

# “The Negro’s Peculiar Work”: Jim Crow and Black Discourses on US Empire, Race, and the African Question, 1877–1900

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In 1887, T. Thomas Fortune published an editorial, “The Negro’s Peculiar Work,” in the black newspaper the *New York Freeman*, wherein he reflected on a recent keynote speech delivered by Reverend J. C. Price on 3 January in Columbia, South Carolina, to commemorate Emancipation Day.<sup>1</sup> Price, a member of the Zion Wesley Institute of the AME Zion Church, hailed from North Carolina and his denomination considered him to be “the most popular and eloquent Negro of the present generation.” On the occasion meant to reflect on the meaning of the Emancipation Proclamation (which went into effect on 1 January 1863) for present-day African Americans, Price turned his gaze away from the US towards Africa. In his speech “The American Negro, His Future, and His Peculiar Work” Price declared that African Americans had a duty to redeem Africans and help them take back their continent from the Europeans who had partitioned it in 1884–85. He railed,

The whites found gold, diamonds, and other riches in Africa. Why should not the Negro? Africa is their country. They should claim it: they should go to Africa, civilize those Negroes, raise them morally, and by education show them how to obtain wealth which is in their own country, and take the grand continent as their own.<sup>2</sup>

Price’s “Black Man’s Burden” projected American blacks as agents of capitalism, civilization, and Christianity in Africa.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Price suggested that

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<sup>1</sup> T. Thomas Fortune, “The Negro’s Peculiar Work,” *New York Freeman*, 15 Jan. 1887; American Colonization Society, “Minutes of the Board of Directors,” *African Repository*, 63, 2 (April 1887), 50–51.

<sup>2</sup> Price quoted in Fortune.

<sup>3</sup> Michele Mitchell uses this phrase in “‘The Black Man’s Burden’: African Americans, Imperialism, and Notions of Racial Manhood 1890–1910,” *International Review of Social History*, 44 (1999), 77–99.

African American suffering under slavery, failed Reconstruction, and Jim Crow placed them in a unique position to combat imperialism. He was not alone in seeing parallels between the conditions of "Negroes" on both sides of the Atlantic. Many African Americans, Afro-Canadians, and West Indians saw imperialism in Africa as operating according to Jim Crow logic: white Europeans would subordinate and segregate Africans, while economically exploiting their labor to bring wealth to Europe.

Fortune, one of the most important black intellectuals and activists during the Gilded Age, was skeptical of Price's claims that African Americans could (or should) intervene in African affairs. In his commentary on Price's speech, he assured readers that "thoughtful" African Americans would pay close attention to events unfolding in Africa. However, he maintained that the struggle for black liberation was foremost domestic and must take place "here" in the United States. Both Price and Fortune were cognizant of the continued Liberia emigration agenda of the American Colonization Society (which began in 1816), as well as independent black-led expatriation efforts focussed on "returning" to Africa. Yet Price intimated that the black American presence in Africa would know no boundaries. That is, the black man's responsibility to uplift Africa would span the continent wherever "Negroes" resided. It is worth noting that Price's ambition did not include a *formal* role for US involvement in the "scramble for Africa." In other words, the expectation was not for the United States to establish colonies or spheres of interest in Africa as various European nations had done before and after the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 that inaugurated the formal partition of the continent. Rather, African Americans would be catalysts for "civilizing" and modernizing Africa using American and African American models. In doing so, blacks might be able to establish Africa as a refuge to escape Jim Crow and actualize their own political freedom and economic independence. Other advocates (mostly white Americans) for African American direct involvement in African affairs envisioned blacks as an advance guard for expanding US power and influence in Africa beyond Liberia.

This article explores and analyzes the ways in which the African question – defined from 1877 to 1900 as African affairs broadly, and more pointedly as the status of Africa and Africans under European imperial control – took on significance for African Americans during the nadir of American race relations. It contributes to a body of scholarship that examines the compelling, portentous, and protracted debates among African Americans about their prospective roles in Africa.<sup>4</sup> It extends that historiography by contextualizing these

<sup>4</sup> For works that cover the 1877–1900 period see James T. Campbell, *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787–2005* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007); Michele

debates within broader American conversations about the significance of Africa to US empire and foreign policy and the role of the US in shaping the “modern world” during the late nineteenth century. As Ian Tyrell has noted,

the boundaries between American and foreign developments were culturally, economically and socially porous in the nineteenth century; a profound connectedness to world history was aided by the relative weakness of the American state, by the pressures of other empires, by economic and social modernization in a wider world and by domestic forces of economic and political change which drew in and reworked foreign influences.

The paper, in part, explores how African Americans played active roles in the processes that led to “the development of a distinctive [American] ‘empire’ ... out of these experiences of connectedness” during the Gilded Age.<sup>5</sup> In addition, it places African American activities in Africa in a broader history of transnational humanitarianism. While blacks often framed this work as inextricably tied to their racial politics, they were part of a wider circulation of Americans who engaged in reform movements abroad before 1898 when the United States substantially transformed its empire.

In focussing on African American émigrés to Liberia and their supporters, black missionaries, black activist intellectuals, and pan-Africanists, this paper demonstrates how Africa fit into what Ian Tyrell calls “wider patterns of informal American expansion and the transnational networks implicated in those patterns.”<sup>6</sup> Scholars of US foreign policy and expansion during the Gilded Age either do not address Africa or limit brief discussion of American involvement in the continent to anti-slavery campaigns, missionary activities, and

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Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Elliot Percival Skinner, *African Americans and U.S. Policy toward Africa, 1850–1924: In Defense of Black Nationality 1850–1924* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1992); Ousmane K. Power-Greene, *Against Wind and Tide: The African American Struggle against the Colonization Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Marika Sherwood, *Origins of Pan-Africanism: Henry Sylvester Williams, Africa, and the African Diaspora* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Lamin Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Tunde Adeleke, *Un-African Americans: Nineteenth-Century Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998); Edwin Redkey, *Black Nationalists and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890–1910* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1969); Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent*, 1st edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Ian Tyrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective since 1789* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ian Tyrell, *Reforming the World: The Creation of America’s Moral Empire* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 2.

emigration.<sup>7</sup> In these studies, Africa’s relation to American empire is peripheral despite evidence that many prominent and lettered Americans seriously considered Africa as a future site for US cultural, economic, and “moral” expansion. Americans “in the world,” particularly during the 1870s and 1880s, included blacks who, while abroad, articulated a racial politic fundamentally rooted in their Americanness and US liberalism. In propagating black liberation, racial uplift, and what Michele Mitchell calls “racial manhood” in discussing Africa,<sup>8</sup> they simultaneously touted US political exceptionalism and condemned Jim Crow. It is this messy terrain of black discourses on the African question that this paper explores.

The spectrum of black thinking about and involvement in Africa was not solely framed as repudiations of Jim Crow at home and similar policies in colonized Africa (something discussed at length by scholars), but also as informal and cultural diplomacy meant to influence the US role in the “development” of Africa. Here I use Catherine Forslund’s definition of “informal diplomacy” to identify “exchanges between citizens or groups of citizens from two or more nations outside the boundaries of the official governmental institutional apparatus ... who seek to influence events or attitudes of governments.”<sup>9</sup> In this study, I approach the black Atlantic as a regional formation wherein informal cultural diplomacy unfolded, and where blacks branded the American South as a site of oppression from which they launched a transatlantic critique of colonialism and imperialism. I locate “cultural diplomacy” (or soft power)<sup>10</sup> in instances where blacks attempted to spread American and African American culture in Africa through their interactions with Africans, Europeans, and other blacks from the western hemisphere. For example, they promoted American republicanism and black Christianity not as merely part of a *mission civilisatrice* (often positioned as African “redemption”), but also as tools for potential African liberation from colonial rule. In this context, these blacks focussed their efforts on influencing US foreign relations with European imperial powers in Africa and rejecting imperialism as Jim Crow globalized. However benign these intentions, we must be critical of the colonizing impulse of blacks who thought that because of their Western identities

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Tyrell, *Reforming the World*, 44–45, 57–58, 131–33; and Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890–1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982). Most books written about this period focus on the Caribbean, Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific.

