

Introduction

From the Revolution to the Civil War, white Americans entertained the strangest of notions: their black compatriots, who comprised one-fifth of the population in 1770 and still one-seventh by 1860, could, would, and should leave the United States for some other land. Stranger yet, the same blacks whom whites thought too degraded to ever form part of the American nation would civilize other peoples, thanks, ironically, to the American influences that they had imbued.¹ That belief was called “colonization,” at once an ideology, a movement, and, most famously, the eponymous project of the American Colonization Society (ACS), established in 1816–17.² In the 1820s, the northern reformers and southern slaveholders who had founded the ACS secured a settlement in west Africa for black Americans, which they named Liberia. Although these “colonizationists” – that is to say, the supporters of colonization, as distinct from the colonists themselves – would be the best-known face of the movement, the ACS (and Liberia) was far from the only scheme (and location) that Americans had in mind. Indeed, the major contribution of this book is to chronicle the full geographic and institutional range of the drive for black resettlement.

In the labor-hungry Americas of the nineteenth century, it was remarkable that a movement to expel part of the workforce even existed,

¹ Hugh Davis, “Northern Colonizationists and Free Blacks, 1823–1837: A Case Study of Leonard Bacon,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (1997), 662; Samuel E. Cornish and Theodore S. Wright, *The Colonization Scheme Considered* (Newark, 1840), 15–16.

² Eric Foner, “Abraham Lincoln, Colonization, and the Rights of Black Americans,” in Richard J. Follett et al., eds., *Slavery’s Ghost: The Problem of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore, 2011), 34.

let alone inspired humanitarians, politicians, and the public.³ That lesser-known manifestation of “American exceptionalism” reflected a combination of demographic, economic, and intellectual factors peculiar to the United States and its cultural hinterland (in certain respects), Canada.⁴ Uniquely among the western Atlantic polities that permitted slavery by 1861 (which otherwise meant Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Surinam), the United States saw its enslaved population keep growing by natural reproduction – the only way that it *could*, once Britain and the United States had each banned the transatlantic trade in 1807–8. Although ending the slave trade was the obvious complement to removing those foreign “Africans” (in reality, African Americans) already present in the United States, that virtual precondition might not have sufficed, on its own, to encourage so many white Americans to try exiling their black neighbors.⁵ But the United States of the long nineteenth century was also blessed with the bulk of Europe’s emigrants to the Americas, a demographic luxury that allowed politicians from the northern states (where slave agriculture was less significant than in the southern states) to agitate for the western territories of the ever-receding frontier to be reserved for white settlers, who would shun living alongside black competitors.

Congress endorsed that “free soil” impulse with the Northwest Ordinance (1787), banning slavery from those territories east of the Mississippi that would become Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin, as well as with the Missouri Compromise (1820), banning slavery from those territories west of the Mississippi (gained from France in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803) that lay above 36°30′N. Granted, at the same time, Congress allowed slavery to expand into the southerly lands where the institution would prove more valuable. Moreover, the federal government could not prevent any *state*, as a territory became once admitted to the Union, from exercising its sovereignty by adopting slavery. Despite congressmen’s concessions to southerners’ property

³ Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (New York, 2009), 140; Alexis de Tocqueville and Henry Reeve, trans., *Democracy in America* (New York, 1839), 373–4.

⁴ Nicholas Guyatt, “Tocqueville’s Prophecy: The United States and the Caribbean, 1850–1871,” in Jörg Nagler et al., eds., *The Transnational Significance of the American Civil War* (New York, 2016), 205–6, 221.

⁵ Christa Dierksheide, *Amelioration and Empire: Progress and Slavery in the Plantation Americas* (Charlottesville, 2014), 27.

Introduction

3

rights, however, advocates of slavery's expansion found themselves on the ideological defensive until the late antebellum period.

