"Discovering Global Blackness: African Diaspora World Travelers"
Sean Hanretta, History Department, Stanford University
summarized by Stephen Pitcher

Professor Hanretta's talk focused on two members of the African diaspora whose lives, travels, and writings reveal much about 19th-century attitudes toward race and the notion of "global blackness." Edward W. Blyden (1832–1912), born into a middle-class family in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, was refused admission to Rutgers due to his race despite his apparent brilliance as a scholar. Discouraged about the opportunities for intellectual advancement offered blacks in the U.S., he emigrated in 1850 to Liberia, where he was to become arguably the most important black intellectual of the 19th century. Benjamin J.K. Anderson, a mathematician, surveyor, and businessman from Virginia, emigrated to Liberia at the age of seventeen and came to be prominently involved in the government there. Both men undertook journeys that would prove crucial to their ideas about race.

Liberia began as a colony formed by the American Colonization Society (ACS), an unlikely coalition of abolitionists, Southern racists, and blacks, who for highly disparate reasons had misgivings about the future of free blacks in American society. Convinced that blacks would enjoy greater advantages if "repatriated" to Africa, the ACS was instrumental in founding the Liberian colony and monitoring its development until 1847, when Liberia declared its independence. Issues of race have played a central role in Liberian politics ever since, with tensions among mulatto elites, their darker-skinned compatriots, and politically marginalized ex-slaves (Africans who had been enslaved in Congo, captured by the U.S. Navy, and freed on the coast of West Africa), and between the settlers as a whole and the native Africans.

Stephen Allen Benson was elected President of Liberia in 1856; himself a dark-skinned man, Benson felt the relationship with the darker Africans was crucial, and organized expeditions into the interior of the continent to learn about and create bonds with the natives. Edward James Roye, elected President in 1870, was also strongly in favor of a vigorous "Americo-Liberian" engagement with the rest of Africa, but there was much back-and-forth on this topic as control of the government swung between mulatto-dominated and pro-African factions. In was in the context of this ongoing dialogue between those desiring a greater integration with Africa and those wishing to hold Liberia aloof that Blyden and Anderson undertook their perspective-altering journeys.

In addition to this political background, Blyden was influenced by the groundswell of interest in Muslim civilization then sweeping Liberia, thanks to which many who had formerly believed Islamic society to be uncultured were surprised to learn of its intellectual and artistic accomplishments. These elements, along with his continual brooding over the position of a black person in a world largely given to ignoring his intellectual attainments, underlay his experience of, and writings about, his 1866 voyage to the Middle East. Four excerpts from his 1873 work, *From West Africa to Palestine*, were read and discussed. ["Palestine" for him meant modern-day Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine.]

The first excerpt deals with Blyden's reflections upon visiting the Pyramid of Cheops in Egypt. He calls to mind the words of Liberian poet Hilary Teage, "From pyramidal hall, / From Karnac's sculptured wall, / From Thebes they loudly call— / Retake your fame"—an injunction to celebrate, and participate in, the glory of the ancient Egyptians, whom, insisting on their being part of Africa and therefore of blackness, Blyden permits himself to invoke as his "African progenitors." He revels in these works of the "enterprising sons of Ham, from whom [he] is descended," which affect and inspire him differently, perhaps more thrillingly, than have "the mighty works of European genius."

> While standing in the central hall of the [great] pyramid [of Cheops] I thought of the lines of [Hilary] Teage, the Liberian poet, when urging his countrymen to noble deeds:
>
> 'From pyramidal hall,
> From Karnac'ssculptured wall,
> From Thebes they loudly call—
> Retake your fame.'
>
> This, thought I, is the work of my African progenitors. Teage was right; they had fame, and their descendants should strive, by nobler deeds, to 'retake' it. Feelings came over me far different from those which I have felt when looking at the mighty works of European genius. I felt that I had a peculiar 'heritage in the Great Pyramid'—built … by that branch of the descendants of Noah, the enterprising sons of Ham, from whom I am descended. The blood seemed to flow faster in my veins. I seemed to hear the echo of those illustrious Africans. I seemed to feel the impulse from those stirring characters who sent civilisation into Greece—the teachers of the fathers of poetry, history, and mathematics… I felt lifted out of the commonplace grandeur of modern times; and, could my voice have reached every African in the world, I would have earnestly addressed him in the language of Hilary Teage—
> 'Retake your fame!' (*West Africa to Palestine* 104-5)

Noting that there was "a lot going on in this chunk—race, identity, history," Professor Hanretta asked for a discussion of its salient features.

