

# “Where the Mask Ends and the Face Begins Is Not Certain”: Mediating Ethnicity and Cheating Geography in Jonny Steinberg’s *Little Liberia*

**Loes Nas**

## **Summary**

Mixing historical commentary, reportage, biography and personal stories, South African writer Jonny Steinberg takes up the tale of a fractured African nation and its diaspora in *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York City* (2011). The “little Liberia” founded in New York’s urban jungle may have represented, for many of its inhabitants, a way to “cheat geography” by recreating a home away from home, but *Little Liberia* shows the reader it has not allowed them to cheat history. The book deals with the lives of two inhabitants of Park Hill Avenue on Staten Island, where nearly everyone is Liberian. Their conflict threatens to implode the community, igniting suspicions and accusations that had been bottled up since their exile. The article focuses on the interface of mediated ethnicity and citizenship related to the struggle for power in the diasporic Liberian community on Staten Island. Attention is also paid to feelings of identity of *Little Liberia*’s author.

## **Opsomming**

Met ’n mengelmoes van historiese kommentaar, verslaggewing, biografiese en persoonlike stories vertel Suid-Afrikaanse outeur Jonny Steinberg die verhaal van ’n gebroke Afrika-volk in *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York City* (2011). “Little Liberia” wat in die betonoerwoud New York ontstaan het, is vir baie van sy inwoners ’n manier om “geografie te flous” deur ’n tuiste weg van hul vaderland te skep. *Little Liberia* laat die leser egter sien dat die geskiedenis self nie om die bos gelei kan word nie. Die boek beskryf die lewens van twee inwoners van Park Hill Avenue op Staten Island, waar byna almal Liberiaans leef. Die konflik tussen hierdie twee dreig om onderdrukte gevoelens van suspisie en beskuldiging wat opgekrop is sedert die begin van hul ballingskap te laat ontplof en die gemeenskap te vernietig. Die artikel fokus op die raakvlak van bemiddelde etnisiteit en burgerskap gekoppel aan die magstryd in die ontwortelde Liberiese gemeenskap op Staten Eiland. Daar word ook aandag geskenk aan die identiteitsgevoelens van die outeur van *Little Liberia*.

## Counter-travel Writing

Together with Antjie Krog Jonny Steinberg is arguably one of South Africa's most important non-fiction writers. His first book, *Midlands*, was published in 2002, followed by *The Number: One Man's Search for Identity in the Cape Underworld and Prison Gangs* (2004); *Notes from a Fractured Country* (2007); *Three-Letter Plague* (2008; published as *Sizwe's Test* in the USA); and *Thin Blue: The Unwritten Rules of Policing South Africa* (2008). *Little Liberia* (2011) is his sixth book. Having been awarded a doctorate in political theory from the University of Oxford in the UK, he is currently a lecturer there in African Studies.

*Little Liberia* could be classified as "new" or narrative journalism, travel narrative, non-fiction, or even fiction, but I would prefer to think of the text as a counter-counter-travel narrative, or counter-counter-travel writing. What exactly is counter-travel writing? According to Edwards & Graulund in *Postcolonial Travel Writing* (2011), counter-travel writing "aims at shaking the reader's complacency through the "unmapping" of 'mapped' worldviews .... In so doing it dismantles the Eurocentric views that gave rise to the genre" (p. 73), that is, the genre of travel writing initially associated with colonial explorations. A common trend in traditional and colonial travel writing was for the traveller to record his or her experiences and thus delight the reader with the exotic; in postcolonial or counter-travel writing, on the other hand, the travelogues are infused with a preoccupation with identity and belonging: well-known tropes are home, belonging, exile, displacement, etc. As Barbara Korte noted in her *English Travel Writing from Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations* (2000), postcolonial travellers' urge to travel was often inspired by a search for a home: "the question of defining one's home still seems to be more urgent than for other travellers, and the search for a home may even be their primary motive for travel" (2000: 170). The postcolonial travelogue therefore focuses both on the personal and the social and seems to be more inward focused ("who am I," "where do I come from," or, in other words, a desire for knowledge of the self) than outward focused (quest for "authentic" experience, desire for the exotic).

