which speakers "who recognize [the dominant language] more than they can use it" (Bourdieu, 1977b: 656) are under constant pressure to adopt this "power code" (Perry and Delpit 1998) if their words are to be truly heard, and as a result, may only use their own nondominant language in certain ways and contexts.

The expediency of Bourdieu's marketplace dwindles some when we consider that it does not deem activities like translanguaging or "crossing" (Rampton 1995) to be particularly valuable on their own, as they may constitute what he calls "illegitimate and illegal use of the legitimate language," acts which he analogizes to "a valet who speaks the language of the gentleman, the ward orderly that of the doctor, etc." (Bourdieu 1977:653). These acts of fraud, as Bourdieu would have them, do not really fool anyone if the speaker's "true" social position is easily read through some other perceivable sign (like accent, phenotypical features, dress, etc.). He explains, "What speaks is not the utterance, the language, but the whole social person…" (653), indicating the criticality of students' ability to not only gain competency in a dominant language, but to make themselves legible and legitimate users. Clearly then, schools provide invaluable sites of inquiry for any student of ideology (including ideologies of race, gender, class and other social constructs) because they serve as both the primary apparatuses of explicit and implicit ideological dissemination and as fertile social spaces in which these ideologies are taken up, contested, and reconfigured.

That language and race have historically worked together to differentiate and define peoples is not surprising and has been (and continues to be) addressed in a growing body of educational and applied linguistics scholarship based on minority language students in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom (e.g., Adger 1998; Alim 2009; Alim and Baugh 2007; Bucholtz 2001; 2011; Delpit and Dowdy 2002; Fordham 1996; 1999; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López and Tejeda 1999; Ibrahim 2014; Kubota and Lin 2009; Moll and Diaz 1985; Perry and Delpit 1998). While the amount of work in this area specifically concerning speakers of African diasporic languages has been scarce (despite the rapidly growing number of African transnational children and adolescents attending U.S., Canadian and British schools), some valuable scholarship has emerged that helps us better understand the recondite ways black identities and subjectivities are assigned to/pursued by/contested by African transnational youth (e.g., Alim and Baugh 2007; Alim and Pennycook 2007; Ibrahim 1999; 2003; 2014; Forman 2001; Osumare 2002; 2007; Rampton 1995; Traoré 2004). The analysis that follows focuses on one exchange that occurred early on in a larger four-year project looking at the historical, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts through which young African transnationals go about constructing performable (and thereby, construable) black subjectivities and associated social identities in an anti-black world.

In Ibrahim's "Becoming Black: Rap and Hip Hop, Race, Gender, Identity, and the Politics of ESL Learning" (1999), the intersections of race and language are explored from the vantage point of the marginalized so that the processes of subject-

formation among African ELL students become the analytical focal point (rather than focusing on (re)productions of ideology and treating racialization exclusively as a top-down process). In this piece, African "migrant" students in an urban Canadian high school displayed tenacious efforts towards acquiring what Ibrahim called Black Stylized English (BSE) and the aspects of personhood indexed by it, bringing into view a politics of desire and causing Ibrahim to pose the intensely generative question: "what symbolic, cultural, pedagogical, and identity investments would learners have in locating themselves politically and racially at the margin of representation?" (350). In particular, he is concerned with how these students both construct and perform a Black subjectivity and social identity through languaging as they go about acquiring Black English as a second language (BESL), a language that he says is mainly accessed through Hip Hop culture. In the following, Ibrahim considers the reflexive process of performativity in constructing self-conceptualizations and social identities:

As an identity configuration, "becoming black' (Ibrahim 2014) is deployed to talk about the subject-formation project (i.e., the processes and spaces through which subjectivity is formed) that is produced in, and simultaneously is produced by, the process of language learning, namely, learning BESL. Put more concretely, becoming Black meant learning BESL for many African transnationals, as I further substantiate in this article, yet the very process of BESL learning also dialogically produced the epiphenomenon of "becoming black" (350).

When synthesized with Bourdieu's linguistic marketplace and a general knowledge of racialization in the US, we can begin to picture the socio-cultural landscape in which Ibrahim's students must situate themselves and see how a "politics of desire" repositions BSE as the language they deem most symbolically powerful. In this case, a variety that is traditionally marginalized in formal schooling contexts is conferred significant legitimacy and value as students try to attain competency in it. Beyond that, the experience of being raced as "black" seems to engender the acquisition of a locally relevant "black language," which, I posit, can be better understood as a linguistic register (Agha 2003; 2007), or a way of speaking that indexes a recognizable figure of personhood.

One important and sobering fact to consider is that whether the African transnational students in Ibrahim's study subscribed to the linguistic hierarchy that identified Standard English as dominant/superior or to a more unconventional hierarchy that valorized some variety of African American English, they most likely found that their home languages were inscribed with similar pejorative or denigrating meanings and were assigned a similarly low position in both of these hierarchies.

4.3 "That's not in our part of Africa"

Like many inquiries into multilingual spaces, I was interested in the ways young Liberian transnationals manipulated their "communicative repertoires" (Rymes 2010; 2014) (which Rymes theorizes as including a range of semiotic practices beyond verbal language that students utilize in their everyday navigations of the world), and for the purposes of this chapter, I focus on data from a single conversation to locate specific instances of signifying that employ particular registers overtly or covertly (a US-based hip hop register and a "snarky hipster" register). I also lean on Irving Goffman's interactional analysis (1981) methodology as a way of deciphering the possible relational work being done by specific utterances (and by some paralinguistic and nonlinguistic practices as well) as evidenced through shifts in "footing." Goffman describes shifts in footing as changes in one's alignment to him/herself and to his/her interlocutors, or as a change in the "frame of events" (128). Asif Agha expounds on Goffman's notion of footing in order to emphasize the semiotic work that mediates these changes in alignment (2007). In particular, he considers the nature of footing in the case of linguistic registers, which we can understand as (malleable) sets of perceivable linguistic signs that are linked to particular stereotypic social phenomena. For this analysis, the stereotypic social phenomena with which we are concerned are "figures of personhood" (i.e., a social type or kind), or characterological figures of personhood, that are "performable through semiotic display or enactment (such as an utterance)"(177) and are associated with American (U.S.) hip hop cultures by the relevant participants. Agha

explains that, "When the social life of such figures is mediated through speech stereotypes, any animator can inhabit that figure by uttering the form…" (177). This allows characterological figures that one might call a "snarky hipster" or "cosmopolitan" or "hip hop-oriented youth" to become performable and readable through speech signs (for those within a social domain who share an understanding of the meanings ascribed to particular signs) by operating on an ideological level (or a level of second-order or indirect indexicality as explained in a previous section). The legitimacy, or efficacy, of such performances, of course, is contingent on numerous slippery conditions that only the most agile of actors can successfully navigate.

Essentially, any communicative event is a semiotic affair that not only employs the Saussurean object (signifier) and meaning (signified), but also requires a mediator, or interpretant, for construal (Peirce 1932). This interpretant requires a social actor to carry out the process of interpretation, and therefore reconfigures the entire semiotic event as a socially, historically, and culturally conditioned happening. From this purview, it is helpful to see the following excerpts (see Appendix for transcription key) between two focal students from the ELL class (Liberian American sisters, Adima and Poady), taken from a conversation they had while interviewing one another, as embedded within a larger co(n)text of past and future events (some local and explicitly referred to within the stretch of talk, others of indeterminable scope) in order to imagine the complex social labor that was possibly being carried out.

A: ...it's Black (.) Americans (.) (an) you know. Like one time me and some other boy got in a argument in class cuz he gon talk about (.) things like AIDS man. My teacher said something (.) and (-) discuss-

P: -HE SAY AIDS come from green African monkeys=

A: =°and then he said (-) all- that Afr-° that some man from Africa brought AIDS

P: ((*inaudible*))

A: you know (.4) have sex with the monkey and stuff >so I ask him was=like< WHERE WHEN OR HOW DID YOU HEAR that? Cuz I wanna know. I wanna hear about it too. And we got in a big argument (.) like huge argument I got sent down to- (.4) It just piss me off (d-) when I [hear people talk- - - - - -]

P: [YEAH CUZ IT'S SO IT'S SO I-](.2) IT'S SO IGNORANT BECAUSE THEY DON'T KNOW NOTHING ABOUT AFRICA cause the whi- (.) like people send people go to Africa:: and take the worst picture a Africa and they bring it here in America and they think we (still -) jungle (.) we fight with- we fight with (.2) monkeys. And that's like so embarrassing because you're like saying right that you know you from Africa=

A: =((*inaudible*))

P: =and they're like saying stuff like that it's so embarrassing to you cuz you like (.) that's your culture and they're talking about it=be=like 'do ya'll sleep in the TREES? do ya'll- do ya'll wear clothes?' I mean how do you not wear clothes when you-

A: =that's the question some boy ask me was that 'oh in Africa do ya'll jump from tree to tree?' (.4) I was like what kind of ignorant question is that- do ya'll jump from- do you jump from tree to tree in America? And the he was like 'no.' cuz (.) the way people you know show Africa that's what d- that's what they think [(- - -)]

P: [THAt's not in] our part of Africa- that's a different part of Africa. If- if- you go in my country you gon like it- we have beach, we have good weather, we have good music- it's- it's just like- it's a good place to be- it's just like people got to go there to believe it. YOU SEE LIKE A DIFFERENT PART OF AFRICA than people don't wear clothes they think that that's where we're from- no- we're from in the city we have- we're from the BIg city we have fun there we have party, we have everything, we have clubs, we have ma:lls, we have shopping centers we have everything so:

Like the focal students in Traoré's report on a study she conducted with a group of African "immigrant" students in a Philadelphia high school (2004), comments that

associated primitiveness with Africa and Africanness clearly bore on the ways 17-year-old Adima and her 18-year-old half sister, Poady, were experiencing their immediate social world (at school), and thus, how their sense of subjectivity was being formed. Consequently, any concept that was easily correlated with primitiveness (e.g., primate similitude, close relationships with animals and nature, poor hygiene, low intelligence, low linguistic development) was also cited as a source of anxiety, frustration, hurt, or anger by the other focal students. While no methodology allows us to actually peek into one's subjectivity, the explicit metapragmatic discourse that Adima and Poady share in the excerpts above can shed light on how they perceived their social surroundings and their American-born interlocutors, as well as illuminate how they may have been conceptualizing and (re)constructing themselves in relation to these spaces and people (i.e., we can see and say something a propos to "intersubjectivity").

By deploying a range of discursive maneuvers, Adima and Poady, along with most of the focal students in this study, seemed to consciously and unconsciously counter the "primitive African" model of personhood, together with nuzzling up to American blackness and chiding it. I found the most intricate (and fascinating) of these maneuvers to be signifying through American hip hop-related languaging, or flipping the performative script by mashing up two or more respectively *black* ways of speaking.

As noted earlier, this "primitive African" figure of personhood was referenced in conversations with all but one of the African transnational students interviewed. Like Adima and Poady, these students described questions and assumptions about their ways of life in their African home countries that they had encountered since arriving in the US- questions and assumptions that did not leave to question the linkage between mass mediated, deficit-oriented constructions of Africa and signs and performances of Africanness. Adima and Poady's more blatant metapragmatic evaluations of these comments and questions in the previous excerpt can easily be indexed on a lexical-denotational level (e.g., ignorant in previous excerpt, line 12; mean in excerpt on page 46, line 7) or on a phrasal/sentential-denotational level (e.g., "they don't know nothing about Africa" in previous excerpt, line 12), and some of their less overt evaluations can be indexed connotationally in several different ways. Phonologically, one might interpret the young women's perceivable rises and dips in pitch and volume (such as Poady's very loud "trees" in line 20) as significations of various culturally-informed (from multiple sources) shifts in footing, requiring that one be familiar with the languaging styles in their repertoires in order to have some sense of how to "read" their phonological shifts.

In this fraught bit of talk we get a sense of the prevalence of one particular "Africa-monkey" discourse in these two young women's experiences. Here, Adima begins a story and cued by only one sentence, Poady interjects (or collaborates, depending the cultural frame) and announces what she expects to be the climax of the account. She seems to presuppose that the cardinal act in her sister's story is the boy's claim

that AIDS originated in a "green African monkey," a reordering of "African green monkey" one of the species of monkeys cited in early AIDS genesis theories. This presupposition could be based on possible prior conversations between the two sisters or with other people in the young women's local social spheres, or it could be partially informed by any of many multiscalar semiotic arenas beyond their school and community to which they have had access (such as national newspapers, news broadcasts, sitcoms, talk shows, etc.) (Blommaert in press; Wortham 2012) for in depth discussions of scale. AVERT (Averting AIDS and HIV), an international philanthropic organization focused on AIDS and HIV-related knowledge production, offers a helpful (although not exhaustive) overview of HIV/AIDS origin theories currently in global circulation on their website ("The Origin of HIV", n.d.), with four of the five theories citing Africa and primates of some kind.

That Poady anticipated the classmate's monkey reference was not likely a result of her imaginative aptitude but was an indicator that she had encountered discourse about the origins of AIDS being related to Africa and monkeys in some other context. In other words, the fact that she assumed this to be a salient point in Adima's story upon hearing the mention of AIDS and verbal discord indicates that she has either engaged in topically similar conversations with her sister or others, or that she is at least privy to the existence of such discourses.

Her use of the phrase "green African monkey" is particularly telling because this is one of the primate species that science discourses named as an early host of SIV

(simian immunodeficiency virus)[25] (Brannon 2010) and offers an authoritative specificity to the scientific narrative that links African *people* to these particular monkeys – through bestiality or the consumption of monkey meat, two behaviors that are among the most acute indexicals of primitivity in many social imaginaries, especially American ones. Poady's swift entextualization of the noun phrase "African green monkey" (recognizable despite a reordering of the lexemic components) to exploit its powerful indexical charge was an efficient way to signify Adima's subsequent turn begins with what seems to be further explanation of the boy's report (line 5) and after Poady shares something inaudible that sounds like a question (line 6), Adima goes on to impart that the boy in discussion claimed that an African man had had intercourse with a monkey (line 7). Her volume then rises considerably as she shares her response to the boy's report, explaining that she essentially demanded details and documentation (lines 7-9). Adima also lets Poady know that this conversation was far from benign, as it resulted in disciplinary action against her (lines 9-10). She ends the turn by sharing how the whole event (and ones like it, which she alludes have also occurred) made her feel: "It just piss me off when I hear people talk…" (line 10). Poady jumps in, talking over Adima for a bit, to share both her own evaluation and emotional reaction to this and similar events, and uses the word embarrassing twice (lines 15 and 18). She plainly links the story about the AIDS monkey to other unfavorable projections of Africa and Africanness

[25] Another allegedly culpable primate was the chimpanzee who was said to have contracted SIV from the green monkey (Owen 2006).

she has encountered, and notes further associations with monkeys (lines 11-21, see bolded text).

Adima aligns with her sister's accounts by corroborating with a similar account of a question or comment by a peer who alluded to "monkeyness," or primitiveness (lines 22-25). These excerpts constitute the metapragmatic frame around how Adima and Poady may have been evaluating certain modes of conduct and they also provide a sense of how the young women may have understood certain others' perceptions of them. Clearly, they found comments that associated Africa and Africans with primitiveness to be the progeny of ignorance or meanness. These two evaluations were represented by some comparable metapragmatic assessment by the other focal students, and seem to be a reliable way of conceiving of the metadiscursive frame that helped constitute some of their orders of meaning.

4.4 Signifyin and Black Semiosis

1	P:	In my class some girl be calling me- she's- she=be=like I look like a monkey (.2) I
2		was [like <u>really</u>↑?]
3	A:	[((*giggling*))]
4	P:	(REALLY) I LOOK LIKE A MONKEY? Say that outside to me and you gon see
5		what↓
6	A:	((*giggling*))
7	P:	They're so <u>mean</u> I just don't get it. If you wanna be mean to me (.2) say it outside of
8		school and you're goin to find out if I'm African or [a <u>mon</u>key]
9	A:	[vi(h)olent(h)] ((*giggling*))

In this second excerpt, Poady shares an incident in which she was insulted by a female classmate (whom she later identified as Black American). Poady describes both how her peer told her she looked like a monkey and how she reacted to this comment. Her interlocutor's comment was much more abject than simply linking Africa or Africanness to monkeys; here she was actually likening Poady's physical person to a non-human animal. One can only speculate how such a comment might infect the processes through which a young person conceptualizes a sense of personhood in relation to a particular social space and to particular persons. At one point, Poady offers a very clear metapragmatic evaluation of the young woman and others who behaved similarly by stating that "they" are "mean" (line 7), but the rest of her discursive exploits are much more indirect and do some tricky troping known as "signifying." Poady's first act of signifying comes in line 2 in her reported use of a particular sign that some may interpret as indexical of a figure of personhood

widely associated with a young, hip American register: the lexical-phrasal item *really?* as a rhetorically interrogative independent clause. By saying that she was like the interrogative *really?,* we cannot be sure if she actually uttered the question to the girl who made the comment and this is a stylistic feature of the "narrated event" (see Wortham and Reyes 2015: 45) or if this like conveys a mental state or inner monologue (Romaine and Lange 1991) and is part of the "narrating event" (Wortham and Reyes 2015: 45). Indeed, we do not know if any part of Poady's narrative following the clause "She be like 'I look like a monkey'" is apostrophic, meaning not only is her addressee absent at the time of the narration but also that the actual reported speech act might never have actually occurred. Nor can it be certain if the narrative is constructed dialogue (Tannen 1986 as cited in Romaine and Lange 1991) which Romaine and Lange define as "a recollection which is often more accurate in general meaning than in precise wording" (1991:230). In either case, she reports that she responded with this single-lexeme, independent clausal interrogative either in her actual speech or in her head at the time of the encounter.

We might note that this sign (*really?*) is already tropic, meaning that the literal denotation of asking for the verification of a previous statement's accuracy (because you genuinely are not sure) is not the sign's intended meaning when it co-occurs with particular syntactic (before or after a clause) or phonological cues that index sarcasm. Her use of the form can be construed as signifying because this particular deployment of *really?* (as an independent clause) may be understood as an enregistered sign that is emblematic of (a) certain figure(s) of personhood (Agha

2007), or that indexes a particular social kind that she may feel is not readily assigned to her: a hip, witty, irreverent, and very American social kind. Some aspects of the characterological figure I link to this register are debatable, but as a mass-mediated social kind to which most people in the United States have access, I think many would contend that the most socially salient aspects are accurate.

In line 4, Poady creates an interrogative construction by pairing this emblematic token with the question "I look like a monkey?" and in so doing, mashes up indexes of multiple social kinds, or a "mass-mediated demeanors" (Rymes 2008), who would understandably be incredulous to being physically linked to a primate. And very importantly, before re-enacting her incredulity, Poady sets up the response with an explanatory sentence that includes the highly-marked aspective *be* associated with African American English. Possibly stimulating this use of AAE (and such a distinctive feature of it) were widely-circulated discourses about a kind immigrant submission and compliance that have often been propped up against notions of Black American insurgence and assertiveness/aggression – discourses which Poady had expressed familiarity with when talking about the ways white teachers and administrators viewed African parents as less confrontational and problematic than Black American parents who were always challenging the school's disciplinary practices and intervening on their children's behalf. Indeed, the mash-up of language varieties evoked social demeanors that one could argue were the very antitheses of stereotypical African femininity and of primitiveness (i.e., social demeanors that were variably "American," smart, assertive, sarcastic, "cool")

according to those who have been socialized into Northern/Western conventions. Had Poady reported, "(Do) I really look like a monkey?" one could certainly construe her question as rhetorical and sarcastic and might socially index such conduct similarly, but the use of the enregistered *really?* as a stand-alone, almost endophoric, constituent before (line 4) or after another constituent(lines 1-2), does very specific social work for people familiar with the register (which would be most people under the age of 30 who watch American television). I interpret her actions as taking these tokens (*really* and aspective *be)* from language varieties that do not "belong" to her or her assigned social kind, as such, and as mashing them up against her discernible accent and African-identified body to indirectly emphasize the absurdity of likening her (of all people) to a monkey- thereby signifying on both registers. Adima immediately aligns herself with her sister's discursive toil and conveys her construal by laughing (line 6), a response that linguists of AAE would tell us is fundamental to the practice of signifying, as it is a collaborative, interactional practice usually expressed through humor and only successful with accurate construal by an audience.

