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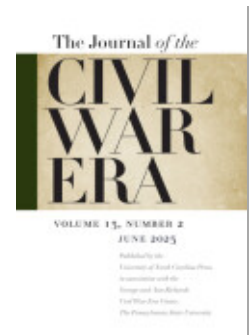
Time and Place, Time and Chance

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Time and Place, Time and Chance

SEBASTIAN N. PAGE

Editors' Note: The following essay is the acceptance speech for the Tom Watson Brown Book Award, conferred on the best book published on the Civil War era in 2021. Tad Brown, president of the Watson-Brown Foundation, awarded the prize to Sebastian N. Page for Black Resettlement and the American Civil War, published by Cambridge University Press. Page delivered his speech during the Southern Historical Association's annual meeting on November 11, 2022, in Baltimore, Maryland. The Society of Civil War Historians judges and administers the book prize.

I'd like to thank the Society of Civil War Historians, the Watson-Brown Foundation, and the prize jury for this huge honor. I'd also like to thank, by name, Tad Brown, Joan Waugh, Lesley Gordon, Andy Lang, Dave Thomson, and Jim Marten.

This is a night of firsts. It's my first time in the United States . . . since 2019, for the same reason it's the first "analog" meeting of the Southern in three years. It's also my first appearance at any conference other than BrANCH, the Association of British American Nineteenth Century Historians. For the prize, it's the first time it has gone to an Englishman. There are two exceptionally generous awards in US history: this one and the Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize. Each has been won by a Briton just once—the Lincoln Prize by Richard Carwardine in 2004. While I'm gratified to note that Richard and I are both graduates of the University of Oxford, I'm delighted to say that we're also graduates of Corpus Christi, the smallest—and evidently the best!—of Oxford's historical colleges. Being associated with Richard's name brings me such pleasure that I've just made sure to plant that association in your mind.

I'm also the first winner of the Tom Watson Brown Book Award to declare himself a failed academic. But I've always suspected I'm a decent *historian*, which this evening's events may confirm. Still, I tried and tried

again for an academic position and failed—ergo, “failed academic.”⁷¹ Others may spurn the *f*-word and identify as academics off the tenure track or even outside higher education—and that, too, is valid. Although I wouldn’t claim to represent those who didn’t make it, I will observe that my sort is underrepresented at conferences compared with tenured professors and graduate students who haven’t failed to make it . . . yet. So I’d like to thank every advisor honest enough, with themselves as much as anyone, to alert their students to the state of the market and at least speak respectfully of mainstream careers. And I’d like to highlight my own situation, which comes under the much-overlooked category of “employment allowing for study,” rather than “employment incorporating study skills.” I’m a weekend receptionist at Hertford College, another constituent college of the University of Oxford. From Monday to Friday, I do my own research, and from Saturday to Sunday, I do my own research, those being quiet days at the front desk. I’m lucky: I’m all about the research and get by with part-time employment because my needs are modest. From tonight, they’re even more so. Thanks to the Watson-Brown Foundation, I’m receiving a check for more than twice my gross annual salary. The charity is about to endow the independence of this researcher for life—and for that, I am, by definition, eternally grateful.

And what’s my research like? Well, it’s thorough. I despair of summarizing a work that encompasses thirty countries and stretches from the 1770s to the 1890s. Don’t let the title fool you: it’s *Black Resettlement and the American Civil War*, not *in* or *during*, because any survey of the nineteenth century’s many schemes to separate black Americans from white must climax in the 1860s, a claim that might dismay some scholars. I didn’t set out to write this book, and I suspect several historians would rather I hadn’t written it, too. My intended PhD project was a study of the American Colonization Society (ACS) during the late antebellum period, which I chose when Oxford’s Vere Harmsworth Library, a repository devoted to the study of America, bought microfilm copies of the ACS records, held at the Library of Congress. An account of the 1850s revival of the Liberian colonization movement would’ve made a sound dissertation. But that’s now just chapter 1 of *Black Resettlement*. For during my first year, a US-based researcher, Phillip Magness, suggested I visit the UK National Archives to investigate Abraham Lincoln’s pursuit of forgotten colonization schemes in the British West Indies. I was intrigued by Phil’s pointer, since I knew well the debate over Lincoln’s involvement in African American expatriation, which ranged from claiming that Honest Abe had been insincere, to palliate a racist electorate, to promising that he had at least jettisoned the policy. Phil’s suspicions were right—the White

