

LIBERIA: POSTWAR, NOT YET POSTCOLONIAL

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

"Liberia: Postwar, Not Yet Postcolonial" is a project discussing the ways in which, two Liberian presidential candidates (re)construct and perform their socio-political identities in order to build constituency in the postwar context. I am mainly concerned here with the ways in which Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and George Weah, locate themselves in relationship to Liberia's founding dilemma: the tension between the Americo-Liberian minority (Liberian-born descendants of the country's African American "founding fathers"), and the indigenous Liberian majority. This project primarily addresses the 2005 Liberian presidential election as a discrete moment in Liberian history. It also attempts to explain and situate the surprising election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as Liberia's 24th and first female president, into a national cultural context that advantages repatriated Liberian intellectuals and politicians like Johnson Sirleaf, while disadvantaging and marginalizing indigenous knowledge and talent. By investigating the concept of repatriation, and the political agendas of Johnson Sirleaf and Weah, this project explicates the ways in which gender and class privilege impact political participation, democratic institutions and political organizations in ways that allow historical inequalities to reproduce. The exclusionary nature of politics in Liberia demand that Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, as the country's new president, encourage a sustained moment of decolonization in order to address major concerns related to national identity, reconciliation, reconstruction and postwar recovery. This project challenges the meaning of Johnson Sirleaf's presidency as a landmark election. It also encourages us to think critically about the ways in which repatriation contributes to class, gender and educational inequality.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ms. Jamila A. Crowther comes to Cornell University from Washington, DC where she worked as a Program Officer, Africa Projects for the Phelps Stokes Fund (PSF). As a Program Officer, she focused on creating and managing scholarships for women and girls as well as rehabilitation programs for former combatants and war affected youth in Liberia. Prior to her work at PSF, she served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Togo in a Girls Education Empowerment program. She graduated with honors from the University of Virginia with dual degrees in Political and Social Thought and African/ African American Studies. Presently her research interests include settler colonialism, black elite formation and gender studies.

To my mother Frances Crowther for always encouraging me to transform my weaknesses into strengths and for pushing me to take risks. She always encourages my dreams, academic and otherwise, saying, “To aim high and fall low, is no disgrace.” This is also for my father, the archetypal West African intellectual. Thanks for always believing in me and encouraging me to do more: to be better, smarter and sharper today than I was the day before. This is for both of my parents, without whom, none of this would be possible.

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INTRODUCTION

“I thank my Lord the God of Peace. O He really answers prayers. Thank God the United Nations and Papa Kofi Annan... Thank God for President Bush, the Peace is here forever. I say one way, one-way ticket to Monrovia. I’m never coming back.”

Lyrics by Caroline Barnard

The lyrics to this song, penned by Caroline (C.C.) Barnard in 2004 became increasingly popular in the weeks and months leading up to the October 2005 Liberian presidential election. The song’s popularity was due, in part, to its ubiquitous presence at Ellen Johnson Sirleaf fundraisers and campaign rallies throughout the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Barnard, a Liberian expatriate living in Maryland, just outside the beltway, expressed longing for a last and final return to Liberia, a message that resonated with the Liberian community in the United States, of which she was a part. Many of these expatriates fled the country after the 1980 coup d’etat when an indigenous leader replaced the Americo-Liberian president. Johnson Sirleaf was the candidate they believed could facilitate this final return. In this way, it became a popular political anthem for Liberians immigrants in the United States, and a song that had little or no currency in Liberian capital of Monrovia itself. At the time, with no existing provisions for out-of-country voting, Liberians living in the United States struggled to create a direct connection to the political process unfolding in the West African Nation. While many could not return home to cast their vote for Johnson Sirleaf, they could still influence the outcome of the election by urging family members at home – those often dependent upon their American relatives for income – to vote in their stead. At its peak, the song was an internet sensation and sales of the CD catapulted C.C. Barnard into the spotlight; the tune was even featured in a story by

the Washington Post about the history-making postwar political transition. It was, in short, a song written by a Liberian expatriate, and consumed in large part by that same demographic. The song expressed feelings of hope, longing, redemption, and above all else, *repatriation*: these are themes, put to music by Barnard, that have historically defined, and resonated with the Liberian elite class.

The popularity and genesis of the song are not surprising given that ideas of displacement, and return are nothing new to Liberia's "Congo" people. This ethnic group is also known as Americo-Liberians, are the descendants of the African American repatriates that founded the country in 1847. Congos, like the Krio of Sierra Leone, are formerly enslaved, African descended peoples, repatriated to the continent after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807. Much like the hyphenated name of this ethnic identity suggests, Americo-Liberians exists on the boundary between Africa and the West. To use a term coined by Ali Mazrui to describe Algeria's "pied noirs" and South Africa's "Afrikaners," they are Africans by adoption, but also, by virtue of their African heritage, they are understood additionally as Africans "of the blood" (Mazrui, p.11).

It is largely because Americo-Liberians are Africans "of the blood" that they are rarely written about as settlers returning to Africa from the diaspora. The creation of the Liberian state itself was predicated upon the foundation of the Americo-Liberian leadership and identity, in the Weberian sense, as an elite political class. Americo-Liberians began to resettle west Africa beginning in 1822, leaving the United States before slavery was abolished and carrying with them the culture of the antebellum South. The settlers, rather than leaving the legacy of slavery and racism behind them, recreated the same master – servant system in their new home. This history, and the legacy of the cultural divisions between "western" repatriated and indigenous blacks continue to pervade present day society. It is these questions,

concerning what type of Liberian is the “right” type of Liberian that resurfaced during the postwar campaign, and subsequent election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

The election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia’s first female president, in November 2005, provides a unique opportunity to understand the ways in which politics and progress are shaped by cultural identity. Deeply grounded in the Americo-Liberian or “Congo” political tradition, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf raises the question of whether or not black leadership, particularly, black female leadership is by nature, progressive. What helps to distinguish Americo-Liberians from other Liberian ethnic identities is culture, and the ways in which local institutions are constructed in order to reproduce that culture and identity. This study addresses the 2005 presidential election as a discrete moment in Liberian history where old resentments held by indigenous Liberians surfaced and created a counter-narrative to the election discourse on postwar reconstruction. This project rethinks the fundamental problem of what constitutes social and cultural progress, asking what type of Liberian is the “right” type of Liberian to lead the postwar country? This study is also an exploration of the two archetypal Liberian identities, the “Congo” and the “Country” that from different communities and classes in Liberian society is understood as the central founding dilemma undermining the stability of the Liberian state. All of this serves to provide a context for understanding what the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf means, and how her interventions in the postwar context shape how and in what ways Liberia might engage in a sustained process of decolonization.

That Liberia, whose name means “liberty,” is one of the most unequal societies on the African continent is largely a result of traditions and policies begun by the country’s founding fathers. Now that Ellen Johnson Sirleaf sits atop the Liberian democracy, one wonders what her role will be in the trajectory of historical progress. Will she reproduce the mistakes of Liberia’s past presidents by enacting policies that

benefit the leadership, at the expense of the people? Under the William Tubman and William Tolbert regimes, domestic policies failed to decrease the socio-economic gap. Tolbert's government, using a rhetoric that engaged a philosophy of sustainable development, coined the terms from "Mat to Mattresses" and "Total Involvement for Higher Heights," to illustrate the importance of improving lives of all Liberians during his presidency. Despite his use of racial uplift rhetoric, his policies did not weaken the concentration of power in the hands of just a few dozen families and friends. Samuel Doe, Liberia's first indigenous president also failed to increase opportunities for indigenous Liberians. His public policy proved only that indigenous Liberians could be as corrupt as Americo-Liberians. During his presidency, largely defined by U.S. Cold War policies, he did little or nothing to improve the living conditions of the indigenous people.

Liberia: Postwar, Not Yet Postcolonial, presents a distinct and different way of looking at the crisis in Liberia as not a failed, failing or fragile state, but an example of bourgeois modern statehood itself. What can be gained by looking at the 1980 coup d'etat as the direct result of indigenous resistance to the 1847 settler intrusion? How does Liberia fit into the broader paradigm of settler statehood presented by British in Kenya, French in Algeria, and Afrikaner and British in South Africa? This study interrogates competitive elections as a study in culture and identity. By comparing and contrasting Johnson Sirleaf and George Weah, I look at the ways in which identity is constructed in order to build constituency in an election process that includes, print news, campaign slogans and radio interviews. Chapter One offers a discussion of the fundamental ways that history can be used to construct political personas. I look at the ways in which Johnson Sirleaf leverages the myth and tradition that Americo-Liberians, (also known as "Congos") are natural born leaders in order to advance her campaign. This chapter is an exploration of how these two candidates interact and

engage one another in a conversation about culture, identity and the future of the Liberian polity. It also explains how the roots of their two competing views on the 1980 coup d'etat and how that moment does or does not shape their conceptualization of the reconstructed Liberian state.

In Chapter One, I also address the ways in which George Weah's campaign can be understood in the context of Liberian "strong man" politics. Mike McGovern writes about how "strong man" politics only validate the individual who at the time of the vote has the strongest army. For a country still recovering from the ravages of war, George Weah's core constituency of former child soldiers became a metaphorical representation for the use of force and fear to validate illegitimate regimes. In the subtext of the election, Johnson Sirleaf reasserted and carried the mantle of Americo-Liberian political supremacy. George Weah attacked the fundamental assumptions undergirding Johnson Sirleaf's campaign with makes an ideological argument, critiquing the use of culture to subordinate, marginalize and discredit Liberia's indigenous people. The force of Weah's critique is unfortunately overshadowed by his own larger-than-life personality and the assertion that he his successful career and wealth made him as Liberian royalty, an assertion that his supporters reaffirmed, calling him "King George."

This project discusses him as a popular, albeit polemical figure. He understands and articulates indigenous Liberian frustration about their political disenfranchisement in a unique way, initiating a public discussion about privilege and progress. Unfortunately, it is clear from the outset that Weah's campaign is predicated on his popularity alone. He does not seriously engage a peace agenda or promote reconciliation and harmony among all Liberians. Instead, he stokes indigenous resentment in order to drum up grassroots support for his candidacy, without advancing a refined political agenda. His unbridled machismo is largely responsible

for driving away many women voters who comprise the majority of the population and were the constitutive majority. In many ways, the nature of his campaign was a complete affront to the Liberian women peacemakers that had played an integral role in bringing about the political resolution of the conflict.

Over the course of the election, Weah raised, but did not answer the question, who are the real citizens in Liberia? George Weah's embrace of his "Country" identity endeared him to many of the country's disenfranchised youth, who, much like him, had been denied opportunities for formal education. The use of the term "Country" is actually a derogatory term denoting all of Liberia's 16 indigenous ethnic groups. It generally refers to an unassimilable indigenous identity unfit for assimilation. The divide between the Congo and the Country dates back to the 1822 founding of the original settlement and is generally understood to denote colonial exclusion, created when the minority settlers monopolized political power claiming that indigenous Liberians were too unsophisticated to run the state. Country people had no rights and could be jailed and forced into plantation-style labor by Americo-Liberians. Country people were routinely humiliated, forced to enter Americo-Liberian owned homes and government buildings through the back door and even forced to pay a tax to observe the proceedings of the legislature.

By contrast, Americo-Liberians were called "Congos," owing the term "Congo" to a smaller group of Africans that were relocated to Liberia in the 1800s after being freed from slave ships. Congos lived in the homes of Americo-Liberians and largely assimilated the culture and social attitudes of Americo-Liberians through marriage and adoption. To native Liberians, both groups were the same. The name "Congo" is derived from the fact that most of them claimed to have originated in areas close to the Congo River in central Africa. The term "Congo" later came to apply to both Americo-Liberians and Congo people, connoting their non-native status.

Americo-Liberians and Congos, still inhabit areas such as Congo-town in central Monrovia where the Congos once formed a self-protective enclave.

Africans and Westerners alike have hailed Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's election as the continent's first female president a triumph. It has also been considered the beginning of a new type of democratic politics in Liberia. For the first time in Liberian history, women voted in large blocs to elect their next president. Chapter Two entitled, *A (Lone)Star Is Born* discusses the ways in which the grassroots women's movement in Liberia catapulted Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to electoral success during the November 2005 runoff election. In what ways is this election unique or exceptional, and how did it represent a break from the past? How can we understand Sirleaf as Liberia's first female president? Is she an exception, or is she part of a longer history and continuum of female leadership in Liberian society? I attempt to understand and articulate ideas about what tradition of female leadership Sirleaf is accessing, indigenous or Americo-Liberian. I also investigate issues such as the "glass ceiling" that forced Sirleaf abroad for continued professional development. In addition, this discussion addresses Sirleaf's personal narrative as an indigenous Liberian, in order to determine how she broke through cultural and gender barriers in order to assimilate into the Americo-Liberian political elite in ways that benefitted her over the course of the election.

A (Lone)Star is Born describes how Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia's "Iron Lady" drew much of her political support from women voters and from Liberia's small educated elite. As a new president, she faced the challenges of rebuilding the country as well as fostering a climate of reconciliation. What began as a grassroots anti-rape and anti-war movement spearheaded by a consortium of women's organizations including Liberian Women's Initiative (L.W.I.), Women in Peace Building Network (W.I.P.N.E.T.) and Manor-River Women's Network

(M.A.R.O.P.W.I.P.N.E.T.) created the momentum that propelled her into the presidency. When Johnson Sirleaf, at the advice of her campaign consultant Riva Levinson, began to articulate the historical importance of her candidacy, Liberian women voters began to rally around her as their candidate.

During Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's inaugural address on January 16, 2006, she clearly articulates an invitation for displaced Liberians to return to Liberia in order to lend their talents and professional skills to the reconstruction process. She has also spent a disproportionate amount of time in the United States, greeting her American supporters, meeting with American politicians and lecturing at the country's most prestigious universities. She is by far, one of the most sought after and popular African politicians on the continent at this time. Johnson Sirleaf envisions a reconstruction process in Liberia and a development policy in which African Americans and Liberian Americans directly invest in and recapitalize the private sector.

Chapter Three, *Repatriation as Patriotism*, addresses the possibility of ongoing and future cultural "clashes" as the Liberian Diaspora return home to work, and rebuild, forming a "defacto" new ruling class. Will the members of the Diaspora in their return, re-enact the original colonial encounter? These issues are important in the context of the country's shifting cultural composition, as internally displaced rural Liberians living in Monrovia acquire elevated status. Also of note are is the potential for tension between the internally displaced population living in Monrovia and the established landowning elite who, encouraged by Johnson Sirleaf's election, are returning from abroad in record number to resettle and claim a stake in the country's economic and political systems.

CHAPTER 1

WHO ARE THE REAL LIBERIANS? TOWARDS A NATIONAL IDENTITY

“So my feet are in two worlds - the world of poor rural women with no respite from hardship, and the world of accomplished Liberian professionals, for whom the United States is a second and beloved home. I draw strength from both. But most of our people have not been as fortunate as I was. Always poor and underdeveloped, Liberia is only now emerging from two decades of turmoil that destroyed everything we managed to build in a century and a half of independence.”¹

-Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

In a crisis-ridden country filled with larger-than-life electoral drama, the 2005 election contest between Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a politician of World Bank and Citibank pedigree, versus her celebrity opponent, George Weah, international footballer of AC Milan fame unexpectedly reveals one of the most candid electoral discourses ever engaged in the West African nation. As an adversary, political novice though he was, the thirty-nine year old, George Weah proved to be a worthy contender in the race for the presidency. In the mid-1990s, at the peak of his laudable sports career, he held the titles, FIFA World Player of the Year, European Footballer of the Year, and African Footballer of the Year. As a Liberian football hero, his global stardom, wealth and famous name, made him a favorite among the youth, the postwar

¹ Johnson Sirleaf, Ellen. Transcript from address to U.S. Joint Session of Congress. March 15, 2006. [online] URL available.
<http://www.emansion.gov.lr/content.php?sub=Joint%20Session%20of%20Congress&related=Major%20Speeches>

country's single-largest constituency.² Johnson Sirleaf however, a sixty-seven year old grandmother and thirty-year veteran of Monrovia politics was also a household name. Although she lacked Weah's charm and popularity, Johnson Sirleaf was a ferocious competitor, a trait, once well known by her prior challengers, that now was almost entirely obscured by her graying hair and small stature. Johnson Sirleaf, a thirty-year veteran of Liberian politics, had attempted twice before, but lost both bids for the presidency. These defeats, coupled with her surprising return to politics, added an element of drama to a contest and competition between the two candidates that turned this election into a legendary matchup.