Participant: In that moment he seems to be connecting himself with the flow of things (tribes, etc.) much larger than himself.
Hanretta: Yes, he has gone from his own experience to a global experience; there's a massive opening up of scope of vision.

Participant: He's defining blackness as continental, anything coming from Africa. Northern Africa is conflated with blackness.
Hanretta: There is an insistence on Egypt being part of Africa.

Participant: The fact that he referred to "European genius"—had he previously thought only Europe had genius?
Hanretta: Just as his experience of race has gone from individual to global, so his definition of genius is broadening.

Participant: How much at this point were they aware of Timbuktu and other fabled societies in Africa? Were they at all familiar with that history or was it just a vague rumbling occasionally heard? You've described them as being kind of isolated on the coast. Because I could se him having the same experience from encountering those.
Hanretta: It's quite interesting—in the 1840s an interest in Africa begins to return, and Blyden's reading about Timbuktu and Ethiopia, but it's significant that he chooses to travel not to Timbuktu but to Cairo and Jerusalem: there's something about his interest in Islam that *makes* him want to go to the Middle East, despite being a deeply committed Christian.

Participant: The way in which he situates a racial group seems the most circumscribed part of his reaction: he's viewing civilizations that weren't Christian at all.
Hanretta: What we see a lot in Blyden's thought is fragments: early claims of Afrocentrism, also a biological understanding of race, or bloodline; then also a biblical way of thinking ("sons of Ham"), referring to the passage in the Old Testament about Noah's three sons, Japheth, Shem, and Ham. The European interpretation of that story—Ham's curse, the idea of being a descendant of Ham being a way of talking about racial inferiority: black people are cursed by God. So part of Blyden's thought has to do with reclaiming the sons of Ham—only the sons of *Cain* are cursed. It's so wrapped up in theological disputes.

The next excerpt described Blyden, flushed with excitement over his "perilous adventure," feeling he has earned the right to carve his name beside the hundreds on either side of the entrance, which he does, along with the date and the word "LIBERIA," remarking that "[t]here is a tolerable certainty, therefore, that the name at least of that little Republic will go down to posterity." His somewhat melancholy idea was that even if this "little Republic," this experimental attempt at nurturing black self-determination, should fail, the *idea* of it will go down to posterity, linked forever to this pyramid and to the civilization that bore it.

> I felt that my perilous adventure [in the Pyramid] had given me the right of inscribing my name among the hundreds which I saw engraved over and on each side of the entrance, bearing dates as early as the sixteenth century. … I engraved, not far from a name dated 1685, the word LIBERIA, with my name and the date – July 11th, 1866—immediately under it. There is a tolerable degree of certainty, therefore, that the name at least of that little Republic will go down to posterity. (*West Africa to Palestine* 112)

Q:

How did this American corporation get the land? War? Or nobody cared, so they just walked in?
A: There were a lot of military conflicts, involving the British and others; a violent edge is part of colonialism always: how do you impose yourself on an economy and land while trying to make common cause with it? It's a complicated process. It wasn't until the coup in 1980 that Liberia had its first president not of American descent; Liberia has been hugely bound up with the U.S. throughout.

Q: Was the British colony in West Africa earlier?
A: Sierra Leone was a little earlier. It was an attempt to get the impoverished free black population out of London. Freetown was sort of a model, there's a relationship between Freetown and Liberia.

