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Identity**

Yolanda Covington-Ward

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What is most important is not the “true” origins of the grand march, but the meaning that Liberians collectively give to its practice and import in their everyday lives—which explains how a European dance came to define an African immigrant identity.

# **Transforming Communities, Recreating Selves: Interconnected Diasporas, Performance, and the Shaping of Liberian Immigrant Identity**

**Yolanda Covington-Ward**

*This paper examines the role of European ballroom dances such as the grand march in the shaping of group identity, both in Liberia and for Liberians in the United States. I use participant-observation, interviews, and historical documentation to trace transformations in the grand march from the performance of an exclusive, educated Americo-Liberian elite in the nineteenth century to a more inclusive practice, open to Liberians of all backgrounds who immigrated to the United States in the twentieth century. In both cases of these interconnected diasporas, collective performance is used reflexively, to perform group identity for others, and transformatively, to redefine the group itself. This study suggests the need for further attention to performance in studies of ethnic group identity formation.*

Writing in October 1849 to her former master, John McDonogh, in New Orleans, Henrietta Fuller McDonogh's letter from St. Paul's River in the West African country of Liberia captured the new possibilities for formerly enslaved African Americans to remake themselves: "Liberia is the home for our race. . . . Industry & perseverance is only required to make a man happy & wealthy in this our Adopted country. . . . Here we enjoy the same rights & privileges that our white brethren does in America. It is our only home" (Wiley 1979:153). She was one of more than 17,000 African Americans who had settled in Liberia with the assistance of the American Colonization Society, state colonization societies, other organizations, and their own funding and initiative between 1820 and 1904.<sup>1</sup>

More than one hundred fifty years later, ZayZay Mulbah shared his story with a reporter from the *New York Times*. An immigrant from Liberia who was blinded in an attack during a notorious and deadly civil war, he had immigrated to New York City with the help of relatives and was taking

English and keyboarding classes. He had high expectations for his future, as shown when he said, "I can't allow my problems to overcome me. . . . I feel that one day, I'll be somebody" (Bovino 2003). He is just one of an estimated 71,956 Liberian-born immigrants living in the United States as of 2010 (US Census Bureau 2012). Liberians have immigrated to the United States in increasing numbers since the 1970s, living in places such as Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and reversing back across the Atlantic the direction of migration flow that has existed since the nineteenth century.

This study uses the case of interconnected diasporas—where Liberia and the United States are connected through multiple migration streams over the course of two centuries—to explore the role of performance in processes of immigrant group identity formation. I analyze how particular European ballroom dances were and continue to be used by Africans to define group identity in two different ways on either side of the Atlantic. Though I examine several dances, I specifically focus on transformations in the multiple meanings and uses of the event known as the grand march. Privileging performance in this manner provides a different perspective on how immigrant group identities change in new contexts. The analysis presented here argues for increased attention to the role of performance in the process of creating, transforming, and shifting multiple definitions of group identity.

## Methods

The grand march is an elegant couple ballroom dance that was brought to Liberia by free blacks from the United States during the nineteenth century (Szwed and Marks 1988:31) and was then brought across the Atlantic back to the United States by Liberian immigrants in the twentieth. Other studies mention the grand march in passing, if at all, but this is the first extensive research study of this performance as it relates to Liberian identity. It is primarily an ethnographic study, drawing on participant-observation, performance analysis, individual interviews, and focus groups, along with newspaper records, photos, and other written sources from nineteenth- and twentieth-century Liberia. It uses data from the American Community Survey of the US Census Bureau and the Yearbook for Immigration Statistics to describe the Liberian community in the United States.

My interest in the grand march dates back to 1999, when I was first exposed to it at an event in the Liberian immigrant community in Providence, Rhode Island. I watched with interest as people lined up in couples, arm in arm, and then marched in time down the center of the dance floor to an upbeat popular West African song. The women peeled off to one side and the men to another, and then they met again in the middle of the floor. Following the instructions being called out by an older gentleman at the front of the line, the couples at the front of the line raised their interlocked hands into a type of bridge, and the couples behind them passed under,



**Figure 1.** Photo of the arbor (bridge) as part of the grand march at a wedding in North Providence, Rhode Island, in August 2011.  
Photographer: Anthony Abu. Used with permission.

helping create the bridge when they emerged on the other side (Figure 1). When everyone had passed through, the leader stepped behind his female partner, and the other men followed suit, creating a line that curved around and around onto itself until its front emerged from the middle of a long spiral of people. A number of other steps followed, and when the grand march was over, the dance party officially began. I was completely intrigued with this performance!

I began to study the grand march formally in a small, exploratory ethnographic project within the Liberian community in the Detroit metropolitan area in 2009. Over the last fourteen years, because of my marriage to a Liberian and incorporation into several Liberian immigrant communities, I have been a participant-observer at numerous events where the grand march was performed, including weddings, independence-day celebrations, queen contests,<sup>2</sup> fundraisers, and ethnic group and county association events. At these events, I have often spoken with people informally about the grand march. Between 2009 and 2011, I conducted individual interviews with participants in Michigan, Oklahoma, and Rhode Island, and a focus-group interview in Pennsylvania. Other dances are performed within Liberian communities, but the grand march is the one that seems to be presented in many different communities and among different ethnicities as a shared symbol of Liberian identity.<sup>3</sup> That is why I chose to focus on the grand march here.

The first part of this paper explores the place of cultural forms in diaspora and migration literature; it then introduces performance as an

analytical concept and explores what can be added to analyses of group identity formation. The second part of the paper briefly outlines the history and significance of ballroom dances such as the grand march as they moved from Europe to the United States and then to Liberia, and the way in which they became a performance of an exclusive Americo-Liberian elite. The third part of the paper explores the role that the grand march currently plays in transforming and redefining a more inclusive Liberian identity in the US-based diaspora. Thus, this paper examines the changing role of performance in the shaping of class and national identity, as well as in representations of Liberia and Liberianness, both in West Africa and abroad. Such a study is important for the history of Liberia and its diasporas, and it has implications for studies of ethnic group identity formation more generally, by showing how performance can be used to create boundaries that define in-group and out-group status and how performance can foster sentiments of belonging and togetherness for groups that may otherwise have been separated back in their country of origin.