How words or phrases become tokens of a register and how ways of speaking become "enregistered" relies on their stereotypic power. Stereotypes about registers are basically categories of communicative behavior that reflexively create presupposed ways of being for which a perceivable and shared model exists. That is to say, they "set text-defaults on the construal of behavior for persons acquainted with them" according to Agha (2007:148).

These text-defaults, or register tokens (2007), can be operationalized in various ways by manipulating their textual environments to create intricate indexical scripts (*register token(s) + co(n)text*) for performing and (mis)construing particular interactional tasks. In the case of Poady "borrowing" phrasal tokens from an American Hip Hop register and using them in conjunction with signs that may have had a different stereotypic indexicality (e.g., her identity as an ELL African student, her accent, her self-proclamation of being African), I am suggesting that she took the performative indexical script (*register token + co(n)text*) and effectively mashed up indexically-incongruent, but mutually-constitutive, messages that had to be read together for accurate construal of the new, or unfamiliar, figure of personhood they were intended to convey (*register token + incongruent co(n)text = Hip Hop register token + stereotypically "non-American Hip Hop" signs*) (Figure 1). In so doing, she was effectively performing and entailing (Silverstein 2003) a stereotypical kind of African personhood that clearly indexed an American register and model of personhood. In other words, she combined the ostensibly incongruous stereotypic (or indexical) meanings of certain signs to ultimately disrupt such meanings and reconfigure the signs.

It is interesting to see that Poady shifts back and forth between a narrative mode and a full-on re-enactment mode and as a result, makes rather stark deictic shifts and obfuscates the participation frameworks (i.e., addressee(s), referent(s), speaker(s)) of her narrated event and that of the actual narration. Her re-enactments commence without any kind of introductory marker (like "I said" or "I

was like") so we have to pay close attention to when she is speaking to her sister or re-enacting her utterances to the girl in the narrated story. A deeper analysis of Poady's manipulation of participation frameworks could provide insight into "both the internal organization of stories and the way in which they can help construct larger social and political processes while linking individual stories into a common course of action that spans multiple encounters with changing participants" (Goodwin and Goodwin 2004: 232), or how her storytelling is situated in a chain of semiotic events that help construct its meanings. In considering participation frameworks, we should again note the important role of audience (Morgan 1998), or over-hearers, in signifying and note that Poady is aware that she is being audio-recorded and that her utterances may be heard by a range of individuals, perhaps even by the adversary of whom she is speaking. There are a number of different ways to conjecture the interactional work that could have been occurring through these kinds of shifts in footing and mash-ups of time-space, but I will now shift to another act of signifying I believe to be of utmost significance (lines 4-9).

After signifying through this "snarky" register and through AAE, Poady shifts footing quite significantly by moving into a rhetorical, and pragmatic, construction very familiar to speakers of (and those familiar with) AAE: provocation by issuing a directive to perform some action that, if actually executed by the addressee, would not be to the speaker's liking. This rhetorical request for a dispreferred action is akin to taunting someone to do something that will engender a negative reaction from the issuer of the dare and functions interactionally as a threat of sorts (i.e., "I

dare you to [unpreferred action]"). Other variations of this kind of practice are to state "I wish you/he/she/ would>" with *would* as a verb phrase ellipsis (the specific verb is implied)or with a verb to compose a complete conditional verb phrase ("I wish you/he/she would try that with me.")

In considering the pervasiveness of hip hop cultures and African American hip hop registers around the globe, and particularly in the suburbs of a predominately black city, we can conjecture that the young Liberian women of concern were aware, on some level, of the hip hop register's stereotypic indexical power (i.e., its power to evoke a social kind who is hip hop-oriented and probably cosmopolitan, street savvy, assertive, and tough as well). One can easily imagine many possible contradistinctions between this model of personhood (however it is locally construed) and a "primitive African" model of personhood and speculate the kind of interactional work Poady may have accomplished in the narrated event (and the work she accomplished in the narration of the event) when she signified on the African American classmate using a construction from an African American hip hop language variety, a variety that the young woman would have been more readily linked to than Poady herself would have been. Subsequent observations of Poady's interactions with US-born and Caribbean-born black peers, along with extensive observation of other young Liberian transnational women interacting with black peers, suggest to me that creating disturbances in peers' summations of African people by mashing up semiotic texts (bodies, languages, clothes, gestures) that

index different social types was an efficient way of creating room for becoming in a new social space.

This act of signifying is particularly meaningful because by using this enregistered (i.e., widely recognizable as indexical of a particular social kind) signifying construction from an African American hip hop-related register to talk about how she will show her interlocutor that she is indeed an African, Poady was portraying a very particular kind of African persona - one who could competently perform the rhetorical practice and cleverly mash up two seemingly divergent registers, as Figure 1 shows.

Figure 4.4 Mashing Up Performative Indexical Scripts

Expected performative indexical script:

register token + congruent co(n)text)

Mashing up performative indexical scripts:

register token + incongruent co(n)text

African American hip hop register token

stereotypically "non-African American hip hop" sign vehicles

As we saw in Adima and Poady's exchange, usage of a hip hop register seemed to do more than just "mediate such figures through speech stereotypes" (Agha 2007:177) because of the kind of signifying that is performed on and through the register. As

mentioned, my treatment of signifying comes not only from sociolinguistic scholarship on the phenomena but also from Henry Louis Gates' historicization of the practice in literary contexts in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988), from Saidiya Hartman's examination of cultural practices in slavery in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997), and from Brent Edward Hayes' recalibration of diasporic practice as décalage (i.e., (dis)articulation) in the introduction to *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003).

As an offering of black literary criticism, Gates is primarily concerned with analyzing written texts, but he acknowledges the multiplicity of texts and devises a rather flexible analytic that can be dispatched to any semiotic system, or text. Gates takes Mikhail Bakhtin's double-voiced word (1981) and Mitchell-Kernan's account of signifyin' (1972) (along with many other samples of theoretical and empirical scholarship) and carefully recasts them along the contours of a black literary and discursive tradition that can be traced from the realm of the sacred in pre-colonial western Africa to various peoples and spaces throughout the "Black Atlantic" (Gilroy 1993). In so doing, he reveals signifying to be an enculturated mode of conduct (i.e., a cultural practice) that embodies the double-consciousness (DuBois [1903] 1944), or twoness, of Blackness as it is experienced in places that have been colonized, seized, or merely cohabitated by a hegemonic other. Ironically, he traces the American manifestation of the Yoruba orisha (loosely translated as an ancestral

spiritual authority) Esu Elegbara, the tricky liaison between the spirit and physical worlds, to the Signifying Monkey character present in a considerable amount of African American folklore and contemporary literature. Signifying is a literary and discursive tradition that Gates and others consider the trope of tropes, as the very nominalization of the practice (signifying, or signifyin(g), as he demarcates) is itself an act of signifying because it takes the Standard English lexeme signify and re-inscribes it with an indirect and esoteric meaning (44-51). Gates pours through a profusion of theories, ponderings, and examples of signifying and reports that the only universal characteristic to be found amongst these representations is an indirectness of some kind.

I think it is crucial to note that signifying, which is described as a "pervasive mode of language" and as a rhetorical tradition in African American culture by Gates (1988:80), extends beyond trope or indirectness, because it is essentially the troping on (or re-inscribing of) Language itself as a proxy for ontological multiplicity. In this way, the polysemy of the linguistic sign reflects the speaker/writer's fragmented or compound subjectivity. Perhaps more important, signifying is a quintessential example of one manner of "black semiosis" – or one way in which a practice of meaning-making is constructed through the experience of blackness. As discussed in Chapter 1, indirectness, or indirection, is often not a stylistic choice but an imperative issued by one's social condition.

4.5 Conclusion: Verbal Mashups as Black Diasporic Agility

To return to Ibrahim's work with African "migrant" youth, his conceptualization of the process of becoming was informed by his own lived experience as a Sudanese refugee in North America on whom blackness was ascribed and simultaneously imbibed and reformatted (2003). Ibrahim discusses how the focal students in his study come to embrace "Black cultural and representational forms as sites for positive identification" (2003:177) (namely, those black representations created through and by hip hop cultures) upon encountering the mostly negative representations supplied by dominant culture. This alternative conception of newly bestowed and assumed blackness not only helps shape the politics of desire and resistance that play out in the language learning classroom, but also requires a localization (in terms of cultural, not physical, space) of blackness. I would also emphasize that newly acquired blackness provided access to (or requires) new modes of meaning-making (i.e, black semiosis). Ibrahim's research (1999; 2003), Adima, Poady, and some of their African transnational peers seemed to desire and valorize very specific forms and practices from the mass-mediated and locally experienced representations of American blackness they encountered, and from my observations seemed to go on to synthesize these forms and practices with some from their "home" cultures, and from other cultures, to mediate "new" models of blackness often by utilizing semiotic strategies they accessed through their new blackness.

Ultimately, Poady and Adima appeared to discursively co-construct social identities that drew from, and mashed up, an array of models of personhood that countered a primitive African stereotypical figure, a figure that seemed to circumscribe the ways they were being imagined by their peers, according to their metapragmatic commentaries. Beyond typical troping, their deft reordering of signifying, a practice understood to convey the twoness of black subjectivity, and their transmutations of American hip hop register and African American English to verbally embody contemporary Africanness, not only revisited the practice's presumed origins in many ways, but also worked on a higher level of indexicality (by employing ideology) to better represent a complex subjectivity informed by a multiplicity of places, peoples, and cultures.

From their displays of knowledge about Spanish, French, Indian filmography, Jamaican Patois and Haitian Creole, Gullah and AAE, Standard English grammar, sex, friendship, and life in general, it seemed that many of these young Liberian folks routinely mashed up various models of personhood that, by employing the black semiotic practice of signifying, may have effectively countered the primitive African stereotype and bridged intervals between the blackness assigned them and other models of blackness. In this way, they performed both manners of black semiosis by producing meanings about blacknesses and by using a black meaning-making practice to do so.

Through hip hop signifying in particular, the young women in this analysis wielded language to reflect their own complicated occupation of blackness which co-terminously functioned as a reconfigured Africanness, and as a still-forming model of identity. In this sense, they lived out Homi Bhahba's description of the underpinnings and consequences of mimesis among colonial subjects, a concept he called "colonial mimicry" (1984; 1994). He contends that in compulsory cultural replications by a designated Other, some slippage is inevitable, or possibly strategic (on both the part of the subject and the overseer), so that what gets lost in translation/re-articulation ultimately helps to maintain difference. What, then, do we make of *fully self-initiated* cases of a kind of mimicry that enlists an observable, and possibly tactical degree of imprecision or incongruence? I propose that communicative practices that at first pass may index (on a second or indirect level, per Ochs's [1990] and Silverstein's [1976; 2003] schemas) an apparent desire for closer proximity to American blackness or black Americaness, is somehow intended as a way to "emphatically *no*t be" black (or "almost the same but not quite" [1994:86]). When we recall Bourdieu's warning about the dissonance created by the valet speaking the language of the gentleman and apply Bhabha's recalibration of such forms of alleged mimicry, the perceived threat of such performances to the socially-designated gentleman/s sense of cultural authority and authenticity easily computes.

By performing some of the ways liminal young people from Liberia discursively make meaning with and through their Black American peers, Poady and Adima offer

a clearer conception of how a semiosis of Black Diaspora (and diasporic intersubjectivity) may simultaneously follow trajectories of continuity and discontinuity, and effectively speak *décalage* into daily life. That is to say, they show us that an extraordinary discursive competence and agility are necessary to quickly spot and clear deep-running cracks of *décalage* and to scale the Man-made mountains that comprise the landscape of Black Diaspora. To "be" black in the world (i.e., to experience black corporeality, to cultivate a black self conception, to embody and/or perform construable blackness), unavoidably means learning how to communicate with other black people in ways that signify some form of consciousness about the shared experience of having a black body, subjectivity, and/or social identity. This can be done linguistically (speaking with a Jamaican accent), paraverbally (doing the Nae Nae), discursively (speaking critically about white people), or through countless other behaviors that, in the context of globalized racial logics, become signs of shared or distinctive blackness among those socialized into this semiotic register. In this way, the unfilling and unfulfilling concept of race, as it was originally constructed gets fattened up with cultural and social and political nuance. The marbled blackness that diasporic-oriented youth embody seems to know difference while bending toward belongingness when circumstance demands it. Or, as Fred Moten waxed:

> "The lived experienced of blackness is, among other things, a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an ontology of dehiscence, a para-ontology whose comportment will have been (toward) the ontic or existential field of things and events. That ontology will have had to have operated as a general critique of calculation even as it gathers diaspora as an open set—or as an openness disruptive of the very idea of set—of accumulative and unaccumulable differences, differings, departures without origin, leavings that continually

> defy the natal occasion in general even as they constantly bespeak the previous" (2008: 187).

With the turn of phrase "ontology of dehiscense," which is the ripping open of a sutured wound, Moten is casting a mode of being that transpires through rupture, suture, and re-rupture and that confides in phenomena it doesn't know, or possibly, doesn't even believe to really exist. This persevering (in process and product) gathering of unwieldy and slippery diasporic differences that young Liberian transnationals were discursively carrying out, while I watched and listened and took part, felt like the anthropogenic expression of parallel social occurrences – those sociogenic assemblages and dispersions that need order so earnestly, they sometimes just pretend that it's there.

CHAPTER 5 – FIGHTIN' WORDS: ANTIBLACKNESS AND DISCURSIVE VIOLENCE IN AN AMERICAN SCHOOL

Mass hallucination, baby
Ill education, baby
Want to reconnect with your elations
This is your station, baby

- Kendrick Lamar "Good Kid"

5.1 Introduction

Anthony was agitated. This was the first time I had seen the normally collected and soft-spoken 17-year-old riled up. He, his close friend (who he described as brother-like), and I were in the thickest parts of a tightly packed conversation about their consistent troubles with school administrators, teachers, local authorities, and Black American peers since they had moved to the United States a few years earlier. His following statement conveyed how mystifying and frustrating such tightly plaited systems of punishment could be for a newcomer:

> "*And then, when you try to fight back they say you fight and you gettin suspended for fightin. But you try and defend yourself. Maaan, I don- it just hard- it just hard to… to get a way of get along in this school, or in the country, in general. Cause whatever you do, you still gets in trouble. So I don' know. If you try to defend yourself, you get in trouble. You try to get away, you still in trouble so. Even if you go to the- even if you tell them, they won't DO nothing about it. Once nothing happen, they can't do nothing about it. That's the law, and… I don't understand the law."*
>
> (Anthony and Timothy Conversation, May 2009)

Timothy, his more vociferous brother-friend, would share even more troubling encounters with authority and with black and white American classmates and, in the years that would follow this interview, I would come to see their

narratives of social turbulence as quite representative of many other young African newcomers' experiences at Central High School, a large suburban school located just outside Philadelphia, and in other local schools. Punctuated by statements conflating "the law" and school policy, their narratives and observed interactions would also illustrate longstanding mergers between schooling and the state, and their oscillating stories about global black convergences and meaningful divergences would speak to the subtle inflections of black diaspora. Together, these conditions can be read as the contexts under and through which black semiosis transpires.

Throughout the four years I spent at Central and in local neighborhoods, I was the fortunate addressee of (or eavesdropper on) story after story about these kinds of troubles, each one featuring inimitable parts that made understanding them in any kind of synthetic way a difficult task. In some cases, these troubles resulted in nasty words exchanged with "Black American" peers,[26] physical violence with said peers, and/or in punitive actions by schools and local polities against the newcomer students and their American-born associates. For many, like Anthony, these troubles seemed to mestasticize in convoluted ways and their sources were hard to pin down, for them and for me. Was it the mass mediation of dehumanizing and infantilizing representations of Africa and Africans? Was it the invisibility of African histories, contemporary cultures, and languages from school discourses? Was it a

[26] I frequently use "Black American " instead of "African American" to speak of US-born, slave-descended, black-identified people because this is the term that was most frequently used by Liberian-born subjects. I also use "African" or "Librarian" from time to time to speak of Liberian-born or African-born transnationals because these were also frequently used self-identifiers (and, on occasion, also for simplicity).

general lack of understanding about the functionality of race (racial identity, structural racism, racist ideology) in various African countries? Was it a lack of understanding about the functionality of these phenomena in this country? Or was it the diligent avoidance and erasure of race from most school curricula and discourse (Pollock 2008)? Was it the seepage of antiblackness into well-intended discourses and pedagogies? Was it a simple case of "self-hating" Negroes, in the case of the Black Americans who targeted their African classmates? Was it a perceived sense of superiority by African students that their peers were reacting to? Or, perhaps, the real issue was the criminalizing and over-policing of black bodies wrought by a perception of black "exceptional violence" (Thomas 2011)? Was it the "school-to-prison pipeline" ardently manufacturing "troublemakers" who would promptly be reformatted into "criminals" to maintain a capitalist carceral state (Alexander 2010)? Regardless of the tension's murky origins, during my first academic year at the school, 2008 to 2009, students and teachers reliably recounted one particular incident to illustrate it gravity.

The incident involved a young Liberian newcomer being "jumped" (physically attacked) by a group of African American young men after school and then being hit by a car as he tried to escape his attackers. Most quickly added that the boy had been tapped by the car and walked away from the scene, but the horror of the whole incident resonated clearly in their accounts. One afternoon while students were volunteering to participate in a storytelling project one of my advisors, Betsy Rymes, and I were conducting in an English as a second language (ESL) classroom, Anthony

revealed that he would interview the young man who had been the victim of this infamous attack so that he could tell his story. The conversation that transpired, along with many others between fellow students and teachers, inspired this chapter.

Harkening back to DuBois's ([1903] 1994) and others' discussions of "the Negro" as an inexorable problem in twentieth-century America, this chapter considers how Anthony's words signify (in the traditional semiotic sense) the ways he and his African transnational peers may occupy a similarly troubling space in both American societies and the transnational black diaspora today. Throughout the chapter, I revisit my conversations with Anthony and other students from western Africa – some of which emerged during the aforementioned storytelling project and others during observations at Central High over four years. Specifically, I examine the words and actions of some of these young people to scout out the ways they navigated and responded to discourses and policies that positioned blackness, or certain kinds of blackness, in categorically dreadful stations. I pay closest attention to the ways "discursive violence" (via words, images, and silences) seemed to play a part in how they situated themselves in the world: conceptual violence to the conception of black personhood which was often mediated institutionally; and violence inflicted by discourses from peers, media, educators, and curricula that indexically tethered primitivity to African personhood. The term "discursive violence" was best described, in my opinion, by John Paul Jones, Heidi J. Nast, and Susan M. Roberts (1997) in the following passage:

> We define discursivity as those processes and practices through which statements are made, recorded, and legitimated through linguistic and other means of circulation. Discursive violence, then, involves using these processes and practices to script groups or persons in places, and in ways that counter how they would define themselves. In the process, discursive violence obscures the socio-spatial relations through which a group is subordinated. The end effect is that groups or persons are cast into subaltern positions. (394)

Their rumination emanates from a widely shared conception of "discourse" as the semiotic (often linguistic but can be visual or sonic) actualization of ideology and as the raison d'être of social structure, or in Foucauldian terms, "discourse" as the "enouncement," or "statement" (Alan Sheridan's preferred translation of *l'énoncé*) of social formations (1972). Like the morpheme to words, the lexeme to grammar, and the grammeme to text, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault offers the statement as the "atom of discourse" (80) and as a unit of analysis. To rummage through discursive violence and locate its units of analysis, then is to reread signs (verbal, in this cases) as enouncements, or statements with discursive meanings that harm – directly and emotionally (e.g., "monkey discourse" discursive fragments) or indirectly and systemically (e.g., "black on black violence" discursive fragments).

