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Autor: Mühlheim, Martin

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MARTIN MÜHLHEIM
(UNIVERSITY OF ZURICH)

“Black But Comely”: Settler-Colonial Identity,
African Whiteness, and Intertextuality
in James L. Sims’s Travel Narrative
“Scenes in the Interior of Liberia” (1858)

Constructing a coherent sense of communal identity was far from easy for early Americo-Liberian settlers. They felt the need (a) to distinguish themselves from a racist ‘white civilisation’ while nevertheless claiming to be among the ‘civilised’; (b) to set themselves apart from black Americans in the U.S. while remaining equally committed to anti-slavery and abolition; and (c) to emphasise their superiority over indigenous ‘heathens’ while at the same time staking their own claim to ‘true Africanness.’ From previous studies, we know a great deal about the material challenges of life on the shores of West Africa. But how did Americo-Liberians grapple with the ideological and psychological complexities of their contradictory position as black anti-slavery settler-colonists? This essay argues that mid-nineteenth-century narratives of exploration into the black republic’s hinterland are a particularly promising source for scholars interested in examining how Americo-Liberians sought to contain the conflicting push and pulls that threatened to unravel their attempts at self-definition. More specifically, the essay demonstrates that in one such travel narrative – J. L. Sims’s “Scenes in the Interior of Liberia” (1858) – intertextual references are not merely ornamental, but instead deployed strategically, in an attempt to stabilise the disconcerting volatility of Americo-Liberian settler identity.

Keywords: travel writing; intertextuality; settler-colonialism; Liberian literature; collective identity

Introduction: Negotiating Difference

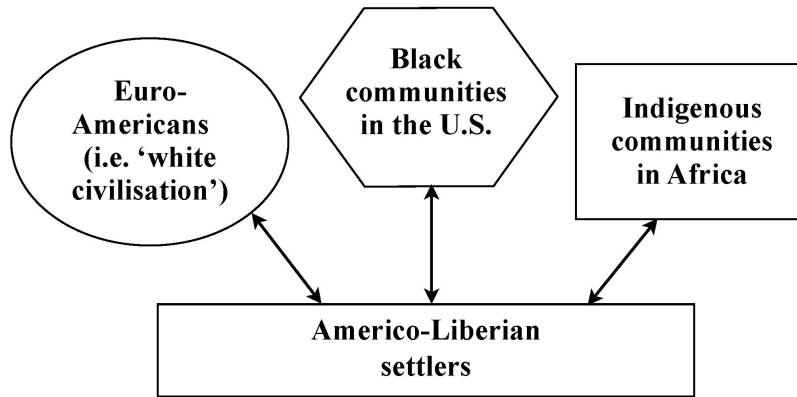


Figure 1: Three Vectors of Difference

Americo-Liberian settlers suffered from a sort of redoubled double consciousness because they had to negotiate their settler-colonial identity in relation to three different groups.

“[T]wo warring ideals in one dark body”: This is how, in 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois famously described the “double-consciousness” of black men and women in the United States, who – he posited – suffered continually under the burden “of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (364–365). And yet, maintaining a coherent sense of self was arguably even more complex a task for the small band of Americo-Liberian settlers who, in 1847, established an independent black republic on the shores of West Africa. Indeed, having recently been ‘repatriated’ to their African ‘homeland,’ these former inhabitants of the U.S. – some born free, others enslaved – could be said to have laboured under a sort of redoubled double-consciousness. This is to say, Americo-Liberian settlers saw themselves not only through their own eyes and through those of ‘white civilisation,’ but also through the disapproving looks of black Americans (who, for the most part, opposed African colonisation) as well as through the watchful gaze of the indigenous African communities that surrounded the newcomers’ coastal settlements (Figure 1). Much excellent scholarly work documents how the settlers dealt with the material challenges of life on the shores of West Africa: “the penury, isolation, hardship, and death that stymied early development” (Clegg 88). But how did Americo-Liberians grapple with the ideological and psychological complexities of their contradictory position as black anti-slavery settler-colonists? How did they attempt to cope with the “bitter internal division” that, increasingly, came to characterise the settler communities (Fairhead

et al. 18)? In short, how did they seek to contain the conflicting push and pulls that threatened to unravel any coherent attempt at self-definition?

The question of settler identity was explicitly negotiated in Liberian newspapers, poetry, and political declarations and oratory (see, for example, Lambert 5). In addition, David Kazanjian has shown that “the hundreds of letters written by formerly enslaved black settlers to their family, friends, and former masters in the United States” are a vital source for enhancing – and complicating – our understanding of Americo-Liberian identity (867). However, one of the most promising sources for addressing the question of settler-colonial identity are narratives of exploration into the black republic’s interior or hinterland (see Douglass-Chin, “Liberia as American Diaspora” 215). In such accounts, Americo-Liberian travellers recorded their direct encounters with indigenous groups, while at the same time addressing a literate audience of fellow settlers and, importantly, white as well as black readers across the Atlantic. This latter point is especially pertinent in the case of James L. Sims’s 1858 travel narrative “Scenes in the Interior of Liberia.”