## Interconnected Diasporas and Ethnic Identity Formation

The term *diaspora* is a Greek word, first used to refer to the forced dispersal of the Jews in a Greek translation of the Hebrew bible around 200 BCE (Manning 2009:2; Safran 1991:83). In a seminal article, William Safran defines people who constitute a diaspora as exhibiting six major traits: they (or their ancestors) were dispersed from one original center to two or more foreign locations, have a collective memory about their original homeland, believe they are not fully accepted by their host society, regard their place of origin as their true home (to which they or their descendants would eventually return), are collectively committed to the maintenance of their homeland, and continue to relate to that homeland in one way or another (1991:83–84). While Safran's list is useful, it is rigid and doesn't capture the complexities and social transformations that can occur with groups that have "collective homes away from home" (Clifford 1994:308). James Clifford suggests that such a checklist doesn't consider that "at different times in their history, societies may wax and wane in diasporism, depending on changing possibilities . . . in their host countries and internationally" (1994:306). Thus, he sees diaspora as a "loosely coherent adaptive constellation of responses to dwelling in displacement" (1994:310). Two major ideas remain key in defining diasporas: one's connections to an original homeland and one's connections to and within the adopted country. Indeed, the "sentiments of attachment" to a homeland, real or imagined, are what make *diaspora* a more useful term in this case than terms such as *transnational*, for instance (Johnson 2007:9). A more useful, general definition that captures all these aforementioned ideas defines people who are diasporic as those who "have settled, or been resettled, outside the place they once considered home; balance a connection to an adoptive state with a connection to that original homeland, 'mythic' or

real; and within the adopted country, balance a community connection with a connection to a wider society" (Burns-McGown 2007:10). Recent scholarship, such as Patrick Manning's focus on connections across diasporas, has illustrated the need to get away from simplistic concepts of one-way movements of people and consider the "many types of contacts among regions, peoples, or situations" that can be two-way or other complex forms of connections (2009:9). The case of Liberia and the United States is an example of what I call interconnected diasporas, with multiple back-and-forth movements of people, ideas, and cultural practices over two centuries.

The phrase *African diaspora* first became popular during the 1960s, possibly coined at an international conference in Tanzania in 1965 (Manning 2009:3). It was most commonly used to refer to the massive transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans from Africa to Europe and the Americas between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries (Harris 1994; Palmer 2000:28). In this literature, largely dominated by historians and anthropologists, studies of the cultural performances of the enslaved, when they were even addressed, were usually couched within debates about cultural retentions, resistance, and accommodation (Holloway 2005; Mintz and Price 1992; Thompson 1983; Thornton 1998; Yelvington 2001).

In contrast, the literature that emerged in the early twentieth century (largely dominated by sociologists) to address the influx of immigrants to the United States mainly focused on European immigrants. Recent studies of immigrants to the United States have shifted their focus to Latino and some Asian immigrant groups; African immigrants are often not at the center of the discussion. In this literature, while the term *diaspora* may be used as a catch-all phrase for migrants, other terms, such as *transnational* are often used to describe recent arrivals. The most useful theory to emerge from migration literature in regard to the grand march is that of ethnic group identity formation, which explores how migrants come to form ethnic groups in host countries. Anthropologist Frederik Barth's groundbreaking work focuses on how ethnic groups are not essential or natural, but "categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves" (1998:10). They are thus socially constructed in a dialectical manner, and ethnic boundaries are created and maintained in relation to other groups. With an emphasis on boundary maintenance, however, Barth minimizes the role of cultural forms, both existing and invented, in shaping ethnicity (1998:15). Nevertheless, cultural forms play a large role in shaping ethnic identity:

Ethnic boundaries function to determine identity options, membership composition and size, and form of ethnic organization. Boundaries answer the question: Who are we? Culture provides the content and meaning of ethnicity; it animates and authenticates ethnic boundaries by providing a history, ideology, symbolic universe, and system of meaning. Culture answers the question: What are we? It is through the construction of culture that ethnic groups fill Barth's

vessel—by reinventing the past and inventing the present.  
(Nagel 1994:162)

Other scholars have reiterated this point by calling for and giving increased attention to cultural forms and how they shape immigrant group identity (Gerson 2001; Hume 2008; Olwig 2003). In an overview of studies of immigration in anthropology, Nancy Foner challenges anthropologists to “tease out both the cultural legacies and the cultural changes among migrant populations in the United States” (2003:32). All of this points to the importance of cultural forms for processes of group identity formation.

In this article, I seek to bring these bodies of literature in conversation with one another by examining how the same performances were strategically employed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to represent new nations, delineate group membership, and create communities. I take an agent-centered approach to examine what people do themselves in their everyday lives to adjust to new societies. I argue that performances—regardless of their origins—have a crucial role in the intentional making of self, at individual and group levels, especially when that self is living outside one’s place of origin.

## Performance: Reflexivity and Transformation

This paper aims to bring together literature on diaspora and migration with another field that offers a fresh approach to ethnic identity formation: performance. Performance is an “essentially contested concept,” which has been used in the humanities and social sciences to describe and analyze a wide variety of human activity.<sup>4</sup> Richard Schechner, coming from a theater background, defines *performance* as “restored” or twice-behaved behavior, based on past actions and observations (1985:36). Linguistic anthropologist and folklorist Richard Bauman, in contrast, defines it as “an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience” (1989:262). Schechner focuses more on movement and Bauman more on the contextual framing of events, but bringing their approaches together gives us a working definition of performance as *preexisting movements, executed with a sense of heightened awareness in the presence of observers* (audience). Performances do not happen just on stages: they can take place in different arenas of everyday life (Goffman 1959).

