

The Uses of Melodrama: George S. Schuyler and the Liberian Labor Crisis

Jeffrey B. Ferguson  
Amherst College

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In January, 1931 as George Schuyler steamed toward Liberia to study labor conditions in the troubled black Republic, his raucous and controversial satire Black No More appeared to the loud cheers of W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Countee Cullen, Walter White, Carl Van Vechten and many other regulars of the Harlem Renaissance. The first full length satire written by a black American and an important landmark of the period, Black No More relates the events following the invention of a three-day treatment--involving "electric nutrition" and "glandular control"--that transforms blacks into "one-hundred percent Americans." Despite the ardent opposition of the Democratic Party, black political leadership, and a Ku Klux Klan spin-off called the Knights of Nordica, the treatment succeeds overwhelmingly, thus defeating the power of whiteness by turning everyone white. The sheer charm of this plot, along with its evenhandedness in poking fun at both sides of the color line, brought cheers from the critics mentioned above, but an equally loud chorus of jeers came from Rudolph Fisher, P. L. Prattis, H. L. Mencken, and Dorothy Van Doren, who judged Schuyler's send-up of American race relations as alternately crude, disrespectful, vicious, and envious of black leadership. Schuyler could not have hoped for more. Of all literary modes, satire appears weakest in the midst of praise and strongest as the object of denouncement. To his credit, Schuyler had inspired a little of both, just enough acclaim to confirm Black No More's capacity to tickle and just enough censure to establish its ability to cut.

Rather than sure agreement, Schuyler always aimed for such responses. Throughout the 1920s, in the satirical column "Shafts and Darts," in his weekly Pittsburgh Courier column "Views and Reviews," and in many essays appearing in such journals as the Nation and the American Mercury, he used the tools of the satirist to prod and provoke his audience into a many-sided consideration of the race question, especially regarding its most absurd manifestations. In this effort, Schuyler took aim at many targets. He attacked the white pretense to racial purity, myths of white intelligence, black racism and the black "inferiority complex" in upholding an ideal of interracial unity and democratic possibility. Just as he held fast to the somewhat paradoxical and anti-sentimental idea of interracial harmony through rhetorical violence, he promoted both black pride and amalgamation, race loyalty and "passing" for white, tactical racialism and strategic anti-racism. As a dogged defender of the right to play sexually, socially, and rhetorically on both sides of the color line, he opposed in substance and style the tendency of the American race discourse to fall into the melodramatic logic of victims and villains, purity and danger, heroes and cowards, loyalists and traitors.

Yet, in facing the question of Liberian slavery--and along with it the almost farcical circumstance of former slaves becoming masters on the symbolic ground of freedom--Schuyler appears to reverse field. Here at the very moment when an ironic voice might seem most appropriate for portraying the strange relationship between collective trauma, progress, denial, and obsessive return at the center of the African American romance with Africa, the satirist of the Pittsburgh Courier trades heavily and unabashedly in the currency of melodrama. Viewing this turn on the surface, we might posit, somewhat dramatically, an internal doubleness or two-ness in Schuyler, broadly

along the lines of Du Bois's famous statement in The Souls of Black Folk. Yet, however attractive as a way of capturing the indeterminacy at the center of Schuyler's view, such an approach would tend to obscure the more pragmatic dimensions of the author's choice, which represented an attempt to resist the vortex of melodrama around the question of Liberia, and around the race question in general, by entering it rather than adopting the safe distance of satire.

We might say this in another way. In the 1920s, George Schuyler employed satire to make trouble for anyone who attempted to reduce the race question to the simple binary of black and white. In the 1930s, and starting with his second novel Slaves Today, which appeared only eleven months after Black No More, he used melodrama to do the same. For a muckraking iconoclast interested both in controversy and in resisting the high voltage currency of race melodrama, the Liberian Labor Crisis provided the perfect stage with all of the essential elements present: Long-standing black hopes and dreams of racial destiny, intra-racial class conflict, white imperialism, black imperialism, the clash of the primitive and the modern, the mixture of American and world politics, and the sensational accusation of brothers selling brothers into slavery.

