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Black Lives in Limbo: Liberian Refugees, Migrant Justice, and the Narration of Antiblack U.S. Border Politics

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Abstract: The Trump administration's attacks on immigrant communities, especially undocumented people, produced major policy reversals on temporary humanitarian relief programs, such as the termination of Deferred Enforced Departure (DED). While these policies have had wide-reaching impacts across communities of color, within the broader immigration debate, the experiences of Black migrants have often been overlooked. This paper asks the following questions: How did extremist policies impact Black migrants under the Trump administration? What vulnerabilities did these policies produce or exacerbate? What do these efforts tell us about the "turn" toward authoritarianism in U.S. politics? Applying antiblackness as a theoretical framework, this paper conducts a content analysis of media outlets to examine the impact of extremist policies on Liberian DED beneficiaries. The ramifications of these policies intensified pre-existing antiblack dynamics of belonging and exclusion within the state by reinforcing racial hierarchies, producing social exclusion and vulnerability to state violence, and maintaining constrained access to citizenship. In assessing the many ways that antiblack racism manifests for citizens and non-citizens alike, we can extend our understanding of migrant justice, racial justice, and anti-imperialism as interdependent struggles in the face of rising authoritarianism.

Keywords: immigration; racial justice; migrant justice; black politics; border politics

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1. Introduction

The far-right political parties gaining in popularity globally are doing so, in part, by taking a hard stance on immigration. In the United States, as a central component of President Donald Trump's platform (2016–2020), anti-migrant policies, legislation, and sentiment rose exponentially at various levels of civic and political life. Though racist nationalism and the violence it incites have long been facets of American life, their resurgence within mainstream politics has heightened the vulnerability of already marginalized communities. Given the ways antiblack racism reifies U.S. citizenship, immigration, and border politics, its implications for Black migrants deserves greater scholarly attention.

This article asks how did extreme policies impact Black migrant communities under the Trump administration? What vulnerabilities did these policies produce or exacerbate? What do these efforts tell us about the "turn" toward authoritarianism in U.S. politics? I explore these questions through the experiences of Liberian beneficiaries of Deferred Enforced Departure (DED), a temporary humanitarian relief program which faced termination under the administration, alongside Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS). I present a content analysis of various media outlets, particularly interviews of Liberian DED participants, considering the influence of public testimonies on public understanding, and recognizing the significance of witnessing and storytelling in the immigrant rights movement.

DED, as a humanitarian relief program, operates under executive discretion, allowing for the provision of temporary protection to countries facing crises, including armed conflict, natural disasters, public health emergencies, and other short-term scenarios. It

is important to note that, though many left Liberia as a result of a U.S.-backed coup which plunged the country into a brutal civil war (1989–2003), DED beneficiaries are not legally recognized as refugees as defined by international law. The term "refugee" is used here to signify displaced persons, including those without any status (Espiritu et al. 2022). While the program provides relief from deportation and access to driver's licenses and work authorization, it does not provide a pathway to permanent residency. The beneficiaries of temporary relief programs have remained under this status for decades. According to Cecilia Menjívar, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) participants, under the authority of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), lived in the U.S. for an average of 20 years (Menjívar 2017). The Trump administration's attempt to dismantle these minimal protections for long-term foreign-born residents served to jeopardize any semblance of protection and stability, introduce new challenges, and exacerbated existing vulnerabilities.

I focus on Liberian DED beneficiaries for three reasons. First, this group represents one entry point into the varied subjectivities at the intersection of an anti-migrant and antiblack political sphere. Second, Liberia's 19th-century founding as a U.S. colony for the racist displacement of Black Americans and the protection of white supremacist society, exemplifies the antiblack and colonial logics foundational to U.S. citizenship, immigration, and border politics. Finally, unlike the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), though still under threat, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and DED are lesser-known programs among the public. All three programs were slated for termination by the Trump administration; however, advocacy groups were able to challenge the terminations of DACA and TPS through court injunctions. During this period, Liberia was the only country designated for the DED program, meaning that the administration's policy decisions related to the program and the outcome of advocacy efforts would exclusively impact Black beneficiaries.