Johnson Sirleaf's presidential ambitions date back to the late 1970s when she served as the first female Minister of Finance to William Tolbert, the last Americo-Liberian oligarch. During this time, she is suspected to have moonlighted with "Movement for Justice in Africa," of (M.O.J.A.), a group of university students and indigenous-Liberian intellectuals, including Amos Sawyer and Togba Tipoteh and Gabriel Baccus Matthews who plotted to overthrow the Americo-Liberian-led government in 1979.³ Later, in 1985 she campaigned against Tolbert's assassin turned successor, Samuel Doe, the C.I.A.-backed military dictator. During this 1985 election, she survived two imprisonments and a treason trial for her opposition to his leadership. For either the strength of her resolve, or her ability to invoke the confluence of international pressure that eventually forced Doe to release her, it was this 1985 stint as a political prisoner that earned her the title Liberia's "Iron Lady."⁴

² The majority of Liberia's population is under the age of 35 according to UNICEF population statistics.

³ Mamdani, Mahmood. Text of talk at the Divestment Teach-In, Columbia University, November 13, 2002. Online. Retrieved April 26, 2009.

⁴ "President Doe's Prisoner" *Index on Censorship*, Volume 16, Issue 5 p, 11-15, May 1987

With no incumbent president in the race, the 2005 election, would present no new threats to physical security for her to overcome. On a whole the political process was devoid of the violence that through voter intimidation, political imprisonment, and ballot theft, had overshadowed the 1985 and 1997 elections, distorting its outcomes. The 1997 election of warlord Charles Taylor while “clean,” by international standards, was, as Mike McGovern calls, deceiving because it served only to validate the nation’s “strong man,” and did not qualify as evidence of vibrant of a viable democracy.⁵ That election proved only that Taylor had the strongest army at the time of vote, not that he inspired voter confidence. When Liberians voted for him in 1997, they voted to save their lives: they went to the polls saying, “You killed my ma. You killed my pa. You will not kill me, I will vote for you.”⁶ It was Johnson Sirleaf’s late 1990s affiliation with Charles Taylor that cast aspersions upon whether or not a successful Johnson Sirleaf campaign was feasible at all in the wake of the 2003 U.N. and U.S.-led military intervention. After all, it had been her acute political ambition that led her to partner with the now infamous Taylor in support his insurgency to oust the Doe regime. During her time as his deputy, she infamously sanctioned Taylor’s bloody siege on the Monrovia executive mansion where Doe supporters were sheltered - a virtual death sentence to the city’s tenement dwellers - saying “level it, and we will rebuild it,”⁷ a comment for which she later apologized. Although Johnson Sirleaf parted with Taylor in the early stages of the war, after he “killed two of her friends,”⁸ the damage to her reputation had already been done; she

⁵ McGovern, Mike. Rebuilding a Failed State: Liberia. *Development in Practice*, Vol. 15, No. 6 (Nov., 2005), pp. 760-766

⁶ Rice, Andrew. “George Weah’s New Game.” *New York Times*, August 21, 2005

⁷ Gbakwenju, Dennis Jah. “Liberia’s ‘spoil it and fix it’ mentality.” May, 2009 online: <http://dennisjah.blogspot.com/2009/03/liberias-spoil-it-and-fix-it-mentality.html>

⁸ Anderson, Jon Lee. “After the Warlords.” *The New Yorker*. New York: Mar 27, 2006. Vol. 82, Iss. 6; pg. 58

lost when she ran against him in 1997, in part because she could levy no moral argument against him. For all of these reasons, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf long has, and continues to be a dynamic, multifaceted force in the contentious, often-violent world of Liberian politics.

At stake at this point in her career, thrice defeated as a presidential candidate, Johnson Sirleaf entered the race with a specific purpose: the 2005 election was considered Johnson Sirleaf's opportunity to censure critics that questioned her credibility because of her close ties to Taylor, the country's most destructive warlord. The fight against George Weah was in part, an opportunity to rebut old resentments against her and argue that she was not only a part of Liberia's past, but also its future. Major diplomatic professionals and ambassadors found her to be the most palatable candidate because of her past success in the world of international business and finance. The process of resurrecting her political career and winning the trust and support of Liberians through her political slogans, speeches and campaign rhetoric would prove to be one of the most difficult challenges that she had yet faced. By the time of the 2005 campaign, she was already well known as a neoliberal reformer and had a reputation as an indefatigable taskmaster.

Reintroducing herself to the Liberian electorate in August 2005 was a crucial process because her personal political narrative, and its evolution, in a sense, had to be inspiring in order for her to clarify her dubious history in Liberian politics. The historical nature of the election also demanded that she revisit and redefine her political and cultural identity in new and previously unarticulated ways. She says, "People always thought I was Americo-Liberian, until today-it's a political hurdle. If I had not had such a history of political activism, I would never have become

President.⁹ Despite the fact that she professes to maintain the same political agenda from the beginning of her political career in the 1970s until now- that of a democratic reform-driven activist- many in political circles questioned her dubious political affiliations and feared that she would replace “big man” politics with a new woman-led form of autocracy. These concerns were largely couched in accusations of her Congo-ness given that both Congo people had partnered with Americo-Liberians to exploit indigenous Liberians. Congo men and women, to a large extent, cooperated to aggregate power and maintain political and economic control over marginalized indigenous or Afro-Liberians.

Despite the fact that earlier in her career, she had navigated the Americo/ Afro-Liberian divide by emphasizing that she crossed “both worlds,” in 2005, she would finally be forced to articulate a position that rooting her firmly on one or the other side of the divide. If she were to renounce her Americo-Liberian or “Congo” identity, her political detractors would call her a hypocrite, largely because she had benefitted from a political system that had advantaged her and other indigenous wards of Americo-Liberian families like her, as a card-carrying member of that particular ethnic identity. To embrace her indigenous identity (Johnson Sirleaf is directly descended from two of Liberia’s indigenous ethnic groups, the Gola and the Kru), would signify participation in a particular political event, one that would bring to light the historical marginalization of Liberia’s indigenous people. It would also give her candidacy new meaning, bringing her own historic election into alignment with the presidency of Samuel Doe, the country’s first indigenous president. Never before had a presidential candidate engaged these two ideologically opposed identities simultaneously in a national election. The Congo (Americo-Liberian) vs. Country (indigenous and/or

⁹ Anderson, Jon Lee. “After the Warlords.” *The New Yorker*. New York: Mar 27, 2006. Vol. 82, Iss. 6; pg. 58

Afro-Liberian) divide is widely regarded as Liberia's most important historic and original dilemma. Resentments over the 133 year disenfranchisement of indigenous Liberians by Americo-Liberians is largely considered the cause of the 1980 coup d'etat that brought Samuel Doe to power, and responsible for the resulting twenty-three years of political violence.

Because Johnson Sirleaf was forced to identify herself as either Congo or Country in the post-conflict context, it signaled to Liberian voters that this would be an historic election unlike any other. Johnson Sirleaf had built bridges in the United States and with Western institutions that validated her professional skills and intellectual capabilities, but those connections did not necessarily endear her to the Liberian people. Her primary identity as a "Western" educated Liberian positions her in a "colonial" construct that encourages Western educated elites to dominate Liberian politics. For years, the Americo-Liberian bourgeois landed gentry exploited indigenous labor for financial advantage. Indigenous histories, cultures, talents and language had all been subverted by Americo-Liberian colonial domination. In 1847, the year of the country's founding, instead of taking the opportunity to adopt Vai as the Liberian national language (the Vai alphabet dates back to the 1840s), or subordinating themselves to the authority local chiefs, Americo-Liberians chose not to, because they wanted to be seen as Americans, not Africans. Americo-Liberians introduced Western values, tastes and habits into the new nation and used the power of the state to enforce these new conventions.

It is for all of these reasons that understanding Johnson Sirleaf as a politician demands that one explicate and explore the boundaries and the relationship between cultural identity and the state. Johnson Sirleaf wants her political identity to reflect Liberia's future and not its past. Is she, through her presidency, reflecting the current state of Liberian politics, or does she represent the ways in which Western influences

can permeate and impact the outcomes of African elections? Johnson Sirleaf is demanding that the West, and the international community in general, restore its diplomatic relations with Liberia, ties that were broken under the Taylor regime. The political function of her representation of a bourgeois, “Westernized” identity is a signal to western states that the violence in Liberia’s past is behind them and that the country is once again, “open for business.”

In April 2005, Ambassador John Blaney, the U.S. Ambassador to Liberia, felt compelled to state, as reported in *The Analyst*, a Monrovia newspaper, that this was Liberia’s “last chance” to secure its future. Blaney, like many others in diplomatic circles, expected the October election to send the message that Liberia was permanently at peace. Despite the fact that the message expressed a certain degree of optimism, it certainly was more of an ultimatum than a promise of continued financial and military support.¹⁰ In short, Liberia might not again receive high levels of American-led international assistance if the country were to implode again. Johnson Sirleaf’s campaign, leveraged a political perspective, widely supported by Americo-Liberians, that Liberia’s conflict ridden past was indeed behind them. This point of view was predicated on the belief that saw Doe’s 1980 coup d’etat as the root cause of Liberia’s twenty-three years of despotic regimes. Her campaign advanced the notion that it was the failings of Doe’s indigenous-led government, and not ideologically driven resentments between indigenous Africans and Americo-Liberian settlers that had driven the state to the brink of collapse. In turn, the George Weah campaign agreed that the past 23 years of decline was indeed a hyperbolic form of despotism, but argued instead that the fighting resulted from deeply rooted societal divisions. In short, Weah claimed 133 years of despotism, to Johnson Sirleaf’s 23, thus raising the

¹⁰ Sawyer, Amos. “Liberating Liberia, Understanding the Nature and Needs of Governance.” *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 27 (3) Fall 2005

stakes of the political discourse. To make an argument for 133 years of despotic rule is to argue that Liberia was not, and never had been a democratic country, and that democracy itself was an American Colonization Society created myth that Liberia, meaning “liberty,” was a haven from Western racism. The conversation about the original cause of conflict and the cultural background of the candidates took place on a national stage. For Weah (himself an indigenous Kru), that public discussion was critical because the conflict between the native Africans that he symbolically represented and African-American settlers who had long been reduced to a one-dimensional depiction of Samuel Doe’s takeover that ended True Whig Party dominance, (in a single party system) and installed a Krahn-led (one of Liberia’s 16 indigenous ethnic groups) military dictatorship. The importance of historically revisiting and revising the origins of the conflict is essential to any discussion of reconstruction, rehabilitation and state recovery. For Johnson Sirleaf, that discussion was particularly dangerous because her own identity and symbolically, her campaign itself, had been predicated upon the preservation of certain historical silencing of oppositional, radical identities, experiences and mythologies. George Weah, however, foiled Johnson Sirleaf’s efforts to downplay the significance of her Congo privilege and he brought to light the processes of assimilation that transformed politicians of indigenous blood such as Johnson Sirleaf, into “Congos.”

Cultural identity is a concept specifically tied to issues of subjectivity and representation. Cultural identity, as Stuart Hall writes, “reflects the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us … with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (Hall, 223). Hall traces the development of cultural identity and creolization to the post-colonial struggles that “have so profoundly shaped our world” (223). Certainly, the rejection of one identity and the assumption of another, more mainstream identity (of which the inverse is also

true) can be a signifier of cultural and social change. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's transformation into a Congo person both highlights the socio-cultural violence embedded in the perpetuation of this identity through the subordination of indigenous Liberians by Congo politicians. In order to be "Congo," one must embrace a narrative of cultural imperialism that masks and normalizes assimilation as part of Liberia's transition into a modern nation.¹¹ Ellen Johnson Sirleaf rejects the notion that a divide between the Congo and indigenous Liberian communities exists at all is her way of saying that she is not one of the country's elite. She rejects the idea of a class system altogether saying, "If such a class existed, it has been obliterated over the last few years from intermarriages and social integration."¹² Despite her denials however, the name Johnson Sirleaf alone, derives its meaning from a colonial context. By renouncing her indigenous name, Johnson Sirleaf embraces a settler colonial past and brings into public view, the ways in which indigenous names, and indigenous resistance was suppressed.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, born to indigenous parents, had a Gola father and was $\frac{1}{4}$ Kru and $\frac{1}{4}$ German on her mother's side. With no direct Americo-Liberian blood, she was, by birth, and by law, an indigenous Liberian. In the 1930s and 1940s, her father Jahmale Johnson, the son of a Gola chief, had given his surname in reverence to Hilary Johnson, Liberia's 9th president. The president had bestowed the Anglophone name upon him, as a reward for his grandfather's loyalty. Assuming an Anglophone name had many privileges, least of which that Jahmale Johnson was born in Monrovia. He was educated by an Americo-Liberian family named McCrity, became a lawyer and later served as the first indigenous Liberian in the legislature. Johnson Sirleaf

¹¹ Bhaba, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2004

¹² Evans, Alistair Boddy. Biography of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. *About.com*. January 2009. [online] URL Available <http://africanhistory.about.com/od/liberia/p/Sirleaf.htm>

notes that her father bore a great many indignities as the “country” ward of an Americo-Liberian family. In a 2005 address she gave to the All Liberia National Conference in Columbia, Maryland, she said the following:

“As a result of my grandfather’s friendship and loyalty to President Hilary Richard Wright Johnson and on the advice of the President, my father was brought to Monrovia, his name changed to Johnson and he was given to the settler family, McCritty. He served in the usual manner and suffered the usual humiliation of a country boy under the ward system but he was able to get an education and become an apprentice which enabled him to become the first native representative in the National Legislature and was included in several Liberian delegations to meetings abroad.”¹³

Her father’s Anglophone name and close ties to the country’s political leadership improved his own future prospects, as well as that of his family. By rejecting his indigenous name, Jahmale Johnson and his family benefitted from increased mobility and greater freedoms within Liberian society. Through these personal and political connections, he acquired a certain degree of political agency that his daughter would ultimately translate into political power.

The acquisition of an Anglophone name by an indigenous man or family itself is predicated on loyalty and the acceptance of contradictory principles and silences. Jahmale Johnson was able to move his family from the rural indigenous life in Bomi County, to the locus of Liberian power and society because his surname alone afforded him political personhood normally denied to the indigenous majority. In “Citizenship at the Margins: Status, Ambiguity, and the Mandingo of Liberia,” Augustine Konneh describes how northern Muslim traders were integrated into the

¹³ Johnson Sirleaf, Ellen. Speech at “All National Liberia Conference” Columbia, MD, April 14, 2005. [online] URL Available <http://www.liberiapastandpresent.org/JohnsonSirleaf/TribalRoots.htm>

Liberian polity. Until the 1950s, under Tubman's Unification Policy, the 1847 Constitution of Liberia's "blacks only" citizenship provision applied to Americo-Liberians, only 5% of total population. Mandingo traders, however, increased their status by acting as a conduit for Americo-Liberian-led central government policies in the hinterland previously ignored. The Mandingo and Americo-Liberians, both considered "foreigners" by native Liberians, forged a mutually beneficial partnership. This is how Mandingo traders, rejected by natives because of their Muslim religion, nomadic lifestyle and other cultural differences, established a toehold in the Liberian economy. They assisted the Americo-Liberian colonial project by administering taxation and domestic trade policy throughout northern and central Liberia. For this, they were granted provisional citizenship in order for the Tubman administration to maintain and consolidate control over the interior.¹⁴ The same system that allowed Mandingos to acquire wealth and status for their service also applied to local chiefs. While it is unclear if Johnson Sirleaf's grandfather, as a Gola chief sought the favor and attention of the Americo-Liberian president, one can assume that it was because of his willingness to acquiesce to this system of indirect rule, was the sacrifice for which he was rewarded.

Although Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is not the first politically active member of her family, she has certainly become more successful than her father. Her own upbringing reflects the complexity of her cultural identity and cultural capital, as well as the relationship between identity and power. Johnson Sirleaf's parents also did not raise her since she was brought up in Monrovia by an Americo-Liberian woman named Cecilia Dunbar and spent her summers in Jujuleh, Bomi County.