In 1930, at the behest of the Liberian government, a League of Nations commission consisting of the black American sociologist Charles S. Johnson, the British explorer Cuthbert Christy, and the former President of Liberia, Arthur Barclay conducted an investigation of labor conditions that confirmed the existence of slavery and widespread forced labor in the black Republic. Most notably, the report confirmed the forcible selling of indigenous tribesmen to the Spanish on island of Fernando Po for two-

year terms of service. This trade, which started in 1914, when the Liberian government signed an agreement with the Spanish to supply labor for the underpopulated and disease-ridden island, provided only the most notable instance of widespread corruption in the relations between the fifteen thousand American descendants on the coast and the two million natives of the hinterland. In light of these findings, the commission made a series of recommendations, including the installment of a League of Nations representative to reform the government, greater African-American involvement in Liberian affairs, and the restoration of authority to tribal chiefs. While Christy and Johnson roundly criticized the Liberians, they conveniently and predictably avoided the demand end of the problem, namely the Spanish and the French. Eventually, the bad odor from the slavery scandal led to the resignation of President C. D. B. King, but the True Whig Party, which represented the Americo-Liberian ruling class, remained in power until 1980.

The Liberian government agreed to the League of Nations investigation mainly as a result of American pressure. When the rubber magnate Harvey Firestone signed an agreement with the Liberians for one million acres of land in 1926, the American relationship with the black Republic came under new scrutiny both at home and abroad. The agreement, which included a loan from Firestone to the Liberian government of five million dollars and a provision for the delivery of a steady labor supply, secured for the United States an alternative to the British and Dutch rubber monopoly. It also threatened to associate the United States with the shady labor procurement practices of the Liberian regime. While it could afford to condone the exploitation of own black citizens through a great range of inhumane labor practices, especially in the South, the American government could not afford to associate itself with such policies abroad.

Although it wanted to follow the general principle of protecting American business interests abroad, especially where the business in question benefited American national interests, it could not afford to violate the essentially isolationist principles that went along with the post-World War I pro-business posture of the Republican Party. Wasting too much time and money addressing the problems of an African nation would not sit well with many white Americans, most whom doubted black people's ability to govern themselves. All of this pointed toward the establishment of a neocolonial rather than a colonial relationship with Liberia, and a strategy of dissociation from the more discreditable actions of its ruling class. The pressure on Liberia to accept the League of Nations investigation, supposedly on humanitarian grounds, served this end well. It also helped that the commission found no fault with the labor practices of the Firestone plantation.

The Firestone deal with the Liberian government made American relations with the black Republic a recurrent news item throughout the late 1920s, especially in the black press. The League of Nations inquiry brought the attention level even higher, which convinced the publisher George Palmer Putnam that a muckraking book on the subject along with a series of newspaper articles would have strong commercial potential. His search for a good researcher and writer led him to George Schuyler, who immediately agreed to take the job. Schuyler's series of articles, entitled "Slavery in Liberia," appeared in the New York Evening Post in June and July of 1931, and later in the Buffalo Express, the Philadelphia Public Ledger, the Washington Post, and the Pittsburgh Courier. Painting a highly unflattering portrait of the Americo-Liberian ruling class, the series concentrated most of its attention on the unabashed exploitation of

indigenous peoples through slavery, forced labor, and concubinage. In one article, Schuyler responded to the many different types and levels of exploitation in Liberia by asking "When is a slave a not slave?"

This is one of the questions the visitor to Liberia begins asking himself not long after he arrives in the country....Landing at the dock at Monrovia, pushing through the cluster of nondescript natives and officials, wending one's way through the weeds, rocks, and rubbish that clutter the streets and past the grotesque residences...there are no slave blocks to be observed. True there has been and may still be the traffic in "boys" to Fernando Poo, though weighty minds have hastened to declare it not to be slavery in the "classic" sense.

But who are these ragged little children carrying school books for well-dressed little Americo-Liberians? Who are these servants clad in discarded odds and ends of clothing who march behind aristocratic Liberians carrying purchases, a task that the latter would not dream of performing? Who are these equally ill-clad house servants who have been trained to reply "Yassah, massa, I comin'" whenever called? Who are these women, many of them young and comely, that one sees around Liberian residences but who do not seem to be members of the family?

Schuyler answers that if these are not slaves, they are at best serfs.

