

Immigrant Experiences: Helene Cooper

Helene Cooper emigrated from Liberia in 1980 as a child.

In my fantasizing about attaining “been-to” status...by living in America...I dreamed I would become a career girl and stride down the streets of Minneapolis turning the world on with my smile. Or maybe...end up in Los Angeles, like...in Charlie’s Angels, running around beaches in my bikini, jumping into my convertible when Bosley called.

When we climbed aboard Pan Am 150, we were privileged, elite Congo people. When we arrived...we were African refugees....

Aunt Jeanette and Bridget and Gabriel met us at the airport and took us to their ranch-style house.... Mommee shared Aunt Jeanette’s bedroom; I shared Bridget’s; Marlene shared Gabriel’s. As resident refugees, Knoxville took on a different personality. It was no longer an exotic vacation spot where we spent two weeks running around buying hair perms and shampoos to take back.... Instead, it now seemed like a place where I was trapped, a prison far from home....

Mommee seemed to be healing. I heard her talking to Jeanette a couple of times about what happened at Sugar Beach, but as soon as they caught me eavesdropping, they stopped talking. In August 1980, just days before the start of the new school year, Mommee found an apartment nearby for us to move into.... Our new home was as different from Sugar Beach as a squat shrub from a tall cypress.... Sharing a room with Marlene should have felt familiar because we often slept in the same room at Sugar Beach. But in Knoxville, at night when we both retired to our twin beds on each side of the wall, there was a cavernous emptiness in the room.... Mommee tried to make it homey. On the first day of school, she turned up the heat...even though it was only September, and still hot.... When I came home that afternoon, the very warm apartment smelled like Jiffy corn muffins and vegetable barley soup, American-style. I immediately yearned for Old Man Charlie’s Liberian pepper soup.

Marlene was already home. Mommee had been called to pick her up from school early after she had gotten into a fight with another girl in her fifth grade class.... The girl had walked straight up to Marlene and said, “You’re from Africa, so you must steal.” Marlene had replied to the girl, who was black, “You’re from Africa, too.” “No, I’m not, I’m from Detroit!” With that, the girl punched Marlene....

Being in Knoxville felt like straddling two worlds. There was my physical world, with the monotony of going to a school every day where no one talked to me.... Then there was the world in my head, the one in Liberia, pre-April 12, 1980. That was the world I cared about, the world that I missed so much. That was the world filled with beautiful ripe smells—of dried fish and tropical flowers. That world was filled with people I knew and people who knew me. It was filled with a deep-to-the-bone knowledge that I was somebody and I came from somewhere, a world that Elijah Johnson and Randolph Cooper and my ancestors had built from scratch through blood and sweat. Would we ever get to go back?... Who was in my pink room at Sugar Beach?

I didn’t think about the post-April 12, 1980 Liberia, the one that we’d lived in for a month before running away. In my head, Liberia was the Liberia I’d known before the coup.... I could see the Liberian flag, with its eleven red and white stripes, and it’s one Lone Star....

But we had deserted it. At the first sign of trouble, we’d run away. We were refugees.

“Mommee, are we refugees?” I asked one evening. “Absolutely not.”

“What makes us not refugees?”

“Because we paid for our own plane tickets.”

Thomas Dublin, *Immigrant Voices: New Lives in America, 1773-2000*, (Urbana: IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 227-241.

Immigrant Experiences: Mary Paik

Mary Paik emigrated from Korea in 1905 at age six.

One afternoon...I saw two strange men...walking toward our house.... They were Japanese officers and wanted...our home to house their soldiers.... It felt as though the sky had fallen on us. The only choice was to leave that night or stay and live with the soldiers in our home, which no one wanted.... As our family ate dinner they talked about disturbing rumors from other parts of the country....

It took several days and nights of walking with very little rest.... We could only bring our bedding, clothes, and food for the journey.... There happened to be two ships in Incheon harbor, sent by owners of sugar cane plantations to recruit workers.... If a man signed a contract to work for one year, he and his family would be given free passage...wages [of] fifty cents per day, working from dawn to dusk. Father signed on, and...we went to Hawaii....

Life in Hawaii was not much different from in Korea because all the people I came in contact with were Orientals. I don't remember seeing white people...not face to face.... We arrived with only the clothes on our backs and our bedding. We lived in a grass hut, slept on the ground, had to start from scratch....

After his year in Hawaii was up, Father borrowed...to pay for our passage to America.... We landed in San Francisco.... As we walked down the gangplank, a group of young white men were standing around.... They laughed at us and spit in our faces...called us names we couldn't understand.... I was so upset. I asked Father why we had come to a place where we were not wanted.... He explained that anything new or strange causes fear at first, so ridicule and violence often result. He said...what we must try to do here in America—study hard and learn to show Americans that we are just as good as they are. That was must first lesson in living, and I have not forgotten it....

In those days, Orientals were not allowed to live in town with the white people. The Japanese,

Chinese, and Mexicans each had their own little settlements outside of town. My first glimpse of what was to be our camp was rows of one-room shacks...and little sheds for outhouses. We learned later that the shacks had been constructed for the Chinese men who had built the Southern Pacific Railroad.... I used a block of wood for my pillow. It became such a habit that even to this day I do not like a soft pillow.... There was no gas or electricity....

When I told Father that I needed a coat to wear.... He made a beautiful red coat for me; I was so happy to wear it.... When I asked Mother how Father could do such a wonderful thing, she smiled and said that...Father was an expert tailor in Korea. He studied to be a minister and had taught the Korean language to missionaries, but tailoring was how he made a living.... [In California] Father found a job as a janitor in nearby apartment buildings....

My first day at school was a frightening experience.... None of the students except one spoke to me.... One day, she asked if I would like to go to church with her.... I asked my Father about it. He said, "Why not? Maybe times are changing." He was always [an] optimist.... As we neared the church, a man stood in the doorway.... He said, "I don't want dirty Japs in my church." My reply was, "Would it make any difference if I told you we are not Japanese but Korean?" He said, "What's the difference? You all look alike to me...." In time they all... discovered that we, too, were human beings.

I noticed that there was no one to sweep the schoolroom, so I went to the company office and talked to the supervisor. He...listened to my story. I told him that I wanted to earn enough money to buy my books when I got to high school. He decided to hire me. My job was to clean the blackboards, sweep out the room, chop the wood for the stove, keep the outhouse clean, and ring the school bell at 8:30 A.M. [for] twenty-five cents a day....

Thomas Dublin, *Immigrant Voices: New Lives in America, 1773-2000*, (Urbana: IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 159-161.