¹⁴ Konneh, Augustine. "Citizenship at the Margins: Status, Ambiguity, and the Mandingo of Liberia. *African Studies Review*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Sep., 1996), pp. 141-154

In Liberia, the home has important political and ideological significance. Helene Cooper's writes extensively, almost obsessively about the first-world niceties that she enjoyed in her aptly titled book, *The House on Sugar Beach*. In it, she and her adoptive “sister” Eunice, explore the social, cultural, and economic violence of second- class citizenship in Liberia. The home itself was also an important cite of assimilation where traditional cultural ties were broken upon the threat of shame and punishment. Cooper recounts how her mother broke her Bassa laundryman’s cultural ties that forbid him to wash Eunice’s clothes, Helene’s new Bassa “sister.” When he refused, Mrs. Cooper, Helene’s mother threatened to fire him, saying that he should acquiesce because “small shame better than big shame,” meaning the small indignity of washing her clothes was better than the shame of unemployment.¹⁵ Johnson Sirleaf remarked in her address to the U.S. Congress in 2006, that she considers herself lucky that she had not borne the types of abuses as a domestic servant such as endured described by her father and mother, whose experiences were typical of the daily indignities suffered by many in the indigenous community.

It was Johnson Sirleaf’s assimilated into a “Congo” personhood through a formal (education) and informal (domestic life) assimilation processes that transformed her into a higher status Liberian. Later on, through her education abroad (“been to”), and cultural sophistication (“kwiness”) she illustrates how identity can be both constructed, and deconstructed in the Liberian context. While Johnson Sirleaf’s attempt at cultural fluidity lay in her ability to claim both her indigeneity as well as her Congo-ness, as a product of “both worlds,”¹⁶ she had to convince the Liberian public that Liberia could in fact move forward incrementally and without totally embracing a

¹⁵ Cooper, Helene. *The House at Sugar Beach*. Simon & Schuster, New York, New York: 2008 p.42

¹⁶ Sirleaf, Ellen Johnson. Speech to Joint Session of U.S. Congress. March 15, 2006 Online: <http://www.emansion.gov.lk/content.php?sub=Joint%20Session%20of%20Congress&related=Major%20Speeches>

radical oppositional identity like the one that George Weah offered. Without the acceptance of her as bi-cultural, she could not effectively argue that she could be both part of the Liberian establishment could protect and defend the rights of the country's indigenous majority.

Because Johnson Sirleaf deconstructs her identity from the standpoint of a Congo (an assimilated indigenous Liberian or African repatriate), she is able to assert and give voice to her own indigenous heritage as a part of her Liberian-ness. Embedded within her cultural identity, there is an explicit or implicit charge to speak into existence new identities and unexplored possibilities that contest, intervene and point out the contradictions within the dominant discourse that historically advantages mainstream assimilated identities and ideologies. Because historically marginalized groups, and by extension, marginalized cultures are, in large part, deprived of the authority to speak, they must engage in a crucial process that reclaims the voice in order to speak truth to power and forge a path for discussion about the ways in which one's "political world permeates [their] inner lives."¹⁷ It is this question of voice and identity that draws attention to the history of resistance embedded in the oppositional identity. This process of reclaiming voice, but also a process of choosing which experience or experiences are key to identity, that would make it possible for her to play a greater role in shaping not only electoral politics but also expand the possibilities of a "postcolonial" nationhood.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's Congo-ness represented a look backwards rather than forwards in Liberian cultural identity. It signaled her tacit acceptance of the rhetoric of repatriation that suggests that one forges a new "globalized" ethnic identity in lieu of speaking with an indigenous voice, simply by returning "home" after receiving

¹⁷ Mohanty, Satya. "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On "Beloved" and the Postcolonial Condition" *Cultural Critique*, No. 24 (Spring, 1993), pp. 41-80

education abroad. In Johnson Sirleaf's case, Harvard University was the Western institution that enabled her transformation from an indigenous woman into a member of the country's elite. It was this logic that not only justified 19th century settler colonialism and the "assumption and exercise of power of ... been to,"¹⁸ in Liberia but also maintains that links to the Western world add value to one's own identity. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, by virtue of her Harvard education and World Bank pedigree is a "been to," ready to take up the reigns of power. The Congo identity itself indicates a stubborn refusal to change course and participate in a peripatetic moment that would provide an opportunity to add more voices to the formation of a Liberian identity reflective of the country's indigenous majority. Johnson Sirleaf is not just an indigenous Liberian-cum-Conga woman, but a Westernized black woman leading Liberia because of her close proximity and familiarity with Western power. This was in fact the political and historical function of the Americo-Liberian, to serve as a cultural and social intermediary between the West and Africa. Liberia's 20th president, Tolbert, not inspired by the Pan-Africanism of the 1970s, advised members of his cabinet and others that Liberia had been established by its founders to provide a "non-revolutionary" voice on the continent, a voice that remained moderate even during the post-colonial tumult of the 1960s and 1970s. The name of the country, Liberia, meaning "liberty" and the slogan, "the love of liberty brought us here", is also known as the Lone Star state. This rhetoric reflecting the Hegelian dialectic of Africa as the "dark" continent, and Africans, without leadership potential of their own, relied upon the West to provide direction. All of this makes clear that the country had not actually been built not upon principles of "freedom" but upon a code of silence supported by a predilection for bourgeois black identities.

¹⁸ WaThiong'o, Ngugi. "Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature." Diogenes.1998; 46: 101-104 (63)

Former President Tolbert attempted, and failed, to convince the Liberian public that he shared status with indigenous Liberians, had indigenous blood and had suffered like they had suffered. So charged was the issue that when Tolbert suggested that a “son of natives”¹⁹ would succeed him, he lost critical political support from his True Whig Party. Tolbert, a Vai/ Americo-Liberian hybrid was the second president to speak an indigenous language. He often did so while wearing African dress at political rallies, the implicit message being one of solidarity with the indigenous people. These symbolic gestures only seemed to make indigenous Liberians more impatient for change and a president that represented an indigenous identity in its entirety, rather than a figurative representation of that identity. The rice riots of 1979 would later set the stage for the so-called “progressives”, among them Amos Sawyer, then a professor at the University of Liberia, to advocate for regime change on the basis of majority rule. Even the slightest suggestion of Congo identity was offensive, in that it had historically served as part of a coordinated effort to mask, displace and render silent the less mobile, indigenous population and devalue their tastes, talent, and knowledge. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf’s articulation of her own “twoness” was a risky conceptualization given that indigenous Liberians have shown little or no sympathy in the past, towards political leaders of indigenous heritage that participate in any way in assimilated or creolized identity. In the end, for the late President Tolbert, this failure to be embraced for his indigenous heritage had been his greatest political liability.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf throughout the course of the campaign never acknowledged her Congo privilege, despite the fact that her surname and her family’s socio-cultural history locates her solidly in the midst of Congo, Country divide. Her political campaign team, including high-powered Washington, DC political consultant,

¹⁹ Tolbert, William. *It Is Time For Change, Speeches of William R. Tolbert*. Victory Publishing International. Abidjan, 2002.

Riva Levinson, made a concerted effort to separate Ellen Johnson Sirleaf from past presidential regimes, for fear that Liberians would write her off as the political product of the Tolbert or worse, the Taylor regime.

In the end, this was a gamble, for which she was highly rewarded, as the Liberian public responded well to the opportunity to make history in the country, and on the continent. While Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was trying to distance herself from the past twenty-three years of civil war, George Weah made no such effort and constructed a campaign that while energetic, was mired by the fact that his primary constituency was composed largely of demobilized fighters. It was largely these soldiers, many themselves victims of entrapment and forced conscription that had terrorized the civilian population at the behest of Charles Taylor, Sekou Conneh and other Liberian “big men.” George Weah’s seemingly too close relationship to former combatants seemed to undermine his claims that he was looking for a new way forward and brighter future for Liberia. Many of his critics feared that a vote for Weah, and his enlarging band of cronies, would yet again create a power vacuum in the same ways that the military and warlord leaders in the past had done, and eventually focus more on maintaining and consolidating power than serving the Liberian public. George Weah appeared to confirm these suspicions when upon a visit to and campaign rally in Grand Gedeh, Doe’s home county, “he had donned a T-shirt with a photo of Doe and had promised two senior security posts to former Doe associates ... the incident reverberated around the country, particularly in Nimba County, the northern county where Doe’s troops had been accused of serious abuses while seeking to crush Taylor’s rebellion.”²⁰ By visiting Doe’s home in Grand Gedeh,

²⁰ Kramer, Reed. “Showered with Enthusiasm, Liberia's President-Elect Receives High-Level Reception in Washington.” *AllAfrica.com*. December 11, 2005.
Online:<http://allafrica.com/stories/200512110034.html>

George Weah was honoring his hero. During that campaign rally, he even promised Doe's sister Edith that, as president, he would continue to help her family and Grand Gedeh residents just as he had provided them with humanitarian assistance during the war, saying "I am like you; I know what it's like to be hungry, or to go to school barefoot. Things must change, take your destiny in your own hands!"²¹ While paying homage to Doe and the suffering that had occurred in Grand Gedeh, George Weah effectually added yet another layer to the history of ethnic tensions between Grand Gedeh and Nimba County that had borne the brunt of Doe's raids in 1983, 1985 and the rebel-led National Patriotic Front of Liberia bush war in 1997.²² While commiserating with one constituency, George Weah was alienating another in the more populous and ethnically diverse Nimba County, a county that Johnson Sirleaf would later win handily cementing her victory and the presidency in the November runoff election.

In Search of A Peripatetic Moment

It is important, as it is surprising that George Weah would assign himself this responsibility to take on the mantle of creating or increasing levels of upward mobility for disadvantaged Liberians. Although he had not been expected to take on this cause-his humanitarian efforts with the Liberian football team had been well received- this election would compel him to articulate his view on larger and more complex problems, his vernacular intelligence notwithstanding, for which his professional football career had not prepared him. George Weah, in the fullest sense, had always been a Liberian, never alluding to "global" or American citizenship in the ways that

²¹ "The Messiah? George Weah's Biggest Match" *The Independent* October 11, 2005. Online: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/the-messiah-george-weahs-biggest-match-510397.html>

²²"If Tolbert's Killers Testify, I'll Testify About Doe's." *The Analyst*. Monrovia, Liberia. August 13, 1998. [online] URL Available http://www.analystliberia.com/if_tolbert_killers_testify_i_will_testify_about_doe_death_feb01_08.html

Johnson Sirleaf had done. Instead, he expressed an affinity for a local identity, returning often to Liberia during his breaks from football and passing down a second-generation affinity for Liberia to his American-born son, George Weah Jr. George Weah Jr. expressed an interest in returning to Liberia, a country he had never before seen, that could only be attributed to the urgings of his father. He said that he too hoped to return to his father's country of origin to "play for Liberia,"²³ not AC Milan, Chelsea or Manchester City. The younger Weah, in his aspirations to return to play for the Liberian national team, hopes literally and figuratively to return "home" to Liberia to follow in his father's footsteps, particularly those footsteps that lead to renown on the football pitch.

On the basis of athletic performance alone, George Weah could not be denied as an endearing Liberian national hero. All Liberians, regardless of class, status or cultural background, knew of George's successes and took pride in the fact that Weah had represented the country and raised the profile of Liberia around the world at a time when Charles Taylor had turned Liberia into a regional and international pariah, spurring conflicts in neighboring Sierra Leone. Later, rebels in Cote D'Ivoire would owe their start to Taylor's Libyan trained forces. Although Weah had been wildly successful as a football star, transforming his fame and success in sports arena into political capital would present many hurdles. The majority of Liberians felt that Weah's career had not prepared him to lead a country at a time when the country's entire infrastructure was broken. He would have to prove that his popularity could transcend sports much like Imran Khan of Pakistan, Otto Jelinek of Canada, Sebastian Coe of Great Britain, and other athletes – turned – politicians had done. He also had

²³ Hassan, Kiawu. "Filling Weah's Shoes" LiberianSoccer.com, Online: <http://www.liberiansoccer.com/Filling%20Weah%27s%20Shoes.htm>

to prove that could command the respect of world leaders whose emergency and immediate financial support was critical to Liberian recovery.

The type of vernacular intellectualism and “oppositional” identity that George Weah represented had not been performed on such a large scale in Liberia at any other time during the country’s history. Even Charles Taylor, a socio-cultural outlier himself, early on had taken offense to Weah, possibly jealous of Weah’s natural charisma popularity. When Weah refused to “remove his sunglasses”²⁴ when greeting Taylor, Taylor took it as a sign of disrespect. Weah is well known globally, and within Liberia for marching to the beat of his own drum. Weah expected, if nothing else, to be his own boss, but in many ways, this cavalier attitude made him his own worst enemy. The election was Weah’s to lose and while his populist message brought many people to his campaign rallies, his failure to articulate a vision of Liberia’s future rendered him unable to turn that grassroots support into votes, at the moment when it mattered most. It was this challenge, his inability to demonstrate his competence to the Liberian public, that would prove to be his greatest difficulty. While his frequent use of Liberian English during campaign rallies endeared him to the public, many wondered if he had the capability, not only to control the hangers-on and that his campaign had attracted, but to effectively lead a postwar government.

George Weah had been raised by his grandmother in the infamous Claratown slums of Monrovia and lived, even in the context of a poor Third-World country, a hardscrabble life. He had little schooling, achieving a third grade education and none of the opportunities reserved for the Monrovia elite. Growing up, however, he had idolized Samuel Doe, the first indigenous president, who overthrew the William Tolbert regime in April 12, 1980. The wide gulf between Weah’s base (the former

²⁴ “Profile: George Weah.” *BBC News*. Friday, 11 November 2005 [online] URL Available <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4403120.stm>

child soldiers) and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's (educated elite) can be traced back to that moment in particular, when the hypocrisy of Liberia as settler-state was exposed and the country imploded. Samuel Doe, led the seventeen soldiers who murdered President Tolbert on April 12, 1980. Tolbert's assassination is significant not only because it marked the beginning of indigenous rule, but also because Doe, in his ire for Tolbert, was holding an ethnically mixed leader (Americo-Liberian/ Vai) ultimately accountable for the over 133 years of indigenous oppression, but indicated through his ruthless pursuit of Tolbert's cabinet and family members, including A.B. Tolbert, son-in-law to Houphet Boigny, president of neighboring Cote D'Ivoire. Houphet Boignet privately tried to intervene on A.B. Tolbert's behalf, pleading with Doe to spare his life, but A.B. Tolbert was executed by machine gun fire like the rest of his male family members, a signal that all Americo-Liberians would be punished for the transgressions of preceding regimes.²⁵ At the time of the executions, Weah was 13 and Johnson Sirleaf 42. President William Tolbert was assassinated and nine days later, thirteen members of his cabinet were tied to telephone poles and machine-gun fired until death. These political killings were public, broadcast on Liberian television and the images disseminated around the world indicating that Liberians were living under a new regime.²⁶ Many Americo-Liberians, unnerved by the public executions, went into exile. Weah's admiration for Doe was shared by many indigenous Liberians and based on a longstanding resentment of Americo-Liberians. The ruthlessness with which Samuel Doe and his junta hunted and murdered Americo-Liberians, to the chagrin of neighboring sitting presidents, illustrated a public desire to

²⁵ Tolbert, Victoria. *Lifted Up: The Victoria Tolbert Story*. Macalester Park Pub Co, July 12, 1996

²⁶ Cooper, Helene. *The House at Sugar Beach*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008

see Americo-Liberians displaced, if not expelled, from the country by any means, and at any expense.

