An Ironic Downfall

The victory of bullied underdogs over their arrogant counterparts is a classic tale. Helene Cooper’s 2008 memoir, *The House at Sugar Beach: In Search of a Lost African Childhood*, describes a cyclical series of events that begins and ends with this story. Through her own eyes as a young girl growing up at the top of a classist, racist society, Cooper recounts her view of the rise and fall of the Americo-Liberians, beginning in 1820 when her African-American ancestors first arrived in Africa and founded the country of Liberia. Although Cooper never comes to this realization, the arrogant Americo-Liberians were ultimately responsible for their own demise. Gordon Allport’s ideas about reference groups, in-groups, and out-groups work to explain how people can come to see themselves as superior and thus also explain the irony in Cooper’s story: African Americans came to Africa to overcome social inequities in America, but instead immediately became oppressors nearly identical to those they were so eager to escape. The disastrous results of this irony reinforce the importance of avoiding the cycle of the oppressed oppressing others.

The African-American founders of Liberia pioneered an attitude that would corrupt the attitudes of generations of Americo-Liberians after them. These founders, freed slaves and free African Americans, had intentions of starting a new life away from racial discrimination in America, especially as it was epitomized in the American Plantation system. Their motives to enlighten the people of an unknown land, however, quickly turned into a sense of superiority over the Native Africans. Contrary to their hopes of escaping further indignities, these founders experienced immediate dissonance with the Native Africans, who partook in a still-booming
transatlantic slave trade, which, according to Cooper, the founders took “as another sign of their superiority to the native Africans, [an attitude] which would persist for decades to come” (34). The settlers also came with an extravagant vision of their new lives, which aligned eerily with the lives of the plantation owners they had so sought to escape; the Plantation owners had become the settlers' reference group. Gordon Allport, author of “The Formation of In-Groups” and “Prejudice and the Individual,” defines a reference group as “a group in which the individual wishes to be included” (35). American Plantation owners—having wealth, land, power, and everything the colonists could want—served as a reference group for the colonists, who, being a minority struggling against the dominant white Americans, aspired to live the way they did. Allport explains this kind of identification, finding that “the member of an ethnic minority tends to fashion his attitude as does the dominant majority…. It exerts a strong pull on him, forcing attitudinal conformity” (302). The colonists’ separation of themselves as superior to the Native Africans eventually resulted in the ironic re-creation of the American Plantation society in Liberia. James Ciment, author of Another America: The Story of Liberia and the Former Slaves Who Ruled It, identifies this recreated Plantation society as “the only social and political order they knew, that of the antebellum South—[but] with themselves as the master class” (xvii). This was an unfortunate and twisted way to start their new lives. With their previous persecutors as their model, the colonists were building on shaky ground.

The elitist Cooper family is the result of decades of progress in the questionable direction that the founders first began. Helene Cooper describes her family as direct descendants of Elijah Johnson and Randolph Cooper, key players in the founding of Liberia (29). Her parents, Calista Dennis Cooper and John Lewis Cooper Jr., are thus the epitome of upper-class Liberians and, along with other descendants and later arriving African Americans, they create and maintain the
racist, classist society that is Helene’s in-group. Allport explains that the best way to define an in-group is to say that "members all use the term we with the same significance" (295). The Coopers, then, are part of this dominant in-group, which Helene Cooper calls “royalty” (36) because they are directly related to the founders. Allport says, “a reference group [can also be] an in-group that is warmly accepted” (300). The Coopers, priding themselves on their heritage and always striving to live up to their ancestors’ greatness, align themselves with their ancestors as both their reference group and their familial in-group. It only follows that, like their ancestors, they aspire to the American lifestyle. Allport goes on to say that “an in-group always implies the existence of some corresponding out-group” (304). Seeing what Cooper calls the inferior “Country People” as a threat to those she calls the “Congo People” (6), the descendants close their ranks to include only their own elite. Allport explains this as well: “the presence of a threatening common enemy will cement the in-group sense of any organized aggregate of people” (305). Calista and John Cooper, along with the rest of the Congo People, band together, with the Country People as their common enemy. The Coopers—despite knowing their ancestors’ original intentions in coming to Africa—take ironic pride in this familial in-group, as they continue to live as if they were superior to the Native Africans.

Allport's ideas help to explain how groups and individuals come to see themselves as superior to others, and how, as the daughter of John and Calista Cooper, Helene is the most ironic example of upper-class condescension. At the age of seven, she possesses amounts of haughtiness and disdain that seem largely disproportionate to her young age. She unabashedly calls her house on Sugar Beach “the Cooper family’s perfect and perfectly grand paradise” and deems it “a testament to the stature of [her] family in a country where stature mattered, sometimes above all else” (11). Helene is completely unaware of her own blatant displays of
condescension. She is a good example of Allport’s finding that “In every society on earth the child is regarded as a member of his parents’ group” (295). Unlike her founding ancestors, Helene is born into her privileged in-group. She has what Allport calls an “ascribed status” as opposed to her ancestors’ “achieved status” (296). Helene is true to what Allport says about in groups: “we live in them, by them, and sometimes for them” (305). Like everyone else in her in-group, Helene reveres her reference group (expanded by the founders’ descendants to include all of Western society), explaining, “In Liberia, a ‘been-to’ meant you’d been to America or Europe…. In my fantasy, I looked fresh and hip and American or British as I swept off the plane after a year living in the States or London” (17). She also describes her mother as having Western Culture's and thus Liberia's “ultimate symbol of beauty in Liberia: long, silky, soft, white people’s hair” (13).

