

Introduction

In any other place, at any other time, it would assuredly have been an odd dinner party. The guest, Horatio Bridge, an officer of the U.S. Navy, listened intently and recorded every detail from his host: the average temperature of the place, the number of residents, the looks of its cattle, and how the locals rested upon their heels. While he did not record what he ate, he did note that his host bestowed upon him a collection of monkey skins and other “curiosities.” In taking these detailed observations of his surroundings, Bridge was only following the instructions of his lifelong friend Nathaniel Hawthorne. Bridge described his host, John Brown Russwurm, as a “man of distinguished ability and of collegiate education,” an affirmation of Russwurm’s talent if not exactly effusive praise for a fellow graduate of Bowdoin College who had even joined the same literary society as Bridge and Hawthorne.¹

What brought Bridge and Russwurm together in September 1843—and piqued Hawthorne’s interest—was the colony of Liberia. Bridge served aboard the USS *Saratoga*, Matthew C. Perry’s flagship for the little Africa Squadron, four ships dispatched by the United States to combat the illegal Atlantic slave trade in 1843.² Hawthorne cared little for any supposed benefits from America’s military intervention in the Atlantic slave trade, but he did see the financial gain to be had in a book deal. Before sailing, Hawthorne suggested that his friend keep a journal of his African adventures, which they would subsequently publish with Hawthorne serving as editor.

Hawthorne was especially interested in Bridge’s journal, as his tour of duty would place him near the settlements of African Americans first established by the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color (the American Colonization Society or ACS) in 1822. Hawthorne entreated Bridge to include copious details about his experiences in this colony of Liberia, believing that “if, in any portion of the book, the author may hope to

engage the attention of the public, it will probably be in those pages which treat of Liberia.”³

With growing national anxiety over slavery and abolitionism, Hawthorne was gambling that an exposé on the ACS and its African colony would find a ready readership. The ACS was formed in December 1816 by a group of prominent white men in Washington, D.C., who styled themselves as philanthropists following the path established by Paul Cuffe, an Afro-Indian sea captain who argued that the establishment of African American colonies along the western coast of Africa could stymie the Atlantic slave trade and spawn “legitimate” commerce.⁴ Cuffe passed away in 1817 before the society was a year old. If the early black-led emigration efforts had found cautious acceptance among the nation’s burgeoning free black population, the white-led ACS, filled and governed by many slaveholders, seemed a plan designed solely to prop up American slavery by removing its most ardent opponents to distant shores. From its earliest days, controversy surrounded the society and its African colony.

Those “pages which treat of Liberia” were, indeed, a significant portion of the work, as sixteen of its twenty-two chapters dealt with some aspect of Liberia, including Bridge’s dinner with Russwurm. Russwurm was a former editor of the *Freedom’s Journal*, the first African American newspaper in the United States, who had earned the scorn of most free people of color when he reversed course and endorsed colonization. Russwurm had emigrated to the colonial capital, Monrovia, in 1830 to serve as editor of its newspaper, the *Liberia Herald*. But at the moment that Bridge found himself sitting at Russwurm’s table, the former editor was serving as agent and governor of the independent colony established by the Maryland State Colonization Society (MSCS) at Cape Palmas, nearly three hundred miles southeast of Monrovia.⁵

Apparently, the main topic of dinnertime conversation was the governor’s recent expedition seventy miles into the interior. This was not an insignificant distance, as the majority of the Liberian settlements hugged the coast. Russwurm impressed his dinner guests with tales of encountering a powerful “tribe” in the “Bush,” and although he could not secure an escort for further exploration from the mighty “king” of this group, the African leader was impressed enough by Russwurm and his entourage to dispatch his son to the coast “to see the *black-white* people and their improvements.” The “black-white people,” it turned out, were none other than the African American settlers of the Liberian colonies. The West African neighbors and inhabitants of Liberia, who conceived of themselves as “black,” recognized

the significant cultural differences between themselves and these newly arrived Americans. To African eyes and ears, the Liberian settlers prayed to a Christian God, spoke English, wore Western-style clothing, constructed Western-style dwellings along grid-pattern streets, and, in short, behaved in the manner they associated with the European and Euro-American traders and sailors who had been traveling down the western coast of Africa for centuries. And so as Liberian settler Diana James succinctly wrote to her former enslaver in 1843 about the customs of the Africans, “they call us all white man.” Instead of operating as binaries, as they often are presented, the whiteness and blackness of these African American settlers operated simultaneously. In their African enclave, the African American settlers were the “black-white people.”⁶

Even more surprising, although he supported the removal of free people of color from the United States owing to the hardened and seemingly immutable racial lines drawn there, Bridge paradoxically recognized that something different was afoot in the Liberian settlements he visited and that the “race” of the African American settlers was perhaps not so immutable after all. For Bridge and most white supporters of colonization, the “colored people of America, or any other part of the world, may be regarded as borrowed from Africa, and inheriting a natural adaptation to her soil and climate.”⁷ In other words, people of African descent, regardless of their temporal or physical distance from Africa, held a “natural” affinity and place in that land of their ancestors. It was a central tenet of colonizationist rhetoric that this relocation to western Africa actually constituted a “homecoming” for these settlers; for the readers of Bridge’s journal, they were informed that Liberia “may indeed be called the black man’s paradise.” But after these repeated affirmations of unchanging and unalterable racialized—and masculine gendered—blackness, a blackness “borrowed” from Africa, Bridge then paradoxically noted that “blackness” was perhaps *not* a mutually shared identity between the settlers and their African neighbors.⁸ Indeed, Bridge was so struck by the prejudices held by many of the Africans against the settlers, and vice-versa, that he actually employed the rhetoric of “race-mixing” to describe the relations between the two groups: “Many of the natives look with contempt on the colonists, and do not hesitate to tell them that they are merely liberated slaves. On the other hand, the colonists will never recognize the natives otherwise than as heathen. Amalgamation is scarcely more difficult between the white and colored races in America, than it is in Africa, between the ‘black-white’ colonist and unadulterated native.”⁹