Despite the fact that Weah had won the general election on October 11th in a field of twenty-two candidates by a slim nine point majority, claiming 28.3% of the total vote, (to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's 19.8%), Liberian election law maintained that the victory had to claim at least 50% of the vote or higher.²⁷ The runoff election to be held November 8th would narrow the field to a competition between just the two leading candidates, Weah and Johnson Sirleaf. At a campaign rally, attended largely by his core supporters, the demobilized child soldiers that had comprised many of Charles Taylor's as well as Movement for Democracy in Liberia (M.O.D.E.L.) and Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (L.U.R.D.) fighting forces, Weah took on his critics directly, those who had asserted that his lack of education unfit him for the presidency. He engaged, asking, "What have the educated people done for us? All of the educated people had failed. With all their education and experience, they have governed this nation for hundreds of years. They have never done anything for the nation."²⁸ This was a position that Weah would repeat again and again to his crowds would eventually lead them to reply: "He know book, he not know book, we will vote for him." To his supporters, he represented the possibility of a future in which the lack of education and training would not handicap their participation as full citizens in the "new" post-war Liberia, an expectation that Weah validated at his campaign rallies:

"We are here to cause the emancipation of our people from their state of abject poverty into prosperity. On October 11, you, the masses, the deprived and

²⁷ National Election Commission. Online: <http://necliberia.org/results/>

²⁸ Profile: George Weah. *BBC* November 11, 2005 [online] URL Available <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4403120.stm>

abused people of Liberia will go to the polls. You are going to elect a government that must guarantee peace for all Liberians. Under my leadership, you can rest assured that you will enjoy peace and prosperity. The people love me because of my achievements, because of the contribution I have made to my country and the role I played in bringing peace".²⁹

Weah, while overstating his participation in the political resolution of the Liberian Civil War, emphasized not only his commitment to the rehabilitation of Liberians, but also intimated a commitment to introduce a more populist form of politics, promising a government that worked on behalf of the people living outside of Monrovia, even the most destitute and rural areas.

Unlike Johnson Sirleaf, whose ties to the political establishment made it difficult for the youth to warm up to her candidacy, Weah enjoyed almost a cult-like following among his supporters throughout the election. This could be due in large part to the fact that his campaign rallies often took place in large arenas or fields where, in order to entertain the crowd prior to Weah's arrival, loud music was pumped over loudspeakers and supporters, giving an appearance of rock concert for which Weah footed the bill.³⁰ The crowd, composed largely of former fighters, had gotten used to a similar message that Weah's largesse would provide for them. To this severely disenfranchised and stigmatized group, he was "King George", a moniker that he had chosen himself, calling his radio station King's FM,³¹ a brand that he would later use again in founding King TV. It was these rallies in particular, often

²⁹ Blair, David. "Ex-Chelsea Star Player Plays Role of Liberia's Messiah." *Telegraph UK* October 11, 2005. Online: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/liberia/1500335/Ex-Chelsea-soccer-star-plays-role-of-Liberias-messiah.html>

³⁰ Dukule, Abdoulaye W. "I am the Voice of the Voiceless, Says George Weah." *The Perspective*, August 25, 2005. [online] URL Available <http://www.theperspective.org/articles/0825200503.html>

³¹ Rice, Andrew. "George Weah's New Game." *New York Times*, August 21, 2005. [online] URL Available <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/21/magazine/21WEAH.html>

drawing several thousand attendees, which would lead to Weah's demise. In those rallies, he came to resemble the warlord past that Liberians so desperately wanted to put behind them. By playing to the longstanding Liberian stereotype of the president as the nation's father, patriarch and sovereign beyond reproach, or in Liberian English, "papay", Weah invited comparisons to the civil war past as Charles Taylor had once demanded that members of his "small boy unit" called him "papay." Weah responded to these concerns saying that he understood and accepted what this title meant and took it as a sign of respect saying "Once you take care of people, people respect you. They call you 'papay.'"³² For him, it seemed to be a sign that he, that he, a poor kid from the Monrovia slums had succeeded against considerable odds.³³ To the war-weary populous, Weah and his cronies looked disturbingly like the warlord presidents of the past. Weah's campaign faltered largely because his political platform and bid for voters was hinged on his larger than life personality alone. With neither a political platform explaining how he was uniquely qualified to resolve issues of poverty and unemployment in Liberia nor special skills that ensured his ability to turn the country around, it was a risk that the beleaguered Liberian electorate did not want to take. If his campaign alone represented Weah's idea of change, the Liberian voters weren't buying it.

While the Liberian voters felt that Weah's politics too closely resembled Charles Taylor's tactics, it was Samuel Doe that Weah actually wanted to imitate. The ideology behind the Doe revolution was part of a political philosophy that revolution was the only way for indigenous Liberians to reclaim their ancestral land as their

³² Rice, Andrew. "George Weah's New Game." *New York Times*, August 21, 2005. Online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/21/magazine/21WEAH.html>

³³ WaThiong'o, Ngugi. "Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature." *Diogenes*.1998; 46: 101-104 (63)

birthright. The complexity of the Doe years, the significance of his strong-arm tactics to the instigation of inter-ethnic tension, while not lost on Weah, were considered by him, a necessary part of breaking with the Americo-Liberian past. Weah, whose family hailed from the impoverished Grand Kru County in Southeastern Liberia, recalls the Doe leadership from 1980 to 1990 as an era of increased opportunities for indigenous Liberians. In fact, it was under the Doe regime that Weah got the break that would catapult him onto the international football stage. President Doe sent the national team to Brazil for training at the cost of \$100,000.00, money that Liberian taxpayers could ill afford to pay. For Weah, at least, the gamble paid off and he was later picked up by French club A.S. Monaco in 1988 at the age of twenty-two. This was a debt, in Doe's absence, Weah wished to repay to the Liberian people. In fact, he recalls this moment as the rationale for his campaign and bid for the presidency in 2005. His campaign manager explained this by saying, "George says he owes that to the Liberian people... so that's why he wants to give back to the society".³⁴ The possibility of Weah's leadership certainly did excite a war-weary population that at several times during the civil conflict felt as if the international community had turned their back on them and left them to die. The possibility of Weah's leadership meant that for many of the former soldiers and war affected youths that, by virtue of his celebrity and his profile in the world of professional football, that they, as social outcasts, could never again be forgotten. It was the desire for a population that had long been invisible to have the opportunity to be celebrated and experience popularity in place of the routine scorn and derision levied upon former combatants. This was a dispossessed group seeking their own voice in the Liberian body politic.

³⁴ Rice, Andrew. "George Weah's New Game." *New York Times*, August 21, 2005

Johnson Sirleaf took a different, more subdued approach to discussions of ethnicity. While she refused to acknowledge that she enjoyed a disproportionate advantage because of her Americo-Liberian and or “Congo” privilege, she argued instead that that she was drawing upon her diverse experiences in the West as well as her youth in Jujuleh equally, and was a product of Liberia’s “two worlds”. It is a statement of ethnic solidarity, the sincerity of which has been called into question along with her penchant for speaking the Gola and Kru languages of her “two illiterate grandmothers³⁵” to large crowds on the campaign trail. Her reclamation of her indigenous identity was met with suspicion by the other candidates in the field. Her opponents argued that she was trying to combat the public perception of her as a Congo.³⁶ This was a transition that the Liberian public was at first unwilling to believe but later came to accept as Johnson Sirleaf’s argument that politicized not only her ethnic, but gender, identities.

Throughout the course of the 2005 election, the indigenous voice, and more importantly, the indigenous critique, took on a distinct diction, that of refuting a history and rhetoric of exceptionalism that purported elite, non-radical rule by the Americo-Liberian and Congo people as the only acceptable paradigm of leadership. Johnson Sirleaf, as well as the descendants of former president Tubman, demonstrated that the Congo identity, while weakened, is not obsolete, and continues to permeate Liberian. It affects the ways in which Liberians interact with one another. The main perception that Johnson Sirleaf would have to combat, along with other candidates of Americo-Liberian pedigree, was that she and other like candidates were part of a coordinated Congo resurgence.

³⁵ Even after her election, Sirleaf continued to articulate this self-identity, doing so notably in her inaugural address and in her address to a joint session of the United States Congress in March 2006

³⁶ Sawyer, Amos. “Emerging Patterns in Liberia’s Post-Conflict Elections: Observations from the 2005 Elections.” *African Affairs* Vol. 107, 427, 2008-04, p. 177

In response to the threat of a return to pre-war and neo-colonial Congo leadership, a group formed called the Heritage Movement, a loose association of individuals and politicians, formed with an explicit aim: to “ensure that a person of Americo-Liberian or Congo background did not win the presidency.”³⁷ This mobilization against Congo leadership in general and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as an individual indicate that she was not considered by her peers to be a native or indigenous person. While she could lay claim to indigenous blood, her cultural points of reference were “Congo” in nature, along with her Anglophone surname; according to the Heritage Movement claim, Johnson Sirleaf could not be an authentic representative of the indigenous majority. The Heritage Movement despite its desire to promote indigenous candidates, attacked Weah as well as unqualified despite the fact that his ethnic heritage was beyond dispute. Weah, although a popular athlete, was barely literate and not considered a suitable candidate either. In addition, die-hard tribalists, “who see the establishment of a retaliatory hegemonic regime”³⁸ who might have sought revenge were also excluded. The Heritage Movement itself, intimates that Liberians are in need of post-colonial leadership that represents neither Liberia’s past (either Congo or tribalist) nor present hybridized identity that could be a harbinger of persistent instability the country’s future. It also indicates that the post-war political environment was no political tabula rasa and issues of indigenous exclusion should be brought to bear as an essential part of easing resentments in the post-war climate.

The efforts Johnson Sirleaf had made in an attempt to reclaim her indigenous roots in the “new” Liberia was much like what other “repatriated” post-war Liberians

³⁷ Sawyer, Amos. “Emerging Patterns in Liberia’s Post-Conflict Elections: Observations from the 2005 Elections.” *African Affairs* Vol. 107, 427, 2008-04, p. 177

³⁸ Sawyer, Amos. “Emerging Patterns in Liberia’s Post-Conflict Elections: Observations from the 2005 Elections.” *African Affairs* Vol. 107, 427, 2008-04, p. 177

like her had attempted to do in order to ease back into post-war life: create an identity that locate them in solidarity with long suffering, local indigenous Liberians.

Repatriated Liberians orchestrated this identity shift without discussing how their own absence during the war was in some measure, indicative their own relative privilege. Without that discussion, Johnson Sirleaf continues to perpetuate the myth of Congo identity as the singular political identity with a unique perspective and authority to lead. Because she refuses to acknowledge the longstanding inequalities between indigenous Liberians and Americo-Liberians, Liberians remain caught in a vicious cycle in which old notions of coloniality are remade and repackaged in a way that positions the Westernized Liberian individual, or “been to” as superior to indigenous knowledge, talents and leadership.

The main difference between Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and George Weah is the way in which they provide differing accounts of the past, Weah highlights the contradictions embedded in ideas of citizenship and political subjectivity based upon the historical marginalization of Liberia’s 16 ethnic groups, while Johnson Sirleaf makes little or no mention of this specific type of oppression. While Johnson Sirleaf and Weah are both success stories in their own right, they are actually worlds apart in terms of culture, constituency and vision of the Liberian identity. Because Johnson Sirleaf contributes to a mainstream, non-radical and non-oppositional identity as part of a cultural and political inheritance of Americo-Liberian leadership, she, in short, is seemingly in support of rearticulating the logic of Americo-Liberian settlement that purported non-African leadership, and the values of freedom and liberty, would make Liberia a model state on the continent. The dichotomy that is the Liberia project is that it can produce a talent such as Johnson Sirleaf, a woman of extraordinary skills and abilities – who in light of Tolbert’s assertion is more the exception than the rule - while by the same token, masking and marginalizing the indigenous majority. Weah,

despite some early missteps, did succeed in giving voice to and shedding light on the former combatants and war-affected youth that comprised the majority of his political supporters. This group in particular, much like the rest of the country, was recovering from the past traumas and physically embodied, scars and all, the past twenty-three years of political violence and struggle. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, by virtue of the fact that she had enjoyed an uninterrupted education, a safe haven during times of war and financial stability represented, in large part, the Liberians that had escaped much of the trauma plaguing and handicapping the professional development of the general population.

At best, Johnson Sirleaf speaks of a desire for a postcolonial identity that would restore voice, authority and dignity to a long disenfranchised indigenous majority who, though subjected to twenty-one years of war, have made little or no substantive progress in terms of economic or social transformation. Liberians have suffered in large part because of “too much war, but no revolution.” Because of Johnson Sirleaf’s political history, she cannot authoritatively speak on behalf of subjugated indigenous Liberians or initiate an interrogation into whether or not Liberian politics has changed, or, if it has, by repositioning “been tos” such as Johnson Sirleaf as elites when they return home, has reverted back to the status quo.

In a runoff election, that literally should have been Weah’s game, Johnson Sirleaf tapped into and revealed an electorate unwilling, if, unable to completely reject its “bourgeois” past in favor of an uncertain future under Weah. Weah knew how to defend his position based on the Congo versus Country divide but not against Johnson Sirleaf’s argument for woman leadership in which she toyed with and reframed gender boundaries. In this modern retelling of the Congo vs. Country divide and dilemma upon which Liberia was built, the Congo people, represented by Johnson Sirleaf’s triumph again non-native leadership in a potentially radical indigenous African

leadership. It was, in fact an outcome that Congo people had been rehearsing for generations. Johnson Sirleaf could repatriate to Liberia but not be forced to return to the colonial past in order to address past wrongs and systemic inequities. Liberians picked the candidate contemplating and rehashing ideas about identity over the candidate seemingly too closely tied to the past. When the final results came in on November 23, 2005 with Johnson Sirleaf winning 59.4% of the voter over Weah's 40.6% and Weah supporters took to the streets chanting "no Weah, no peace." The Liberian electorate however was sure that it had made the right decision.

CHAPTER 2

A LONE(STAR) IS BORN

“It is difficult to start a revolution, more difficult to sustain it. But it's later, when we've won, that the real difficulties will begin.”³⁹

-The Battle of Algiers

The Golden Tulip Declaration

Liberian women peacemakers, banned from 2003 Accra Accord peace negotiations as third-party stakeholders, were also forbidden from attending the peace talks as civil society participant observers. This exclusion was certainly one of the most prohibitive acts experienced by women activists in the wake of United States (U.S.) -led humanitarian intervention that forced Charles Taylor into Nigerian exile in August 2003. Liberian women had, after all, played a critical role in highlighting the plight of Liberian civilians - the basis for the large-scale Jacques Klein headed 15,000 troop U.N. military intervention - the largest U.N. peacekeeping deployment in the world at the time.⁴⁰ After being denied entry to the Ghanaian-held peace talks, Liberian women, during a five-hour meeting in a room in the Golden Tulip Hotel in Accra, (adjacent to the conference site), hashed out a response to what they considered their exclusion their rightful place at the bargaining table. This exclusion appeared to be a harbinger of things to come in the “new,” post-war, transitional climate in Liberia. Liberian women leaders including Ruth Sando Perry, Etweda Cooper, and

³⁹ *Battle of Algiers*. Dir. Gillo Pontecorvo. Perfs. Gillo Pontecorvo, Franco Solinas. Rizzoli Pictures, 1967.

⁴⁰ “New Liberian Transition Leader Chosen.” *Online NewsHour*. August 21, 2003. [online] URL Available http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/liberia_08-21-03.html

Theresa Leigh-Sherman among others, decided not to return to Monrovia from Accra without further intervention. This exclusion produced, firstly, a written censure of the peace talks, Liberian women, had after all tried to keep the peace while Charles Taylor (Government of Liberia), Sekou Conneh (L.U.R.D.), and Thomas Nimley (M.O.D.E.L.) battled for control over Monrovia. In Accra, Ghana, they realized that they would need to identify a politician to run in 2005 who would champion their cause.

During this climatic meeting, they wrote, issued and signed the Golden Tulip declaration: it was a rebuttal of their wholesale exclusion from the political negotiations. In it they argued forcefully for the crucial role of women in maintaining the tenuous peace as part of Liberian civil society, coordinated in large part by foreign donors, troops and the Gyude Bryant-led transitional government. The document critiqued the exclusion of women from the closed-door tripartite meetings amongst the warlords and the warlord president, Charles Taylor, arguably the worst president that Liberia has ever produced. His military strategy included conquering neighboring territories to create what he called ‘Greater Liberia,’ which included parts of Guinea and the diamond mines of Sierra Leone.

The statement, issued on August 15, 2003, was well received and resonated with the negotiating parties, regional and international actors including the United Nations Fund for Women (U.N.I.F.E.M.), who supported the women representatives. The battle over Liberia’s resources had been fought several times before, and peace agreements had been negotiated and broken in 1992 and 1996. These women emphatically asserted that lasting peace in Liberia could only be achieved through the substantive incorporation of women into the peace process. Women as well as children had borne the brunt of much of the wartime violence and as such had a special understanding of the reconstructive process. Attendees left that meeting, not

only having fashioned a critique of how the peace talks had been conducted, but also having refined a political agenda: the insertion of gender as integral to the post-war political discourse on peace.