<sup>8</sup> See Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Forslund, *Anna Chennault: Informal Diplomacy and Asian Relations* (Wilmington, DE: S. R. Books, 2000), xiv.

<sup>10</sup> See Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, “What Are We Searching For?”, in Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried, eds., *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy* (New York and Oxford: Berghan Books, 2013), 3–12, 11.

(Du Bois's "double consciousness"), they could best solve the African question. Moreover, as Mitchell has argued, we must attend to the gendered nature of the redemption narrative/project where achieving racial manhood required black men to lead the charge and black women to play supporting roles in Negro efforts to save Africa.<sup>11</sup>

### "WE THERE HAVE A COUNTRY"

In the article "The African Question," which appeared in the *African Repository* in 1877, the author recalled the "Christian" colonization of Georgia in the eighteenth century and reasoned that there was "no reason why similar colonies should not be planted within a quarter of a century on the shores of Africa." He believed that newly freed black Americans required at least twenty-five years to gain enough intelligence to commence "the subjugation of Africa to Christian civilization."<sup>12</sup> That same year, the *Repository* also published "African Destiny," an article reprinted from the *Christian Recorder*. In it, the author called on fellow "negroes" to "have a hand in possessing Africa," instead of standing by neutrally while Europeans controlled the continent. Affirming human and Christian brotherhood with whites and arguing that Africa is "common patrimony," the author nevertheless argued that the black man was entitled to his "rightful share of the inheritance," and thus it would be dishonorable for African Americans to settle "for crumbs" in the United States while Whites laid claim to the continent's riches. "We should strengthen Liberia, not by any wholesale exodus, but by men of business going thither and engaging in the cultivation of coffee and cotton," declared the author. Drawing parallels to the "Christian" settlement of America, the writer reasoned that black settlers would fare better in their attempts to colonize Liberia than Europeans did in settling the original thirteen colonies.<sup>13</sup>

"African Destiny" evoked the settler colonial origins of the United States as precedent for persecuted individuals to seek refuge in foreign lands. In this scenario African Americans would escape Jim Crow regimes in the former Confederacy and bring their talents to Africa. Those abilities included business

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 51–52. See Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914–1962* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Keisha N. Blain, "'We Want to Set the World on Fire': Black Nationalist Women and Diasporic Politics in the *New Negro World, 1940–1944*," *Journal of Social History*, 49, 1 (Fall 2015), 194–212; and Keisha N. Blain, Ula Y. Taylor, and Asia Leeds, eds., *Women, Gender Politics, and Pan-Africanism*, special issue of *Women, Gender, and Families of Color*, 4, 2 (Fall 2016), on gender and black internationalism in the early twentieth century.

<sup>12</sup> "The African Question," *African Repository*, 53 (July 1877), 78–79.

<sup>13</sup> "African Destiny," *African Repository*, 53 (Jan. 1877), 23.

acumen and experience in plantation labor. Essentially, blacks would bring their agricultural knowledge to Africa, where they could farm free of sharecropping contracts, which had become the dominant form of black rural labor in the South in the 1870s. In outlining this ambitious plan, the author did not address how blacks would interact with indigenous African populations. The argument for having a hand in “possessing Africa” echoed the language of Europeans who had begun exploring the continent in earnest during the 1870s. The capitalist logic undergirding these calls for blacks to help develop Africa reinforced arguments made by other Americans invested in the economic expansion of the United States in foreign lands. However, it was unclear how Africa fit into this imperial dream.

The idea that African Americans should, and indeed had a right to, repatriate to or establish colonies in Africa dates back to the late eighteenth century. In 1787, Anthony Taylor, president of the African Union Society of Newport, Rhode Island, wrote William Thornton – a white man born in Tortola, British Virgin Islands, but living in London – requesting information about “returning to Africa and settling there.” Thornton had knowledge of the “Province of Freedom” colony founded by the British in Sierra Leone that very year. Taylor specifically asked,

by what right or tenor we shall possess said Lands, when we settle upon them, for we should think it not safe, and unwise for us to go and settle on Lands in Affrica [*sic*] unless the right and fee of the Land is first firmly, and in proper form, made over to us, and to our Heirs or Children.

Taylor wanted to know what international legal precedent would ensure their claims to land in the colony. Thornton forwarded Taylor’s request to the Committee on African Affairs in London. While Taylor did not receive an immediate answer, the society continued to inquire about resettlement in Sierra Leone well into the 1790s. The African Benevolent Society of Newport, Rhode Island also took up the emigration cause in 1808.<sup>14</sup> In 1811, Massachusetts-born emigration proponent and black abolitionist Paul Cuffe set sail for Sierra Leone. In 1815 he brought thirty-eight African American émigrés to the colony. A year later, white Americans formed the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color in the United States (later the American Colonization Society) to help African Americans immigrate to West Africa in the area that would become Liberia.<sup>15</sup> Despite

<sup>14</sup> William H. Robinson, “The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society” (1976), *Faculty Publications*, Paper 329, vii–xii, 16–17, available at <http://digitalcommons.ric.edu/facultypublications/329>.

<sup>15</sup> Tom J. Shick, *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settlers in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 5–6.

the prominence of Liberia in the US-based emigration agenda, African Americans continued to travel to Sierra Leone.<sup>16</sup>

While the motivations of African Americans and black organizations that supported emigration and the white-controlled ACS may have differed, these groups and individuals shared some ideas about the outcome of the (re)settlement projects – that African Americans would bring Christianity, commerce (perhaps with the United States), and American civilization to the region while securing their own freedom and independence. As Nicholas Guyatt has argued, the ACS was part of a group of “enlightened whites” who invented “separate but equal” by urging blacks to create a colony in Liberia, rather than commit the organization to fighting for racial justice.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Taylor and Salmar Nubia of the Union Society applauded the efforts of persons who proposed and strove “to effect their return to their own country and the settlement there, where they may be more happy than they can be here, and promote the best good of our brethren in that country.” Like the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society, the ACS believed that free blacks would never be equal citizens or truly free in the United States as racism was so entrenched in the white American psyche and institutions. In its 1820 petition to the United States Congress for incorporation and funding to aid colonization of Liberia, the ACS touted the success of the emigration project and articulated why African Americans should be part of ex-slave settlements on the West African coast. They argued that “the Civilized people of color of this country, whose industry, enterprise, and knowledge of agriculture and the arts, would render them most useful assistants, should be connected with such an establishment.”<sup>18</sup> They believed that US efforts to capture enslaved Africans on the high seas and settle them in Liberia would be for naught without the assistance of African Americans who had gained agricultural

<sup>16</sup> See Nemata Blyden, “The Search for Anna Erskine: African-American Women in Nineteenth-Century Liberia,” in Catherine Higgs, Barbara Moss, and Earline Rae Ferguson, eds., *Stepping Forward: Black Women in Africa and the Americas* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 31–43; Blyden, “‘We have the cause of Africa at Heart’: West Indians and African-Americans in 19th Century Freetown,” in Mac Dixon-Fyle and Gibril Cole, eds., *New Perspectives on the Sierra Leone Krio* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 91–105; Blyden, “Edward Jones: An African American in Sierra Leone,” in John W. Pulis, ed., *Moving On: Black Loyalists in the Afro-Atlantic World* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1999), 159–82.

