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Errand into Africa: Colonization and Nation Building in Sarah J. Hale’s *Liberia*

SUSAN M. RYAN

To many white Americans before the Civil War, the idea of “returning” free blacks and manumitted slaves to Africa sounded like the perfect solution to the United States’ increasingly rancorous and violent racial problems. Generally thought a moderate position in its day—compared to radical abolitionist and pro-slavery sentiments—colonizationism has since come to seem (as it seemed to most anti-slavery activists at the time) misguided at best, and venomous at worst, in its attempt to eliminate racial difference within the United States and so to evade the troubling issues such difference inevitably raised.\(^1\) It is no surprise, then, that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s advocacy of African colonization near the end of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—probably the plan’s most famous articulation—has elicited innumerable condemnations, lamentations, and apologies in the more than 140 years since the novel’s publication. By contrast, however, Sarah J. Hale’s *Liberia* (1853), which explores the same possibility, has been rather pointedly ignored.

\(^1\)According to William Loren Katz, “William Lloyd Garrison’s *Thoughts on African Colonization* [1832] marked a significant reversal in the policies of the young abolitionist movement. For many years those opposed to slavery, including Garrison himself, had accepted the argument that the emancipation of Negro slaves should be followed by their removal from the United States, preferably to Africa.” Katz writes that the wealthy black Philadelphian James Forten was influential in turning Garrison against colonization and probably helped him to secure “the collection of Negro anti-colonization writings that form an important part of his book” (“Earliest Responses of American Negroes and Whites to African Colonization,” in *Thoughts on African Colonization*, by William Lloyd Garrison [New York: Arno Press, 1968], p. 1).
While my primary focus in this essay is Hale’s particular colonizationist theory and its reformulations of American nationalism, it seems useful first to examine the tensions inherent in any pro-Liberian stance. The ambivalent responses of both modern critics and anti-slavery activists to Uncle Tom’s Cabin help to elucidate these difficulties and may also suggest reasons for the relative obscurity of Hale’s novel.2 The “problem” with Stowe’s text for many readers is that this greatest (most influential, most widely read) of American anti-slavery novels fails to create a fictional space within the United States for survivors of the slavery system. Karen Sánchez-Eppler, along with other recent critics, has decried “Stowe’s failure to imagine an America in which blacks could be recognized as persons.”3 Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s portrayal of colonization as a solution—which Stowe herself later regretted—was especially problematic for the abolitionists of her own day, who recognized that the novel’s phenomenal popularity and its power to arouse in readers a sensation of slavery’s injustice made it invaluable to an anti-slavery movement that had recently suffered the disastrous passage of the Fugitive Slave Act.

Frederick Douglass’s response to the novel, which Robert S. Levine examines in some depth, nicely illustrates the abolitionists’ dilemma. Stowe’s colonizationism clearly vexed him, as an excerpt from his 1853 letter to her (later published in Frederick Douglass’s Paper) shows: “The truth is, dear madam, we are here, and we are likely to remain. Individuals emigrate—nations never. We have grown up with this republic, and I see

2I call Liberia a novel (as does Nina Baym in Feminism and American Literary History: Essays [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992]) despite the fact that it is more precisely a combination of novel, historical account, and propaganda tract. The fictional passages predominate, though, which I believe justifies the use of a somewhat reductive term. The original title page states that the book was “edited by” Hale, presumably because she collected a number of historical documents in the appendix. Hale’s 1852 edition of Northwood advocates colonization as well but does not make it a central element of the narrative.

nothing in her character, or even in the character of the American people as yet, which compels the belief that we must leave the United States." Nevertheless, Douglass defended Stowe and her novel against the criticism of Martin Delany, who not only deplored Stowe's colonizationism but questioned the legitimacy of her entire project. In response to Delany, Douglass wrote "We shall not . . . allow the sentiments put in the brief letter of GEORGE HARRIS, at the close of Uncle Tom's Cabin, to vitiate forever Mrs. Stowe's power to do us good. Who doubts that Mrs. Stowe is more of an abolitionist than when she wrote that chapter?"4

Douglass's apology, surely inspired by his perception of Stowe's importance to the anti-slavery effort, attests to the necessity of neutralizing the discomfort her colonizationist stance aroused. It was not simply that she advocated emigration but that she advocated emigration specifically to Liberia. Some black abolitionists, including Delany at various times in his career, promoted the idea of black emigration to various sites—Haiti, South America, territories in the American West, and even western Africa—but nearly all rejected the Liberian colony because of the racist history and membership of its sponsoring organization, the American Colonization Society.5 The ACS, and white colonizationists in general, expressed a variety of attitudes toward African Americans, ranging from outright hostility to presumptuous paternalism: at one extreme were Southern slaveholders who, as James Wesley Smith asserts, advocated free black emigration from fear that this "incendiary" population would subvert white authority; at the other were anti-slavery reformers who felt that assimilation was a desirable but unrealistic goal and whose advocacy of emigra-


5I do not mean to imply that African Americans universally rejected Liberian colonization but rather that the radical or "immediate" abolitionists overwhelmingly did so. African Americans who did support Liberian colonization, like Alexander Crummell (1819–98), tended to advocate more conservative, gradualist plans for emancipation. On Crummell's conservatism and his place in the black nationalist movement, see Wilson J. Moses, The Golden Age of Black Nationalism: 1850–1925 (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1978), esp. pp. 59–82.
tion signaled a reluctant submission to American racism. Most colonizationists, however, occupied positions somewhere between these poles—many felt that slavery was unjust and should be gradually eliminated but also believed that the United States was essentially (and preferably) a white nation, while others encouraged emigration because they believed manumitted slaves were ill prepared for independence and would, therefore, become a burden to (white) society.

For all the wincing that Stowe’s colonizationism has prompted, she articulated in Uncle Tom’s Cabin a position far less racist than mainstream white colonizationist theory—a position closer, in fact, to the sentiments of black emigrationists and nationalists. George Harris arrives at his decision to emigrate from a position of strength rather than desperation, never

6I have chosen to use the term “African American” despite the fact that it asserts precisely what colonizationists, both black and white, were questioning. I also use the admittedly inadequate term “black” at times but name groups more specifically—“free blacks,” “ex-slaves,” “emigrants,” etc.—wherever possible. This problem of naming points to the very issues of identity and legitimacy I am attempting to address.