Ruth Sando Perry was, like no other woman in the room at the Golden Tulip hotel, a former Liberian head of state. She had served as a transitional president from September 1996 to August 1997 during a short period of peace.⁴¹ Her tenure was the result of an Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (E.C.O.M.O.G.) intervention. The Nigerian-led forces were so notorious for their lack of discipline that Liberian's came to think of them less as peacekeepers and more as looters of private property. In the rural villages, as well as in Monrovia, the acronym E.C.O.M.O.G. was said to mean, "Every Car Or Moving Object Gone." The effort, negotiated by President Obasango, the de facto regional leader and head of the region's largest military force after the 1992 Cotonou Agreement had been broken, a treaty between Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (N.P.F.L.), Interim Government for National Unity (I.G.N.U.) and Doe's remaining supporters (Doe was killed by Prince Johnson in 1990).⁴² Perry had served after Amos Sawyer,⁴³ (the E.C.O.W.A.S.-supported transitional president from 1990-1994) and before Charles Taylor's infamous 1997 election, after which she turned over power to him. As former president, she chaired the committee and distributed The Golden Tulip Declaration to Ghanaian leaders, peace talk mediators, UN representatives and all

⁴¹ African Women Presidents and Prime Ministers. *Jenda Journal* Online: http://www.jendajournal.com/issue9/african_premier_ministers.htm

⁴² Tuck, Christopher. "Every Car Or Moving Object Gone" The ECOMOG Intervention in Liberia". *African Studies Quarterly*. 2000 4(1): 1. [online] URL Available <http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v4/v4i1a1.htm>

⁴³ Amos Sawyer is a noted academic and scholar currently teaching at Indiana University.

delegates at the talks during the last days of the formal negotiations.⁴⁴ The Golden Tulip declaration was the culmination of several years work in which women stood up for the right to be seen, heard, and counted. Liberian women, hoping to solidify potential gains facilitated by the collapse of the state system, and, by extension, the destruction of the linchpins upholding the patriarchal system and would settle for nothing less than an equal opportunity to speak out the consequences war has on women's lives.⁴⁵ Liberian women had used their voices to raise awareness about the abuses of women and children as victims of sexual and physical violence over the course of the civil war and the peace process would be no different.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and the Postwar Gender Dimension

Despite the fact that Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was neither a signatory nor in attendance at the events in Accra, many already believed that she could "succeed" Ruth Sando Perry as Liberia's next female president. The difference between Sando Perry's and Johnson Sirleaf's leadership style, represents the tension between internationalism and localism. Perry symbolizes a strong female leader who takes her strength from the community and in return is accountable to that community. Before her appointment as transitional president in 1996, Perry was well known for her leadership attributes. Ruth Sando Perry, unlike Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, had little political experience at the time of her appointment, having been born into a disadvantaged rural family that was not politically connected. Perry's hailed from a small village in Grand Cape Mount County and was a Muslim of Vai heritage. In Liberian society, her rural ties and Muslim religion makes her achievements that much

⁴⁴ World Movement for Democracy. Profile of the Mano River Women's Peace Network [online] URL Available <http://www.wmd.org/wbdo/aug07/mrwpn.html>

⁴⁵ Adams, Melinda. "Liberia's Election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Women's Executive Leadership in Africa." *Politics and Gender*, Cambridge University Press, 2008

more incredible because she was able to transcend the Christian Americo-Liberian hierarchy in order to become a serious political figure. Perry completed her secondary education and higher education in Liberia and after receiving her teaching degree in from Teachers College at the University of Liberia in Monrovia. She then returned to Cape Mount to teach at a local community school. Unlike Johnson Sirleaf whose longstanding international connections are well known, Perry decided to forgo an education overseas, choosing to reside in Cape Mount and participate in a distinct type of “localism,” focusing on the developing the local community in contrast to Johnson Sirleaf’s penchant for finding work internationally. It is prescient that Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a woman better known for her achievements abroad, than her contributions at home would go on to overshadow Perry, who had a more regional and community development focus. It was Sando Perry of course, that introduced the Liberian public to the idea of a woman president but Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (by virtue of her international stature and prominence) that introduced the world to Liberian political (and peace) women.

Johnson Sirleaf’s decision to leave Liberia, during times of intense fighting, and serve in high-profile Western financial institutions such as Citibank (and later the World Bank) was an integral part of her campaign platform and reputation as a reform-minded candidate. Her work abroad was facilitated by crucial, if not historic occurrence: the creation of the Bretton Woods financial institutions in the 1940s that created the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). The advent of these institutions, in which she worked and trained, indicated the replacement of an ideologically-drive post-colonial optimism and with a neoliberal ideology. Bretton Woods institutions undermined the nationalism driving the anti-colonial ideologies of the 1960s and 1970s, if not the sovereignty of many of Liberia’s neighbors, particularly Ghana, and Cote d’Ivoire. Kwame Nkrumah’s vision of a “United States

of Africa” in the 1960s and Leopold Senghor’s earlier articulation of a cultural revolution of negritude Senegal that spread to francophone Cote d’Ivoire and Guinea were replaced by a Keynesian approach to third-world local, regional and international development. By 2003, Liberia was considered a failed state and subject to the strategies of development that directly injected international non-governmental organizations (I.N.G.O.s) into the roughshod civic and political environment that was post-war Liberia. Shortly before the Accra Accord, the United States renewed its formerly broken diplomatic ties (suspended in order to protest the lawless Taylor regime) and renewed the development assistance it had rescinded in 2000. Taylor’s exit from Liberia precipitated the return of international development organizations as well as development assistance.

At the time of the 2003 Accra Accord, and the issuance of the Golden Tulip Declaration, the struggle of Liberian women’s organizations to survive in the presence of international peacekeeping bodies had reached a critical juncture. For women leaders, who had become an integral part of local Liberian peacemaking and peacekeeping processes, struggled to remain relevant in the post-war context. With I.N.G.O.s implementing programs and strategies in overlapping, but not necessarily in cooperation, with local, women’s organizations, the stature of Ruth Perry, Mary Brownell and Etweda Cooper, was somewhat reduced. These women leaders knew that they would need to create more structures to organize and rally behind a single leader in order to advance their strategy of female civil action. Liberia at this critical moment, represented a distinct post-war, but not postcolonial moment in which the end of violent conflict invited the return of Liberia’s professional political class, including Johnson Sirleaf, that benefitted from a fragile peace that was the culmination of over a decade of robust women’s political and social activism.

The struggle for women's participation in the reconstruction of Liberia intensified under the Gyude Bryant headed transitional government. Bryant led the government from 2003 to 2005. The women's organizations including Mano River Women's Peace Network (M.A.R.W.O.P.N.E.T.), Women in Peacebuilding Program (W.I.P.N.E.T.) and Liberian Women's Initiative (L.W.I.) that strongly advocated for a regional solution for Liberia in order to achieve a long-term peace strategy were overshadowed by a different statist solution promoted by I.N.G.O.s. I.N.G.O.s in Liberia, facilitated by the United States Agency for International Development (U.S.A.I.D.) began to coordinate and implement emergency assistance programs that overlapped with and oftentimes overshadowed the relief and recovery efforts of Liberian women's groups. For Ruth Perry and other Liberian women leaders, who had more local and regional connections than Johnson Sirleaf, their commitment to a regional and local solution remained consistent. In fact, the women's peacemaking model had been the only form of opposition to the war that had succeeded and thrived from the 1990s to 2003 when international diplomatic attempts to resolve the Liberian conflict failed.

The Liberian peace women became a testament of resilience and strength that resonated throughout the country, and Johnson Sirleaf became the symbol of their extraordinary achievement. Frustrated female constituents, still smarting from the slights of the Accra Accord, refused to be left out of the national dialogue on reconstruction and reconciliation: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and her bid for the presidency represented the opportunity to solidify any gains that they had made through their peace advocacy and anti-war efforts during the latter stages of the civil war. Johnson Sirleaf's global renown and her reputation for reform and success in a "first-world" environment provided the platform from which Liberian women could find an international to continue to advocate for inclusiveness, equal political rights and

representation. Liberia, like most post-conflict countries, make the greatest strides towards inclusiveness in post-conflict situations. Post-war reconstruction in Rwanda led to an almost 50:50 representation of women in the legislature, post-apartheid South Africa had a female deputy president in 2005, and advancements in women leadership have also occurred in Sierra Leone, Uganda and Congo-Kinshasa.⁴⁶ The Golden Tulip Declaration was just the beginning of such an appeal, facilitated by this crucial and historic moment, to ensure that the decolonization of the mind- to borrow Ngugi Wa'Thiongos's concept- and the multiplicity of Liberian identities it exposed, had a gendered dimension.

The representation of gender and internationalism in Johnson Sirleaf is encapsulated in her anti-rape platform, a message that resonate with the women who had rallied to form self-protective communities and community associations based largely in Monrovia. Rape had been a tool of war that had been used indiscriminately by all warring parties as a form of violence, intimidation and even as a soldier's reward for bravery in battle, akin to looting.⁴⁷ It was practiced in which all groups that had participated in the Accra peace talks (Government of Liberia, Movement for Democracy in Liberia and Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy) engaged. Women had many responsibilities during the war, first and foremost to protect young children. They also had the responsibility to find food, "keeping the children safe, and in many instances... hiding the men from danger."⁴⁸ While men were most visible on the front lines of the fighting, women had to heal their families

⁴⁶ Adams, Melinda. "Liberia's Election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Women's Executive Leadership in Africa. *Politics and Gender*, 2008

⁴⁷ McGovern, Mike. "Rebuilding a failed state: Liberia." *Development in Practice*, Vol. 15, No. 6 (Nov., 2005), pp. 760-766 2005

⁴⁸ *Liberian Women Peacemakers: Fighting for the Right to be Seen, Heard and Counted*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004

and maintain the community. Men were kept out of the crossfire but girls often became the victims of rape when they left their homes to forage for scarce food and supplies during times when their husbands, brothers and sons could not, for fear that they would be forcibly conscripted into the government or rebel armies. An anti-rape message had yet to find its way into the mainstream Liberian consciousness despite the femicide campaigns begun by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (U.N.I.F.E.M.) and the global breadth of the Beijing Conference on Women in which Hilary Clinton famously declared that women's rights as "human rights"⁴⁹ had yet to make an impact on the grassroots level. Liberian women, not wanting to be left out of the debate not only on identity, but on reconstruction and reconciliation efforts, made the case that women as wives, mothers and teachers and were more likely to contribute to their communities. They not only wanted protection from violence, but better job prospects and the opportunity to improve their skills through education.

The liberation of women, as well as her pro-education agenda, created the opportunity for Johnson Sirleaf to attract women voters who felt that the post-war climate had marginalized their efforts to sharpen an anti-war political consciousness. In a surprising twist, Johnson Sirleaf found an unlikely constituency among female former combatants (former combatants even under the transitional government were still beholden to their former rebel and government leaders), non-combatant war affected youth also articulated this desire for a formal education and support for Johnson Sirleaf. Black Diamond, an infamous fighter for the LURD rebel army (led by Sekou Conneh), had willingly joined the rebel forces to seek retribution for her rape, and the death of her parents at the hands of Charles Taylor's infamously undisciplined soldiers. She rose through the ranks to become a Commander, the

⁴⁹ Labott, Elise. "Michelle Obama, Hillary Clinton team up to honor women." *CNN*. March 11, 2009. [online] URL Available <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/03/11/womens.rights/index.html>

highest level of command achieved by any female combatant.⁵⁰ During several interviews after the war, she talked about not only her willingness, but the urgency for an education that would order to improve herself, as well as improve the life prospects of her young daughter whom she affectionately calls “small diamond”. Black Diamond, who had, during and after the war, become a local celebrity for being a woman succeeding in a “man’s world” of frontline combat, said in multiple interviews that she saw her own future as indelibly linked to the future of the country: She says, “School pays. Your pen and paper will not leave you tomorrow,”⁵¹ openly making the connection that the ephemeral end of the conflict had left her without a job to do. In a later interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), she put it more bluntly, “We achieved our target. Taylor has left the country. I want to go to school.”⁵² Twenty-two year old Black Diamond, despite her fearsome combat training, was like much of Liberia’s youth, hopeful that in peacetime they could return to more mundane activities, like education. Even Sekou Conneh’s wife, (Sekou Conneh, after having participated as LURD representative in the peace talks, had begun positioning himself for a 2005 presidential bid) publicly parted with him, on January 20, 2004, con the basis that he was threatening to derail the peace process. She said that she had “seized control because she believed her husband was putting the peace process at risk... She declared: ‘I am here as a peacemaker and mother for all.’”⁵³ In this statement, that stoked the ire of her husband and derailed his later

⁵⁰ “Liberia’s Women Killers.” BBC Online. August 26, 2003. [online] URL Available <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3181529.stm>

⁵¹ Transcripts. Inside Africa. CNN.COM December 20 2003 [online] URL: http://www.cnnstudentnews.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0312/20/i_if.01.html

⁵² “Liberia’s Women Killers.” BBC Online. August 26, 2003. [online] URL Available <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3181529.stm>

⁵³ Walsh, Declan. “A strong woman in a man’s world rules from the bedroom”. *The Independent*. February 7, 2004. [online] URL Available <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/a-strong-woman-in-a-mans-world-rules-from-the-bedroom-569123.html>

presidential bid, she articulated that the woman's role in Liberia was changing and the country's leadership would have to change with it.

Liberian youth were the unintended victims of a vicious power vacuum that had enveloped the country for nearly 23 years. An entire generation of young people had received little or no formal education. They needed education and re-training that wholesale, only the Liberian government could provide. For those young people and former rebels that willingly disarmed, they did so because they saw the end of fighting as a new beginning. Liberia's future relied upon those individuals such as Black Diamond and Aisha Conneh after spending years in combat, effectually contributing to the country's destruction, finding the wherewithal to rebuild it.

In the political battles that Johnson Sirleaf would have with George Weah, Johnson Sirleaf self-consciously portrayed herself as a liberated, indigenous woman, casting aside a formerly colonial "Congo" identity in order to do battle against a sexist patriarchy reminiscent of a time when warlords reigned. The male leaders, she argued, were woefully out of touch with the needs and desires of the average Liberian. In this construction, Johnson Sirleaf became a veritable "woman warrior" who much like the female fighters that took up arms to defend themselves against physical attacks, she was doing battle against an institutionalized patriarchal system in order to ensure that in the political arena women and children had a voice and would not again become the casualties of a scramble for power. Johnson Sirleaf was, in fact, fighting definitively on behalf of "third world" women. Johnson Sirleaf's ability to command an audience with both Liberian and Western media could facilitate a historic, if not critical imperative: she brought the struggles of Liberian women peacekeepers to light, in order initiate a discussion on securing women's rights as an inimical part of the reconstruction or "decolonization" of Liberia.

Johnson Sirleaf's gender argument positioned her as a champion of a women's rights issues that provided Liberian's women's organizations with a genealogy that showed their impact on the conflict as well as the post-conflict environment. Her promotion of gender balance positioned her well in relation to her local Liberian and international audience. The World Bank had made gender equality a priority and emphasized girls' education as a means of achieving that goal and strengthening communities. International audiences, particularly U.S. government officials, also commended her run for the presidency on the basis that the success of the U.S.-led intervention could be solidified by her historic election capitalizing the potential to make her presidency an African success, story satisfying a desire for a successful resolution to the civil conflict, one that would historically mark the country again as "exceptional" as well as stable, and on the course towards sustainable development.

Liberian Women's Organizations

By mid-2004, Liberian women peacemakers were well known throughout Liberia and the region for their strategies of anti-war protest; they took as part of their inspiration, the non-violent, passive resistance campaigns. They also regularly used their familial connections to encourage dialogue amongst the warring factions. One of Liberia's peace women said of bringing rebel leaders from different warring groups to the same table, "when your mother calls you, you must show up,"⁵⁴ meaning that women used their personal influence and relationships as relatives of warring parties in order to force the combatants to negotiate with one another. The Liberian Women's peace movement incorporated several different independent organizations including the L.W.I., W.I.P.N.E.T., M.A.R.W.O.P.N.E.T., the National Women's Commission of Liberia (N.A.W.O.C.A.L.) and the Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia

⁵⁴ "Liberian Women Peacemakers. Fighting For The Right To Be Seen, Heard and Counted." *Africa World Press*. Trenton: 2004

(A.F.E.L.L.) as members and represented a remarkable achievement in women helping women.

