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Bodies in Motion

Liberian Settlers, Medicine, and Mobility in the Atlantic World

ROBERT MURRAY

In late 1839 a Baltimore merchant carefully and deliberately packed a trunk and box for shipment across the Atlantic. The contents of the box—Henry D. Rogers's geological survey of Pennsylvania, a magnifying glass, a history of mythology, two volumes of *Nicholas Nickleby*, an instructional guide for painting flowers using watercolors to name but a few items—marked the recipient as a scholar with far-flung interests. Somewhere in the trunk or box, probably packed tightly between the other reading materials on the new garden cemeteries of Baltimore and Philadelphia and Maris Bryant Pierce's address regarding the future of the Seneca nation, lay a collection of texts on phrenology. The beneficiary of this bounty found much to appreciate when he pried open the containers in January 1840; the work on watercolors in particular was singled out for praise as his "knowledge of the art was very imperfect."[1]

The works on phrenology, however, were not particularly useful or compelling. "The premises on which the science is sustained seems to

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1. Samuel F. McGill to Moses Sheppard, Jan. 20, 1840, Moses Sheppard Papers (hereafter MSP), Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA. Sheppard to S. McGill, Dec. 6, 1839, MSP. Sheppard and McGill engaged in a long transatlantic correspondence that spanned many years and topics. For an overview of the antislavery aspects of McGill and Sheppard's correspondence, see Andrew Diemer, "The Quaker and the Colonist: Moses Sheppard, Samuel Ford McGill, and Transatlantic Antislavery across the Color Line," in *Quakers and Abolition*, ed. Brycchan Carey and Geoffrey Plank (Urbana, IL, 2014), 135–48.

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me insufficient and incorrect," he wrote to the merchant in reply. He held the proper credentials to pass such judgments, a medical degree from Dartmouth issued just the year before. In response, the merchant deferred to his better-educated colleague. Besides, the actual man of science, a doctor posted to the Maryland State Colonization Society's (MSCS) Liberian colony in West Africa, had dispatched his own package to Baltimore. The doctor's box leaned toward natural science, containing the skins of African animals, a sea horse, and a bottle of local insects in addition to colonial newspapers and sketches of the MSCS settlement, Maryland in Liberia, produced by the doctor-cum-budding artist. Perhaps most surprising was the "iron bound" cask containing an adult female chimpanzee and her infant, preserved in twenty gallons of rum and Mercury chloride. The pair had been felled by a group of Liberian settlers who had fired several volleys into the tree tops after discovering the troop above their heads. The doctor had paid $25 for the bodies, a small fortune in the sickly and impoverished colony, and dispatched them to his Baltimore colleague as a gift of African curiosity.[2]

Initially, this snippet of the correspondence between Moses Sheppard in Baltimore and Dr. Samuel F. McGill in West Africa seems to offer little more than unusual examples—books, magnifying glasses, and primates—of the Atlantic world's exchange of ideas, goods, and peoples. Their epistolary relationship becomes much more remarkable when we learn that the African correspondent, McGill, was a freeborn African American originally from Baltimore and the first African American to receive a medical degree from a U.S. institution. That McGill secured this educational achievement at the same historical moment when other African Americans were forced overseas to pursue educations owed much to the patterns of mobility and the social networks that marked the Atlantic world. McGill's success was as much a Liberian story as an American one, for he utilized and manipulated the racial dynamics elaborated in colonial West Africa to secure dreams previously denied African Americans on account of race.

Racially identified as whites by the African inhabitants of Liberia due

2. S. McGill to Sheppard, Jan. 20, 1840, MSP. Sheppard to S. McGill, July 27, 1840, MSP; Sheppard to S. McGill, Oct. 7, 1840, MSP. On phrenology, see Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago, 2010).

to their western cultural practices, African American settlers like McGill and their Euro American allies intentionally used this African whiteness to create an exotic foreign racial identity predicated upon Atlantic mobility. The settlers used the spaces opened by their Liberian travels to negotiate with whites in the United States in order to secure advantages for themselves abroad and in the United States. Many secured relaxed travel arrangements, found patrons to help free their families from bondage, and achieved previously unattainable educational accomplishments. McGill was a master of this negotiation, and an examination of his transatlantic sojourns between Liberia and the United States to secure his medical degree opens up new avenues for researching how mobility shaped and was shaped by racial constructions. By focusing on both sides of the Atlantic and the pathways between, this article examines how whiteness and blackness simultaneously existed within the same mobile Atlantic subjects.[3]

McGill's success required him to navigate complex and evolving racial dynamics on two sides of the Atlantic. McGill's role as a colonizer and a controller of African blackness shaped his transatlantic journeys and gave him opportunities to slip through American racial binaries and reinvent himself time and time again. This article initially focuses on McGill's many identities and how others perceived him. It then turns to McGill's perception of others, especially the black Americans living and dead for whom he had less and less respect with each passing year. While McGill was one of the most gifted Liberian settlers at racialized reinvention, he was certainly not the only one. This then is also a story of colonial Liberia and how certain well-placed individuals could utilize and manipulate the racial dynamics of that space to secure dreams previously denied them on account of race.

McGill's transformative journey suggests a need to reevaluate colonial Liberia and its place in the Atlantic world. First, given McGill's expansive transatlantic communications and repeated journeys to and from the United States, we must establish Liberia as a significant and evolving point within a mobile Atlantic world. Historians Tom W. Shick, Claude

3. For a discussion of the racialized problems African American travelers faced in the antebellum United States, the very problems Liberian travelers sought to avoid, see Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor, *Colored Travelers: Mobility and the Fight for Citizenship before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016).

A. Clegg, Marie Tyler-McGraw, James Campbell, Eric Burin, Beverly Tomek, and Bronwen Everill have produced significant scholarship establishing relationships between the colonists and African Liberians, the post-migration experiences of the settlers, the settler/colonizationist and black/white relationships forged in the establishment and peopling of the Liberian colonies, and the ways in which thinking about Africa reflected Diasporans' thoughts on America. But these scholars have mainly focused on lived experiences *within* the colony. The oceanic journey of these settlers is largely perceived as the culmination of their transatlantic peregrinations instead of just the beginning. But McGill's desire to seek an American medical education reminds us that for many settlers, Liberia was not the simply the end of a one-way journey. The full implications of settlers' residence in Africa shaped American racial constructions.[4]

At its core, colonization was an argument about space. The white leadership of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States (usually shortened to the American Colonization Society or ACS) believed the continued presence of free people of color within the United States would lead to disaster. The ACS was formed in December 1816 by a group of prominent white men in Washington, DC, who styled themselves philanthropists and devotees of "legitimate commerce" arguments. They followed the path established by Paul Cuffe, a free man of color and sea captain, who believed that black emigration to Africa offered economic benefits and that trade in enslaved peoples could be stymied by African American settlements along the coast of Africa. While the parent society based in Washington would broadly oversee colonial affairs and dispatch expeditions, it was

4. See Tom W. Shick, *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* (Baltimore, 1980), 99–100, 142–43; Claude A. Clegg III, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004); Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic: Black and White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007); James Campbell, *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787–2005* (New York, 2006); Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville, FL, 2005); Beverly C. Tomek, *Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania* (New York, 2011); Bronwen Everill, *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (New York, 2013).

up to state auxiliary societies—themselves composed of more localized organizations—to raise funds and recruit settlers. This decentralized, state-based organization has sparked significant scholarly debate regarding the organization's antislavery credentials. The chapters in Pennsylvania and McGill's Maryland proclaimed themselves antislavery organizations, while other groups voiced stronger support for slavery. Following the ACS's contentious 1833 annual convention in which participants debated the group's relationship to slavery, the Marylanders broke away from the parent society and independently established Maryland in Liberia in 1834. The MSCS did not believe it could continue its expressed antislavery agenda while under ACS control, a telling indictment regarding the antislavery chops of an organization that focused on free people of color.[5]

If the first annual report of the ACS dismissed those free blacks as "idle and useless, and too often vicious and mischievous" it also predicted that this "idle and useless" population would return "civilization" to Africa by bringing "arts knowledge and civilization" to that continent. The men at that first meeting in January 1818 conceived of their future colony—the first African American settlers would not arrive at Cape Mesurado, the future capital of Monrovia, until 1822—as a transplanted United States. In keeping with the historical trajectories of most settler