8Moses argues that an interest in “civilizing” Africa (and persons of African descent) characterized nineteenth-century black nationalism in general, and emigrationism in particular, as many saw “the uplifting of the [African] continent as an initial step in the elevation of black people everywhere” (Golden Age, p. 21). Few, if any, questioned the foundations of such terms as “uplift” and “civilization.” A more polemical account of black nationalism and emigrationism is Bill McAdoo’s Pre–Civil War Black Nationalism (Brooklyn, N.Y.: David Walker Press, 1983). See also Floyd J. Miller, The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Colonization and Emigration, 1787–1863 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975); Hollis Lynch. James Theodore Holly: Ante-Bellum Black
relinquishing his right to remain in the United States or questioning his ability to survive in white society. Though he acknowledges that he and his family are light enough to “mingle in the circles of the whites,” he embraces his mother’s African lineage. By asserting that he has “no wish to pass for an American” and claiming that he is going to Liberia in order to “find myself a people,” he assures us that blackness and American-ness are, for him, mutually exclusive. While white colonizationists tended to share Harris’s belief that blacks and Americans possessed nonintersecting identities, they hardly shared his valuation of the former, and generally considered the separation prescriptive as well as descriptive.

If a colonizationist stance as (comparatively) palatable as Stowe’s could cause such dis-ease among anti-slavery activists, they must have been significantly less comfortable with a novel like Hale’s Liberia, whose portrayal of African colonization was far more representative of white colonizationists’ beliefs. The fact that the book was not mentioned, as far as I have been able to discern, in three of the major anti-slavery periodicals (Frederick Douglass’s Paper, the Liberator, and the National Anti-


Despite Liberia’s unpopularity among activists, several thousand African Americans did emigrate there under the auspices of the ACS. Nevertheless, it would be a grave error to assume that their beliefs and motivations were identical to those of their white sponsors. Many accepted the offer of emigration because it was their only alternative to slavery; others felt that their christianizing mission took precedence over other political considerations; and some, surely, wished to leave the United States and chose pragmatically to accept financial assistance from a less than ideal donor. See Bell I. Wiley, Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia, 1833–1869 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980).

Stowe attempts to answer potential criticism of her advocacy of colonization through George Harris’s self-justifying letter to a friend. This apologia acknowledges the mixed history of the colonization movement and grants that “Liberia may have subscribed all sorts of purposes” in the hands of white oppressors but asserts that God may simply have used white colonizationists, however racist their sentiments, as a means of establishing a black nation (Uncle Tom’s Cabin: or, Life Among the Lowly, ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar [New York: Library of America, 1982], p. 502).

Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, pp. 501–2.
Slavery Standard) in the year of its publication or the year after, may owe something to this discomfort.\textsuperscript{11} The 14 April 1854 issue of Frederick Douglass’s Paper did, however, review two cookbooks that Hale had recently published, with the cutting implication that her attempt to enter into the debate over slavery (possibly in reference to Liberia but more likely to a March 1853 piece in Godey’s Lady’s Book or to the 1852 edition of Northwood) was both unwelcome and illegitimate.\textsuperscript{12} While Douglass’s Paper considered Stowe’s voice acceptable despite her colonizationism, it wanted nothing to do with Hale’s writings on slavery, even as positions against which to argue.

This desire to keep Hale out of the conversation has persisted in twentieth-century scholarship. Nina Baym argues that scholars have been reluctant to identify Hale as a political writer, despite the fact that abolition and women’s rights were issues of great importance to her, particularly in the 1850s. “The problem,” Baym writes, “is that from ‘our’ point of view [Hale] argued for the wrong side in both instances.”\textsuperscript{13} Much is to be gained, though, from the exploration of political positions

\textsuperscript{11}I qualify my assertion that abolitionist papers did not mention Liberia because it is difficult to have absolute confidence in a visual search of so much microfilmed material; in addition, some issues from the runs I searched were missing.

\textsuperscript{12}After criticizing Hale’s recipes for requiring “too much expenditure of time and money,” the reviewer writes: “we should be deemed more egotistical than ever, were we to add that we have a strong idea of publishing something on this subject. . . . Amidst her domestic researches, Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale found leisure to write a weak and diluted defence of the great Patriarchal domestic Institution of Slavery! So we don’t see why we may not find opportunity to discourse on French Flummery, Puff Paste, Apple Fool, &c.1 especially as we are peculiarly desirous to display our knowledge on this subject” (“Literary Notices,” Frederick Douglass’s Paper, 14 April 1854, p. 3). While I have no proof that Douglass and his associate Julia Griffiths (who wrote many of the paper’s book reviews) were aware of Liberia and deliberately chose to review Hale’s cookbooks in its stead, their hostility to her commentaries on slavery is obvious.

\textsuperscript{13}Baym, Feminism and American Literary History, p. 168. Most scholarship on Hale focuses on her editorship of Godey’s Lady’s Book and, to a lesser extent, on Northwood and Woman’s Record, a historical work Hale published in 1853; Liberia is usually mentioned briefly, if at all. An exception is Baym’s chapter “Sarah Hale, Political Writer,” which treats the novel in some detail (Feminism and American Literary History, pp. 167–82). Baym treats Liberia less extensively in American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790–1860 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995). Patricia Okker’s recent book, Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century American Women Editors (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), came to my attention while this essay was in press; although Okker takes
that now seem objectionable and embarrassing; not only do such investigations reveal the tactics and beliefs of important historical actors, but they often reveal unexpected commonalities with those positions we hold in higher esteem. Hale’s *Liberia* is remarkable in its embodiment of the prejudices and agendas (hidden and overt) of a particular brand of white colonizationism, yet the novel also represents an apparently sincere and to a large extent religiously motivated reformist project—one strangely similar to the abolitionist fiction whose implications and goals it opposes. Critical investigations of that anti-slavery fiction—its tropes, rhetorical strategies, and political compromises—have helped to elucidate the cultural matrix we call “the slavery issue.” I wish to explore that matrix from another perspective, using a text from a decade in which a great deal of fiction about slavery appeared and in which there was substantial belief in fiction’s ability to do certain kinds of cultural, even political, work.14

Hale quite seriously as a literary figure and editor, she treats Hale’s views on slavery and colonization only briefly.