Liberian women's organizations, in addition to leveraging their direct personal relationships with the warring factions to guide them towards a peaceful interactions, added their own traditional cultural aspects to the anti-war movement. During their peace protests and demonstrations, they often attended and hosted meetings dressed from head to toe in all white, the international symbol for peace, which had specific regional and Liberian cultural significance. The Poro and the Sande societies, cultural institutions in Liberia, as well as Sierra Leone, Guinea, Gambia and Cote d'Ivoire teach women how to play a peace-making role as part of their spiritual and social maturation into womanhood: "A woman has the privilege to attend both the Poro and Sande societies. Most times, the chief Zoe of these societies is a woman who has been trained in the two schools. As a chief Zoe she is responsible to arbitrate major crises like war."⁵⁵ These women often wear white, and used white chalk to draw a dividing line between warring parties during the peace processes. Liberian women borrowed from traditional practices as an immutable cultural resource that provided the socio-cultural context for their coordinated interventions as well as the wherewithal to think creatively about non-violent strategies. The use of cultural markers was also an attempt to indicate that the problem of conflict needed not just a local, but a regional, solution. In their attempts to institute a uniquely Liberian solution to a pervasive regional problem, the activities of Liberian women peacemakers preceded the statist-centered peacekeeping approach implemented by the United Nations. Despite the fact that Liberian women peacekeepers had pushed for and created neutral spaces for mediation, the arrival of international peacekeepers effectively overwhelmed and

⁵⁵ Ekiyor, Thelma. *Women in Peacebuilding*. An Account of the Niger Delta Women [online] URL Available http://www.wanep.org/publications/Women_in_Peacebuilding.pdf

replaced the efforts of Liberian women from their peace making role and in the post-war environment, rendering them voiceless and without a proverbial seat at the table.

The intersection of gender and non-violent and silent peace protests resonate convincingly as a symbol of resistance among women living in the Monrovia as well as those women displaced from their rural villages residing in the Monrovia's temporary homes and communities. The crux of the peace movement was the assertion that women as wives, mothers and teachers had a large stake in the future of Liberia and their protection and physical security had to be a critical success factor in the “new” Liberia. In an astute political maneuver, Johnson Sirleaf invoked the importance of women’s rights, which enabled her to make a connection between her own candidacy and the futures of women and children all over Liberia. It was a message made, in part to suggest that a lack of women leadership is what had prolonged (if not precipitated) Liberia’s downward spiral. Setting aside an argument about the root causes of the conflict, it was resoundingly clear, that without education and rehabilitation programs, specifically targeting many of Liberia’s youth could return to conflict simply because the looting and war profiteering the civil war permitted was more lucrative than the allure of a lasting peace. “Education is a very, very big challenge for us. As I mentioned in another forum, it’s probably for the first time in the history of many nations that the younger generation is less educated, less knowledgeable and less informed than the older—a complete reversal of worldwide trends.”⁵⁶ Johnson Sirleaf’s commitment to education and the (re)-training of Liberian youth was part of an imperative that would, through investing in women’s groups and associations, ensure that young women would receive the mentoring and guidance

⁵⁶A Conversation with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, DC. March 26. 2006. [online]URL Available http://www.cfr.org/publication/10278/conversation_with_ellen_johnsonsirleaf_rush_transcript_federal_news_service_inc.html

necessary to emulate the achievements of women leaders and learn how to leverage the power of their unique critique. The focus on engaging and enriching the lives of Liberian women and girls suggested that the next socio-cultural revolution in Liberia would be a peaceful one.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and the Post-War Problematic

Within the local and international community, across political and ideological boundaries, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has been perceived in many different ways. Local women leaders view her as a skilled politico who benefitted from, but was not part of, a grassroots political effort to increase the representation of women in politics. The United States and I.N.G.O.s view her as a willing and creditworthy partner in the physical reconstruction of Liberia. She has been portrayed by the international media, hungry for the transformation of Liberia from Africa's "basketcase" to its "poster child" identify as the future of Liberia, and potentially the future of leadership on the continent. This optimism begs the question as to whether or not the mantle of the African Renaissance, articulated by (the now deposed), South African president Thabo Mbeki in the late 1990s, could be borne by a woman. Johnson Sirleaf is not just any woman, but a woman with education and connections that has been vetted, and approved by Western institutions for her reliance upon democratic principles in the (re)construction of the state. In short, she is perceived as indicative of a return to Liberian "bourgeois" leadership that bowed to Western interests in the country and the region. Like many symbolic figures, she represents an era of women's achievement in politics but has yet to prove that she takes a substantive interest in the issues facing women. Since her election and her stirring arrival on the global political scene many have made predictions about the future impact of her presidency. The documentary film, Iron Ladies of Liberia, situates Johnson Sirleaf and Liberia as part of a "quiet

revolution” on the continent in which business oriented MBA presidents like Thabo Mbeki in South Africa represent a “third wave” of democratization in which African presidents are labeled progressive, if they willingly submit to free market principles and adjustments as part of their reconstruction agenda, Johnson Sirleaf figured in a post-war climate and Mbeki in a post-apartheid environment. Bureaucrats, lawyers and businesspeople have supplanted the optimistic zeal and legacy of legendary 1960s post-colonial African leadership.

Because Liberia never experienced a sustained post-colonial moment (Americo-Liberian descended (neo) colonialists remain and an integral part of Liberian society), during the anti-colonial movements in the 1960s and 1970s, the country has never been fully understood as a post-colonial nation. The extent to which it is appropriate to write Johnson Sirleaf as a post-colonial figure is based on the extent to which she positions herself as a progressive intellectual rather than a politician. The extent to which the post-colonial leader is possible in contemporary Africa is also in question. Is the 21st century post-colonial politician one that has participated in and has been accepted by the “metropole” or the ideal leader a (radical), intellectual, with no ties to or aspiration for Western acceptance or power? To what extent is contemporary African leadership progressing towards open and free societies, and to what extent do we see and place the Johnson Sirleaf election as part of an emerging global black elite and the creation of a new non-aristocratic but still bourgeois “titular” class?

Within this construction of global black elitism in Liberia, (of the original 22 candidates in the general election, 4 candidates had assets valued more than \$1 million) the majority of candidates returning from the diaspora were wealthy even by Western standards. Johnson Sirleaf’s ability to speak on behalf of poor, traumatized, disenfranchised women was mediated through her own ability to identify and

transform needs into an accessible campaign platform emphasizing the need for education and jobs. In order to identify and mark Johnson Sirleaf as a post-colonial politician it is important to rethink and understand what represents a sustainable postcoloniality. In order to identify and rethink Johnson Sirleaf as a global citizen, it is necessary to rethink what it means to be a leader of a fragile state. It is no surprise that Johnson Sirleaf, once elected, would begin to rally for the diaspora's return to Liberia, hoping the repatriation of those who left Liberia (many in order to circumvent local hierarchies that would have precluded their success) and others who departed to avoid civil war violence, could fill the country's talent gaps.

Johnson Sirleaf set her sights on filling key cabinet posts with female leadership. She succeeded in placing “women in all the strategic places you know-finance, justice, commerce, you know- police director... And I think that sends a strong signal that we believe that women who have the competence – chances are, based on our experience, do have a higher level of integrity.”⁵⁷ She made these appointments, in order to meet the expectations of the Liberian female electorate, but also justified these appointments using the rationale that women were more trustworthy and altruistic and less prone to corruption. Little is said however, about the strong diasporic presence in her cabinet. Antoinette Sayeh, Finance Minister is a former World Bank and International Monetary Fund colleague. Whether or not a repatriated diasporic cabinet member, much like an ethnic or (gender) minority is more likely to invest in the local community remains to be seen.

While necessity of diasporic political appointments is clear in the depopulated post-war environment, the rationale as to whether or not the diaspora can serve in

⁵⁷ “A Conversation with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Washington, DC March 21, 2006. [online] URL Available http://www.cfr.org/publication/10268/conversation_with_ellen_johnsonsirleaf_audio.html

government with increased transparency and accountability is unclear. While she was not the only female candidate in the race, Margaret Tor-Thompson campaigned for the top spot with the Freedom Alliance Party of Liberia and a female vice-president, Amelia Ward was on the Liberty Party ticket, Johnson Sirleaf was the only candidate to openly discuss gender as a part of her campaign. She discussed the special needs of women and sympathized with the suffering of women and children. She was able to do this in such a way that made the inclusion or protection of women and children synonymous with the success of her leadership and the development of Liberia as a nation. It was for this reason that when she was elected president, her victory was hailed a “triumph” by international observers. Never before had women and gender taken center stage in a country better known for its war crimes more than its politics. This single act, the acknowledgement and inclusion of women in Liberian politics, at the highest level, brought Johnson Sirleaf into a new paradigm in which an African nation could match and even surpass its First World counterparts in terms of creating a more inclusive citizenry. As president, she became one of twelve female heads of state world, many of whom come from the “Third World” countries. Johnson Sirleaf, however, when compared to the likes of her third-world contemporaries, Michelle Bachelet of Chile, Maria Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo of Philippines and Cristina Fernandez de Kircher of Argentina stands out because she is neither a political legacy nor married to a former politician. Johnson Sirleaf is essentially in a league of her own: a member of a historically disenfranchised group who through popular election (not arms) took the reigns of leadership, in part, because of a social evolution, if not revolution.

The magnitude of Johnson Sirleaf’s election gave hope because if Liberians could overcome the historical inequities of discrimination against women to elect a female president, that the country could succeed in other areas as well. Indeed, the

country that Johnson Sirleaf inherited was not only war-torn and underdeveloped, but a failed state in every sense of the term. Johnson Sirleaf even remarked of the country during a congressional address that while the nation that she led had once thrived, it was first or second from the bottom in terms of development. She had finally achieved the position that she had strove for her entire life, but the work at hand was laborious and the hands available to do it were few.

Johnson Sirleaf relied upon the idea of repatriation and, contributing to the message of regionalism advanced by Liberian women peace organizations, envisaged a diasporic effort in which Liberian professionals like herself, who had either fled the civil war during the 1980s or the 1990s, would return “home” to Liberia in order to assist in the reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts. Her push for the diaspora’s return was based on a distinct form of nationalism borrowed from African American intellectualism, that Liberians could better help other Liberians because their efforts would be part of longer term, sustained development, for the country, rather than the well-funded, emergency and quick-impact programs initiated by the United Nations and the U.S.A.I.D. partners such as Creative Associates, Mercy Corps and Catholic Relief Services, that did not have a local or regional focus on capacity building. These U.S.-based organizations and institutions, facilitated by the U.S.A.I.D. Office of Transition Initiatives was among the first to respond to the crisis, in large part because of their longstanding relationship as private sector partners of the aid organization. These I.N.G.O.s began to establish a relationship with donor agencies in order to fund accelerated vocational training and rehabilitation programs geared towards war affected and displaced youth. The overarching problem with this approach is that instead of partnering with local organizations, I.N.G.O.s implemented programs and services using expatriate workers at the expense of developing local talent.

Many women's organizations bore the brunt of the expatriate international presence. The Liberian Women's Initiative, founded in 1994 and chaired by Etweda "Sugars" Cooper is currently no longer in existence. During a conference on gender co-hosted by the Ministry of Gender and Development and the Women NGO Secretariat, more than 300 women attending called upon for the elections commission to "ensure that electoral reforms and processes are gender sensitive and that women throughout Liberia were sufficiently sensitized about their right to vote and the need for exercising their rights."⁵⁸ They articulated the need for economic rights as well, calling for the Government to "strengthen the Liberianization laws and encourage the capacity building (soft loans, trade visits, import/export facilities, others) of women to effectively engage and compete in the industrial sector."⁵⁹ The issue of capacity building arose before the 2005 election, largely because the intervention of peacekeeping groups and international non-governmental organizations made it difficult for local organizations to compete. International organizations such as Catholic Relief Services, Mercy Corps and Creative Associates International, funded by the U.S.A.I.D and coordinated by the Office of Transition Initiatives (O.T.I.), developed programs and recruited expatriates to fill the positions. The women's groups that had formed and operated up until August 2003 found that without the funds needed to be relevant in the post-war environment they quickly became obsolete, many of them disbanding altogether. As women leaders, figuratively, and largely unwillingly, "turned over," peacekeeping responsibilities to the United Nations peacekeeping troops, the association's members transitioned into other areas and

⁵⁸ Tapson, Bobby. "Women Want 30 Percent Slots in Public Positions." Monrovia, Liberia, May 17, 2004. [online] URL :http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/archives/04_0517_lr_wip.htm

⁵⁹ Tapson, Bobby. "Women Want 30 Percent Slots in Public Positions." Monrovia, Liberia, May 17, 2004. [online] URL :http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/archives/04_0517_lr_wip.htm

became vocal advocates for voter registration drives, often facilitating information sessions in rural areas to educate women about their right to vote.

Johnson Sirleaf's support among women was considerably more than that of Weah's. Johnson Sirleaf had adopted a very critical approach. She engaged in a listening tour, traveling to remote areas of the country in order to hear citizen's voice their concerns. The Liberian women's organizations and their activist orientation provided Johnson Sirleaf with a model and method of outreach throughout her campaign. A number of women's organizations, including the L.W.I. endorsed Sirleaf's campaign, leading to her victory in the runoff election.⁶⁰

While campaigning in rural Liberia, Johnson Sirleaf spoke mainly using Liberian vernacular English, Liberia's lingua franca and, engaging in - to borrow from Grant Farred's conception of the vernacular intellectual – a discourse derived from Liberia's long history of inequality. While the country's most prestigious form of language, standard English was used by her campaign in formal political speeches, print and broadcast media, Liberian English demanded that Johnson Sirleaf reject her own privilege as a Congo and offer a new paradigm of herself as a politician and of Liberian political life. For the tens of thousands of unlettered Liberians, this language was the only non-indigenous shared language available for their use. Many of the organizing activities of the Liberian Women's Initiative used Liberian vernacular English. While on the road, traveling throughout the country, Johnson Sirleaf did too. This use of Liberian vernacular English, the only appropriate language to not only served to bolster her image as a woman who could "comfort" the nation during a time of grief, loss and reconstruction, but also showed a willingness to serve as a conduit for a cultural revolution, and the ability to listen to and articulate the needs of a

⁶⁰ Adams, Melinda. "Liberia's Election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Women's Executive Leadership in Africa" *Journal of Politics and Gender: Cambridge University Press*, 2008

disenfranchised community as they had communicated them to her. It was the first time a candidate not only spoke directly to Liberian citizens (in contradistinction of speaking for them), but offered the opportunity for them to respond to her, rhetorically, with a colloquially.

Liberians, while largely disenfranchised during the 1985 and 1997 Taylor and Doe elections, had used vernacular and Liberian English in order to refute the electoral abuses, overlooked by the international community in order for both elections to be declared “free and fair.” In order to articulate their frustration about the levels of violence and voter intimidation that preceded the vote, they summed up their voting as under duress saying, “You killed my ma. You killed my pa. I will vote for you,” in a sense gruesomely describing how they “democratically” elected Charles Taylor, under very undemocratic conditions. While Johnson Sirleaf had access to, and could have used the Gola or Kru languages, the languages of her indigenous grandparents to communicate with rural constituents, she chose to speak instead to speak a language of linguistic importance to her theme of national unification. To Johnson Sirleaf, national unification was an important endeavor. It was imperative to focus on the cultural traits and values that Liberians had in common rather instead of using indigenous language as a reminder of the problems that divided them.

Clearly, Johnson Sirleaf’s sense of social justice, and her conception of a universal Liberian identity grew out of her experience as a member of the indigenous or Afro-Liberian community. Her modes of communication, self-expression and dress also drew upon the resources that she had been exposed to as a member of that community. Johnson Sirleaf’s communication style and method of political outreach embodied the women’s rights struggle in Liberia. Johnson Sirleaf not only accessed pre-war conceptions of female leadership (a tradition evidenced by the adoption of Poro and Sande principles to peacemaking), but also tapped into post-war

sentiments that Liberian women were a strong and immutable force that had crafted an anti-war message that not only captivated the nation, but had invited the attention of the entire world. Johnson Sirleaf's ability to tap into this sentiment and articulate to an even larger audience the role the peacemaking role that women had played in Liberia and ensure that role and place in the country's history was the extent to which she could succeed in her political campaign. It had been Liberian women after all that had begun to return and rebuild their communities proving that they were not only capable of leadership, but had a special stake in ensuring that the country achieved a lasting peace.

