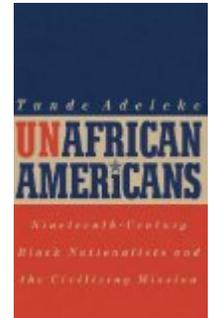


Tunde Adeleke. *UnAfrican Americans: Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. xv + 192 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-2056-0.



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Key nineteenth-century American black nationalists--Martin Delany, Alexander Crummell, and Henry McNeal Turner--are derisively portrayed in Tunde Adeleke's *UnAfrican Americans*. Professor Adeleke, educated at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) and the University of Western Ontario and currently employed at Loyola University (New Orleans), argues that Delany, Crummell, and Turner--all occasional emigrationists who themselves sojourned in Liberia--were collaborators in the late-nineteenth-century imperialist ideas and policies that led to the colonization of most of Africa.

Adeleke understands his subjects as reaching toward black nationalism, or pan-Africanism, but failing because of two conditions: First, relatively few African Americans endorsed or envisioned emigration to West Africa, so the theoreticians of resettlement lacked the audience that might have pushed them further into black nationalism. Second, European businessmen and governments were interested in the natural resources and cheap labor that Africa seemed to promise. Hence, Delany, Crummell, and Turner were led into col-

laboration with economic and military forces that the black men thought might serve their interests but soon proved to be powerful beyond their influence. The strength of *UnAfrican Americans* is its author's frank presentation of the anti-African, or civilizationist, face of its subjects. The weakness of the work is its blindness to the historical background of emigrationism.

Adeleke begins his story around 1850, but many of the patterns he analyzes--including the roles individuals like Delany, Crummell, and Turner played in commerce, governance, and migration--were established between 1780 and 1830. The black nationalists' beliefs and actions look less individual and more structural, less idealistic and more self-serving, if we consider the earlier history. Moreover, the book conveys an overall uneasiness with the idea of black nationalism--an uneasiness the author does not confront but that is worth discussing in a review.

Adeleke argues that, beginning with the approval of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, former integrationist Martin Robison Delany turned to Africa. Abandoning hope for liberty and self-gov-

ernance for black people in the USA, Delany announced that African Americans could achieve civil rights in West Africa and, in 1859 and 1860, he traveled in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Niger Valley to arrange the future himself. In Abeokuta (birthplace of Wole Soyinka, Fela, and in the 1940s, a Nigerian women's anti-collaborationist resistance movement) Delany contracted with local chiefs for land for African American settlers. Equality with indigenous peoples—whether cultural, economic, or political—was an impossibility for Delany, who was convinced that African American men would carry civilization, including Christianity, to West Africa and would be the governors of new states there. He thought that African American men could not achieve independence in isolation, but would rely on European markets for West African produce (cotton would be a prime export, he thought) and on cheap, indigenous labor for agricultural production. He envisioned what Adeleke acidly calls a "triple alliance"—collaboration among European industrialists, African American governors, and native laborers—in the development of new societies and commercial systems in West Africa. To this end, Delany traveled to Great Britain in 1860 and lectured to businessmen, scientists, and government officials about the value of African produce and the cheapness and availability of African labor. Tension between the American North and South in the 1850s gave him an opportunity to predict to British manufacturers the unreliability of the American cotton crop in the 1860s and to extol West African agricultural produce for manufacturers who needed steady sources of raw materials. He did argue that "legitimate" trade would muscle out the remnants of the slave trade. But his overwhelming vision was one of African workmen employed by African American settlers who traded with European manufacturers.

As an episcopal priest, missionary, entrepreneur, "civilizationist," and Delany's host in Monrovia, Crummell could be seen as an even less attractive figure than Delany. Crummell presented

West Africa as a field of rich natural resources waiting to be exploited by African Americans. He justified the use of violence against indigenous peoples, whether by African American settlers or Europeans. Not only did he assert the right of settlers to battle with native peoples, but he commended the Belgian government for its forceful moves against Africans in the Congo. (Adeleke does not note that other emigrations, like John Russwurm, saw the Americo-Liberian settlers as being in the same relationship that Englishmen had been with American Indians in the seventeenth century.) Moreover, Crummell argued that the slave trade and New World slavery were providential, were God's way of preparing black people to enter the modern world of commerce, religion, and democratic governance. African American settlers, according to this argument, were divine instruments, forged in the New World, for civilizing and converting Africa.

Turner, who went to Liberia some years after Delany and Crummell, echoed their ideas about civilization and commerce, but with some significant variations. After the federal retreat from Reconstruction and the Supreme Court's recision of civil rights extended in the 1870s to African Americans, Turner began to speak of "reparation" to blacks for the sufferings and inequities of enslavement. He demanded of the federal government \$40 billion to fund the travel of African Americans to West Africa and start-up costs for their agricultural and mining concerns there. He criticized American isolationism, contrasting it to European focus on Africa. He traveled as bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church to South Africa and congratulated the Boer settlers for bringing civilization to the native peoples there. Turner had an aptitude for the infelicitous phrase. One day, he wrote, "millions will thank heaven for the limited toleration of American slavery" (p. 101).