Sims had emigrated to Liberia from Norfolk, Virginia, in 1851, and he composed his account at a time when the black emigration movement had been regaining traction in the U.S., due to the growing despair among black communities caused by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) and the Supreme Court’s infamous Dred Scott decision (1857; e.g. Ciment 102; Clegg 172–174; Mills 132). Accordingly, Sims not only engaged explicitly with the way he saw (and was in turn seen) by his ‘heathen black brethren’ and his fellow Americo-Liberians in West Africa; as a recent arrival in Liberia he would also have been keenly aware that his narrative would very likely make its way back to the United States, where it would be printed and circulated as part of the ongoing “Abolitionist Propaganda War” surrounding African colonisation (Everill 81; as noted in Fairhead et al. 49, Sims’s narrative was indeed soon published in “near-complete extracts” in the *Maryland Colonization Journal*, the *Philadelphia Colonization Herald*, and the *New-York Colonization Journal*). But how exactly did Sims address the conflicting demands and expectations of these diverse audiences, while at the same time maintaining a sufficiently coherent identity for himself and his Americo-Liberian compatriots?

In this essay, I will argue that one key literary strategy of ‘identity management’ in Sims’s travel narrative is his extensive use of a wide variety of intertextual references: religious, ethnographic, and poetic (for a complete list, see appendix). Far from merely ornamental, these inter-

textual references prove central to Sims’s self-fashioning project. Indeed, it is precisely through the strategic deployment of intertexts that Sims attempts to stabilise the disconcerting volatility of Americo-Liberian settler-colonial identity.

African Whiteness: Colonisation and Liberian Identity

To begin to untangle the threads of Americo-Liberian identity, we must examine the specific context of Sims’s journey into the Liberian hinterland, and in particular the state of relations between settlers and indigenous groups. Despite the fact that Liberia had recently become an independent republic, the settlers continued to lead “a precarious existence” in a “few scattered settlements along the coast,” and they were keenly aware that development depended, among other things, “on trade relations with the far interior” (Fairhead et al. 14, 28). However, to develop their direct trade with the interior, settlers had to engage with the indigenous groups in their immediate vicinity, in relation to whom the question of land acquisition had long been “a source of misunderstanding and conflict” (Sawyer 77). Indeed, the main competitors of the Americo-Liberian merchants in inland trade were the “well-established African chiefs” of their neighbouring communities (Sawyer 89), who were, understandably, keen to resist the settler’s attempts to avoid paying “‘transit’ duties” (Fairhead et al. 17). This, in turn, is one reason why “Liberians contrasted their problematic engagement with immediately neighboring populations – often imaged as hostile, disorganized, heathen, crude, and naked – with the images of civility, piety, and literacy of peoples in the far interior” (23); fantasies of fortune were projected onto the Africans inhabiting the more distant hinterland where, as the settlers recognised, any “meaningful and permanent administrative presence was [...] unfeasible” (Mark-Thiesen and Mihatsch 896), while the indigenous groups that lived closer to home tended to be portrayed as obdurate pagan obstacles to the forward march of Christian commerce. This attitude emerges in Sims’s narrative, too, when he claims that the morals of the indigenous groups in the interior were “far superior to those of the natives living near the beach, who have had intercourse with foreigners” (123). At the same time, Sims is keen to deflect racist claims about any inherent inferiority of black people in general, insisting that “there are white men in America and Europe who can do things with as much brutal apathy as the blackest and most woolly-headed Negro that ever sweltered beneath the burning rays

of an African sun” (123). The indigenous Africans are thus both fundamentally equal to all other human beings, yet also sadly in need of redemption and uplift through the civilising mission of Americo-Liberian settlers.