In other installments of his six-part series, Schuyler continues to press the case against both the Americo-Liberians and against Christian missionaries, whom he excoriates for saying little to nothing about human rights abuses. Yet, despite the ill-temper he shows toward almost everyone holding power in the African Republic, he starts to sound like a State Department booster when he turns to the question of Harvey Firestone. Reporting on a visit to one of Firestone's plantations, Schuyler seems almost overcome with the contrast it makes with the corruption and squalor that he finds almost everywhere else in Liberia. "To motor into the largest of the three Firestone Plantations is to enter a totally different world, a picture of what this beautiful country might be under intelligent control. In just eight years a model development has been carved out of what was almost impenetrable jungle. The miles of roads running in all directions well

crowned drained and bridged could hardly be improved and workers, clerks and superintendent are well housed. . . . It is indeed a little American colony in the heart of wild Africa."

In essence, this "little American colony" provided Schuyler with a viable rationale for displacing the Liberian ruling class. Holding out little hope that Liberia could reform from within, he regarded a benign American presence as the only hope for providing the African natives with skills and ultimately with political leverage. Although he doubted that Liberia could remain sovereign under this arrangement, he saw no reason to regard oppression at the hands of blacks as somehow better than the same at the hands of whites, especially when the latter came with a paycheck. In a 1926 editorial on the question of the Firestone loan to the Liberian government, he made this point with his characteristic nasty twist: "The little country on the West coast of Africa now has the big rubber interests of the United States behind her and the half-starved-populace and comic opera officials are at last assured of a regular supply of food and clothes. True, Liberia may lose her sovereignty, but she will gain good roads, decent housing, supremacy over the jungle, better health conditions and a regular supply of pork chops, hog maws or whatever it is that they prefer in Liberia." In another editorial a few months later, he makes the same observation even more pointedly: "When big corporations come in with a strong government behind them, liberty usually goes out the door. Doubtless it was a question with the Liberian government whether liberty and poverty were preferable to riches and dependence. Having had sufficient experience with the former, they have taken the step which will doubtless lead to the latter. For one, I don't blame them. At best, liberty is an illusion."

Schuyler's novel Slaves Today (1931) gives this message a fictional form. It tells the sad tale of Zo, a member of the Gola tribe, and his bride Pameta, the daughter of Bongomo, village chief of Takama. The day after the marriage celebration of Zo and Pameta, the sadistic David Jackson, the Americo-Liberian Commissioner of District One, descends on Takama with a detachment of the Frontier Force demanding larger payments of rice and palm oil from the defenseless Gola village. Having exhausted all spare supplies in the celebration, Bongomo asks "massa" Jackson to wait a short while for the village to comply. Impatient, suspicious, and eager to teach a lesson, Jackson orders the flogging of Bongomo in full view of the chief's puzzled and shocked followers. Stripped of his dignity, the bloody chief makes a suicide leap at the District Commissioner's throat. The ensuing volley of the Liberian soldiers kills him along with several of his angry followers.

Later, as Zo hides from the troops, Jackson's trusty servant, the servile and devious Bassa man, Joe captures the beautiful Pameta for use as his master's concubine. After Jackson departs, the witch doctor Tolo uses his magic to send a spiritually possessed little boy around the village to find the one responsible for the horrible events. The boy fingers Zo, who "confesses" to the crime of possession by an evil spirit, which presumably caused his desire for Pameta. No longer able to remain in Takama, Zo departs in pursuit of his bride, and moral redemption. Predictably, he finds Pameta, but fails to evade discovery by David Jackson's soldiers, who capture him a split-second before his escape. Along with Jackson's other prisoners, Zo is marched to Monrovia, sold to the Spanish, and shipped to the disease-ridden island of Fernando Po, where he receives an alternately rough and sweet introduction to modernity, one that climaxes, so



to speak, in the bed of a seductive Spanish prostitute. After serving his two-year term with the Spanish, Zo returns to the toxic atmosphere of Liberia, where he eventually finds his wife lying in the jungle discarded and riddled with venereal disease contracted from the evil Jackson. As she dies in his arms, Zo vows revenge. After sneaking into Jackson's compound and cutting the villain's throat, he is shot in the head by a guard as he hacks away at the dead man's body.