Adeleke's distaste for his subjects is evident throughout his book, but he is also sometimes

sympathetic to them. He resists the easy road of stating that Delany, Crummell, and Turner were so enthralled by European civilization that they dismissed African culture and, indeed, Africans' lives. Instead, he argues, more complexly, that the three men aimed for black nationalism but were hamstrung by their context (insufficient interest in settlement on the part of African Americans and overwhelming interest in commercial appropriation on the part of Europeans). They were at heart American integrationists who had little true interest in Africa and who returned to the USA as soon as they felt the political climate was hopeful there. Crummell, for instance, lived in Liberia only between 1853 and 1872. They never knew, Adeleke reasons, the Africa they betrayed and abandoned.

Consideration of the seventy years before Adeleke begins his analysis reveals that his subjects' anti-Africanism can be explained in another way. Efforts to quell the slave trade by means of "legitimate trade" began in the 1780s, but were neither purely pro-African in intent nor antislavery in practice. The Sierra Leone Company, for instance, envisioned African laborers "liberated" from their traditional societies and social leadership and busy producing raw material for British manufacture and consumption. The same laborers were to become consumers of British finished goods. The "legitimate trade" campaign actually strengthened the institution of slavery in areas where goods for the Atlantic trade could be produced. The goods were produced and transported not by independent farmers but often by slaves. The first generation of Americo-Liberian settlers knew this and sought to take advantage of it.

>From its inception in the 1820s, Liberia was meant to be a commercial colony utilizing cheap African labor. Despite the rhetoric of carrying civilization and religion to the natives and undermining the slave trade, the Americo-Liberians and their white supporters envisioned Monrovia as an entrepot that would shuttle American goods (in-

cluding such slave-produced goods as tobacco, along with whiskey, cloth, glassware, and guns) to Africans while returning African goods (including such goods as palm oil, camwood, and ivory, harvested and transported to the coast by slaves) to the United States. Records of the blacks and whites who traveled to Liberia in the 1820s under the aegis of the American Colonization Society reveal that they knew that slave labor could produce tremendous wealth and had few compunctions about dealing in slave-produced material even if they opposed the Atlantic slave trade. The violent disagreements between the Americo-Liberian settlers and the native groups, beginning in the mid-1820s, are usually described as disputes about land possession, but it is at least as likely that they were disputes about the misuse of local laborers by the settlers. Even less fortunate than the locals who ended up working for the settlers were the "recaptives," who were rescued from slavers at sea only to be indentured to Americo-Liberian settlers. A tradition of the misuse of laborers would of course result in the investigation in the 1920s by the League of Nations the result of which was that Liberian officials were condemned for profiting from the unfree labor of indigenous people.

The Americo-Liberian colonist is usually understood in American historiography as an abolitionist or freedom fighter, but he was really a middleman attempting to shuttle goods produced by unfree or semi-free black people to the Atlantic economy. He was someone who transferred the value of the labor of black people, often enslaved, to a larger economic system, hoping to retain a portion for himself. Perhaps a good example is Lott Cary, who is often seen as a black Virginian preacher and abolitionist who sought a greater freedom in Liberia. In the early nineteenth century, Cary was a hired slave in a Richmond tobacco warehouse—exactly the person through whose hands the value of slave labor passed. In the 1820s, he sailed to Monrovia, ostensibly as a missionary (one of his nineteenth-century hagiogra-

phers conceded that there was no evidence that he ever preached to the natives), but actually with plans to settle himself as an entrepreneur moving goods between the USA and areas around Monrovia. The move to Liberia was meant primarily to improve his position as a middleman. He became a scourge of the natives and died in a gunpowder explosion as he was preparing for one of many assaults on them. The large question, of course, is why someone like Cary has persistently gotten good press as an American freedom fighter.

The importance of Cary and early Liberia for Adeleke's book is that the role of middleman between black labor (whether it was cheap, semi-free, or slave) and the Euro-American economy was an established one into which men like Delany, Crummell, and Turner fell easily. It was part of the structure of the Atlantic world, not merely a choice Delany and company made. Although black nationalist rhetoric might be a part of it--Cary indeed said he was going to found a black nation--the role was essentially economic and suggested no abolitionist implications at all. Often skilled people with some experience of economic advancement, the Americo-Liberian settlers, about 13,000 between 1822 and 1865, migrated in an effort to ratchet up their positions in the Atlantic economy by availing themselves of indigenous land and labor. Perhaps the most accurate way to describe the American black nationalists of the mid-nineteenth century is that they stood at the interface of slavery and imperialism, drawing their assumptions about labor and markets from the past while gesturing toward the future forms of commerce and governance they understood only imperfectly.

Crummell earns particular scorn in *Un-African Americans* for the lengths to which he was willing to pursue the providential argument that God had planned the slave trade and New World slavery as instruments of a great good--the Christianizing and civilizing of Africa. The use of

this providential argument in the 1860s was even worse than Adeleke relates, since it had been a standard application of theodicy to the slave trade and to slavery in the eighteenth century, but by the second half of the nineteenth century had lost its respectability. Had Crummell articulated the providential argument about a century earlier, as did Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, Olaudah Equiano, James Albert Ukawasw Gronniosaw, Lemuel Haynes, and Phillis Wheatley, he would have been in the black avant-garde, which was using providentialism to argue for its own role in the Atlantic world, but in his time he was at best out of date, at worst in bad faith. Crummell's use of providence was entirely self-serving and out of line with mid-to-late-nineteenth-century Anglican theology. The omnipotent, omniscient God of the Protestant Reformation was an overruling deity who brought good out of evil by overruling the sins of humankind with events He wills to be.