I spend a good amount of time examining the circulations and possible effects of two kinds of discursive violence: (1) "black-on-black violence" discourses that linguistically and ideologically exceptionalize black existence by theorizing a primordial or inexorable "culture of violence" (Thomas 2011); and (2) discourses of difference that craft distance from universally unloved models of blackness (e.g., primitive Africans and pathological Black Americans). Along with "inflicting injuries

that are endemic in modernity's production of race" discourse of black primitivity have historically been used to exceptionally anathematize the black body (Smalls 2014:20), and discourses of "exceptional violence" (Thomas 2011) have been operationalized to pathologize black ways of being, thus proscribing a sincere conception of unqualified black humanity. I will first address school and community discourses that either circumvent the racialized charge of ongoing conflicts between African American and African transnational students or that racialize them by way of under-examined and pathologizing discourses of "black-on-black" violence.

These young people's words and actions help us grasp the ways they and their black-identified peers worked together and against one another to negotiate racialized conditions of cultural belonging amidst discourses and structures engendered by ubiquitous antiblack sentiments and logics. In ways that reflect and differ from other migrant experiences, black African transnationals must "weave themselves into our knotty sociopolitical fabric while inhabiting bodies that get saddled with local histories of blackness" (Smalls 2014: 20). They quickly learn that "trouble" lurks around every corner and comes in all colors. As the following stories tell us, whether speaking or silent, moving or still, their bodies seemed to trouble their new compatriots in all kinds of unanticipated ways.

America's history of criminalizing young black and brown people via race-based policing and media representations stretches across centuries, and endures into this moment with the recent murders of Amadou Diallo, Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, Taja DeJesus

and countless other black and brown transgender women, as well as the nine individuals murdered in a Charleston church. This ongoing siege on black life reminds us that living in a black or brown body can be quite treacherous in the United States regardless of one's citizenship status, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, or gender identity, an understanding that Anthony and his black transnational peers learned swiftly. But while they and older community members readily understood squabbles with the law are as connected to white supremacy, in many cases, their melees with black peers were often attributed to black pathology, a pathology from which they seemed to imagine themselves immune. Among Liberian transnationals, this pathology was frequently theorized as the logical result of white supremacy via slavery and contemporary systemic racism (i.e., a loss of culture, self-determination, self-recognition, and self-love) and among many educators and media, the pathology was untheorized and in that way, was discursively naturalized as just the way Black Americans were.

Their accounts, along with my conversations with and observations of teachers and administrators, convene to tell a story about a particular kind of intersectional "double-bind" in which blackness and "foreignness" powerfully reconfigure belonging along contingent political and cultural lines.

Like Betsy Rymes' gripping ethnography on the counter narratives of students at a California alternative high school for "at-risk" young people (2001), Norma Mendoza-Denton's landmark ethnography of young Latina gang members and affiliates (2008), and Anita Chikkatur's important work exploring students'

narratives about national and cultural belonging in the United States (2014), this analysis puts Central High students' narratives in conversation with their daily activities as well as with sociohistorical discourses of assorted scale, although not as elegantly as the aforementioned scholarship. I suggest that through their talk and social conduct, many participants repeatedly responded to misunderstandings with school and local law enforcement authorities, which they saw as intertwined, and also addressed noxious constructions of African personhood by their Black American peers (primarily) by reframing ways of understanding Africa and Africans and/or theorizing their peers' state of affairs. In this chapter, I focus on their talk *about* race, (un)belonging, and systemic troubles (or, their social theorizing and metapragmatic theorizing) and contextualize this talk with teacher discourses and my own observations and theorizing.

Practically, these concerns beg new discourse and action by educators and decision-makers that draw from considerations extending beyond "black-on-black violence" accounts and approaches in order to better discern the subterranean and eruptive interactions occurring in their classrooms and hallways. This final point is vital to the possible ideological and structural decoupling of the criminal justice system from the school system.

5.2 The Trouble with Big Black African Boys: The Discourse of Threatening "African Boys"

Timothy and Anthony were two of many young men from western Africa that I would meet who easily dispelled the disturbing account of "huge" and "challenging" "African boys" I'd heard from a few white teachers. They *were* on the tallish side, both hovering around six feet, and it was true that Timothy expressed himself passionately, but after watching one of the teachers who offered the "huge and challenging" characterization reprimand (a little too excitedly, in my judgment) a young man from Liberia who did not raise his hand before responding to a question she had posed to the class, I became leery of her barometer for "challenging" students and could not help but think of Pedro Noguera's observation that young black men and boys are often thought to be "too aggressive, too loud, too violent, too dumb, too hard to control, too streetwise, and too focused sports" (2008: xxi). I had asked to observe her class and explained that I was interested in learning more about African-born English Language Learners and the first thing she shared with me was how big the "African boys" in her class were and that they were a "handful." Because this was the third or fourth time I had heard that kind of characterization by a teacher (they were all white-identified according to another teachers' informal assessment[27]) in my two years at the school – yet had not seen any more massive or rambunctious black males than white, Latino, South Asian, or other in the classrooms I observed or in the hallways that I loved to swim in during class

[27] When I asked one adminsitrator about the racial make up of the faculty, he said that they did not keep records of things like that.

changes, I was struck by how the size of these boys' bodies became amplified discursively. Because she made this notation so quickly and sincerely, for a moment I actually thought to myself, "Oh! *These* must be the huge African boys everyone's been talking about! They must all be in her class." When I walked into her classroom on my first day of observations, I looked around the small room of desks arranged in a semi-circle and quickly took in all of the individuals who appeared to be black and male. I noticed a stocky young man around my height (five-foot-eight) and couple of skinny young men a little taller. No giants. I realized that for some reason, these young people were being magnified in some of their teachers' eyes.

When they began to fill in a graphic organizer together as a class, Ms. Thomas writing in answers offered by students on a transparency that was projected onto a white screen at the front of the room. They were analyzing a story they had either read at home or in a previous class and I noticed that one of the ganglier young men was visibly engaged – nodding frequently, eyes fixed on Ms. Thomas. From time to time, he looked across the room and made eye contact with me. When Ms. Thomas had introduced me at the start of the class, and I scanned the room, he had met my eyes and smiled warmly, and briefly bowed his head to me in a gesture that felt somewhat deferent. I smiled back and took a seat parallel to his on the other side of the semi-circle. After his reprimand and no uptake of his good answer (which I did not write down and cannot recall), he didn't make eye contact with me again that day. A few days later, I'd learn that his name was Luther.

I imagine that my own experiences as a teacher and community program director in schools with far fewer resources and far more economically struggling students also colored my critique of Ms. Thomas. One school, like Central High, had been an exclusively white suburban high school but in the previous two decades, it had acquired a majority black student population, and the teachers' lounge chatter was often a chorus of lamentations - the common refrain a general fatigue and frustration with "these kids" who "come from families that don't value education" (I also could not help but to compare Ms. Thomas's engagement with students particularly, black transnational students) to other white teachers at Central High who I had seen interact with students. For example, Mrs. Rogan talked about being excited by the unexpected challenge of teaching mostly Liberian students as an ESL Reading Specialist and her excitement showed in the ways she spoke to and about students (some of them the same "challenging" students Ms. Thomas was so flustered by). And Mr. Zolzky's adaptive pedagogy created many different kinds of spaces for participation, which he deemed crucial for English language learners and for students adapting to a new culture. After observing two of his classes the previous semester, it seemed that he certainly preferred when students raised their hands before offering cogent response to his questions, but on more occasions than I could count, I witnessed him shoot a variant of a quick "Hand next time" reminder if they didn't do so, and he usually said this *after* acknowledging the student's contribution.

But I can't put all of that onto Ms. Thomas, my personal teaching experiences - Mrs. Rogan's enthusiasm or Mr. Zolsky's refined craft - I just know that she did not appear to enjoy teaching certain students and was consistently harsher with some than others. I suspect that my distress from the way she shut down Luther's "inappropriate" (in the Hymesian sense [1972]) participation also related to what H. Samy Alim (with Django Paris, 2014), Nelson Flores, and Jonathan Rosa have identified as "raciolinguistic ideologies" that, by collapsing racialized bodies and the words they speak, "produce racialized speaking subjects who are constructed as linguistically deviant even when engaging in linguistic practices positioned as normative or innovative when produced by privileged white subjects" (2015: 150). In this case, Luther's actual linguistic performance wasn't the transgression, but the rather it was the pragmatics of his language use, and the extent to which it was deemed deviant (and in need of a harsh reprimand) that suggested a raciolinguistic ideological connection between Luther's body and his communicative behavior.

In many ways, Ms. Thomas's reprimand felt and appeared discursively violent as the behavior Luther demonstrated in response indicated some kind of injury. In addition to ceasing visual contact with me and not smiling for the rest of the class, he sucked his teeth (almost imperceptibly) when it happened and then rested his forehead on his open palm, as if his head had become heavy. Most importantly, he did not raise his hand or call out a contribution the rest of the class session. When I visited again a few days later, I was greeted with the same warm smile but Luther

still seem disengaged for the most part and was shushed once for talking with his classmate.

Flores and Rosa interrogate the ideological detritus of "appropriateness" as a goal of Standard American English instruction in American schools and extend "culturally sustaining pedagogy" to include more anti-racist and compassionate practices in language education. They explain:

> "This raciolinguistic perspective builds on the critique of the white gaze - a perspective that privileges dominant white perspectives on the linguistic and cultural practices of racialized communities—that is central to calls for enacting culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2014). We, too, seek to reframe racialized populations outside of this white gaze and hope to answer the question of what pedagogical innovations are possible if "the goal of teaching and learning with youth of color was not ultimately to see how closely students could perform White middle-class norms but to explore, honor, extend, and problematize their heritage and community practices" (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 86)." (155)

Ms. Thomas's reaction to the hand-raising misstep may have been related to previous, and possibly more severe, infractions of school or classroom rules of conduct by this student. I did not ask her and only visited her class for another month. But in the six weeks that I did spend in her classes, it seemed that her patience with students was on the shorter side and that her frustration with certain African and South Asian male students was disproportionate to their behaviors, hinting towards an unexamined and undue expectation that they perform "White middle-class norms" to perfection. In light of these observations, it is worth consider that Ms. Thomas, as a listening (and watching) subject, may have imagined Tamba's non-hand-raising through his black body (which she experienced as very large), his strong Sierra Leonean accent, and his booming baritone voice as

significantly deviant, not through the actual utterance and its nonverbal context. Like Judith Butler's exploration of the racialization of the visible field, in her consideration of the Rodney King trail and verdict, Flores and Rosa help us conceptualize the racialization of the aural field (1993). Their "raciolinguistic ideology" allows us to apply Butler's warning that "The visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful" (17) to our understandings of listening subjects. Just as we are taught how to speak and are inculcated with culturally mediated ideologies that frame "ways of speaking," we are taught how to listen and the same ideologies of speaking condition our "ways of listening." Butler's examination of the epistemes that consented a reading of King's beaten black male body as imminently violent joins up many others literary, political, and cultural interrogations, and reveals that violence against black male bodies is not often seen as violence but as a justifiable reaction to the "site and source of danger, a threat" (18) that has the potential to act. Ms. Thomas unease around her black male African students, and her visual field that imagined them much larger than they were, seemed to collaborate to make an innocuous breach of norms like not raising a hand in a small class an indicator of an always already there threat that demanded preventative penalization.

5.3 Black-on-Black: The Discourse of Exceptional Violence

In curious juxtaposition to these characterizations of threatening and difficult African boys, I also heard a more widely circulated discourse (on school, community, and national scales) about violent tensions between black African-born students and "Black Americans" that seemed to position the "American" students as the chief agitators and "African"[28] students as consummate victims. The point that most concerns me here, however, is that both discursive iterations, in effect, rendered young black men (chiefly, but women as well) as conspicuously brutish and the violence between them exceptional.

Because the "African vs. Black/American," "black-on-black," and bullying discourses and individual narratives seemed so prevalent in the school and local community, I was particularly interested in hearing and participating in Anthony's interview with Timothy. Later, Anthony would also share that he had hoped Timothy's story would kindle some kind of justice to counter a general brand of injustice that he felt he and his African-born peers experienced daily.

So the story told depicted Timothy, a strapping and charismatic young athlete, being jumped by a group[29] of Black American young men while trying to make his way home from school. To hear it from him, he hadn't so much been "bullied" by bigger and more aggressive Black American kids (as local and national media would frame

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[28] I use the descriptor "Black American" frequently to reflect the ways many African-born students named black US-born (or natural-born-citizen) individuals. I found that often, this grouping included second generation black Caribbean American students.

[29] Neither young man ever specified a number.

such encounters), as much as he had gotten caught up in an ongoing conflict between two complicatedly antagonistic and closely affiliated communities, "Africans" and the "Black Americans, "and was unfairly (and quite cravenly, it seemed) jumped by a group from the other community. To complicate his articulations of confusion about the "problems" transpiring between the two groups in the excerpt above, over the course of the academic year, Timothy would also share his varied frustrations with, and pejorative views of, Black Americans that not only preceded the attack, but that, in many cases, preceded his migration to the United States. He would claim diasporic ties based on a belief in shared origins in one moment and then in the next, would repudiate any binding cultural ties to Black Americans, whom he seemed to view as less sharp than both White Americans and Africans. He would tell of his disappointment when he first saw America and how he didn't really feel like he was here until he saw a bunch of white people. He would also share unexpected frustrations with authority in the United States – and the ways schools and the criminal justice system seemed dismally bound in a larger racist and nationalist project that targeted black immigrants in uniquely problematic ways.

Despite volunteering for the project to help disclose Timothy's story about being bullied by Black Americans, Anthony was also compelled to share how *he* had experienced the ensnaring nature of the United States criminal justice system in a particularly traumatic way when he (along with two other black boys) was wrongly charged with raping a white female classmate. As he told his story of being routinely

harassed, first by peers in his new rough New Jersey neighborhood and school, and second, by teachers and administrators who were "always blaming" him for something, he was animated and fluent. But his eyes turned downcast and his dropping voice started to catch around the words describing the rape accusation and his experience with law enforcement and the judicial system. In his story, he, his cousin, and a group of African transnational friends went to one of their houses after school with a white female classmate.[30] He explained that the young woman liked his cousin and when he rebuffed her sexual advances, soon after the rest of the group had left and she had been asked to leave as well, she ripped her blouse and called the cops to say that he had raped her. Anthony said he returned to the house and gave the police a statement, explaining that his cousin had not raped the girl and that her accusations were false and he says that when he when took the witness stand during his cousin's trial a police officer told him "You from Africa – you don't know nothing." Anthony had difficulty understanding how her single testimony could prevail over the statements of the six young men and said that because of her lie his cousin was going to spend the rest of his life in prison, presumably being raped repeatedly because he was not a "tough guy."

"It just doesn't make sense…" he said more than once while shaking his head, his body helping to speak his confusion and contention. Like Timothy's assessment of the school's and local authorities' handling of his situation, Timothy also found notions and practices of justice in the United States to be deeply mendacious and

[30] From Anthony's telling, it seems that they were at his cousin's house.

rooted in something that neither named explicitly, but both implied to be related to "white people" and their prejudices or ignorance regarding black people.

When dealing with relationships between black youth from different parts of the world, patent and pathologizing diagnoses that refuse to earnestly grapple with the tenacity and tyranny of racism (and its more salient translations: anti-black racism/anti-blackness, white supremacy), contribute much more to the ideological fonts of the physical and ontological violence Timothy would go on to describe (and generate) than to the attentiveness and understanding required for its abolition. Many of the community and school discourses around "Black American - African" tensions and violence that have transpired in the Philadelphia area since the early 2000s demonstrate a generally short historical memory and begin assessing the matter from two to three decades past, if that. They may speak of competition for community resources, or nod to "legacies of slavery" that cripple Black American social and psychological structures, or allude to the barbarity of African conflict, but strikingly missing from this anthology of theories about such violences is a rigorous discussion about legacies of slavery and African colonialism and other institutions of anti-blackness that continue to infect White American (and White European) social and psychological structures, as well as contemporary institutions like schools, prisons, media conglomerates, "big business," etc. Race scholars from various disciplines and fields have long warned that these latter kinds of conversations are not really possible as long as "whiteness" remains naturalized and invisible, and so, this project, while focusing on the conditions and components of co-constructing

blackness, encourages us to consider the salience of whiteness, and white supremacy in particular, as an institutionalized structural process and modality of violence, in young black lives, shaping discourses and conditioning conflict (e.g., Painter 2010; Lipsitz 1998; Yancy 2008). This purview helps us see quite plainly the ways in which most conflicts that bubble up between black folks from different neighborhoods, regions, countries, or continents are as much about living under a pervasive and a piercing white gaze and rubric of humanity (i.e., scrambling for a higher spot in an insidious racial schema and fighting for crumbs in a rigged economic system) as they are about adversative cultural difference (Pierre 2012). It also helps us see that such conflict is not the result of a peculiar social pathology that only affects people with black bodies ("black-on-black").

Much education and other social science literature that addresses race, in an effort to historicize and examine "racial formations" (Omi and Winant 1994) and the institutional reproduction of racial inequality (e.g., Bell 1992; Crenshaw 1995; Ladson-Billings 1995; Matsuda 1996; Williams 1991) in the United States, can unintentionally reify static notions of identities and of bounded, immutable categories of race. Central High students' interactions and comments indicate that just as individuals' national, ethnic, sexual, gender, and cultural "identities" are dynamic and contingent, so too are the saliences and meanings of racial identities as they function in our daily lives. That is not say that a person may socially identify as black one day and Asian the next, but it does mean that the meanings embedded in and articulated through racial categories can change within a social domain by way

of semiosis. The messy semiosis of blackness and through blackness that occur in schools and workplaces and neighborhoods implores that we continue to do the hard work of peeling back not only the historical and broadly political contexts of embodied performances and discursive formations, but also the tedious itemizing of *interactional* events that actualize discourse.

After hearing their fragmented and sometimes incongruent narratives, and after spending time observing them interacting with teachers and peers in class, it seemed that the crucial injustices the weighed most heavily upon Timothy and Anthony were threefold: the teasing and physical brutalization Timothy (and others) endured at the hands of individual Black American students, the misrepresentations or lack of representations of Africa and Africans in popular and news media, *and* the congenital partiality of an anti-black and anti-immigrant school-criminal justice system. The latter, I suggest, placed them in a particular kind of "double bind" (Crenshaw 2004) in which citizenship/ national identity and race rendered them both unfamiliarly and familiarly threatening and problematic. In my consideration of different modes of discursive violence, I contend that the second and third components (the responses of authorities and media) were also fermented in a brew of "post-intentional" (Perry 2011) anti-black discourse that imagined black conflict as invisible, inscrutable, or instinctive.

Over time, I would come to interpret the plethora of individual stories, commentaries, and interactions I encountered in my interactions with several

Liberian-born students as a collective narrative about the ideological and structural conditions and contingencies around interethnic black relations in school spaces, specifically, and about the convoluted relationship between Liberians and Black Americans more generally.

The majority of the teachers, administrators, and community members I informally spoke with, along with most media coverage of the jumping incident, characterized it as classic bullying, sometimes suggesting it was indicative of "ethnic tension," and sometimes describing it as "intraracial" or "black on black" violence. Many expressed utter confusion about the possible sources of such tensions and others theorized a pathological culture of violence among African Americans and/or Africans, anecdotally citing crime rates in the "inner-city" or incessant conflict on the African continent. Some seemed to imagine and valorize an African authenticity that was preferable to African American cultural practices. A few of these accounts noted the economically-stressed conditions in which such conflicts often occurred and cited them as a possible font. Frequently, the jumping was corroborated with other physical attacks on African (and curiously, almost exclusively Liberian) young people in the Philadelphia area[31] – the most notable being Nadin Khoury in 2011 because the tragic event was video-recorded and circulated via Youtube garnering it national media coverage (Ball 2011; Hoye 2011; Hurdle 2011). One teacher and more than a few news articles also mentioned a similar phenomenon of Black

[31] Jacob Gray was a middle school student who was jumped by African American schoolmates in 2005 (Moran, Bahadur, and Snyder 2005).

American aggression against East Asian and Southeast Asian immigrant peers in events that occurred in South Philadelphia and Southwest Philadelphia schools, possibly suggesting, through such interdiscursive linking, that problem was ultimately a Black American one.