Like most melodramas, Slaves Today employs undivided character types--the innocent native boy, the evil government official, the beautiful debauched damsel, the prostitute with the heart of gold--dramatic turnabout, stark opposition, and a blunt moral closure to achieve its end. Still, Schuyler's ironic point of view remains essential to its formula. This becomes almost immediately apparent upon consideration of Zo's captivity on Fernando Po, which represents both the low and high point of his life. As a forced laborer for the Spanish, he suffers degradation but he also gains in knowledge and skill, something that the crude and greedy Liberian ruling class, in slavish imitation of its white American model, would always deny him. Using a technique he employed in Black No More, but for the opposite end, Schuyler caricatures almost every important Liberian government official in Slaves Today in simplified portraits intended to encourage easy self-righteous moral closure. Portraits of the devious President Sidney Cooper Johnson (Edwin Barklay), the insidious Vice President Samuel Williams (Arthur Barclay), the merciless Commissioner of District One, David Jackson (Samuel Ross) and the angelic reformer John Thomas (Thomas Faulkner) all reinforce this basic effect. In his short forward to the novel, Schuyler reassures the reader that even his native African characters like Zo, Pameta, Chief Bongomo, Soki, and Big Georgie "answer to those names in

Liberia today." He also claims to know personally almost all of the Americo-Liberians who appear under fictional names in the novel. Such framing grants Slaves Today all of the urgency of "reality," even as it infuses supposedly real characters and events with simplest kind of fictional significance. Yet, in relation to the broader debate on Liberia, and on Africa in general, this kind of simplification, serves a complicating purpose. By villifying the Americo-Liberian ruling class so starkly, and by bringing various ethnic groups and nations into view, it resists the common tendency to view Africa only in terms of race. In this way, Slaves Today seeks the same fundamental end as Black No More.

The Liberian Labor Crisis maintains its fascination for current students of the race question both for its role in the establishment of an early version of neo-colonialism and for how neatly and uniquely it pitted slavery against race loyalty. In choosing to denounce Liberian slavery in the most full-throated terms, Schuyler realized that he had also thumbed his nose at an important diasporic dream, one that for some held an almost mythic import. In the years after World War I, the rhetoric of self-determination; the concentration of Caribbean, African, and African-American intellectuals in major western capitols such as New York, Paris and London; and the general expectation of a "decline of the West" combined with many other factors to provide a new impetus for anti-colonialism. In the United States, the rise of the black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey and the arrival of the Harlem Renaissance contributed to a greater interest in Africa both as a symbol of spiritual essence and as a political focus for the black diaspora. As the only independent modern African nation, Liberia took on special significance within this general way of thinking.

Established originally in 1822 by the American Colonization Society for reasons at once unsavory, self-serving, and benevolent, Liberia declared itself a sovereign nation in 1847. During these years, it inspired more derision than ridicule among African American political leaders due mainly to racist intentions of its white founders. By the 1850s, amid a rise in black nationalism caused by the Fugitive Slave Act, the Dred Scot Case, and other racist provocations, it became more common to view Liberia as a beacon of hope. Still, even in this period, emigrationists like Martin Delaney--who rejected the ideal of African redemption embraced by many black nationalists, but insisted vehemently on black ownership and control--roundly denounced the young black Republic as "a poor miserable mockery--a burlesque on a government--a pitiful dependency." Yet others, like Rev. Daniel H. Peterson, who published a narrative of his travel experiences in 1855, regarded Liberia with a mixture of religious zeal and pragmatism that brought together ideas of a "Promised Land" with the hope of economic opportunity. In the following passage, he urges his black brethren to embrace both sides of his vision.

I say the truth, that if the colored people neglect to embrace or refuse this noble opportunity now offered to them, and let it fall and come to nothing, they will never rise above their present condition. They will be doomed to slavery forever. But I have a better opinion of my colored brethren in the United States. I trust that all of them will see and know that it is upon this noble enterprise of settling Liberia that the salvation of the whole colored population depends. It depends upon our own actions and efforts to do our duty, and to secure our rights and liberties in Monrovia, Liberia--a land that has been kept and preserved for us for thousands of years and now the time is fulfilled. . . Let everyone join in this noble work, and all the sons of Africa will soon be free, and religion and civilization will spread over that great quarter of the earth, to the glory and honor of the blessed Son. . . . [Liberia] may be the means of civilizing the whole world of mankind and also fulfilling the Scriptures of Truth, which say that the Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached unto all the world for a witness, and then shall the end come.