This study found that extremist policies impacted Liberian DED participants by reinforcing racial hierarchies, intensifying social exclusion and vulnerability to state violence, and maintaining constrained access to citizenship. These findings are important because they highlight the ongoing and deep entanglements between antiblack racism and the U.S. immigration system. Moreover, in the context of an administration with authoritarian aspirations, these findings give insight into the function of antiblack racism in bolstering authoritarianism—systematically creating the issues by which the nation-state is supposedly burdened in order to legitimize, reinforce, and expand antiblack border politics. Thus, this study not only underscores the systematic marginalization of Black migrants, but also illuminates how antiblack racism serves as a critical tool for perpetuating authoritarian control and legitimizing oppressive border policies within U.S. immigration.

This article begins by providing the historical and political context, situating Liberia's history in relation to antiblack U.S. immigration policy and U.S. foreign policy, which are connected to the contemporary displacement of Liberian DED holders. The subsequent three sections look closer at the experiences of Liberians facing the termination of DED under the Trump administration. I examine media interviews of DED beneficiaries and the themes raised within them to understand how they contended with far-right xenophobic discourse seeking to reinforce racial hierarchies. The following section examines how policies like "extreme vetting" work to produce social exclusion and exacerbate vulnerability to state violence. The final section interrogates how a punitive political climate maintained limited access to citizenship despite a legislative victory through the passage of the Liberian Refugee and Immigration Fairness Act (LRIF) in 2019.

I write this article as both a researcher and an experiential expert, drawing on my personal experience as a Liberian-American who was formerly undocumented during childhood, a former holder of TPS and DED, and a beneficiary of the LRIF. I have also actively participated in national advocacy campaigns challenging the termination of DED and advocating for broader legalization pathways, and am a named plaintiff in *African Communities et al. v. Trump et al.*

2. Literature Review

This article contributes to the scholarship on the intersection of racial and migrant justice, focusing not only on the complex lived experiences of racialized migrants, but also the power structures that shape those experiences. By centering Black migrants in the U.S., this article utilizes antiblackness as a theoretical framework with which to address a system that is more specific than the generalized idea of racism faced by migrants, many of whom are people of color. Antiblackness allows us to explore the structural and ontological realities of the modern world—a deeply embedded and adaptive feature of contemporary social dynamics in which Blackness is categorized as "other", or less than human (Kretsedemas and Gow 2024). Antiblackness calls attention to the enduring legacies of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, patriarchy, and other interlocking systems of white supremacy, urging us to take these ongoing processes seriously.

From this vantage point, antiblack racism has been integral to the formation of the U.S., shaping its citizenship, immigration, and border politics. Central to this, though highly overlooked, has been the regulation of Black mobility, rooted in slavery and the imperative to control the movement and labor of free and enslaved Black people. Simone Browne, for example, directly links border regulation and the focus on certain identity documentation to the history of African enslavement, arguing that these "technologies concerned with escape" were designed to surveil and control the movement of Black people (Browne 2015). As U.S. expansionism in the 19th century continuously reconstituted its borders, measures such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the deployment of patrols to the U.S.–Mexico border to prevent Black escape, and the proliferation of Black exclusion laws in newly incorporated states were not incidental but fundamental to the processes of U.S. state formation and border enforcement (Walia 2021; Barber 2023). As such, as described by Robyn Maynard", . . . a North American border-regulation regime structured, in the past and present, toward Black disposability, emphasizes the relationship between U.S. borders as a site of racialized control, the denial of Black citizenship and mobility, and antiblackness in North America more broadly" (Maynard 2019, p. 125).