House had pursued black emigration to what are now Belize and Guyana, into 1864—and our findings became a monograph, *Colonization after Emancipation*, which caught the start of the sesquicentennial cycle and made the press for its Lincoln discoveries.²

But with that early success came drawbacks. My next book project grew by an order of magnitude, since it would have to synthesize well-known colonizationist activity with the further discoveries that *Colonization after Emancipation* foreshadowed. I also faced other historians' incredulity, which I can understand. I know what it's like to doubt that the man on the penny could have persisted in separatist dreams. About half the reviewers of *Colonization after Emancipation* dismissed it. That half of *them* called it plausible but pettifogging and the other half incredible and inadmissible might be why I'm standing here now. To all those critics, I extend the hand of friendship. I'd love to think they'll accept it and agree with me that incredulity achieves nothing, whether directed at colleagues or at historical actors who deemed black removal viable, even compelling.

But the highest cost of precocious publication was how my new, expanded project unnerved those around me, who in turn unnerved me. By the time I wrote *Black Resettlement*, my mental health was strained through gaslighting. I grew wary of the Helpful Friend: the type who invariably asked, "How's the book?" I don't know what a book would say—"I'm tightly bound today," perhaps—but surely they meant to ask, "How's work?" or just "How are you?" Whenever I replied that no book was imminent, the HF was so quick to say, "Don't be such a perfectionist!" and so slow to ask, "Actually, what's your project about?" In the presence of the Helpful Friend, I felt like another capitalized character, Schrödinger's Scholar: the academic simultaneously so brilliant he couldn't possibly need to do more research and so dimwitted he couldn't possibly know his own to-do list better than his interlocutor did. In hindsight, I sense that the Helpful Friend was trying to help themselves in some way, but I can't see how. It seems obvious to me that some projects are larger than others and that anyone who says they need to spend more time on theirs is doing anything *but* claiming to be the better researcher.

One clue to the HF's mindset was that they seemed to confuse expectations with reality: *Black Resettlement* must be a "book of the dissertation," because that's what search panels would expect. *Colonization after Emancipation* must have preempted *Black Resettlement*, because that's what search panels would *say*. Looking back on these "conversations," I think that two very different tribes are drawn to graduate study: the careerists and the purists, to borrow from Joel Silbey's division of the wartime Democratic Party into legitimists and purists.³ Careerists see research

as the means to an academic post, and purists see an academic post as the means to research. Both stances are legitimate—and both tribes are naïve. The careerists do not see that, no matter how well they play the game, adjuncthood or adjustment to some very different life is still their likeliest fate. Meanwhile, the purists do not see that academic employment is an awful way of getting research done! At least I see it now.

Still, the careerist premise is the more insidious, since it embodies survivorship bias: the fallacy that a student can replicate their advisor's success by deliberate action when, at this level, luck is more important. "Just write the quickest book you can; then once it gets you a job, you can write the one you want to. Simple!" But this is an extreme form of hindsight-abuse. It looks back from an outcome that hasn't happened, won't happen, and increasingly *can't* happen. So, to the professionally precarious, likelier to read this address than hear it tonight, know that writing the book your topic deserves, no matter how long it takes, is a sweeter, surer source of satisfaction than a jar of jam tomorrow.

And what was my own book—this work that admitted of no early exit? *Black Resettlement* is the first full survey of the nineteenth century's go-to answer to the so-called race question: the relocation of African Americans, usually outside though sometimes inside the United States, but always at a distance from their white compatriots. It is the history of proto-segregation, of a pre-*Plessy* impetus scaled up for a world that had seemed to offer plenty of space. Although you know what colonization was, you won't know all the destinations it encompassed, especially within the Americas. Since I've uncovered swaths of ultimately unsurprising separatist activity, my questions tonight are more historiographical than historical. Why did it take so long for someone to produce this study, when historians have contemplated the colonization movement since the dawn of the profession? Why, when Atlantic statesmen of the long nineteenth century tackled all manner of problems, real or presumed, by drawing lines on a map and telling people to move, do so many historians still dismiss *this* form of relocation as somehow anomalous? How could researchers claim to have exhausted a topic defined by international migration without touching foreign archives? And how could specialists in specific instances of colonization have made any absolute claims, when to understand one scheme must involve comparing it with its counterparts?