Of course, scholars may have paid little attention to *Liberia* for reasons other than its embrace of colonization; by most academics’ standards, it is not a particularly “good read.” Nevertheless, I would argue that the novel’s capacity to embarrass modern readers—and the fact that it does not fit neatly into the anti-slavery/pro-slavery binary—has discouraged close examination of it. Recent work by Dana Nelson and Eric Sundquist, among others, challenges this tendency to avoid the racial ambiguities in texts by white Americans. See Nelson, *The Word in Black and White: Reading “Race” in American Literature, 1638–1867* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), and Sundquist, “Mark Twain and Homer Plessy,” in *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 225–70. Maggie Sale has made a strong case for the inclusion of racist texts in academic discourse. In reference to Americanists’ tendency to avoid discussing texts that blatantly promote white supremacism, she asserts that “we make it easier on ourselves by repressing what we do not want to acknowledge and by focusing on writers whose sensibilities are perhaps closer to our own.” “This exclusion,” she argues, “facilitates the operation of the very ideological constructs we are attempting to subvert by masking their presence—and thus their power—but not eliminating their operation” (“Critiques from Within: Antebellum Projects of Resistance,” *American Literature* 64 [March 1992]: 696). *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* has responded to similar arguments by including a brief selection of pro-slavery texts in its second edition.

14Hale’s statement at the end of the 1852 *Northwood* illustrates her faith in fiction’s power to effect change: “Let us trust that the pen and not the sword will decide the controversy now going on in our land; and that any part women may take in the former mode will be promotive of peace, and not suggestive of discord” (*Northwood: or, Life
Hale's treatment of colonization expresses much of what abolitionists deplored in the American Colonization Society—racism, condescension, fear of blacks, and the desire conveniently to be rid of the "race problem" by expelling non-whites from the United States. But Hale's project is not simply about displacing an unwanted population; she also conceived of it as a means of improving the status and condition of the "African race" as a whole. Colonization, Hale believed, would greatly increase opportunities for erstwhile American blacks to achieve a dignified self-sufficiency insofar as they would finally be relieved of the burden of their "inferiority" to whites and of the virulent racial prejudice that seemed to her irremediable within the United States. Even more compelling for the devoutly Christian Hale was the notion that colonization would provide a means of christianizing and civilizing "heathen" Africa.

Most notable, though, is Hale's incorporation of such widely held colonizationist points of view into a narrative that explores the meanings and possibilities of nationalism; she promotes African colonization as a means not only of preserving the Union as she conceives of it (that is, as Protestant and Anglo-Saxon) but also of replicating, among ex-slaves in a "new" country, American-style nation building, national identity, and citizenship, as she defines them. Libran colonization in Hale's novel becomes an unusual incarnation of colonialism, in that the departure of blacks from the United States results in two

———. *North and South* [1852; reprinted, New York: Johnson, 1970], p. 407). She is probably referring here to Stowe—whether or not the "little lady" in fact started the "big war." Hale seems to have feared the possibility. Such a direct reference is temporally plausible; the preface to the 1852 *Northwood* is dated 9 September, while *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in March of the same year and appeared in serial form even earlier. Rita K. Gollin notes in her introduction to the 1970 reprint of *Northwood* that Hale "offered her expanded novel as a peaceful if long-range alternative to Mrs. Stowe's abolitionism position" (p. xix). According to Angela Zophy, though, both Hale and Louis Godey denied that the republication of *Northwood* had anything to do with the recent appearance of Stowe's novel ("For the Improvement of My Sex: Sarah Josepha Hale's Editorship of *Godey's Lady's Book*, 1837–1877" [Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1978], p. 98).

strong nations on the (white) American model rather than a racially and regionally divided (and possibly disintegrating) United States, on the one hand, and a heathen non-nation in Africa, on the other. The implications of such a strategy for both the emigrants and the African natives whose land they would "share" are disturbing indeed.

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*Liberia: or, Mr. Peyton’s Experiments* is both a fictional representation of Hale’s proposed solution to the slavery question and a piece of pro-colonization propaganda.¹⁶ It depicts a paternalistic Virginia landowner (the Mr. Peyton of the subtitle) who decides to free a number of his slaves for their years of faithful service, and particularly for their loyalty to his family during a threatened slave insurrection. Though several of Peyton’s slaves accept his offer of emancipation with excitement, others make it clear that they prefer their present state. Clara, a household servant, remarks that “a nigger’s nothing but a nigger, whether he is free or not,” and she rejects Peyton’s offer largely because she prefers labor in the home to labor on the land.¹⁷ According to the narrator, “a desire for freedom, for its own sake, was too abstract and intangible a motive” to override her concerns for personal comfort (p. 72). Clinging more fervently to his slave status, Essex, the Peyton family’s head waiter, declares that “as I came into this world, so I go out of it” (p. 52). Hoping to win over Southern readers who would be offended by a negative depiction of plantation life and perhaps

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¹⁶The book’s lengthy appendix contains white colonizationists’ writings, Liberian documents, and letters from black emigrants. Hale presumably includes these letters—which surely were chosen carefully—because they present Liberia in a generally positive light, contradicting the unfavorable reports that anti-colonization groups were circulating in the United States. They also tend to mirror her narrative, as black settlers attest to their improved status and wider range of options in Liberia. Interestingly, Hale uses letters written by blacks to legitimize her story, just as the authors and editors of slave narratives often included letters by whites to assure readers of their authenticity.

also wanting to distance herself from other Northern authors who ardently opposed slavery, Hale presents a version of slavery so benign that it hardly seems to require abolishing.