<sup>17</sup> See Nicholas Guyatt, *Bind Us Apart: How Enlightened Americans Invented Racial Segregation* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> “American Colonization Society: A Memorial to the United States Congress,” 1 Feb. 1820, in Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando, eds., *Civil Rights and the Black American: A Documentary History* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), 70–71.

and trade (arts) knowledge under slavery and in freedom. They would properly “civilize” the receptive.<sup>19</sup>

As word of the successful ACS settlement of African Americans in Liberia reached black communities during the early republic and antebellum periods, black organizations formed with the expressed purpose of fostering emigration. Individuals, groups, and societies petitioned state governments to cover transportation costs for their immigration. For example, in 1831, disgruntled with the overall efforts of the ACS, Marylanders broke away to form the Maryland State Colonization Society. They petitioned the state for funds to send African Americans to what became the colony of “Maryland in Africa.” In 1851 – four years after Liberia declared its independence – members of the New York and Liberia Emigration and Agricultural Association presented a funding petition to the New York State Legislature to aid their emigration efforts. Skeptical of the white-controlled ACS project, members of the Wellsville community in Brooklyn, New York, founded the African Civilization Society in 1858 under the leadership of Henry Highland Garnet, its first president. Garnet was born a slave in Maryland, but escaped to freedom with his family, becoming a minister and abolitionist. In the preamble to its constitution, the organization reflected on the “efforts” of missionaries and explorers to “permit the interior of Africa to be made known to us,” declaring that its members could “no longer mistake the intention of the Divine Mind towards Africa.”<sup>20</sup> Apparently, God had orchestrated events to allow descendants of Africans in America to travel to the home of their ancestors and redeem it. Article II of the constitution made explicit the members’ objectives to bring Christianity, commerce, and civilization to “the descendants of African ancestors in any portion of the earth, wherever dispersed,” to abolish “the African Slave-trade,” and to work for “the elevation of the condition of the colored population of our country, and of other lands.”<sup>21</sup> While the constitution did not list emigration as an objective, on 4 November 1861 the society held a “special meeting” in New York to discuss the matter. The members later added a supplement to the constitution, making clear that the “Society is not designed to encourage general emigration, but will aid only such

<sup>19</sup> See Sharla Fett, *Recaptured Africans: Surviving Slave Ships, Detention, and Dislocation in the Final Years of the Slave Trade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Penelope Campbell, *Maryland in Africa: The Maryland State Colonization Society, 1831–1857* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); Judith Wellman, *Brooklyn’s Promised Land: The Free Black Community of Weeksville, New York* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 100–2; “African Civilization Society,” in Howard Brotz, ed., *Negro Social and Political Thought, 1850–1920: Representative Texts* (New York and London: Basic Books, 1966), 191.

<sup>21</sup> “African Civilization Society,” 194.



persons as may be practically qualified and suited to promote” the “civilizing mission” outlined in Article II.<sup>22</sup>

Efforts to settle African Americans in Africa remained private until the Civil War. In 1862, the US Congress decided to subsidize black colonization in Liberia under a \$600,000 appropriation (\$100,000 for newly freed slaves in Washington, DC and \$500,000 for freedmen covered under the Second Confiscation Act). The US government had officially adopted settler colonialism as a remedy for the “Negro question.” That same year, Edward W. Blyden penned the essay “The Call of Providence to the Descendants of Africa in America.” In it, he urged “Africans in the Western hemisphere” to take interest in their “fatherland” and create an “African nationality” that served the interests of Africans. He argued that God “set the land before” blacks and “bids [them] go up and possess it.” As a spokesperson for Liberia, he called on people of African descent in Canada, the United States, South America and the “East and West-Indies” to emigrate to the black republic and “take part ... in our great work” to bring Christian civilization and commerce to the rest of Africa. Blyden claimed that the Americo-Liberians (Liberians of African American origin) and the “aborigines” of Liberia would “assimilate” with each other to further the cause of raising “the land of their forefathers from her degradation.”<sup>23</sup>

Blyden was born in St. Thomas in 1832 while the Caribbean island was still part of the Danish West Indies. He immigrated to the United States in 1850 and moved to Liberia in 1851 to teach. When he wrote his 1862 essay he was convinced that the blacks from the western hemisphere had a future in Liberia, where they would work with indigenous Africans and descendants of settlers to make the republic a beacon and model of African liberal democratic governance. The Liberian government had modeled its Constitution and political system after the United States, with separation of powers between the executive, judicial, and legislative branches. As a result, Liberia would be a political force to reckon with on the international stage, a diplomatic power in adjudicating the grievances of Africans against Europeans. Indeed, Blyden would later boast of his ability to meet with the Earl of Derby, British Secretary of Foreign Affairs, in London in 1877, as minister plenipotentiary representing Liberia. While in London, he also met with former US President Ulysses S. Grant and Edwards Pierrepont, US minister to Great Britain. Reflecting on these meetings, Blyden argued that “only in Liberia, or a properly

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Vorenberg, “Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Black Colonization,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 14, 2 (Summer 1993), 22–45; Edward W. Blyden, “The Call of Providence to the Descendants of Africa in America,” in Brotz, 112–26, 119, 125–26.

established Negro nationality, can they [blacks in the United States] ever attain to true manhood and equality.” While Blyden’s rhetoric did evoke elements of *mission civilisatrice* discourse, he clearly envisioned the development of Africa as a cooperative venture between blacks from the West and Africans.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Blyden considered Liberia just one of potentially several African republican nations where black racial manhood and liberty (not to be confused with freedom) could thrive. The nineteenth-century concept of liberty entailed political and social freedoms associated with citizenship and national belonging. This is how Blyden framed “Negro nationality” as conditioned not only on freedom from enslavement, but also on membership in a *black* body politic.

Two years after Congress subsidized the Liberia colonization program, it withdrew the funding, with President Lincoln only spending \$38,000 of the allocation.<sup>25</sup> This, however, did not deter the efforts of the ACS and black communities to help African Americans move to Liberia. In 1864, the ACS credited itself with only settling twenty-three blacks to Liberia. However, those numbers increased dramatically between 1865 and 1872, with a sharp decline in 1873. Despite the hesitancy of many African Americans to work directly with the ACS, some blacks sent emigration applications to the ACS, preferring to place their fortunes with a proven colonization organization.<sup>26</sup>

The demographics of black migration to Liberia before 1874 were decisively southern. Before 1865, blacks left the United States to escape slavery, and after the Civil War they sought to escape the Black Codes passed in the South between 1865 and 1866. According to the ACS, between 1820 and 1874 it had directly colonized 13,848 people of African descent to Liberia. Of that number, 12,388 (a little over 89 percent) came from Washington, DC and the states that comprised the antebellum slaveholding South (Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri, and Texas). Some 346 émigrés came from the British colony of Barbados in 1865. The ACS also took credit for providing homes for 1,227 African Americans colonized by the Maryland State Colonization Society to Maryland County, Liberia, as well as 5,722 Africans “recaptured” by the US Navy in suppressing the slave trade, bringing the total to 15,075 émigrés. Revealingly, 9,163 of the 13,848 (66.1 percent) settled in Liberia from 1847 to 1874 – after Liberian independence and during the waning years of Reconstruction. The most concentrated immigration waves occurred between 1850 and 1854 after the

<sup>24</sup> 3 Sept. 1877 letter by Blyden partially quoted in “Liberia at the Court of St. James,” *African Repository*, 53 (Oct. 1877), 117–18; Claude A. Clegg III, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 98.

<sup>25</sup> Vorenberg, 22–45.

<sup>26</sup> American Colonization Society, *African Repository*, 51 (April 1875), 55.

passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and from 1865 to 1868, in the immediate years after the Civil War.<sup>27</sup> ACS reports consistently emphasized that the organization's work was not only to help colonize Liberia, but also to assist in the "civilization" of Africa. Joining blacks who left the South and the Caribbean with aid from the ACS were freedmen who left Indian Territory – mostly notably Choctaw freedmen who were not considered citizens of the Choctaw nation until 1885. Some left in the 1850s and others after the Civil War, during which the Choctaws allied with the Confederacy.<sup>28</sup> The "redemption" of the South in 1877 renewed interest in emigration and the ACS.

