

Martin Delany (1812-85)

From 'Introduction' to *Four Months in Liberia: or African Colonization Exposed* (1855)

An editor, physician, orator, and journalist, African American Martin Delany spent time in Canada, Liberia, and England in his quest to secure a space of true agency for African Americans. After the 1850 passage of the Fugitive Slave Act and the 1857 Dred Scott Supreme Court decision, leaders like Frederick Douglass and Delany questioned whether African Americans—even those not enslaved—had a future in the United States. Black emigrationists sought to distinguish their vision of voluntary relocation from the goals of the American Colonization Society (ACS), which advocated enforced removal of all those of African descent from the United States.

Delany was initially drawn to emigration during this period. His 1852 *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* proposed that US Blacks could emigrate to the Caribbean or Central and South America. His serialized *Blake; or, the Huts of America* (1859-62) echoed that argument in a fictional narrative, with the novel's protagonist traveling from the South to Canada and then Cuba. In this 'Introduction' for William Nesbit's 1855 *Four Months in Liberia*, however, Delany rejected Liberia as an option and levied harsh criticism against the ACS. Delany reaffirmed the argument by Nesbit (1822-95), another African-American activist-author, that Liberia was unsuitable, given its unwelcoming environment, but even more so because the systems of governance and daily life there differed little from the 'master-slave' model from which African Americans sought to escape.

See also, in the print anthology *Transatlantic Anglophone Literatures, 1776-1920*, these related texts: Remond, 'Colonization: To the editor of the "Freed-Man"' and Shadd Cary, 'Plea for Emigration'.

From 'Introduction' to *Four Months in Liberia*

Mr. Nesbit: Having been favored, in company with other gentlemen, with hearing your MSS.¹ read previous to going to press, and requested to give an opinion of its merits, permit me to say, Sir, that there is nothing which I could express, would add any additional interest to your graphic portrayal of the infamy of that *most* pernicious and impudent of all schemes for the perpetuity of the degradation of our race, the AMERICAN COLONIZATION SOCIETY.² I say *most* pernicious, because it was originated in the South, by slave-holders, propagated by their aiders and abettors, North and South, and still continues to be carried on under the garb of philanthropy and Christianity, through the medium of the basest deception and hypocrisy.

Your words convey with them, their *own* introduction; and although several pamphlets, purporting to be exposures, and many letters have been written from, and concerning Liberia,

¹ manuscript.

² In *Condition of the American colored population, and of the colony at Liberia*, the ACS declared that 'by profession and principle, [it had] nothing to do with the rights of slave-holders [...] They wish, in their organized capacity, only to remove the blacks, which are now free, and shall from time to time be made free by their masters. In doing this, and by other exertions, they hope, however, so to affect the interests and feelings of the slave-holders, that they will enlist in the enterprize, and rejoice to free themselves from all property in human flesh' (11).

yet, I venture to assert, that your description of the real state of affairs in that most unfortunate locality, by far exceeds all others which have, as yet, ever been given to the public. The subject is handled in a manner which does credit both to the head and heart of the writer; and I am much mistaken, if your little book does not meet with its deserved success. [...]

There are several points of interest contained in your pamphlet, which are nowhere to be found, as I remember, in any other place, and, therefore, deserve particular attention.

In the first place, it is not known by the people of this and other countries, that the *whole country* of Liberia is *daily* overflowed—the face of the earth completely *covered* by the *tide-water* from the ocean—the people being, consequently, compelled to confine themselves to the few hill-points which border the sea-coast. This is a natural hindrance to the *health* and *growth* of Liberia as it is, which the art of man, nor the laws of science, can never obviate. [...]

In the second place, *slavery* in Liberia claims the attention of your readers. [...] [T]he true Liberians, have mainly been themselves the servants and slaves of the whites, and, consequently, have acquired all of the folly and vices of their former wicked and unprincipled masters, considering themselves their equals, the more nearly they ape after them. [...]