Historians usually discern a rise and fall to the colonization movement—by which they tend to mean the ACS and its west African colony, Liberia—or rather, two cycles of rise and fall: the formation of the society in the 1810s and 1820s, its stagnation in the 1830s and early 1840s, its rejuvenation from the late 1840s to the early 1860s, and its diminution

after 1863. My book shows that white policymakers' drive to duck biracialism was in fact continuous and that when one separatist project rose and fell, it was because others, many in hitherto unknown places, were falling and rising.

In part, I've reconstructed that master narrative by harnessing several bodies of scholarship, each with its own, navel-gazing debates. Professional balkanization does much to explain how historians lost sight of the overarching phenomenon of black resettlement. To that I would add an overreliance on US-based primary sources that downplayed foreign locations other than Liberia, Canada, and Haiti, as well as an undue deference to historical actors' claims that their own projects had nothing to do with *colonization*, a word tainted by its association with the ACS. But the weakest link has been the field of Civil War studies. From the 1960s to the 2000s, original research on wartime colonization, the zenith of the drive for black expatriation, stopped dead. Why?

When I started writing this address, I was clear that I should *not* focus on Abraham Lincoln. The movement for black resettlement spanned a sea of people and places, I told myself, so I should talk about some obscure figure instead: Lewis Putnam, perhaps, the black New Yorker whose tireless lobbying of politicians for his Liberia Emigration and Agricultural Association drove James McCune Smith to the most cutting abuse. Or Francisco Párraga, the Colombian diplomat who craved US recognition in his country's own civil war—the near-forgotten context of the infamous Chiriquí scheme—but who couldn't bring himself to approve unchecked African American immigration to the Panamanian isthmus. Or Nathaniel Pollard, an engineer who visited this city to recruit laborers for the cane fields of Trinidad before himself emigrating to Australia. And so, inevitably, I'm going to focus on Abraham Lincoln, whose support for colonization has been a flashpoint in the brouhaha over the 1619 Project.

My own response to the project is both honest and evasive: I haven't read it, because I don't get the *New York Times*. Still, I have caught the Twittersphere's chatter on colonization. The web has intensified a tendency long present in the literature: that commentators treat Lincoln as a proxy for the evolution of US race relations, a man-sized microcosm of the "freedom narrative," the whiggish trajectory whereby politicians, prodded by biracial or multiracial alliances of activists, eventually extend emancipation and equality to all groups in American society.⁴ It's a compelling story. The idea of the United States as a bastion of the belief that all men are created equal appeals to both right and left. It echoes Bill Clinton's promise that there's nothing wrong with America that can't be cured by what's right with America. Even those historians averse to an overall

framework of American exceptionalism, laudatory or critical, may fall for a Lincolnian exceptionalism: the belief that the Civil War years, at least, were redemptive ones, removed from the shabby “Compromises” to either side, like a fine, firm formation of granite cutting across a century of sedimentary sludge. The long arc of the moral universe bending *toward* justice also allows for moments of regression, without acknowledging which it would lose all credibility, though whether such junctures *were* moments is doubtful when black men are still being killed for being black men.

Above all, the freedom narrative’s strength is that it *is* a narrative. Until recently, nobody had offered an alternative of comparable ambition. History can be hard to digest without a chronological structure, which is why the freedom narrative dominates popular writing more than it does academic writing. Noting this difference, I must confess to a most unkind thought: what if some of the biggest names in Civil War history *are* the biggest names because, no matter how sincere they are, they also tell the public what it wants to hear? But I doubt that any historian would recognize himself as a purveyor of the freedom narrative. We’re all happier pigeonholing others than being pigeonholed ourselves, and the freedom narrative has been so hegemonic that its proponents may forget that it is an interpretation, and not a matter of fact.

Yet other narratives of American race relations are possible. Narratives that don’t get trapped in culture-war binaries of 1619 versus 1776, or accounts of relentless racism versus those of latent egalitarianism. Narratives that don’t wrench the United States from a wider continent also steeped in revolutionary ideology, ethnic diversity, and slavery and its legacy. And narratives that don’t vindicate the civil rights movement by stressing its antecedents, an exercise in narrow validation that can backfire when research such as mine delivers a reality check. After all, a past cannot be “usable” if it’s wrong. I propose a new narrative—one of many that might be written—of politicians trying to manage race relations by engaging with migration, slave and free; domestic and international; actual and anticipated; and, for that matter, Euro-American, Native American, and Chinese American as well as African American. In *Black Resettlement*, that story of migratory panaceas is one of policymakers winnowing their options until they decided they could keep black and white Americans separate without a colonization program.