Offering a somewhat different take on things, one white female teacher who appeared to be in her late 20s and early 30s offered the competing narrative that "the African boys" seemed particularly aggressive and seemed to prefer handling matters with violence rather than come to teachers to report bullying. She also admitted to feeling nervous around some of them, although no mentions of attacks against teachers rationalized her anxiety.[32] Another teacher also noted the rise of Liberian "gangs" and suggested that their seemingly immediate recourse to violence was somewhat excessive. Interestingly, the two teachers who suggested that African students were not always blameless victims, were also more likely to refer to the African students by nationality (emphasizing that they were Liberian or Sierra Leonean for the most part) than to use the generic "African" descriptor most others used, perhaps indicating some familiarity with violent political events in their countries of origin that propelled conclusions about possible violent tendencies.

Among the students I spoke with over the four years (14 African transnational and four Black American), most maintained the narrative of an exclusive Black American

[32] In 2014, almost five years after my conversations with Ms. Thomas, there was a physical attack of a Liberian substitute teacher by a black student of undisclosed ethnicity that was video recorded, publicized, and generated a school discourse about dangers to teachers (Graham 2014).

onus (with theoretical qualifications), but notably, there were some passionate departures provided by three of the four African American students, as well as from a few African transnational students. Regarding Nadin Khoury's attack, for example, Johnetta sucked her teeth when I asked her about it and basically said he was a troublemaker who attended the adjacent alternative school for troublemakers. She described him as a "bad boy" and seemed wary of the idea of him being jumped with no provocation. Confirmed by her suspicions about Trayvon Martin's unequivocal innocence, which she voiced in a class discussion facilitated by a colleague of mine, Johnetta's critical uptake on pervasive narratives about victimization was always surprising to me and forced me to reconsider my own assumptions about these incidents. While I ultimately maintained that young Mr. Martin had been brutally and unjustifiably murdered, I did begin to decelerate my generalizing conclusions about the tensions between the American and African students after hearing her stance.

Two years after speaking with Timothy and Anthony, when I asked Brian about the overall tensions, he seemed to regard the occurrences as historical and claimed that those things didn't matter as much to him or his friends as they did "back then." He admitted that most of his friends were Africans (and primarily Liberian) but said he also had good friends who were Black Americans and that most of his friends also had "a lot" of Black American, White American, Latino, South Asian, East Asian and other friends. He also shared that he had been teased because of his accent when he first relocated to the United States but seemed to chalk it up to kids not liking

difference in general. When I asked him if he thought a Black American who moved to Liberia would be teased for how they spoke, he chuckled for a moment and initially said, "Yeah, it would be the same" but then quickly recanted the response and said, "No, no, no. Because African people love the way American people talk." He then went on to talk about the only white boy who attended his Catholic school in Monrovia who he said everyone "adored," indicating that a Black American student's linguistic Americanness would be equally revered. At the time, I found his assessment of "African" valorization of "American" ways of speaking particularly intriguing because I had just read a similar view expressed in Helene Cooper's rich memoire about growing up in Monrovia, *The House on Sugar Beach: In Search of a Lost African Childhood* (2008), in which she frequently recalled her conscientious efforts to speak "*cullor,*" or to speak like Americans.

After pushing him to think about why these tensions seemed to be a thing of the past (save for Nadin Khoury's attack earlier that same year, which, like Johnetta, he also didn't seem to understand as a case of straightforward bullying), Brian eventually offered the following valuation, reluctantly referring back to "executive" efforts on the part of Timothy and Anthony and their crew of older young men as part of the reason.

Krystal: Yeah cause I was like
I feel like that's all people were talking about
more like a few years ago
um
cause I've been comin here
this my fourth year

	but yeah
	four years ago it was like
	“all the African ki:ds” ((low voice))
Brian:	um-hm
Krystal:	“and Americans ki:ds”
Brian:	=There was a lot of [fights ((nodding))
Krystal:	yeah]
	(- -) fightin 205veryday::y and
	seems like
Brian:	um-hm
Krystal:	I don’t really hear [that mu-
Brian:	the cops] would be
	everywhere afterschool
Krystal:	Yeah
	I wan- so I wanna know what happened
	That’s what I wanna figure out
Brian:	Yeah I don(h)
	((short pause))
Krystal:	I mean I’m *glad* whatever happened happened.
	You think it was just like people getting used to each other?
Brian:	I think.
	I don’t know I don’t know
	I really don’t know
Krystal:	I mean is there still ever like beefs and stuff
	and people still say stuff?
	Or you
	don’t even really hear it anymore?
Brian:	=You don’t hear it anymore
Krystal:	Huh
	((Long pause))
Brian:	Back- back then
	it was sophomore yea:r
	and this African kid got jumped, right?
Krystal:	=Uh-huh
Brian:	Yeah
	Yeah and he told Timothy and them
Krystal:	=Uh-huh
Brian:	Franklin and like all the African guys
	they got together
Krystal:	=Uh-huh
Brian:	And said
	they was
	gonna fight
	the guy that got

	the boy jumped
Krystal:	=Uh-huh
Brian:	So that – that was one reason why
	those fights
Krystal:	Mm::
Brian:	like group fights
Krystal:	um-hm::
Brian:	kids jumping
	people
Krystal:	Um-hm
	But you think that's- why it
	stopped?
	Partly?
Brian:	Yeah=Like-
Krystal:	Yeah cause they know that
	it's goin to be reta(h)liation [[laughing]]
	(It's like)
Brian:	=((laughing quietly))
Krystal:	=this isn just goin to stop right here

(Brian Interview 1, December 2011)

Brian's reluctance to characterize the Liberian student community response (which included young women, I would later learn) as the result of formal or explicit organizing was most likely a quick-witted decision to not encourage swift and perfunctory conclusions about Liberian "youth gangs" for which national and local media, school authorities, and local law enforcement seemed primed (e.g., Ludden 2008). Hearing his assessment of the collective efforts of Timothy and his friends, and how effective they appeared to be, caused me to rush back to my laptop to listen to the recorded 2009 conversation again. Listening to the young men's disillusionment with the systems of justice that were supposed to protect them, and their frustration with an increasingly militarized school that was indissoluble from the criminal justice system, certainly indicated that a logical next step would be to

organize a community-based body of justice and protection. I did not use the term "gang" either but did cut off Brian's response about the efficacy of this executive decision made by Timothy and his peers to use the word "retaliation," a lexemic sign often used to indexically point to a gang-related activity, and I was met with a half-hearted and close-mouthed "hm-hm" (weak laughter) and then a small bridled smile. This was my first sit-down with Brian so I knew not to push it, but almost three years later, I would ask him point-blank about his familiarity with local Liberian youth gangs and their multifarious functions. I have chosen to table that discussion for the next chapter, so that I can address it a bit more comprehensively and responsibly than I can in this discussion of discursive violence.

Outside of the school, Black Americans were almost invariably positioned as the agitators of these tensions (discursively, but not necessarily punitively, as the young men's narrative implies), and they were invariably reported by the media as the aggressors in any resulting incidents (Graham 2010; Hoye 2011; Hurdle 2011). Among many educators at other local schools, community members and organizers, parents, and journalists, a generic "bullying" label was readily applied to these incidents, often in non-racial, apolitical, dehistoricized ways, and sometimes in a *fractionally* racialized discourse of "black-on-black" violence. I emphasize the fractionality of this racialized discourse because in its very appellation, as well as in its application, it erases the logics of whiteness that permit the conception of such a thing. As Wahneema Lubiano clarifies in talk she gave at Duke University, black-on-black discourse ultimately reifies a black (and Black American, specifically)

pathological singularity through a naturalized whiteness, evidenced by the absence of "white-on-white" discourses about violence (2013).

A noteworthy exception to such thinly examined and deceptive conclusions, one meeting I attended of the Mayor's Commission on African and Caribbean Immigrant Affairs (a council made up of educators, business owners, elected officials, and community leaders to address issues concerning black immigrants in Philadelphia and the surrounding area) included an earnest conversation about school violence between African and Black American students and seemed to conclude that both groups were ultimately victims of discursive and systemic violence that pitted them against one another, but that African students were bearing the brunt of this victimization. This group also seemed to focus on the cases that involved Liberian and Sierra Leonean students specifically, which, according to my canvassing of physical events, indicated a preponderance of Liberian young people involved. Like the better-theorized accounts offered by the students themselves, these older community members listed a number of phenomena most likely at work in these tensions. One set of phenomena they theorized that quite directly echoed the theories of some students (who used narrative rather than terminology to convey them) was enculturated ignorance, internalized racism, or "self-loathing," that was considered particularly rife among Black Americans given our traumatic history.

I am actually of the same mind that anti-black racism and discursive antiblackness deeply traumatize people and injure their self-perceptions, and that this is very

much a factor in the way many Black American students at Central High and surrounding schools received their African peers. I also avow that chattel slavery, Jim Crow and its existing offspring, and the web of cultural practices that constitute white supremacy in the United States conspire to make recognizing and loving a black self impracticable. My concern with the swift and heavy-handed diagnoses of internalized racism, by and about Black Americans and others, is that such diagnoses rarely provide expedient responses and they can over determine our ways of conceptualizing responses to racism, often reducing them to an unsatisfying dichotomy (i.e., perceptible resistance or assimilation).

Conversely, within the school, it appeared that discourses pathologizing both groups, disparaging cultural practices related to them, or erasing their blackness altogether, moved most freely among teachers, administrators, and students. The table below features some examples of discourse fragments that I heard (in conversations I had with the teachers or administrators or in conversations that I overheard). They are paraphrased except when in quotes.[33] My descriptions of the speakers are based on my own conjecture and were not verified by anyone.

[33] Quotes are reported to the best of my ability. If they are not from audio-recordings, they were transcribed during or immediately following the interaction in which they were uttered.

Table 5.3.1 Teacher Discourses and Comments About Black Students

Teacher Discourse Fragment	Description	Source
A lot of the kids from Africa talk about getting beat at their old schools, so they're just grateful to be here.	Multiple	Field notes (conversations)
These kids are rough. You don't want to mess with them too much. They've been through a lot. (*referring to African transnational students*)	White male teacher (mid 30s)	Field notes (conversation)
I've found the African kids to be really respectful and they really want to learn."	White female teacher (mid 30s)	Field notes (conversation)
"The fact of the matter is, the black kids just don't have a lot of respect for teachers."	White female teacher (late 40s)	Field notes (conversation)
African Americans don't have a strong cultural foundation, generally speaking.	White male teacher (early 30s)	Field notes (conversation)
Most of our fights are between the black students.	White male administrator (mid 50s)	Field notes (conversation)
"This used to be a really good, you know, classic Americana, suburban high school."	White female staff (late 50s)	Field notes (conversation)
Some of these kids really hate school and they come from communities that don't have the same value for education as other groups.	White male administrator (mid 40s)	Field notes (overheard conversation)
It's pretty wild here. You have students who don't know how to sit at a desk, let alone read and write.	White or Middle Eastern female teacher (late 20s)	Field notes (conversation)
"Some people want to make it about ethnicity. I don't think there's any real racial or ethnic component to any of it." "Kids don't like others kids that are different. That's' just how it is."	White male teacher (early 30s)	Field notes

Overall, the violences meted out by "black-on-black violence" and related discourses that indirectly pathologized blackness writ large or that called out certain kinds of blackness as troubling, were not directly experienced by African transnational or African American students. That is to say, they were not as bombarded with talk of

black-on-black violence or talk framing their relationships fas "intraracial," but beyond their earshot, teachers and administrators produced the following discourses that (re)produced categorically denigrating conceptions of black people. (Table 5.1).

Table 5.3.2 Anti-Black Discourses Among Teachers

Black students have been conditioned towards violence, in ways that are contradistinctive to white and other forms of non-black violence.
The size and body shapes of black students warrant mention and discussion.
Black cultures value formal education, and by proxy, intellectualism, less than other cultures.
There are certain "hot-headed" and "hot-blooded" black ethnic groups (e.g., Jamaicans, Haitians, African Americans, Liberians) and others that are more peaceful (e.g., Kenyans, Guineans, Senegalese, Ethiopians).
Non-francophone black immigrant students have more difficulty learning "English" (Standardized American English) because their home languages are often not as complex.
Some of the African students get contaminated by African American culture and create the same kinds of problems.

For example, Timothy's theory of Black American economic struggle placed accountability solely on the shoulders of Black Americans themselves, asserting that if we were more intelligent, we would benefit from our own labor rather than continue to be slaves for white people. He explained:

> *"It's just how it is, man. I can say- I 'm just gonna be honest with you. That's why people wonder why white people are up there and black people are down here, cause… no ma- even though there was slavery stuff went on and stuff like that, let's just forget the fact that slavery went on. In person… … like, in person, white people are intelligent. Because... they like … ... th- they people that use their*

> *brain. Why- why they use- they use the black to make the money for them. That's what they don't understand. They use the black (boy) to make the money for them. They're getting the money and you gettin out there (go). Why can't they think for their self? Why can't the black people think for their self and say "oh, how I can be (.2) doin it?" Even though the white man not doing slavery no more but, if you think about it, they still doing slavery because their slaving you for your brain cause they're smarter than you. They're using you."*
>
> (Timothy and Anthony Conversation, May 2009)

5.4 Primitivity and Pathology: The Discourses of Diasporic (Dis)connection

> *"I don't know, it- it's- I don't know if that how it is but it's like African Americans and like the Africans from Africa, they just they just been havin' problem. They thinks they better than the African because they from Africa… … So, I don't think nobody better than me and they not going to stop me from doing anything cause e- somebody don't like me. And I don't get it. You BLACK. It doesn't matter if you was born in America - if you check back you ARE from Africa so I don't care what anybody tell me - you can be whatever you think you are, once you black, you from Africa, that's what I know."*
>
> (Timothy and Anthony Conversation, May 2009)

Timothy shared this pregnant stream of thought just a day before his 18th birthday, his passion visibly mounting as his hands became more active with each uttered syllable. He and Anthony sat directly across from me at a table in their suburban high school's now-empty basement cafeteria, my iPhone® between us with its Voice Memo app recording our conversation. The two were "Class of 2009" seniors at this school of more than 2500 students and since I'd started visiting the school earlier that year, I'd been overwhelmed with stories about conflict between Black American and African students by both educators and students.

The teasing was reported to often take the form of a Black Americans student or group discursively differentiating, and subjugate, the black *African* body specifically using discursive memes that have historically been deployed against black bodies generally. In a chapter called "The Proverbial Monkey on Our Backs: Exploring the Politics of Belonging among Transnational African High School Students in the US," published in an edited volume on education and migration by Jill Koyama and Mathangi Subramanian (2014), I propose that this kind of discursive labor "marks how a growing African presence in the United States may deeply trouble young African Americans by forcing them to engage in an agonizing political and intersubjective project: re-conceptualizing themselves in relation to whiteness via the rhetorics of white supremacy" (20). Either in reaction to their reception by Black Americans or as a derivative of pre-migration theories about Black Americans, some African transnationals also imagined their cross-Atlantic contemporaries pejoratively and through the rhetorics of white supremacy, and anti-black discourses, specifically.

Related to this troubling ontological rupture, Timothy's vacillating narrative also included the following statement, paradoxical to his earlier assertion that if you are black, you are from Africa, in some sense (a sentiment that Peter Tosh famously endorsed):

> *"Right now if something happen, I know where I'm from, I know I can go back home. But they think they from America. They think America is their home – America is not their home. If something happen right now, they say everyone should go back to their country and stuff like that,*

> *where will you go? I know where I'm going. I know that I got people back home. I got a place to stay. I got land, houses back home. I'm going to live good life. Where you going?"*
>
> (Timothy and Anthony Conversation, May 2009)

This stabbingly frank observation was directed at me and my Black American peers, and seemed to be both a plea for us to wake up and realize that we were choosing the wrong compatriots and a joke at our expense. In and under his words, I heard that we have been successfully duped by a spurious citizenship, and had chosen our masters over our kin.

It felt like poking at an open wound, which I told him, and then asked if he thought that we might be aware on some level of this homelessness he was referring to and if he thought that was why so many Black Americans bristled at the sight of Africans. He explained that he thought the discomfort was actually due to our misconception that this generation was the one that sold us away into slavery. He suspected that we catholically considered Africans complicit in slavery and therefore of partial blame for our predicament.[34]

I was moved by Timothy's concern about our misconceived sense of belonging in America, and it was a sentiment I deeply related to as transnational nomad who has

[34] Anthony was the only one to broach this subject in all my years of research with young African transnationals. Also, none of the Black Americans I spoke with brought up African involvement in slavery and when I brought it up in one interview, the young African American man responded that "that was only a few of them and they didn't know the white people were going to treat us so bad," a very accurate account (according to my limited research) that seemed to suggest that the issue was a non-issue in the community. Because I spoke with so few older adults, and Timothy reportedly conversed with his older uncle on these matters regularly, I am not sure if this particular discourse is generationally distinct.

felt nationless her entire life. I also shared his frustration with a sense of bounded nationalism among Black Americans and wished more of us imagined and realized selves beyond the conscripts of a nation that seemed/seems to only want us for our economic and libidinal labor. Six years after that conversation, while I was writing this manuscript, I saw a post in my Facebook feed from a young Liberian man who was a friend of Brian's (Figure 5.1); a post that reaffirmed Timothy's statement with an added exigency fired by the surge of anti-black violence in the "Black Spring" of 2015 (Wooten 2015). His scolding of fellow Liberians who coveted American citizen uses Black Americans (or, blacks that call themselves American) as illustrations of our prohibited equality, pointing out that if the nation neglects those on whom the it was built, naturalized black citizens are delusional if they think America is their home. The semiotic work of iconographic "emoticon" cannot be overlooked, either. After verbally referring to the self-named Black Americans, he inserts an icon of two hands with palms their facing outward, an emoticon that appears to interdiscursively reference a popular graphic virtually and physically circulated among protestors after the police shooting and murder of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old unarmed Black American young man in Ferguson, Missouri. The graphic is a black silhouette of a male torso with his hands raised above his hands, a gesture that is required by law enforcement to signify submission and to prevent an escalation of use of force. The poster's use of the open hands as nonverbal co-text to a verbal description of impossibility of black equality is quite poignant. He follows this multimodal declaration with a hashtagged phrase often used to ironically

punctuate a well-argued and provocative point with a nonchalant disclaimer ("just sayin'") in American youth register.

Figure 5.4 Screenshot of Black Citizenship Facebook Post

And notably, he closes the post with the valedictory motto "Forever LIB." The second word is enunciated "L.I.B" and is either an acronymic nickname for "Liberia" or is an actual acronym for the Liberian youth gang "Living In Blood." I have noticed that some young people use it ambiguously to suggest the latter gloss even if they are not formally affiliated with the organization. Flanking the poster's pride and fidelity to Liberia, verbally and visually displayed (by his words and his profile photo which is a text graphic proclaiming "Africa is the future") are two closing signs (a hypodermic needle and a gun), urging us towards the second construal of L.I.B.

While Timothy's theory about Black American homelessness bespoke an unsettling, but widely recognized reality, his theorization of Black American economic struggle placed accountability solely on the shoulders of Black Americans themselves and ultimately asserted that if we were more intelligent, we would benefit from our own labor rather than continue to be slaves for white people. A part of that barbed commentary follows:

> *"It's just how it is, man. I can say- I 'm just gonna be honest with you. That's why people wonder why white people are up there and black people are down here, cause… no ma- even though there was slavery stuff went on and stuff like that, let's just forget the fact that slavery went on. In person… … like, in person, white people are intelligent. Because... they like … ... th- they people that use their brain. Why- why they use- they use the black to make the money for them. That's what they don't understand. They use the black (boy) to make the money for them. They're getting the money and you gettin out there (go). Why can't they think for their self? Why can't the black people think for their self and say "oh, how I can be (.2) doin it?" Even though the white man not doing slavery no more but, if you think about it, they still doing slavery because their slaving you for your brain cause they're smarter than you. They're using you."*
>
> (Timothy and Anthony Conversation, May 2009)

Overall, the students' statements about difference actualized black heterogeneity and a diaspora that creates a commons of blackness in which folks are invited/required to summon their cultural, gendered, class-based, religious-based, phenotypical, corporeal, and other differences. Their sprawling discourse about black folks in the sample of discursive statements in Figure 5.2.