Political debates over slavery had assumed such an antislavery default because they were steeped in an Anglo-American tradition of abolitionism (in its limited, pre-1830s sense), which had emerged as a formal movement on both sides of the Atlantic during the American Revolution. By the 1770s, many white Americans, north and south, agreed that slavery was inefficient compared with free labor. (They would doubt that piety after 1793, when the invention of the cotton gin birthed a new slave economy, and dismiss it after 1834, when the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies nearly destroyed the old sugar industry.) They also thought bondage unrepugnant, by depriving slaveholders of the economic independence required of virtuous citizens, and unchristian, by denying that God had “made of one blood all nations of men,” as the Bible had it. Yet while metropolitan Britons could emancipate their colonial slaves without having to live alongside them, and while ancient slaveowners could manumit those whose servile status had never been based on racial difference, white Americans felt unable to do either.⁶ In the words of the slaveholder, intellectual, and third president, Thomas Jefferson, “among the Romans, emancipation required but one effort. The slave, when made free, might mix with, without staining, the blood of his master. But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture.”⁷ For the rest of his life, Jefferson worried about the “blot” of America's own black population, and supported colonization – at least, notionally.

Jefferson's concerns were echoed by other white Americans, who embraced black resettlement whenever they probed the social, cultural, and racial foundations of their nation. During the nineteenth century, thinkers throughout the Atlantic world moved from an inclusionary, civic understanding of nationalism, in which the nation comprised all men (though usually not women) who attested shared political values, to an exclusionary, ethnic one, in which the nation comprised those united by lineage, language, and religion. Despite African Americans' claims to a *cultural* Anglo-Saxonism, ethnic definitions of the American nation self-evidently left less room than the civic one for a racial minority whose ancestors had, in fact, usually arrived in the United States earlier than had

⁶ David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York, 2006), 176.

⁷ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Boston, 1802), 199.

whites'.⁸ (Moreover, even the civic definition could exclude former slaves, whom, Jefferson alleged, bondage had left unfit to participate in politics.)⁹ While an increasingly diverse range of European immigrants precluded the narrowly Protestant, British-descended homogeneity that nativists desired, virtually all white men could agree, unsurprisingly, that their government should be one of, by, and for white men. And in reality, compared with those countries south of the Rio Grande, it *was*. The precursor colonies of the United States had been settler colonies, dominated by white immigrants who had dispossessed Native Americans and imported Africans only as slaves, so white Americans could just about contrive to treat “race” in (literally) black and white terms. By contrast, the Spanish and Portuguese colonies had been conquest colonies, in which limited numbers of Iberian immigrants had, by necessity, formed interracial relationships. Accordingly, Latin American norms acknowledged a smoother spectrum of color, though with the darkest-skinned still at the “inferior” end, than did Anglo-American mores. That was why, even as white “United Statians” (a term that this book ultimately avoids) attempted to expel their black compatriots, Latin Americans contemplated, albeit with misgivings, extending a home to the putative exiles.

It takes no expert to surmise that white Americans’ expulsive impetus, though ever present in US race relations, was almost always a frustrated one. Indeed, that fact imbues the movement for black resettlement with its true significance, for that very record of failed colonization efforts attests to whites’ inability to imagine a biracial society outside, and sometimes even within, the framework of black slavery. Yet Euro-Americans also discerned mechanisms other than colonization for “whitening” the United States, even as African Americans grew in number from 750,000 in 1790 to 4,500,000 in 1860 (of whom 4,000,000 were slaves). Where slavery had once seemed an obsolete institution, which the states from Pennsylvania northward had, by 1804, moved to extirpate, a viable US cotton industry from the 1790s sealed the fate of the Southwest as a land defined by bondage. Moreover, Congress’s territorial restrictions of 1787 and 1820 were matched by its acquiescence in slavery’s expansion

⁸ Dale T. Knobel, “‘Native Soil’: Nativists, Colonizationists, and the Rhetoric of Nationality,” *Civil War History* 27 (1981), 325; Paul Quigley, *Shifting Grounds: Nationalism and the American South, 1848–1865* (New York, 2011), 6, 31; Jay Rubin, “Black Nativism: The European Immigrant in Negro Thought, 1830–1860,” *Phylon* 39 (1978), 199–200.

⁹ Brian Steele, *Thomas Jefferson and American Nationhood* (New York, 2012), 180–1.

