Atlantic Passages: Race, Mobility, and Liberian Colonization. Robert Murray. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020. 298 pp. $85. Hardcover ISBN: 9780813066752.

In the 1931 novel by George Schuyler, *Black No More*, Max Disher undergoes a procedure to turn his skin white in order to woo the daughter of a white supremacist. He soon discovers that "the race problem" transcends the color of his skin. Despite the existence of a machine that should theoretically flatten racial distinctions, "whiteness" as an ideology, set of practices, and tool of social engineering is quickly redeployed in new ways. Schuyler, who published the novel alongside a scathing account of the Liberian colony, was satirizing what he saw as an American obsession with racial essentialism. Robert Murray explores a similar theme in *Atlantic Passages: Race, Mobility, and Liberian Colonization*. Murray uncovers some telling historical details through careful reading of archives in the United States relating to African colonization. The collection of African skulls sent to Philadelphia by the Liberian settler doctor Robert McDowall or the way that Americo-Liberian Samuel McGill presented himself as African-born to access medical training in Baltimore trouble more simplistic notions of race. Murray emphasizes the significance of "trans-atlantic crossings." This mobility was, in Murray's view, "transformative" for Americo-Liberian settlers, as it was through settlement in Liberia and travel to and from the US, that they began to be perceived as "white."

The book's five chapters each delineate a broad theme. There is no concluding chapter, though the introduction offers a clear outline of Murray's theoretical claims and historiographical rationale for revisiting this period of Liberian history. Namely, he aims to use the colony as a case study to explore the intersections of the study of the Black Atlantic and whiteness. Murray challenges "an assumed cohesiveness founded on enslaved pasts or presents." A "socio-spatial argument" undergirds this central point about how the Liberia colony troubled notions of race, both in West Africa and the United States. The first chapter is about transformative transatlantic mobility. West Africans, realised the potential of mobility to transform their fortunes, sending their children to the US for education. However, mobility was unevenly "transformative" and the examples cited indicate that class background and racial ambiguity strongly determined the extent to which migrants were privileged by "African whiteness." The second chapter focuses on cartography and the organisation of Liberian space. In a detailed analysis of nineteenth-century maps of Liberia, Murray points to how the existing population was minimized, patronized, and eventually simply airbrushed out of existence. The erasure of the representation of indigenous people on maps was closely linked to the disavowing of their patterns of land use and agriculture, which follows patterns seen in other settler colonies. The third chapter focuses on Black African labor in the colony. Controlling the labor of Africans, Murray contends, "nourished the conceptualizations of Liberian settlers as 'civilized,'" and this was harnessed by the Liberian settlers through apprenticeship, the employment of domestic servants, and systems of child fosterage. The fourth chapter addresses colonial violence. The Americo-Liberian settlers attempted to establish a monopoly over the use of violence in the settlements. In this, they were frequently frustrated by the resistance of Grebo, Kru, Bassa people and others. The fifth chapter focuses on the US and how the Liberian

colony and the settlers who inhabited it shaped debates over abolition and colonization. Mobility, space, control, and violence, the defining features of imperialism were wielded by the Black settlers who crossed the Atlantic from across the US and Caribbean to colonize what would become the tiny Republic of Liberia.

Throughout the book, Murray deploys a "socio-spatial argument" to parse out the seemingly tortured logic of the colonization movement. Why did the white leadership of the American Colonization Society believe that free Black people were capable of "uplifting" West African societies but were not deserving of full political rights in the US? In Murray's analysis, the Americo-Liberian settlers of the nineteenth century functioned as "intermediaries" between being white/American and being Black/African. In some ways, confusingly, it appears as though the settlers jettisoned their Black African identities through moving "spatially" to Africa but could reclaim "Africanness" to their advantage in the United States. To explain this, he contends that the "racial morphing" of the Black settler population while they were *in situ* in Liberia was pivotal in changing how they were regarded by white supporters of colonization in the US. In order to make sense of this, Murray invites the reader to consider "whiteness" as a complex notion or a set of "cultural practices" rather than simply the fact of skin color. In this approach, Murray builds on a rich body of scholarship on whiteness as a social construct. The book's primary intervention is to show how moving the study of whiteness to Liberia offers a fresh perspective on its socially constructed nature.