5. Eric Burin and Beverly Tomek have most recently carried the mantle for rehabilitating the movement's antislavery credentials through their research on Pennsylvania colonizationists. The fracturing of the Marylanders and other colonizationists from the parent society suggests it may be much more useful to think in terms of colonization "movements" and Liberian "colonies" rather than the more oft-used singular terminology. Although McGill's family emigrated to Monrovia before the establishment of Maryland in Liberia, they soon relocated to take advantage of the MSCS's determination to more rapidly fill the colonial administration's ranks with African Americans. While the first expedition and governor was an Anglo American, James Hall, the MSCS selected John Brown Russwurm to be his replacement and the first Liberian governor of African descent. Despite the various administrative differences, it would be a mistake to overemphasize the dissimilarities in these Liberian settlements. Relocation amongst them was frequent and many families, such as the mercantile McGill family, had members living in several different towns under the governance of different societies. Despite such straightforward place names as "Maryland in Liberia," these settler societies were rarely homogenous for both their American and African inhabitants. For the early history of the MSCS and Maryland in Liberia, see Richard L. Hall, *On Afric's Shore: A History of Maryland in Liberia, 1834–1857* (Baltimore, 2003).

societies, the African American settlers *did* attempt to reproduce the United States. They laid out their towns along a grid pattern, fastidiously retained their dress despite living in a tropical climate only a few degrees north of the Equator, and desperately attempted to replicate the farming practices of their American homeland (again, despite the climate). The efforts of Americo Liberians to re-create American society in Africa led historian James Sidbury to conclude that Liberia ironically provided a place where black Americans could be more fully American.[6]

As a self-conceived "civilized" space surrounded by heathenism, colonial Liberia was an expansionist entity characterized by violence and an Africanized reproduction of American institutions. Although slavery was illegal, the African system of pawnship, whereby a debt was paid by another's labor—usually a child's—evolved in Liberia into a system of indentures. Cheap indigenous labor was also ripe for exploitation. Most Liberian families utilized African youths as domestic servants, and much of the hard labor in the colony was performed by the indigenous population. Americo Liberians attempted to assert control over their "heathen" neighbors through labor and the sword, and colonizationist propagandists made much of the settlers' vaunted position in Africa. Within this framework, merely living within that civilizing space surrounded by African "barbarity" would transform the dregs of American society into the great civilizers of "benighted Africa."[7]

This logic behind this duality has always perplexed and intrigued scholars of Liberia. How could anyone have imagined that people viewed as an uncivilized and violent class in America might form the civilizing backbone of a rejuvenated and Christian Africa? Colonization was a spatially based metamorphosis that underscored the geographical orientation of colonizationist thinking. The key to unlocking colonization is to understand that its true paradox lay in its supporters' understanding of race. Colonization was a complex socio-spatial argument, which asserted that merely inhabiting the space of Liberia was transformative and "civilizing" for all parties, and the racial morphing of the Americo Liberians played a critical role in how white colonizationists perceived their

6. *First Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States* (Washington, DC, 1818), 29, 39. James Sidbury, *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic* (New York, 2007), 200–201.

7. *First Annual Report*, 28, 46; Clegg, *The Price of Liberty*, 94–96, 246–47.

respective "civilization" across the Atlantic. Colonizationists' understanding of the African American settlers' Liberian whiteness as indicative of their passage into "civilization" opened up opportunities for mobile settlers to return to the United States transformed, perhaps not as "whites" but also not necessarily as "negroes" either.[8]

The lived experiences of these settlers were complicated by multiple factors. The many different and diverse indigenous and migrant peoples who lived along the Liberian coast when the first ACS ships arrived identified the behaviors of the settlers through a racial prism. They labeled newcomers' activities "*white man's fash*," racially identifying the African Americans as whites due to their western cultural practices. George McGill, Samuel's father, ascribed this racialization to literacy in English when he reported to the leadership of the MSCS that the Africans living at the future site of their colony "express a strong wish to become white men, (i.e. Read & Write)." The *Liberia Herald* pointed toward dress when it reported that neighboring Africans "look with suspicion upon the colony, and a word from a 'white man' (a generic term for all classes, colors and conditions enveloped in clothing)." And in writing to her former mistress in 1843, settler Diana James blurred gender lines when explaining that in the customs of various indigenous peoples she met, "they call us all white man." Obviously, there was not a single cultural practice but rather a full array of western customs that established whiteness. To their African neighbors, the language, dress, food ways, religion, and cultural practices of the Liberian settlers more closely resembled the European and Euro American traders who had been plying the western shore of Africa for centuries. Of course, possessing a different understanding of settler racial constructions did not mean Liberia's African peoples were unaware of the history of their new neighbors. The same ships that carried settlers like McGill also carried Liberian Africans to the United States. Maryland in Liberia's Grebos even dispatched their own ambassador to directly negotiate with MSCS leaders in Baltimore. Liberia's Africans were intimately aware that the settler ranks largely consisted of formerly enslaved persons. For Africans, the whiteness of the settlers was malleable and simply denoted a broad range

8. Marie Tyler-McGraw found this transformation more indicative of "alchemy." Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic*, 24; *First Annual Report*, 40; Clegg, *The Price of Liberty*, 30.

of western cultural practices. The white colonizationists and settlers, however, interpreted these racial constructions as evidence that Africans viewed the settlers as superior.[9]

Just as many different mobile settler groups complicated Liberia's settlements, so too did the diverse array of equally mobile African peoples complicate Liberian spaces. There were more than a dozen ethnic groups in the territories claimed by the various colonization societies, each possessing their own characteristics, cultures, languages, and motivations. Although some American settlements found themselves especially attached to specific West African peoples—McGill's Maryland in Liberia was predominantly Grebo—the fact that most of these settlements hugged the Atlantic fostered migratory, diverse, and ever-changing populations. These different groups at various times found the settlers useful allies, bitter enemies, indifferent trading partners, helpful educators, annoying interlopers, and beneficial mediators in their conflicts with one other and with the settlers.[10]

If Liberian settlers recorded and utilized this "white man" moniker to

9. George McGill to Maryland State Colonization Society, Mar. 8, 1834, Records of the Maryland State Colonization Society (hereafter MSCS), Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore; "Monrovia, Liberia. Sept. 21, 1842," *Liberia Herald*, Sept. 21, 1842; Diana Skipwith James to Sally Cocke, Mar. 6, 1843, in *Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia, 1833–1869*, ed. Bell I. Wiley (Lexington, KY, 1980), 57. "King Freeman," the Grebo leader who signed the treaty ceding the territory for the formation of Maryland in Liberia, dispatched Simlah Balla to directly negotiate with the MSCS managers in Baltimore. Upon his emissary's return, "Freeman" extended an invitation for every American slave to settle in Africa. See J. Leighton Wilson and King Freeman [Pah Nemah] to the Board of Managers of the MSCS, Sept. 5, 1836, MSCS; John B. Russwurm to John H. B. Latrobe, Feb. 12, 1837, MSCS. On Maryland in Liberia, see Hall, *On Afric's Shore*.

10. The largest groups in Liberia today include the Kpelle, Bassa, Gio, Kru, Grebo, Mandingo, Gola, Kissi, Dei, Loma, and Vai. The debate regarding the "real" inhabitants of Liberia, a coastal space with a long history of migratory peoples, continues today. Augustine Konneh, "Citizenship at the Margins: Status, Ambiguity, and the Mandingo of Liberia," *African Studies Review* 39 (Sept. 1996), 141–54. See also Svend E. Holsoe, "A Study of Relations between Settlers and Indigenous Peoples in Western Liberia, 1821–1847," *African Historical Studies* 4 (Jan. 1971), 331–62; Holsoe, "The Manipulation of Traditional Political Structures among Coastal Peoples in Western Liberia during the Nineteenth Century," *Ethnohistory* 21 (Spring 1974), 158–67.