Q: As to race as a 19th-century concept: how far back does the light/dark issue go? Isn't that a 19th-century interpretation of the Bible?
A: In the 19th century there was an emergence of a mixed-race African elite, middle-men in the slave trade, defining people by the light/dark contrast. I'm not an Americanist, so I don't know how or when it manifests in America, but there definitely was a time in the 19th century when the understanding of race crystallizes around this—Linnaeism, Darwinism, race as a phenotype. . . . Color gets mapped onto those kinds of distinctions; it was mapped onto the Caribbean and Brazil as well as Africa pretty early on.

After undergoing this revelation as to his ancestral blackness, Blyden goes to Jerusalem, where he further rethinks his ideas about race, attempting to reconcile his sense of racial distinctiveness with a religious identity superseding race. The third excerpt unfolds Blyden's conception of the relative youth vs. age, and vigor vs. exhaustion, of various races.

> [It] is by no means improbable that the … [African] race… is of comparatively recent origin. And this will account for their wonderful tenacity of life, and their rapid increase, like the youthful and elastic Hebrews of old, amid the unparalleled oppressions of their captivity. While the American Indians, who were, without doubt, an old and worn-out people, could not survive the introduction of the new phases of life brought among them from Europe, but sunk beneath … the vigorous hand of the fresh and youthful Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic races, the Guinea Negro, in an entirely new and distant country, has rather delighted in the change of climate and circumstances, and has prospered, physically…
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> We may conclude, therefore, that as descendants of Ham had a share, as the most prominent actors on the scene, in the founding of cities and in the organisation of government, so members of the same family, developed under different circumstances, will have an important part in the closing of the great drama. (*West Africa to Palestine* 109-10)

According to this line of thought, the "African" race is "of comparatively recent origin," and accordingly vigorous, like the "youthful and elastic Hebrews of old," whereas American Indians were "without doubt, an old and worn-out people," all but smothered by "the vigorous hand of the fresh and youthful Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic races"; while the "Guinea Negro, in an entirely new and distant country, has rather delighted in the change of climate and circumstances, and has prospered, physically." He concludes that, just as the descendants of Ham were noteworthy participants in the founding of ancient cities and governments, so that "same family" would play an important part in "the closing of the great drama."

Q: When he refers to "Guinea Negro"—
A: We know that Blyden was deeply anti-racist, but this was the common understanding of history at the time: when Africans were brought to the New World, they tended to thrive physically, compared to American Indians, who were perceived as moving toward extinction. There's no analysis of the economics or health or anything; it's just something about blackness conducing to survival, while something about the American Indians pointed in the other direction. It's a bit hard to reconcile to his moral commitment.

Q: It's a form of global evolution: it's a great problem of slavery that people who lived through it were the cream of the crop, and therefore survived.
A: Blyden hadn't yet encountered Darwin (though he would, and they'd have an interesting connection), but he's moving toward thinking about races as biological entities (which can be either old or young).

Q: I wonder if he's working out his relationship with hinterland Africans; i.e., going [to?] Africa and getting strong and civilized as an explanation for his difference from native Africans.
A: That's interesting: having experienced this challenge in this new environment sets him apart. He has an interesting read on whiteness, that racism is a deep problem but serves a useful historical purpose by shaking Africans out of their complacency, and supplying them with Christianity and "European genius" to facilitate their developing their own.

Q: The choice of Europeans is interesting—Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic: we kicked the French out, whereas the Anglo-Saxons and Teutons are just kicking along.
A: It's a fascinating thing about the book, his development in traveling of a typology of Europe: Englishmen were anti-intellectual businessmen, etc. It's a Western Hemispheric way of thinking.

Q: Blyden sees Africans as old Jews [in terms of the similarity of their sufferings].
A: Exactly right: he frequently compares slavery to the Babylonian captivity and uses biblical references, despite his own anti-Semitic sentiments ("Won't it be nice when the Jews convert to Christianity?").

Q: Did he see himself as a Muslim?

A: Not so much but he exerted a tremendous influence on an early 20th-century guy who does, Marcus Garvey, a deep reader of Blyden's work. Blyden has huge echoes—on Du Bois, on every black intellectual.