Hale extols Peyton's liberality nonetheless, and in doing so she invites readers to identify with his efforts to do what is right—free his slaves—without creating a worse situation for them by doing so. He is especially concerned that his "servants" be able to support themselves once they move beyond his benevolent supervision. There is a danger, according to Peyton's eminently sensible sister, that his slaves, once free, would become like the other "free negroes" in the area: "idle, degraded, and worthless men, a burden and a nuisance to every respectable person near them" (p. 46).

The "experiments" of the novel's subtitle, then, are Peyton's attempts to find or create a viable living arrangement for his former slaves—one that will prevent their becoming "burdensome." The first of these is to establish a group of freed slaves on their own farm. Peyton prefers to keep them nearby, however, because, he asserts, Southerners "are so familiar with their habits of improvidence and indolence, that it does not strike us with the same feelings of surprise and contempt that it does the thrifty Northerners" (pp. 47-48). Hardly a vote of confidence, but thus he initiates the project. His second "scheme for improvement," to use Hale's rhetoric of uplift, is to free a family of slaves and help them secure employment in Philadelphia. Both attempts at domestic emancipation—one Southern and rural, the other Northern and urban—fail miserably, and Hale concludes that freed slaves become "a drain" on American society "whenever the conduct of their life is given in their own hands." But, lest the first half of her narrative prove too pessimistic and frustrate any desire to pursue alternative solutions, Hale insists that her characterization applies only to "the masses": "noble exceptions . . . have risen up more quickly and in greater numbers than their best friends could have ven-

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18 The term "servant" was often used in antebellum America to refer to slaves, especially in the South. For a discussion of the social implications of this usage, particularly among white domestic workers, see David Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 47-50.
tured to hope” (p. 127). These exceptions have not, however, been witnessed in America but only where the black man is “freed from the crushing superiority of the white man” (p. 127).

At first, Peyton’s agrarian experiment goes well: “animated by the desire of proving themselves worthy of their liberty, all faithfully performed their part in the common task.” During the first year, the former slaves “worked the land for Mr. Peyton,” and Nathan, a particularly trusted member of the group, was “their overseer” (p. 57). Once they are on their own, however, most of the ex-slaves become lethargic, debt-ridden, and more willing to steal than to work. Having “tasted the pleasure of an indolent life,” they are “not inclined to resume their old habits of active exertion” (p. 58). A select few—Nathan, Keziah, and Polydore—do relatively well once Peyton relieves them of their communitarian pact with the rest and allows them to work their own parcel of land independently (in emulation of Hale’s exemplar of individual responsibility, the Yankee farmer); the majority of Peyton’s ex-slaves, however, are insufficiently ambitious or self-disciplined to work without coercion.

Having fully exploited the time-worn stereotype of the slow, shiftless rural “black” who cannot (or will not) “regulate” himself, Hale then draws on the popular image of the frivolous, pleasure-seeking, irresponsible urban “black.”19 Ben and Clara, who eschewed the farming option they were previously offered, want their freedom only if they can have it in a city, where they can indulge their love of spectacle and fine clothing. And indulge they do, as the narrator disapprovingly notes. They invest in expensive adornments for themselves and music lessons for their daughter Maggie, without a thought of saving their money or preparing for adversity. Criticizing the family’s interest in cultural attainments—Clara’s brother Americus’s involvement in a literary discussion group and Maggie’s music

19Hale’s urban and rural stereotypes resemble the stock characters Zip Coon and Jim Crow of blackface minstrelsy; she sanitizes them, however, of the sexual suggestiveness common to such theatrical representations. It seems unlikely, though, that Hale was a devotee of the minstrel show; I assume that both she and blackface performers were drawing on well-established modes of representing African Americans.
lessons—Hale implies that freed slaves should invest their time and money in things that will be “of use.” She disapproves of their attempt to adopt the trappings of a bourgeois culture to which, because of their race, level of education, and economic status, she believes they have no legitimate claim.20

Although the family experiences prejudice, segregation, and violence in the city—Americus is assaulted at one point by a band of working-class whites—its members ultimately fail through a combination of misfortune and their own lack of foresight. When Ben becomes ill and loses his position as a coachman, the family soon faces destitution because no one has ever bothered to set aside any money. Clara takes in extra sewing in a desperate attempt to support the family, but, as Ben sinks into alcoholism and the family’s standard of living falls drastically, “not poverty alone, but crime” comes to characterize their existence (p. 107). Hale borrows much from temperance literature in this segment of the novel: the family’s situation improves only when little Maggie, filthy and pathetic, begs the assistance of two young women who alert a city missionary, Mr. Lyndsay, to their plight. Under this (white) missionary’s watchful eye, Ben and Clara are restored to respectable self-sufficiency and no longer seek luxuries they do not deserve.

Unlike Stowe’s George Harris, who as a free man “found constant occupation” and earned “a competent support for his family,” Hale’s freed slaves are a feckless lot, ill prepared for the responsibilities and complications of autonomy and dependent on the benevolence of white men to save them from themselves.21 Hale does not, however, assert that blacks are be-

20Such arguments are not, of course, the sole province of whites. Nearly half a century after the publication of Liberia, Booker T. Washington would make similar claims. Newly freed slaves, he believed, should not pursue culture; instead, industrial education and the attainment of basic economic independence would better meet their needs. Washington’s most famous remark along these lines appears in Up from Slavery: “one of the saddest things I saw during the month of travel which I have described was a young man, who had attended some high school, sitting down in a one-room cabin, with grease on his clothing, filth all around him, and weeds in the yard and garden, engaged in studying a French grammar” (Up from Slavery [1901; reprinted, New York: Penguin, 1986], p. 122).

21Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, p. 497.
beyond improvement, despite occasional essentialist claims as to “the indolent and docile nature of the African” (p. 94). Instead, she insists that blacks’ servitude has engendered in them the lack of ambition and self-hatred that render them, in effect, helpless in a competitive, largely unsympathetic society such as America’s. “The overpowering superiority of the white man in social and political advantages” crushes “every earthly aspiration” in both free black and slave and thus prevents them from altering their subservient position within the United States (p. 68). The very presence of whites constantly reinscribes the inferiority and degradation of former slaves.