### "AMERICA IN AFRICA"

In a 26 January 1876 letter to the ACS, AME bishop Henry McNeal Turner expressed his belief that blacks would best realize their "dignity" and "manhood" in Africa. Born free in South Carolina in 1834, Turner moved to Georgia and began preaching throughout the state and earned a seat in the Georgia State Legislature in 1868, until the white legislators expelled him. He retook his seat in 1870 but the voters did not reelect him, as Jim Crow politics, which included disenfranchisement laws, solidified white Democratic control of the emerging "New South." Undeterred, Turner continued to fight for the rights of African Americans, but became jaded by the collapse of Reconstruction and deteriorating race relations in the South.<sup>29</sup>

When Turner assumed the vice presidency of the ACS in 1876, he was cautious in celebrating the emigration cause as a way out of the Jim Crow South. While rejecting the title "colonizationist," he maintained that his past support of the ACS had been twofold: first in its advocacy for the abolition of slavery in the United States, and second in its work to bring "civilization" and Christianity to "the millions of Africa." Yet he claimed that the ACS had a present and future relevance – to help African Americans establish a "government and nationality" of their own in Africa. He prophesied that "the time is near when the American people of color will seek that genial clime as the European has this Western world, and there erect the UNITED STATES

<sup>27</sup> American Colonization Society, *Annual Report of the American Colonization Society: With Minutes of the Annual Meeting and of the Board of Directors* (Washington, DC: American Colonization Society, 1866), 7; Donald L. Canney, *Africa Squadron: The U.S. Navy and the Slave Trade, 1842–1861* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, Inc., 2006), xi–xiii.

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Krauthammer, *Black Slaves, Indian Masters: Slavery, Emancipation, and Citizenship in the Native American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 76; Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 19–26.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Ward Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 121–22.

Table 1. Emigrants sent by the American Colonization Society to Liberia, 1847–74.

Year	Number	Year	Number	Year	Number	Year	Number
1847	51	1854	553*	1861	55	1868	453*
1848	441	1855	207	1862	65	1869	160
1849	422	1856	538	1863	26	1870	196
1850	505*	1857	370	1864	23	1871	247
1851	676*	1858	167	1865	527*	1872	150
1852	630*	1859	248	1866	621*	1873	73
1853	783*	1860	316	1867	633*	1874	27

OF AFRICA.”<sup>30</sup> It is tempting to dismiss Turner’s phrasing as rhetorical flourish; however, he tapped into an existing sentiment that US-styled democracy was exportable abroad – particularly in “benighted” lands.<sup>31</sup> Turner, as a student of Liberian affairs, knew that the Americo-Liberians modeled their Declaration of Independence after the American document, as well as their government. In his opinion, it was not far-fetched to imagine other blacks from the diaspora doing the same in other African locales. Turner analogized European settler colonialism in the Americas and the founding of the United States to the African American settler movement in Africa, envisioning the establishment of independent republican African states united in a confederacy. Unlike many black missionaries who viewed Africa as simply a “mission field,”<sup>32</sup> Turner saw liberalist revolutionary political potential in Africans – that is, their ability to adapt traditional African political structures to republicanism.

Notably, both Turner and Blyden spoke of “nationality” as vital to the success of black emigration to Liberia. For them, the fact that Africans and African Americans belonged to the same “race” was not key to realizing manhood and equality in Africa. Rather, in their estimation blacks needed their own nation and national identity, as despite their birthplace, the United States did not treat them as equal citizens and many white Americans did not consider them to be “true” Americans. The domestic-enemy status that states and many white citizens conferred on African Americans through negrophobia, Jim Crow, white supremacy, and racial terrorism deprived black men of their manhood and subordinated blacks in American society and the body politic. While black American women

<sup>30</sup> “Letter from Rev. Dr. Henry M. Turner, Savannah, Georgia, January 26, 1876,” *African Repository*, 52 (July 1876), 84–86.

<sup>31</sup> This sentiment solidifies in the 1890s as part of the American white man’s burden narrative, especially after the Spanish–America War. See Alessandra Lorini, *Rituals of Race: American Public Culture and the Search for Racial Democracy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 64.

<sup>32</sup> Tyrell, *Reforming the World*, 57–58.

would take part in this flourishing of democracy in Africa, the rhetoric of many black leaders stressed masculinity and manhood as virtues that would undergird African and black nationalism. Ultimately, for Turner and Blyden “emigration” to Africa was not merely a means for seeking sanctuary, but the first step in establishing black independence and placing black men on equal footing with whites on the international stage.

During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, many advocates of the colonization movement began linking Liberia to the broader “African question” and increasingly spoke of American interests in Africa. Once Europeans began in earnest their colonization of Africa, Americo-Liberians and many African Americans feared that the imperial powers (particularly France and Great Britain) would set their sights on Liberia. Arguably, this fear arose from Liberia’s boundary dispute with Great Britain regarding sovereignty of the Gallinas territory (an area once notorious for slave-trading), suspicions of slave-trading taking place in Liberia territory, and Liberia’s seizure of the British merchant vessel *Elizabeth* in 1869.<sup>33</sup>

With regard to slavery, as early as 1858 the British government suspected that “Native Chiefs” in Liberia were selling “Negroes” to French agents on the coast. The *Regina Coeli* incident (named after the French vessel on which these Africans sailed) served as a pretext for the British to make clear to the Liberian government that such actions violated a treaty signed between the two nations.<sup>34</sup> Article IX of the 1848 Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between Her Majesty and the Republic of Liberia stated, “Slavery and the Slave Trade being perpetually abolished in the Republic of Liberia, the Republic engages that a law shall be passed, declaring it to be piracy for any Liberian citizen or vessel to be engaged or concerned in the Slave Trade.” The treaty also gave British vessels of war permission to stop ships suspected of slave-trading flying under the Liberian flag.<sup>35</sup> While the treaty made no provision for Great Britain to seize Liberian land, in 1865 British captains claimed that chiefs in the Gallinas sought their protection from Liberia. Captain Leveson Wildman testified before the House of Commons committee that “the question of a slaver which was taken inside

<sup>33</sup> Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 109–11, 118.

<sup>34</sup> Gerard Ralston, Liberian consul general, “Slave Trade Draft,” 16 Aug. 1858, Foreign Office, FO/96/31/7, 110–13, The National Archives of the UK.

<sup>35</sup> “Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between Her Majesty and the Republic of Liberia,” in *The Annual Register, Or, A View of the History and Politics of the Year 1850* (London: George Woodfall and Son, 1851), 377.

the Gallinas River” further gave cause for the Gallinas to request British intervention and for the area to fall under British control.<sup>36</sup>

Tensions between Liberia and Great Britain came to a head in 1869 when President James Spriggs-Payne ordered the schooner *Elizabeth*, operated by the Company of African Merchants, seized. Liberian agents arrested five Sierra Leone traders and a trial ensued, with the jury finding the traders guilty of violating port-of-entry policy. The British responded by questioning the legitimacy of Liberian actions and sending two naval vessels to Monrovia demanding the release of the *Elizabeth* and recompense for the ship’s losses. Spriggs-Payne capitulated, agreeing to pay off the fee in increments of 500-pound bonds. However, the government could not pay the first installment in full. Subsequently, in 1871, President Edward James Roye secured a £100,000 loan from a British bank to pay off its financial obligation to Great Britain, as well as invest in public works projects. In 1872, enfranchised Liberians (primarily of African American descent) elected former President Joseph Jenkins Roberts to a second presidency, hoping that he would rehabilitate the republic. The loan controversy made Liberians fear that Europeans would violate their sovereignty.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, African Americans aware of the strains between Liberia and the UK, as well as French claims in the 1870s to Liberian territory bordering French Guinea, feared that either Western nation would declare a protectorate over the republic.

By the 1870s Portugal, France, Great Britain, and Belgium were vying for control of large portions of West and Central Africa. As mentioned above, supporters of King Leopold of Belgium established the African International Association (AIA) in 1877 to facilitate the “civilization” of Central Africa through exploration, missionary activity, the establishment of trading posts, and the abolition of the internal slave trade. By 1877, there existed an American Branch of the International Association for the Civilization of Central Africa under the presidency of John H. B. Latrobe, a lawyer who had been active in the Liberian colonization project. Delegates from this group attended the annual meetings of the AIA alongside members from “national committees” representing Belgium, Switzerland, Holland, France, Austria, Germany, and Spain.<sup>38</sup>

Immediately in response to these developments in Liberia and Central Africa, some Americans began making a case for furthering American

<sup>36</sup> “Minutes of Evidence Taken before the Select Committee on Africa (Western Coast),” *Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons and Command*, Volume V (London: HMSO, 1865), 163–64.