In *Tourists with Type-writers: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing*, Holland & Huggan define travel writing as "occupying a space of discursive conflict" straddling different genres and "borrowing freely from a wide array of disciplines such as history, social science, journalism, autobiography and fiction" (1998: 10). As a hybridised travel text *Little Liberia* consists of a varied mix of historical commentary, geographical descriptions, interviews, reportage, maps, photographs, notes, a list of further reading, as well as a thorough index, biography and personal stories, which is revealing both about the author and his subjects, and about the vagaries of memory and motive. This type of non-fiction has currently

become “*the genre*” of South African writing, as became evident from a colloquium at the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape in 2011, where a discussion took place between academic Duncan Brown and writer Antjie Krog on the nature of literary or creative non-fiction. Krog suspected that the current prevalence of non-fiction writing in South African letters, defined by Brown as writing that “makes its meanings at the unstable fault line of the literary and journalistic, the imaginative and the reportorial

has something to do with our history of “apartness”. That we are continually busy translating ourselves, our landscapes, our communities, our experiences of other communities to one another. We can perhaps not begin to value each other’s fantasies or fictions, if we don’t understand the realities that gave rise to them ... I believe non-fiction writing is also about unearthing a hidden or unacknowledged or unnoticed life .... [T]here are such obvious and huge gaps in South African society that every second person must feel she has to fill a vacuum.

(Brown & Krog 2011: 1)

*Little Liberia*. I would argue, fulfils a similar role for Jonny Steinberg; his aim seems to be the filling of a gap, a vacuum he feels as a white African being part of Africa, yet not quite understanding Africa. As a travelling subject he opens up a part of Africa in order for the reader and for himself to understand an intriguing part of Africa, that is, Liberia and its diasporic community on Staten Island, allowing him the opportunity to reflect on notions of identity, or more in particular African identity, ethnicity, exile and displacement, thus moving away from the more traditional dichotomous interplay between home and abroad as he inserts himself as a travelling persona into the text.

As Steinberg writes in his acknowledgement, an old friend told him in a Cape Town cocktail bar in 2006 about a community of Liberians living in a Staten Island housing project while mentally inhabiting quite another time and place, “frozen in the moment of their flight from wartime Liberia” (2011: 275). Steinberg went to visit the “little Liberia” founded in New York’s urban jungle in 2008, met with its leaders there and found that this Liberian enclave in New York may have represented, for many of its inhabitants, a way to “cheat geography” by recreating a diasporic home away from home, in Steinberg’s words: “On Park Hill Avenue, one can cheat geography. One can take a short bus ride from a slice of Liberia to the heart of New York. One can drench oneself in America without fear of drifting from home” (p. 156), but in the course of his book Steinberg shows the reader that it has not allowed them to cheat history.

## Mediated Identities

In this way *Little Liberia* creates an interesting counter to the postcolonial counter-narrative. Its aim does not seem to be so much the “unmapping” of “mapped” world views as in the above-cited definition of postcolonial travel writing, but rather the “mapping” of postcolonial Africanness or mediated African identity, of what it means to be a postcolonial African, extradiegetically, on the part of the author who casts himself as a travelling persona in the text and not only tries to understand Africa or Liberia, but also tries to find affirmation of his own Africanness by seeking acceptance by black fellow Africans as a white African brother: “Jacob smiled a wide, sweeping smile, one that involved most of his face, and opened his arms. ‘My African brother,’ he crowed. ‘My white, South African brother’” (p. 10). On the one hand Steinberg struggles to understand the complexity of the relationship between his two diasporic protagonists, which is inextricably rooted in the fraught and singular history of Liberia. Through telling the story of two individuals Steinberg is able to illuminate the broader social and political landscape of this part of Africa. The reader can sense Steinberg’s desperation of failing to understand, when eventually, after two years of painstaking research and interviews, Steinberg himself pays a visit to Liberia, and is asked by Rufus, one of the protagonists, by the end of the book: “Do you understand Liberia?” (p. 261). On the other hand the reader can sense Steinberg’s elation on acceptance and acknowledgement of his Africanness when Jacob, the other protagonist, greets him as “my white, South African brother”. It is here that the personal and the political intersect in this travelogue.

And at another level, intradiegetically, the author is trying to understand what makes the Liberian Africans on Staten Island stand out from other diasporic Africans, and why it is that migration to a different world seems to have had little effect on the relationships among the Liberian immigrants on Staten Island as the same battles that were fought in Liberia continue to be fought in New York. When meeting Steinberg, Rufus, the other protagonist, aptly describes the political situation of diasporic Liberians of whom he himself is one of the key players:

“You know,” he said, “if it isn’t rehabilitated ... Liberia may never recover from the war. The country is sick from war. You see it in Staten Island. There was no fighting on Staten Island before the war. There was only one Liberian church when I arrived. Now, there are nine. In twenty years, Liberians have not accomplished anything here. They have only fought.”

(Steinberg 2011: 266)

When a local leader has to be chosen for the Staten Island Liberian Community Association, for instance, it becomes clear that the leader that is going to be chosen must have, like leaders in Liberia itself, an Americo-

Liberian background and also “that he would have to be bought” (p. 200), like leaders in Liberia are wont. Steinberg’s interlocutors told him that the system of patronage was the only way one could get things done in Liberia:

The national system of patronage turned Liberians, Congos and natives alike into a fawning and obsequious people. To get anything done, you had to know somebody more powerful than yourself, a patron to whom you ought to show great deference. And so the trappings of power and office were greatly exaggerated in Liberia. There was much self-aggrandisement and pomp, for these were the currencies in which influence and power were traded.