Hale’s assignments of blame and causality in the novel prove quite ambiguous. She indicts her “shiftless” black characters for their failures—almost gloating over their myriad missteps—but she also claims that their inadequacies are to a large extent imposed rather than inherent. The degree to which whites bear responsibility is unclear as well. Hale argues that the slavery system has robbed an entire population of its ambition, self-assurance, and autonomy, yet nearly all of the slaveowners she portrays (in Northwood as well as Liberia), with the exception of Keziah’s first master, are benevolent souls who want only the best for their “dependents.” Taken together, these portrayals in effect absolve the individual slaveholder from guilt for continuing to participate in an unjust system since he had not himself established the system but merely inherited it. All he need do is appear well intentioned.

Inconsistent, too, are Hale’s attributions of power and powerlessness. African Americans inspire considerable fear in her narrative—the threat of a slave uprising at the beginning of the novel causes the area’s white inhabitants to flee their plantations, and the black inhabitants of a Philadelphia slum terrify two young, white women engaged in charity work. Nevertheless, Hale’s frightening blacks are all anonymous, mentioned in the abstract or in the realm of possibility, while her individual black characters are generally ineffectual and never menacing. Even though Hale tends to treat the “African race” as a single, unified category, her characterizations are mutually exclusive. As Barbara J. Fields notes in her discussion of Southern planters’ ability to believe simultaneously in their slaves’ weak-
ness and in their power, Hale’s confusions were not unique: “attitudes are not discrete entities and people have no innate compulsion toward logical consistency.” Hale portrays blacks as both fearsome and pathetic, both culpable and victimized, presumably because she believes that all those descriptions are accurate; it is also true that such paradoxes serve her purpose. In order to promote colonization, she must present a population sufficiently helpless that its success in the United States is impossible but sufficiently powerful that its later achievement—the founding of a new nation—is credible.

Once Hale’s former slaves cross the Atlantic, she suddenly shows them considerable respect and abandons her use of racial stereotypes. Instead of cataloguing their inadequacies, she now details their accomplishments; they tend their houses and lands with exemplary efficiency, she asserts, and she applauds Junius’s missionary work and Keziah’s attempts to educate native girls and women. Even the less outstanding colonists (among whom none of Peyton’s ex-slaves is included) are described as succumbing only to “the natural desire that all people share for... self-indulgence” (p. 167); indolence is now a common, human (rather than a racial) trait. In Hale’s America, whiteness is the standard, or universal, state, and so whites’ attributes are human attributes (or else individual aberrations), whereas blacks as a minority are “nonstandard,” “other,” and are granted only group identity, with no access to universality or particularity. Once in Africa, where blackness is the standard, the emigrants’ qualities are suddenly generalizable and human. This transformation from minority to majority status changes their self-concept; without the presence of the white population, Hale’s colonists can “forget all about... color in a little while” and feel “more like men” (p. 224).


23 Several of the letters from Liberia in Hale’s appendix reinforce this sentiment: one emigrant writes that “I have grown to be a man; in America I never could have been a man” (p. 253); another claims that, even if he were seventy years old, he would “come to Liberia and be a man, and no longer a nigger” (p. 256); and a third writes that “in America the free colored man can never be ‘a man’” (p. 257).
One of emigration's most unusual outcomes is that the former slaves (with the exception of Polydore) lose their rural black English dialect and begin to use grammatically perfect, standard (white, northern) English: "Dey" becomes "they," "it don't" becomes "it does not," etc. In fact, their new speech patterns are practically indistinguishable from the narrator's, a transition that occurs without explanation or acknowledgment within the text. Landowners, teachers, missionaries, and colonizers, those once slaves now speak like Sarah Hale; emigration begins to close the gap between the educated, white, middle-class author and her black characters, as they prove in a sense "whiter" in Africa than they could ever have been in America.

The emigrants' family structures, too, adhere more closely to conventional white models once they arrive in Liberia—specifically, to the model of the white pioneer or independent farming family. Keziah and Polydore, who had formerly "kept company" in an informal, desexualized partnership, decide to marry; they select "a fine tract of land for themselves," build a cottage on it, and begin the work of clearing and planting (p. 167). Later, when they have moved several miles inland to a more advantageous spot, they build a sugar mill to increase their self-sufficiency and plant a thick hedge to maintain the privacy and impenetrability of their home. Some distance away, Nathan builds "a substantial farm-house" for his family and begins accumulating acreage at an impressive rate (p. 218). Male emigrants feel "more like men" because they are landowners and because they can provide their children with opportunities and inheritances—a far cry from their situation in the United States, where slaves could neither own property nor guarantee that their children would not be sold away from them. In Hale's Liberia private property, and privacy itself, become supremely important as each family, though friendly with other settlers, works (and uses cheap native labor) to better its own condition.24

American slavery was often criticized for destroying black family life. It separated family members, thus supposedly dis-

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24 Hale's central characters learned the "lesson" of private property in their Virginia farming experiment, but there they were always in danger of being dragged down by their shiftless neighbors; in Liberia, such problems seem not to exist.
couraging attachment, and by emasculating African-American men, left them unable to provide adequately for their families, to protect their wives from sexual violation by white masters, and to bequeath their children land and other material goods. Stowe focuses particularly on this assault on the slave family in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and her subsequent reconstruction of the Harris family and its emigration to Liberia, as Gillian Brown notes, “colonizes Africa for domesticity.” Hale engages in a similar project: the more conventional family arrangements among blacks in the Liberia section of the novel undo the dissolution (or at least the disorganization) of family life for which slavery was thought to be responsible. Hale, however, “colonizes Africa” for other cherished American ideals as well—namely, for private property and free enterprise.