advance their own agendas in the United States, their success depended upon colonizationists' willingness to attend to both the gendered and racialized elements of the term. Colonizationists propounded an aggressively masculine agenda centered on a mission to "tame" and "civilize" African "savagery." Its supporters focused on political action, military force and violence, and expansive agricultural and mercantile pursuits. Bruce Dorsey has argued that colonizationists—white and black—presented a masculine framework that emphasized politics and open forums, and thus limited the roles available to women when compared with abolitionist groups. Like McGill, settler Diana James repeatedly voiced her desire to return to the United States, but she never did. Although the colonization societies did not prevent her from traveling, they failed to offer her the same aid that they extended to male settlers. If there were many possibilities for some Liberian settlers returning to the States to find patronage, James's failure to ever make that journey highlights a great roadblock for others to secure a passage on that returning vessel: gender. When McGill invoked "white man's fash," then, he reinforced a cultural superiority that depended on masculinity.[11]

The racial element of "white man's fash" was equally welcomed among colonizationists. Whiteness acquired in Africa provided the critical bridge to explain how colonizationists in the United States perceived how the most "degraded" class in America—free people of color—would become the great civilizers of Africa. The paradox of colonization, that race was both inherent and unchanging *and* a social construction, was exhibited from the first moments of the colony. Four years after the establishment of Monrovia in 1822, Liberia's Anglo American governor Jehudi Ashmun published an account of the settlement and its survival against a Pan-African alliance that had attempted to wipe out the colony. In his recounted response to these African threats, Ashmun not only demonstrated a surprising understanding of African racial coding but also reinforced it. Employing a neutral African as messenger, Ashmun warned the leaders of the force prepared to wipe his tiny colony off of the map that "if they proceeded to bring war upon the Americans . . .

11. G. McGill to MSCS, Mar. 8, 1834. Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, NY, 2002), 136–64; James to S. Cocke, Mar. 6, 1843, in *Slaves No More*, ed. Wiley, 57–58; Diana Skipwith to S. Cocke, May 20, 1839, ibid., 46–47; James to John H. Cocke, Mar. 7, 1843, ibid., 58–59.

they would dearly learn what it was to fight white men." At that moment, Jehudi Ashmun was the only Euro American manning the fortifications on Cape Mesurado. For his assuredly confused readers, Ashmun provided an explanatory footnote to clarify that "white" denoted "A phrase by which civilized people of all colours and nations are distinguished in the dialect of the coast." Thus, with the wave of a seemingly magic wand, the newly arrived free people of color instantly became "civilized," "Americans," and "white" to boot.[12]

While the study of whiteness that flourished in the 1990s and early 2000s reminded scholars to include "white" in their discussions of "race," most whiteness studies continue to rely upon the definitions of whiteness that held sway in the antebellum United States that fail to capture the experiences of "black-white" Liberian settlers. In Liberia, whiteness was produced by the settlers' Christianity, English language, living in a frame house, and efforts to dominate the local African population by serving as both colonial masters and cultural exemplars. The same set of circumstances did not produce the same racial identity in the United States at the same time, and the gendered constraints of settler whiteness challenge the predominance of whiteness over all other identities, but minimally colonizationists within the United States were aware of the racial adaptations in Liberia.[13]

12. Jehudi Ashmun, *History of the American Colony in Liberia, from December 1821 to 1823* (Washington, DC, 1826), 25; Ashmun, "Memoir of the Sufferings, &c. of the American Colonists," *African Repository and Colonial Journal* 2 (Aug. 1826), 173–82, esp. 175–76.

13. For an earlier analysis of whiteness studies at the height of its popularity, see Peter Kolchin, "Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America," *Journal of American History* 89 (June 2002), 154–73. Scholars have sought to rectify the problems of an American-centric field by relocating whiteness studies beyond the confines of the United States and reestablishing it as a global product. Such is the solution put forward by the authors of the essays in a collection edited by Leigh Boucher, Jane Carey, and Katherine Ellinghaus, *Re-Orienting Whiteness* (New York, 2009). The editors and authors argue that the United States is not the most important area for the study of whiteness, but rather the colonial spaces of European empires. Additionally, the essays remind readers that whiteness is a particular product of a time and place, not a universal phenomenon, and that scholars have been too theoretically sloppy in their conflation of whiteness as an empirical category, a term used by their subjects, as compared to a category of analysis.

The African American settlers and their allies intentionally used this African whiteness to create an exotic foreign racial identity embedded within the murkiness of Atlantic mobility. Of course, the process was uneven. In the case of McGill, his role as a colonizer and mutable-white helped him secure the support of powerful patrons like Sheppard, but in negotiating with other Euro Americans McGill often had to rely on racial ambiguity created by Atlantic mobility. Broadly, the settlers used the spaces opened by their Liberian travels to negotiate with whites in the United States in order to secure advantages for themselves abroad and in the United States. McGill was a master of this negotiation, but it is important to note that he differed only in style rather than kind from many of his fellow Liberian settlers. Due to his success, an examination of McGill's travels between Liberia and the United States to secure his medical degree opens up new avenues for researching how mobility shaped and was shaped by racial constructions. Critically, in focusing on both sides of the Atlantic and the pathways between, this article examines how whiteness and blackness simultaneously existed within the same mobile Atlantic subjects.[14]

The McGill family's Atlantic sojourn began with its progenitor, George, who had been a freedman in Baltimore working as a lay Methodist minister and teacher. His decision to relocate his family stemmed from his connections with many leaders of the colonization movement who assured him high-ranking positions within the colonial administration. Building upon this foundation, the McGills counted among their ranks merchants, colonial administrators, and even John Brown Russwurm, the first African American governor of a Liberian colony, who married George McGill's daughter, Sarah. At the age of twenty-one, Samuel sought a profession befitting his African social status. James Hall, the first governor of Maryland's Liberian colony and a medical doctor originally from New England, steered the younger man into medicine and served as his first mentor. So it was from a position of colonial prominence that McGill wrote to the leaders of the MSCS in the fall of 1835 to request assistance in securing and paying for his medical education.

14. The term "Americo Liberian" is usually reserved to denote the succeeding generations of the early African American settlers who inhabited the Republic of

That request for aid was founded in part upon McGill's violent suppression of neighboring Africans. During the night of June 10, 1835 the Bassa people attacked and destroyed the Americo Liberian settlement at Bassa Cove. One month later, the ACS settlements mounted an expedition of roughly 300 soldiers that defeated the Bassa leader "King Joe Harris" and burned his town to the ground. Among the ranks of this little colonial army was McGill. Written in the wake of the attack, McGill's letter was a far-ranging epistle dedicated to the political, economic, social, and military affairs of the colony. He proudly detailed his participation in the assault; while time would not permit him to detail "the particulars of the attack," he did want his correspondent to know that his fellow soldiers had elected him from the ranks to the position of third lieutenant. He evaluated the agricultural potential of certain settlements; he drearily noted that wars among nearby African nations hampered the colony's commercial endeavors. The letter's effect was to portray its author as a man—now an officer no less—in control of his colonial space capable of dealing justice to heathens who would challenge his authority. As an Americo Liberian, McGill expressed a comfort with his governance over colonial affairs and Africans, amply demonstrated by the long list of topics and his participation in the punitive expedition against the Bassa. Although jarring, the rapid transition from economics, politics, and war to medicine implicitly distinguished McGill from his "heathen" African surroundings and allowed him to claim a "civilized" identity through distancing himself from and suppressing black barbarity.[15]

McGill's choice of correspondents was not accidental. Moses Sheppard, a leading Baltimore merchant and philanthropist, had previously served on the Board of Governors of the MSCS and was personally acquainted with McGill's father. Significantly, he was also a colonizationist who greatly admired the African constructions of whiteness he read about in colonizationist literature. Writing to another Liberian settler only a few months after receiving McGill's request, Sheppard confided, "I have expected you to be one of the respectable settlers and

Liberia following independence in 1847. I use it here in the context of colonial Liberia as shorthand to differentiate African Americans from Liberian Africans.