Johnson Sirleaf energized politics as a cultural event, an opportunity to both showcase her personal and professional skills as well as her ability to think strategically about Liberia's best interests in the near, as well as long term. Many of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's counterparts will say that she is gifted, even more will argue that her success is the result of her hard work. Indeed, during her first few weeks in office, she was known to keep long hours, rising early in the morning (before 6am) and at times leaving the office after 11pm proving, that the reconstruction of Liberia to be a Sisyphean task, and Johnson Sirleaf as its leader, the re-configured, black and diasporic Sisyphus.

CHAPTER 3

REPATRIATION AS PATRIOTISM: THE FUTURE OF LIBERIA

Johnson Sirleaf is perhaps the first African president to celebrate her personal and professional connections to American culture, traditions and capital. At the beginning of her presidency, she made it clear that repatriated talent would play an important role in her administration, filling key cabinet posts and recapitalizing the country's private sector. In fact, attracting direct investment from the Liberian and African American diaspora was central to her strategy for replacing U.N. and U.S. emergency financial assistance with a sustainable development policy. Shortly after her inauguration, universally hailed by the American government as a triumph of democracy over autocracy in Liberia, Johnson Sirleaf put her plan into action. She traveled to the United States to extend a personal invitation to members of the diaspora, who like her had fled the violence, to return home: she could ensure the country's stability if they could return to invest in and help rebuild the country.

She included this plea in her January 16, 2006 inaugural address to the nation: "We call upon our colleagues of all political persuasions now in the Diaspora to return home and join us in meeting this exciting challenge of national renewal."⁶¹ This appeal was more identifiable as a symbol of diasporic "internationalism," and patriotism than nationalism. It was not long after that address that the Liberian government produced video and written materials reinforcing the idea that African Americans business leaders had a key role to play in both repatriating and recapitalizing Liberia. The release of documentary films produced and re-aired in the United States leading up the election, including PBS' *Liberia: America's Stepchild*

⁶¹ Liberia: Text of Inaugural Address by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia AllAfrica.com. January 17, 2006. <http://allafrica.com/stories/200601170106.html>

and Jonathon Stack's *Liberia: An Uncivil War* focused on the unintended consequences of U.S. Foreign policy in Liberia and the eleventh-hour intervention that lead to Taylor's ouster. All of this contributed to widespread popular support for Johnson Sirleaf's presidency the association of her with peace in the country. The out-of-control violence that the films documented created a perception problem that Johnson Sirleaf would have to challenge in order for her message to resonate.

For leaders and purveyors of popular culture in the West supportive of the role of women in politics, the Johnson Sirleaf election was met with enthusiasm. For the January 16, 2006, inaugural event, the United States sent a powerful delegation including First Lady Laura Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in order to illustrate the strength of the unique relationship between the U.S. and Liberia. For Rice, this was not her first stay in Liberia, she had visited Monrovia for several days as a child; this second trip in an official capacity in support of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's administration was, something of a symbolic return. Johnson Sirleaf's conception of repatriation, and her celebration of her American ties, made her more identifiable as a symbol of the ability of educated blacks to lead. Johnson Sirleaf's work ethic, combined intensity, drive and the "bootstrapping" of Condoleezza Rice, with a domestic policy focus on improving the lives of women and children like that of Hilary Clinton. With her stern, yet soft voice, she represented, as opposed to Hilary Clinton's "sisterhood of the traveling pantsuits," a softer, more grandmotherly womanhood. With her ability to convene diverse groups, and create a constituency among both genders, her political power was more accessible, unlike the gender neutrality represented by Margaret Thatcher or Madeleine Albright. In early 2006, it had already become clear that Hilary Clinton was positioning herself to campaign for the Democratic nomination, and with Vice President Dick Cheney retiring from electoral politics, Condoleezza Rice's name had been circulated as a possible contender

for the Republican nomination. The 2006 inauguration of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf functioned simultaneously as a critique of pervasive patriarchal control over the American presidency, as much as it highlighted the advances being made in “third world” countries, producing upwardly mobile female leadership in political systems far younger than the American democracy.

Johnson Sirleaf, having beaten a celebrity politician to win the presidency, has replaced Weah in the public eye, (Weah has reportedly gone back to school with the intent to challenge Johnson Sirleaf in 2012),⁶² to become somewhat of a celebrity politician herself. Because of her unprecedented political success, Johnson Sirleaf was featured on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in May 2006 in a program showcasing women political leaders worldwide. Johnson Sirleaf’s Ivy League pedigree, rags-to-riches story and focus on substantively improving the lives of Liberian women and girls, made her an inimitable guest for the show and provided her with an outlet to reach the mainstream American public with her message.

Johnson Sirleaf’s *Oprah* appearance came at an opportune time. Discussions of black genealogy, cultural and social Africanisms and African ancestry, that were in vogue in the 1970s and 1980s, had once again regained a higher profile with the advent of scientific advances such as genetic mapping. At the time, Oprah was herself was preparing to launch the Oprah Leadership Academy in support for girls’ education in post-apartheid South Africa. Adding an additional element of interest to the interview was the fact that months earlier, it had been revealed to Oprah Winfrey by Professor and Chair of the African American Studies program at Harvard University, Henry Louis Gates, that her most likely African ancestry was mostly likely a match

⁶² “George Weah Returns to Classroom” July 11, 2007 BBC.COM [online] URL: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6290754.stm>

with the Kpelle ethnic group in Liberia.⁶³ Johnson Sirleaf appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show on May 16, 2006 in Chicago, IL as part of a coordinated effort to push for investment and reconstruction assistance in the country.⁶⁴ At the January inaugural she had taken the oath of office wearing African garb and a traditional headdress complimented by a single strand of pearls. On the Oprah show, she used this same approach, appearing on the show impeccably dressed, genteel and representing a hint of Western style that seemingly reinforcing the message that a relationship between Liberia, African-Americans and the West could be constructive, linking Western or American engagement in Africa to a program of mutually beneficial, program of sustainable development.

Speaking directly to Oprah's national and international audiences, Johnson Sirleaf advocated for donations to the United States-based Liberian Education Trust (headed by Dr. Deborah Harding, former Vice President of the George Soros Foundation) and underlined the importance of girls' education to Liberia's economic recovery. On the show, Johnson Sirleaf spoke of the challenges that women face in Liberia, and the need for early advocacy and intervention, particularly on behalf of the girls:

“In our country, as in much of Africa, the girls get left behind,’ she says. ‘The boys are seen as the ones that will be the power brokers, the ones that will be the professionals. Girls get married very early and so the emphasis will have to be on the girl child. And so we're trying to respond to that, make sure we get programs that will support girls' education.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Levitt, Jeremy. “Oprah’s Liberian Heritage Could Inspire Nation’s Residents.” Chicago Sun-Times, February 17, 2006

⁶⁴ Liberia: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf on Oprah's Wednesday Broadcast, Continues Push for Investment and Rebuilding Assistance. Website: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200605160901.html>

⁶⁵ *The Liberian Education Trust.* (2006) [online] URL. April 29, 2009. Available <http://www.liberianeducationtrust.org/index.htm>

Johnson Sirleaf used this mantra of girls' education to create inroads with the African American public, at a time when African American desire for African identity had again taken on a cross-cultural dimension with more and more African Americans seeking to solidify their ties to the continent.⁶⁶

As an outspoken advocate for repatriation, Johnson Sirleaf possessed a confidence and appeal that grew out of her own professional and educational development, as it much as from a desire to resolve pressing social problems at home. Johnson Sirleaf did not invent the concept of repatriation, but her grace, mannerisms and style have become an immutable aspect of her cross-cultural appeal. She encouraged Liberians living in the United States to participate in either lobbying efforts to increase the amount of funds made available to the Liberian government or to return home to participate in the reconstruction of both the public and private sectors. The efforts of Liberians and African Americans had created positive results once before. Rhode Island Senator Lincoln Chafee (Republican) co-sponsored critical bi-partisan legislation with Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy (Democrat) because of an ad hoc group of African American lobbyists called Liberia Watch. Liberia Watch coordinated an effort to force the George W. Bush administration to intervene in Liberia. As a political figure, Johnson Sirleaf needed to reassure Liberians in the United States that Liberia was safe enough to return home, and, to those who by virtue of family or other obligations wished to stay in the U.S. that they could contribute by raising awareness and raising funds to donate to Johnson Sirleaf's key presidential initiatives.

⁶⁶ Younge, Gary. "New Roots." *The Guardian*. February 17, 2006. [online] URL: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2006/feb/17/comment.columnists>

New York Times reporter Helene Cooper, one of Liberia's most famous, if not, by her own admission, unidentifiable members of the Liberian diaspora, reiterated Johnson Sirleaf's message in her bestselling book, *The House on Sugar Beach*, published in 2008. In *The House on Sugar Beach* she spoke of this urge not just to return "home" but also to return to the stability of pre-war Liberia. Cooper refers to an idyllic childhood as crucial to her continuing affection for Liberia. She referred to that childhood, afforded to her by ancestor Elijah Johnson who repatriated to Liberia from New York in 1820, as akin to a "one-in-a-million lottery ticket... she didn't have to grow up African American or a poor African girl."⁶⁷ Her only retelling of the colonial-like suffering endured by the nation's indigenous people was reduced to what amounts to her family's adoption and assimilation of a Bassa girl into her nuclear family and "Congo" lifestyle. Not all members of the Liberian diaspora were as cavalier as Cooper in their articulation of "home," given the longstanding societal divisions that historically have undermined the country's stability. Johnson Sirleaf engages the idea however that individuals returning to Liberia from the diaspora would be rewarded for doing so.

Unprecedented as a congenial and hospitable African political figure, Johnson Sirleaf has a charm and confidence that translates equally well in both African and Western environs. She has raised her international profile through public speaking engagements, headlining several commencement speeches in 2006. She is sought after as a speaker and has spoken at institutions such as Spelman College, Brown University, Dartmouth University, Harvard University, University of the District of Columbia, University of Toronto, among others, to the delight of African American and white audiences alike. In doing so, she is creating a framework for those who will

⁶⁷ Cooper, Helene. *The House at Sugar Beach*. Simon & Schuster, New York, New York: 2008 p.42

succeed her on how to become the “new” African president on the continent. Critics such as Kofi Woods, a Liberian human rights activist, have complained that she spends too much time outside of Liberia rather than in the country, and as such is adopting a corporate leadership model. It must be said, however, that her high profile among Western leaders and institutions seems to have had some positive impacts at home. Several debt-holders, including the United States and Norway, have cancelled much of Liberia’s \$3.7 billion debt, of which \$358 million was held by the United States and amassed under the Taylor administration.⁶⁸ Johnson Sirleaf is transforming the African presidency insofar as she is poised to become a household name in the United States as well as Africa. In many places, Johnson Sirleaf has come to be known by her first name only, simply as Ellen. Robtel Pailey, an-Oxford educated Scot Fellow, and current Special Assistant for Communications at the Liberian Executive Mansion explains the importance of the popularity Johnson Sirleaf enjoys. In an article she wrote for the *Washington Informer*, Pailey explains: the 67-year-old president, as the country’s new president “commands the same personable admiration as rock stars known by a single name – Madonna and Bono, for instance.” Vivian Lowery Derryck of the Academic of Educational Development made a similar observation: “Children call her ‘President Ellen.’ So if I slip and call President Sirleaf ‘Ellen,’ it’s with the same reverence and respect and the affection that I’ve seen the Liberian people and the international community shower on her.”⁶⁹ Johnson Sirleaf’s continual naming and renaming is part of what has shaped her identity so definitively, showing that despite certain constants, her identity, to borrow Paul Gilroy’s concept, is

⁶⁸ Mekay, Emad. “Finance: US Cancels Liberia’s Debt, But Billions Pending” *Institute for Policy Studies* February 13, 2007. [online] URL Available <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=36551>

⁶⁹ Pailey, Robtel. “Africa and You. Liberian President on World Stage.” *Washington Informer*. March 23, 2006. [online] URL Available <http://www.washingtoninformer.com/A1AfricaandYou2006March23.html>

infinitely malleable: constantly changing, evolving and responding to different environmental conditions. In Liberia's postwar environment, that Liberia's children address her as "Ellen," or "President Ellen" signals that Johnson Sirleaf's election ushers in an era of openness, freedom and democratic governance that can smooth ease the transition from warlords to peace.

In her domestic appearances, away from and out of the international spotlight, Johnson Sirleaf transfigures herself as a Liberian "homegirl," unafraid to engage directly with her constituents. At one event on a Sunday afternoon, after attending Methodist Church service, "Ellen" donned sneakers and a baseball cap "as she dribbles a soccer ball across a soccer stadium, showing off some of the moves she learned as an 8-year-old girl on an all-boy soccer team."⁷⁰ This public appearance seemingly reinforced a consultative approach to developing the country that belied her many years of World Bank experience. She remarked of her approach to rebuilding the country, "Instead of telling them 'We are going to build you a school,' we ask them, 'what is your priority?'"⁷¹ She insists that it is up to Liberians to decide for themselves what type of country they want to live in. As a cultural figure she is dynamic, drawing attention to the activities that Liberians enjoy across age, gender, and ethnic lines.

Johnson Sirleaf had both quiet and high profile support from Americo-Liberians in exile that have chosen to transition back to life in Liberia. Richard Tolbert- who is now Chair of the National Investment Commission – and nephew to the assassinated president, approved of the election: "By electing Africa's first female president, Liberia - Africa's first republic - has again taken its rightful place at the

⁷⁰ Ackerman, Ruthie. "Mother of a Nation: Liberia's President." *Christian Science Monitor*. January 11, 2007. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0111/p13s02-woaf.html>

⁷¹ Ackerman, Ruthie. "Mother of a Nation: Liberia's President." *Christian Science Monitor*. January 11, 2007. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0111/p13s02-woaf.htm>

vanguard of African liberation and democracy.”⁷² In this repetition of repatriation rhetoric, Johnson Sirleaf’s election again put Liberia in the spotlight as Africa’s “exception,” a point of view that had been advanced by Richard Tolbert’s uncle and former president, William Tolbert. Johnson Sirleaf was the first to proclaim that her gender made her uniquely qualified for the presidency. For other constituencies, among them the country’s youth who Weah had erroneously declared “would never follow that old woman,”⁷³ the gender discussion became one for all ages and generations. It was this youth population that despite having rallied to elect an “internationalist” president, would complain that in Johnson Sirleaf’s early days in the office, that she never spent enough time in Liberia.

During her first twelve months in office, she forced international donors to make good on the financial pledges made during the 2005 and 2007 international donor conferences. In order to implement her development agenda and stabilize the country, Johnson Sirleaf needed outside resources to make good on campaign promises such as road construction and electrification projects. U.S. leaders assured her that she could continue to look to them for support. Nancy Pelosi, during Johnson Sirleaf’s 2006 visit to Washington, DC, promised that the United States would make good on its promise to support her administration, saying, “You have electrified the world -- we will electrify Monrovia.”⁷⁴ From the outset, Johnson Sirleaf used her international recognition and popularity to execute critical campaign promises. Liberians, while slightly pacified by the election, were still easily riled, due partially

⁷² Kramer, Reed. “Showered with Enthusiasm, Liberia's President-Elect Receives High-Level Reception in Washington.” December 11, 2005 [online] URL Available <http://allafrica.com/stories/200512110034.html>

⁷³ Levinson, Riva. “Liberia: It's the Little Things - A Reflection on Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's Journey to the Presidency.” March 24, 2006 allafrica.com

⁷⁴ Council on Foreign Relations. A Conversation with Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf [Rush Transcript; Federal News Service, Inc

by George Weah's continued presence but also because of a fear that they would be left out of the conversation on the emerging national identity.