Two particular aspects of performance are clearly related to the construction of group identity. The first is that performances are inherently reflexive. Anthropologist Victor Turner rejects the idea that performances are simply reflections of social life, arguing instead that they are reflexive opportunities, where “people become conscious, through witnessing and often participating in such performances, of the nature, texture, style, and given meanings of their own lives as members of a sociocultural community” (1987:22). He thus likens performance to acting as “the eye by which

culture sees itself," suggesting the importance of performances for shaping group identities as people contemplate how others are viewing them as a group and how they want to represent themselves (1987:24). The second aspect of performance is the potential of performances to transform social realities. Anthropologist Edward L. Schieffelin captures this best: "Performance deals with actions more than text: with habits of the body more than structures of symbols, with illocutionary rather than propositional force, with the social construction of reality rather than its representation. . . . Performances, whether ritual or dramatic . . . alter moods, social relations, bodily dispositions, and states of mind" (1998:199). His observations suggest the importance of performances in the constitution of individual and larger group identities.

In current studies of immigrants to the United States, performance practices are usually overlooked in favor of studies on remittances, family structure, and social organization; however, performances, especially performances that a group connects to the culture of its land of origin, often serve as a visible way of representing one's ethnicity to others. There has been research on Polish, Puerto Rican, and Ecuadorian ethnic parades as public performances of identity (Pallares 2005; Ramos-Zayas 2003; Schneider 1990). Some literature focuses on dance specifically—as a leisure activity for Chinese immigrants in Tokyo temporarily seeking to escape their host society (Liu-Farrer 2004), a means of presenting folklore to host societies for Chileans in Norway (Knudsen 2001), and an activity that blends practices from home with those in new host countries for Filipinos doing ballroom dance in California (San Juan 2001). With few exceptions (Vissicaro 2009), however, less scholarly attention has been given to the importance of dance for recent waves of African immigrants. This project explores how dances such as the grand march can be crucial ways of creating and rebuilding community affiliations and identity in immigrant communities in new host countries.

## The Land of Liberty: Liberia

The small, West African nation of Liberia was established as the first independent African republic in 1847. There was already a large indigenous population, consisting of people from different ethnic groups, but Liberia had been settled, starting in 1822 under the sponsorship of the American Colonization Society,<sup>5</sup> by thousands of African Americans from the United States, as well as a significant number of African recaptives, taken from captured slave ships (Clegg 2004). The settlers from the United States—some freeborn, educated, and of mixed race, and almost all Christian—came to be known as Americo-Liberians. Over time, they intermarried to some degree with the indigenous population and fostered and apprenticed indigenous children in their households, but these practices did not change the relative social positions of the largely educated and well-off Americo-Liberian minority and the largely uneducated and poor indigenous majority (Cooper 2008).

Americo-Liberians established a stratified society, placing themselves at the top as an elite class and the indigenous population beneath them, and this social arrangement lasted for more than a century.

For the first five years after Liberia's initial settlement by African Americans, freeborn African Americans dominated the society. After 1827, however, emancipated former slaves, freed by their owners for the sole purpose of emigrating to Liberia, and African recaptives from slave ships, came into Liberia in much larger numbers. Over time, these groups were incorporated into the Americo-Liberian population through practices of apprenticeship and fostering, military service, mission activities and conversion to Christianity, Western education, and membership in benevolent societies and fraternal orders (Shick 1977:59). The Americo-Liberian population continued to reproduce certain practices from the United States, such as foodways, architecture, and dress, all of which set them apart from the indigenous population (Holsoe and Herman 1988). A white American traveling in Liberia in the late 1850s observed the following about the population in Monrovia, Liberia's capital city:

Society in Liberia is as good as can be reasonably expected; indeed we found a degree of refinement and taste for which we were not prepared. The people desire to live in comfortable and pretty houses, the ladies and beaux dress in the fashion, and an aristocracy of means and education is already set up. The people generally dress above their means, extravagantly so, and the quantity of kid gloves and umbrellas displayed on all occasions does not promise well for a nation whose hope rests on hard hands and well used and well developed muscles. . . . As a people, they are proud, very much puffed up, and offensively boastful. (Thomas 1860:156–157)

The reproduction of America in Africa was evident in clothing, food, the constitution, the flag, and placenames like Maryland and New Georgia. All of this indicated a desire on the part of African American settlers to maintain their connection with their place of birth, which for most was actually the United States. This was also evident in the ways in which settlers used their bodies in recreation, as another practice that they continued was performing at balls, inaugurations, and other events a number of dances linked to their American past, including a dance called the grand march.

### **From America to Liberia to America: Origins and Circulations of the Grand March**

Bishop Bennie Dee Warner, former vice president of Liberia,<sup>6</sup> described the grand march thus in an interview in 2010:

Grand march is a dance in which people are selected, or people get in line, and they march around in different directions. . . . There's someone who leads the grand march, and he calls the action. Like, for instance, men go one side and the women go one side, or they go under, you hold your two . . . hands up sort of like a bridge, and women and men go under until they come to the end, or you could make a complete circle, and individual couples dance until the whole group gets to dance, but I think in your research you may have found out that this dance originated somewhere in the South. Most . . . black Americans that immigrated to Liberia came from Virginia . . . and they carried with them . . . the architecture, dance, and cooking. So . . . the dances came from what the blacks saw, from the white plantation owners when they had parties.

While the grand march did become popular in the United States, its origins lay in European quadrille dance suites. The quadrille is a ballroom dance for four couples, often in a square formation, which emerged in France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Featuring the combination of several cotillion figures into one dance of style and elegance, it was introduced in London in 1815 and spread to the rest of Europe and to the Americas. By the 1840s, "the quadrille step was reduced to a simple glide-walk or *marche*" (Cohen 1998:285–287)—which likely explains the name of the grand march as it is used by Liberian Americans today. The grand march, also called a promenade, came to be used to start the dancing at ballroom events. Numerous dance-instruction manuals published in the United States described codified steps of the grand march, such as the serpentine (in which the couples form a line that coils and finally unwinds), platoons (in which dancers march four or even eight abreast), and the arbor (in which couples form an arch with their joined hands for other dancers to pass under), revealing how embedded the dance was in American social life (Harvey 1889; Koncen 1883). Such European dances were popular among not only white Americans, but also black Americans, enslaved and free alike.