<sup>37</sup> Shick, 120–21.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: 1876–1912* (New York: Random House, 1991), 1–3, 11–16; Henry Shelton Sanford, “Report on the Annual Meeting of the African International Association, in Brussels, in June 1877,” *Journal of the American Geographical Society of New York*, 9 (1877), 103–8.

diplomatic and commercial interests in Africa through collaborations with the Liberian government, as well as funding African American immigration to the continent, which the US government had abandoned in 1864. For example, Methodist Episcopal bishop Gilbert Haven opened his two-part article “America in Africa,” published in the *North American Review* in 1877, stating that “Africa to-day is the realm of romance.” In the first part he discussed at great length the European presence in Africa, highlighting the “achievements” of explorers and the intrepidity of King Leopold in establishing a commercial presence in the Congo. He argued that European interest in Africa was purely economic, contending that Europeans saw the continent not as a land to “civilize” or explore, but rather as a place “to be occupied.” He predicted that European colonization would follow the establishment of trade relations in Africa, making explicit comparisons between the colonization of the Americas in the early modern period and the situation in Africa. He warned that “the Africa of adventure” would become “the Africa of occupation” in the hands of Europeans and suggested that the United States could offer Africa an alternative to European imperialist subjugation. He argued that the United States had a stake in Africa and should take advantage of its “Negro” citizens and “special” relationship with Liberia, to secure its place in developing Africa. Haven declared, “We have an Africa in America” and “America in Africa,” referring to the US African American population and Liberia as a former US colony. He expected that Americans, “many of partial African descent” and “others of pure European descent,” would be among the colonizers of Africa, and sketched out a plan to continue “the first movement to bring Africa and America into closer relations.” In Part II, Haven focussed on Liberia, arguing that the republic needed more emigrants to “help Africa.” He queried, “Why then encourage emigration? To help Africa, not America ... It is to assist in Americanizing Africa. America is being Africanized; Africa should be Americanized.”<sup>39</sup> Haven made important claims here. First, that US culture and society had an indelible African imprint on it in the presence of its black population. Second, that this relationship justified US intervention in foreign affairs regarding Africa. In this rewriting of African American history – particularly southern black history – black culture forged in the crucible of chattel slavery served as the fulcrum for legitimate US interest in Africa.

Haven was not alone in calling for America in Africa. As mentioned earlier, in 1877 several items appeared in the *African Repository* that spoke to the

<sup>39</sup> Gilbert Haven, “America in Africa,” *North American Review*, 125, 257 (July–Aug. 1877), 147, 152–53; Haven, “America in Africa, Part II,” *North American Review*, 125, 259 (Nov.–Dec. 1877), 521.

supposedly indissoluble links between the United States and Africa. The author of "Africa and America" declared,

We believe that the future of the problem of Africa will be found in the voluntary emigration to that continent of the thousands and hundreds of thousands of the best class of colored persons, who aspire for a future on behalf of themselves and their children, and, who do not find their future in America.

In "The African Question," the author noted that most of the church's "exchanges are discussing the African question. That continent is rapidly becoming better known to the American people than ever before." The article explained that Reverend J. B. Middleton in a recent address at the South Carolina Methodist conference posited "the African Question as the possible solution of the problem of the colored man's future." The author also claimed that African Americans were not "listless spectators" to the events unfolding in Africa, calling attention to several "prominent ministers" of the AME Church who began advocating colonization.<sup>40</sup> Both articles envisioned African Americans as catalysts for strengthening US relations with Liberia and solving the African question.

Some Americans who argued for an amplified US presence in Africa did so without reference to African Americans and their hypothetical racial destiny in Africa. "American Interests in Western Africa" argued for a more aggressive foreign policy with Liberia and the development of commercial interests in Africa, asserting that "Liberia represents American interests in Western Africa" as American "philanthropy" led to its establishment. Claiming Liberia as America's "foster child," the author urged the United States to establish a "proper policy" with the African republic so that it could secure its own trading interests as Great Britain had done through colonizing Sierra Leone and areas on the Gambia river and the Gold Coast. He called attention to Commodore R. W. Shufeldt's 1876 speech before the ACS where he laid out a plan for the United States to achieve this by first establishing "a line of steamers ... half manned and half armed" to carry Liberian and US officials monthly to and from each country. Shortly thereafter, the United States would locate a merchant marine fleet along the coast to protect its trade with Liberia. As if to realize this proposal, Shufeldt traveled to West Africa in 1879 on a "special mission" to ascertain whether the French and British presence in the area threatened Liberia's independence. Correspondence between members of the State Department regarding his mission revealed no overt scheme by France to place a protectorate over Liberia. Shufeldt's position

<sup>40</sup> "Africa and America," *African Repository*, 53 (April 1877), 62–63; "The African Question," *African Repository*, 78–79.



resonated with Americans who wanted the United States to establish a quasi-colonial presence in Africa as Europeans began “opening Africa.”<sup>41</sup> Shufeldt would later write a letter in 1881 to William Coppinger, then secretary of the ACS, in which he apologized for missing the organization’s public meeting in New York to discuss the Liberian situation. In the letter he commended the “patient efforts” of the ACS and the work of British and American “Christians and philanthropists” in Liberia. However, he declared, “I think there has been too much ‘waiting upon Providence’ for advancing the interest and strengthening the position of the colonists in Africa.” He went on to castigate the United States for its “utter indifference ... towards a colony planted by ourselves in behalf of a race subject for many years to our oppressive laws, and barred by our statutes from taking its place among nations.” He warned that Great Britain aimed to take Liberian property, that “Mohammedanism” threatened to displace Christianity in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and that the British would monopolize legitimate trade on the West Coast of Africa. Shufeldt again proposed that capitalists help build a “steam line” that would bring American goods directly to Liberia, to insure its “progress and prosperity.” He concluded his letter emphasizing, “I do not expect, nor indeed is it necessary, that the Government of the United States take any aggressive position towards other questions on the Africa question.” Rather, he urged the country to “take an active interest in Liberia.”<sup>42</sup> The United States appeared hesitant to take an “aggressive” position on the African question in the 1870s and 1880s. However, the government sent representatives to attend two of the largest conferences on the African question during the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

The Berlin Conference of 1884–85, convened by Kaiser Wilhelm II and Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, sought to definitively lay out and solve the most pressing issue relating to the European presence in Africa – namely “legitimate” commerce and trade. The European quest for dominance in Western and Central Africa had come to a head in the early 1880s. From 1876 to 1884, King Leopold shored up his economic interests in the Congo, while European nations vied for access to the Congo river and its tributaries, which the regent’s International Association of the Congo (founded in 1879) claimed to control fully by 1884. British-born, self-

<sup>41</sup> “American Interests in Western Africa,” *African Repository*, 53 (July 1877), 88–89; United States, Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, Volume I (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1879), 341–45; Peter Duignan, *The United States and Africa: A History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 121, 136.

<sup>42</sup> “The United States and Liberia: Letter from Commodore Shufeldt,” *African Repository*, 1 Oct. 1881, 126–30.

identified American explorer Henry Morton Stanley, acting on Leopold’s behalf, led expeditions into Central Africa and collected signatures (often X marks) from hundreds of African chiefs and kings who allegedly ceded their sovereign rights of access to the Congo basin to the Association. Citing the Congress of Vienna (1814–15) stipulation regarding the free navigation of European rivers as precedent, several European powers were skeptical of the legality of such documents under Western international law. In 1884, the British and Portuguese agreed to a convention whereby Great Britain recognized Portugal’s control of the two banks of the Congo river despite French claims to the same. They signed a treaty on 26 February 1884 that bound both nations to suppressing slavery and slave-trading on both the eastern and western coasts of Africa, as well as recognizing Portuguese rights to the mouth of the Congo, but provided the British unfettered navigation on the Congo and Zambezi rivers.<sup>43</sup> That same year the United States and other nations recognized the sovereignty of the International Association.