As the momentum to “sell” the colonization project builds, Hale begins to lose sight of her characters’ humanity. Any semblance of cohesive storytelling, character development, or interpersonal drama that exists in the American episodes is lost, and the writing becomes largely propagandistic and informational; snippets from Liberian documents and the exploits of historical figures such as Lott Cary and Elijah Johnson now compete with Hale’s fictional characters for the reader’s attention. When those characters do speak, they often ventriloquize a hard-sell of the colony, including favorable details of its climate, indigenous plants, and economic opportunities. Though Hale proposes to the reader that emigration has al-


26Cary, a minister and former slave from Richmond, Virginia, and Johnson, an emigrant from New York, both assumed leadership roles early in the colony’s history (Smith, *Sojourners*, pp. 14–16, 22–26).

27Nineteenth-century representations of Liberia were contradictory and quite politicized. Predictably, colonizationists tended to present an idealized view of the settlement in order to encourage emigration, while anti-colonizationists often described the place as an unhealthful backwater where no informed person would settle by choice. For contrasting views, see William Nesbit’s and Samuel Williams’s accounts of their travels in Liberia (William Nesbit, *Four Months in Liberia: or, African Colonization Exposed*; Samuel Williams, *Four Years in Liberia: A Sketch of the Life of Rev. Samuel Williams*. Both have been reprinted in *Nesbit and Williams: Two Black Views of Liberia* [New York: Arno, 1969]). Hale’s representation of the colony is not entirely positive—she mentions difficulties with pests and fever and the presence of some poorly adapted settlers—but it is far rosier than historical records support.
ollowed her black characters to become fully “human” or, more precisely, fully “civilized,” it becomes clear that she cannot represent them as such, for they have no convincing subjectivity in the narrative, nor even any believable dialogue. Hale has re-made the emigrants into familiarly structured families, like the hard-working Romilly family she portrays with such warmth in *Northwood*, but their lives have become unrepresentable in the process. In her attempts to make the former slaves as much like herself and her venerable pioneer ancestors as possible—to make them, in effect, the dominant social group in their environment—she is essentially (according to her belief system) making them white, or at least analogous to white people. But Hale can never quite forget that they are not actually white, and so she cannot sustain the characterization. Her efforts to normalize former slaves have a limit, as she stops short of portraying a level of intimacy among them that would seem, in fact, too close to home.

Imaginative failings aside, Hale does theorize how the ex-slave’s transformation from social burden to community leader can occur. In a newly formed colony, the strongest blacks will “naturally” rise to power. Once free of whites’ insults and socioeconomic superiority, the colonists have an incentive to achieve, a chance at and desire for self-improvement and advancement that they did not have in the United States. Hale’s proposal sends manumitted slaves and free blacks to a place where, according to her standards of judgment, everything is so “backward,” so uncompetitive, that they cannot help but seem superior. Nathan asserts proudly that in Liberia “the natives look up to us as something wonderful” (p. 220). She suggests that this perceived superiority then solidifies, over time, into reality. For Hale, who firmly believes in the inevitability of a gradation of status based on color, the best thing one can do for black Americans is to place them against a darker background.

Hale also implies, though, that it is the very experience of superiority that effects the emigrants’ transformation. By the end
of the novel it becomes clear that the absence of whites is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for black actualization; the emigrants must also have a group of people whom they can dominate. The African natives, of course, serve that purpose.\textsuperscript{28} Despite numerous battles with native tribes, the settlers soon have the upper hand in the colony—economically, culturally, and politically. Natives work for extremely low wages and often serve as the colonists' house servants. Junius, the missionary, considers the natives to be "sunk in the deepest ignorance and superstition," and he christianizes them by denouncing their faith "with the utmost boldness" while the natives listen "in meek submission" to his sermons and agree in time to replace their gods with his (pp. 231, 241). The natives not only accept the emigrants' religion, but also their laws. In a passage that Hale presents as historical rather than fictional, she claims that by 1852 a minority of eight thousand settlers in Liberia and the Maryland colony had "nearly two hundred thousand Africans living in their republic and submitting to their laws" (p. 229). She applauds the emerging hierarchies in Liberian society; for her, there must always be the teachers and the ignorant, the civilized and the savage, the patriots and the sluggards, the leaders and the led.

Liberian immigration is, for Hale, a civilizing process. In order for Africans to achieve status as "real," civilized men, they must have been colonized by white American society (through the institution of slavery), must have absorbed white values and, especially, white religion, and then must return to Africa to civilize and christianize their native "cousins."\textsuperscript{29} Advo-

\textsuperscript{28}Though Liberians worked to undermine the transatlantic slave trade that was still active on Africa's west coast, historical records indicate that some Liberian settlers kept natives as slaves, or at least as very badly treated "indentured servants." It also seems, though, that the Liberian government attempted to eradicate such practices. See Tom Shick, \textit{Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 174; Nesbit, \textit{Four Months in Liberia}, p. 15; Beyan, \textit{The American Colonization Society}, pp. 127–31; Smith, \textit{Sojourners}, p. 64.

\textsuperscript{29}Like others writing prior to late-twentieth-century concerns about sexist language, Hale ostensibly means both men and women when she writes "men." But, as is often the case, in a sense she really does mean men. Her depiction of the ex-slaves' increased status focuses largely on issues of political and economic power, which she considered
cates of slavery had long justified it on the basis of its success in persuading African Americans to embrace Christianity, but Hale, like many fellow colonizationists, carried this line of reasoning a step further: by converting the colonized subject, the ex-American slave, into a colonist and a missionary, she not only solves the immediate problem of what to do with these social and economic outsiders but also assuages white America’s collective guilt by re-defining the nation’s participation in African slavery as providential. Liberia enacts Hale’s declaration at the end of the 1852 Northwood: “Liberia has solved the enigma of ages. The mission of American slavery is to christianize Africa.”