(Steinberg 2011: 48)

The need for an Americo-Liberian as president, the insistence that he or she would have to be bought we saw, incidentally, also recently played out in Liberian history when Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was re-elected president of the country amidst controversy if we are to go by a report in *The Liberian Times* entitled “Repeating Mistakes from the Past.”<sup>1</sup> The Liberian political system inside and outside Liberia is based on clientelism, or patronage: “Whether you run the government of Liberia or a soccer club on a dirt road, you can build a shield of clients and kin and acolytes as hastily as you can” (p. 150). When campaigning for her first presidency, Johnson Sirleaf was depicted in local cartoons as the old elite coming back in disguise, as Steinberg writes: “She had been the Finance Minister in the last Americo-Liberian cabinet before Doe’s coup, and thus a member of the old elite. Was she a Trojan horse bringing Congo rule back to Monrovia?” (Steinberg 2011: 208).

“It was clear from the start,” writes Steinberg, that “much of Liberian history would be played out on the stage that his Jacob and Rufus (the two protagonists) had erected” (p. 209) on Staten Island. This was confirmed by one of the people he interviewed: ““You don’t understand .... The people of Park Hill Avenue are not politically educated. All their lives, power has come with an Americo-Liberian name. That is how power has come”” (p. 200). All of this seems to run counter to Stuart Hall’s reflections in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1994) on the fluidity of mediated diasporic cultural identities, since he writes: “[They] come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power” (p.

---

1. Sungbeh, Tewroh-Wehtoe. “Repeating Mistakes of the Past,” *The Liberian Times*. <<http://theliberiantimes.com/?p=7628>>. 16 April 2012: “After going through successive leadership change and a civil war that radically transformed the landscapes of Liberia, [*The Times*] reports in 2011 that President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has resulted to [sic] hiring her sons and other family members to key positions in government.”

394). There seems to be no fluidity of identity in the diaspora for Liberians, as the drama unfolding on Park Hill Avenue, Staten Island, where Rufus Arkoi and Jacob Massaquoi are vying for the leadership of their local community association, is a microcosm of the political scene thousands of kilometres away in Monrovia. “Liberians, after all, have for a long time played out big, national dramas on small, local stages” (p. 209), Steinberg writes. And as Paige McClanahan writes in her book review: “Liberian politics is a complicated sport. But Steinberg’s account sheds light on how the game is played, and what rules – written or not – govern the players’ moves”.

How does my chosen theme, mediated ethnicities, tie in here? Firstly, I would like to argue that in the diasporic society intradiegetically described in *Little Liberia*, counter to what Stuart Hall argued above, new forms of identity have not evolved and ethnicity remains mediated or “performed” in an essentialised fashion in spite of access through society of new models of ethnicity and citizenship, the power struggle referred to above being an obvious case in point. By the end of this article, the interface between mediated ethnicity and citizenship related to the struggle for power in the diasporic Liberian community on Staten Island should have become clear. And secondly, extradiegetically, as regards the position of the author as a travelling subject, I hope to have shown that Steinberg’s need to travel to New York and Monrovia and record his interactions with the diasporic Liberians and their histories seems to stem from a personal urge to solve inner conflicts about home and belonging. As a travelling persona he puts himself in a sense centre stage, careful always to explain and locate himself in relation to his field of inquiry at a metanarrative level and eager to avoid any essentialist positioning in much the same way as Pico Iyer for instance did in *Video Night in Kathmandu* (Iyer quoted in Edwards & Graulund 2011: 55). Iyer defines travel as “an activity tied up exclusively with ... personal definitions of what makes up self and home” (Iyer quoted in Edwards & Graulund: 59), “a means of understanding [one’s] own notion of home and identity regardless of our point of departure” (Iyer quoted in Edwards & Graulund: 60-61). When Steinberg shows a finished draft of his book to Jacob, the latter is displeased. He says: “Sometimes we were speaking with the recorder on. That was for the book. Other times you came around and hung out, and I told you stuff ... because I grew to like you as a friend” (2011: 256). Characterised as “both a gentleman and a cunning bastard” (p. 261), Steinberg willingly accedes to some of Jacob’s editing demands, so what the reader gets, is an adjusted version of the originally drafted text. By contrast, Rufus’s focus seems to be “the promise of a modest royalty” (p. 265). Steinberg had not set out with preconceived ideas, but rather tried to locate himself in relation to fellow Africans, on the continent and abroad. In other words, *Little Liberia* is as much a book about Liberians as it is about Steinberg. In one of the many self-reflexive passages

in his book Steinberg admits there is still a lot he does not understand when trying to grasp what Jacob is telling him: “I do not understand. Defeated, I soon forget and think of other things” (p. 83).