The nexus between Blackness and U.S. immigration is particularly revealing in the context of contemporary immigration enforcement. Karla M. McKanders asserts that the foundational immigration laws, and their lack of constitutional protections, have not only led to their outsized enforcement on Black immigrants, but are part and parcel of U.S. national efforts to ensure Blackness itself as the border of citizenship (McKanders 2021). Tanya Golash-Boza's study of Jamaican and Dominican male deportees provides an example of this racialized enforcement and criminalization, which disproportionately subjects Black and Latino youth to deportation (Golash-Boza 2017). In the convergence of racial and migrant justice, it becomes evident that the broader systems of criminalization and their discriminatory impact on Black people are not merely incidental, but by design.

In this light, addressing antiblackness and exploring the possibilities of Black freedom remain urgent, and raise the importance of solidarity as a critical strategy (Lindsay 2015; Palmer 2017). A recent work by Kretsedemas and Gow (2024, p. 11) maintain that "It is more important to consider how antiblackness can be used to explain the present-day migration regime, rather than figuring out how to better include Black people in discourses on immigration that take the non-black migrant as their default starting point". This approach is particularly vital given the adaptive nature of antiblackness, which in the U.S., compels immigrants, including Black migrants, to distance themselves from Blackness and Black Americans in order to reinforce racial hierarchies. By centering antiblackness, a broader analysis emerges that will help to foster solidarity and coalition building toward collective liberation.

3. Historical and Political Context

Connecting the present displacement of Liberians to antiblack racism's foundational role in U.S. citizenship, immigration, and border politics requires turning to a few key historical moments. First, the expansion of plantation slavery in the 19th century deeply

influenced U.S. society and politics. Faced with a growing, free Black population, coupled with fears of slave revolts, white resistance to Black integration animated the debate about a colonization scheme (Alexander 2011, 2022; Power-Greene 2014). Liberia's founding by the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1822 underscored the common ground that white elites, including abolitionists and enslavers, found on the question of Black deportation. Despite gaining formal independence in 1847, Liberia remained subject to Western political domination within a global imperial order "of unequal international integration that took an increasingly racialized form in the late 19th and early 20th centuries", as theorized by Adom Getachew (2019, p. 9). Situating Liberia's founding within a colonial framework highlights the country's complex historical position as both an outpost of U.S. political interests and a site of Black self-determination.

Second, national independence in 1847 enabled the consolidation of political power among the minority settler class of elites, known historically as Americo-Liberians. Collaboration between the Liberian elites, who linked their self-interest with the imperial powers, and the U.S. often developed at the expense of the country's indigenous populations. This alignment facilitated U.S. corporations' exploitation of land and labor, as well as strategic military relationships (Mitman 2021; Pailey 2023). President William V.S. Tubman's "Open Door Policy" during his administration (1944–1971) further exemplified this dynamic by promoting foreign investment, which stimulated domestic development and alleviated some political inequities between the settler elites and the majority indigenous population; however, economic inequalities remained. Consequently, this relationship between the settler elites and U.S. foreign interests continued a troubling legacy of economic and social disparities at multiple levels.

Lastly, President William Tolbert pursued a new direction for the country, following Tubman's death in 1971, in the context of the Pan-African struggle, by advocating for political and economic independence through socialism. His agenda emphasized the end of capitalist exploitation, Pan-African unity, and establishing ties with the Soviet Union, among other leftist policies. This new direction raised tensions between the United States and the Liberian government, as the U.S.'s Cold War interests prioritized ensuring that decolonizing nations align with capitalism and U.S. liberal democracy over Soviet communism. In 1980, the indigenous military sergeant Samuel K. Doe led a successful coup d'etat and established a new government with assistance from the U.S., which increased foreign aid from USD 20 million to USD 80 million between 1979 and 1982 (Gershoni 2022). When the relationship between Doe's repressive regime and the States deteriorated, another coup, led by Charles Taylor who was of Americo-Liberian descent, in 1989 (following his escape from prison in the United States), plunged the country into a brutal civil war from 1989 to 2003. The first half of the war alone claimed an estimated 250,000 lives, internally displaced 1 million people, and forced at least an additional 850,000 Liberians from their homeland (Kieh 2016).