Helene’s sense of self depends fully on her membership in the upper-class, and her world is founded on its discrimination and prejudice against the Native African lower-class. To her, in Allport’s words, “whatever the family is, is ‘right’” (419). Allport explains this, writing that “prejudice is not inborn but acquired” (418) and elaborating that “much prejudice is caught rather than directly taught” (418). At various points in her memoir, Helene talks about the disdainful aspects of her society without a second thought. She mentions parts of her life that continue to mimic the Southern Plantation life her ancestors escaped from when she says, “In Liberia, servants are called ‘boys’….no matter how old they are” (20). She even imitates her mother’s complaints about the servants: “I got’ de same problem m’self, I tell you…. I asked Old Man Charlie to cook palm butter and he cooked Casava leaf!” (8). Helene, like her parents, is well aware of her ancestors’ original aims. In fact, she even reflects, “those two men [her ancestors] handed me down a one-in-a-million lottery ticket…. None of that American post-civil
war/civil rights movement baggage to bog me down with any inferiority complex” (29). However, her self-inflated sense of superiority—“Let everybody else try to be equal to me” (29)—and the fact that she can live such prejudice on a daily basis, without a second thought, shows the irony of her “caught” prejudice: the Congo people define themselves by their ancestors’ initiative to come to America, and yet they exemplify the flipside of the discrimination they are so proud to have escaped.

The Americo-Liberian Congo People fail to see their world coming apart before their eyes. Helene, too, is oblivious to the implications of ominous unrest. Her ignorant naivety reflects the attitude taken by Congo rulers; Congo People, in all their self-importance, failed to foresee any harm befall their ruling in-group. Helene reflects, “For years, I had thought Liberia was one of the few peaceful countries where disasters did not occur…. As the forgotten pot of water got hotter and hotter, I took no notice” (145). Neither did anyone else, and in April 1980, Native-African soldiers, led by Samuel Doe, stormed the Executive Mansion and killed Congo President Tolbert (Cooper 165). After years of being the ostracized out-group, the Native-African Liberians were now on top. And yet, the Congo People, after years of fortifying their in-group and chasing their reference group, still failed to see how they had become the same kind of people their ancestors escaped from, and thus how they caused their own demise.

The events that follow effectively drive home the irony of Helene’s ignorance. She recalls how her mother was raped (175), her Uncle Cecil was executed (185), her father was in the hospital with a gunshot wound (188), and Helene, her sister, and her mother departed Liberia for America in May 1980 (191). Helene and her family flee, but they never once harbor any thought or regret for the role they have played in this continuing ordeal. Ciment fills in the details: the tyrant Samuel Doe waged war against the Americo-Liberians, and, although Doe
falls, he is replaced by Johnson, who simply takes on Doe’s position of cruelty (251-52). The horrors of the Liberian Civil war that follow, involving the brutal forces of Johnson and then Taylor, drugged child soldiers, and elders forced to dig their own graves (Ciment 251-52), suggest the bleak conclusion that there could be no end in sight to the cycle of the oppressed becoming the oppressor.

However, the fortitude of a group of determined Liberian women represents a bright spot against a backdrop of darkness. Led by Liberian social worker Leynah Gbowee, these women had no intention of accepting such a conclusion. Gina Reticker’s 2008 film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* tells of the inspiring determination and courage of these women in saving their country from further violence. The women first join together in unity themselves—Christian and Muslim, rich and poor—and then they gain the involvement of the men, who they see as the instigators of the war, by commencing a sex strike. Eventually, with non-violent protest after protest led by Leymah Gbowee, they convince President Taylor to attend peace talks and agree to a cease-fire. As Ciment happily notes, 15,000 UN peacekeepers finally stepped in, signaling the start of happier years for Liberia, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected president of Liberia (255). In Reticker’s film, Leymah Gbowee describes Sirleaf’s election as the “icing” on the “cake” of the Liberian women’s mass movement to peace. Unity in the face of destruction, then, is Liberia’s alternative to the ironic cycle of group-based social inequities and subsequent violent revolt by the underdog. The horrific events of the Liberian civil war and the women’s initiative to take alternative action serve to reinforce public knowledge about both the consequences of prejudice and the importance of never surrendering hope for peaceful unity, even in the worst of times.
Works Cited