In April 1884 (seven months before the Berlin Conference convened), an editorial appeared in the *New York Freeman* decrying the Anglo-Portuguese treaty. The editor, Fortune, remarked, “England, in her foreign policy, is a sly, grasping, avaricious bully. Her policy is dictated by her selfish, money-getting merchants and manufacturers.” He alleged that the International Association of the Congo would serve as a bulwark against this greed, ensuring that all nations would benefit from trade on the Congo. Fortune continued,

We applaud the action of the United States Senate in recognizing the claims of the International Association and in declining to recognize the treaty concluded between England and Portugal; and we hope that the President will store up all the great powers of the world to resist unitedly this unholy and infamous scheme, and establish over the Congo Valley de jure and de facto international jurisdiction.<sup>44</sup>

Fortune applauded Leopold as a visionary who would bring Christianity, commerce, and civilization to Central Africa. Moreover, Fortune wanted to see the US take a more prominent role in the leading African question of the day – the future of the Congo. It is unclear how many readers of the black newspaper shared his sentiments.

Imperialist nations interested in Africa remained skeptical of the benign intentions of the International Association. Concerned about the association’s monopoly on access to the Congo and Niger rivers and the Congo basin, as

<sup>43</sup> Guy Stone, “The Foreign Office and Forced Labour in Portuguese West Africa, 1894–1914,” in Keith Hamilton and Patrick Salmon, eds., *Slavery, Diplomacy and Empire: Britain and the Suppression of the Slave Trade, 1807–1975* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> “England on the Congo River,” *New York Freeman*, 26 April 1884.

well as on rubber production, Wilhelm II and Bismarck began planning the Berlin Conference to secure free trade and free navigation of the Congo and Niger rivers, as well as their tributaries. They invited representatives from the major European powers, the Ottoman Empire, and the United States to participate. They did not extend invitations to the President of Liberia, the emperor of Ethiopia, the sultan of Zanzibar, or any other African ruler. This was to be a conference where Europeans and the Ottoman Empire would determine the status of Africa and Africans.<sup>45</sup>

The conference produced a General Act of 1885, which rationalized the partition of Africa (with the exception of Liberia and Abyssinia) into European protectorates, colonies, and spheres of influence that would benefit Western geopolitical and economic interests in Africa. The Congo Free State remained a “free state” in the eyes of the European signatories and the United States. Less than a decade after Turner had foretold the United States of Africa and Haven had made his impassioned argument for American intervention in Africa, Europeans had divided the continent – with American approval. John Kasson, diplomat and US envoy to Germany, and Henry S. Sanford, former minister to Germany and member of the American Branch of the defunct International Association for the Civilization of Central Africa, represented President Chester A. Arthur at the conference. The American representatives signed the Act; however, the House and Senate later questioned whether Kasson, Sanford, and the President possessed Constitutional powers to bind the United States to the conference’s agreement. The House Committee on Foreign Affairs “in reply to a resolution of House adopted January 5, 1885” resolved that “no prospect of commercial advantage warrants a departure from the traditional policy of this Government which forbids all entangling alliances with the nations of the Old World.” They concluded that “the participation of the delegates of the United States in the so-called Congo Conference” departed from this doctrine “which forbids the Government of the United States to participate in any political combination or movement outside the American continent.”<sup>46</sup> They interpreted the partition of Africa and the Berlin Act as a “political combination” rather than a legitimate treaty that safeguarded US sovereignty. Congressmen in the minority concurred but recommended adding that the House “explicitly declares its dissent from the act of the President of the United States in accepting the invitation of Germany and France to participate

<sup>45</sup> Pakenham, 23–33, 239; Duignan, *The United States and Africa*, 133.

<sup>46</sup> “Participation of the United States in the Congo Conference,” H.R. Rep. No. 2655, at 1–2 (1885), 48th Congress.

in the International Conference at Berlin.”<sup>47</sup> The Senate never ratified the Act, removing any obligation from the United States to abide by its provisions. The Senate referred the General Act to the Committee on Foreign Affairs on 14 January 1886. Nevertheless, European dignitaries noted the presence of the United States at the conference as a clear sign that the nation had entered a new phase in its foreign policy. Supposedly, America had abandoned its isolationist posture and steadfast noninvolvement in European affairs.<sup>48</sup>

As the House Committee on Foreign Affairs remarked in 1885, they were not “unmindful of the conspicuous part American enterprise, energy, and skill [had] taken in the development of Africa.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the United States had commercial agents stationed across Africa during the nineteenth century. As scholars have argued, the United States’ desire to build an overseas commercial empire was a dominant theme in American foreign policy during the period. Securing “legitimate trade” in Africa to replace the illegal transatlantic slave trade was the goal from 1807. However, it was not until the 1850s that the US consular presence in Africa began increasing substantially.<sup>50</sup> For example, in 1855, there were US consuls in the Barbary States (Tunis, Tangiers, and Tripoli) and in Alexandria, Egypt (as part of the Turkish Dominions). In contrast, there were two commercial agents listed as residing “in Africa” – one in Monrovia and one in Zanzibar. From 1862 to 1885, the US consular presence in Africa grew to include one ambassador, and multiple commercial agents, consuls, consular agents, and minister residents. Most of this increase occurred in the 1860s, coinciding with US diplomatic recognition of Liberia and the rising European presence in Africa. By the time of the Berlin Conference, the United States had a geographically dispersed consular corps throughout Africa, whose duties were not limited to representing US commercial interests. In that group, African Americans served exclusively in Liberia, giving the United States its sole ambassadorial presence on the continent.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. Andrew G. Curtin of Pennsylvania chaired the committee, and Perry Belmont (NY), Judson C. Clements (GA), William R. Cox (NC), and Charles Stewart (TX) expressed the minority views.

<sup>48</sup> Pakenham, 254; Duignan, 133–38; In the Senate of the United States. January 14, 1886. – Referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations and ordered to be printed. General Act of the Conference of Berlin. S.Misc.Doc. 68, 49th Congress, 1st Session.

<sup>49</sup> H.R. Rep. No. 2655, at 1–2 (1885).

<sup>50</sup> Michael J. Hogan, ed., *Paths to Power: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations to 1941* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2–3. See Kinley Brauer, “The Great American Desert Revisited: Recent Literature and Prospects for the Study of American Foreign Relations, 1815–1861,” in *ibid.*, 44–78; Edward P. Crapol, “Coming to Terms with Empire: The Historiography of Late Nineteenth-Century American Foreign Relations,” in *ibid.*, 79–116; George E. Brooks, *Yankee Traders, Old Coasters & African Middlemen: A History of American Legitimate Trade with West Africa in the Nineteenth Century* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1970).

America's interest in Africa did not wane, as in 1890 the government sent Sanford to the Brussels Conference to further discuss efforts to suppress the slave trade in Africa and restrict the importation of liquor, firearms, and ammunition into the continent to trade with Africans.<sup>51</sup> Unlike its predecessor the Berlin Act of 1885, the Brussels Act of 1890 had supporters in the Senate, which ratified the treaty on 11 January 1892.<sup>52</sup> Arguably, the celebrated Act aided efforts by Europeans to prevent their colonial subjects from acquiring weapons with which they might rebel. Blacks in the West weighed in on both Acts and their implications for Africans.