By giving her emigrants an “errand,” Hale casts them in the mold of America’s founders. Like many of her era and region who considered American nationalism providential, she conflated Puritan and Pilgrim enterprise with the settlement of all of New England and saw New England as the “cradle” of the American Revolution. As Lawrence Buell has noted, the legend of our “Pilgrim-Puritan origins was patently reductive” but nevertheless had great currency in the nineteenth century, perpetuating itself through “public speeches and patriotic festi-

unequivocally a part of the masculine sphere. Oddly enough, some anti-colonizationists used similar terms to criticize blacks who emigrated to Liberia. A piece that appeared in the Liberator decried black colonists as “utterly lost to every sense of manhood” (“Preamble and Resolutions of the Anti-Colonization Believers in Syracuse,” Liberator, 15 April 1853, p. 58).

Hale, Northwood, p. 408. Daniel Webster, white Methodist minister John P. Durbin, and black nationalist Edward W. Blyden, among others, spoke of American slavery in providential terms, citing it as the means by which Africa was to be christianized. Other Liberian advocates did not push the issue as far; a white colonizationist’s editorial, reprinted (with disapprobation) in the Liberator, argues that “It may be a compensation, that if Africa’s children have been dragged through the horrors of the Middle Passage, that their descendants have been returned with the germs of civilization, acquired during their long servitude” (“Refuge of Oppression,” Liberator, 9 December 1853, p. 191). Although this author is not willing to call American slavery providential, he is eager to assert that some good has emerged from injustice.

Nina Baym calls Hale “ever a daughter of New England” and asserts that she tended to identify “the origins of the nation with the settling of Plymouth Colony” (“Onward Christian Women: Sarah J. Hale’s History of the World,” New England Quarterly 63 [1990]: 260). Appropriately, Hale was active in the campaign to institutionalize the Thanksgiving holiday, a cause she pursued from 1846 until 1863, when President Lincoln made the observance official (Ruth E. Finley, The Lady of Godey’s: Sarah Josepha Hale [Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1931], pp. 195–204).
vals.”32 It is not surprising, then, that in her attempts to dignify the Liberian settlers’ endeavor, Hale should call them “pilgrims,” though her use of quotation marks implies a reluctance to see the two groups as equal (p. 145). Nonetheless, similarities abound. Following an American pattern of settlement and expansionism, Liberian colonists procure and “improve” tracts of virgin land, that is, land unused or underused by European standards; moreover, their wars against native African tribes recapitulate the American colonists’ Indian wars. Just as America’s own natives had been vilified, so Hale’s white nineteenth-century readers would have found much to despise in the native Africans, in part their continuing participation in the West African slave trade but, mostly, their “savage,” non-Christian way of life. Hale makes much of the natives’ “heathen rites” and violent customs, all of which serve to capture the moral high ground for her settler-conquerors.

Much of Hale’s description of the Liberian experience has to do with nation building. She titles the first of the Liberian chapters “The Planting of the Nation” and uses Whittier’s lines as an epigraph: “I hear the tread of pioneers, / Of nations yet to be . . .” (p. 128).34 Hale also includes long passages on Joseph J. Roberts, Liberia’s first president, and on the new nation’s efforts to establish itself and to gain international recognition. Her fictional characters, not entirely forgotten among the historical details, express a growing patriotism: Nathan says that he does not believe “there ever was a nation before that has grown so rapidly,” and he hopes that his son will become “a senator or a judge, if not a president” (p. 220).

Hale’s notion of full citizenship, and the dignity that accom-
panies it, rests on an individual’s ability to claim original status within a nation, at least among its “civilized” population. Nativism and racism intersect as she asserts the centrality of being a founder, or a descendant of one, a status uniformly unavailable to blacks in the United States, however, no matter how early their ancestors arrived, because they have historically had little access to the social and political power required for nation building. Hale’s colonizationist stance, then, is not simply a plan for solving the race problem in the United States; it is a means, she suggests, of elevating blacks to the status of Anglo-Americans—perhaps even to the status of New Englanders. In her zealous (though hardly anomalous) patriotism, she believes that the American model of nation building, if applied in the right context, can transform even a previously “degraded” population like manumitted slaves. Her implied answer to Machiavelli’s maxim, that “to make a servile people free, is as difficult as to make a free people slaves” (p. 128), is the American prescription for legitimacy and self-improvement: those unfortunates must find a country to call their own, force its inhabitants to bend to their will, and establish for themselves and their progeny the status of “founders.”

A central question Hale’s nationalistic program raises, though, is precisely when and how race matters. She advocates placing American-born blacks in a situation where they will not “have to be ashamed of their color,” where, it would seem, race does not matter. But simply because they must escape to this site where race is supposedly irrelevant attests to its overwhelming, determining importance. And, further, it becomes clear that race, or something structurally very much like it, does matter in Liberia, as a hierarchical society begins to develop with American-born blacks (especially those born free) and their descendants occupying the upper echelons of society and native Africans occupying the lower. The historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, among others, has argued convincingly that race should be conceived of as “a social construction predicated upon the recognition of difference,” a difference arising from “the simultaneous distinguishing and positioning of
groups vis-à-vis one another.” Race is neither an essential nor a stable category, and it becomes particularly unstable in the context of African colonization; as one (actual) Liberian settler noted in a letter to her former owner, the native Africans habitually “call us all white man.” But even if Hale were to recognize native Africans and American-born emigrants as belonging to different racial groups—which, of course, she does not—she would still see the emigrants as free of racial constraints in Liberia, for the privilege of having race “not matter” is intimately related, in her scheme, to the notion of citizenship. Part of founder’s status, at least as it has been articulated in the United States, is the privilege of establishing one’s own race as the nation’s standard.

Liberian colonization was, as abolitionists so vehemently argued, a racist and unworkable solution to the problems of slavery and racial difference in nineteenth-century America. Hale’s colonizing plan is, in some ways, particularly troubling in that it seems to promise equality but the price exacted is greater than most African Americans were willing or able to pay: acceptance of the proposition that a country (in this case the United States), once claimed and “civilized,” belongs to the race of those who staked that claim.