Table 5.4.1 Discursive statements about relations between interethnic black people

Discursive fragment	Speaker	Description	Source

Some family members say you can't trust Black American women	Brian (2012)	Liberian transnational student	Field notes
Liberians love Americans, love different kinds of people	Brian (2011)	Liberian transnational student	Audio recording
African students joining forces and retaliating against Black Americans is mostly what stopped the ongoing conflict	Brian (2011)	Liberian transnational student	Audio recording
Some Africans "act black" by using "nigga" as a term of address	Victoria (2012)	Liberian transnational student	Field notes
Sometimes it's hard to talk to white people. They don't talk like us. (*speaking to Black American researcher (author)).*	Johnetta (2012)	Liberian transnational student	Field notes
"She's Jamaican, I'm African – but we're both from Africa- we're both African"	Aliyah (2012)	Cote d'Ivoirian transnational student	Field notes
Students, almost all African-American, were ruthless with the newcomers. "They call the refugee children monkeys. Tell them, go back to Africa."	Macuda Cata-Doe, teacher in Southwest Philadelphia	African American	NPR "All Things Considered"
The problems are not just between kids. Our parents have issues at work too.	Timothy (2009)	Liberian transnational student	Audio recording
If you're black, you're from Africa (in some sense)	Timothy (2009)	Liberian transnational student	Audio recording
Black Americans don't want to work hard	Timothy (2009)	Liberian transnational student	Audio recording
Black Americans are still angry about slavery	Timothy (2009)	Liberian transnational student	Audio recording
"They- they don't even wanna know, they don't care, they ignorant. All they talk about 'African- in Africa you cl-.' They're so dumb. Like they claims Africa is like one country. How? They say you fight baboon. Fight monkeys."	Timothy (2009)	Liberian transnational student	Audio recording

Discursive fragment	**Speaker**	**Descriptio n**	**Source**

Yeah cause it's so it's so i- it's so ignorant because they don't know nothing about Africa cause the whi- … like people send people go to Africa and take the worst picture a Africa and they bring it here in America and they think we (still) jungle, we fight with- we fight with… monkeys. And that's like so embarrassing… because you're like saying, right, that you know you from Africa"	Poady (2009)	Liberian transnational student	Audio recording
"Personally, I'd rather be around Black Americans than white people"	Kevin (2010)	Liberian transnational student	Field notes
"Some of my closest niggas are Americans"	Donald (2012)	Liberian transnational returnee	Field notes
Liberian students teased me because I couldn't speak English	Malaika (2009)	Guinean transnational student	Filed notes
"Well, the Black Americans are just arrogant. The rappers are arrogant, you know? And really I hate it and I love it. Really love it. Black Americans survived a lot and that's why they're arrogant and Liberians have been through a lot too with war and everything so some of us feel arrogant too."	Frankie (2012)	Liberian national	Field notes
Africans and African Americans have to fight each other for scarce community resources	Community member (2013)	Liberian transnational	Field notes
African Americans are jealous of Africans because they have better educations and work harder.	Community member (2010)	Liberian transnational	Field notes
Africans think they're better than African Americans	Community member (2010)	Liberian transnational	Field notes
Africans don't understand American racism and what African Americans have faced here	Community member (2009)	African American	Field notes
"I'm starting to understand why (Black) Americans are the way they are living in this white country"	Community member (2010)	Liberian transnational	Field notes
African Americans don't know anything about Africa	Kevin (2012)	African American	Audio-recording*
African Americans only learn about Africa through 1-800-feed- the-children	Multiple	African transnationals	Field notes
Many African immigrants are used to resolving problems with violence	Multiple	African American	Field notes

Put simply, nearly every denomination of existing ethnoracial theory was represented in their discourse on transnational blackness, and some emergent epistemes were introduced as well.

5.5 Conclusion: Doing better

While the discourses explored here may have problematic derivations and permutations, they do address a very real predicament that causes injury to the minds and bodies of many young people in the Philadelphia area and throughout the United States. I am in no way suggesting that we not seriously address violence that occurs among black young people, or that we ignore the apparent racialized schema in play in such conflicts, I only counsel against approaches (theoretical and practical) that treat the concept of black people hurting other black people as unique and essentially pathological. To render an encounter as another episode of "black-on-black" discursive or physical violence that emanates from a deep-seated self-hatred without scrutinizing this peculiar designation or mining its foundations, leaves us at a loss for how to prudently address it in schools and communities. If we don't assiduously (like our lives depended on it) consider how such violence and tension are partially the outgrowth of competition over scarce material resources (jobs, social services, access to capital and accumulation of capital, etc.) and of predatory social systems, phenomena that many have argued are prototypical of the strategic maintenance of white dominance (e.g., "divide and conquer"), we cannot

direct our energies towards educating and reminding black communities of these stratagems and we cannot collaborate efforts to demand and produce more resources. We cannot construe the inextricability of race and capitalism (Clarke and Thomas 2006; Robinson 2000) and thereby, the intractability of racism, imperialism, and heteropatriarchy. If we are not attending to the likelihood that violence and tension within international black communities could be the result of good old-fashioned intercultural misreckonings, at least in part, then it is very unlikely that we will address the necessity for enhanced curricula that earnestly take up global black cultures and political histories and that does not naturalize whiteness and the histories it tells. If we say "black-on-black" and we do not cogitate on imperialism and political economies of blackness, we cannot make out "diasporic hegemonies" (Thomas and Campt 2006; Thomas et. al 2007) and how the co-construction of "first-world blacks" (Redmond 2015) requires the accumulation of both cultural and material capital by participating in the propagandization of black primitivity. If we do not bear in mind the allure and common-sense nature of "authenticity" as a rubric for reality, we cannot detect the ways people live sincere, unscripted, or deeply edited, racial and ethnic and cultural selves via revised histories and speculated futures (Eshun 2003; Jackson 2005; 2014).

It is imperative to reverently note that most of the young people I spoke with did ruminate on these imbricated and thwarting contextual frames every time they spoke of discursive or physical violence issued from the mouths and hands of their Black American peers. That is not to say that they did not participate in expressly

pathologizing Black Americans, in concordance with many older African community members and some of their teachers (nor did they exonerate their Americanized peers), but these pronouncements rarely connoted an intrinsic brutality based on race or a nearly inescapable pathology via an essentialized notion of culture. And regardless of whether or not they corroborated denigrating depictions of Black American ways, they made note of the ways American discursive structures wound black people, especially young black people. These young people passionately or passively cited some larger powerful authority (always white and usually specifically American, via referential or non-referential indexicality) as the source or conduit of these discourses and structural conditions, or of the ideological predispositions that bred such discourses and structures. One woman, Liberty, chided "white people" for trying to play the role of God in the world and she worried for their collective eternal soul, for example. In an impromptu interview one afternoon, she told me, "White man's justice is not real justice! Only God's justice is real. That's all I care about."

Thus, their analytical gazes provided the basis of the discussion presented here. Based on my observations and ruminations on their theorizing, I cautiously suggest that a kind of reconfiguring of race and antiblackness (one which constructs different types of black persons not only according to cultural difference but in response to anti-black ideology) was very likely at play, both for many of the American students (who tried to position their African peers at the furthest, primatial end of the human spectrum they had been taught, and themselves

somewhere closer to whiteness and modernity) and for many African students (who tried to position African Americans as culturally and morally bereft and inauthentic, and also as pathologically damaged by slavery and subsequently, less civilized). Ultimately, their words decreed that these complex uses of anti-black rhetoric warrant an extensive and nuanced investigation that goes beyond rudimentary conclusions of "self-hatred" or colonial subjectivities, and that their progression/regression into physical violence demand more than an impoverished discourse on "black-on-black" violence.

All told, these discourses that imagine black bodies and minds as more, or uniquely, predisposed towards violent behavior effectively proscribe the ways they can communicate (safely) in certain spaces. In order for their bodies not to appear as dangerous, many learned how to distance themselves from Black Americans in the presence of white people (often not realizing that there was also a narrative devoted to African violent proclivities in circulation), or to employ various other strategies that have been acquired through the black experience (akin to Brent Staples "whistling Vivaldi" to disarm uneasy white women in his Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago [2004]). As I alluded to earlier, some of the white teachers I spoke with affirmed this type of black collating by talking about African transnational students as more respectful, hardworking, and gentler than Black Americans (males).

Utilizing epistemes as indexes that help to disassociate one from an undesirable social type is one of many discursive strategies that, if read through a colorblind or

"neutral" semiotic lens, would not reveal the racialized structures of meaning at work in such interactive labor. In this way, a black semiotic lens that attends to widely-circulated meanings around blackness, along with local constructions of blacknesses, helps us better understand what may be happening in these young people's interactions. At the very least, such a lens helps us begin to discern the stakes around such work.

CHAPTER 6 – NIGGAS IN MONROVIA: GLOBAL HUSTLING IN A LIBERALIZED LIBERIA

I'm the product of a failed state
Yep, I carry the weight of mistakes
made by the ex-slaves and our forefathers
I'm climbing Jacob's ladder, won't come down
Energized by the sun so I'm bound to shine
Won't recline til I'm locked and loaded,
made and molded, substantially
and my cash is encoded to plastic
I pledge allegiance to the things for which I stand
What's good for the tycoons is good for the common man
Madam president, please keep an eye on my Uncle Sam
Please make sure that he pays me my dividend
I'm the product of a failed state
(I'm a warrior)
I'm the product of a failed state
(I'm a warrior)

- Pochano "Product of a Failed State"

6.1. Introduction

From the persuasive gesturing of marketwomen pedaling cooked food, produce, and European factory-printed fabrics featuring fauna and patterns non-autochthonous to Liberia, to the marketing of "live African music" by local bands in Monrovian nightclubs that predominantly featured Nigerian Hiplife covers, to quotidian commentaries and oft-recited Hipco lyrics that hyped the unparalleled realness of Liberian "niggas," this chapter explores some of the more striking ways in which many young black men and women in Monrovia, like their peers and elders across the globe, find ways to sidestep the state, pervasive poverty, and a veritable

proscription from global economics by positioning themselves as "hustlas" – on a variety of scales and via a variety of means.

As a racialized construct, *hustlas* are one component in an extensive circulation of black cultural forms and practices, and their related signifiers, that point to competing ideologies around the structure of blackness and to the contingent and circuitous criteria for legitimate citizenship in a contemporary Liberian diaspora and in global black diaspora. This following pages briefly explore specific aspects of gendered, classed, ethnicized, and generational fractures and community "sutures" (Forman 2001) that affect the lives of some young Liberians in Monrovia as they fashion a sense of belonging that transcends the state yet faithfully coalesces around litigious productions (and consumptions) of race. In this sense, one could imagine the *hustla* as an especially black mode of being because of its dependence on a wide-ranging communicative repertoire for survival and because it pokes at the borders around legality and conventional conceptions of intelligence.

As I illustrate here, a rather persnickety politics of blackness and belonging has long occupied a uniquely generative space in Liberian history and continues to do so in its postcolonial diaspora. Dissecting the anatomy of "belonging" in the contemporary Liberian diaspora - a kind of stateless and placeless nation constantly made and unmade in everyday life - helps reveal the affective and ontological potency of political economies of blackness(es) that maneuver through and around the fragile state and its mighty counterpart, the United States. The sorting of black

bodies, then and now, "here and there" (Allen forthcoming), remains a fraught and finicky semiotic project that attempts to reconcile white supremacist (or, euphemistically, "Eurocentric") ideals about humanity with experiencing the world through black corpora, and subsequently, the resulting ontological project becomes entangled with epistemic rhetorics from a cast of foreboding, but pertinent, 'isms' - including: social Darwinism, classism, linguicism, sexism, and the paragon of the isms, racism.

My conversations with young people, school administrators, teachers, along with international aide and development workers, echoed the account of a white American woman working for a major non-government-organization (NGO) who had found the rebuilding of Liberia's infrastructure a uniquely slow and painful process. Young Liberians' calculations of the slow process differed impressively from those of Mary and another NGO director, who diagnosed a peculiar flaw in the Liberian psyche as the root problem. They seemed to think Liberians (not the government, but Liberians as a kind of people) not interested in self-sufficiency and overly dependent on foreign aid. One particularly sagacious young Liberian woman explained to me, with a patient precision, that Liberia would never achieve its potential, "its destiny," unless it owns and is the sole profiteer of its vast resources. The high school senior broke down a few specific agricultural industries, providing concise historical context and a succinct summary of the present situation, to explain why the state was not positioned to see sufficient profit from these industries. Another young woman at a different secondary school explained that

most of the foreign aid went to pay the salaries of the many NGO workers in the country.

As she spoke, I thought about the fact that one could not go a full minute without seeing a white United Nations vehicle pass by, and I thought about the handful of non-Liberian friends I had made since being there and only one did not work for an NGO (and he was actively pursuing employment with one). Another Liberian young man I'd talked to expressed deep frustration with not being able to get a position at any NGOs despite his college education. "I think you have to have sex with some man to get those jobs. That's what I heard, " he told me. I put their accounts up against those of the two white American NGO workers' and wondered how many young Liberians they had ever spoken with – if they had every heard how "foreign aid," "international capital," "global economy" were being imagined by any of them, and how they were imagining selves through, or in spite of, such entities.

One of many white UNMIL vehicles on Monrovia streets, 2012 (*Photograph by author*)

It seems that the commodification of a genericized and gendered "Real Africanness" (via an enthusiastic clique of global consumers of "authentic" African artifacts, practices, and experiences and equally enthusiastic vendors who are generally women) and the circulation of "Real Nigga" signifiers (via the "mediatization" (Agha 2011) of patriarchal American hip hop and the production and consumption of Liberian hip hop by mostly male actors) have produced varied signifiers that weigh heartily in the semiosis of Liberian diasporic and black transnational belonging. Young people's stories, along with an interrogation of the constructions of these models of personhood, may tell us a great deal about the conditions of possibility around participation in a liberalized global market as a young citizen of a tremendously fragile nation-state

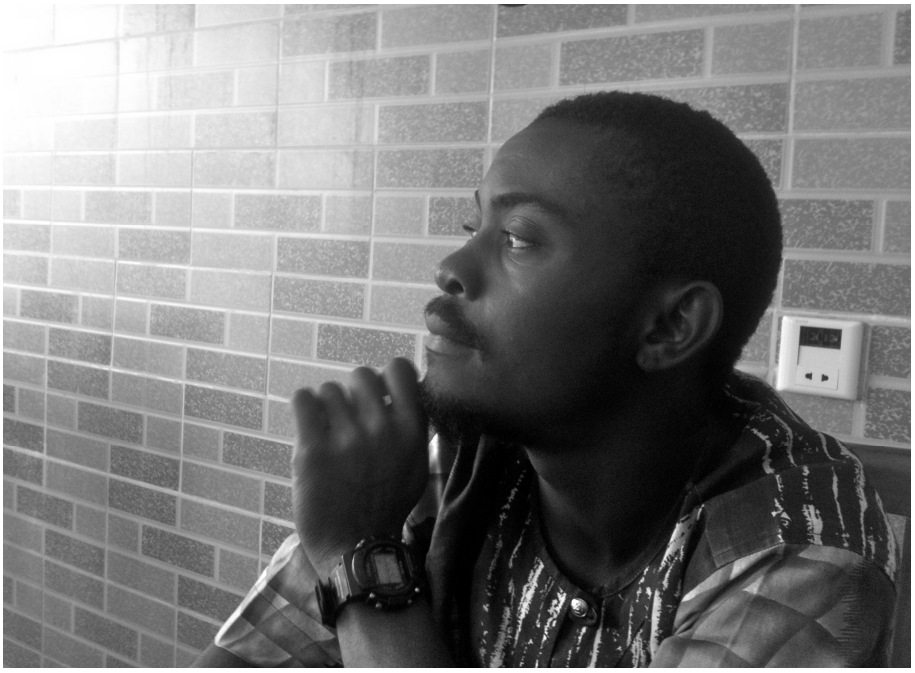
6.2 Contentions in Black Heterogeneity

"*You know I can show you a real black attitude, right? And I'm nasty. I'm telling you, I'm nasty!*" Donald was trying to hold me in a pretty penetrating gaze, and with all the sexual undertones complicating our new ethnographic relationship already, I found myself looking away uncomfortably. I have family members and many friends whose speech is peppered with the word "nigga" as a vocative or third-person reference, and I use the term myself with black and brown interlocutors who also use it competently (per Hymes' "communicative competence" 1972), but Donald's excessive use of the word was adding to my discomfort and was beginning to tax my nerves. Had his story not been so interesting, and the extensive spread of American barbeque before us not been so appetizing, I might have rushed our interview. And, had the restaurant's blissful air conditioning (powered by a loud generator in the back of the building) not been working on that extraordinarily sultry day, I might have been even more inclined to wrap things up early. My unfortunate choice to visit Liberia at the end of the rainy season meant that all fabrics I came in contact with, including my clothes and bedding, were permanently limp with dankness, and that my wooden earrings would quickly develop a thin film of mildew. Above all, the warmth and constant rain meant that I had to be strategic about setting up midday meetings with folks.

After Donald's pronouncement of nastiness (and as I mentally replayed the entire first verse and refrain of Janet Jackson's "Nasty" (1986)), I looked up from my

mediocre coleslaw and met his intense gaze, now punctuated by a half-smile that read as playful in one second and a little sinister the very next. The show of bravado/machismo/swag by this twenty-something young man was effective; I felt like I understood in a personal and profound way his statement about how he conducted himself in certain social interactions, and was duly impressed and disquieted. And if truth be told, I was deeply familiar with this particular sense of formidability and embodied resistance; it was one that stole away in the recesses of my own consciousness, appearing in certain moments to protect, intimidate, or rebel. And I had certainly seen most of the black men I know harness a bit of this fraught, contrary energy from time to time as they cultivated legible and leverageable masculinities.

Donald and I were having lunch at Sam's Restaurant in the Sinkor section of Monrovia - a gleaming new eatery that occupied the lower level of a comfortable-looking hotel and that prided itself on offering only fresh healthy far. That this fare was categorically American (save for the "Liberian Dish of the Day") is certainly of significance and I wondered if that was why Donald had recommended the location for our lunch meeting and interview. Although Liberian cuisine is among my favorites in the world, I was quite pleased to see cold vegetable dishes (like coleslaw and tossed salad) on the menu, a welcome change from the flavorful and substantial rice-based dishes I'd been eating twice a day for nearly two weeks.



Donald reflecting, 2012. (*Photograph by author*)

Doing my best to gracefully dodge his skilled dalliances, I asked Donald a slew of questions about his experiences in the United States and about his recent return to Monrovia. He was candid and detailed: everything an ethnographer could hope for in an informant. Despite my explicit avowals that I would not be spending time with him in any romantic capacity (and informing him of my ongoing liaisoning with a local "mulatto" man in my age bracket), I think Donald saw my interest in his story as an opportunity to wear down my defenses. In retrospect, I realize that I knowingly allowed for a hint of possibility to remain – delicately woven throughout my rebuffs – in order to prevent him from shutting down altogether and cutting communication with me.[35] But, as I would find in many other instances, Donald

[35] This, among other strategies, I found helpful for navigating the field as an unpartnered woman. I found that young men were often the gatekeepers to "youth culture" and to groupings of my

seemed to be a step ahead of me, teasing me about my strategic coyness and my motives. There was something in the way he called me out – a kind of recognition and respect that portended a series of conversations I would have with other young men and women in Monrovia who described comparably variegated vocational pursuits that centered around performing towards desired ends. Although he didn't name this vocation expressly, the others did. They called themselves "hustlas."

I had been in Liberia for about two weeks already when I met Donald on the beach, just yards from my boarding house. The beach a prime location for meeting participants, I found out by my second day in the country. I was talking to another young man who would become a fictive nephew in short time when Donald and his friend, also a young man, approached me and asked if I was from America. When I said "yeah" he said he was too, then added a "well kinda" and looked at his companion who I believe had shot him a side-eyed glance. Over the coming weeks, I would witness Donald do a dance with Black Americanness kind of similar to what I'd seen with some of my Liberian young people in and around Philadelphia. He would tap the social capital of being a *been-to* (a kind of old-timers' term for folks who have been to the United States or abroad) when it served him (and also when it felt like his truth, I imagine), and he would emphasize his Authentic African Real Nigga-ness when that seemed to make the most interactional sense. To me, the ways Donald and other young men in Monrovia would mediate these kinds of blackness

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generational peers in Liberia (and in other locations where I've conducted fieldwork), making my single-status and romantic interest in males both advantageous and dangerous.

felt unquestionably like more than mere nods to a recent past in which the *kind* of black one was governed one's existence.