15. S. McGill to Sheppard, Oct. 9, 1835, MSP; S. McGill to Sheppard, Feb. 22, 1836, MSCS.

I have no doubt of my expectation being fully accomplished, you will then be a white man, for freedom and independence make a white man, not colour." Sheppard hinted at the origins of his racial theory a few years later writing to the same settler: "I am pleased with the meaning the native Africans give to the term 'white man' they make these words refer to intelligence rather than colour, the construction is a good one." Sheppard understood whiteness through the prism of the Liberian settler and western superiority.[16]

Sheppard embodied that great colonizationist paradox: a man completely aware of the fluid nature of race and also one fearful of unending and unchanging racial conflict. For a member of a society trumpeting the whiteness of its African American settlers, he thought race to be far more malleable than many other colonizationists, even to the point of denoting whiteness as a "construction." He certainly respected the West African ideas being passed through settler filters more than most other ACS members. In many ways, however, Sheppard was a predictable result of colonizationist propaganda about the African whiteness of the settlers. At some point a few readers would set down the ACS mouthpiece, *The African Repository and Colonial Journal*, and not scoff at the ideas displayed before them. Sheppard's assumption that "freedom and independence" produce "white men" also reinforces the significance of the gendered construction. If Liberian "constructions" helped male settlers to navigate American racial binaries, then gendered constraints impeded the full enjoyment of settler "freedoms." While male settlers like McGill found transatlantic connections to secure educations, give public lectures, and travel in ways largely unavailable to other African Americans, very few women settlers enjoyed these same privileges.

In writing to Sheppard, McGill intentionally sought to establish a transatlantic partnership with a well-connected individual who viewed the Liberian colonies through a settler-oriented framework. It was a good decision, as soon after the arrival of McGill's letter Sheppard worked to transform that partnership into a much broader network. A group of white colonizationists met at Sheppard's house, found the prospect of educating a settler to serve as colonial physician tempting, and secured a position of sorts in Baltimore's Washington Medical College. They left

16. Sheppard to William Polk, Mar. 14, 1836, MSP; Sheppard to Polk, May 15, 1838, MSCS.

it to Sheppard to temper the young Liberian's enthusiasm for his future as a medical student. "You must not expect to hear the term Mr. McGill from a white man," Sheppard warned. "In the College you must appear as a servant; there is not a medical school in the U. States into which you could be admitted in any other character." As this was McGill's first visit to the United States since he was a child, Sheppard was clearly worried that the Liberian would be ill-prepared for American racism.[17]

McGill accepted this rather grim forecast and made his way to Baltimore prepared to "appear as a servant" rather than be admitted to the institution. The experiment ended predictably. He began attending lectures in November 1836 and by December the other medical students had organized and demanded the expulsion of the "Negro boy" who had "gone far beyond the limited space granted him, and has encroached as far upon the privileges enjoyed by the students, as to wound their feelings, disgust them by his actions." While McGill had been instructed to "appear as a servant," his fellow white Baltimorean students seemed to expect that the proud (and freeborn) Liberian behave as a servant as well.[18]

Even as the episode demonstrates whites' commitment to constricting African American education regardless of whether the student sought to settle permanently in the United States, it also underscored the constrained possibilities for Liberian settlers in the United States. Washington Medical College's student petitioners initially proved the validity of Sheppard's warning that there would be no "Mr. McGill" from white lips. But their petition's wording displeased the medical faculty who had granted McGill permission to attend lectures. Facing backlash from their instructors, the students dispatched a second letter couched in softer terms. Although they still demanded McGill's removal from the college, the departure was now framed as a "painful duty" and he was referred to as "Mr. McGill." The new petition refocused attention away from McGill's presence as a direct threat to his fellow students' sentiments and instead zeroed in on their ability to secure future employment in the South. They pointed to undisclosed "prejudicial reports" circulating to

17. Sheppard to S. McGill, Jan. 12, 1836, MSCS (also available in MSP); Sheppard to S. McGill, Dec. 21, 1835, MSP.

18. Students to the Faculty of the Washington Medical College, Dec. 12, 1836, MSCS; Committee of the Maryland State Colonization Society to R. E. Harrison, Dec. 17, 1836, MSCS.

argue that once word got out that they had graduated on equal terms with a man of African descent, they could never practice medicine in a slave state.[19]

And yet, even as the students accentuated McGill's African ancestry and his *blackness*, others redrew the perceived color line and emphasized McGill's African *whiteness*. After writing to McGill to orchestrate the Liberian's return to the States, Sheppard followed that letter with another one to McGill's father one week later to inform the elder McGill of the society's actions regarding his son. Sheppard admitted that in his letter to Samuel he had characterized the United States in unsavory terms to fully prepare the young man for the worst of what was to come. That said, Sheppard hinted that McGill's position might be better than his initial letter conveyed. In fact, Sheppard noted that McGill would "be regarded as a white man by a very numerous and respectable circle, but the habits and useages of society, alas our prejudices, will prevent his being treated as such in our public and common intercourse." To ensure that McGill was surrounded by a "respectable circle" of friends, Sheppard enlisted a network of like-minded colleagues in Baltimore and New England. At the same time, another overlapping network of colonizationists began seeking a new home for their Liberian medical student.[20]

They found that home in New England. Edward E. Phelps, an acquaintance of James Hall and faculty member of the University of Vermont's medical school, agreed to take on McGill as a private medical student at his home in Windsor, Vermont. Although McGill would be a private apprentice, Phelps assured the MSCS that he would learn the curriculum of the University and attend some of its lectures. McGill immediately relocated in the early winter months of 1837; the climate was undoubtedly a bit of a shock for a man who grew to adulthood so close to the equator. Despite the cold, McGill's journey to New England was as comfortable as Sheppard could make it. The older man plowed deep furrows of whiteness for his protégé to travel through. Bypassing the captain of the ship that would carry McGill to Boston on the first leg of the trip, Sheppard wrote directly to the vessel's owners. He noted that

19. H. McCulloch, et al. to the Faculty of the Washington Medical College, undated, MSCS. Given how recently McGill had arrived at the school and that nothing seems to have been published about his presence there, the students were probably reacting to rumors circulating within Baltimore's medical community.

20. Sheppard to G. McGill, Jan. 19, 1836, MSP.

McGill was a paying cabin passenger and requested that they inform the captain to "treat him as such without reference to colour." McGill carried letters of introduction to several leading white citizens of Boston, each utilizing the same approach of emphasizing both McGill's "respectability" and the patronage of the MSCS. Fearing disruptions to his travel and everyday life, the colonizationists even designed special traveling documents for McGill that denoted his Liberian origins. The necessity for these documents underscores the morphing effects of movement and Liberian residence: The colonizationists feared that their charge would face the usual humiliations and white hostility as other African American travelers when they explicitly wished to set him apart. The end result of McGill's travels was to transform himself into an African American differentiated from other Americans of African descent who must also be treated as white. If Atlantic travel fostered racial morphology in McGill through African whiteness, travel within the United States threatened to undo all that transatlantic work by returning McGill to segregated spaces reserved for traveling American blacks.[21]

21. Sheppard to [Thomas Matthews & Samuel Hopkins], Jan. 18, 1837, MSP. Edward E. Phelps to Ira A. Easter, Jan. 9, 1837, MSCS; S. McGill to Easter, Aug. 11, 1837, MSCS; S. McGill to Sheppard, Aug. 18, 1837, MSP; S. McGill to Sheppard, Aug. 29, 1837, MSP; Matthews to John H. Pearson, Jan. 18, 1837, MSP; Sheppard to George W. Light, Jan. 25, 1837, MSP; William Woodward to Thomas Edmunds, Jan. 31, 1837, MSP. Elizabeth Pryor has demonstrated the importance African American travelers placed on government-issued travel documents. Between 1834 and the 1860s, the State Department refused to issue passports to African Americans traveling abroad. Since American blacks were required to carry a series of identification documents ranging from slave passes to free papers to black sailor passports—documents Pryor accurately describes as "racialized surveillance documents"—whites often grumbled at the requirement to carry passports abroad, while African Americans coveted the possession of a State Department-issued passport that would have validated their claims to U.S. citizenship. Intriguingly, one of the few exceptions unearthed by Pryor of an African American receiving a U.S. passport was Peter Williams, who planned to travel on to Liberia after an initial European stop. Colonial Liberia presented a unique problem to this question of black citizenship. While their residence in Africa signaled their desire to leave the United States, their inhabitance in a colony of a private benevolent society based in the United States did not offer an alternative citizenship. The confusing legal situation probably led the colonizationists to secure the services of the chief judge of the Baltimore City Court to design McGill's travel documents and affix the seal of his court to them. See Pryor, *Colored Travelers*, 116.