Although Hale takes great care to present the Liberian option in a positive light, presumably with the goal of encouraging blacks to emigrate, the extent to which she actually addresses African Americans is unclear. Her potential black audience would necessarily have been limited to a relatively elite group—those who were literate, had access to books published

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35Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” Signs 17 (1992): 253. Along similar lines, Michael Omi and Howard Winant have written that “racial categories and the meaning of race are given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded” (Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s [New York: Routledge, 1986], p. 60).


37Liberians exercised this “right” in their 1847 constitution, which “excluded whites from citizenship” (Wiley, Slaves No More, p. 2).
in the northeast, and were not enslaved (or whose owners could be convinced to emancipate them for the purpose of emigration). In her preface, Hale implies, instead, that whites are her primary audience when she refers to “the African, who among us has no home, no position, and no future” (p. iv; italics mine). This collusive “us” appropriately sets the tone, for the question that governs the first half of the narrative—what to do with one’s slaves—is a white man’s question, and the Liberian solution of the second half originated among and is largely administered by whites. Moreover, Hale’s colonizationism speaks directly to the concerns of mainstream (Northern) Anglo-Americans, who worried about the future of the Union and wondered how slavery could be eliminated without leaving hundreds of thousands of former slaves destitute, many of them “flooding” into Northern cities in search of work.

In some sense, then, the book is as much about Anglo-Americans as it is about African Americans; Hale is, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz, telling white America a story about itself. For Geertz, the Balinese cockfight about which he uses the phrase is “a kind of sentimental education”; the story that it tells the Balinese about themselves, though exaggerated and abstracted, is nonetheless somehow true. The story Hale’s text tells, however, is a wishful distortion. Not only has she manipulated historical representations (her slaveowners are far more benevolent and her colonists healthier and more successful than historical sources would support), but, more important, the attitudes, justifications, and emotions such representations engender are carefully controlled. Her book offers a

A paragraph on Liberia in Godey’s “Literary Notices” (surely approved, if not actually written, by Hale) describes the limitations of her appeal to African Americans in quite different terms, asserting that the work “commends itself not only to the attention of those who are anxious to benefit an unhappy race, but also to the serious consideration of such of that race as have sufficient intelligence to comprehend their true interests, and sufficient energy to follow their dictates” (Godey’s Lady’s Book, March 1854, p. 274). The notice’s author effaces the constraints of illiteracy and enslavement, defining the book’s audience instead according to innate intelligence and self-determined (and determining) “energy.”

flattering portrait of a well-intentioned “representative” white man who has earnestly sought a solution to the slavery problem and has found it in the replication of whites’ own colonizing experience. Not only, then, have whites exonerated themselves for their participation in slavery by fashioning this satisfactory remedy, but they can also congratulate themselves for having given blacks the training—Christianizing and general “civilizing”—that assures its successful application.

_Liberia’s_ preface makes explicit these self- and group-justifications:

And who can doubt that, in thus providing a home of refuge for “the stranger within her gates,” our beloved Union was nobly, though silently, justifying herself from the aspersions of oppression and wrong so often thrown out against her?

What other nation can point to a colony planted from such pure motives of charity; nurtured by the counsels and exertions of its noblest, wisest, and most self-denying statesmen and philanthropists; and sustained, from its feeble commencement up to a period of self-reliance and independence, from a pure love of justice and humanity? [P. iv]

Hale’s is a story of white nobility and self-vindication, of which the transformation of slaves into colonists is merely the occasion. And, barely submerged in these celebratory variations on the colonial script is a reinforcement of the legitimacy of the United States’ own founding and of its expansionist and white supremacist policies, for Hale presents colonization and nation building in entirely positive terms, with only benefits accruing to both colonist and “heathen” native.

A significant disjunction remains, however, between my critical reading of Sarah Hale’s colonizationism— influenced as it is by late twentieth-century perspectives on colonialism and American race relations—and her expressed desire to aid African-American slaves (a desire whose genuineness I do not fundamentally question, though I maintain that it coexists with other, less admirable desires). Nevertheless, the assumptions on which her work rests—that African Americans are inevitably to occupy an inferior social position in the United States, that
Christianity is the one, true religion and should be spread wherever possible, that ownership of private property is inherently superior to communitarian arrangements—are not, for Hale, or for many of her contemporaries, inconsistent with her benevolent impulses; in fact, they are essential to her expression of those impulses. Ultimately, the contradiction is mine and not Hale’s.

Such difficulties are not, of course, exclusive to Hale; they inhered in any attempt to deal with nineteenth-century white Americans’ writings on race. Even Stowe and Lydia Maria Child—authors whose anti-slavery stances make them more acceptable than Hale to twentieth-century readers—rely on racist and racialist assumptions that render their texts extraordinarily difficult to assess (and to teach). Clearly, to begin and end inquiries into the thought of these authors by simply plumbing the depths of their racism inexcusably reduces the richness and cultural relevance of their work; indeed, the very label of “racist” becomes all but meaningless in its ubiquity if we apply the standards of most late-twentieth-century academics to nineteenth-century writers. But neither does it seem sufficient to re-create, relativistically and nonjudgmentally, these authors’ own conceptions of their projects. What interests me, finally, is how their representations of racial difference and proposed solutions to the problem of slavery functioned; that is, what cultural work did they perform and whose interests were thereby served? Broadly speaking, how did these ideas circulate through what might be termed the racial economy of antebellum America? That economy cannot be understood without considering the writings of middle-class white women like Sarah Hale. The coexistence of their good intentions and

What seems most useful here is a “strategic relativism,” that is, a willingness temporarily to enter into the mind and value system of a historical figure for the purpose of understanding, but with the expectation of moving outside that world view once again in order to judge and analyze as a twentieth-century scholar with particular ethical and political commitments. (This coinage was suggested by Gayatri Spivak’s notion of strategic essentialism. See her collection The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues, ed. Sarah Harasym [New York: Routledge, 1990], pp. 50–51.) Such a process is extremely difficult to enact with someone like Hale, whose racial attitudes differ so radically from those with which most twentieth-century academics feel comfortable; it is easier, perhaps, with Stowe and Child.
their nonetheless damaging representations is a legacy that, however disquieting, we cannot afford to ignore.

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