

Accommodating Master Narratives and 'Slave' Narratives

Contribution to the 2025 Workshop

Re-Search: A Workshop Exploring the Notion of Research as Theory, Practice and Identity

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“ The gathering addressed the questions of how and why to incorporate new perspectives, stories, epistemologies, and ontologies into the study of African histories. My paper, which was later translated into collage form, was entitled "Accommodating Master Narratives and 'Slave' Narratives: Reflections on Researching Liberian History." It reflected the internal conflicts I regularly experience as a Liberian-born woman and historian of Liberia



Abstract

The first collage, on a light blue background, is called "Slave Narrative." It recalls Liberia's glorious past as the first Black republic, which was intended to redeem the heavily racialised and dehumanizing image of Africa (and Africans) at the end of the transatlantic slave trade. It also emerges from my lived experience and history of the place, with a key family member having "returned" to Africa from the Caribbean as part of the Marcus Garvey movements in the 1930s. Founded in 1822, Liberia's national leaders had a keen sense of a fate rooted in "Divine Providence" in the nineteenth century. They flaunted their symbolic power and the promise of their historical relevance. This, in spite of being regularly ridiculed by others within the global community. As an example, the central image of both collages, which feature an image of the cabinet of Liberia under President William David Coleman, ca. 1896–1900 originally carries the belittling byline: "Le cabinet de la République de Libéria avec son Président. En grande pompe! Ce sont tout des 'honorables' comme ils se titulent. 'Il n'y en a point comme nous!' (translated: "The Cabinet of the Republic of Liberia with its President. With great pomp! They are all 'honourables' as they call themselves. There are not at all like us!") (Basel Mission Archive, QD-30.044.002). The crude comment coming from a member of the internationally well-networked Swiss Basel Mission Society.



The backdrop of the second collage, 'The Master Narrative', is my contention, and that of other Liberians, with the fact that Liberian historiography has been dominated by foreigners — ironically, mostly Americans and Israelis — who continue to perpetuate a 'single story' about Liberia's past, namely that of black colonialism, which portrays relations between the Black settlers and indigenous groups as strictly hostile and exploitative. I have attempted to visually capture this story of inequality, while already complicating it by trying to locate it within a global context.

And, yet, I recognise that there is a patriotic and Eurocentric trap in my defensiveness. This awareness is only intensified by recent events in the Middle East. While I therefore insist that inclusive historical storytelling is antithetical to the promotion of a 'single story', I also believe that a self-reflexive and pluriversalist approach needs to critically question the unilinear vision of progress embedded into Collage 1 (see, for example, Priya Satia Time's Monster). For instance, similar to many (though certainly not all) conquering African powers and kingdoms before them, Liberian leaders pursued an agenda that, at least in the nineteenth century, anticipated and promoted the eradication of indigenous beliefs and practices, as well as the "enlightenment" of their African brethren, especially through Christianity and commerce.