This statement, which construes Liberia as a key part in God's plan to Christianize and civilize mankind, provides one good example of the well-meaning imperialism of many early immigrants. The heavy emphasis on conversion in Reverend Peterson's appeal to black Americans carried with it assumptions of moral superiority rooted in a sense of transcendent mission vaguely reminiscent of seventeenth century Puritan ideas that cast Native Americans in binary terms as either convertible or evil.

Reverend Peterson's statement finds many twentieth century analogs. Of these none articulates better the continuing appeal of the ideals he held dear than the statement on Liberia at the end of W. E. B. Du Bois's essay, "The Negro Mind Reaches Out," which appeared as the final selection in Alain Locke's collection The New Negro (1925).

And now we stand before Liberia; Liberia that is a little thing set upon a Hill;--thirty or forty thousand square miles and two million folk; but it represents to me the world. Here political power has tried to resist the power of modern capital. It has not yet succeeded, but its partial failure is not because the republic is black, but because the world has failed in this same battle; because organized industry owns and rules England, France, Germany, America and Heaven. And can Liberia escape the power that rules the world? I do not know; but I do know unless the world escapes, the world as well as Liberia will die; and if Liberia lives it will be because the world is reborn as in that vision splendid of 1918.

And thus again in 1924 as in 1899 I seem to see the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the Problem of the Color Line.

Here Du Bois self-consciously associates Liberia with the utopian image of a "City on a Hill" to point out the dual role of the Black Republic in imitating and in providing an alternative to American dreams and realities. Like Reverend Peterson, Du Bois connects the Liberian mission to the highest ideals that he can imagine: to the transcendence of greed, war, and colonialism. Also, like Reverend Peterson, he commits himself to a "civilizing" project rooted heavily in converting and dominating the native population.

Not long after his 1924 trip to Liberia, where he represented President Calvin Coolidge as "envoy extraordinary" and "minister plenipotentiary" on the occasion of President C. D. B. King's inauguration, Du Bois stated that the Liberian government had to take a "high hand" with the indigenes in order to assure them that "it really was a government." Otherwise, he said, "the tribal chiefs would take matters into their own hands" This view stemmed directly from a deeply ingrained western bias, one which led Du Bois to judge just after World War I that the principle of self-determination "cannot be wholly applied to semi-civilized peoples." Yet Du Bois wanted to keep racist whites from applying this rule to all blacks. A modern independent African nation like Liberia provided an important argument from example that blacks could and should govern themselves. Also, within Du Bois's conception of Pan Africanism, Liberia served as an important symbol of pride and racial identity that pointed the way toward a future when blacks could share fully their hard won racial "gifts" with the rest of humanity.

True to the dictates of his idealism concerning Liberia, Du Bois despised everything that George Schuyler wrote about it, and his review of Slaves Today wasted little time pointing this out. In reviewing several books he placed Slaves Today last, he said, "because we like it least. And frankly, we are sorry that George Schuyler wrote it." Congratulating Schuyler for his willingness to "stand up against surrounding convention" in his past writings, Du Bois wondered whether Schuyler knew enough to pronounce on Liberia as boldly as he did. Blaming the problem of Liberian slavery mainly on the surrounding atmospherics of imperialism, Du Bois, sounding very much like a lawyer for the defense, lectured his audience on the relevant mitigating facts. Hemmed in on all sides "only as a small, helpless group of internationally despised people can be" and

possessing little capital to develop natural resources, Du Bois reasoned that "there was only one thing that Liberia had left, and that was her native labor. . . . She was guilty, but not nearly as guilty as Spain, Belgium, France, and England. And to picture Liberia as a land of slaves, and say nothing about her background and surroundings, is both unfortunate and untrue."

Schuyler responded to Du Bois's review with a pointed personal letter. Sensing the advantage, he attacked directly Du Bois's quick willingness to discount Americo-Liberian agency. Chiding the Crisis editor for allowing his "belligerent and commendable Negrophilism" to warp his vision in the case of the "rascally" Liberian ruling class, Schuyler cautioned him to distinguish between true victims of injustice and proven rogues. Challenging Du Bois's contention that the Liberians had no other economic choice than to sell native labor, he contended that an intelligent system of roads and a small bit of industry would have allowed the Liberians to trade with the British, the Dutch, and the French--all of whom had trading posts in Liberia--for manufactured goods. Having made this economic point, Schuyler turned to Du Bois's moral case: "You argue like most Negroes here, that the Liberians are not to be strongly censured for exploiting and murdering their native wards because white colonial powers do the same thing. In other words, that the one is no worse than the other. But are we not to expect that Negro colonists who are so excessively religious and about "The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here" will be more humane to their black native wards than would white colonists? Especially so when these black rulers boast of their race patriotism?"