During the antebellum era, free blacks living in urban areas, including Charleston, New Orleans, and Richmond, often held balls where they performed many of the social dances that had come from Europe. In 1853, an observer of a "Negro ball" in Charleston noted that the musicians played, "waltzes and quadrilles, which were danced with great zest, and the hall rang with good-humored laughter" (Hazzard-Gordon 1990:51). Likewise, after emancipation, elite urban blacks often held race-improvement dances, which had a "distinctly European flavor. No African inspired dances, no congo or buzzard lope, were performed in these arenas. Socially elite blacks danced in a dizzying round of quadrilles, waltzes, . . . polkas, mazurkas, valses, cotillions, grand marches, and scottisches often until early morning" (Hazzard-Gordon 1990:70).

While events like corn-shucking and cotton-picking parties, as well as dances such as "set da flo" and the buzzard lope, all appear in the narratives of formerly enslaved black Americans, many of the same dances that circulated in European, white American, and freed black communities were familiar to enslaved blacks. Liza Mention, a formerly enslaved woman in the United States being interviewed for a Works Progress Administration project, remembered dancing the "de cardrille, the Virginia reel, and the sixteen hand cotillion" (Camp 2002:556). Likewise, a formerly enslaved woman interviewed in 1901 said,

Us slaves watched white folks' parties where the guests danced a minuet and then paraded in a grand march, with the ladies and gentlemen going different ways and then meeting again, arm in arm, and marching down the center together. Then we'd do it too, but we used to mock 'em every step. Sometimes the white folks noticed it, but they seemed to like it; I guess they thought we couldn't dance any better. [Malone 1996:18]

The prevalence of these European dance suites in black American life, both enslaved and free, and the many ways in which they were given new meaning, whether through derision or otherwise, indicates the complexity of cultural performances in the New World. For many free blacks, the embodiment of civility through measured steps and careful bearing was clearly an attempt to make claims on rights of access and citizenship that were being denied to blacks, both free and enslaved; however, dances of derision mocked the audacity of slaveholders dancing in a so-called civilized manner while holding a significant percentage of the American population in permanent bondage. What formerly enslaved and freed blacks emigrating to Liberia had in common, however, was the use of dances such as the quadrille and the grand march as a form of embodied memory of the Americas, albeit a selective one. A number of dances were performed under the lash in the United States and even in the Caribbean (for the smaller number of Liberian emigrants who came from there), but an analysis of newspaper and other documentary evidence shows that Americo-Liberian settlers made a conscious choice to reproduce only certain dances associated with gentility in their new West African home.

## Dance and Gentility in Nineteenth-Century Liberia

The emigration experiment that was Liberia led to issues of social, economic, and political inequalities. Nevertheless, Liberia at the time it became a republic stood as a beacon of hope for people of African descent all over the world, especially in regard to demonstrating the ability of blacks to govern themselves in the midst of slavery and the increasing encroachment of Europeans on the sovereignty of African land. The world was watching

Liberia, and political, religious, and intellectual leaders in the nation were well aware of this fact. As a result, the image of Liberia that was projected to the rest of the world often emphasized the settlers' education, Christianity, and thrift—all of which they hoped would put them on an equal footing with the Western world, since they essentially embodied the Western world in a West African setting.

An example of this is Edward Wilmot Blyden's<sup>7</sup> 1883 interview with a reporter from the *New York Tribune*, in which he was asked about the customs and habits of residents of Liberia. His responses, published in the January 1883 issue of *The African Repository*, demonstrate an attempt to shape particular notions of a civilized Africanness as the representation of Liberian identity:

"Do the Colonists carry with them their particular characteristics and indulge in corn-shuckings and great revivals?"

"Oh, no. They have no time for all that nonsense. There is no corn-shucking or any shouting or carrying on, such as there is in the South. All that stuff is left behind them."

"Do they have any amusements of any kind?"

"Oh, yes. There are parties, balls, and dinners. White men who have been present on some of these occasions expressed their great surprise at the refinement and culture displayed. It is not African to shout in meetings and carry on as I know the Negroes do here. You see there is great pressure to bear on the colonists by the Mohammedans, who in their worship are very dignified and sober."

In this passage, Blyden first rejects the popular embodied expressions that are most associated with the black population in the South, insisting that all of that has been "left behind." This suggests a deliberate choice on the part of Americo-Liberian settlers to perform only certain dances that helped maintain an image of Liberia as a place of civility while seeming to suggest that such a decision moved the Americo-Liberian population forward in a march toward greater progress: the amusements enjoyed in Liberia, in balls and parties, are so cultured and refined that visiting white people have been impressed by them. Moreover, Blyden says that the behavior of American Negroes was in fact *not* African. By juxtaposing the frenzied and passionate shouting of the American Negro with the solemn worship of Muslim Liberians, Blyden rejects the stereotypical association of Africanness with emotion and irrationality and instead aligns Americo-Liberians with an alternate image of Africans, based on rationality, poise, and the control of their bodies. His comments can be further contextualized in an increasing European presence in Africa—one that would culminate in the Berlin conference the following year.

Blyden was not the first Liberian to articulate the embodiment of civilization through refined dances, however. A description of Liberia's first

independence celebration in *The African Repository and Colonial Journal*<sup>8</sup> in 1849 mentioned booming cannons, military marches and salutes, and "guests in parties [who] enjoyed themselves in promenades of measured steps to the buoyant sound of a band of music sweet." Likewise, the issue of the *Liberian Recorder* dated 6 August 1904 mentions a birthday celebration of President Arthur Barclay in which several prominent couples in Liberian elite society led the grand march. Thus, in the larger context of colonialism in Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dances of Western origin became tools of self-representation and self-definition for the Liberian elite, who continually had to justify Liberia's status as one of only two African countries that remained independent. Performing dances such as the grand march emerges, then, as a form of political strategy—to shape the conception and image of Liberia in the wider world.