Q: What's with this "sons of Ham?"
A: It's a biblical construct: from Ham are descended the Africans, from Shem the Semites, from Japheth the Caucasians. Blyden says the pyramids were built by sons of Ham who had not at that time developed the characteristics we associate with Africans now, thus distinguishing the sons of Ham from black people: "members of the same family, developed under different circumstances. . . ."

Moving on to his second moment of revelation, in Jerusalem, Blyden in the final excerpt declares that while what he experienced at the Pyramids was a "worldly" frustration at the "persevering efforts in modern times to ignore" his people's ancient accomplishments, in Jerusalem he partook of a universal exultation "shared by every son of Adam who has been made to rejoice in the light of the gospel."

> What I felt [at the Pyramids] … was of the earth…drawn from worldly considerations … dwelt upon at length, because there have been such persevering efforts in modern times to ignore the participation of the African descendants of Ham in the great works of ancient civilisation. But here [in Jerusalem] the emotions I felt were such as are shared by every son of Adam who has been made to rejoice in the light of the gospel….(*West Africa to Palestine* 157-8)

Q: It sounds like he's become a Universalist.
A: Certainly in the sense of Christian universalism, which he sees as being higher, more enlightened, and less worldly or political than the racial perspective.

Q: I think he's becoming more Christian; I thought he was wavering back in Cairo, and might have become a Muslim, but now that he's in the Middle East he's become Christian again.
A: It's fascinating because Blyden was constantly working with and for missionaries, and constantly having to defend his Christianity, but it is perceptible in his description of Cairo: he's kind of overwhelmed.

Q: The turn of phrase "who has been *made* to rejoice" is kind of an echo of the experience of Africans coming to the Western Hemisphere and being *made* to rejoice in the gospel.
A: Equiano, the anti-slavery writer, calls for epic forcible colonization/Christianization of Africans. So does Blyden—but it's really *God* making them do that, the intertwining of the political and the religious.

Q: Did he think Adam was black?
A: I think he would say that Adam predates, or transcends, that sort of racial differentiation; racial differentiation is a historical phenomenon. If asked what Adam looked like he'd hedge, but he'd say those racial categories only come after Noah.

Q: Did he have difficulty getting his education?
A: He was largely self-taught. He learned Hebrew and Latin while studying the Bible. He was constantly being told by white folks, "Oh, you're the most educated black person I've ever met."

Q: Did he view Christianity as a racial equalizer? A means of redeeming oneself [for the complicity in the expulsion from the garden lodged in the phrase "every son of Adam"] and becoming a better person?
A: Blyden would say, on a theological level, absolutely; but it's historically problematic. He was deeply critical of missionaries, and felt people should become Muslims first, because if they became converted by racists it would be worse than nothing—a stance which gets him into trouble.

While Blyden was a humanist, linguist, and writer, his close friend Benjamin J.K. Anderson possessed a more scientific mind, and as such was sent by the Liberian government on voyages to the interior, to make treaties and explore and generally learn about the Africans.

Two excerpts from Anderson's 1870 writings about those travels were read and discussed. The first alludes to the "superior physical appearance" and "natural intelligence" of the Mandingo people, while relating their extreme displeasure at Liberian penetration of their lands.

> The Mandingoes have always excited the liveliest interest on account of their superior physical appearance, their natural intelligence, their activity and their enterprise. No one has passed unnoticed these tall black men … in whose countenances spirit and intellect are strongly featured…
>
> Nothing is more dreaded, and especially by the BoporuMandingoes, than the penetration of the interior by the Liberians…
>
> To a force without artillery … [the capital of the BoporuMandingoes] would give some trouble…
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> [The King of the BoporuMandingoes] began with my Congoes. Every means that language and signs could produce was used to frighten and discourage them. They were told of the wars in the path… My carriers, who had hitherto shown willingness and obedience, now began openly to disobey my orders; and my difficulty was greatly increased from the fact that I had not been able to get a single civilized person to accompany me. I had no one, in consequence, to confer with, or to assist me in watching the movements of my mutinous Congoes. (*Journey* 5-6, 11, 15, 17-18)

Anderson describes the Boporu Mandingo king's apparently successful attempts to intimidate "[his] Congoes" (Africans who had been enslaved in Congo, captured by the U.S. Navy, and freed on the coast of West Africa, whom Anderson employed as porters), whose subsequent mutinous behavior afforded him great inconvenience.