“What the U.S. Owes Liberia”

In order to critique Johnson Sirleaf's approach to the reconstruction of Liberia, one might look no further than an article that Johnson Sirleaf wrote and published in the New York Times on August 11, 2003 entitled, “What the U.S. Owes Liberia”⁷⁵ to know that she sees the U.S. as a third-party guarantor of Liberian freedoms and its sovereignty. The agenda that brought U.S. intervention as part of what it “owes” to Liberia according to Johnson Sirleaf's article, also meant that it had a large stake in how the country was rebuilt. Johnson Sirleaf's conception of repatriation, and her promotion of it, combined a desire for world-class professional skills along with a high valuation of Western work ethic, transparency and business practices – though Johnson Sirleaf unlike anyone that came before her conceives of repatriation as a patriotic duty, a way for Liberians who had avoided the physical and psychological scars of the war could return as part of a reconstruction effort. Jacques Klein's (U.N.M.I.L. Special Representative) hurried departure from Monrovia in 2004, one year short of the full term of his contract, amid a political scandal seems to give legitimacy to her argument that Liberians could do no worse than the international representatives that expected to serve them.

Johnson Sirleaf's efforts to refine the diaspora's reconstruction efforts begin with her own inner circle of repatriated talent. For his efforts, campaign manager Amara Konneh, was sent to Harvard to attend the one-year Masters in Public Policy program, he recently returned (in 2008) to a promotion: he is now the Minister of Planning and Economic Affairs. Amara Konneh, became a confidante of Johnson

⁷⁵ Johnson Sirleaf, Ellen. “What the U.S. Owes Liberia,” *New York Times*. August 11, 2003

Sirleaf's after moving to the United States in the 1990s when his ethnic group was targeted during the Liberian civil war. He founded Liberians for Ellen, or L.I.F.E. (which in 2004, before campaigning was allowed inside Liberia), a consortium of Liberian residents in the United States, who raised funds and awareness for her campaign in the United States.

Johnson Sirleaf has also made inroads with high-profile African American business people. Billionaire financier, Bob Johnson, Black Entertainment Television (B.E.T.) founder, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Delta Air Lines recently announced that it would introduce the first "and only flight between Hartsfield Jackson Atlanta International Airport and Monrovia's Robertsfield International Airport,"⁷⁶ the flight would make one stop in Cape Verde before continuing on to Monrovia to begin in June 2009. This is a landmark moment because it makes the goal of repatriation easier to orchestrate: before this flight was announced, choices were limited to European carriers or U.N. charter flights. The Robertsfield international airport had struggled for years and recently was able to meet Federal Aviation Administration standards for baggage screening, making it able to attract an American airline. The strength of this airline partnership seems to be predicated on establishing a long-lasting relationship with the African American diaspora, particularly black American businesspeople looking for opportunities to invest in Liberia. Liberians living in America also benefit because it makes it easier for them to continue to have their feet in "both worlds." Again, at a National Press Club briefing, she repeated this mantra, speaking forcefully about of how important the direct flight would be to Liberia, because of the increased mobility it could afford to returnees. She said, "This development also provides convenience for Liberians in Diaspora to come home and to bring their skills and

⁷⁶ Liberia: Delta Airlines to Fly to Monrovia, *AllAfrica.Com* October 23, 2008. Online: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200810240886.html>

talents in support of the country's development.”⁷⁷ The Delta airlines flight was reminiscent of the now defunct direct Pan Am flight from New York City to Monrovia that was a well-worn path allowing well-to-do Monrovians to shuttle back and forth to New York City often for business or shopping excursions in the 1950s and 1960s.

Monrovia had once been a haven for black celebrities, providing a respite from American racism. Luminaries such as Nina Simone, Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis (who was stationed in Liberia during World War II) frequented Monrovia and its pristine beaches. Ossie Davis' reflections on Liberia in the 1940s identified the impeding class conflict. The impact of black colonialism so affected him that he wrote about the experience in his memoirs:

"The Americo-Liberians, black though they were, tended to live like Europeans or Americans, and that surprised me. They had new cars; they regularly sent their children off to Europe or America to college, and they fraternized with their peers at Firestone. They seldom mixed with the natives, with whom I had already bonded, who were authentic Africans and much more fun. I was not only uneasy with the class conflict I felt was brewing in Liberia, I was disturbed by it. But most of the soldiers on the post were not. They, too, quite easily, took to treating all the natives, not as brothers and comrades, but like servants, in much the same way white folks treated black folks down in Georgia.”⁷⁸

What Ossie Davis described was a type of imperialism that has continued unabated without serious challenge. Despite the efforts of past presidents to develop the

⁷⁷ “Bob Johnson, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Delta Airlines Jointly Announce..” *Reuters*, October 28, 2008. Online: <http://www.reuters.com/article/pressRelease/idUS196184+22-Oct-2008+PRN20081022>

⁷⁸ Davis, Ossie and Ruby Dee. *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together*, New York: Harper Collins, 2000 p.133

country's interior, including President Tubman's national Unification Policy in the 1950s, followed by President Tolbert's "from mats to mattresses" and "Total Involvement for Higher Heights" in the 1970s, even the most progressive of Liberia's past presidents were more immersed in rhetoric than reality.

The Delta airlines flight also facilitates Bob Johnson's future investments in Liberia that include a large resort hotel on the coast located in the heart of the Kendeja Liberian cultural reserve slated to open in March 2009. The resort, which already plans to host delegates attending the 2009 International Colloquium of Women Leaders, "including President Tarja Halonen of Finland and President Sirleaf herself - will be the first of what Bob Johnson believes will be a steady stream of guests, including United Nations personnel, NGO workers and government officials. Bob Johnson also believes that Kendeja will be a favorite among wealthy Liberians."⁷⁹ Johnson Sirleaf is facilitating business investments in Kendeja, the national cultural resort founded in 1964 is located on the Atlantic Ocean coastline and continues to be home to the National Cultural Dance Troupe that is composed of performing artists selected from Liberia's major ethnic groups.⁸⁰ With these recent developments, Johnson Sirleaf's travels to the United States, to build relationships with wealthy African Americans appear to be paying dividends.

Richard Tolbert, a former Wall Street Investment banker, facilitated the Bob Johnson - Kendeja deal.⁸¹ The National Investment Commission that Tolbert heads handles mineral trading with Russia, the United States and Israel (trading iron ore,

⁷⁹ Park, Alex. "Liberia: Robert Johnson Aims to Make Coastal Resort A Luxury Vacation Destination" July 30, 2008

⁸⁰ Liberian Ministry of Information online:
<http://www.micat.gov.lr/content.php?sub=Kendeja%20Culture%20Center&related=Culture>

⁸¹ Mr. Robert L. Johnson, America's Black Billionaire meets Chairman Richard Tolbert. National Investment Commission. online: http://www.nic.gov.lr/press.php?news_id=1&related=28

gold and diamonds) as well as to the business investment climate in Liberia. Tolbert explains his Wall Street ties, as well as the nature of his professional relationship with Johnson Sirleaf in a 2008 interview:

“I am a Liberian by birth. I had to leave when the war came in 1980, because my family was a political and business family. We had the biggest business in the country which employed up to 6,000 employees before the war. It was a company that worth more than 15 million dollars. I went to work on Wall Street for 25 years. I am a private banker by training, a lawyer and an economist. I went to Harvard. The President, who is older than me, and I went there together. I resigned two weeks after she was elected because I know that she has the leadership that can turn this country around. I came to help fix this country. *This is my home I have a duty to come back home and help once I believe in the leadership.* The time is rough, but the key thing about our leader is that she has been able to assemble a team of professionals around her. I believe in her vision and I want to see it carry on.”⁸²

This is a remarkably reflective statement from a man whose uncle, the last Americo-Liberian president, had been killed as a result of settler tensions between Americo-Liberian and indigenous people. But perhaps it is not so surprising if one considers that, for all of the difficulties within the Liberian state, he was decidedly shaped by his experiences as a member of the Americo-Liberian elite. Tolbert’s vision of returning home, takes on the tenor of “noblesse oblige,” in which he feels that the reconstruction effort, and special invitation from Johnson Sirleaf proves that Liberia cannot survive without its middle class. Tolbert advances an opinion of Liberian reconstruction that had originated with Hegelian rhetoric of “the dark continent,” and that African

⁸² Tolbert, Richard. “Interview with Richard Tolbert.” *World Investment News*, September 11, 2008. [online] URL Available <http://www.winne.com/dninterview.php?intervid=2211>

American leadership would provide the “shining light” on the continent such that the Liberian state would be a model for other African leaders to follow. In later interviews, he elaborated on this point, saying, “by electing Africa's first female president, Liberia - Africa's first republic - has again taken its rightful place at the vanguard of African liberation and democracy.”⁸³ With Tolbert driving the country’s development industry, sitting at the helm of Liberia’s extractive industries including iron ore, gold and diamond mining, lies an additional problematic because his political and economic philosophy seemingly suggest that the country’s elites alone will benefit from development, thus contributing to problems of underdevelopment within the country’s interior.

Tolbert himself has lived a life of privilege both in Liberia and in the United States working, like Johnson Sirleaf, in the banking industry. From 1980-1998, he was a Vice President with Merrill Lynch. Later, he went on to become Senior Vice President of PaineWebber Inc., one of America's largest investment houses and is responsible for developing international business, especially in Africa. He is a member of the Corporate Council on Africa, based in Washington, DC and African Business Roundtable, based in Johannesburg. Despite the fact that he is well credentialed, he is advocating top-down development approach that without government policies offering job training and education to Liberia’s war affected youth, will continue to exacerbate existing inequality.

Despite the fact that Johnson Sirleaf has had access to a world-class education, in key cultural moments, Johnson Sirleaf is too involved in the promotion of capitalist values and neoliberal practices, to critique the offensive ideological underpinnings of

⁸³ Kramer, Reed. “Showered with Enthusiasm: Liberia's President-Elect Receives High-Level Reception” *AllAfrica.Com* December 11, 2005. [online] URL Available <http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/200512110034.html>

repatriation rhetoric. The Tolbert appointment itself is problematic because Johnson Sirleaf's over-reliance upon repatriated Americo-Liberians for political and economic talent undermines indigenous leadership and talent. This is a trend, reminiscent of the original Americo-Liberian intrusion in West Africa when Americo-Liberians were given carte blanche created one of the continent's most repressive economic systems on the continent. During Johnson Sirleaf's frequent visits to the U.S. she often stops in Washington, DC to visit with her mentor and friend Stephen Cashin, who helped raise funds for Johnson Sirleaf's campaign; he also serves as her economic advisor. Cashin, President of Pan African Capital Group is now planning to open an office in Liberia.⁸⁴ Johnson Sirleaf's use of repatriation rhetoric is merely a guise for a process of recapitalizing Monrovia with foreign investments. By placing "Congo" people such as Tolbert in key areas in order to facilitate opportunities for outside investment, she is building bridge between Western imperial interests and cheap African labor, through which Liberian's Congo people are the conduits for the exploitation of Liberia's poor, which throughout the country's history has traditionally the role of the "Congo" bourgeoisie.

Not only is the country becoming capitalized by Western interests, and staffed by Western talent, it is also becoming increasingly militarized. Johnson Sirleaf's broke with the African Union by offering Liberia as a cite for African Command, or AFRICOM, a project that would allow the U.S. to coordinate its military, diplomatic and humanitarian assistance programs from one central location. Johnson Sirleaf's willingness to play host to AFRICOM, reveals that she is more closely allied to the United States than the countries in her region that resisted this effort as a "neocolonial" intrusion. Bob Johnson took to the Washington Post in an Op-Ed page

⁸⁴ Dukulé, Abdoulaye W. "US Corporate Council On Africa Holds Roundtable on Investment and Business Opportunities in Liberia." *The Perspective* Atlanta, Georgia February 24, 2006

to forcefully urge Johnson Sirleaf to host the base and the U.S. to assist her in creating the infrastructure to support it. In the article, he argues that the role played by the Jewish American lobby as a model that African Americans should emulate. He also links the country's militarization as a necessary part of securing his and other private corporate investment assets:

Promoting U.S. investment in Liberia should be another priority. In many sectors, Liberia has world-class natural resources. Under an agreement ratified a week ago, Mittal Steel will invest more than \$1 billion to extract iron ore from northern Liberia. Firestone, which has been in the country for 80 years, is working to significantly increase its rubber production. Other opportunities exist in timber, mining and infrastructure development.... Liberia deserves American support, and African Americans especially must come forward to reestablish the historic bond between our nations. The Sirleaf government is working tirelessly to create a better and more prosperous future for citizens. We bear a special responsibility to ensure that she succeeds.⁸⁵

Johnson again links, as Johnson Sirleaf had earlier, the importance of the diasporic influence in Liberia to the country's development, economic and political stability.

Johnson Sirleaf followed up one month later in an editorial that she wrote herself and published on Allafrica.com (Bob Johnson sits on the Board of Directors) reiterating his main argument. The article called, "Africa: Africom Can Help Governments Willing to Help Themselves," supports the perspective that capital

⁸⁵ Johnson, Robert L. "Liberia's Moment of Opportunity." *The Washington Post*, May 14, 2007 online: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/13/AR2007051301123.html>

growth and military security in Liberia are mutually dependent.⁸⁶ Johnson Sirleaf advances and uses the “personal responsibility” rhetoric that Africans bear the responsibility for their own development and/ or underdevelopment. This is a point of view that has been vigorously refuted by leading Liberian academics including Emira Woods of Institute for Policy Studies (I.P.S.) and Ezekiel Pajibo a journalist and human rights advocate responded a month later Foreign Policy in Focus, the think tank where Emira Woods (a Harvard graduate herself) works that publishes the leading publication by the same name. Together they used the occasion of Liberian Independence Day (July 26, 2007) to argue that militarization has led to less, and not more stability in Liberia:

“Liberia's 26-year descent into chaos started when the Reagan administration prioritized military engagement and funneled military hardware, training, and financing to the regime of the ruthless dictator Samuel K. Doe. This military ‘aid,’ seen as ‘soft power’ at that time, built the machinery of repression that led to the deaths of an estimated 250,000 Liberians. Basing AFRICOM in Liberia will put Liberians at risk now and into the future. Liberia’s national threat level will dramatically increase, as the country becomes a target of those interested in attacking U.S. assets. This will severely jeopardize Liberia’s national security interests while creating new problems for the country’s fragile peace and its nascent democracy.”⁸⁷

Woods and Pajibo link the decline of Liberia into a 26 year war and the advent of Cold

⁸⁶ Johnson Sirleaf, Ellen. “Africa: Africom Can Help Governments Willing to Help Themselves” *All Africa.com*, June 25, 2007 online: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200706251196.html>

⁸⁷ Woods, Emira and Ezekiel Pajibo. Ed. John Feffer “AFRICOM: Wrong for Liberia, Disastrous for Africa.” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, July 26, 2007. [online] URL <http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/4427>

War politics to the prevailing logic that advanced by the U.S. agencies that “failed,” or “failing,” states could become havens of terrorist activity. The Liberian intervention became that much more important because of the fact that Charles Taylor’s administration had been linked to Al Qaeda network.⁸⁸ The AFRICOM quagmire dissolved despite the fact that Johnson Sirleaf never opposed it (it is now hosted by Germany instead) seems to point to a critical crack in Johnson Sirleaf’s seemingly impenetrable veneer. It is the same divide that proved disastrous for the regimes led by Charles Taylor, Samuel Doe and even William Tolbert.

The Ellen Johnson Sirleaf administration as in the governments that preceded her, the leadership philosophy possesses the same “fatal flaw,” continuing to repeat the same mistake of catering to Western interests at the expense of developing or challenging the prevailing statist-centered developmental epistemology. Liberia’s current and past instability continues to be predicated upon a fundamental cultural problem and identity crisis: whether or not the Americo-Liberia leadership are Africans or see themselves as Americans. While Ellen Johnson Sirleaf speaks with the voice of a modern Africa, that voice alone is not “postcolonial”, or even reminiscent of a postwar consciousness. Is Johnson Sirleaf, and the belated postcoloniality that she it embodies a sign of Africa’s future or more reminiscent of its past?

⁸⁸ “West Africa: Debate Over al Qaeda’s Connection to West Africa’s Diamond Trade Takes New Turns” All Africa.com. August 5, 2004. [online] URL Available <http://allafrica.com/stories/200408050800.html>

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