Amid the broader global political unrest during this period, the George H.W. Bush administration established humanitarian relief programs, such as DED and TPS, in 1990. More specifically, the development of these programs were directly tied to U.S. intervention in Latin America, such as the backing of a brutal anti-communism dictatorship in El Salvador, which forced one-sixth of Salvadorans to flee (Mountz et al. 2002). Mountz et al. (2002) noted that granting asylum to those fleeing the U.S.-supported repressive regime would have contradicted U.S. Cold War policies. This history, though not singular, underscores how U.S. foreign policy has functioned as a driver of displacement, generating migrants from the very sites of its own imperial interests. As such, Liberia's civil war, fueled by instability linked to U.S. foreign policy in Africa, with its own particular logic, allows for some parallels to be drawn.

Policy experts have noted that the number of Liberian DED holders has been difficult to determine because the informal status does not require registration. Over the course of the war, the U.S. formally resettled an estimated 23,500 Liberian refugees (Weine et al. 2011) However, for those who were displaced but could not make asylum claims, among other

reasons, the Bush administration granted TPS to about 10,000 Liberians in 1991 (National Immigration Forum 2021). In 1999, President Clinton authorized DED for Liberians for the first time. In 2007, President George W. Bush terminated TPS for Liberia, allowing Liberian TPS holders to transition to DED. However, based on the 2007 count of registered Liberian TPS holders, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), along with other experts, estimated that there were about 3600 Liberian DED holders who had resided in the US since the 1990s, by the time President Trump announced the termination of DED in March 2018, citing Liberia's ability to "adequately handle the return of its nationals" (United States Government Information 2018; Vasquez 2018).

The connection between Liberia's founding as a U.S. colony for antiblack displacement and its civil war epitomizes how the histories of colonialism and U.S. foreign policy have shaped migration. Social scientists and legal scholars are contending with how the colonial past can help us rethink our understanding of contemporary migration as it relates to the unequal relationships between the Global North and South (Mablin and Turner 2021; Achiume 2019). The processes enabling who gets to move, how, and why remain constrained not just by the colonial past, but by ongoing cycles of colonial domination. In the case of Liberia, the need to preserve U.S. national and economic interests rooted in its identity as a white settler colonial state, the utility of the settler class allies friendly to imperial interests in the colony, the extension of U.S. power through corporations, and the forging of obstacles against socialist advances, link the past and present. As such, the maintenance of hierarchies of power perpetuates the ongoing processes of structural inequalities at the heart of migration and displacement.

4. Findings

4.1. Reinforcing Racial Hierarchies

> So interesting to see 'Progressive' Democrat Congresswomen, who originally came from countries whose governments are a complete and total catastrophe, the worst, most corrupt and inept anywhere in the world (if they even have a functioning government at all), now loudly . . . and viciously telling the people of the United States, the greatest and most powerful Nation on earth, how our government is to be run. Why don't they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came. Then come back and show us how . . . it is done . . . (Trump 2019)

In July 2019, President Trump publicly targeted four women of color lawmakers in a series of tweets, despite their all being U.S. citizens, and three of the four born in the United States. His racist attacks on House Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY.), Ilhan Omar (D-MN), Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), and Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) reflected far-right ideas that people from marginalized communities are the source of political, economic, and social problems. The age-old racist retort directed at people of color to "go home", with Black people told to "go back to Africa", emphasizes how people of color, including Black Americans, have existed outside the bounds of American national identity and belonging. Harsha Walia (2021, p. 196) analyzes Trump's message, and its broader ideological roots, as racist retorts which "casts racialized people as perpetual outsiders, erases Indigenous nations, normalizes European colonization, reproduces anti-Black racial order, and is the ideological basis for all deportation policies". This underscores the idea of racialized citizenship, defined in the U.S. through the lens of whiteness, that the far-right seeks to normalize.