In *Red, Black, and White: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (2010), Frank Wilderson offers an incredibly generative schema to conceptualize structures of race produced through settler colonialism in the Americas and this schema is helpful for thinking through models of blackness in Liberia, as well. It is through the subject positions Settler, Slave, and Savage that he narrates the gory construction of blackness, whiteness, and indigeneity in the United States. If we take up his rendering, which is really a story about a continuum of humanity, or humanness, as it is imagined through tautology of modernity, we see whiteness produced through the Settler – who, in nearly every example in human history is already or *becomes* white, or symbolically white perhaps. As Settler, who we may understand not only as one who settles down *in* a place, but one who is also rendered capable of settling or cultivating untamed lands and people, one signifies a living, thriving humanness for which whiteness becomes a tyrannical proxy. On the other end of the continuum is blackness, produced through the Slave's requisite suffering and objectification, or "thingification" as Cesaire (1972) and others have imagined it. And, oscillating between these ends is the Savage, who will later reconstruct herself as Indigenous (Wilderson 2010:9-10) in the age of late capital via endangerment politics. She is neither black nor white, and moves between elucidations of life and death, of progress and decay. She is less than fully human, but rendered an object of obstruction rather than of utility like her counterpart, the Slave. It is through the

attempted annihilation of the Savage, and what Patrick Wolfe called the "logic of elimination" (2006), that Wilderson insists that she has a construable ontology as Indigenous, subjugated and othered, but legible, while the Slave's ontology is unintelligible and thus, illegible as well.

When we harness Wilderson's fecund, but rather tidy, subject positions and their correlating racial structures to the case of Liberian settler colonialism, a new strain of questions springs forth. We must consider what happened in those rare historical occasions in which the Settler may have been symbolically white in some ways but was also *emphatically* and *viscerally* black – visceral in the sense that her very viscera was read and treated as black flesh was routinely read and treated and in that she *felt* black down to the marrow? And, we are pushed to ponder what happened when the Savage, too, inhabited a black body? And what transpired if this Savage had also *become* black through an Atlantic conception of blackness before or soon after the arrival of this black Settler? And then, what if she encountered and was forced to embody blackness as a Slave? Or, to put it in Fanonian terms, she encountered her body as a phenomenological problem for the first time (Mahendran 2007)? First encountered the disorienting allure of black Atlantic suffering and its progeny? Its enigmatic fortitude and melancholy? First heard a field song or ringshout? And, what happens when both figures, the black Slave-cum-Settler and black Savage (-cum-Slave in some cases and -cum-Settler in others) are harassed by a piercing white gaze and weighed down with a black burden that both manage to force their way into every interaction, every thought perhaps? And, as this entire

text queries, what happens 160 years later, after generations of toggling over and under these structures, when the descendants of those same players meet up on another continent, in contemporary urban conditions that lamentably resemble those of antebellum America? Previous chapters attempted to look at relationships between young Liberian migrants and slave-descendent Black Americans and White Americans, and others, and considered how the darker actors in these relationships continue to grapple with conscriptions of modernity that, despite numerous permutations, still maintain their station as black Savage or Slave.

Also of significance in these recent configurations, are the ways the displaced Savage (as black *and* indigent) must levy the capital garnered from notions of authenticity and from having a rightful place and cultural space to call "home" against the tolls of being constructed as the antipode of modernity. From the outside, this space to negotiate different models of blackness is enviable. The growing US-centered discourse of "regular black" versus some "other" kind of black speaks to White America's, and the global community's, prevailing sense of *au fait* regarding Black America, largely due to our over/under-exposure via mass media. For our white and other non-Black American compatriots, our cultural practices, political projects, moral make-up, motivations, physiologies, etc. have been foregone conclusions for some time now, and any opacity that remained after slavery was cleared by the disciplinary birth and burgeoning of sociology. For people around the world, Black American bodies and cultural practices have been synonymous with "American" and consequently, have been on exhibition and available for consumption for some time.

In Claude A. Clegg's account of Liberia's inaugural black settlers/colonizers from North Carolina (2004), we see plainly an ontogenetic purgatory that characterized a life "between slavery and freedom"(29) in 19th century America and that bears uncomfortable resemblances to the lives of many Black Americans in Philadelphia's poorest neighborhoods and surrounding townships at this very moment. Deemed a "useless and pernicious, if not dangerous" (30) segment of society in 1816, free (unincarcerated) black people in America, especially those who are young and male, continue to be read as an impending threat to, if not niggling "problem" (DuBois [1903] 1994) for, the state, creating a complex paradox in which the brute is to be considered countryman on paper but can never truly operate as such.

In parallel, young black and brown women from poor urban communities are ladled with expectations of their imminent economic dependence on the state and of willful collusion in the proliferation of black and brown male criminality (either as lacking single mothers or complicit co-offenders). Despite a gradual shift in pathologizing academic and medical discourses, many young black and brown men and women in and around cities like Philadelphia (where the poverty rates among black and brown people at least double those of white people) are not only imagine and treated as prospective (or inevitable, in some cases) "thugs" and "welfare queens), they are also strategically provided less access to economic, social, and health resources, like adequately-funded schools, preventative healthcare, safe recreational venues, and so on. Akin to cities all over the United States, after being shoved into tiny spaces in cities, poor black and brown urban dwellers are being

shoved out to surrounding suburbs by a range of practices. In many communities like the one where most of my participants lived, complete inversions of white-to-"people-of-color" ratios are occurring (Rotondaro 2015) as white residents flee and black urban refugees and transnational migrants try to find affordable housing. In such conditions, it is no wonder that many black youth from poor and working-class families can scarcely grasp any material advantages that may come from being a black citizen as opposed to a black non-citizen in the US. Indeed, the very meaning of "citizenship," political and cultural, has long been troubled by the relatively recent emergence of the "black citizen" in modern nation-states (with the exception of Ethiopia, Haiti, and Liberia). From this position, the plight of the black immigrant might not feel significantly more vile than a global "predicament of blackness" that Jemima Pierre suggests makes a "seamless and borderless black world" conceivable for many (2012: 187).

6.2.1 Sonically Mashing Up Real Blackness and Authentic Africanness=

My work with this small group of young indigenous Liberians suggests that much of the social labor they performed to make and signify legible selves in a global frame entailed the continuous remaking of undesirable pasts towards productions of desirable futures – and they did this often by *mashing up* varied phenomena into Daedalean self-texts.

A term I first heard from Gullah-speaking relatives to describe breaking something or pouting one's lips in consternation, "mash-up" signifies to many the making of

something new through the fusion of musical or moving image texts in ways that stubbornly evade concerns about originality or authenticity, or about discrete entities. As I discussed in the introductory chapter, some mash-ups sound like cacophonic messes and others unexpected symphonies, but all manage to unsettle in some ways. And they do so by bringing together not just different, but often seemingly antagonistic texts and doing so in ways that makes beginnings and ends indiscernible.

One of the most potent examples of this mash-up work among young indigenous and Americo-Liberians occurs sonically, as many consume and produce music that semiotically synthesizes sound signs of Settler, Slave, and Savage models of personhood. Liberian Hipco, for example, is a genre (for lack of a better descriptor) of music that brings together Black American-inspired hip hop (which is really the case for all hip hop, many would argue) and local linguistic and musical forms. In one popular amalgamation, Queen V, Takun J, and Nassuman's song "I'm From" borrows its hook (refrain) from American neo-soul artist Anthony Hamilton's song "Coming From Where I'm From" and vocal stylings (pronunciations, lexicon, and prosody, namely) from Jamaican-born dancehall and American hip hop. Like Poady's mimetic mashup of African American English, American hip hop register, and her Liberian self, the song is effectively a Liberian youth anthem, in which the artists proudly proclaim being from "L.I.B." (Liberia). In the chorus a demonstration of contentiously overlapping subjectivities – and possibly even attempts to re-work settler, slave, and savage ontologies into simultaneously inhabitable ways of being.

Boima Tucker's short but generative analysis of Hipco shows us how politics of belonging and political economies of blackness materialize and move in Liberia (2011). "With the implementation of recording technology, the Liberian music industry, like everything else, was financed and controlled by politicians," he states before highlighting a handful of phenomena that speak to entanglements between politics and music production/consumption (2011: para 3). Regarding the emergence of Hipco and other genres of Liberian hip hop, Tucker mentions the role of iconic American hip hop figures like Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls in the lives of young Liberian men in the 1990s, at the height of the First Civil War, and reminds us that the rappers functioned as patron saints for many young combatants. According to Tucker, localized forms of hip hop (along with other local music genres) began to really take form during a period of stability following Charles Taylor's first election in 1997 due to the availability of recording software and the emergence of small recording studios. However, Liberian hip hop truly found its voice, if you will, in the political unrest that followed Charles Taylor's 2003 deposal with some artists actually developing their sound offsite in the Budumbura refugee camp in Ghana (2011).

Tucker notes that although Hipco is "helping to define a new national identity for an entire generation of young Liberians, the economics of the industry are still entrenched in the same old patronage systems" (2011; para 16). He breaks down the limits of Hipco's transformative power, explaining that without much thriving *local* private industry that circulates capital within Liberia's borders, to make music

many artists are forced to rely on government sponsorships or foreign investors, two funding sources that generally wouldn't be inclined to advance politically disruptive music (para 16). He closes the *Cluster Mag* article urging transnational collaborations between Liberian artists and others in "Tha Global Cipha" (Spady, Alim, Meghelli 2006) so that the democratic ideals proposed by politicians can be realized through the music industry (Tucker 2011: para 21).

Tucker's article closely correlates with Jesse Shipley's extensive ethnography on hip hop entrepreneurship in Ghana (2013) which explores how Hiplife (Ghana's localized hip hop genre, or its globalized indigenous music):

> "is a symbolic realm through which youths on the margins reimagine themselves as socially authoritative, free-thinking public speakers" who must contend with "corporate, state, and media institutions {that} attempt to harness youth styles – and their images of self-expresion – for the other purposes, demonstrating the potentials and hazards of the free market." (4)

When musical texts and accounts of a rising hip hop industry like Tucker's and Shipley's are "read" alongside conversations like one that I had with Donald, in which, after describing a Gola friend as "Congo," he explained that the designation no longer just referred to those of Americo-Liberian lineage but could be used to describe anyone who was "a real civilized type of person" and made "good money" we glimpse a possible revision of history and a reordering of nationalist belonging that assert a kind "consumer citizenship" (Lukose 2009) as the organizing principle for social stratification.

More access to capital, or at least to commodities provided by an increasingly liberalized Liberia, also seem to produce an ingress to this formerly settler ethnicity

(which effectively functioned as a caste), rendering it a class in the more classic sense than an ethnic distinction. Mary Moran (2006) and others suggest that this kind of reordering (based on class) may not be so much an "appropriation" of imported notions of civilization as much as it may be a realization of already-present notions of civility and prosperity within indigenous orders of meaning. In the lyrics and videos of many Hipco songs, we can also see and hear demonstrations of "classiness" and economic success to support this claim of civilized (and symbolically closer-to-white) status, but we can look over the fact that they occur in tandem with semiotic valorations of Authentic African and Real Nigga models of personhood.

The ethnoclass mobility denoted by fluid terms like "Congo" and "civilized" appears to be an analogue to another kind of digitized mobility that entails migration through timespace. As many, across disciplines, have noted, the chronotope of modernity (Bakhtin 1981; Blommaert in press) was and continues to be one of the most salient rubrics of international relations between the Global North and South, usually filtered through development rhetoric. As Chapter 3 discussed in detail, this rubric, historically articulated through discourses of civility and primitivity (e.g., "civilized people" and "natives" or "country people"), organized social life in Liberia before the arrival of black American settlers in 1821 and sedimented the social hierarchy over the following century and a half. Through the everyday employment of digital technology as a social modality and through their passionate participation in the global market, I posit that the young men highlighted in this chapter have

effectuated a "digital migrant" subjectivity, meaning they seem to imagine their spatial mobility as imminent (or at least very possible), and their temporal mobility (that is to say, the ability to move across temporal regimes to experience contemporaneity with America, specifically) as immanent. As self-described "hustlas" and "businessmen," these individuals invariably presented themselves as plucky and self-assured, and by connecting almost daily with people across the global via phone, text, internet, or through the circulation of expressions of life (i.e., music, language, fashion, political discourse), these young men talked about themselves as members of a global network, even if located on the periphery.

6.3 Exporting Niggas and Saving Savages

In my conversations with a number of Liberians young and old, in Monrovia and in the Philadelphia area, I often heard a revision of history that seemed to reconcile a violent colonization by black settlers with Black Nationalist, Pan-Africanist, and *negritude* sensibilities, and I also witnessed a veritable embrace of a slave ontology- or "real niggertude" – often demonstrated through the localization of popularized signs of Atlantic blackness (United States blackness most enthusiastically produced through hip hop.[36] These re-workings of colonial acculturation and postcolonial struggle appear to render a slave ontology not only desirable but very applicable to

[36] See Deborah Thomas and Tina Campt's mediated discussion with Maureen Mahon and Lena Sawyer (2007) for a broader and deeper discussion of "diasporic hegemonies" and the power of gendered Black American cultural practices.

the indigenous Liberian experience. Linguistically, the very existence of Liberian English, or "colloquial" as it is often termed, as an Africanized creole, helps signify this ontological occupation as well, demonstrated even in the moniker "Hipco," as a fusion of 'hip hop' and 'colloquial.' And, with polyrhythms typical of many western African musical genres, tokens of local languages like Kissi and Bassa, and explicit declarations of being "a native Liberian," Hipco manages to provide localized and embodied signifiers of white modernity and Atlantic blackness (already deeply entangled phenomena) while maintaining the "authenticity" of indigeneity, which some may imagine as a re-working of a native/savage subject position forced upon them.

If we go back a bit to get a better sense of how these ontological structures have helped animate social relations in Liberia since its inception and how they continue to inform Hipco and hip hop consumption and production in Monrovia and the Liberian diaspora, we may note that the moment black settlers of various hues began colonizing the shores of Liberia in the 1820s (under the auspices of white missionary officials of the American Colonization Society) (Clegg 2004), the prominent schemas of the time for sorting bodies and subjectivities were thrown into irreparable disarray.

The colonial encounter in what is now Liberia entailed the usual suspects, the colonizer and the colonized, and certainly employed the usual suspects in such encounters – the civilized settler and the savage native – two categories that

typically mapped quite neatly onto different kinds of bodies: those read as 'white' and those read as 'black' or 'red' or 'brown,' respectively. But clearly, in Liberia, when settlers came with the paradoxical two-fold mission of liberating themselves from white subjugation in the US and liberating their savage brethren from darkness with the lessons they had learned from their white oppressors, parsing bodies and types of subjects became painful and tricky business. There were a host of complicating factors in this colonial encounter, but the most notable may be the peculiar kind of ontological baggage these early settlers brought with them to Liberia: the weight of being a universally insufferable and undesirable nigger - a slave, former or future save for particular and providential circumstances. They came with the weight of understanding that the very modernity through which they knew themselves had rendered their own black bodies as possible remedies on the one hand, in terms of providing the labor necessary to erect a veritable empire and in terms of propagating a broader civilizing mission.

On the other hand, they had been constructed as persistent problems, in terms of disrupting white imperialism at home by demanding forms of equity. Along with this ontological heaviness, many of these settlers had donned masks of whiteness that scarcely covered an unbearable blackness - masks that some yearned to remove in this new land of liberation, but kept on because they feared what lay beneath even more. These masks, or attempts at a symbolic whiteness, at different turns compromised and bolstered the efficacy of their civilizing antidote for the poor savages that they saw as their brothers and sisters that had been left behind – left

behind from civilization and in turn, salvation. While Bhabha's notion of "mimicry" (1984), as a way of articulating what one is not, is easily applicable to those indigenous Liberians who participated in the civilizing project set out by their Black American colonizers, it becomes an especially provocative and productive, albeit difficult, schema for grappling with the social labor of the oppressed oppressor. While it does not fully account for the racialization work carried out by Liberia's black settlers, as slavery produced conditions analogous but similar to colonialism, it does help to expose the layered mimicries and hybridities at play in early and present-day inter-ethnic relations in the Liberian diaspora. Mashup, as I apply it in this text, sufficiently attends to these tiered mimicries that produce a range of hybridities and notes the nuances of subject-formation processes engendered by the simultaneity of subjugation and insurgence that historically characterizes co-constructions of blackness. That is to say, blackness has always been understood as antithetical to whiteness, providing meaning for the other via a perpetual antagonism. In this light, mimicking whiteness could never be a considered possible in a body already constructed as black and leaves creolized practice as the only viable option.

Because black settlers looked familiar in corpora, some indigenous Liberians may have responded to their language, their stiff woolen attire, their foods, and their Bibles more openly than they would have had the bearers of these strange products/practices been an ostensible other. Mary Moran's (2006) and others' work with the Glebo community in the Cape Palmas region on Liberia indicates that Glebo

collective memory/local history of the colonial encounter is that of a litigious cultural and economic exchange between equal players, each with their own vested interests and strategies for achieving these aims. This rendering of the settler colonizer as an equal interlocutor appears to be one of many complexly racialized phenomena that forces a re-conceptualization of reductionist analogies to other colonizing projects on the continent. The narrative of the poor native being tricked or robbed of their land by beguiling settlers, or tales of brave "pioneers" as Americo-Liberian folklore and standardized school curricula would have them, is routinely revised among Glebo people to situate seizures of land by colonizers within a larger history of migrations and land disputes among indigenous groups - that is to say, between equal rivals.

Conditioned by this peculiar colonial history and postcolonial present, young indigenous Liberians in both Monrovia and US cities manage to juggle various models of blackness that have traveled back and forth across the Atlantic as they simultaneously hold firm to a sense of being "rightful of the land" in their home country. In Liberia, we see that the remaking of blackness was largely a colonial project, while the making of indigeneity as we generally see it used today, seems to have been more of a post-colonial project. This provides an interesting juxtaposition to Patrick Wolfe's (2006) theorizing on the makings of blackness and indigeneity in the Americas via settler colonialism. He tells us that blackness in this context was largely constituted through slavery, so that individuals were constructed as slaves, or potential slaves, and blackness was effectively made through that construction. In

the making of a modern nation-state, the privatization of land and cheap labor to cultivate and build on it, are indispensible, which made black bodies, as the chosen candidates for free slave labor, indispensable as well. Wolfe also proposes, quite provocatively, that "Indians" and Indianness were effectively made via New World colonialism and the founding of the United States as a modern nation-state in the sense that they functioned as disposable impediments for the emerging empire and provided the impetus for a "logic of elimination" (via murder, forced relocation, forced assimilation, rape, and involuntary miscegenation, etc.), territorialist genocide.

As Wilderson affirmed as well, indigent bodies were things to be transmuted or eliminated whereas black bodies were seen as things to be used and owned. However, many would contend that both groups were ultimately constructed through the logics of modernity and therefore served as the stuff against and through whiteness was being made. From Wolfe's work, we get a sense that indigeneity and the notion of indigents, or people "rightful of the land" as many Rastafarians might frame it, did not become a relatable or relevant construction until quite recently, when indigenous people themselves began publicly flipping (neo)liberal logics of territorialism to revise history and to stake a legible claim to land through human rights and civil rights discourses. In this sense, projects in which black people in the New World, and even black settlers on the African continent, assert claims of indigeneity and seek/demand rights associated with this

designation, are not very unlike the projects by those groups that we widely recognize as "authentically" indigenous.

This slavery-engendered blackness described by Wolfe and Wilderson was imported into Liberia through its black settlers but was also conflated with indigeneity by this ruling caste/class, as the indigenous peoples there were conscripted into the lowest rank of blackness and black American settlers carved out a symbolically white, but ostensibly and still meaningfully black, stratus for themselves. In this stratification, there emerged a black settler caste and a black savage caste, and hovering over both was the specter of the slave – a sometimes cursed and sometimes blessed legacy that each group would cast onto the other (with varying degrees of impact), or take up themselves, at different points in Liberia's tumultuous history and present.