Similar strategic use of European ballroom dances to represent non-European nations occurred during the American Revolutionary War, when one of the first public recognitions of the newly independent United States was a lavish state ball in Philadelphia, viewed by thousands of spectators (Smith-Rosenberg 2010:291). Such public performances, along with culinary practices, conspicuous consumption of European goods, and classical education, were ways by which white Americans were trying to prove their gentility and civilized manner to Western Europe during the late eighteenth century (Smith-Rosenburg 2010:303). In the antebellum Caribbean, newly freed blacks and mulattoes in the late eighteenth century took care to learn the exact movements of dances such as the quadrille as "a demonstration of their equality with the French" in Martinique (Cyrille 2006:55). In a similar manner, dances such as the grand march came to define the way in which Americo-Liberians sought to represent a particular conception of Africa, not only to themselves, but also to visiting guests, dignitaries, and others scrutinizing Liberian society.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British and French colonial powers began to extend the boundaries of their colonies surrounding Liberia, staking claims to land that the Liberian government was including within its own borders. In the wake of the Fernando Po forced-labor scandal<sup>9</sup> of the late twenties and early thirties, there were a number of threats to Liberia's sovereignty as a nation (Sundiata 2003). Accusations of forced labor and the misuse of power by elected officials found by a committee from the League of Nations and within Liberia itself led to the hasty resignation of President Charles D. B. King. In such a context, the use of dances such as the grand march continued to be highlighted as embodied signs of order in a country that was gaining a reputation for chaos. In 1936, the wife of an American ambassador attending the inauguration of President Edwin Barclay described the ball: "There was a sudden blare of trumpets, and the grand march began. A few white people joined in with Liberia's elite who promenaded in white ties and tails, formal gowns, and silver slippers. . . . I glanced at my program. It called for fifteen dances: fox-trots, two-steps, waltzes and blues, two quadrilles, and 'extras'" (Furbay 1943:48). Here, at the inauguration, while dances



**Figure 2.** President William V. S. Tubman and Mrs. Tubman (second couple from left) perform the grand march with guests at the January 1956 inaugural ball. This photo appeared in the inaugural program, commemorating the Tubmans' reelection. Indiana University, Liberian Collections, William V. S. Tubman Photograph Collection. Used with permission.

popular at the time were included on the program, such as waltzes and fox-trots, time was reserved for the quadrilles and grand marches—dances that, for the most part, were no longer popular in Europe or the United States, but remained symbols of Liberian national identity.

The grand march and quadrille were very popular during the presidency of William Tubman, from 1944 to 1971 (fig. 2). As president, he popularized the quadrille to such an extent that it began to be called the national dance (Henries 1967:146). Performing dances such as the grand march and the quadrille became a marker of elite status in Liberia, one that was extended to a select few from the indigenous population. The performance of such dances, not only at inaugural balls and independence-day festivities, but also at the balls and receptions of secretive orders such as the Freemasons, the United Brothers of Friendship, and the Sisters of the Mysterious Ten (all of whose membership was dominated by the Americo-Liberian elite), helped maintain a sense of separation between the elite and the rest of the population. It is in this vein that the grand march and associated dances can be seen as signifiers of class.<sup>10</sup>

## Migration Back across the Atlantic

The stratified society established by Americo-Liberians was always tenuous, in the sense that they were a minority of the population in the midst of an indigenous majority. President William Tolbert (who entered office in 1971, after Tubman's death) attempted to institute more radical reforms and include more indigenous Liberians in his administration, as well as present himself as a "common man" through his dress and interactions with the Liberian people, but it was too late. All the presidents of Liberia were Americo-Liberian until 1980, when President William Tolbert was overthrown and executed in a coup d'état led by Samuel K. Doe, a military leader of the Krahn ethnicity. The tables had turned, and Americo-Liberians were chided with shouts of "native woman born soldier" as indigenous Liberians celebrated in the streets. Doe led the country for almost a decade, a time when favoritism continued, but focused on members of Doe's own ethnic group over others while persecuting members of the Gio and Mano ethnic groups, which Doe held responsible for an attempt on his life in 1985 (Outram 1999). Civil war erupted among rival factions in 1989, and Doe was disposed of and killed by a rebel leader with the support of Charles Taylor, leader of another faction, who later became president. This began a civil war that lasted for fourteen years before coming to an end in 2003. During the times of ongoing political unrest that began in 1980 and escalated after 1989, waves of Liberian refugees from different ethnic backgrounds immigrated to countries such as the United States, seeking stability, safety, and opportunity.

Postslavery immigration of Africans into the United States is a trend that has been increasing over the last few decades, especially since quotas and national origin preferences favoring western and northern Europeans were removed with the 1965 Immigration Act (Arthur 2000:7). As a result, more Africans have immigrated to the United States in recent decades than entered the country during the era of enslavement. For example, the census in 1970 counted 61,463 people born in Africa who were then living in the United States, as compared to 881,300 in 2000 (Arthur 2000:2).

## Profile of Liberian Immigrants in the United States

From the appearance of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in 2006 to the near win of Korto Momolu on season five of Bravo's *Project Runway* in 2008, Liberians are becoming more visible in the national media and the larger public imagination in the United States. Like estimates of other African immigrant groups, the number of Liberian immigrants is hard to determine. An estimated 71,956 people born in Liberia were living in the United States as of 2010 (US Census Bureau 2012). These estimates do not include second- or even third-generation Americans of Liberian ancestry who were born in the United States and are a crucial part of Liberian

immigrant communities. The vast majority of Liberian immigrants arrived after 2000; between 1996 and 2010, nearly 55 percent of Liberians who became permanent residents initially came to the United States as refugees (Department of Homeland Security 2001–2010). Antwi-Boateng, in an article on the Liberian diaspora, notes that many Liberian immigrants to the United States had access to kin networks that eased their migration, unlike Liberians who sought refuge in other African countries (2011:8–9). While this is certainly the case, my research revealed a pattern in which Liberians resided in neighboring African countries—such as Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, or even Guinea—for years before receiving approval to migrate to the United States as refugees.