Concerning the Missionaries, I have always been suspicious and fearful of this class of men, along the western coast of Africa, ever believing their presence generally among the natives, had an injurious effect, in more ways than one. But your exposure of their pernicious and wicked traffic in *rum*, their systematic and established rule of *cheating* the natives, and justifying themselves therein, and probably dealing in slaves, I am certain, however little surprised I am to hear it—and I am *not*—will startle the true Christians of both hemispheres. The conduct of those American hypocrites, is in character with that church and religion, which can

condemn the amusement of dancing as a great sin, but acknowledge *slave-holding* as a *Bible* institution!

Your statements but confirm a long-maintained opinion of mine, that white men generally, and American white men in particular, are wholly inadequate to the important undertaking of the establishment of colonies, and the spread of the Gospel as missionaries among the colored races. For the simple reason, that they are not the proper representatives of the people for whom they profess to act; and, therefore, cannot be proper instrumentalities, because of the absence of due interest and regard for their welfare.

Had half the money been spent in the proper education and preparation of young colored youths of both sexes, to carry the gospel to the foreign heathen, that is spent in support of pompous white men as missionaries; men who have neither interest, regard, nor respect for those races; the Gospel of Jesus Christ would have long since been spread throughout every heathen land beneath the sun. Of this fact I have not a shadow of doubt.

Another, and the most objectionable feature of this white missionary policy is, that their continual advent and presence among those races, create the impression that all great and good things are inherent in the whites, and, therefore, must necessarily emanate from them; thus irresistibly fixing in their minds, the assumptious dogma of the *superiority* of the *white* race. Such are the effects of this policy, that the people of those countries invariably prefer the whites as teachers and rulers, to those of people of their own race; as the course pursued in the Missionary scheme, plainly implies incapacity and insusceptibility on the part of the colored races, to occupy and fill such positions. These facts have fully developed themselves in all parts of this country, where a similar course of policy has been pursued toward the colored people, by

the domineering Directors and Superintendents of the Common Schools.³ So servile have they become, in consequence of this, that a community in any State or County, can scarcely be found, where a *preference* is not given, as a teacher, professional or business man, or mechanic of any kind, to a *white*, by the colored people generally, rather than to one of their own color! [...]

But one effect, must certainly and assuredly follow your exposure of American Colonization and Liberian infamies: a re-action among the colored people of this and other countries (as Canada and the West Indies), which shall so effectually recoil upon their heads, as to prove their successful overthrow.

The wretches who selected the tide-swamp of the coast of Guinea, instead of a healthful location in Africa,⁴ as a colony for the colored people in America, knowingly and designedly established a Potter's Field,⁵ into which the carcass of every emigrant who ventured there, would most assuredly moulder in death.

I simply conclude by saying, that every individual in America and the world, should read or hear read, your truthful exposure of Liberia and the American Colonization Society.

³ Open to all residents in a community, the common schools, with their focus on non-sectarian learning, were a precursor of today's US public schools.

⁴ Delany vacillated in his position around the emigration to Africa. Robert S. Levine says Delany viewed the ACS's 'idea that U.S. blacks "belonged" in Africa,' as 'reinforc[ing] the racist assumptions of U.S. whites who had their own "American dream" of a nation purged of blackness' (316). In 1859-60, though, Delany would organize an effort to create a colony in the Niger Valley—an initiative, to be led by Black elites, for which Delany raised funds through a successful lecture tour in Britain (317).

⁵ burial ground for poor people.

Your Friend and Brother,

M. R. Delany

Source text:

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References:

American Colonization Society, *Condition of the American colored population, and of the colony at Liberia* (Boston: Peirce & Parker, 1833).

Levine, Robert S. (ed), *Martin R. Delany: A Documentary Reader* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

Seeley, Samantha, 'Beyond the American Colonization Society', *History Compass* 14.3 (2016), 93-104.

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