The settler-colonists’ identity was not, however, shaped solely through their ambivalent relations with indigenous neighbours; it also unfolded against the backdrop of the idea of African ‘repatriation,’ which had emerged long prior to the settlement on the West African coast from the 1820s onwards. Two driving forces provided the impetus among Euro-Americans for the idea of ‘repatriation’: the twin spectres of revolution and miscegenation. The former – slave revolt and revolution – was of course a constant worry in the slave-holding U.S. republic, and the presence of free blacks in particular posed a seemingly intractable challenge. The solution, for some, was displacement: sending these potentially unruly black subjects ‘back’ to Africa, their ancestral homeland. Indeed, as Lorenzo Veracini convincingly argues in *The World Turned Inside Out*, proponents of settler colonialism more generally have consistently regarded it as an “an *alternative* to revolution” – irrespective of whether they found “revolution likely and yet abhorrent” or “desirable but impossible” (8). Commenting specifically on the case of Liberia, Veracini notes that white Americans evidently belonged to the former group, regarding black emigration as a way to neutralise the threat of revolutionary violence, while the future settlers themselves – or, more precisely, those among them who migrated to West Africa voluntarily – would, for the most part, have welcomed an anti-slavery revolution in the U.S. but simply did not regard it as likely (158–159).

For many Euro-American proponents of African colonisation, however, revolution was only one worry, as miscegenation constituted a second ‘black threat’ to white republican stability. As early as 1785, for example, Thomas Jefferson was perturbed by the idea that the “slave, when made free, might mix with [...] his master” – and to avoid such a “staining of the blood” he proposed that free blacks “be removed beyond the reach of mixture” (209–210). According to Brendon Mills, “Jefferson likely did more than any other individual in the early republic to initially popularize the concept of creating colonies for former slaves,” yet he was far from exceptional, as “both slaveholders and antislavery advocates alike echoed these sentiments” (10). Indeed, as Robert Murray insists, it is surely no coincidence that African “colonization and Indian Removal emerged as racial remedies for the United States at the same historical moment”; both, after all, were underpinned by the same aversion to hy-

bridity and ‘racial mixture’ (77). In 1816, the idea of African colonisation became institutionalised in the American Colonization Society (ACS), and between 1820 and 1860, the ACS transported some 10,000 people from the U.S. to Africa (Clegg 197), where they enjoyed a new type of political freedom, but also suffered from scarcity, high mortality rates, and the separation from loved ones who remained in the U.S., sometimes involuntarily. At the same time, colonisation as a strategy of “ethnic purification” had proved controversial from the start (Moses xiv), and most free African Americans were in fact “unwilling to become settlers in Liberia” (Mills 5; see Shick 7). Indeed, as Robert Murray has shown, to most free people of colour in the U.S. the Americo-Liberian settlers seemed “little more than black-masked whites hoping to emulate the white enslavers in the United States” (136).

In a similar vein, the indigenous groups in West Africa regarded the Americo-Liberians, not as true ‘black’ sisters and brothers, but as ‘white’ strangers and foreigners. Murray has examined in detail what he terms the settlers’ “African whiteness,” and this seemingly paradoxical notion is clearly reflected in James L. Sims’s travel narrative, when he describes how he was perceived by members of the “Goulah and Passah people”:

I was a ‘white man’ – white because I was a ‘Merica man’ – ‘Merica man, because I Sarvy book,’ and every body who ‘Sarvy book,’ except the Mandingoes, are ‘white.’ They say the Mandingoes would be white too if they would only dress like white people. (95)

For indigenous Africans, Sims’s narrative makes clear, the terms ‘black’ and ‘white’ did not primarily signify skin colour, let alone imply any sort of racial essence, but referred instead to a particular set of cultural signifiers: a style of dress and, importantly, the settlers’ ability to read (“Sarvy book”).

Africa Delivered: Literature, the Civilising Mission, and Torquato Tasso

This kind of ‘book knowledge’ was, moreover, important for both the propaganda of the ACS’s Euro-American colonisationists and for the Americo-Liberians’ own understanding of their settler communities as a vanguard of commerce, Christianity, and civilisation on the supposedly benighted shores of West Africa. The centrality of literature as a marker of

Liberian progress can be seen, for example, in an anonymous piece from the February 1836 edition of the *Southern Literary Messenger*:

We are perfectly serious in speaking of *Liberian Literature*. Yes – in Liberia, [...] where, thirteen years and a half ago, the tangled and pathless forest frowned in a silence unbroken save by the roar of wild beasts, the fury of the tornado, the whoop of the man-stealer, or the agonizing shrieks of his victims on being torn from their homes to brave the horrors of the Middle Passage and of the West Indies – in Liberia, the English language is now spoken; the English spirit is breathed; English Literature exists; and with it, exist those comforts, virtues, and pleasures, which the existence of Literature necessarily implies. (158)

In a series of colonialist tropes, the author evokes the brutish wilderness of Africa – only to claim that this savage space has now been tamed by the Americo-Liberian settlers, who brought with them from the U.S. the English language, spirit, and “Literature.” Of course, the reality of settler existence was far more precarious and, to the embarrassment of Americo-Liberians, included widespread illiteracy. Thomas W. Shick has documented the settlers’ efforts to organise schools despite a lack of qualified teachers (55). Shick has shown, too, how the establishment of literary organisations, together with religious associations, was meant to encourage the settlers to work together for the common good, even as they also constituted civilisational bulwarks against the supposedly detrimental influence of their ‘savage’ African neighbours (53). What Sarah Meer has written about slave narratives in the U.S. thus applies to the Liberian scene as well, for what mattered to the settler-colonists was the very gesture “of placing their lives – symbolically their selves – in the realm of letters, learning, and books” (Meer 74). In other words, the very existence of newspapers and other types of literature in Liberia constituted a form of cultural capital that was seen to vindicate the settler-colonial project as such.