### “THE AFRICAN PROBLEM AND THE METHOD OF ITS SOLUTION”

In 1886, Barbados-born African American lawyer David Augustus Straker weighed in on the international implications of the African question in an article for the *New York Freeman*. He criticized “the theory that the conquest of a barbarous people by a civilized power is justifiable through its benefits. This we know is a plea of justification made by the Pilgrim Fathers in their warfare in America against the aborigines, or native Indians.” However, for him the Berlin Conference's imperial project differed in its orientation as it resulted from “the light of discovery of history, law, science and Christianity, which have given to the civilized world so much knowledge of Africa, its resources and developments.” Straker's reference to America's settler colonial past reads as a subtle rebuke of the English colonists for using war to conquer Native Americans and steal their land. However, he seemed to view the actions of Europeans in Africa as different, arguing that if their goal was to civilize Africa, then the continent would benefit from their presence. Nevertheless, he entreated those “who are identified with the African race” to pay close attention to and discuss “this topic” – the African question.<sup>53</sup>

Like Straker, Edward Blyden in his 1890 speech “The African Problem and the Method of Its Solution” discussed the historical precedent of the European colonization of the Americas to contextualize European aims in Africa. However, rather than focus on the genocidal warfare that European colonists waged against Native Americans, he focussed on the inability of white settlers to mobilize indigenous labor. Blyden claimed that the Indians had “passed

<sup>51</sup> Pakenham, 254; Duignan, 133–38.

<sup>52</sup> Slave Trade and Importation into Africa of Firearms, Ammunition, and Spirituous Liquor (General Act of Brussels), at [www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ustoo0001-0134.pdf](http://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ustoo0001-0134.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> D. Augustus Straker, “The Land of Our Fathers,” *New York Freeman*, 23 Jan. 1886.

away” because they “would not work,” and therefore “God suffered the African to be brought hither” to help the Europeans build up their countries in the Americas. This discussion of European settler colonialism in the western hemisphere served as a prologue of sorts to his larger argument – that “Africa is to be for the African or for nobody.” Calling attention to King Leopold’s establishment of the Congo Free State and other attempts by European powers to “utilize white men as colonists to Africa,” he predicted that Europeans would never successfully colonize Africa as God had “permitted the exile and bondage of Africans” so that they would return to Africa as the “chosen instrument” of its “redemption.” He foresaw westernized blacks supporting the creation of “such States as Liberia” throughout the continent. Turner had made a similar argument in 1877. Blyden appealed to African Americans to go over to Africa and help their “brethren.” For him, the only American presence in Africa should be that of the American Negro.<sup>54</sup>

In the aftermath of the Berlin and Brussels conferences, Blyden was not alone in imagining Africa transformed into a continent of black republics. In 1893, J. G. Robinson, an AME Church elder from Mississippi, predicted,

If the American Negroes of education and wealth would go at this work with energy and push, what will be the result? The sun-burnt sons of Africa will be seen sitting presidents over the greatest and richest country in the world; governors of states greater than New York or Pennsylvania.

He also believed that if African Americans “would go to work – earnest work – at the development of the continent of Africa, in the twentieth century, a civilization will ‘loom up’ on the banks of the Nile and Niger, greater than the civilization on the Hudson and Mississippi.” Robinson continued to advocate for African American migration to Africa throughout the remainder of the decade, believing that the political and economic transformation of Africa was nigh.<sup>55</sup> The editor of the *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review* published an article in 1898 encouraging “Bantu” exposure to black missionaries to aid in “civilizing” Africa. He predicted that

all Bantu-land ... will equal Europe in civilization, will be united in a great United States of Central Africa under a new and improved edition of our American

<sup>54</sup> Edward W. Blyden, “The African Problem and the Method of Its Solution” in Brotz, *Negro Social and Political Thought*, 126–39, 130, 132–34, 139.

<sup>55</sup> Lawrence S. Little, *Disciples of Liberty: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Age of Imperialism, 1884–1916* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000), 46, 70, 74, 204; J. G. Robinson, “Africa, and the Educated and Wealthy Negroes of America,” *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review*, 10, 1 (1893), 161–62. Little calls attention to Robinson’s article J. G. Robinson, “The Negro Must Go to Africa,” *Recorder*, 17 (Jan. 1895).

Constitution, and will produce master-pieces of literature, science, and art, vying with all the best that Europe and America will then be able to bring forth.<sup>56</sup>

The idea that American-style republicanism would forestall or supplant European attempts to subdue Africans under colonial rule resonated with many supporters of black missionary activity and black emigration to Africa, as it reinforced the notion that blacks had a providential duty to redeem and uplift Africa. Playing into reigning stereotypes, these proponents held that under their tutelage, Africa would no longer be the backwards “Dark Continent” associated with slavery, “paganism,” and “tribal” politics and warfare, but rather a model for black self-determination across the diaspora. Interestingly, this sentiment reflected a growing consensus among some Americans that they themselves had key roles to play in international philanthropy and reform as part of the US’s broader project of modernity.

While some black intellectuals like Robinson and Blyden made impassioned pleas for blacks to immigrate to Africa and help “build states” and protect the continent from European domination, others expressed skepticism about the success or feasibility of such a venture. Addressing the American “race problem” in 1892, Anna Julia Cooper castigated leaders who thought that the solution to the problem was expatriation. She implored, “for the love of humanity stop the mouth of those learned theorizers, the expedient mongers, who come out annually with their new and improved method of getting the answer and clearing the slate: amalgamation, deportation, colonization, and all the other ‘ations’ that were ever devised or dreamt of.” Cooper distrusted any scheme that she believed allowed the United States to absolve itself of its duties to its black citizens. She appears to have been aware that the US government and southern states expressed concerns about losing black laborers as a result of westward migration and colonization movements. She stated that if “an American family of whatever condition or hue takes notion to reside in Africa or in Mexico, or in the isles of the seas, it is most un-American for any power on this continent to seek to gainsay or obstruct their power.” However, she went on to argue that whites had no right to “calculate” the costs of sending millions of African Americans to Africa without consulting blacks themselves about their position on colonization.<sup>57</sup> Ultimately, Cooper rejected any government-initiated colonization schemes to address the “Negro problem” in lieu of dismantling Jim Crow. Moreover,

<sup>56</sup> “Facts about Africa and the African Negro,” *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review*, 14, No 1 (1898), 453–56.

<sup>57</sup> Anna Julia Cooper, “Has America a Race Problem? If So, How Can It Best Be Solved?” (1892), in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper: Including a Voice from the South and Other Important Essays, Papers, and Letters*, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2000), 121–33, 132.

she was cynical of blacks who abandoned their commitment to fight for equal rights in the US rather than launch a full-frontal assault on white supremacy.

Like Cooper, T. Thomas Fortune also expressed his pessimism regarding the colonization movement in “Will the Afro-American Return to Africa?” (1892) – a position that he had expressed in part back in 1887. Acknowledging the historical importance of the African question, Fortune wrote that presently, “A handful of people, who imagine that they control the matter entirely, insist that the Afro-American must, will, shall return to Africa. They will not listen to any argument.” Fortune called these proponents “imprudent and impudent . . . intermeddlers” who had never traveled to Africa and did not possess any knowledge of the continent. Like Cooper, he predicted that African Americans would not “return” to Africa in large numbers.<sup>58</sup>

The 1890s constituted a defining moment in the colonization movement as African Americans seeking to immigrate to Africa gradually turned away from the ACS to cast their lots with black-run ventures. The 1892 scandal surrounding the unexpected arrival in New York of two hundred blacks from the Cherokee Nation intent on expatriating themselves to Liberia called into question the infrastructure of the colonization agenda. The emigrants arrived in New York to discover they had no shelter or food, and there was no ship waiting to transport them to Liberia. News of their plight spread across the city, galvanizing the local black community to help the emigrants. Fortune and other black leaders organized public meetings to coordinate relief efforts and denounce the emigration movement. The national coverage of the debacle turned many African Americans against colonization, and they subsequently refused to endorse further efforts to plant an immigrant black American presence in Africa.<sup>59</sup> Instead, the decade saw the emergence of modern pan-Africanist discourses that approached the African question from the standpoint of international foreign policy, framing the liberation of Africa as a political imperative – not a liberal humanitarian or philanthropic issue.