## Metanarrative

Theresa Mallinson observes in *The Daily Maverick* that in contrast to Dave Eggers’s *What Is the What*, published in 2006, which Eggers calls a novel that is an “autobiography” of Sudanese refugee Valentino Achak Deng, Steinberg insists on calling his book non-fiction. He thinks Eggers “called it a novel to give him some freedom – freedom to imagine what his subjects felt; freedom to get away with not sticking to facts”. His own approach is different, however: “I enjoy the discipline of non-fiction; the discipline of not being allowed into somebody’s head; the constraint of only writing what I know; what I interpret,” he says “The writer of fiction ... is the master of his own house and may do what he likes with it .... But the writer of non-fiction is only the renter, who must abide by the conditions to the lease” (Steinberg quoted in Mallinson 2011: 264). This approach also means that when Jacob finds it difficult to talk about his experiences in the war, Steinberg does not fill in the gaps in the story, but only puts on record what Jacob told him:

(Jacob) had been detained for three days and serially tortured by Charles Taylor’s security personnel. About what happened to him when he was detained, he will speak only obliquely, and in the most formal language. “It became very risky for me to stay,” he explains of his leaving (Liberia). “They accused me of espionage against the government. They wanted a copy of speeches I had made. There had been extracts of my speeches in the newspapers. Some of the remarks I made .... They held me to account.”

(Steinberg 2011: 129)

Writing Jacob’s story in this way allows Steinberg to add a meta-layer to the narrative. Rather than imagine what his characters are feeling, Steinberg reflects instead on what and why they are holding back. “I’ve always given the people I write about the book (in draft form), and I always write about their response,” he tells Mallinson in *The Daily Maverick*. Rufus did not choose to really engage in this process, merely e-mailing Steinberg a few minor factual corrections. With Jacob, it was different. “It was somebody reading a book about themselves; it’s a very awkward and difficult experience for anyone, and one that I wanted to record,” says Steinberg. Jacob accuses Steinberg of being neocolonial: “Africans come to live in New York, and what do you write about? That they fight one another like brutes, like animals. This aspect of your book is neo-colonial” (Steinberg quoted in Mallinson 2011: 262). Steinberg objects and asks Jacob whether he must

“airbrush out” a significant period in his life: “That you can only be represented as an African once conflict is hidden away?” (p. 262). Jacob acknowledges he has not told the full story: “Of course I closed up. My feelings about these things are ... they are mine. They are for my use, not yours” (p. 263). As Mallinson observes, there is a danger when a writer portrays other people’s lives, that there could be an inherent power imbalance. However, Steinberg succeeds in achieving the opposite, by granting his subjects as much agency as possible. The effect hereof resulted in feelings of incompetence on the part of the author, who having shadowed Jacob for nearly two years, was yet not able to get to the core of Jacob’s “sacred piece”, which he had decided to keep hidden from the author: “as renter and tenant we were both dissatisfied, he by what he had done with the room he had leased to me, I because the room was too bare, the household treasures taken away and stored elsewhere” (p. 264). When working on the final draft, Jacob nevertheless reluctantly allowed Steinberg to put in one or two items of value in “the bare room” Jacob had given him.

When we have a closer look at the two different covers of the book, one American, the other South African, we can observe some noticeable differences in how the publisher exercises control over the prospective buyer of the book. Although published by the same publishing house (Jonathan Ball), the focus of the American edition differs from that of the South African one. In the American version we see an urban jungle overwhelming two black males, one in a dark suit, supporting himself on a walking stick, the other in an African shirt, his arm up in the air; one with a severe limp, Jacob, the other with a big ego, Rufus. This American cover offers quite a contrast to the South African edition, where the focus does not so much seem to lie on the diasporic lives of Liberian immigrants as on the link between the urban jungle of New York and a stereotypical image associated with Africa, namely that of violence and war (cf. the proximity of the image of a machine gun and the words “An African Odyssey” on the South African cover). This equation of Africa with war, by the South African branch of Jonathan Ball, seems confirmed by similar images found on the web: when surfing for book reviews I found the cover of the book in several instances juxtaposed to images of child soldiers, appealing to Africa’s worst stereotypes, and underlining its mediated ethnicity. What worried me most, however, was that this reinforcement of stereotypes seems to come from the African angle in publishing.