But, to return from a continental scale to the precincts of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, what about that man so tall as to act as a lightning rod for all our angst about race? One fascinating facet of the creed that Lincoln abandoned colonization is that nobody believes it. We always hear about how the president stopped referring to colonization in public or promoted

alternatives in black enlistment and enfranchisement or treated African Americans respectfully (which he always had), and so on. This is artful dodging. This is history as it should have been—which is not history. The implication is that Abraham Lincoln never gave up his only developed vision of America's racial future and that that limited his imagination. For at the heart of colonization was not racism, exactly, but resignation to the persistence of prejudice. Colonization was a prophecy—and prophecies often prove self-fulfilling. When white Americans put more thought into racial separation, they put less into integration. And would-be apologists might consider whether, when Lincoln and others recurred to underfunded, undersubscribed, and underwhelming resettlement projects, those facts *increase* colonization's significance. I would also dissuade them from the excuse of the Helpful Friend, who oh so helpfully informed African Americans that other whites—always *other* whites!—would be so prejudiced that the only solution was for black people to leave a country their forebears had peopled long before most whites' ancestors.

I spent years researching this book, but I didn't do it alone. I'd like to thank Phil Magness, Nick Guyatt, Bev Tomek, and Richard Blackett for our invaluable conversations. I'd also like to thank Michael Douma, Anders Bo Rasmussen, Maria Clara Sampaio, Claire Bourhis-Mariotti, and Céline Flory for their contributions to an edited collection on Civil War-era resettlement. That the collection failed for want of funding makes me thank them even more. Anyone who wished to take that baton would be welcome to the material I've amassed. But I'd also like to acknowledge several scholars I've never even contacted, who've pushed the boundaries of this topic more in the past five years than in the previous fifty: Ikuko Asaka, Martha Jones, Brandon Mills, Alice Baumgartner, Elena Abbott, Damian Pargas, and Samantha Seeley.⁵ Although I grit my teeth to have just missed out on their books in most cases, I take heart wherever they've said what I'd have said. Of course, we've been molded by the same influences, but I was delighted by those moments, when, quite independently, we had uncovered the same sources—with the help of archivists, past and present—and drawn the same conclusions. It's a reassuring rejoinder to the assumption that History is just about taking new angles on old facts. But to make such discoveries, you must be willing to look.

I've said that it is a night of firsts for the Tom Watson Brown Book Award. And here's another: I am the first recipient to announce my retirement from the field of US history. How could I ever top this moment? If I've spoken candidly, it's because this is already a farewell address. Retirement may prove a mirage. My door will always be open to research inquiries and requests for dust-jacket endorsements, especially for the survey that

supersedes my own. Whoever the author of that work may be, they should know that quality is effort is time—and that *some* good things come to those who wait.

Thank you, and good night.

NOTES

1. I described my experiences in an anonymous article, “Connecticut Yankees in King Arthur’s Court: Why Americans Have an Edge in the UK,” *Times Higher Education*, September 8, 2016, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/the-american-studies-melting-pot>. With six years’ hindsight, I regret encouraging would-be doctoral students to choose US degrees over European ones, when I should have joined the many commentators advising them to avoid graduate study altogether unless they are prepared to incur enormous opportunity costs.

2. Phillip W. Magness and Sebastian N. Page, *Colonization after Emancipation: Lincoln and the Movement for Black Resettlement* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011).

3. Joel H. Silbey, *A Respectable Minority: The Democratic Party in the Civil War Era, 1860–1868* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977).

4. Carole Emberton, “Unwriting the Freedom Narrative: A Review Essay,” *Journal of Southern History* 82, no. 2 (May 2016): 377–94.

5. Ikuko Asaka, *Tropical Freedom: Climate, Settler Colonialism, and Black Exclusion in the Age of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Brandon Mills, *The World Colonization Made: The Racial Geography of Early American Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Alice L. Baumgartner, *South to Freedom: Runaway Slaves to Mexico and the Road to the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 2020); Elena K. Abbott, *Beacons of Liberty: International Free Soil and the Fight for Racial Justice in Antebellum America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Damian Alan Pargas, *Freedom Seekers: Fugitive Slaves in North America, 1800–1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Samantha Seeley, *Race, Removal, and the Right to Remain: Migration and the Making of the United States* (Williamsburg, VA: Omohundro Institute, 2021).