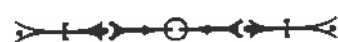
Sheppard's request that McGill be treated "without reference to colour" is a significant indicator of what Liberian settlers sought in terms of their American travels. Settler Andrew Hall succinctly explained this sentiment when he wrote an MSCS official, "I find it is true what you told me in your office that I would not be willing to come back to America to be called a negro." While the tantalizing unanswered question is the conditions under which Hall *would* be willing to return to America, it is incredibly telling that he points to the white colonizationist as the source of this desire to not be "called a negro." Dr. Robert McDowall, an Afro Scottish physician who served in Liberia, fell more in line with Sheppard's approach. In 1835, McDowall was very displeased with the ACS's *African Repository* journal for reprinting one of his letters. McDowall was not incensed about the publication of his message, but rather the text of the byline identifying him as the author. He notified the colonizationist editor: "I have to request that in all official documents, wherein it may be necessary to mention my name that the epithet 'coloured gentleman' shall not be coupled with it." McDowall believed that the inclusion of "coloured gentleman" set a "limit" on his abilities that greatly impeded both his current practice and also his future prospects. McDowall feared that being identified as "coloured" would "place me on a level with slaves." Seemingly rejecting any possible coupling of "free" and "colored," McDowall rejected the identity of "colored" as solely the possession of "slaves." As with other Liberian settlers, McDowall did not want to be "white," but rather desired to inhabit a murkier undefined space between antipodal blackness and whiteness.[22]

McGill found success through another option: using his Atlantic connections and Liberian experiences to create an exotic and foreign identity that escaped associations of primitivism through colonizationist claims

22. Andrew Hall to Maryland State Colonization Society, Jan. 24, 1847, MSCS; Robert McDowall to Ralph R. Gurley, Aug. 4, 1835, Reel 153, Records of the American Colonization Society (hereafter ACS), Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. McDowall seems to have been quite skilled at this game. In her work on Samuel George Morton, one of the founders of craniometry, and his collection of skulls, Ann Fabian discusses the skull of a Bassa man sent by McDowall. Fabian does not note that McDowall was Afro Scottish and, given his desire to remain indeterminate, it also seems likely Morton did not know the racial identity of McDowall either. See Fabian, *The Skull Collectors*, 37, 229.

that Liberia served as a beacon of civilization in Africa. This became necessary after but a few months in Vermont when Phelps resigned from the University in July 1837. Phelps lived a mere twenty miles from Dartmouth College, and having lost access to the University of Vermont he called upon his friend Reuben Mussey, professor of anatomy and surgery at Dartmouth, to pave a path for McGill's admittance there. Not only did McGill finally find official admittance to a medical institution as a student at Dartmouth, he eventually graduated officially, medical degree in hand, with the class of 1839.[23]

McGill's graduation from Dartmouth's medical school marked an unheralded milestone for African Americans. While James McCune Smith is recognized as the first African American to receive a medical degree, he was forced to acquire his education abroad at the University of Glasgow after being denied admittance to several American institutions on account of his race. Another man, David Jones Peck, is usually identified as the first African American physician to receive a medical degree from an American institution. Peck, however, graduated from Rush Medical College in Chicago in 1847, nearly a decade after McGill left Dartmouth. In fact, Peck graduated in the same year as Dempsey R. Fletcher, a student of McGill's and the *second* Liberian colonist to pass, degree in hand, through Dartmouth's doors.[24]



23. S. McGill to Easter, Aug. 11, 1837, MSCS; S. McGill to Sheppard, Aug. 18, 1837, MSP; S. McGill to Sheppard, Aug. 29, 1837, MSP; Records of the Faculty of Medicine in Dartmouth College, 1819–1838, Dartmouth College Archives, Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH.

24. For a summation of Peck's life, see Ira V. Brown, "An Antislavery Journey: Garrison and Douglass in Pennsylvania, 1847," *Pennsylvania History* 67 (Oct. 2000), 532–50, esp. 545; Michael J. Harris, "David Jones Peck, MD: A Dream Denied," *Journal of the National Medical Association* 88 (Sept. 1996), 600–604; Leonard W. Johnson, Jr., "History of the Education of Negro Physicians," *Journal of Medical Education* 42 (1967), 439–46, esp. 440; Thomas J. Ward, Jr., *Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South* (Fayetteville, AR, 2003), 47. Smith had attempted to gain admission to Columbia College and Geneva, New York's school of medicine. At Glasgow, Smith earned his BA in 1835 and his MD in 1837. John Stauffer, ed., *The Works of James McCune Smith: Black Intellectual and Abolitionist* (New York, 2006), xx–xi. See also Hall, *On Afric's Shore*, 16.

An exotic, but civilized, foreignness built upon Atlantic mobility was foundational to the successful completion of McGill's studies at Dartmouth. Of course, the creation of an identity based upon mobility was complex and uneven due to those Atlantic motions. Even a well-developed transatlantic network like McGill's varied from person to person and place to place, something McGill experienced firsthand when he first traveled to New England. Trekking north in the early winter months of 1837, McGill carried a letter written on behalf of his colonizationist sponsors. The MSCS's agent and author of the note underscored (and underlined) the racial hierarchy of the United States, reminding McGill that he "must not forget that you are an *African* in *America*; and in that station, whatever may be your sense of equality with your fellow man, remember, it will be dangerous to show it." Seemingly forgetting McGill's American origins, the letter broadly conflates African and African American identities.[25]

Paradoxically, it was this same journey during which McGill was informed that he was now an "African" that Sheppard worked so diligently to ensure his treatment "without reference to colour" and the colonizationists created special traveling papers. This already messy presentation of an African/African American/colorless traveler was further complicated by Mussey at Dartmouth. To prevent a response like the one McGill received among Baltimore's medical students, Mussey capitalized on McGill's complex identity. He introduced McGill to Dartmouth's medical students as a native-born African because "foreigners of any color are respected." McGill's Atlantic mobility apparently severed his connection to any particular geography.[26]

For his part, McGill in turn concocted an explanation for his fluency in English and, as he phrased it in his report to the MSCS, "the deception carried the point." Although McGill seemed miffed that in acquiescing to Mussey's "whim" he was forced to maintain the deception, he apparently saw potential that the con "may prove beneficial." Within one year's time, a free person of color born in Maryland had both been informed that he *was* African and subsequently been requested to *play* the part of African—an entirely different form of passing. If McGill's identity as a Liberian settler secured uplift and patronage in the United

25. Easter to S. McGill, Jan. 17, 1837, MSCS.

26. S. McGill to Easter, Aug. 11, 1837, MSCS.

States from colonizationists like Sheppard, then that role as exotic foreigner, a native African with fluent command of English and understanding of American culture, provided McGill the requisite space to secure the acceptance of his classmates and New Englanders among whom he lived. In fact, McGill's presence in Windsor seems to have created a bit of spectacle for the locals. Reports of the hubbub led to grumbling on the part of Sheppard. Referencing Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man" in which a group of superior beings "show'd a Newton as we show an ape," Sheppard sardonically grumbled that "a white ape would have attracted as much attention in the good town of Windsor as a coloured Liberian aspiring to science."[27]

The ways in which McGill and his compatriots toyed with his identity underscores that Liberians did not seek whiteness within a Eurocentric framework. Whiteness scholars have probed the contours of whiteness by focusing on those fringe "not quite white" identities—"white trash," Mexican Americans, the Irish, southern Europeans—who may have enjoyed certain legal protections afforded by whiteness while simultaneously finding themselves culturally and socially excluded from privileges associated with that racial identity. The tactics of these groups were to largely *deemphasize* their foreignness. Liberian settlers tread the opposite path by *emphasizing* their foreign exotic identities while retaining a mantle of civilization. The ways in which settlers described themselves through negation ("not a negro," "not a coloured gentleman") is significant and signaled their intent to inhabit an indeterminate space between whiteness and blackness.