## Four Diasporas

*Little Liberia* deals with the lives of two inhabitants of Park Hill Avenue on Staten Island, where nearly everyone is Liberian, most of whom having fled Liberia’s brutal civil war. The arrival of Jacob Massaquoi in 2002



eventually leads to a conflict with Rufus Arkoii, who had arrived sixteen years before, in 1986. Their conflict threatens to implode the community, igniting suspicions and accusations that had been bottled up since their exile. The baggage that survived the trans-Atlantic journey has come bursting open, revealing all of the old hatreds, passions, prejudices, and family ties that shape the lives of the recent immigrants. In a book review article called “Return without Homecoming in the Forging of Liberian and African-American Identity”, Stephen Lubkemann traces the history of Liberia’s conflicted founding and its effects on both sides of the Atlantic. Between 1820 and 1893 just over 2,000 North Carolinian blacks left for Africa, but this “colonization” movement, the second diaspora, was fraught from its inception, characterised as it was by a paradoxical dynamic, on the one hand the abolitionist idea of African potential and a deep hatred of the slave trade, on the other hand a disenfranchising plan to get rid of the growing number of free Southern blacks (2004: 123-124).<sup>2</sup> The hope of the promised land is reflected in the elements of the Liberian coat of arms: a sailing ship, a rising sun, a palm tree, a plough and a shovel, a dove bearing a scroll, and the motto “The love of liberty brought us here”.<sup>3</sup> One could argue that the third diaspora described in *Little Liberia*, born out of the violence at the end of the 20th century in Liberia that decimated the power of the original free black colonists,<sup>4</sup> is prefigured by the two diasporic

- 
2. All of this is corroborated by Alan Huffman in *Mississippi in Africa* (2004) (inter alia on pages 6 and 43), who researched the saga of the slaves of the Prospect Hill Plantation in Jefferson County, Mississippi and their legacy in Liberia today.
  3. The history of Liberia, writes Steinberg, starts in 1780 with Thomas Jefferson who envisaged wholesale black emigration as the answer to the problem of slavery. Steinberg, like Lubkemann, refers to early-19th-century forces that shaped Liberia as ranging from the idea that: “black American settlement ... [would] heal America’s soul”, and “to live out the truest values of American civilisation ... blacks would have to leave America”, to “in the founding of a black colony in Africa lay nothing less than America’s redemption, for it was to be her way of repenting for the terrible sin of slavery”, and to finally “a belief that the problem could be worked out on African shores” (p. 36). The first black colonizers started settling in 1822. Ironically, having an aversion to farming, they soon became slave-holders themselves, replicating what they had left behind: “The master-slave relationship was drummed into the brains of their forebears, drummed so deeply and soundly, that it became a genetic inheritance” (p. 42).
  4. Sergeant Samuel Doe came to power in a military coup in 1980. Soon the coup-makers of different ethnicities had fallen out, leading to a civil war in 1989. Many of those fleeing the intensifying violence under Charles Taylor ended up in the United States on Park Hill Avenue.

experiences that preceded it, the first diaspora being “the original transatlantic sin”, by which African slaves were taken to American shores and the second being the “colonization” movement, in which emancipated slaves were driven back across the Atlantic. The genesis of Liberia, in the second diaspora, was characterised by structural violence and the internalisation (and reproduction) of American segregationist and racist ideologies by black settlers, which took the form of subjugation of other African groups and recaptured-at-sea slaves (2004: 127), also known as “Congos”. Lubkemann (quoting Claude Clegg, author of *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (2004)) writes:

In “returning” to Africa, these settlers remained oriented to an America that had sought to purge itself of them – ultimately organizing identity, social hierarchy, economic exploitation, and political power around many of the inequalities from which they themselves had once suffered .... *Liberia was thus ... a realization of diasporic aspirations without a dissolution of diasporic identity – a return that never comes home. In many ways therefore, the Liberian case invites considerations of diasporicity as a persistent social condition capable of defying even the terms of its own ideology.*

(Clegg quoted by Lubkemann 2004: 126)

And further on:

Woven back and forth, and back again across the Middle Passage, *Liberian diasporicity has arguably become above all a matter of social dispossession breeding social dispossession – and not just a question of social dispersion.*

(Clegg quoted by Lubkemann 2004: 127)

It is exactly this process that we recognise in the life stories of Jacob Massaquoi and Rufus Arkoi. The latter had worked his way up since his arrival in 1986 to become the acknowledged leader of the New York Liberians. Steinberg observes: “Rufus’s interior world, it struck me, was tailor-made for exile. In the moment of departure you gather every last detail of the place you are leaving, infuse it with all your wishes and desires, and carry it with you, like a great living ornament, wherever you happen to go” (2011: 267). Yet for Rufus there remains “unfinished business”, as at the time Steinberg last spoke to him in 2010, he was still contemplating the possibility of yet another return, returning to his home country to run for president. He was “waiting for the right moment to return” (p. 265).<sup>5</sup>