In response, immigrant rights activists in the States have challenged narratives of exclusion in varied ways. Slogans, such as "Home is Here" and "We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us", highlight a counter discourse which asserts belonging. These slogans underscore the deep ties to the communities in which undocumented people inhabit. Most importantly, activists have highlighted how state formation and border politics have arbitrarily divided communities. This issue is particularly pertinent for Indigenous, U.S., and Mexican nationals living transborder lives. However, as noted

by Afro-Indigenous immigrant rights organizer and scholar Alan Pelaez Lopez in their reflection of their experience in the movement, pushing back against narratives of exclusion by emphasizing immigrant productivity and worthiness can concede to antiblack and ableist tropes—the very narratives justifying exclusion in the first place (Lopez 2018).

As such, Black immigrant rights organizers have forged their own narratives that address the experiences of their communities. For instance, African immigrants are more likely to have arrived by plane and become undocumented through visa overstays. This is partly why the implementation of the 2017 "Muslim Ban" by the Trump administration had a significant impact on Black immigrants. By banning foreign nationals from seven Muslim-majority countries, almost half of which were African countries, the "African Ban" was simultaneously Islamophobic and antiblack. Even within the immigrant rights movement, Black organizers have lamented non-Black organizers' willingness to compromise on issues that primarily affect Black immigrants, such as family visas and the diversity lottery, in exchange for broader immigration reform (Palmer 2017, pp. 108–9). Thus, the narrative interventions that Black immigrants have forged to counter the far-right discourse is critical for highlighting the many dynamics at play.

Media interviews with Liberian DED beneficiaries reveal at least two major themes that indirectly respond to dominant notions about race, citizenship, and belonging. Firstly, parents highlighted the cynical choice forced upon their children to choose their parents or U.S. citizenship, as Liberia did not offer dual citizenship at the time. In one interview, a U.S. citizen daughter remarked, "That would mean that my mother would have to physically be removed out of my life, and I'd have to continue on. I can't even explain how I would react" (Donovan-Smith 2019a). Another article reported that for one beneficiary, "Above all, she worries about uprooting her two young daughters, who are U.S. citizens. For a time, she considered having them stay with relatives in the Midwest, but she says she can't stand the idea of leaving them behind" (Donovan-Smith 2019b). A Liberian minister echoed these sentiments, stating "Once and for all, our children can know that they belong here, that their families will not be removed, and their parent will not leave them behind" (Pugmire 2019). Further emphasizing the deep social ties Liberians had established, another beneficiary stated "'We've worked here, we've paid our taxes, we have homes here. We don't want our children to be put in the system here. We have tried our honest best to work here and not be dependent on the system" (Torbati 2019).

These testimonies highlight the emotional and practical dilemmas faced by DED participants, underscoring the deep social ties prevalent in immigration advocacy, while exposing the indignity of being asked to leave after decades in the States. The administration's decision to terminate the program conveyed the sentiment that, after 27 years of "temporary" relief, Liberian DED beneficiaries had overstayed their welcome. Remaining in the country, from this perspective, would not only betray the goodwill extended, but refusing to accept further displacement would exploit a government program and impede access for supposedly more "deserving" immigrants in the future. For the far-right, ending birthright citizenship avoids these complications, expedites the removal of people outside their imagining of the nation, and discourages migration. As such, the 14th amendment's citizenship clause, established to remedy the centuries-long denial of Black American citizenship, remains an obstacle to legitimizing far-right "blood and soil" claims to Indigenous land. In highlighting the question of race and citizenship, the testimonies recall the specific history of family separation rooted in Black enslavement that is largely overlooked within the broader outcry against family separation in immigration advocacy. In this instance, the testimonies heighten awareness that the implementation of these programs' termination could deny Black citizen children their constitutional rights. Yet, as the latter quotation shows, at times they still give in to narratives of immigrant worthiness that seeks distance from the stigma of supposed Black dependency.