Most Liberians in the United States live in the Northeast and the South, with the exception of the midwestern state of Minnesota, which hosts nearly 14 percent of them; many in urban areas in Minnesota and in the greater Philadelphia metropolitan area in Pennsylvania are tied to refugee-resettlement programs (Covington-Ward et al. 2011). In other states, Liberians are clustered around and in particular cities, where they build viable communities. They have a younger median age (34.81) than most other West African immigrants, lower rates of marriage, and a sex ratio slightly skewed toward more females (94.34), and they largely work in support positions in health care and office and administrative occupations (Covington-Ward et al. 2011). These Liberian communities consist of refugees, US citizens, and immigrants with temporary protected status or the status of deferred enforced departure<sup>11</sup>; people from a wide variety of ethnic groups, including Bassa, Americo-Liberian, Gio, and Krahn<sup>12</sup>; people who own businesses and people on public assistance; and so forth.

## **Transformations in the Grand March in the Diaspora: Who Are We Now?**

In Liberia, dances such as the grand march and the quadrille came to be associated with the educated Americo-Liberian upper class. Most of the indigenous population, however, was excluded from knowing or even participating in it. Victor D.<sup>13</sup> explained in an interview in 2009:

The grand march is a duplicate of the square dance. . . . When they got in Liberia, they turned it to be [a] grand march because they only did it on big occasions when they were having their celebrations. . . . If you look at it, the grand march and square dance are the same, and it became a traditional, official dance for Liberia. . . . The tribal people didn't know about the grand march. . . . It was . . . mostly done by the Afro-Americans.

Johnetta M. confirmed these ideas in an interview in 2011: "To be honest, I would say the people that started the grand march is the Congo people,"<sup>14</sup>

the people that came from here. . . . The native people, uneducated people, they didn't know anything about such things." Both these statements show that the grand march was associated with Americo-Liberians back in Liberia, and the grand march was not part of average indigenous Liberians' cultural worldview or everyday practice.

Victor and Charles M., also interviewed in 2009, revealed that the grand march was performed at final day dances (proms) for high schools—which is how several interviewees had their first experiences performing the grand march in Liberia. In this sense, the performance of the dance was linked with ascent into the literate and educated class in Liberia—something that was not accessible to huge segments of the population, where even today only 60.8 percent of the adults in the country are literate (CIA World Factbook n.d.). It is in this vein that the grand march can be seen as a signifier of class. Johnetta M., who came from a Bassa family of lower socioeconomic class and minimal education, expressed similar sentiments. She did not recall ever seeing or performing the grand march in Liberia but performed the grand march herself for the first time at a friend's wedding in the United States. "The first time I did the grand march . . . was in the late eighties, and I saw them doing it, and I didn't even know where to start from. . . . Then I asked 'What's that they doing?' They said that the grand march, and I only see the Liberians doing it, but I really didn't know what it means." Her description of her first time doing the grand march reveals her lack of familiarity with the dance and her exposure to it, not in Liberia, but in the diaspora.

In the United States, the grand march underwent a radical transformation in meaning. It is now open to everyone in the Liberian community and has become a performative symbol of being a Liberian in the United States. Henry D. explained in an interview in 2009 that it

was actually done amongst the higher-ups, but . . . it became interesting to me when I became an immigrant here. At least, it became something I could identify with as a Liberian, so every major Liberian gathering or ball . . . in the United States—but it was not as popular as it is here, in Liberia at our parties, no. But here it became something of an identity. . . . You know, it's one way of recognizing our identity, you know, and if you are a Liberian, you know when Liberians get together, this is one way they identify themselves, by doing the grand march, which is something different . . . from what the other people do, especially black people in this country. They don't do the grand march, you see.

Henry's comments reflect the importance of context in shaping the identity of Liberians living in the diaspora. The grand march, as a performance, became a dance that marked an emergent identity for them, a way of connecting with a Liberian identity that was being shaped and redefined in this

new context and differentiating that identity from that of other groups of African descent in the United States, particularly African Americans. It is clear that this dance, which Henry was aware of in Liberia but which was not important to him there, has taken on a different value in the context of the diaspora.

Charles, another Liberian interviewed in 2009, said the grand march

was there, but . . . I wouldn't want to participate in it. I wouldn't want to do it, but here, now, we appreciate it more in a sense; it's mostly appreciated since we came to the states. . . . When I was back home, I never listened to African music in Liberia. . . . We always listened to European music or American music. So when we came, after we came over to the states, we began to appreciate our culture.

For both Henry and Charles, the grand march became an important way of defining and marking an African—and specifically Liberian—identity in the diaspora. Cultural practices scorned and taken for granted in Liberia took on new meaning in a country where Liberians are trying to establish themselves as a distinct group from thousands of other African immigrants, as well as African Americans, Afro Caribbeans, and so forth. The grand march thus serves for drawing ethnic boundaries. A clear example of this in my ethnographic research occurred at Eliza Howell Park in Detroit in July, 2004. The event was the All African Family Festival, an annual event sponsored by the United African Community Organization.<sup>15</sup> A disk jockey played music from numerous African artists and called for each African nation to come into a large outdoor circle and represent itself through dance in front of other African immigrants. After considerable debate about what to do as a group, the Liberians decided to enter the space with a grand march, dancing their identity for all to see. The grassy field of the park was no ballroom; the jeans and lappas<sup>16</sup> were not tuxedos and ballgowns, and the Liberians were mixed in ethnic, educational, and class background. Nevertheless, the grand march is how they chose to perform Liberianness in front of this mixed African crowd. Clearly, this performance is part of a reflexive process, in which Liberian immigrants are deciding how to represent themselves, as a group, in front of others.

### **Transformations in the Grand March in the Diaspora: Who Is Included?**

Henry, Charles, and Victor were all exposed to the grand march in some way while still living in Liberia; however, as Johnetta's experience reveals, other Liberian immigrants did not perform it until they moved to the United States. Henrietta W., another immigrant to the United States interviewed in 2009, recalled that her first time performing the grand march had been at the

Liberian Hall in Detroit; she noted that the dance had become an important part of Liberian identity in the United States:

Y: Is the grand march an important part of Liberian identity in general, meaning not just for you, but for all Liberians? Do you think the grand march is important for them?