In these still rather emergent discourses about blackness and indigeneity, we tend to think in terms of black appropriations of indigeneity or indigenous appropriations of blackness – and that may be because these conversations are largely focused on the constructions and permutations of the two social categories west of the Atlantic. However, when we adjust our focus to other parts of the world – like to the African continent or Oceania, one would find it quite difficult to talk about "black indigeneity" in a way that suggests that it unites two distinct ways of being. In the case of Liberia, and perhaps on other parts of the continent, centuries of global exchange (cultural, political, and economic), seem to have manufactured a

sense of black indigeneity that manages to anchor itself – or relate itself in some meaningful way - to an imagined Atlantic blackness. Looking at indigeneity in Liberia clearly requires one to attend to constructions of blackness in the Americas and obliges one to reconsider black and indigenous as discernible and discrete social and ontogenetic categories.

Throughout my fieldwork, I saw and heard accounts of histories that certainly support Trouillot's assertion that people make and remake the past as means for making meaning of, or perhaps surviving, the present (1995). I was quite surprised, however, to find that many of my conversations with young (and some older) Liberians in around Monrovia and Philadelphia, yielded many pithy and rather rote accounts of the past and were followed by detailed and impassioned visions of possible futures. These stories of the past, whether from personal memory or history class, seemed to be primarily in service to reinterpreting the present and for imagining futures in which prosperity for indigenous Liberians and equity among all Liberian ethnicities was not just possible, but imminent. For example, one young man named Ernie, following a concise and fact-filled recitation of how Liberia was settled by the American Colonization Society and freed Black Americans in 1821 and founded as an independent nation in 1847 by Joseph Roberts, went on to explain that this history is why Liberia has always remained close to the United States and why American investors should compete harder against China's growing economic presence in the country. He mused impassionedly about Liberia really becoming the 51st state many long have joked about it being. Another young woman, a senior in

high school, recited the same narrative but used it to foreground her concerns about one day becoming a government minister despite the rising number of Black American interlopers and Americo-Liberian repatriates in Liberian political and economic affairs.

Another young man who I had gotten to know over the course of a year via face-to-face interactions in Monrovia and via texts messaging on WhatsApp, 21-year-old Frankie, shared the following with me when I asked him how he felt about Black Americans: "Well, the Black Americans are just arrogant. The rappers are arrogant, you know? And really I hate it and I love it. Really love it. (*Laughs*). Black Americans survived a lot and that's why they're arrogant and Liberians have been through a lot too with war and everything so some of us feel arrogant too." In Frankie's words we find another construal of seemingly competing social categories co-occurring simultaneously among Black Americans and Liberians: "the cocky nigga" - or, the slave who has or is surviving persecution and is usurping the settler's social strata in distinct ways.

Conversely, as I saw reflected in everyday youth discourses about Liberian national identity happening almost 200 years after colonization, there also remains a kind of pride in being a citizen (former or present) of a state that was founded by other black men and women rather than by white Europeans. Like black-identified peoples all over the globe, some young indigenous Liberians make brilliant use of Pan-Africanist rhetoric as well as signs and meanings associated with "Atlantic blackness" (slave baggage and all) to signify hybridized, transnational black

identities. Specifically, signs directly indexing Atlantic blackness's most potent connotations with suffering, annihilation, insurgence, and survival appear to have the most traction among young Liberians living in urban centers (on the continent and in the US) where such signs are frequently formulated as beats, rhythms, and rhymes (Osumare 2002; 2007; Perry 2008; Bonnette 2015).

Overall, it seems that among many young people in Monrovia and Philadelphia, there is a keen awareness of the purchase and peril that Atlantic blackness, or slavedom, or niggerdom even, carries in the global community. Not only is it a widely legible kind of blackness, it coterminously represents one of the most despised (sub)human kinds and one of the most emulated – allowing one to emphasize difference and distance from slave descendants (cum settler oppressors) in one moment, and to tap their well of stylized survival strategies, along with their proximity to white modernity, in the next (cum settler founders and Black American cultural "cousins"). In many ways, these young Liberian men and women help substantiate a sentiment so eloquently conveyed by African American comedian Paul Mooney in a 2003 sketch on *Chappelle's Show*: "Everyone wanna be a nigga, but nobody wanna be a nigga."

6.4 The Global Brotherhood of Businessmen

Days after I arrived in Monrovia in the fall of 2012, I met Ansa, a twenty-something well-traveled and reflective young man, whose sunshades and genuine smile seemed to be permanent adornments. He promptly told me that I was on a fool's run – based on my cursory explanation of why I was in the city. I'd told him I was there to learn more about Liberian youth culture and he wryly reported that Liberia had no culture of its own, especially among the young and especially in the city. According to him everything they did there was borrowed from somebody else – other western Africans, Black Americans, Europeans, somebody - but nothing truly "indigenous" and distinctive remained. In his slightly accented Standard American English, he explained that even the food had been changed by Black Americans, the language, clothes, everything. He joked about giraffe figurines and Kente cloth at the local market. "If you see any giraffes in Liberia, please let me know," he said to me, warm smile in play. He also challenged me to pay attention during my stay so that I would see this evacuation of "authentic" Liberian culture of which he spoke. As the weeks passed, Ansa's words would come to mind when I perused African-themed fabric pedaled to me at prices that far-surpassed Yara's on 125th St., or as I ate meal after meal beautifully and familiarly seasoned with hamhocks and chunks of fatback. But they reverberated most loudly against the soundtrack of my Monrovian nights (a compilation of Nigerian Hiplife, Jamaican dancehall and roots, and American hip hop).

It wasn't until I met Michael, one of many ex-combatants selling figurines made from bullet casings alongside a bustling Tubman Boulevard (the main street through Sinkor that connects it to downtown and neighboring Paynesville), that I realized something other than the simplified erasure or contamination Ansa alluded to seemed to be animating contemporary Liberian cultural practice, at least among the many young men I was meeting. It also seemed to be something that most discourses around localization and globalization couldn't quite peg.

After planning to purchase a large quantity of the bullet figures from him shortly before I was to set off back to the United States, promising to spend whatever money I had left at the time, I began nudging Michael to go beyond his sales spiel and to tell me what it meant to him to be selling ammunition art from a war that had left a weariness in his face and comportment like I'd never seen in a person so young. After a few meals together, he shared that selling the bullets, making art from them, allowed him to pretend that they were something else and that he was something else. But it was how he described that something else, that preferred alternative to ex-combatant, soldier, rebel, artisan or salesperson, that struck me. He described his resurrected self as a hustler. He let me know, with a rather unambiguous pride, that he sold a variety of goods and services and that he knew how to make money, how to survive in this world. He was now a businessman who no longer had to use violence because "real niggas recognize who he is" and the very threat of violence that loomed over him was compulsion enough.

Michael discursively connected his past, present, and potential selves orbited around a brand of masculinity articulated through the themes of productivity, authenticity, violence, and some form of belonging via that unique brand of entrepreneurship Shipley discusses at length (2013). Overall, I understood his narrative to be a story about one who could successfully translate the crude vitality and brutality that secures one's survival in combat into the shrewdness one needs for success as a street hustler, a relatively respectable vocation that also provided an initiation into the global brotherhood of businessmen. We hear similar aspirations in Pochano's pledge to "lock and load" until his "cash is encoded to plastic" (in the chapter's opening epigraph) and, we may perceive a somewhat altered illustration of what R. A. T. Judy called "global niggerdom" (1994). In his meditation, "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity" (1994), Judy creates an imaginary and nameless "O.G." (Original Gangsta) character who articulates the philosophy of global niggerdom in terms intellectuals can comprehend and vibe with. He tells us:

> "There is a motto circulating these days: Real Black Folks Work. And where else can you find real black folk except in the killing fields, which is, by definition, the place for nonproductive consumption-the end of work? The killing fields, then, are the place of non-work for complete consumption of needless workers. Real black folk are already dead, walking around consuming themselves in search of that which is no longer possible, that which defines them. Understand that the killing fields are everywhere; and whoever is born after us in the killing fields will belong to a higher history, the history of the nigga. You all are upset by this because you don't know what it is to be a nigga. A nigga is that which emerges from the demise of human capital, what gets articulated when the field nigger loses value as labor. The nigga is unemployed, null and void, walking around like ... a nigga who understands that all possibility converts from capital, and capital does not derive from work." (212)

In Judy's telling, the nigga, a re-commodified subject who has never truly owned his productive labor (first, through its ontological and semantic ancestor "nigger", and second, through the construction of the consumable nigga via the industrialization of hip hop) could be a prophetic figure foretelling the end of political economy, or specifically, the fall of capitalism. He wonders if the nigga is "an attempt to think an African American identity at the end of political economy, when work no longer defines human being" (214). In some ways, the "Global Hustla," who is always already a Real Nigga, also understands "that all possibility converts from capital" but he has re-imagined the "work" that generates it, understanding that toiling in fields or servicing other people who have it is not such work. He tends to think this "hustlin" kind of labor (in which you set your own hours and set the price of your somatic and intellectual labor) is patently "man's work," even as he watches women around him doing it more efficaciously than most of the men he knows. He is an entrepreneur who "complicate{s} simplistic dichotomies between state and market," to use Shipley's phrasing (2013:5) by embodying an alignment of "an established entrepreneurial spirit with changing state interests" (53). The Global Hustla can be a "bad nigger" who is not concerned with the social good or "his people," or he can be a "badman" who is conscientiously seditious like our Pochano (Spencer 1991 as cited in Judy 1994), but in either case, he is a survivor in a global liberal market.

During my time in Monrovia, I'd hear the partial narratives of 10 or so young men under 30 who expressed analogous kinds of survival philosophies – all of which, at

the end of the day, suggested that one's humanity, and perhaps as importantly, one's masculinity was contingent on his ability to make money and to defend himself. These were the things that seemed to constitute a Real Nigga. Clearly, there's nothing new or shocking there, as most conventionalized scripts of masculinity appraise wealth and violence (or the threat of violence) as the most efficient conduits of power, accurately demonstrating the inextricability of patriarchy and modern statism and the ways masculinity becomes an analogue, or metonym, of the state.

Also, far from unexpected, but still of infinite interest and importance, is the ways these scripts of masculinity are routinely written through productive power and more specifically, through a kind of market-based ontology. Altogether, it was quite plain to me that the models of self and the conditions of belonging that Michael and these young men framed as relevant and feasible were not explicitly related to the state, and some would say, given their disgust with government writ large and inclinations to avoid paying taxes or contributing to state wealth in any way, these notions were actually being constructed in opposition to the state, a project in which one who is categorically and eternally located beyond the domain of Humanity – and by proxy, the domain of the Citizen - would logically engage. Some (me) might even go so far as to say that these young men were participating in the recalibration of a savage-cum-slave slot that whittled out a different slot of alterity via a market-based, black global network – and in so doing, positioned themselves not as citizens of the world but as citizens of the market. In this kind of stateless nation, deference

to the US's productive and consumptive might is not only strategically sound, it's essential for creating movable black selves-cum-commodities. And under this allegiance, relocating oneself from the disposable savage slot to the fungible, yet indispensible, slave slot not only allows the young black Liberian indigents to write themselves into the annals of modernity as consequential subjects/objects, but also provides a recognizable and highly-appraised persona– allowing one to negotiate his own price at the auction block (and accordingly, smears the line between subjectivity and objectification).

One young aspiring Hipco rapper, Crastal P,[37] who, like many other disenfranchised young men in Monrovia, lived in an abandoned, unfinished structure, explained that after trying and failing to finish high school, and after failing to find lucrative legal employment, he had resorted to an illicit kind of hustling that I will not discuss here. His inability to continue school was sadly echoed by most of the young people I met in Monrovia, who after having had disrupted educations due to the wars, had a number of years to complete before graduating. With a shortage of free[38] public schools (which were routinely described as overcrowded, severely under-resourced, and under-staffed), all of the young people I spoke with saw private schools as their only chance at a quality education but the relatively exorbitant private school fees that, on average, can equal nearly half of the average annual

[37] I am using Crastal P's real artist moniker at his request.
[38] Free state schools require a range of fees for registration, uniforms, tests, and basic materials.

income of most Liberians ($414US in 2012)[39], precluded attendance and completion of high school for many, a situation that has grown more dire since the Ebola outbreak forced the closing of all schools in Liberia and shut down many employers of Liberian parents and working students (Castner 2015).[40] He expressed clear frustration with a state that had let him down and that remained untrustworthy, a frustration that seemed to prop up his equally clearly expressed need and desire to convene (symbolically, politically, and culturally) with hustlas around the world.

Crastal P standing next to a tagged pillar in his home in Sinkor, 2012 (*Photography by author*)

[39] I am using the per capita GDP reported by The World Bank for annual average income (http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD).

[40] While this chapter focuses on the experiences of young men, it is crucial that I note the exceptional educational challenges that young women in Monrovia continue to face, ranging from sexual assault and pressure for sexual favors in exchange for scholarships to expectations that girls stay home and help maintain households or that they begin earning an income at an early age (Allen 2010).

Michael, the ex-combatant-turned-hustla, offered a cogent argument about how the sufferation in Liberia paralleled and, in some ways, surpassed the well-circulated accounts of the most notorious and realest of niggas in New York, Los Angeles, or Kingston (accounts circulated globally via hip hop and reggae lyrics and languaging). And Pochano's lyrical assertion that the tactics of the tycoon can and should be appropriated by "the common man," reiterates the redemptive force of the hustler, the access to autonomy provided by creative entrepreneurship. In the same vein, his request to President Sirleaf "to keep an eye on my Uncle Sam" to ensure that "he pays me my dividends" illustrates a clear staking of claims in the global market, and a clear designation of the United States as a designated parent company and his exploited cohort as shareholders. That Pochano is accessing capital through hip hop – a diasporic art form/culture/industry that absorbed sounds from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States but that coalesced into a distinct phenomenon on the streets of New York – also speaks to the transnational and transhistorical disposition of the emcee. Via a powerful Facebook® messaging session, he told me in no uncertain terms that as far as he's concerned, his black body and the peculiar suffering it endures through time and space, makes hip hop his birthright, his site of origin. Like so many black young men and women I have met in my travels, their first encounters with American hip hop were as cathartic as my own. Whether or not we knew the grime and gleam of New York City streets bodily, the sentiments of the stories being told were as familiar as our own black and brown skins.

Screenshot from YouTube® video of Pochano's video for "Product of a Failed State," 2015 (*Screenshot by author*)

When I tune my ear to the synchronized doggedness to exist and lamentation over such an existence that echoes throughout Michael's, Pochano's, my cousin's, and my own assessments of the levies of blackness, it makes a great deal of sense to me why hip hop – as art, culture, politic, or commodity – provides an invaluable ontological recourse for those relegated to the savage or slave slot. And when we consider that black semiosis addresses the ways blackness is constructed through the embedding of meaning in signs and the ways meaning is made through the experience of blackness, it becomes quite clear how the familiarity of hip hop and reggae and jazz and soca and sega and any other sonic register made through the experience of blackness renders such cultural productions the birthright of any person who experiences a self through blackness.

From here, we can begin to make out the ways in which political economies of blackness derived from neoliberal formations continue to shape Liberian sociality – at home and abroad – particularly for indigenous Liberians. By looking closely at the construction, commodification, and circulation of signifiers that index a Real Nigga subject- we glimpse to circuits of belonging that circumvent failed states and failed histories - circuits that also engender the hawking of Kente cloth, djembe drums, and giraffe figurines via the construction and commodification of an 'authentic africanness.' Like others relegated to the savage slot who've alternatively chosen an Authentic African or Afropolitan model to inhabit and mediatize, for these young men, a Real Nigga model of personhood seems to provide backdoor access onto the stage of modernity and allows for a simultaneous disavowal of statism.

In the case of Liberia, it is crucial to consider its formation as a state and its pivotal role in earlier iterations of black transnationalism. By doing so, it becomes a bit clearer how neoliberal hustlers are not exclusively the upshots of contemporary globalization but have been cultivated over generations. The immediate, but not exhaustive, suppression of indigenous wealth, political autonomy, and cultural practice by early settlers was portended by their self-liberating and other-civilizing mission. Additionally, the importation of a US-derived political economic ideology crafted and hedged class difference in the new state and perpetuated its enduring economic dependence on the US and Europe – helping form the "mistakes of the ex-slaves and forefathers" of which Pochano still carries the weight. When one recalls that the republic's accrued its first massive debt to Britain as early as 1871 (van der

Kraaij 1983), it appears that Liberia was a full century ahead of its time in regards to exploited body politics accepting crippling loans from the power bloc. This loan and others led to the state locking itself into a 14-year, $1.7 million loan with the US, UK, France and Germany in 1912, an agreement which expired in 1926, the same year a devastating and prognostic incident of African liberalization occurred: the annexation of one million acres of Liberian land for 99 years and the accrual of an additional $5 million debt, rendering the young nation the "Firestone Colony" and one of the first overwhelmingly privatized polities (van der Kraaij 1983; Sirleaf 2009).

In the 1970s, then president, William Tolbert, began implementing policies that ruffled the feathers of the United States government: breaking alliances with Israel and supporting Palestine, entering into negotiations with the Eastern Bloc, auditing Firestone, and so on. His policy changes interrupted a long-standing congenial, and somewhat parasitic, relationship between the United States and Liberia, augmented over William Tubman's almost 30-year presidency that preceded Tolbert's (Dunn, Beyan, Burrowes 2001). Throughout the 50s, 60s, and 70s, Liberian national identity was being emphatically rearticulated through the cultivation of a gradualist and economic-based Pan-Africanism that had been the catalyst for liberation movements around the continent (Thompson 1969). This brand of Pan-Africanism was co-architected by descendants of Black American settlers who were effectively exiled from the United States but who remained tethered to its ideological foundations and enduring capitalist program. The Monrovia Group, made up of

roughly 20 member countries that included Nigeria, Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Cameroon staked the future of continental African independence and prosperity on the maintenance of western European and American support.

As a crucial theater of the Cold War, the continent's schisms in its early years of independence would generally play out through socialist/communist vs. capitalist paradigms and the resulting Organization of African Union would gradually lean more and more towards the victors of the Cold War. As a result, from the 1980s to the present, international capital and the "development industry" (as international aid) have held a firm grasp on emerging African economies as non-government-organization (NGOs), religious organizations, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and other structures continue the colonial project of effectively sapping these nations of any chances at economic, political, and often cultural sovereignty. In the case of Liberia, a nation that emerged from settler colonialism and therefore would not know majority rule until the 1980 coup that effectively expelled that settler society from power, the currents of black transnationalism (conditioned by US empire) has followed a distinctively circuitous path that is difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle with wider accounts of postcolonial Africa. The chaos that has characterized Liberian (and African writ large) politics since the 80s, at least in the global imaginary, has been attributed by some to the complexities of the states' initial formations. This complexity-cum-chaos that typifies the political life of many African nation-states becomes less enigmatic when lensed through racialism and its inextricability from global empire.

6.5 Conclusion: Using Raced Semiotics to Read Black Semiosis

To clarify the conceptual relationship between the terms of personhood I have introduced so far, I am suggesting that "Real Niggas" are one kind of "Global Hustla" and "Real Black" person. Global Hustlas are always Real Black and Real Niggas are always already both. Applying a semiotics that takes into account the interpreter and signifying actor in a semiotic event (i.e., the human agents of signification and uptake) allows us to construe various discourses and daily practices that help construct these figures of personhood and helps us see how they do so by enlisting particular signs and imbuing them with relevant meanings (or "enregistering" them into a network of signs that index a social type [Agha 2003; 2007]). Clearly, the degree of intent and accuracy with which these discourses and practices become enregistered signs varies, but their efficacy in creating recognizable commodities makes the fact of their enregisterment quite certain.