Another prevalent theme from the media interviews highlights the reality that after decades of extensions and renewals with no direct pathway to citizenship, many DED beneficiaries had not visited Liberia since their departure. One beneficiary's daughter, a

DACA recipient, commented, "To be somewhere for 18 years and to not know if you'll be here next year is very hard . . . Especially if you've been away from your home for such a long time. It's very scary" (Rinaldi 2018). Another beneficiary remarked, "I have a son in Liberia. I left him when he was 2 years old; he's 21 now. I haven't seen him, not because of the technology—we Facetime and such and such—but because the way it is now, I could go to Liberia now, but I won't be able to come back because I don't have the status that would let me in and out" (Walsh 2019). Their statements highlight the deep disconnect between their lives in the U.S. and the homeland they have been unable to return to, all while lacking a clear path to citizenship. Moreover, this dilemma demonstrates the complex realities they face, especially within multi-status households, when their experiences and ties diverge from the simplistic narrative of a straightforward "return".

Most significantly, when the Trump administration conceded to public pressure and extended DED in 2019 for another year to allow for an "orderly transition", the administration's own immigration policies already represented an impediment. Relief program beneficiaries have the ability to pay an application and processing fee to apply to travel abroad through Advance Parole, a USCIS-granted travel document allowing for return to the States. However, the administration's overall efforts to dismantle legal migration (one such policy which will be explored further in the next section) rendered "going home" in an orderly manner unfeasible, even for those who might have desired to return.

4.2. Producing Social Exclusion under "Extreme Vetting"

The Trump administration's immigration policies often provoked spectacle and outrage, but it is equally important to recognize the subtle changes to mundane procedures that significantly impacted everyday life. Scholars have defined attrition as the practices and policies that make daily life for undocumented communities so difficult that people are compelled to self-deport (Thronson 2011, p. 245). These practices may include workplace and home raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), among others. I argue that the policy of "extreme vetting" also constituted a form of attrition, because of the ways its implementation threatened people's ability to provide for themselves and their families in tangible ways, thereby subjecting them to new forms of vulnerability and seeking to exclude them from full participation in society.

Extreme vetting referred to a proposed set of more stringent screening procedures for immigrants and visitors to the United States, especially from countries identified as "risks". Policies included enhanced background checks and other additional security measures. While the implementation of extreme vetting was uneven, if not ever fully realized, there were still clear bureaucratic shifts and decreasing transparency from immigration agencies. Notably, the historic delays in the processing of immigration-related applications by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) (American Immigration Lawyers Association 2019).

In 2019, I interviewed three DED and TPS beneficiaries for a media outlet, who lived in various parts of the country, to share how significant processing delays for their employment authorization document (EAD) had impacted them. I summarized their situations as follows (Kiazolu 2019).

> Peter, a New Jersey media professional from Liberia, described the added difficulty of waiting six months for a new work authorization document while looking for full-time work. He states '[The process] is not logical and it's an inconvenience, especially a financial inconvenience.' He received his new work authorization just 15 days before it expired again.
>
> Amal, a New York healthcare worker from Sudan, was out of work for six months [and] also waiting for [a] new work authorization. As the only source of income for her household, the delay caused substantial stress. She reached out to African Communities Together, a New York-based immigration advocacy organization, which assisted her in securing an attorney to resolve the matter.

> Rose is a former New York union representative from Liberia. Currently, she is retired. She has also relied on support from African Communities Together. The organization helped her apply for a new employment authorization which not only took 7 months to arrive, but was backdated and only valid for 3 months. Since then, she has been battling with the Social Security Administration, which has temporarily reduced her monthly income to [USD 0] due to the lapse.

