The Media Production of Dark Ruralities

Assatu Wisseh

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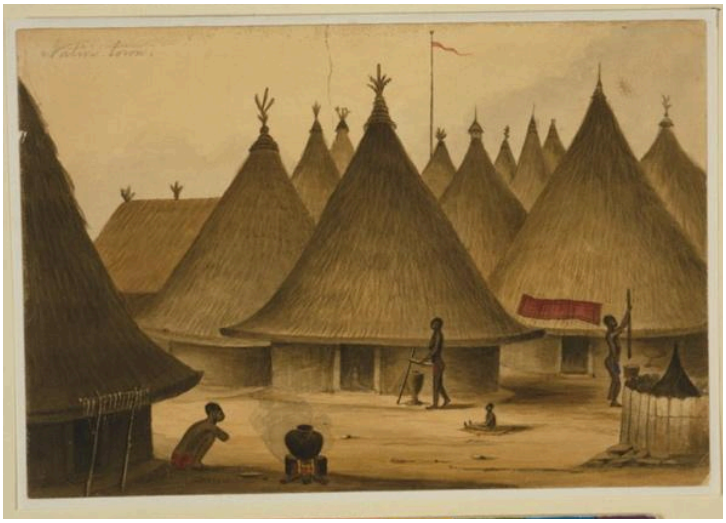


Figure 1. Native village. [between 1840 and 1900]], American Colonization Society, Collector. Painting: Watercolor. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

The American Colonization Society (ACS) was a group of U.S. statesmen, consisting of Supreme Court Associate Justice Bushrod Washington, former Senator and House Speaker Henry Clay, President Andrew Jackson, Colonel Henry Rutgers, and lawyer and poet Francis

Scott Key. These statesmen first organized the ACS in Washington, D.C. in 1817 and designed a plan to protect the racial hierarchy of the United States by colonizing free Black Americans in West Africa.[1] From the early 1800s to the early 1900s, the ACS sponsored the voluntary emigration of free people of color and freed slaves from the United States across the Atlantic Ocean to a colony called Liberia. This extractive process was undergirded by a material infrastructure of ships that moved physical bodies, as well as discursive infrastructures through which ideas circulated. Anthropologist Brian Larkin states "Infrastructures operate on multiple levels concurrently. They execute technical functions (they move traffic, water, or electricity) by mediating exchange over distance and binding people and things into complex heterogeneous systems and by operating as entextualized forms that have relative autonomy from their technical function."[2] This essay explores the discursive level of infrastructure. From the oral and written plans of the ACS, its members built first the colony and later the nation of Liberia in West Africa by making black bodies and land extractable. This ability to turn ideas into form depended upon the discursive power of the ACS infrastructure to produce dark ruralities.

Throughout the ACS archive, records of print journal passages and oral speeches by ACS agents constructed Indigenous West African bodies and geographies as dark, representing them as demonic and devoid of Christianity. Conversely, this archive imagined ACS ships bringing multiple metaphoric rays of light, from education to religion to agriculture, to enlighten a dark Africa. Notable ACS members including Francis Scott Key composed a "memorial" to Congress that used contrasting imagery of light and darkness to support their request that the U.S. House and Senate federally fund the American Colonization Society's African colonization efforts:

> That such points of settlement would diffuse their light around the coast, and gradually dispel the darkness which has so long enshrouded that continent, would be a reasonable hope, and would justify the attempt, even if experience had not ascertained its success.[3]

This chiaroscuro method, the composition of striking contrast between the light of ACS ships versus the darkness of rural West Africa, in print and oral media helped produce a picture of African colonization that framed it as just and necessary, and this discursive positioning worked to conceal the violence of extracting free Blacks from the United States and land from Indigenous Africans.

The construction of dark ruralities openly marks Black bodies and spaces as dark and demonic as in "disreputable place[s] inhabited by disreputable people."[4] By demonic I also mean they are constructed as "ungeographic," outside the mappable and knowable bounds of Christianity and reason.[5] In reprinted journal passages in the ACS Second Annual Report, Reverend Samuel John Mills, an agent of the ACS appointed with Ebenezer Burgess, co-agent, to explore the coast of West Africa, constructed the environments of Sierra Leone and what would become Liberia as shadowy and Satanic cultural landscapes being saved by Providence. Mills wrote on March 22, 1818, "altars on these mountains, which the natives had dedicated to devils, are falling before the temples of the living God, like the image of Dagon before the Ark."[6] Mills's journal excerpts comprised nearly 48 pages of the 80-page annual report. His production of West African rural environments as demonic is a recurring thematic component of the journal excerpts. On April 14, 1818, he composed a picture of rural Liberia as damned by God:

> This territory is generally dry, level, fertile, and covered with forests of ancient growth. Soyarrah has only a handful of people. War, slave-trade, red water, and (as Mr. K. says respecting western Africa), "the curse of God, for their sins and devil worship" have reduced a considerable population to a few scattered relics.[7]

This geographic production shaped early images of Liberia and Indigenous Liberians, as Mills's visuals circulated amongst prominent readers who comprised the audiences of the ACS annual reports. The tethering of Indigenous Blackness to spiritual and environmental deprivation makes the displacement of "the natives" seem more than justifiable. This extractive logic which

shaped infrastructural encounters with Black and Indigenous bodies of West Africa is hidden by the production of dark ruralities.

The removal of Black bodies and land that undergirded African colonization in Liberia can be characterized as an eco-catastrophe. However, the ACS's chiaroscuro method seamlessly constructs colonial ships as light and African bodies and geographies as dark and un(godly), rendering them ripe for extraction. At the funeral of Colonial Agent J. Ashmun, ACS member Reverend Bacon stated:

> At that time, this cape was literally consecrated to the devil; and here the miserable natives, in the gloom of the dark forest, offered worship to the evil Spirit. All this was only a few years ago. And what see you now? The forest that has crowned the lofty cape for centuries, has been cleared away; and here are the dwellings of a civilized and intelligent people.[8]

The produced spiritual and spatial darkness justified the geographic "clearing away" of ecologies.

In the ACS archives, the undeveloped geographies of Black people are imagined as naturally dark, bad, deficient, but these dark ruralities were a deliberate creation. These media productions rationalized the displacement of Black people and lands, framing it as the restoration of forsaken cultural landscapes by an infrastructure of ships, bringing the civilizing light of education, religion, and science in the early 1820s. The ACS chiaroscuro method foregrounds an extractive logic. This discursive production and extractive logic are part of a historical process normalizing the displacement of marginalized cultures, bodies, and land by various infrastructural arrangements from ACS ships to segregated city buses.

Endnotes

[1] American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States. and American Colonization Society., *The Annual Reports of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States. v.1-10 (1818-1827).* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), Seventh Annual Report, 76, 618 e-doc.
[2] Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," Annual Review of Anthropology 42, no. 1 (2013): 335–36, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522.
[3] American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States. and American Colonization Society., The Annual Reports of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States. (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), Fourth Annual Report, 26, 288 e-doc.
[4] Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 4.
[5] Katherine McKittrick, Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
[6] American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States. and American Colonization Society., The Annual Reports of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States., Second Annual Report, 22, 59 e-doc.
[7] American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States. and American Colonization Society., Second Annual Report, 47, 84 e-doc.
[8] American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States. and American Colonization Society., Twelfth Annual Report, 44–45, 189-190 e-doc.

Assatu Wisseh is a PhD Candidate in the Film and Media Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is the Mellon-Rosenwald Project Manager at Fisk University.

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