---

5. Rufus continues to dream of a return: “The reason why I work so hard ... the reason I am getting a graduate education, a doctorate, is to protect myself against those people, the Congos. We must never be dependent on them again” (p. 40); “... he would return, finally, to Monrovia, a man of far greater consequence than a Twelfth Street tailor ever could hope to be” (p. 155) and:

## Essentialising Diasporic Identity

When his rival Jacob Massaquoi arrived in the States in 2002, Jacob was dismayed to discover that Liberia’s marked “haves and have-nots” society seemed being replicated in Park Hill. He had expected to find a diasporic community where all of its members were supported. What he found was a society in which diaspora was acted out as identity discourse, as “a way of imagining, constructing and presenting the self rather than a process of population dispersion” (Lubkemann 2004: 126).<sup>6</sup> What we observe in *Little Liberia*, is a performance of diasporic identities and formation of diasporic consciousness being enacted, that is, the book urges us to look beyond classical immigrant stories and invites us to look at how structural violence and patronage have essentialised Liberian diasporic identity. When Jacob Massaquoi arrives in New York, he notices that between his fellow Liberians and the metropolis “stood a few men behaving as if they and they alone could provide access to the city”. Could it be, he wonders, “that wherever Liberians settled, some among them would become Congos, the rest helpless indigenes?” (Steinberg 2011: 195). Jacob convinces Steinberg that his experiences in Liberia had taught him that “[y]oung educated Liberians understood that every sphere of life, no matter how petty, was organised around a centre of power, and centres of power could be stormed” (p. 55), as Sergeant Samuel Doe had once done in Liberia when he terminated Americo-Liberian dominance in 1980 (p. 59).<sup>7</sup> Jacob is described as someone eager to challenge Rufus Arkoii and shake up the old guard of the neighbourhood’s leadership. To Jacob Rufus represented everything he had wanted to leave behind. He saw Rufus as someone “who took American money in the name of his fellow Liberians, but used it to make a personal

---

“I am going to go home one day and become the president of Liberia” (p. 188).

6. Lubkemann refers to an earlier article co-authored with Andrea Klimt: “Argument across the Portuguese-Speaking World: A Discursive Approach to Diaspora (Klimt & Lubkemann 2002: 145-162).
7. The military coup under Sergeant Samuel Doe brought ethnic Krahn to power (p. 64), thus liberating Liberia from domination by the descendants of freed slaves. Ironically enough, many of those brought to power by Doe were American PhDs (p. 62). Doe was in his turn overthrown by Charles Taylor in 1989 (p. 69), which sparked more than a decade of bloodshed, in which more than 100,000 people were killed. Peace returned in 2003. With the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to the presidency in 2005, the Americo-Liberians came back into power again in May 2012, Charles Taylor was convicted to 50 years imprisonment by the International Criminal Court in The Hague for war crimes.

fiefdom. Was this smudging of public representation and private empire not the story of successive Liberian presidents?” (p. 198), he wonders. “It amazed him that he had travelled all the way to America, only to find Liberia writ small” (p. 199).

Jacob Massaquoi was born in Nimba County, Liberia, “deep in the interior” (p. 34), near the border with Ivory Coast. Unlike his siblings, Jacob was lucky enough to get an education in the capital city of Monrovia. But then war reached the city and his plans had to change. Steinberg records how Jacob describes getting caught in the crossfire among various armed factions in Monrovia in the mid-1990s. He was shot in the foot by rebels – an injury from which he had never fully recovered and which gave rise to suspicions, inspired by jealousy, that he had been a child soldier (pp. 108, 206) – but he managed to escape with his life. Jacob eventually made it to the United States, where he won political asylum after representing himself in court (p. 197). Eager to help his fellow Liberians in exile, he set up African Refuge, a community centre that offers services to immigrants, still in operation today.

The story of Rufus Arkoi is “less dramatic, but equally compelling”, as Paige McClanahan writes in her review of Steinberg’s book. Rufus managed to leave Liberia for the United States in 1986, three years before the country descended into civil war. Following his passion for soccer, he set up leagues on both sides of the Atlantic, slowly creating a power base with the name “Roza”, after his initials.<sup>8</sup> When Liberia’s war children were arriving in their hundreds (p. 169), Rufus took care of them, and his football teams became the basis of a broader community organisation, complete with after-school programmes and tutoring, all under the Roza flag. Big donors started to fund the project,<sup>9</sup> and Rufus became a big man on Park Hill Avenue, a benefactor (p. 177), much along the same lines of what he had already achieved in Monrovia, as Steinberg writes about the time in Liberia before he went into exile: “Already, he was a fabulously successful young man ... who had courted more than his fair share of envy” (p. 2).<sup>10</sup> But then Jacob Massaquoi came along, and when Jacob started to challenge Rufus, his life became more complicated, and war erupted between them, even to

---

8. *Rufus O Zumo Arkoi* (p. 142).