Schuyler's argument against Du Bois, which made an uncompromising case against slavery wherever it occurred, would serve equally well against most of the anti-

colonialists and black nationalists who sought to close issue with him, almost all of whom blamed the Liberian problem on the larger problem of imperialism. In a personal letter to Schuyler, the Trinidadian Communist George Padmore, who would soon abandon Communism for Pan Africanism, advanced this position from the left of Du Bois. Because of this, he granted Schuyler more credit for viewing the Americo-Liberians in class terms, even as he genially wagged his finger at the satirist for bad judgment in blaming them too heavily for the problems they faced: "I am afraid, Schuyler, that you see Liberia as an entity in itself and therefore throw all the blame of the unfortunate country on a handful of political racketeers in Monrovia. You have not attacked these people more than I have done. But when all is said and done, --Liberia and her little autocrats are merely one of the pawns in the big game of world imperialism." Reminding Schuyler that "the whole history of that country has been the object of aggression,--sometimes by Britain, at other times France, at some time Germany, and today America" and admitting that the Liberian ruling class could have avoided "the present complications" if it had been more broad-minded and concerned with the masses, Padmore teases Schuyler for his idealism and for applying higher standards to the oppressed than he does to the oppressors. Why, Padmore asks, would Schuyler ask so much of the Liberians, taking everything about their situation into account?

In a letter to the editor of the Garveyite publication The Negro World, Benjamin Azikiwe, future prime minister of Nigeria and author of Liberia in World Politics (1934) puts the same question even more sharply than Padmore by pointing to other governments involved in practices very close to those of Liberia. He asks: "Is Alabama not preparing to "pawn" eight boys in the electric chair? . . . Who is ignorant of forced

labor and peonage in dear old Georgia? . . . Has slavery stopped in the Portuguese colonies? in the Congo? in Abyssinia? Has forced labor been mitigated in the French colonies? in the British colonies? in the Spanish and Italian possessions?" Following this barrage of questions, he wonders why the international community should ask more of Liberia than it asks of itself and why it would focus its condemnation so exclusively on the only black republic? Finally focusing on Schuyler, he wonders why a black person would offer so enthusiastically to aid this process. Why, Azikiwe asks, would he not go to "Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, or . . . Spain" rather than Liberia.

Azikiewe's respect for Schuyler as a satirist stopped him from directly accusing the journalist directly of willfully betraying his race, but the writers and editors of The Negro World, who published his letter, had no trouble stating this accusation in unvarnished terms. Resuscitating an old battle with Schuyler going back to the mid-1920s, several writers for the UNIA publication gladly followed their established habit of excoriating the Courier editor in a long series of editorials and letters. S. A. Haynes, the most active writer in this regard, appeared in several black newspapers accusing Schuyler of working for the Curtis syndicate and of aiding the United States in justifying its imperialist assault on the Black Republic.

As a rule, Schuyler responded to such charges with wry amusement, especially if they came from followers of Marcus Garvey. In a letter to the Baltimore Afro-American and in a short article in The Norfolk Journal and Guide, Schuyler offered with a chuckle that the United States had no designs on Liberia because "the world is already glutted with palm oil, tobacco, rice, rubber and kola nuts." Yet, on the moral issues, he responded with even more vehemence than in his letter to Du Bois: "I am frank in saying



that I would rather see the fifteen or twenty thousand Americo-Liberians wiped off of the map than to observe a continuance of their ignorant exploitation of the two million natives. I am in favor of the masses at all times as against the bosses. . . . Negroes like Haynes whose principles cannot hurdle the color line and who is incapable of seeing anything except through black spectacles are an obstacle in the path of Negro progress."