H: Over here in the US, I say yes. Back home, I really don't know that much. They probably do it, but like I said, I didn't take notice of that.

Her sentiments were echoed by Allen W., whose first time doing the grand march was at a wedding in Cleveland. When asked in 2011 about doing the grand march in Liberia, he replied, "No, back in Liberia I was not involved in that stuff." That the grand march was not practiced by everyone back in Liberia leads me to now examine another aspect of performance in ethnic identity: the transformation of group identity.

In the diaspora, the grand march seems to be fostering a sense of a cohesive community. This is particularly significant for Liberians, having emigrated from a country where Americo-Liberians had dominated the political and educational realms and friction among ethnic groups was rife during the Liberian civil war. How then might a dance clearly aligned with the history of Americo-Liberians come to represent all Liberians? In response to my question about why the grand march was selected instead of any other dance from the ethnic groups in Liberia, Victor D. and Henry D. had this to say in 2009:

V: I think the reason why [it is] the grand march instead of that [is] because Liberia has been so divided into different cultures, even though we all considered to be one, but every tribe has their own way of dancing, okay?

H: I think what happened, the reason why we seem to practice that at more gatherings than any other dance, is that it is something we can all—

V: —participate in.

H: —participate in and relate to. Yeah, so if I bring my Bassa dance and you are from Bomi territory, . . . you might not be able to, kind of, relate or fit in, whereas with the grand march, almost every Liberian can—

V: —that speaks English and can read and write.

H: —that speaks English or that been to school . . . [and] went to junior and senior proms and all of these things: they've been exposed to it, so we all can actually relate to it, so if we brought it up, everybody would be able to relate to it, join, or decide not to join it. That's why we all, we prefer—

V: —to do the grand march.

Here, Victor and Henry perceive the grand march as a dance that is more neutral than the dances of ethnic groups—which led people to do the grand march as opposed to other dances. However, in my opinion as a researcher, the grand march is not neutral: it is loaded with a history of its own, and through its association with the educated elite it has social capital that other dances do not. In this way, I think that many Liberian immigrants may see performing it as a way of enacting a new identity, one that aspires toward middle- and upper-class success in the United States, by incorporating these elite performance forms from Liberia.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, that the grand march was chosen instead of the quadrille is no accident. According to Bishop Bennie D. Warner, interviewed in 2010, only four couples can dance the quadrille, which takes much more skill and coordination, and an experienced person is needed to call out the steps; the grand march, in contrast, can be learned by simply following everyone else, and large groups of people can participate.

The process of becoming part of the Liberian diaspora acts as an equalizer: people of various backgrounds have opportunities for success in the United States, regardless of ethnicity or pedigree. This is then reflected in the more inclusive nature of the dance itself as performed in the diaspora. This observation was supported in several interviews. Michael D., interviewed in 2011, explained the difference between the grand march back in Liberia versus in the United States: “Back home, [if] you are not high up there, you cannot be part of it; you are not really informed the way it works back home, but here, . . . everybody is on the same level.” This idea of the largely equal status of Liberians in the diaspora was repeated by other interviewees as well, including Bishop Bennie Dee Warner, who pointed out that as Liberians in the United States, “You are no longer in a tribal societal context. Everyone in the diaspora is on similar educational or exposure levels, but in Liberia, you still have the tribal or ethnic, . . . still have differences in terms of class levels. Here, it seems that everyone is relatively in the same socioeconomic class.”

The grand march in the United States is much more inclusive. In fact, for many Liberian immigrants, the first time they did it was in the United States. One sees even children learning it in the diaspora, whereas in Liberia, children are usually not allowed to attend many of the exclusive functions where the grand march is performed. In the diaspora, the grand march serves to create a community that did not necessarily exist back in Liberia. Liberian society was, and in many ways continues to be, highly stratified by class, education, and ethnicity, but in the diaspora, the differences are performatively elided as many groups become one. This does not mean that there are no conflicts among Liberians in America: ethnic and class conflict over the elections for leaders of organizations, membership in ethnic and county associations, and other instances demonstrate that ideas of difference continue to matter in everyday contexts. However, the ideal Liberian identity that is performatively on display through the grand march is more unified than the reality. Herein lies the transformativity of the grand march: through dance, a more inclusive Liberian ethnicity is being created in a new social context,

and the performance brings people together who perhaps would never have interacted in Liberia.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented the case of the interconnected diasporas of the United States and Liberia, looking at how performance lies at the center of immigrant attempts to maintain connections to a homeland, real or imagined, and foster relationships within new host countries. For some Liberian immigrants to the United States, the grand march became linked to their memories of Liberia, much like the free African Americans who danced the grand march and quadrille in nineteenth-century Liberia as a way of embodying their memory of the United States. Bishop Bennie Dee Warner, interviewed in 2010, said this about the connection between the grand march and memory: "For them [Liberians] over here, it originates from Liberia, but for the Liberians in earlier centuries, it originated in America. For those of us in the diaspora, it reminds us of home." With this statement, former Vice President Warner captures how moving to a new land leads to placing more value and significance on cultural practices that in their former context were viewed as more banal. For the black Americans who moved to Liberia during the nineteenth century, the ballroom dances that they reenacted in Liberia connected them with a land that for the vast majority of them had been their birthplace. For Liberians who immigrated to the United States in the latter part of the twentieth century, the same dances evoke memories of another homeland—Africa. In all of this are elements of recreating, reimagining, and selective forgetting. During the nineteenth century, Americo-Liberians recreated themselves as the embodiment of civilization and refinement in Africa; they chose to forget dances and other cultural practices that more clearly linked them with a legacy of enslavement—and with a clearer connection to their African ancestry and past. However, across the Atlantic, Liberian immigrants who have never before performed the grand march now participate in it, dancing a Liberian identity that is inclusive and open to all and belies a complicated history of exclusion and discrimination.