The consequences of these delays are compounding, affecting employment opportunities, income stability, access to healthcare, and eligibility for social security benefits, among other crucial aspects of daily life. Since the validity of EADs are linked to driver's licenses, delays in obtaining EADs further hinders individuals' ability to navigate bureaucratic hurdles. Relatedly, efforts to grant broader authority to state and local police, transforming routine encounters into immigration enforcement matters, pose a significant risk of exacerbating racial discrimination and civil rights abuses.

Rose's experience underscores both the extensive nature of processing delays and their impact on senior citizens—a demographic often overlooked in the immigration discourse, which predominantly focuses on youth. Her story raises another unseen problem: for seniors who may desire to return to their country of origin after years of contributing to American social benefits programs, doing so is not a feasible option. The Social Security Administration (SSA) prohibits non-citizens from collecting benefits while out of the country for more than six months, effectively forcing individuals to forfeit their contributions if they choose to leave. While this SSA policy is not a consequence of extreme vetting, it does reveal the reduced economic agency of seniors.

Together, their stories demonstrate how significant changes to mundane procedures, which largely go unnoticed by the public, are part of a broader assault on immigrant communities. That these changes make routine procedures more difficult and, in turn, strain the capacity of immigrant rights organizations that individuals rely on for assistance, should also be seen as part of the broader assault. Ultimately, people are forced to pay for increasingly expensive services they cannot utilize, with little avenue for recourse. For relief beneficiaries, like TPS, DED, and DACA delayed EADs suspends a person's ability to earn income, maintain employment, and participate overall in the formal economy. As we endeavor to understand these matters in an increasingly authoritarian political sphere, which seeks to make more categories of people vulnerable to detention and deportation, it becomes evident from these examples that policies such as extreme vetting restrict people's choices and coerce them into subjugated social categories.

4.3. Punitive Governance and Constrained Citizenship

The passage of the Liberian Refugee and Immigration Fairness Act (LRIF) in 2019 represents, to date, a rare legislative victory creating a long-awaited pathway to citizenship. Black immigrant rights organizations, including African Communities Together, the UndocuBlack Network, the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI), and the Haitian Bridge Alliance, among many others, have been instrumental in unveiling and contesting arbitrary practices and policies that disproportionately impact Black immigrants. This challenge has included advocating for permanent protections through congressional action. Despite facing a broader antiblack immigration system during the Trump administration, Black immigrant rights organizations made strides in enhancing public awareness and mobilizing support for racial justice and immigration reform, including the passage of the LRIF. However, the enactment of the LRIF highlights how a punitive political climate can not only constrain protections as well as access to citizenship, but reify the structures of displacement. For Liberians with DED, this meant the LRIF was limited in its ability to reach its full estimated number of beneficiaries.

Liberians with DED secured permanent protections through the LRIF in 2019. This milestone was particularly significant for the program participants because, unlike TPS and DACA, which were sustained through court injunctions, the DED lawsuit was dismissed in court (United States Government Information 2019a). Originally slated for termination

in March 2019, and potentially the first among a series of program terminations, heavy advocacy from the Liberian community, immigrant rights groups, congressional allies, and the general public likely contributed to the Trump administration's decision to grant a one-year extension (Presidential Memoranda 2019). In December 2019, the LRIF, initially sponsored by Senator Jack Reed (D-RI) and introduced to every Congress since 1999, was included in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 under "other matters". The LRIF provided eligible Liberians who had been present since 2014, along with other criteria, including the lack of a criminal record, the opportunity to apply for permanent residency and citizenship.

While this development was far from guaranteed, certain aspects of the Liberian case may have contributed to this headway, particularly those related to Liberia's unique position in the American political imagination. Some advocates emphasized that Liberians on DED had been in the U.S. for over two decades, consistently provided their information to USCIS, which made them visible and "familiar" to the system. As a small West African country, Liberian immigrants as a whole in the U.S. make up just 4.7% of the African immigrant population, while Nigerian immigrants make up an estimated 18.8% in comparison (Lorenzi and Batalova 2022). For Liberian DED recipients in particular, the low estimates of 4000–10,000 beneficiaries, including potentially eligible family members, meant a relatively small number of applicants for the LRIF. Additionally, because the LRIF mandates "continuous physical presence beginning on 20 November 2014", it effectively limited eligibility to those who were present before the Obama administration's 21 November 2014 designation of Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone for TPS due to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa (Department of Homeland Security 2014). This stipulation ensured that the already narrow eligibility pool could not expand to include Liberians displaced due to a public health crisis, which was further exacerbated by a strained post-civil war healthcare infrastructure.