In the second excerpt, however, he describes the Mandingoes as being susceptible to persuasion and assimilation, and praises their high level of civilization, literacy, decency, and cordiality, and commending the respect this Muslim people accorded the "loud orisons" of a Baptist member of his entourage.

> [The Mandingoes] are quick and intelligent, easy to be managed by persuasion, and they offer to Liberia a more speedy prospect of assimilation and union than any other tribe… A strong moral advantage is already gained, from their being a reading and writing people, practicing a communication of ideas and an interchange of thought by means of the Arabic. They have a natural reverence for learning… No rudeness, no indecent and wrangling intolerance, was ever shown during my stay among them. No difference of religion ever made them diminish the respect, attention, and hospitality which they conceived were due me. One of my Congo carriers is of the Baptist persuasion, and he used to make himself heard every morning… by loud orisons. Still, our Mohammedan Mandingoes said nothing. It was respected as a prayer, and it was known to be a Christian prayer. (*Journey* 107)

Participant: He definitely feels superior to the Africans: "*my* Congoes."
Participant: Yes—it seems these quotes could easily have been written by white colonialists in Africa.
Hanretta: Yes, white conquerors talk exactly this way. "*My* Africans" are clever and intelligent, but easily manipulable; one has to be careful with these clever, shrewd Africans, because we'll need them but [we can't really trust them.]

Participant: It reads like a classic explorer's narrative, where the explorer assumes himself to be superior to, in this case, people of the interior, but once he interacts with them, the tone's still condescending but he's impressed by their intelligence and respect for other religions. He's still condescending but now impressed, relative to his earlier impression of them as savages.
Hanretta: It's an interesting kind of tightrope he's walking. I encourage every one to read Blyden front to back, but not so with Anderson—there's a lot of deadly boring blather. Every moment of Blyden's text is incredibly rich; you have to work to pull out the nuggets from Anderson, but those nuggets are really interesting. On the one hand he's inherited the colonialist way of thinking about the world, but on the other hand he wants to see Liberia unified with Africa.

Participant [responding to Anderson's comment that the capital of the Boporu Mandingoes "would give some trouble" to "a force without artillery]: "to a force without

artillery" seems to say that a good deal of his superiority derives from his *technical* superiority to the Africans. Is this concept carried out through the rest of the book?
Hanretta: He's looking with a surveyor's eye, a tactician's.

Participant: There's this racial hierarchy: him, then Mandingoes, then Congoes; where would he place "his Baptist"?
Hanretta: I agree completely: there are these subtle differentiations, very different from Blyden, who's thinking in sweeping terms—Anderson's dealing with nuts and bolts, this group vs. that group.

Participant: He sounds isolated; most white explorers—any explorers—are part of a team without whom they can't do their job.
Hanretta: There's been this flashpoint of recent controversy, this debate of reconciliation—how to deal with Liberian history, the history of Americo-Liberians moving out, conquering space, securing territory: Africans are sort of negative space. But in Liberia *today* they're about 98 percent of the population. There's been a recent critique of using "Liberian" to mean "Americo-Liberian," this outcry: "Wait a minute—we're *all* Liberians! We were here for centuries!" "No, you were Mandingo and [other West African tribes] before." "Well, my ancestors were Anderson's porters and guides." The idea of *who is a Liberian*, where does that idea come from. There are conflicting ideas of taking Africans into Liberia vs. pushing Liberia out into Africa. Where is our [Liberians'] history, whose history is it—it's similar to the historical problems occurring elsewhere in the world (e.g., the U.S.); what does it mean to be part of a race, in the American sense? It becomes this global thing. You'd have thought that in Africa the topic of blackness would become moot, but no.

Participant: Was Blyden aware of the idea of Ethiopia, Falasha, with the Afro-Hebrew concept contributing to his notion of Afro-Islam?
Hanretta: I'm unsure about that. The Falasha definitely had an influence on African American's Nation of Islam and radical thought. He was aware of the myth of Prester John, the mythical Christian kingdom hidden away somewhere.