9. “Turning war children into American immigrants had become a veritable business” (p. 171), writes Steinberg: “Child soldiers on college scholarships; refugee camp children in afternoon tutorials; former street gangsters on the soccer field: Rufus had touched every chord on New York’s grant givers” (p. 176).

10. Jealousy plays a significant role in Liberian culture at home and abroad: Rufus was for instance “accused of enjoying Liberian problems on Park Hill Avenue, because it was from them that he built his legacy” (p. 157).

the point that Rufus lost his organisation and later criticised Steinberg for it: “Your Jacob ruined me, and you see fit to give him half of the book” (p. 224).

As the book progresses, Rufus and Jacob vie for the leadership of their local community association. It is a small story in the scale of things, but the drama on Park Hill Avenue is a microcosm of the political scene thousands of kilometres away in Monrovia. “Liberians, after all, have for a long time played out big, national dramas on small, local stages” (p. 209), Steinberg writes. Liberian politics is a complicated sport, as McClanahan observed above. But Steinberg’s account sheds light on how the game is played, and what rules – written or not – govern the players’ moves. On one level, throughout the narrative, Jacob and Rufus, and their fight, function as symbols of a much larger conflict. Steinberg writes:

With regard to home, Rufus and Jacob were stand-in figures: people who could not be trusted to spend public money; people incapable of running for power without cheating; people with terrible acts buried in their pasts. The uncertain future everyone feared for Liberia was condensed into the figures of Rufus and Jacob.

(Steinberg 2011: 209)

## **Doubling**

To unravel those terrible acts buried in the past, Steinberg starts digging in their past and explores, for instance, the distinct divide between Americo-Liberians, the descendants of the freed slaves who came to Monrovia in the 19th century, and the Liberians with purely African roots, many of whom still feel inferior to their fellow countrymen who bear anglophone surnames. He shows us how lucky Liberians – those with a liveable income, a steady job, a good education – face intense pressure to give away their wealth to friends and family. And as McClanahan observes, he describes a kind of malicious pleasure that plagues Liberian communities on both sides of the Atlantic. Liberians, she writes, are deeply suspicious of success. Steinberg shows us that these issues, these patterns of thought and interaction, are deeply ingrained in the Liberian community. At one point, Steinberg asks Rufus what it is about Liberia that produces so much suspicion and jealousy: “It is because of how our families are structured; one man, four wives, four sets of children, four sets of goals”. Polygamy, he says, is “the primary cause of African conflict, for it wove jealousy into the fabric of family life; every woman wanted the children of the other wives to fail” (p. 230).

Rather than providing a secure home to which to retire at the end of the day, diaspora, or “cheating geography”, brings bitter fighting as old tensions

are transplanted to new ground. When Jacob arrived in 2002, he marvelled at this doubling, as it

came to him in a flash that what was spliced onto the surface of Staten Island was a piece of Liberia. His countrymen and women had travelled across the Atlantic Ocean; they had settled in a metropolis littered with universities and hospitals and night schools and degrees by correspondence. Yet between them and the city stood big men with broad shoulders and loud mouths, just as, at home, the big men stood between Liberia and the world.

(Steinberg 2011: 4-5)

The distrust between indigenous Liberians and the descendants of resettled slaves, the Americo-Liberians, the uneasiness about roles people played back home during the war and general suspicion about anyone who showed ambition or became successful, are all features of life in Little Liberia. “It was as if Park Hill and Liberia were twin voodoo dolls, every pinprick felt here drawing blood there, every stab back home wounding someone in this exile” (p. 30), writes Steinberg. In one of the book’s last sections, Jacob explains the imprint that his own near-death in Monrovia on April 6 has left on his psyche.

“I could have died a thousand times on that day. A thousand times. But instead, God saved me. What do I do with *that*? I must do something, Jonny, something very big. Otherwise, what’s the point? What’s the point of having survived?”

(Steinberg 2011: 221)

Contrary to the notion of diasporic identity in relation and not in isolation, as espoused by Edouard Glissant in *The Poetics of Relation* (or to put it simply, routes and not roots shape identity), we find in *Little Liberia*, in spite of, or perhaps due to, the back-and-forth movements across the ocean, that it is the roots that continue to determine relations and continue to be the source of strife and struggle in Liberian society, both diasporic or at home. The “little Liberia” founded in New York’s urban jungle may have represented, for many of its inhabitants, a way to “cheat geography” by recreating a home away from home (“One can take a short bus ride from a slice of Liberia to the heart of New York. One can drench oneself in America without fear of drifting from home” (p. 156)), but *Little Liberia* shows the reader it has not transformed mentality nor reshaped society, in other words, it has not allowed them to cheat history. Even when the third diaspora considers the possibility of another “return”, a fourth diaspora – either physical and definitive, or merely virtual and partial – after the dust having settled in 2003,<sup>11</sup> the question remains, writes Lubkemann, “how