Additionally, the emphasis on Liberia's 200 year relationship with the U.S. focused not on a history of Black self-determination, but rather a colonial logic that values exposure to Western systems. Relatedly, although Liberia's population includes Muslims and practitioners of other religions, it is a predominantly Christian nation with English as the country's official language. Put otherwise, Liberia's "Americanization" is seen as a factor that enhances Liberians' perceived assimilability.

The LRIF and its enactment revealed the limitations of expanding citizenship protections within a punitive governance framework. First, the calculated inefficiency of institutions like the USCIS under the Trump administration, and the pervasive climate of fear emblematic of punitive governance, hindered the success of the LRIF during its initial one-year window. Its rollout during the COVID-19 pandemic created financial and logistical challenges, but these matters were further exacerbated by significant USCIS backlogs and mishandling. The Immigration Legal Resource Center noted that "The lack of government outreach and the impact of the pandemic discouraged applications during the first year. In addition, overly burdensome documentation and other requirements imposed by USCIS, as set out in the USCIS policy manual in 2020, have not only deterred applicants, but also resulted in "Requests for Evidence" (RFEs) which contravened congressional intent" (Gleason and Block 2021). The Biden administration agreed that "The LRIF application process was hampered by a slow launch, cumbersome procedures, and delays in adjudication" and extended the deadline for an additional year through the Consolidated Appropriations Act (2021) (Presidential Memoranda 2021). Even after the original one-year deadline, only about a third of the estimated 10,000 beneficiaries submitted applications (Congressional Research Service 2021). Considering the logistical challenges, advocates attending to the varied fears of community members (particularly those with past police encounters), the exorbitant application and potential legal costs associated with applying for permanent residency for an individual—especially for families, and the already capped application pool, the inclusion of a needless deadline represented yet another obstacle.

Lastly, the LRIF's inclusion in a "must pass" defense authorization bill made its passage possible. This bill, allocating USD 738 billion for national security, further bolstered

U.S. militarism, perpetuating the cycle of war and the displacement of people worldwide (United States Government Information 2019b). Though the LRIF represented a crucial step forward in addressing the needs of Liberians with DED in particular, the prevailing political landscape, characterized by punitive governance and militarism, demonstrated the ways in which such a context seeks to force trade-offs between those inside and those outside of the imperial core. In all, the LRIF's passage and execution has significant implications, as organizers, advocates, and allies continue the struggle for expansive immigration protections for undocumented communities, and push for racial and migrant justice.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this article explored the impact of extremist policies under the Trump administration on Black migrant communities, focusing on the experiences of Liberians affected by the termination of DED. It demonstrated how antiblack racism underpins U.S. citizenship, immigration, and border politics. As one of the earliest groups to benefit from humanitarian relief programs like TPS, Liberians' displacement is deeply intertwined with the legacies of colonialism and contemporary migration dynamics. An analysis of media outlets content demonstrated that the impact of these extremist policies sought to reinforce racial hierarchies and produce social exclusion. Even securing permanent protections through legislative action demonstrated their limits under punitive governance. In an increasingly authoritarian political climate, understanding how antiblackness demonizes, dehumanizes, and otherizes Black communities illuminates the mechanisms through which social differences are produced and authoritarian power is consolidated. Confronting these challenges necessities, in part, a fundamental reevaluation of power structures and ideological frameworks at the intersection of anti-racism, anti-imperialism, and migrant justice, within a broader struggle for collective liberation.

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