Introduction

5

into more lucrative lands, while the Compromise of 1850 and Kansas–Nebraska Act of 1854 removed the Missouri Compromise’s 36°30’N prohibition altogether.¹⁰ But the workings of the internal slave trade, which drained slaves from the cornfields of Maryland, Virginia, and Missouri to the cotton plantations of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, achieved much of what the booster-colonizationists of the upper South had desired.¹¹ The one-way traffic that characterized the internal slave trade had been ensconced by the US ban on new slaves from Africa, and so underpinned the main alternative to colonization, known as “diffusion.” This was an idea that Virginians had articulated as early as 1798 and that became popular during the sectionally charged debates of 1820 over the admission of Missouri as a slave state. Diffusion, southern congressmen claimed, would not only save them from a growing population of restive blacks in the older states, but hasten emancipation by spreading slavery too thinly for it to survive.¹²

Yet if the logistics of mass colonization perplexed racial separatists, so did the sophistry of diffusion, which would expand slavery in order, supposedly, to weaken it. Diffusion also came with a deadline: it could work for only as long as the United States had space.¹³ By the 1840s and 1850s, expansionists proposed the obvious answer, not caring much whether US troops or unauthorized “filibusterers” annexed the independent states of Central America and European colonies of the Caribbean. Part of the expansionists’ logic was their pseudo-scientific belief that black people gravitated toward the tropics, which was to endorse a form of diffusionism with which colonizationists could agree – only, where the former envisioned blacks in the tropics in a state of slavery, the latter did so in one of freedom.¹⁴

Given the speculative basis of all ideologies of US expansion, there could be no clear sectional alignment on the merits of annexationism, its southern tinge notwithstanding. Even South Carolina’s most famous exponent of proslavery and states’ rights, Senator John Calhoun, opposed seizing the whole of Mexico following the Mexican-American War

¹⁰ Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, 2014), 8, 29–30, 155.

¹¹ Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York, 2009), 73–6; Walter Johnson, “The Future Store,” in his *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven, 2004), 20.

¹² Dierksheide, *Amelioration and Empire*, 44–7. ¹³ Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 277.

¹⁴ Robert E. Bonner, *Mastering America: Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood* (New York, 2009), 32–7.

(1846–8), because of the difficulties that he perceived of incorporating a large ethnic minority into the Union.¹⁵ In the 1850s, his fellow inhabitants of the Palmetto State, James Henry Hammond and James De Bow, worried that the expansion of American slavery into the tropics would accelerate the drain of slaves from the upper South, and so disturb the delicate political balance between free and slave states.¹⁶ Indeed, whites' debates about distributing black people over space engulfed late antebellum politics. Historians should not treat the relative importance of its distinct (but overlapping) schools of thought as a zero-sum consideration: it was no coincidence that the campaigns for territorial slavery, black colonization, tropical expansion, and even the reopening of the Atlantic slave trade all peaked in the 1850s.¹⁷

In light of America's unknowable future at mid-century, it was also no coincidence that the practically hardest, but intellectually simplest answer to the "race question," black expatriation, garnered the support that it did from political centrists. Self-styled moderates prayed that the venture would unite the sections of North and South, not only by removing the ostensible source of antagonism between them, but also by requiring material sacrifice from each. Statesmen lauded a scheme that, moreover, combined a lofty providential fantasy – that, with initial help, African Americans could replicate the self-sustaining migration that had driven oppressed Europeans to America – with the political malleability of its avowed focus on free blacks.¹⁸ For a proslavery planter in the lower South, that might mean the few local freepeople, whose anomalous example risked prompting his own slaves to rebel; for a booster in the upper South, that might mean the slaves on his own plantation, or even those throughout the state, freed in waves and on condition of their emigration; and for an evangelical in the North, that might mean every slave in America, freed and sent to Africa to bring Christianity, civilization, and commerce to the presumably benighted natives. And despite their critics' refrains, colonizationists could contend that mass removal had become more viable, not less, by 1850. If the spread of slavery had, in

¹⁵ Steven Hahn, *A Nation without Borders: The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830–1910* (New York, 2016), 139–40.

¹⁶ Lacy Ford, "Reconsidering the Internal Slave Trade: Paternalism, Markets, and the Character of the Old South," in Johnson, *Chattel Principle*, 154–60.

¹⁷ Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), 399–406.

¹⁸ Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876* (New York, 2007), 183–94.