McGill joined his fellow Liberian settlers in rejecting the black/white binary. While he certainly did not identify himself as a "white" man in America, McGill also chafed under the category "free man of color." Writing to an American friend after his graduation and eventual return to Africa, McGill confided, "I have visited the States as a free Liberian under circumstances the most favorable, and even then felt that to be called a free colored man in the States is synonymous with what we here term slavery." These were not unusual sentiments for Liberian settlers. Even as many reached back to the United States to friends and families and others found only disappointment and death in the sickly colony, other settlers—in particular those who like McGill secured a modicum of success under the patronage of the parent society—grew increasingly ideologically distant from African Americans in the United States. Given the racial alchemy that played on these Atlantic sojourners, it is not surprising that so many Liberian settlers framed their ideological separation from their American origins in terms of racial morphology. Settler William Polk wanted colonization officials to "tell the colord people that I would not exchange homes with them on no condition unless thay could make me as the white man." Polk framed his return to the United States on experiencing the privileges of whiteness without actually joining its ranks.[28]

Like Polk, McGill grew distant from African Americans. For one thing, he could not fathom how they could remain in the United States

27. S. McGill to Sheppard, July 12, 1837, MSP; S. McGill to Easter, Aug. 11, 1837, MSCS; S. McGill to Sheppard, Aug. 18, 1837, MSP; Sheppard to S. McGill, May 29, 1837, MSP. The subject of passing within literary scholarship has tended to interpret the act as subversive or as part of the process by which all identities are constructed due to the predominance of "black-to-white" passing narratives in literature, although there have been significant critiques of these tendencies such as Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham, NC, 2000). While McGill did not stand trial, his experiences reflect the findings of Ariela Gross in *What Blood Won't Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2008). Looking through trial records, Gross concludes that the legal interpretation of race before the Civil War was more fluid and determined by performance, much as what made McGill such a New England curiosity was his skilled performance of whiteness while claiming a black African birth. Atlantic mobility could even disrupt the racial legacies of Black Atlantic sojourners. Lisa A. Lindsay was drawn to the story of James Churchill Vaughan printed in *Ebony* magazine in 1975. Vaughan had left his native South Carolina for Liberia at his African-born father's behest. Finding little success there, Vaughan set out to find his father's people and reunited with his ancestors when he found the Yoruba of modern-day Nigeria who possessed the same ritual scarification features—the "country marks"—of his father. Only, as Lindsay discovered, the story was fabricated by twentieth-century descendants who found it expedient to more tightly connect Vaughan to the Yoruba. In reality Vaughan's father had been born in the United States, and he thrived in Africa despite his outsider status rather than being embraced as a long-lost Yoruba descendant. Both McGill and Vaughan, two African Americans who crossed the Atlantic for Liberia, passed for Africans, one in life and the other in death, for the expediency of the situation. See Lindsay, *Atlantic Bonds: A Nineteenth-Century Odyssey from America to Africa* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017).

28. Samuel F. McGill to H. B. Goodwin, Mar. 15, 1845, MSCS. Polk to Captain Hooper, Nov. 29, 1835, MSCS.

when freedom harkened from Liberia. For another, his own elevated status was built upon a foundation of controlling blackness. As a Liberian settler, McGill's actions as a colonizer fostered the conditions of his African whiteness. As a medical doctor, McGill entered a profession whose credentials were built upon a foundation of knowledge overwhelmingly gained from studying black medical subjects and anatomical "material." McGill adeptly followed the practices of his chosen profession. After receiving his medical degree, he worried that he lacked the clinical experience necessary to treat his patients effectively. He hoped that he could stop in Baltimore on his way to Africa to conduct clinical work among Baltimore's black community. "Even though some lives might be sacrificed," he admitted, "it would not make much difference providing I use every exertion to save—To hurry the departure of some of your Colored population out of this world would not be so great a crime." The deaths of American blacks would not be tragic if they furthered the lives of those who elected emigration and elevation in Africa. In a perverse twist of fate, controlling African blackness in Liberia provided the ideal apprenticeship to becoming a doctor in America.[29]

Living among the African Americans from whom he sought to distance himself proved trying for McGill, especially during his time in Baltimore. McGill seems to have especially butted heads with the black janitor of Baltimore's Washington Medical College. Although McGill's time at the school was brief, the janitor, a Mr. Golden, was apparently repulsed by McGill's haughty attitude. The conflicts centered over the two men's competing claims of expertise. Although he stated that he had shown Golden respect, McGill belittled the janitor's own claims to medical knowledge based upon his experiences in the position—as a servant of the college—that McGill had originally intended to occupy in his own quest for a medical education. "I have even received lectures from him on the 'cirkilashun,' the larger portion of which I knew to be erroneous," he complained to Sheppard. "His being Dr. Golden did not elicit from me the degree of Reverence which was generally paid him, by those who had partaken of his *nostrums*, consequently he might have supposed me emulous to acquire superior medical information to what he possessed." Although McGill clearly dismissed Golden, the inclusion of the title

29. S. McGill to Easter, Oct. 16, 1838, MSCS. S. McGill to H. B. Goodwin, Mar. 15, 1845, MSCS.

"doctor" along with the notation that someone was accepting medicine from the janitor suggests that Golden was treating Baltimore's black community in some capacity.[30]

McGill's complaints about "Doctor" Golden speak to his complex relationship with the idea and reality of his life as "free colored man" in the United States. But those sentiments also strike at the institutionalization and professionalization of American medicine during the nineteenth century. This professionalization was intimately connected to anatomical study that provided aspiring doctors with firsthand knowledge of the body's internal organs and systems. Medical historian Michael Sappol has argued that while germ theory allowed trained doctors to separate themselves through the language of science from other traditional claimants to healing powers in the latter half of the nineteenth century, anatomy performed that same task in the early part of the century. Doctors used their familiarity with the human body and the power to wield the scalpel to emphasize their scientific stature and authoritative claims to medical knowledge in juxtaposition to folk medicine, midwives, and traditional healing practices. As doctors wrapped themselves in a cloak of professionalism, the possession of a medical degree from a chartered institution held growing importance, and the number of medical schools multiplied across the United States; by 1849, the United States boasted 38 chartered institutions in operation. In the U.S., these institutions overwhelmingly utilized black bodies for study. Although McGill dismissed Golden's lecture on the human circulatory system, Golden's medical training and McGill's were not terribly dissimilar. Golden possessed much of the same education as other nineteenth-century medical students: hours spent observing the faculty. The critical difference is the scalpel and the control over knowledge—and also black bodies—that it bestowed the wielder. Thus, it probably is no accident that of all the possible lectures for McGill to pinpoint as ludicrous and worthy of mocking, he selected "cirkilashun," a knowledge intimately connected with dissection and observing the heart and blood vessels.[31]

30. S. McGill to Sheppard, June 15, 1837, MSP; Sheppard to S. McGill, May 29, 1837, MSP.

31. Michael Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ, 2002), 2–12, 122–30.

The very anatomical study that distinguished McGill's claims to scientific knowledge depended upon the control of black bodies, at least in the United States. Concomitant with the growth of medical schools was the demand for cadavers in order to perform dissections. At this time, the only legal means in most states to acquire bodies for dissection was via executed prisoners, and the growing demands of medical students far outstripped this meager supply. The deficiency was filled by grave robbers and so-called "resurrection men." Seeking the easiest targets, resurrectionists largely targeted the graves of the poor, the indigent, and the unknown. In this context, a disproportionate number of the cadavers on nineteenth-century dissecting tables were black.[32]

Numerous scholars have examined this illicit commerce in overwhelmingly black cadavers for medical study. The paradox of this trade in black bodies, the fact that African Americans were particularly targeted by grave robbers due to a racial hierarchy that demarcated them as innately different than whites—indeed, at the same moment in which other American physicians and scientists were arguing for a polygenetic origin of humanity—while the sole reason for securing these bodies was the belief that they were completely analogous to whites, has not been lost on scholars or even nineteenth-century observers. Baltimore, situated in a slave state and home to America's largest free black population, developed a reputation as a particularly rich target environment for grave robbers to procure bodies. Upon visiting the city during the winter of 1835 and 1835, Harriet Martineau observed that "In Baltimore the bodies of coloured people exclusively are taken for dissection," she wrote, "'because the whites do not like it, and the coloured people cannot resist.' It is wonderful that the bodily structure can be (with the exception of the colouring of the skin) thus assumed to be the pattern of that of the whites."[33]

When McGill undertook his transformative journey from Baltimore to New England in 1837, he did not travel alone. Instead, he relocated in

32. Ibid.

33. Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (2 vols., New York, 1838), 1: 107. For additional scholarship on the cadaver trade and scientific racism, see Fabian, *The Skull Collectors*; Helen McDonald, *Human Remains: Dissection and Its Histories* (2005; U.S. ed., New Haven, CT, 2006); Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, 2006).