---

11. Peace came to Liberia in 2003. In 2005 Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected president and in 2011 re-elected for a second term.

structural violence will qualify the enacted attachments of those who fled Monrovia to become navigators of an American racial economy that frustrates many of their expectations” (2004: 127). By blending the struggles of Rufus and Jacob, and inserting himself into the story, Steinberg highlights the complex connections between the personal and the political, both intra- and extradiegetically. The focus on individual experiences illustrates how the struggle for political power in Liberian society has repeated itself in the organisation of smaller community structures across the ocean.<sup>12</sup> In the preface, Steinberg writes: “Here on Park Hill Avenue, [Rufus] thought, you can cheat geography. During the day you go and pick the riches of America. At night, the ferry takes you all the way home, as if a piece of Liberia had drifted across the ocean and docked in New York Bay” (pp. 2-3). But after having finished the book, this “piece of Liberia” turns out not the idyllic, imagined homeland found in other migration stories. By telling the story of Rufus and Jacob, by unravelling their respective journeys, Steinberg has managed to show that the past has intrusively mediated itself into the present. Little Liberia has indeed allowed them to cheat geography, but not to cheat history. Liberians, Rufus told Steinberg, “had come to America to work the corruption from their bones, and thus to return home immensely powerful”. And also: “one comes to America to learn self-sufficiency”, which makes Steinberg understand even less of Rufus, a complicated mix of optimism, self-deception and grandstanding: “where the mask ends and the face begins is not certain. One is always performing, even in the most private corridors of one’s soul” (p. 186).

And this brings me full circle to the beginning of this article where I argued that Little Liberia should in the first place be seen as a counter-counter-travel narrative, a hybridised travel text straddling various genres that try to “map” mediated postcolonial ethnicities, both on the part of the author as a travelling subject and on the part of his diasporic subjects. Both Rufus and Jacob are portrayed not as “victims that attract our pity”, as Theresa Mallinson writes in *The Daily Maverick*, but as fellow humans that earn our respect”, at the same time challenging and subverting the narrative that typically frames the lives of immigrants. And Steinberg’s insertion of

- 
12. Colonial mimicry, replication, has, however, all along been a feature of Liberian society as Steinberg writes:

From its inception, Liberia has been located at the other end of the world. Real people lived elsewhere, and Liberians fantasised with props borrowed from afar. First it was the morning coats and the derbies. Then it was the coups and the revolutions. These were the pretend worlds of a place that felt forever half-formed, that had always to mimic in order to be. There is nothing so dangerous as a world of fantasies, all the more so when the recurring fantasy is of the capturing and recapturing of power.

(Steinberg 2011: 58)

himself as a travelling subject into the text allows him to explore notions of postcolonial African identity, turning his book into a truly counter-counter-narrative.

## References

- Brown, D. & Krog, A.  
2011 *Creative Non-Fiction: A Conversation*. Paper 335. Bellville: Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, South Africa.
- Edwards, J.D. & Graulund, R.  
2011 *Postcolonial Travel Writing: Critical Explorations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Eggers, D.  
2006 *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng: A Novel*. New York: Hamish Hamilton.
- Glissant, E.  
1997 *The Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Hall, S.  
1994 Cultural Identity and Diaspora. In: Williams, Patrick & Chrisman, Laura (eds) *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 392-403.
- Holland, P. & Huggan, G.  
1998 *Tourists with Type-writers: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Huffman, A.  
2004 *Mississippi in Africa: The Saga of the Slaves of Prospect Hill Plantation and Their Legacy in Liberia Today*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Klimt, Andrea & Lubkemann, Stephan  
2002 Argument across the Portuguese-Speaking World: A Discursive Approach to Diaspora. *Diaspora* 11(2): 145: 162.
- Korte, B.  
2000 *English Travel Writing from Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lubkemann, S.C.  
2004 Diasporas and Their Discontents: Return without Homecoming in the Forging of Liberian and African-American Identity. *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 13(1): 123-128.
- Mallinson, Th.  
2011 Jonny Steinberg's "Little Liberia" Cossets Big Ambitions. 23 February. Online: <<http://www.thedailymaverick.co.za/article/2011-02-23-jonny-steinbergs-little-liberia-cossets-big-ambitions>>. 13 April 2012.
- McClanahan, P.  
2011 Book review: *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York City* – Thinkafricapress.com. May 5, 2011. Online: <<http://hutimes.com/?p=1294>>. 16 March 2012.



“WHERE THE MASK ENDS AND THE FACE BEGINS IS NOT CERTAIN”: ...

Steinberg, J.

2011

*Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York City.* Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball.

**Loes Nas**

University of the Western Cape, South Africa

loesnas@gmail.com