In 1893, activists, intellectuals, and clergy from the African diaspora convened the Chicago Conference on Africa as part of the World’s Columbian Exposition. Attended by Turner, Alexander Crummell (a former missionary in Liberia and Sierra Leone), Blyden, and other African American male and female activists and leaders, the conferees discussed the relationship between African Americans and Africa, the status of Liberia, and the condition of

<sup>58</sup> T. Thomas Fortune, “Will the Afro-American Return to Africa?”, *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review*, 8, 4 (April 1892), 387–91, 387, 391.

<sup>59</sup> Edwin S. Redkey, *Black Exodus: Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890–1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 99–126.



the “African in America.”<sup>60</sup> The World’s Congress president Charles C. Bonney declared that the purpose of convening was “to present Africa as to unite the world in regenerating her.” Speaking “on behalf of the negro-citizens of America,” “Dr. Jenifer” stated, “We feel assured that such an assembly will by method, learning and influence give Africa a place in the world’s interest and confidence that nothing else could.” Prince Momolu Massaquoi from Liberia gave the response for Africa, stating,

among African heathens there is great interest in this congress. Not a tribe knowing about it but prays for its success. Not long ago there was a meeting of chief-magi at which the blessing of the spirits was invoked – providing this congress was not to take their country from them.<sup>61</sup>

Prince Massaquoi intimated that these chiefs understood the implications of the Berlin Conference and hoped that this conference would not further the imperialist agenda in Africa. While this gathering did not have the radical agenda that would characterize the pan-African gatherings of the early twentieth century, it was clear that Americans were paying attention to Africa and saw the United States as playing a vital role in Africa’s “redemption.”

Two years after the Chicago Conference, missionaries assembled a Congress on Africa in Atlanta, Georgia. Sponsored by the Stewart Missionary Foundation, the gathering featured many African American speakers, including missionaries, journalists, and leaders of black organizations. Fortune delivered a speech, “The Nationalization of Africa,” that, while not calling for massive black emigration to Africa, echoed his earlier sentiments about the importance of missionary work in Africa. He argued, “The nationalization of the African confederation which is a foregone conclusion from the facts in the case, will be the first step toward bringing the whole continent under one system of government.”<sup>62</sup> Fortune believed that Africa would confederate in a mode similar to the American colonies; however, American missionaries (not revolutionaries) would play the most vital role in uniting the continent in republican governance. Unlike the 1893 conference, the Congress of Africa

<sup>60</sup> Minkah Makalani, “Pan-Africanism,” in “Africana Age: African & African Diasporan Transformations in the 20th Century,” at <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-pan-africanism.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Frederick Perry Noble, *The Congress on Africa* (n.p., 1894), 282–83. Massaquoi went on to become a Liberian diplomat serving in Hamburg, Germany in the 1920s.

<sup>62</sup> T. Thomas Fortune, “The Nationalization of Africa” (1895), in J. W. E. Bowen, ed., *Africa and the American Negro: Addresses and proceedings of the Congress on Africa: Held under the Auspices of the Stewart Missionary Foundation for Africa of Gammon Theological Seminary in Connection with the Cotton States and International Exposition December 13–15, 1895* (Atlanta: Gammon Theological Seminary, 1896), 204.

attendees preoccupied themselves with discussing methods for “civilizing” Africa through evangelization. Nevertheless, feelings that shared bonds and destiny united blacks in the western hemisphere and Africans framed some of the conference speeches and publications. For example, Turner, in his conference essay “The American Negro and the Fatherland,” situated this consanguine relationship in a history of slavery and contemporary Jim Crow, declaring, “*There is no manhood future in the United States for the Negro.*”<sup>63</sup> Because African Americans shared no blood ties with white Americans, the United States would never treat them as equal citizens – and more importantly for Turner, black men could not be “men.” Turner understood that many black men residing in the West held a vested interest in patriarchy, but their legal, social, and economic disfranchisement prevented them from performing their manhood. Thus his vision of a black “manhood future” abroad upheld ideas that African redemption was foremost a masculine venture.

The competing visions of the 1893 and 1895 gatherings in the United States encapsulated the complex, and at time fractious, nature of black discourses on the African question during the Gilded Age. Some blacks held steadfast to the belief that American republicanism and African American culture could reform Africa and offer the continent a way out of colonial subjugation – or at least mitigate the impact of European rule. Others increasingly shifted their position on African affairs to emphasize African autonomy in fighting imperialism, but with support from black allies. Encouraging blacks to support efforts to liberate Africa became a fundamental aspect of a new black internationalism during the early twentieth century.

## CONCLUSION: A NEW BLACK INTERNATIONALISM AND AFRICA

The collapse of racial slavery in the Americas and the onset of the so-called New Imperialism transformed the Atlantic space that blacks and African Americans occupied from 1877 to 1900. Cuba abolished slavery in 1886. In 1888 Brazil abolished slavery, becoming the last regime in the western

<sup>63</sup> H. M. Turner, “Essay: The American Negro and the Fatherland,” in Bowen, 195, original emphasis; Paul W. Harris, “Racial Identity and the Civilizing Mission: Double-Consciousness at the 1895 Congress on Africa,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 18, 2 (Summer 2008), 145–76; Jeannette Eileen Jones, *In Search of Brightest Africa: Reimagining the Dark Continent in American Culture, 1883–1936* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 92–97; George Shepperson, “Pan-Africanism and ‘Pan-Africanism’: Some Historical Notes,” *Phylon*, 23, 4 (4th Qtr. 1962), 346–58, 353–54.

hemisphere to enslave Africans and their descendants. Brazilians participated in the transatlantic slave trade, even after its statutory abolition in 1831. The demise of slavery coincided with the installation of new regimes of racialized social control in the Americas. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision that declared “separate but equal” Constitutional in the United State would stand for over half a century. While Jim Crow in the United States had no direct analog in the Americas for people of African descent, black internationalists saw resemblances between segregation, colonialism, colorism, classism, and imperialism in Africa.

When the first Pan-African Conference met in 1900 at the Westminster Town Hall in London, under the leadership of Trinidadian Henry Sylvester Williams, the civilizing mission discourse articulated in Chicago and Atlanta was noticeably absent. The main goal was to protest the inequality and discrimination that people of African descent experienced in the British colonies. In effect, the Caribbean, African American, African, and white British attendees objected to colonial Jim Crow. However, not all participants called for the immediate dismantling of European imperialism in Africa. The conference adopted a somewhat gradualist approach to African liberation, calling on European powers to help African colonies transform into independent states over time through education and social programs, and for blacks and Africans to prove that they deserved liberty and equality.<sup>64</sup> For example, W. E. B. Du Bois’s speech “To the Nations of the World” best encapsulated this sentiment by urging “nations of the world” to “respect the integrity and independence of the free Negro states of Abyssinia, Liberia, Haiti, and the rest,” but argued that

the inhabitants of these states, the independent tribes of Africa, the Negroes of the West Indies and America, and the black subjects of all nations take courage, strive ceaselessly, and fight bravely, that they may prove to the world their incontestable right to be counted among the great brotherhood of mankind.<sup>65</sup>

The conference disbanded with others calling for better treatment of Britain’s imperial subjects.

The *fin de siècle* was more than a chronological turning point for black internationalism and pan-African thought. It was a time of reflection and prophecy for a new generation of blacks – self-stylized “New Negroes” in the United

<sup>64</sup> Shepperson, 354; George B. N. Ayittey, “The United States of Africa: A Revisit,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 632, *Perspectives on Africa and the World* (November 2010), 87–88.

<sup>65</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “To the Nations of the World” (1900), 3, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts, Amherst Libraries, at <http://credo.library.umass.edu/cgi-bin/pdf.cgi?id=scua:mums312-bo04-i321>.

States and their counterparts in the black Atlantic. While Jim Crow continued to limit African American possibilities for full citizenship, many blacks remained steadfast in their commitment to Africa.<sup>66</sup>

### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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<sup>66</sup> For more on post-1900 black internationalism see Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Black Radical Nationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 7–11; Ezra Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).