the company of two deceased males who were more than likely African American and who were shipped at the behest of his new teacher, Phelps. Like many doctors and medical schools, Phelps engaged in the illegal trade of bodies to stock his dissecting rooms. He also shared their assumptions that black bodies were preferable for anatomical study. Indeed, Phelps had recommended to the MSCS that McGill bring cadavers up from Baltimore. "I would advise him to bring subjects with him for in any case practical anatomy will form an early part of his course. They can be packed in barrels safely and transported safely (I have for four years past supplied myself from Baltimore and am thus enabled to at all times to keep my rooms open to everyone who has curiosity enough to visit them)." In a separate letter, Phelps revealed the racial reasoning that made Baltimore an attractive source of cadavers: He "would be very glad to have him [McGill] bring on one or even two subjects with him, if possible and would prefer that they be coloured ones, having always used such here, in consequence of the disturbances which are occasionally made about grave marauders." Thus, all parties involved in McGill's education found it fortuitous that he would be leaving from Baltimore to continue his studies.[34]

Despite Phelps's assurances that he always transported his dissecting subjects in barrels from Baltimore, McGill found the initial shipment of subjects troublesome. On the boat, a sailor on the prowl for a stiff drink of whiskey tapped the barrel "and *took a draw*," McGill reported. "The flavor or taste not exactly suiting his palate, led to an examination, the contents were discovered and it was noised abroad." In Boston, the merchant originally contracted to transport the barrel refused to house the bodies in his warehouse, and McGill had difficulty locating a wagoner who would transport the barrels to Vermont on such short notice. There were additional problems with the cadavers after their arrival. In his initial requests for anatomical subjects, the neophyte McGill had evidently forgotten to request a subject of each sex, thus resulting in the arrival of two males. McGill was also too anxious to begin dissecting. Throughout May and June, he spent five hours a day in Phelps's dissecting room. Unsurprisingly given the temperature, McGill had to report in

34. S. McGill to Easter, May 6, 1837, MSCS; Phelps to Easter, Jan. 9, 1837, MSCS; S. McGill to Easter, May 6, 1837, MSCS; Phelps to Easter, Jan. 9, 1837, MSCS; Phelps to James Hall, Nov. 4, 1836, MSP.

July that one of his subjects had spoiled and that he was keeping the other sealed in the barrel until more favorable conditions arrived.[35]

Given the problems McGill faced with his first all-male cadaver shipment in the summer of 1837, the student was forced to request additional aid—in the form of bodies—from his patrons in the MSCS. Since his patrons were not men of science themselves, detailed instructions from McGill and his professors arrived in Baltimore to help Sheppard fulfill McGill's request. In the spring months of 1838, probably in early April, two graves from one of Baltimore's Potter's Fields, cemeteries designated for the poor and indigent, were robbed of their contents. Per McGill's instructions, the bodies would have been African American teen-aged girls, each weighing less than one hundred pounds. Despite his assurances that good bodies were scarce, it seems that cadavers of the requested age, weight, and sex were successfully acquired by the resurrectionist of the Washington Medical College, an African American recorded only by his nickname, "Bill." Bill charged $6 for each of the bodies based upon a sliding scale that capped at $24 for larger cadavers. The two bodies were taken to another doctor's private dissecting room, packed into the same barrel, and then preserved in 18 gallons of whiskey. A master cooper was brought in to seal the barrel tightly, and then it was placed into a larger barrel with the intervening space filled with bran. In this manner, the large barrel was labeled "four bushels of bran" and consigned to a ship bound for Boston; the false label was calculated to avoid the difficulties that attended McGill's first shipment. The barrels were dispatched to the Boston trading firm of Hutchins, Hurd. & Co., a firm that dealt in Caribbean goods and wholesale groceries. The total cost of the operation was $23.75.[36]

As the vessel containing the cadavers sailed for Boston, it raced a brace of letters bound for Hanover, New Hampshire, and Boston. The

35. S. McGill to Sheppard, June 15, 1837, MSP. S. McGill to Sheppard, July 12, 1837, MSP.

36. S. McGill to Sheppard, Feb. 23, 1838, MSP; S. McGill to Sheppard, Apr. 1, 1838, MSP; Reuben D. Mussey to Sheppard, Apr. 24, 1838, MSP; Mussey to William W. Handy, Mar. 23, 1838, MSP; Sheppard to Easter, Apr. 24, 1838, MSP; Sheppard to Benjamin F. Taylor, Mar. 23, 1850, MSP; Easter to Mussey, May 1, 1838, Agent's Letter Book, Outgoing Correspondence, MSCS. Although the exact departure date of the bodies was not recorded, the letter notifying Mussey of the departure of the dissecting subjects was dated May 1, 1838.

first letter sped to Hanover to warn Professor Mussey that a barrel would soon be arriving in Boston that would need to be spirited to Dartmouth quickly. The second letter notified the Boston proprietors of Ezra Hutchins and John Hurd's trading firm that the large barrel of bran soon to arrive in their warehouse was destined for Mussey. Merely labeling the barrel with its intended recipient, Mussey had informed his Baltimore contacts, would prevent the trading firm from opening the barrel to inspect its contents and "induce them to forward it to me immediately." Mussey, in fact, had been angling for the MSCS to send him a Baltimore body since McGill first arrived at the school. After working to admit McGill to Dartmouth, Mussey had taken the lead in writing a medical colleague in Baltimore to see whether the MSCS would dispatch another Baltimore body to New England for his own anatomical study. Mussey sweetened the deal by promising the MSCS that he "would, as a compensation, take McGill into my dissecting room for the whole term and give him instruction & employment, which is my estimation would be valuable to him." When informed of Mussey's request, McGill wrote an enthusiastic endorsement to his colonizationist benefactors. And so the remains of two indigent black children who died in Baltimore in early April found themselves on the dissecting tables at Dartmouth's Medical College by July. That New Englander Phelps claimed that Baltimore had been his primary source of medical subjects for several years and Mussey's agreement with the Boston trading firm suggests these two physicians engaged in a far-ranging trade in cadavers. Perhaps Phelps and Mussey were crackpots and outliers, but their preference for importing black bodies from the enslaved south suggests the need to reevaluate the traffic in black bodies as a phenomenon that integrated slave South with free North.[37]

37. Mussey to Handy, Mar. 23, 1838, MSP; Mussey to Sheppard, Apr. 24, 1838, MSP. S. McGill to Sheppard, June 3, 1838, MSP; S. McGill to Sheppard, July 6, 1838, MSP; *The Boston Directory* (Boston, 1849), 171, 362; S. McGill to Sheppard, July 12, 1837, MSP; S. McGill to Easter, Jan. 29, 1838, MSCS; S. McGill to Unknown (probably Moses Sheppard), Feb. 23, 1838, MSCS; Mussey to Handy, Mar. 23, 1838, MSP; Samuel F. McGill to Sheppard, Apr. 1, 1838, MSP. As of June 3, 1838, the bodies remained in storage in Boston "owing to the waggoner being unable to bring them." The bodies were eventually "received in good order." McGill began is second round of dissections of Baltimore's poor before July 6, 1838.

For McGill, control over these deceased black bodies for anatomical study was yet another tool in claiming the elevated identity of a Liberian settler, a tool that mirrored his control over living African bodies as a colonizer. Both forms of control were central to his racialized transatlantic identity. The transport of cadavers from Baltimore to Vermont also suggests a far larger network of anatomical subjects than previously unearthed by scholars. Much scholarly focus has been directed toward the slave South and toward statewide networks that funneled bodies to southern medical schools. Yet, an operation of the scale required to continually supply Phelps's Vermont dissecting tables with Baltimore's black population has not been detailed. Additionally, the correspondence helps us see how the trade operated on the ground. Because McGill and his Baltimore sponsors were new to the ways of cadaver procurement and unaware of the mechanics of this dark medical trade, McGill's physician instructors were forced to dispatch detailed instructions in the ways of shipping bodies. These instructions combined with Sheppard's meticulous bookkeeping provide an unparalleled glimpse into this illegal trade.[38]