Introduction

7

one respect, made the work of resettlement harder, then the decrease in African Americans as a proportion of the population, the growth of charitable organizations, a string of favorable political precedents (such as Indian removal), and the emergence of superior forms of transport (such as the steamship) had at once made it easier. Who was to say that colonization could not succeed?¹⁹

Lots of people, it turned out – not least the inhabitants of those countries that were supposed to accept African American immigrants. Across the Atlantic world, foreign governments and those acting in their name (whether authorized or not) beheld with everything from horror to elation what one Colombian described as an impetus “entirely peculiar” to the United States.²⁰ The two countries populated and governed wholly by black people, the west African republic of Liberia and the West Indian autocracy (usually) of Haiti, welcomed African American immigrants – the former having no existence without them. Meanwhile, the two contiguous neighbors of the United States, the republic of Mexico and the British colonies that comprised Canada, had little choice but to accept African American immigrants, often fugitives from US slavery. But more distant lands could exercise greater control in the matter. Although the rulers of the heterogenous states of Ibero-America scrutinized any influx liable to darken the population, the administrators of the struggling post-emancipation European West Indies grasped at any prospect of additional labor, while, however, comparing the merits of African Americans with those of “free” (in reality, bonded) workers from Africa, China, and India.

Furthermore, both national and imperial governments moved to restrain the commercial, often US-based interests that lobbied for the migration of black Americans, since such investors were too often willing to risk diplomatic crisis for personal gain. Stakeholders unilaterally surrendered geostrategic locations and sovereign prerogatives to American actors, or blithely risked the host polity’s relations with the southern section of the United States – during the Civil War, a power in its own right, the Confederacy. Before 1861, foreign recruiters of African Americans might incur a lawsuit by inadvertently accepting fugitive

¹⁹ Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, 1998), 193–4.

²⁰ “Inmigración de libertos norte-americanos a Chiriquí,” *La Estrella de Panamá*, November 29, 1862.

slaves; after 1861, they might provoke war by deliberately trafficking Confederate slaves freed under Union auspices, the so-called contrabands.

Although politicians tried to keep the sensitive diplomacy of colonization within the corridors of power, their plans could hardly escape the notice of their would-be beneficiaries, African Americans. For the most part, blacks objected to whites' presumption in trying to exile them, especially when "back" to an Africa that, following the closure of the slave trade, fewer and fewer had ever seen. While resettlement plans were usually doomed for want of concurrent consent from slaveholders, politicians, and funders, the (largely withheld) consent of African Americans was always the greatest limiting factor on such schemes. But where enslaved southerners had to resist expatriation without fanfare, and often faced the stark choice between an unknowable freedom in Liberia and continued bondage in the United States, free northerners proclaimed their objections to the ACS from its founding. Yet, like their white counterparts, black Americans were engaged in an inchoate, even chaotic process of nation-building. Theirs was self-evidently a nation *within* a nation, a duality that, if anything, divided black separatists and black integrationists by a common language. Although African Americans preferred to invoke civic forms of nationalism, asserting their birthright citizenship long before the Civil Rights Act (1866) and Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution (1868) did the same, they also flirted with nationalism's ethnic bases, exploring their commonality with the other peoples of Africa and the African diaspora. During the intensified white oppression of the 1820s and 1850s, several thousand African Americans emigrated to Canada, Liberia, and Haiti, each of which appealed to a different facet of their identities as African *and* American. But the settlers' fraught interactions with the natives of Liberia and Haiti, in particular, confirmed what opponents of emigration had long maintained: African Americans were, first and foremost, Americans, as prone as their white compatriots to the sense of cultural superiority that that entailed.

For a century from 1770, almost every American institution, black and white, public and private, state and federal, engaged with the drive to resettle African Americans, even if fitfully or fleetingly. Along with a host of hitherto obscure figures, colonization implicated a number of well-known individuals: US presidents from Thomas Jefferson to Abraham Lincoln, black abolitionists from James Forten to Frederick Douglass, and global leaders from Earl Russell, Britain's foreign minister during the Civil War, to Dom Pedro II, the emperor of Brazil for half a century. If sometimes just for a moment, black resettlement affected lands from

Introduction

9

Canada to Argentina, the Danish West Indies to the Niger Valley, and Haiti to Liberia. Some Americans even proposed that blacks remove to Australia, Cyprus, and Poland.²¹ Colonization was notorious in its own day, and has not wanted for academic interest since the very dawn of the American historical profession.²² Why, then, has it taken a century and a half for a scholar to write the first comprehensive, comparative survey of the long-acknowledged revival of colonization during the Civil War era?