Participant: It seems like a story of redemption. Malcolm X's father was a Garveyite
Hanretta: Blyden makes a claim about the suitability of Islam for Africa *now;* the Nation of Islam deletes the historical moment idea, but is also influenced by Blyden. I don't know if Malcolm X read Blyden, but certainly others did.

Participant: It seems like Blyden at the pyramids had an "aha moment," but his writing before was a self-justification: "See, I was right!"
Hanretta: Accounts of revelatory experiences are written *after* they take place. How transparent is this in terms of describing what Blyden actually experienced in Cairo? It's a complicated question. Anderson's text is workaday, plodding along, but Blyden's is a complicated historical document.

Participant: Since he was such a prolific scholar, do we have diaries, etc.?

Hanretta: Blyden's personal papers are not available; nobody knows what happened to them. Liberia became a bit of a mess and he went to Sierra Leone, then Sierra Leone became a bit of a mess. We have some letters back to the ACS, a couple hundred letters, many on microfilm in the Berkeley library, some in the ACS in Washington, D.C. Blyden hasn't been worked on as much as his stature would cause you to suspect.

Participant: With Blyden speaking of Africans being "recent," how did he [reconcile that idea with the existence of the very old civilization whose artifacts he had seen]? Also, when talking about trips to the "interior," where specifically are you talking about, and which of the twenty-some tribal groups were among those visited? Also, there's quite a bit of documentation about the huge death rate of people living on the west coast of Africa; how does that high mortality rate figure into the narrative of the Americo-Liberians?
Hanretta: Part of why Blyden carved "LIBERIA" into the pyramid was a sense of the fragility of the Liberian experiment, how liable it was to fail. Liberia was a slow-moving disaster from the outset, constantly bankrupt, people dying . . . unless you have the sickle cell gene, when you go back to Liberia you die of malaria. Blyden hadn't integrated epidemiological of Atlantic communities—why people are dying here but not there—but it plays into his sense of the colony's fragility.

Most explorers were moving into areas directly north of Liberia, because they were competing with the French and the British, who wanted to restrict Liberia to Monrovia. The process by which other groups were brought in was complicated; Freetown was the intellectual hub of West Africa in the 1850s, 60s, and 70s, more than Monrovia was.
As far as older races, there was a clear sense of Hebrews and American Indians being powerful when they were young but now spent, in contrast to the Africans and Anglo-Saxons.

Primary Sources:

Edward W. Blyden, *From West Africa to Palestine* (1873)
http://books.google.com/books?id=gjsKAQAAIAAJ

Benjamin J.K. Anderson, *Narrative of a Journey to Musardu* (1870)
http://archive.org/details/narrativeofjourn00anderich

Good secondary sources:

Hollis Lynch, Edward Wilmot Blyden: *Pan-Negro Patriot, 1832-1912* (Oxford, 1970)

James Fairhead et al., *African-American Exploration in West Africa: Four Nineteenth-Century Diaries* (Bloomington, IN, 2003)

Major figures:

Edward W. Blyden, 1832-1912
Benjamin J.K. Anderson, 1835-1910
Stephen Allen Benson, President of Liberia, 1856-1864
Edward James Roye, President of Liberia, 1870-1871

Timeline of events:

1816: American Colonization Society formed
1820: "Liberia" founded
1847: Liberia becomes independent republic
1855: George Seymour's first exploration trip
1858: Seymour's second trip; James Simms's first exploration trip
1866: Blyden in Egypt and "Syria" (Lebanon, Israel, Palestine)
1868: Benjamin J.K. Anderson expedition to Musadu
1872-3: Blyden departs on explorations of inner Sierra Leone
1874: Benjamin J.K. Anderson return to Musadu

Americo-Liberian explorers

George Seymour 1855-1858 (Liberia, Guinea)
James Simms 1858 (Liberia)
Benjamin J.K. Anderson 1868 and 1874 (Liberia, Guinea)
William Spencer Anderson 1870 (Liberia)