38. Mussey to Sheppard, Apr. 24, 1838, MSP. James O. Breeden conducted the initial research that unearthed the Virginia trade in bodies later highlighted by Todd Savitt in *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia*, one of the foundational texts for the nexus of slavery and medicine. More recent scholarship has expanded upon the uses of enslaved and free black bodies for medical experimentation and knowledge. Stephen Kenny has noted that doctors in the rural South benefitted from a robust exchange of black bodies and specimens through the creation of medical museums. Gretchen Long examines black medical establishments beginning in the late antebellum period and continuing to the early twentieth century. Her chapters on pre-Civil War black doctors center on physicians James McCune Smith and Alexander Augusta, who returned to practice in the United States after securing their educations abroad. In focusing on the United States medical practices rather than students, Long missed the handful of Liberian settlers in American institutions and concluded that "Nineteenth-century black doctors who had trained before the Civil War . . . had received their degrees abroad." Rana A. Hogarth has expanded the study of "medicalized blackness" to include the greater Caribbean and Atlantic world. She dedicates a chapter to the slave hospitals of Charleston, South Carolina, noting their concomitant rise with the founding of the Medical College of South Carolina. At the same time when medical institutions competed to secure a limited supply of legally available cadavers, the young medical school in South Carolina acquired black bodies with ease, access which its administrators interpreted as a competitive advantage over older institutions. Although a growing body of scholarship, the literature on the exploitation of black bodies for medical research remains wedded to the antebellum South. Long, *Doctoring Freedom: The Politics of African American Medical Care in Slavery and Emancipation* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), 176. Breeden, "Body Snatchers and Anatomy Professors: Medical Education in Nineteenth-Century Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 83 (July 1975), 321–45; Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia* (Urbana, IL, 1978), 291–93; Stephen C. Kenny, "The Development of Medical Museums in the Antebellum American South: Slave Bodies in Networks of Anatomical Exchange," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 87 (Spring 2013), 32–62; Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World, 1780–1840* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017).

These peregrinations of an Americo Liberian medical student demonstrate the results of Liberia's racial hierarchy and mobility. McGill did not conceive of himself as white as he sought to rescue those "of my race" from American subjugation. Yet, if he did not claim a "white" identity, neither did he lay claim to American blackness. Life in Liberia brought McGill into new social structures with new racial identities, an African whiteness of which his colonizationist patrons were intimately aware. Moving between Africa and the United States and the great poles of white and black produced murky shades of gray in the Atlantic world.

McGill's journey to Baltimore and New England was only the first of many visits to the United States for McGill. While the elite McGill crossed the Atlantic with remarkable frequency, even for a Liberian settler, his understanding of that travel paradoxically reveals the importance he placed on stationary residence rather than mobility. After returning to Africa and surveying the large numbers of uneducated former slaves filling the colony, McGill wrote to MSCS leadership, "These same people are now snatched suddenly from the plantations and uninstructed and unimproved are expected by the simple passage across five thousand miles of ocean to be fit to fulfill the functions and duties of free and enlightened citizens." In his first letter, McGill had framed his request for a medical education through his habitation in a colonial space "civilizing" and controlling heathen blackness. It was residence in Liberia

rather than the journey there that mattered to McGill, as it was his status there that provided him with the tools and connections necessary to secure the requisite education to "fulfill the functions and duties of free and enlightened citizens." McGill simply failed to recognize that the "simple passage of five thousand miles" *had* been transformative as the initial act of his racial metamorphosis. Not only had that passage transformed American blackness into African whiteness, but that relocation had also enabled the "mulatto" son of a Baltimore lay Methodist minister to secure a medical degree from a U.S. institution, the first African American to do so, and to count many prominent whites within his circle of friends. Perhaps McGill thought less about travel than many other free people of color given the actions of his patrons to ensure that McGill experienced the United States as a white*ish* traveler rather than an African American.[39]

If McGill's career highlights the possibilities for Liberian settlers when they traveled abroad, it is important to note that this identity was a product of West African racial constructions. McGill was not the only Liberian settler to bring these complicated racial constructions to bear on medical practice. Consider the case of Jacob W. Prout. At the same historical moment in which McGill was discovering the preference for black anatomical subjects in the United States, Prout served as a nurse in Monrovia for newly arrived settlers. While Prout lacked formal education, he had spent more than eight years working under the direction of various colonial physicians. In 1834, Dr. Ezekial Skinner, the new vice agent of the society in Liberia and colonial physician, had taken Prout on as "a student in Anatomy." Prout reported that the doctor "spars no pains with me, he has open several bodies." And much like McGill, Prout apparently began his Liberian training with the understanding from Skinner that he would be able to visit the United States to receive "a course of lectures" in medicine, although it is unclear whether Prout interpreted this as a promise of a medical degree or simply attendance in a lecture hall.[40]

Just one year later, Prout seems to have either received bad news regarding his plans for studies in the United States or simply decided

39. S. McGill to Sheppard, May 1, 1839, MSP; Hall, *On Afric's Shore*, 324–25.

40. Jacob W. Prout to Ralph Gurley, Dec. 18, 1834, Reel 153, ACS; Prout to Unknown (probably Gurley), Mar. 12, 1835, Reel 153, ACS.

such lectures were unnecessary given his clinical experience in Liberia. Either way, he dropped his requests for an American education and instead shifted his attention to securing a salary sufficient to secure his services as a full-time employee of the colony's medical service. Still, Prout clearly understood that in order to secure that salaried position he would need to cloak himself in the mantle of scientific observation similar to his more credentialed colleagues. He maintained "a regular Register of the treatment by the request of many of the respectable citizens" and began developing his own treatment program for newly arrived settlers suffering from the acclimating fever, a program that focused on diet. Although he used the tools of scientific inquiry to give his treatment validity, Prout's program, which he described as the "opposite treatment to any formerly persued," challenged existing medical knowledge. He was especially dismissive of professional physicians' increasing focus on quinine to treat the fever, declaring it to be "more of a poison in certain cases . . . than Arsenic." By 1836, Prout expanded his medical practice in order to secure even more scientific evidence in support of his treatment. Like his counterparts in the United States, Prout assumed that the diseases and their treatments would be analogous for both African American settlers and patients of European descent. As evidence for his argument, however, Prout inverted American medical practices by utilizing white anatomical "material." Six European sailors suffering from fever were placed under Prout's care. Since a steady diet constituted part of Prout's regimen, he was particularly upset with one sailor who refused to eat. Upon that sailor's demise, Prout "opened his body . . . and found the stomach as empty as a bladder." Based upon this autopsy and the successful recovery of four sailors, Prout declared his treatment suitable for black settlers or white visitors.[41]

McGill and his fellow Liberian settlers constructed a new identity, an exotic but civilized blackness forged upon their Atlantic mobility and differentiating themselves from their American past and African present. If the settlers understood the spatial confines of their whiteness in Africa, they also worked to secure the relationships necessary to occupy a liminal racialized space, not white but also not the blackness conceived in most whites' minds in the antebellum United States. These were not

41. Prout to Unknown (probably Gurley), Aug. 16, 1835, Reel 153, ACS; Prout to Unknown (probably Gurley), Dec. 16, 1836, Reel 153, ACS.

men and women seeking to become whites but, having found themselves categorized as such by their African neighbors, many found these tools of whiteness useful in achieving their dreams in their travels abroad. Through these Atlantic connections they found the power to control the scalpel on both sides of the ocean.

Mad Speculation and Mary Girard

Gender, Capitalism, and the Cultural Economy of Madness in the Revolutionary Atlantic

BRENNA HOLLAND

In early 1785, Stephen Girard wrote despairingly to his brother Jean, then in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, "Despite my efforts, if it is not a physical ailment, it is of the mind. I fear to have lost forever the peace which a certain success should procure for life in this world." Writing from Philadelphia, Stephen, a Franco-American merchant, was clearly troubled by limits on his success. But this was no commercial limitation. While many mercantile houses faced failure in the postwar depression of the mid-1780s, Stephen Girard's was not among them. As a merchant, Stephen's ships, and the correspondence and commodities they carried, knit together the ports of the revolutionary Atlantic. Not all of his ventures were successful, but he managed to keep business afloat. Yet, just as he often struggled to control cargoes that crisscrossed turbulent oceans, the tumult that Stephen experienced in the mid-1780s affected him at home. After eight years of marriage, Stephen and his wife Mary's union had begun to deteriorate. Indeed, his primary concern in this letter stemmed from his domestic troubles. Commercial failure was not disturbing Stephen's peace in 1785; the trouble was his wife. By the mid-1780s, Mary had gone mad.[1]

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1. Stephen Girard (hereafter SG) to Jean Girard (hereafter JG), Feb. 21, 1785, Letter Book (hereafter LB) 1, Series 3, Roll 122, 221, Stephen Girard Papers

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