This book has surely benefited from the growth of Atlantic history, though it also straddles a number of specializations within US history proper, such as black history, Civil War history, and the history of reform movements.²³ More than a mastery of a disparate scholarship, however, what this book needed was a researcher willing to overcome their incredulity about the entire venture of black resettlement. For, despite a secondary literature that has exploded even since the turn of the millennium, colonization remains the butt of derision from many historians, who misdirect their criticism of “unrealistic” historical actors toward those colleagues who would study the same. Get beyond scholars’ pained expressions (an image born of personal experience), and their objections seem to be threefold.

First, colonization was impractical. Between the Revolution and the Civil War, the black population of the United States increased by more than 3,500,000. In the same period, slightly more than 20,000 African Americans emigrated to Liberia, Haiti, and the British West Indies (combined) via formal emigration agencies, and a similar number to Canada on their own initiative.²⁴ How can those individual, even anecdotal stories of migration hold any importance compared with the headline event, the ultimate freedom, on American soil, of 4,000,000 slaves?

²¹ “Meeting of the State Council, in Behalf of Colored Americans,” *Liberator*, February 24, 1854 (Australia); W. Winthrop to W. H. Seward, No. 49, September 8, 1862, Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Malta, RG59/T218/5, NARA II (Cyprus); Cassius Clay, *The Life of Cassius Marcellus Clay* (Cincinnati, 1886), 1:440 (Poland).

²² Beverly C. Tomek, “The Past, Present, and Future of Colonization Studies,” in Tomek and Matthew J. Hetrick, eds., *New Directions in the Study of African American Recolonization* (Gainesville, 2017), 11–17.

²³ Don H. Doyle, “The Atlantic World and the Crisis of the 1860s,” in his *American Civil Wars: The United States, Latin America, Europe, and the Crisis of the 1860s* (Chapel Hill, 2017), 1.

²⁴ Nicholas Guyatt, “Rethinking Colonization in the Early United States,” in Tomek, *New Directions*, 329; Michael Wayne, “The Black Population of Canada West on the Eve of the American Civil War: A Reassessment Based on the Manuscript Census of 1861,” *Social History* 28 (1995), 470.

Second, colonization was evasive. Adherents of the ACS were mealy-mouthed about whether they meant to end slavery – no surprise, given the diametric views they had to navigate. Not as eloquent in their speech or elegant in their stance as the institution’s overt opponents, it is tempting to dismiss them as on the wrong side of history.

Third, colonization was, arguably, immoral – but certainly amoral, and confusing for that reason. Colonizationists usually admitted blacks’ natural rights, but were so resigned to the persistence of other whites’ prejudice – always that of meaner whites than themselves, in their imagination – that they could only suggest that blacks emigrate.²⁵ Whenever mobs destroyed black homes, lawmakers disfranchised black voters, or masters insisted on deporting black slaves as the price of their freedom, colonizationists shrugged and handed out pamphlets extolling their preferred destination.

Why, then, study a movement of such seeming irrelevance to the story of American freedom? The answer is simple: it is our duty as historians to rescue proponents of black resettlement from what E. P. Thompson so memorably called “the enormous condescension of posterity.” At the same time, it is not our duty to rehabilitate them or to invoke the discipline’s stock platitude that we should not apply the standards of the present to the past. Colonizationists knew full well that the preamble of the Declaration of Independence promised more to black Americans than whites were willing to concede (at least, in the United States). What the black abolitionist David Walker called the “colonizing trick” was the proffer not of unreflective racists but of thoughtful, would-be enlightened Americans.²⁶ It was not an eccentricity of marginal relevance, but an idea that, like all ideas, did not exist in isolation, and that dampened what might have been a more ardent integrationism on the part of antislavery “moderates.” It was not the inevitable product of some backward age but a conscious artifice, which we know because its opponents mustered every last criticism – moral, political, and logistical – that we, too, would make.

The separatist impulse makes for history at its most frustrating, and nowhere more so than in its zenith during the Civil War, when two and a

²⁵ Annette Gordon-Reed, “The Resonance of Minds: Thomas Jefferson and James Madison in the Republic of Letters,” in Frank Shuffelton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 2009), 189–90.

²⁶ David Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America* (Minneapolis, 2003), 1–2.