Parsing signs as indexical of Real Africans, Real Niggas, Real Blacks or Real anythings becomes funky business because like most signs, they are polysemic and do not wait their turn to index one meaning or another. So, in a single sign, and in the singular usage of a single sign, an unsullied, romantic personhood that has retained not only a cultural integrity but also a kind of sovereignty can be indexed, and in that way is categorically, not a slave. That would be our "Authentic African," primarily signified through the donning of African fabrics; material signs that one adorns one's body with in order to simultaneously express a particular subjectivity,

or a role-fraction of a self, and to enlist a reading via a particular kind of social identification. That these fabrics may be contextualized by more Western textiles or accoutrements, speaks to an understanding that their embedded meanings may be excavated and reordered at will. This model of personhood is also invoked through foodways and ideologies about foodways expressed discursively: from comedic digitally-mediated video and still graphic memes about the primacy of rice in the Liberian diet, and how its waning presence in one's diet is the hallmark of assimilation, to jokes about the smell of "*goo' meat*" (good meat).

Through a black semiotic lens, other signs can be construed as pointing to a sense of permanent and exceptional subjugation – or more specifically, to a sense of being made through "acculumulation and fungibility," as Frank Wilderson (2010) expanded Aime Cesaire's "thingification" (1972) to articulate a uniquely black ontology (which is, in effect, a denial of ontology according to Wilderson and others). This Real Nigga subject is not only denied full humanity, but he is also antithetical to the very axioms of the state, helping to illuminate the ways in which the black body was formulated as the cardinal symbol of alterity in the making of the citizen. In my research, using the term "nigga" itself as a self-referent or term of address for social peers; employing American hip hop music, dress, and language; wearing dreadlocks (among males); reconfiguring their pursuit of wealth as insurgence against white oppression; and producing discourses about inexorable suppression and conscription into state or personal violence are some examples of the ways Real Nigga semiotic practices (practices derived from, but not exclusive to,

being raced as black) were operationalized by many young male Liberians in Monrovia and Philadelphia to convey both a sense of wretchedness and an audacity to exist beyond the boundaries of state-sanctioned citizenry.

When Donald assured me that despite his education and economic mobility he was "real nasty" and definitely "a real nigga" when the rubber hit the road, I understood this declaration as way of letting me know that he was familiar with means of survival and ways of cultivating a self that existed beyond the state and beyond the scripts of modernity. Michael, the ex-combatant-turned-artist, also conveyed how life in Liberia rivaled that of the most notorious and realest of niggas in New York or Philadelphia or Kingston. I certainly have heard countless comparable declarations of a nigga identity from many of my black friends and family and students in the United States (mostly from the male-identified ones), and even I imagine and embody an aspect of myself that is best expressed through this loaded self-naming. But in the context of Liberia, a country that has maintained its ranking among the poorest in the world for the past decade, and in a city with no electric grid of which to speak and few opportunities for self-sufficiency, the significance of surviving against cruel odds, of hustling a life out of no life, reaches new depths.

Combined with other signs indexing other kinds of blackness, all of these semiotic practices that indexically refer to, and help entail, Authentic Africans and Real Nigga models of personhood are collectively enregistered as "Real Black" signifiers: as black signs that transcends continent, state, and ethnicity, but that do so by indexing

shared suffering, fungibility, proximity to death, sincerity, and the impudent pursuits of humanness and happiness despite the specters of the former. In many ways, persons who embody any combination of these human types engage in a kind of confirmation of all things black: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Separately or together, Authentically African and Real Nigga ways of being articulate forms of sincerely black subjectivity that aren't tightly bound to autochtony or accuracy but that speak to ways that blackness, as a product of modernity and imperialism, specifically, is largely constituted via transnational circuits that happen in mighty structural processes and in the tiniest of workaday moments.

Ruminating on the subjective and political valences of practices that index Real Niggadom offers an opportunity to further engage re-readings of transnationalism through blackness and racial formation through transnationalism, complementing work by Deborah Thomas, Kamari Clarke, Marc D. Perry, R. A. T. Judy, and many others. This re-reading foregrounds a specific strain of transnationalism that has long yielded a distinct post-nationalism and anti-stateism – one that transcends the state but that still recognizes and uses it to form a subjectivity against (much as the savage and slave were twin models of alterity in the making of the modern state and citizen). The paradox of being male, and in that sense, analogous with the state, and of being black, and in this other sense, being dissimilar, if not contrary, to the state, plays out in the convoluted relationship young black men in Monrovia, and in many US locales, have with the state. In ways that have been imperative in the procurement of a pragmatic black male ontology, these young men's narratives

speak to a market-based black transnationalism (as the follow-up to black internationalism) that continues to move through and around modernity in circuitous ways and that recognizes the inherent antagonism and antithetical relationship between the modern state and blackness but that also, hungry for conventions that offers a semblance of humanity, clings famishedly to any gristle of patriarchy that it can.

CHAPTER 7 – CAN I LIVE? THE STAKES OF DOING RESEARCH ON "BLACK YOUTH"AND THE STAKES OF BLACK HETEROGENEITY

Strong voice of the weak, voice of the people
One minute we fragile then the next minute we eagles
You hatin' watch me, trust me I'ma make it
Work for all that I deserve and if not I'ma take it
True words coming from a true heart
Life is like a movie I'm just dying for the part
And honestly I didn't choose this life, this life chose me
And I'ma live it, I'ma hone it, till the day I stop breathin'
Can I live, can I live, can I live?
Can I live?

- J Urban "Can I Live"

Nigga, we gon' be alright

-Kendrick Lamar

Trying to stay alive is one thing and trying to live is another thing altogether.

Before celebrities and the President of the United States, Barack Obama, began facetiously tweeting and Buzzfeeding "Can I live?" in response to inhuman expectations and the price of voluntarily vanquished privacy, young black and brown men and women essentially catechized the social structures – and infrastructures – that prejudged, proscribed, policed, and provoked them on a daily basis with the same question. Perhaps the short shrift some of us give to the diamond-studded, Maybach-driving rappers' cries of "Can I liiive?" have allowed us to discount what it is they're saying – whatever it is these hyper-commercialized, materialistic, under-educated, over-digitized, victims of capitalism could be beseeching from the universe and from this trip we call "existence."

It seems that the resonance of this particular appeal has not yet met the ears and tongues of coalminers in Appalachia, families who were forcibly removed from Caracas's Torre de David, or elders begging alms on the streets of Brindavan, but if it does, one imagines that the significance of asking "Can I live?" literally (denotationally) or rhetorically (connotationally, in a sense) would become painfully lucid for even the most jaded, shallow, overeducated, or uninformed among us. From the mouths of everyday people who have been sequestered to under-resourced and over-policed communities, or of hip hop artists we consider "conscious" (i.e., intelligent and socially aware), we unmistakably hear this rejoinder as something other (or more?) than a plea to simply stay alive. And we hear something other than an uncomplicated, and narcissist, request for permission to follow one's desires without judgment or impunity. Instead, we can make out a kind of supplication to live a life that maintains the rudiments of human dignity: to move about the planet without fear; to be seen rather than surveilled; to not be murdered and maimed by state-sanctioned entities; to have access to nourishment; to have access to holistic healthcare; to have access to sustainable employment that pays living wages; to enjoy individual autonomy within a vibrant community; to speak the language of one's forebears and be heard rather than dismissed or judged; to emphatically dream of establishing and sustaining legacies; to embody and experience a self from the center rather than from the margins; and so on.

Our academic and quotidian discourses on power and inequity have generated precious and powerful concepts that take entreaties comparable to "can I live?"

quite seriously. As a result, a plethora of precepts help us to discern, meticulously disassemble – and with any luck, dispose of – wraithlike structures of oppression. So, we speak earnestly of liberation, social justice, and transformation. And we speak about revolution, humanitarianism, unlearning, alternative economies, civil rights, human rights, "right knowledge," getting free, getting rich, and so forth. Some of us try to understand precisely what it is that engenders a prevailing sense of being "trapped in prisons of seclusion" (Luv and Shakur 1991) in one's everyday life, and what it is that fosters such salient alliances with that "caged bird that sings," (Angelou 1970) or that yields strong yearnings to "lay down one's burdens down by the riverside." And, for those of us paying particularly close attention, we begin to sense the urgency around demystifying those processes that have and continue to universally and inordinately dole out this unbearable heaviness onto the darkest backs and minds.

Frequently, we trace racial logics to the latter part of Europe's "Age of Enlightenment," citing the closely-correlated invention of modernity, and specifically, the scientization of race that quickly followed the period of awakening (Jackson and Weidman 2005) – a process that seemed to only concretize an enduring and widespread commonsense "truth" about human hierarchies (Arendt 1944) which places a constructed whiteness at the apex and blackness at the base. Many of us feel a modicum of comfort from having located a plausible genesis of this blight. We stick a pin in that moment and, heads wagging, exclaim, "So there it is!" relishing a bit in that second of certainty. But soon after, we find ourselves in a still

moment, alone with our mouths slightly agape, transfixed and muted by this unspeakable impudence, this utter absurdity that has directed the course of human history since the 17th century.

And then, in another moment, after we've shaken ourselves out of states of disbelief (or been shaken out of them by a staggering news headline or life-altering phone call), we put our noses to the grindstone and begin the hard labor of retracing our collective human steps – to discern how we got ourselves into this mess, how the messiness has played out, and how we might begin clearing things out. Some of us find further clarity through careful examination of the Atlantic Slave Trade as a global economic system that buttressed the rise of mass production and "late capitalism." But frequently, so focused on the task at hand, we (as thinkers and emoting social beings) sometimes fall inadvertently down one of many rabbit-holes and find ourselves lost in a kind of timeless, placeless, and hopeless Gethsemane, and rather than suss out escape routes, educate and exhort oppressive systems and exponents of such systems, catalog instruments of survival, or develop alternative grammars, we spend much of our precious energy stores abstractly admonishing an interminable "history of iniquity" (Hill 2001) with one another (i.e., preaching to, or in effect, harmonizing with the choir) .

But as social actors (i.e., human beings), when we've come face-to-face with the inescapability of anti-blackness in this conceptual black hole, we're compelled to grab hold of black suffering and are sometimes forced to knead it into something

that, ironically, provides sustenance. So, it is in this potentially generative abyss where some scholars of Africana/Black Studies (and its variants) and some black-bodied persons either: willfully succumb and make lives and careers of lamentation; find the impetus for a dogmatic dissidence; locate a kind of peace with the inevitability of suffering and work from there; position themselves within the structures of oppression to engage in piecemeal reformation or renovation; or devote themselves to bringing to bear other ways of knowing and being that reconfigure the very structures of meaning that make blackness (in theory and in practice) (Jackson 2005; 2013). No matter the path or paths chosen, it seems evident that once one has glimpsed the darkness (a Newtonian analogue to "seeing the light"), certain blindnesses are no longer possible and others are engendered (Jackson 2005). It begins to make sense that only in those spaces that lay beyond this dark and procreant abyss – those spaces lit by the blinding fluorescence of multiculturalist, liberalist, conservative and other apologist frameworks – could one miss the inextricability, and insidiousness, of white imperialism and anti-blackness in virtually every social structural and infrastructural entity conceived since the "dawn of modernity" (Levine 2001).

The accounts shared in this text suggest that along with many of the sociopolitical and cultural divergences that help create a veritable and volatile black heterogeneity (or, the consistent malaise and *melees* that constitute local/translocal black sociality (i.e., Black Diaspora)), there exists an unwavering sense of connectedness (which some imagine through an atemporal and metaphysical

kinship, an overlapping pastness, an analogous presentness, and/or an inextricable futurity) and a relentless desire to make meaning of one's life and self. It is this lingering and "unscientific" sense of connectedness (or "belongingness," as I approach it in this project) and desire for self efficacy that finds it ways into verbal and visual communicative practices and that fuels the affective fire burning through people's words and actions. It is also what frequently, forces us to deal with different kinds of essentialisms at work in people's real lives (Jackson 2005: Spivak, Landry, and MacLean 1996). It is this sensibility that allowed Anthony, from Chapter 5, to note an impassable chasm and proclaim irrevocable difference between "Africans from Africa" and "the African Americans" in one breath, and, in the next, affirm an ontological moor that forever connects the same two groups. It is what also allowed him to dis-identify with African Americans via discourses of respectability ('*Black Americans are lazy and aren't grateful for the opportunities they have*.') in order to possibly move closer to whiteness in one statement, and in another statement, to dis-identify with African Americans yet again, but *differently*, via a discourse of authenticity and indigeneity to move *away* from whiteness ('*Black Americans are brainwashed by white people*… *They don't have a home; I know where my home is*.'). It is this simultaneous heterogeneity, antagonism, and belongingness that then allows the same young man to maintain that all "Black Americans" are historically from Africa and, therefore, are not different *enough* from Africans to assume any kind of superiority or to purport any fundamental difference. It is what allows one of his fellow Liberian-born school mate, Poady, to mimetically use

African American English to talk about and demonstrate her entangled, but indisputable, *African*ness (Chapter 4). It is what allows another Johnetta to sheepishly share with me that she can't really talk to white people or go to church with them as she theorizes a black "way of talking" and "way of worshipping" that spans continents. It is what allows another young man from Liberia to rock Taylorgang® clothing by Black American rapper, Wiz Khalifa, to simultaneously signify his admiration of the artist and American hip hop and to reference Liberia's infamous former president/dictator, Charles Taylor. It is what allowed a woman in Monrovia to tell me that she loved Black Americans (and me) shortly after muttering under hear breath in Liberian English to a fellow market woman that she was going to take all my money. The push-pull of difference and belonging is what allowed young men in Monrovia to adopt the vocative "nigga" from the African American experience to gauge one's black and masculine sincerities and to express the ontological upshots of settler colonialism on black bodies and the social consequences of excessive political economic violence (Chapter 6). It is what allowed for a concurrent disparagement of postmodern empire, an exasperation with American arrogance, and a desperation to participate in global neoliberalism as an agentive/Americanized actor (a *hustla*) rather than as a "third world" subject (Chapter 6). And, although not explored in this text, this simultaneity of subjectivities is also what engendered the capture and circulation of visual self-stylings, or "selfies," that integrated "enregistered emblems" (Agha 2007) from oppressive structures with emblems of sovereign selves. Ultimately, this text

inquired about the ways these perplexing syntheses, which frequently procure potentially destructive practices and forms, can and should be re-read with an eye that can perceive simultaneity and also recognize these phenomena as possible acts of sedition against anti-blackness and its attempted prohibition of black life.

However, in tandem with more generous readings of black youth and their productions of belongingness and difference, one of the many niggling questions/concerns raised for me during the writing of this text was black heterogeneity's apparent inheritance of black respectability politics and the violences it helps articulate on and through black bodies, especially when it has finds life through elitism.

After sifting through the myriad ways anti-black racism and antiblackness proscribe how one can be legibly black and human, and then finding scraps of solace where black-identified peoples have circumvented these proscriptions, my mind's eye kept twitching at the thought of "black heterogeneity," a term I have used rather celebratorily throughout the text and have used in a similar manner throughout my short scholarly career.

It seems transparent enough that black elitism insists on heterogeneity, typically through the strategic manufacturing of different kinds of blackness and the enregistering of respective signs. And, it also appears likely that these productions of difference are not born of generally benign individualist or pluralist inclinations but are concerted efforts to hammer out a substrata, a lower rung on Wynter's

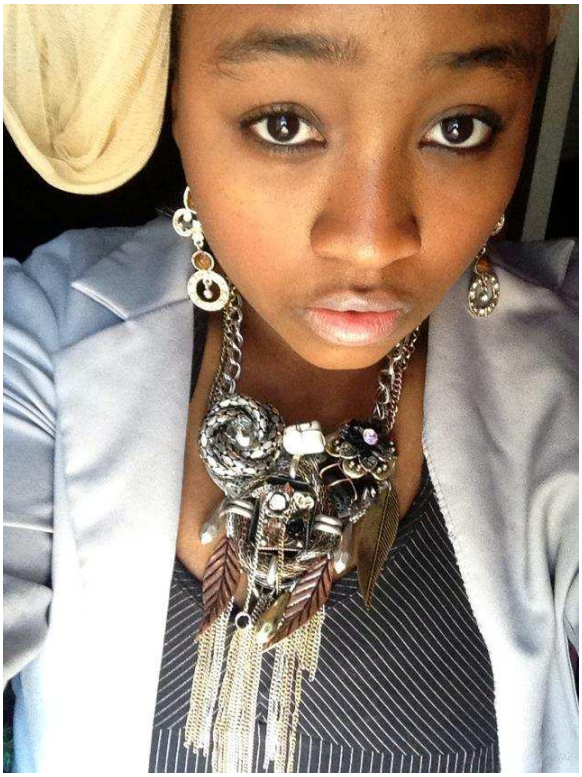
human hierarchy (2003). As disconcerting and frightening as this understanding/ reminder was, it was unsurprising. For me, what was considerably more disquieting and remarkable was the uncertainty about the nature of black heterogeneity - how much of it is always already hegemonic and conditioned by antiblackness on some level? What meaning about race, and about blackness, in particular, could be made independent of white supremacist race logics? If the difference being articulated is fundamentally about class or an authenticity that is decipherable through modernity's gauge of humanness, then is it not inescapably anti-black? Even when heterogeneity has been dressed as ethnic difference (as it typically is), often the meanings inscribed in the signs functioning as ethnic markers will adorn themselves with epistemes from discourses of modernity and in that way, rearticulate themselves through modernity. Time and again, ethnic tensions arise in spaces where both the content and expressions (the signified and the sign-vehicles) of ethnicity are in crisis, and for the past few centuries, such crisis is generally corporealized as racialized suppression.

Shakily, I decided to pick up black elitism again and push myself beyond the easy conclusion that "divide and conquer" was always and only at play in black sociality. Could it be that this seemingly self-loathing black elitism – that practiced by the black settlers, DuBois in his earlier decades, Bill Cosby, and members of Jack and Jill of America, Inc. – while unspeakably problematic, also yields a fascinating variety of black semiosis occupied with creating signs that *presuppose*, or entail, a black human referent? - a decidely specious and seditious project according to antiblack

doctrine and culture. From this stance (still wobbly), I wondered if black elitism's more humble cousin, respectability, could also engage in this seemingly unsustainable making of meaning about and through blackness – to presume, to *know,* a plenary black human self – to translate this humanity into the only language that provides access to a temporary shelter for this human self.

Black humanity needs sign-vehicles, representamen, to express itself but without an interpretant to connect the content (black lives matter) to the sign (#blacklivesmatter), its meaning exists in a vault (not unlike like the tree falling with no one to hear it: whether it makes a sound or not is irrelevant, the issue is whether or not there is someone with the ability to process sonic wavelengths present to experience its thunder).

After resting with this for awhile, the intimation that first brought me to this inquiry began to bear fruit: resistance, endurance, and the impudence to live, literally and metaphorically, in the face of antiblackness (i.e., a denied humanity, ontology, subjectivity) are interpretants of the semiosis of black humanity.



Johnetta in a Facebook®-posted selfie, 2013 (*Photograph by Johnetta)*

So when I return to the young people whose huge lives I rummaged through for the past few years, the degree of agility they demonstrated can not be rendered here in prose or photographs or tables. The rhythmic bobbing and weaving around certain realities, reconfiguring matters in order to maintain a coherent and worthwhile existence, to engineer a kind of permanence, a ground to stand upon, and to avoid dangling off the edge of humanity, or biding in the abyss beyond its mass. The dance that I called "transnational" and "diasporic" throughout, could also be imagined as kind of empryean black subjectivity (if one succumbs to her most romantic and spiritual of inclinations) – a boundless self that, at once, encompasses and signifies

any possible manifestation of black experience. For the enslaved Africans who became Black Americans, the black settlers who became Africans, for Brian, Johnetta, Vanessa, Donald, Crastal P, Pochano, and many others, it seemed that the decoupling of their bodies from their "homes" or of their cultural practices from their homes (via settler colonialism and neoliberalism) transformed all productions of blackness into their birthrights, leaving the conditions of difference infinite and malleable. Through them we can see how black subjective polysemic simultaneity is not just possible, but may be old school meaning making about and through blackness. Their words and actions that wind around continents and weave through neighborhoods cue us for a possible future in which one can occupy a blackened body and mind, resist the "soul murder" of antiblackness (Painter 1995), *and* not engage in the suppression of other black folk in order to inhabit humanity.

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