Schuyler's sheer pugnacity in the face of the Garveyites came out even more when he visited the Native African Union in Harlem. Before an audience of two hundred dominated by African immigrants and Garveyites, Schuyler had the unenviable task of answering three angry speakers who had poured every ounce of gasoline they could find on the smoldering resentment of the crowd by denouncing his position on Liberia as the act of a race traitor. Undaunted, Schuyler responded with gasoline of his own: "Feelings of this sort make no difference to me," he said, "I have addressed audiences of klansmen, and I must say that they were not very different [from] this one. . . . Your dubious justification of evils of that country by saying that slavery still exists in the Southern States of this country, that a dead dog was allowed to remain on the streets of Harlem for three days, and that Tammany Hall is a crooked political organization, are as silly and inconsequential as your impassioned attitude here this afternoon. Countries, like individuals, must answer for their own crimes. What court would free Jack (Legs) Diamond for selling beer upstate merely because he pointed out that Al Capone sells it in Chicago?" At the beginning of the question period, which did not go beyond one question, a follower of Marcus Garvey asked Schuyler whether he approved of the UNIA effort in the early 1920s to start a colony in Liberia. By this point having established a full head of steam, Schuyler answered that he "did not then and do not now approve of

the loud mouthed, ignorant, inefficient manner in which Garvey went about the [Liberian] business. . . . If Negroes are to develop Africa they will have to indulge in less wild talk and wilder mass meetings and go about the business in a business like way as do the white men they criticize. Africa can only be developed by brains plus capital." When Schuyler's questioner accused the editor of ignoring the question, Schuyler retorted that the man did not understand plain English. . . perhaps the worst possible comment to make in a room full of immigrants. When several incensed audience members rose from their seats, the chairman quickly called the festivities to a close.

While it by no means typifies the broader African American response to Schuyler's position on Liberia, the events at the Native African Union do provide a good index of the stakes for those most concerned with the fate of Africa. In writing his series of articles and his novel Slaves Today, Schuyler had crossed a symbolic line. He had taken a position against the sovereignty of the only modern black republic, aired dirty black laundry in white newspapers, and refused to move one inch from his ground even in the face of his most offended brothers. Nevertheless, it remains important to ponder the begrudging respect that made the crowd at the Native African Union tolerate him as long as it did. While Schuyler had indeed crossed the line, his position had an undeniably solid basis in concern for the most humble blacks. Also, he showed a tremendous fighting spirit and dedication to maintaining a vigorous discourse among blacks on important issues. All of this inspired respect. It also did not hurt that, for the most part, the Garveyites agreed with him, on the facts of the Liberian case.

During the early 1920s, Garvey sent four delegations to Liberia to make plans for a UNIA colony. Unlike Du Bois's idea of Pan Africanism, Garvey's conception required

actual settlement in Africa, with the hope of expansion into a full-fledged African empire. Also, unlike Du Bois, Garvey had no interest in sugar-coating Americo-Liberian exploitation of native Africans. The class structure of Liberia deeply offended him and many of his followers. A letter to Garvey, written by Elie Garcia, leader of the 1921 UNIA expedition to Liberia, could not have expressed this disdain better if it had been written by Schuyler himself:

[In Liberia] there are at this present time two classes of people: the Americo-Liberians also called "sons of the soil" and the natives. The first class, although the educated one, constitutes the most despicable element in Liberia. Because of their very education, they are self-conceited and believe that the only honorable way for them to make a living is by having a "Government job." The men of this class having places, are used to a life, which the salaries paid by the Government do not suffice to maintain. Therefore dishonesty is prevalent. . . . Another important fact is the attitude of the Americo-Liberian towards enlightening the native tribes. . . . As it is, the Americo-Liberians are using the natives as slaves, and human chattel slavery still exists there. . . . They buy men or women to serve them, and the least little insignificant Americo-Liberian has half a dozen boys at his service.

This kind of criticism, combined with the disfavor the UNIA held with the British and other European powers for its anti-imperialism made Garvey a dangerous ally for the Americo-Liberian ruling class. Adding to this danger, Garvey's own imperialistic designs on Africa implied the displacement of any group that dared to stand in his way. Also, his undifferentiated racial redemptionist approach to the question of Africa did not bode well for the development of a more complex, measured, and less presumptuous analysis of the Liberian scene. A statement in the Liberian News upon the deportation of a group of UNIA representatives in 1924 gives a good account of what many elite Americo-Liberians came to think of Garvey as their relationship with him declined from half-hearted tolerance to disdain.