The most obvious example was the overruling of the Crucifixion by the Resurrection: the Reformed God worked in human affairs by bringing good out of evil. However, beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century British Protestants began criticizing the idea that God works through human sin and suffering. Central to Arminian religion was the claim that suffering was not part of the divine plan. The older idea of a God who wounds with one hand and heals with the other (as the Puritans put it) retreated in the end of the eighteenth century into theology branded derisively the "New Divinity" and often called "hyper-Calvinism" or "consistent Calvinism." This discredited theodicy did have one value to Crummell in exalting the person who could perceive and articulate the providential design in human suffering. Probably Crummell's pronouncements on the divine design in the slave trade and slavery were not the defense of "religious optimism" (p. 102) against the pain of racism, but rather an effort to situate himself as the major interpreter both of centuries of the slave trade and enslavement and

of the establishment of black settlers societies in West Africa.

Unfortunately, Adeleke does not treat reparations in depth, but mentions the idea only as part of Turner's program that had not appeared in Delany's or Crummell's. But one assumes that had he written more he would have argued that as an idea reparations signify an effort to deal with the costs of slavery, but in practice they are liable to become the property of elites like Turner. Funds for the establishment of a governing, entrepreneurial class of African Americans in West Africa can scarcely be seen as an honest effort at reparations.

UnAfrican Americans shows an uneasiness with black nationalism, or pan-Africanism, that Adeleke does not seek to resolve. On the one hand, the author assumes that black nationalism, or pan-Africanism, in the sense of ideas and practices predicated on the unity of black people throughout the world and aimed at their common good, does exist and can be embodied in a state as well as articulated in a philosophy. Delany, Crummell, and Turner, Adeleke reasons, moved toward black nationalism but reached only an impure form of it. Black nationalism, or pan-Africanism, can inhere in an African state as well as in the hearts and minds of diasporic blacks. On the other hand, the author's arguments imply the opposite—that there is no unity among black people and that African states are not embodiments of black nationalism. Hence, on the one hand, Adeleke writes that "a truly Pan-African and black nationalist program is one propelled by conscious efforts to harmonize, theoretically and practically, blacks in the diaspora and in the African continent" (p. 145) and "the spirit of Pan-Africanism ... emphasizes, *a priori*, solidarity between Africa and peoples of African descent in the diaspora" (p. 151). Yet, on the other hand, he acknowledges complexity, diversity, and conflict among black people and states that "to expect of black American nationalists absolute and unswerving commitment to

Africanism and Pan-Africanism is unrealistic" (p. 148).

A good example of the author's irresolution is his argument that in "the articulation and defense of black/African interests" against European imperialism "one area of success was Liberia." In reality, Liberia expanded its borders through aggression, provided unfree laborers for rubber plantations, and degenerated into various tribal and settler factions that have poisoned the country with carnage and mayhem. It is true that Adeleke addresses only a slice of Liberian history, but one questions the integrity of thinking about Liberia in the imperialist decades without also considering the colonizing decades as well as the years in which Nigerian-dominated ECOMOG forces intervened in Liberian politics in the name of stability. Adeleke's comments about black and African interests and Liberia's "success" are strange. Here, Delany and company are small fry: the real questions are the legitimacy of black nationalist philosophy and the legitimacy of African states that have relied upon it.

If Adeleke is representative of current thinking about black nationalism, the philosophy is probably in much the same situation as American republicanism was in the post-Revolutionary years. A revolutionary ideology made virtually no allowance for differences and conflict among the white population and used various blunt instruments to exclude blacks and Indians from political life. Growth in the population, in the economy, and in the size of the nation blew away the revolutionary ideology forever and pulled forward a middle-class democracy in which diversity is accepted and in which the government must be responsive to a mass of politically-active citizens. Minority groups like blacks and Indians did not advance to equality quickly, but democracy has fostered their advancement in the long run. As democracy grew out of republicanism, older ideals like the mental and moral unity of the citizens (what Karl Popper called the mark of a

closed society) were replaced by pragmatic notions like adaptation, inclusion, progress, and toleration (what Popper called the standard of an open society). Perhaps tomorrow's black nationalism will grow out of today's (or yesterday's) just as democratic ideology grew out of republicanism. Acceptance of diversity and different interests among black people could reform black nationalist philosophy, and a reformed black nationalism could deflate the rhetoric of center and unity as well as guide a worthwhile political culture in nations like Liberia. Although he is not mentioned in *UnAfrican Americans*, Wole Soyinka, one suspects, is the giant behind the book, particularly in his arguments about the importance of transcending the ideas and the politics of centralization while still maintaining the African nation-states that were formed in the imperialist and nationalist decades.

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