Murray claims that nineteenth-century colonizationists relied on a "socio-spatial argument" that migrant African-Americans' "elevated" level of "civilization" would be recognized in Africa, and thus the settlers would be able to control the people they found there. This control would be the medium for their elevation. Basically, in the imagination of the white proponents of colonization, while in America, African-Americans occupied the lowest rung on society's ladder, but in Africa their relative proximity to whiteness could be used to reshape African societies. If residence in the colony made the Black settlers seem more "civilized" in American eyes, then settling in the Liberian colony had the opposite effect to that of white settlers in European imperial possessions. In general, white publics in European metropoles considered proximity to colonized people as a "degrading" influence. This was also true of the American imperial experience. The "socio-spatial argument" identified and utilized in *Atlantic Passages* is thus one familiar to imperial historians of various settings though these comparisons are not explicitly laid out here.

Instead, Murray is at pains to emphasize the "Americanness" of the Liberian colony. *Atlantic Passages* makes a substantial contribution to the historiography of Liberia by building on a growing body of work which pulls Liberia to the center of debates about American imperialism and abolitionism. Early published accounts of the colony drew analogies with early colonial American experiences while place-names and other symbolic items drew from American models. Local people named the settlers "Americans," settlement designs and even building materials were shipped from the United States. In a detailed analysis of nineteenth-century maps of Liberia, Murray points to how the existing population was minimized, patronized, and eventually simply airbrushed out of existence to make way for settlements styled on American lines. All these efforts

were part of the broader "civilizing mission" of the colony, in which "whiteness," "Americanness," and "civilization" seemed to be conflated by the proponents of colonization in Liberia and abroad.

Blurred boundaries between nationality, ethnicity, and affinity were shared by West Africans. Their perspective on the racial identity of the settlers was clearly not fixed and drew on transnational flows of information. In nineteenth-century West Africa, people's sense of collective identity was in flux. Most, if not all, West Africans of the time held multiple allegiances. Some were limited in spatial scale, such as connection to family; others were expansive and dispersed, like religious affiliation or shared language. Murray gestures towards this complexity, noting that the shift from "American racialized lines to murky and fluid African notions of race inflected by cultural practice and performance would be an uneven task for these Americans in Africa." Murray cites evidence that educated African children might have regarded themselves as superior to the settler children, who they presumed to have been formerly enslaved. African children were not the only ones with a prejudice against the formerly enslaved. Various Liberian leaders and educated also expressed disappointment with the "quality of the emigrants" sent direct from enslavement. This disdainful attitude towards the formerly enslaved, shared by some Africans and some black settlers, can be contrasted with African and Liberian affinity for Ethiopianism, a maxim which celebrated the agency of the enslaved in leading the way to freedom.

The afterword focuses on the Ghanaian term "Oburoni," which in some senses means "some born abroad," but more commonly is taken to mean "white foreigner." Others claim it to originate in a term for "wicked." Murray thus concludes with an African term, and an African conceptualization of the relationship between race, nationality, and place. The Ghanaians who use the term to describe African-American immigrants and visitors, in place of a government-sanctioned term of endearment, have a very clear idea of their relationship to people of African descent who were born abroad. But West African perspectives on "race" are not fully interrogated in this work. While Murray claims to place the "racial categorizations" of nineteenth-century West Africans at the center of his argument, he also notes that "a history of the Africans in Liberia is a different book." The inhabitants of the West African coast always already knew and understood whiteness as contingent and changing, a notion as slippery as fish. For them, "white" was always in inverted commas, translated in different ways in the many different languages and dialects of the area claimed by the Americo-Liberians. As Moses Ochonu argues, "manifestations of race in Africa defy constructivist and essentialist grids of analysis." While *Atlantic Passages* moves forward the important scholarly discussion on "whiteness" with an empirically driven case study, an African-centered analysis of race in the Liberia colony might look quite different.

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