It is recognized that the future of Liberia is dependent upon amicable cooperation with all the forces which are at work for the uplift of the *African peoples*. This is a fundamental idea underlying Liberian national thought. Primarily, however, the practical aspects of Negro development and emancipation are limited in Liberia to making Liberia. . . . And so it is unthinkable to a Liberian, influenced as he must be by the facts of his national environment and traditions, when he comes to realize their potentialities for national evil, that Liberian can be used as the point *d'appui*, whence the grandiose schemes of the "Negro Moses" may find their genesis.

As Ibrahim Sundiata shows in Brothers and Strangers, on the way to a comprehensive account of the clash between diasporic dreams and Liberian realities, the Americo-Liberian ruling class found itself in a game of survival much more complex than anything that the idealistic schemes of men like Garvey, Du Bois, or even Schuyler could take into account. Caught between the United States, the Spanish, the French, the British, black American and West Indian nationalists, two million natives of various tribes and nations, and highly unreliable economic prospects, it had to maintain a delicate political balance just to remain viable. At times, this instability could give rise to intrinsically engaging events and personalities, ones whose value transcended the narrow calculus of right and wrong. The Liberian president C. D. B. King, whose tricksterish approach to political survival proves both representative and extraordinary, provides one very good example of this point. A master of diplomatic indirection, he could rival Booker T. Washington in his willingness and ability to find the correct word-lubricant for every situation:

To an American in Liberia, he could say that America was traditionally Liberia's best friend. To the Firestone people, he could say. . . "Liberia must have something. . . . Why cannot Liberia be the greatest rubber-producing country in the world?" To the British. . . "The one thing that has struck me about England is its extraordinary sense of justice." To his colonial neighbors who feared a general awakening of Africa's blacks: I am working for the Liberian nation and not for the Black race. . . ." To Blacks: "God must have had plans for a people who could survive so long in Africa and when uprooted and transplanted to America keep alive and

flourish. [To] Native chiefs upon whom he wanted to impress the need for cooperation. . . he used their own proverb: "One finger cannot remove a louse."

One could imagine George Schuyler in his guise as satirist of the race question finding such a rogue engaging rather than dismissible. Max Disher, Schuyler's main character in Black No More shows skills very similar to those of King when he discovers, after transforming himself into the white man Matthew Fisher, how well his street-level Harlem hustlerism could serve him in fleecing blacks and whites alike as Grand Exalted Giraw of the Knights of Nordica.

Even if one could imagine Schuyler--whose past accomplishment equipped him better than any other commenter on the Liberian Labor Crisis to break through the victim/race traitor dichotomy that dominated the controversy--turning this imagination toward the analysis of Liberian life and politics, it still remains hard to imagine how he could have written a successful satire on the subject. In prosecuting its distorting aim, satire assumes detailed knowledge on the part of its audience. Hardly anyone in Schuyler's audience possessed enough information about Liberia to recognize the relevant characters and historical situations whose twisting, stretching, and reduction would have provided the main occasions for satirical pleasure. Nor would his audience have been able to appreciate the many detailed and subtle cuts that might have balanced the broader and more obvious thrusts and stabs that such an effort would have entailed. Perhaps more important, even though the moral and political crisis surrounding the subject of Liberia in the late 1920s and early 1930s provided a prominent and attractive stage for discussing the problems of the Black Republic--and for questioning the entrenched racial assumptions that almost everyone brought to issues of Africa, slavery,

and modernization--the high stakes atmosphere surrounding the discussion of Liberian labor abuses encouraged retrenchment of the very notions that Schuyler wanted to question. In other words, the labor crisis shined a bright light on the perennial controversy surrounding Liberia but it also reduced the size of the discursive stage and the maneuverability of the actors. Of course, we should not forget that Schuyler also wanted to be popular, and more than this, he wanted to play a prominent role as a situated public intellectual, one who pronounced on important world issues from the special vantage point of his perch atop Sugar Hill in Harlem. He cared about this more than he did about satire, which provided one important stylistic vehicle for achieving his ends. Consistent with his larger commitment, on the question of Liberia, he chose to speak in the language that he thought his audience could best understand on the subject at hand, one rooted in victims, heroes, and strong moral convictions. In the process, he managed to question powerfully the adequacy of race as a framework for interpreting black history and destiny, thereby contributing greatly to the advancement of the discourse on race in his time even as he yielded to forces that he generally opposed.