Interviews and ethnographic observations among Liberians in the diaspora have shown that, in the United States, the grand march has become a symbol of a generalized Liberian identity. In the diaspora, it has come to be performed by any and all Liberians as a way of embodying a unified Liberian identity outside of Liberia, one that clearly contrasts with the social divisions that remain within Liberia, even after Doe's 1980 coup and a fourteen-year civil war. What is most important is not the "true" origins of the grand march, but the meaning that Liberians collectively give to its practice and import in their everyday lives—which explains how a European dance came to define an African immigrant identity. Analysis of the grand march shows that performance is a critical site of inquiry from which to examine the ever-shifting processes of ethnic identity formation, especially in interconnected diasporas.

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## NOTES

1. Founded in 1816, the American Colonization Society (ACS) aimed to settle free blacks in a colony in West Africa. Both abolitionists and defenders of slavery supported colonization of free blacks as a solution to a growing Negro problem in the United States. The ACS founded the colony of Liberia, which became independent in 1847. An exact total of African American emigrants to Liberia is hard to determine because, while the ACS sponsored most emigrants, some families emigrated on their own, without ACS assistance. Certain auxiliary societies and other organizations sent emigrants also, such as the International Migration Society, which sent 200 in 1895 and 321 in 1896 (Redkey 1969). According to calculations by the ACS, the ACS sent 15,185 emigrants to Liberia between 1820 and 1904 (the last year of recorded emigration sponsored by the ACS, according to the *Liberia Bulletin*). These figures are based on the *Liberia Bulletin*, no. 16 (February 1900), p. 28, and were verified with the "Table of Emigrants Settled in Liberia by the ACS," *African Repository* (April 1867), vol. 4, no. 4, pp. 109–118. Numbers for ACS-sponsored emigration after 1899—fifteen people—comes from figures reported in the *Liberia Bulletin*, nos. 17–34. The Maryland State Colonization Society sent 1,227 people to Liberia, and the ACS was responsible for resettling 5,722 recaptives from captured slave ships in Liberia (*African Repository*, April 1867). I did not include the recaptives in my 17,000 estimate, as they were Africans, not African Americans.
2. Queen contests have some similarities with beauty contests, but the women compete to raise the most money from the assembled crowd. The woman who collects the most money is declared the winner; standards that prevail in beauty contests, such as looks or talent, are not directly relevant. See Moran (1996) for more.
3. My assertion about the widespread use of the grand march is based on my nearly fourteen years of involvement in multiple Liberian communities and attendance at many events. The grand march is often listed on the event programs of county associations, alumni groups, and community-association events throughout the United States, usually utilized to open the dancing festivities for the evening.
4. Strine, Long, and Hopkins begin their survey article on performance by recognizing it as an essentially contested concept, meaning "its very existence is bound up in disagreement about what it is" (1990:183). Such an approach to performance fosters constant, often fruitful discussion among scholars, as there is no one, agreed-upon definition.

5. The first ship of African American emigrants arrived in Liberia in 1820, but they were unsuccessful at establishing a settlement. It was not until 1822 that a permanent settlement was founded—at Cape Mesurado (Staudenraus 1961:66–67).
6. Bishop Bennie Dee Warner was vice president of Liberia under William R. Tolbert, from 1977 to 1980 (Dolo 2007:26–27).
7. Edward Wimot Blyden is known as one of the fathers of nineteenth century Pan-Africanism. He was born in the Virgin Islands and immigrated to Liberia. There, he became a prominent journalist, orator, editor of several newspapers, author of several books, professor of classics, diplomat (ambassador to Britain and France), and politician (Secretary of State of Liberia), even unsuccessfully running for president.
8. *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* was published monthly by the ACS from 1825 to 1850. It often featured articles or letters on Liberia. Its title was changed to *The African Repository* (1850 to 1892) and then *Liberia* (1892–1909).
9. The Fernando Po scandal revolved around a system of forced labor starting in 1914, in which indigenous Liberians were shipped by the Liberian government to work for Spanish colonists on the island of Fernando Po. For further information, see Sundiata (2003).
10. See Cohen (1981) for parallels, even in terms of balls and European-style dancing, among Krios in Freetown, Sierra Leone.
11. Temporary Protected Status (TPS), a status determined by the Secretary of Homeland Security, “provides temporary legal residency to nationals of designated countries residing in the United States who cannot return to their home country due to armed conflict, natural disaster, or other devastating conditions” (Simmelink 2011:328). This status usually lasts no longer than a few years, but for Liberians it has lasted more than eighteen. Deferred Enforced Departure is a status similar to TPS, but is granted by the president of the United States.
12. There are more than fifteen ethnic groups in Liberia, including (in alphabetical order) Americo-Liberian, Bassa, Gbandi, Gio, Gola, Grebo, Kissi, Kpelle, Krahn, Kru, Lorma, Mandingo, Mano, Mende, and Vai. I am unaware of any large-scale surveys that assess the ethnic backgrounds of Liberians in the United States, so it is not possible to identify accurately the proportions of Liberian immigrants from each ethnic group.
13. The names given in this article are pseudonyms and are not meant to reflect the ethnic backgrounds of the interviewees. The list of interviews at the end of the article indicates each interviewee’s self-reported ethnicity.
14. Congo is a term first used to refer to the thousands of African recaptives (more than 5,000) who were on slave ships that were captured by the US Navy and taken to Liberia. A large number of these ships came from the Congo River area, and thus the recaptives were called Congos by the Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians alike. Over time, the label Congo came to be used in a derogatory manner to refer to anyone descended from either the settlers from the United States or the recaptives (Cooper 2008; Liebenow 1987:19).
15. The United African Community Organization is an umbrella group for the African community and ethnic associations that make their home in Detroit and its environs.
16. Lappas are long pieces of printed cloth that some Liberian women wear around their waists, covering the bottom half of their bodies.
17. I thank Dr. Cecil Blake for pointing out how performing these dances is linked to immigrant aspirations for success and higher social status.

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- Allen W. 2011. Grebo. Interview by author, 30 October. Pittsburgh.
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