This commitment to the civilising mission is also expressed directly in Americo-Liberian poetry of the time. For example, in “Lines Written on Seeing Cape Mount” (1847), H. L. Wall emphasises that Liberia is “not the offspring of grasping ambitious thirst” but instead devoted to “arts, sciences, literature, commerce combined.” Similarly, the speaker of “Liberian Ministers Praying Fervently, for the Spread of the Gospel Over Their Country” (1854, signed R. H. G.) urges:

Let darkness from our country take its flight:
 Let heathens cease to break thy holy laws,
 And turn to Christ – partake in christian [sic] joys.
 And thus equip them for the pilg[r]im’s fight.

In these two poems from the *Liberia Herald*, civilising the “heathens” is as important a goal as the “love of liberty” that – according to Liberia’s official state seal (Figure 2) – brought the Americo-Liberian settlers to West Africa in the first place. Accordingly, in “Eulogy on the Institutions of Liberia” (1854, also signed R. H. G), we learn that “Liberia’s schools of learning” will fight “thro’ the shades of darkness” – a darkness that is explicitly tied to the absence of ‘true religion’ and literacy.

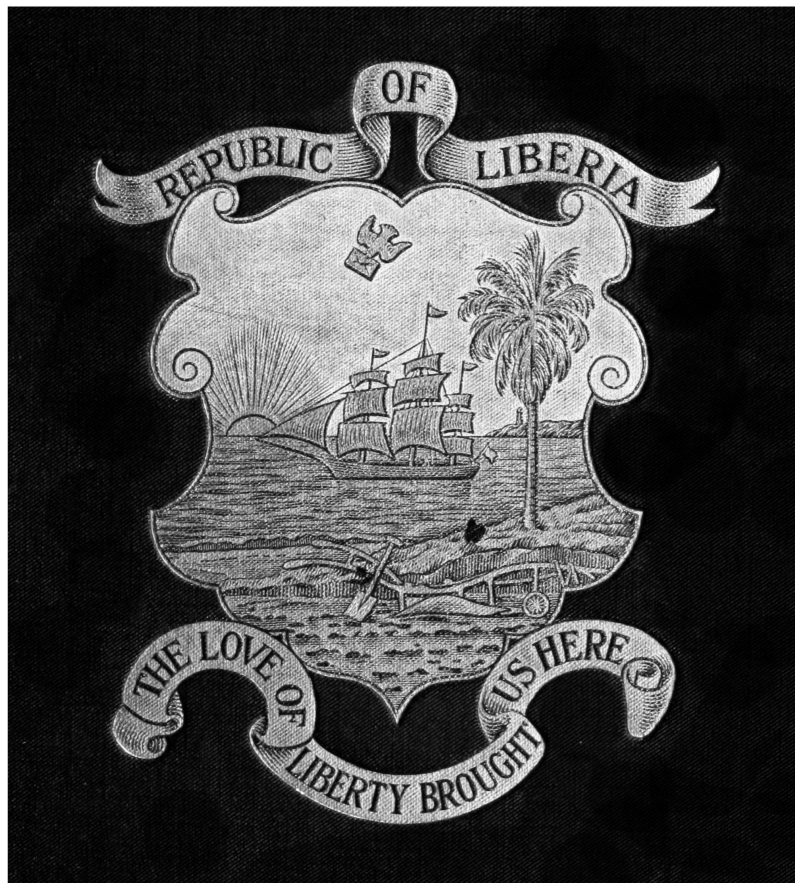


Figure 2: The National Seal of Liberia

Like the very name Liberia, the republic’s official seal emphasises the centrality of liberty for its self-definition (from the cover of Johnston’s 1906 monograph *Liberia*).

Read against this backdrop, Sims's inclusion in his travel narrative of a reference to Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* (1581) can be seen as an indirect assertion of the 'crusading spirit' of Americo-Liberian settlement. Sims quotes Tasso's description of an unusually beautiful bird as part of his own paean to the beauty of the African landscape:

With purple beak, and rainbow colors flung
At random o'er his plumes, among the rest,
Was one preeminent; his supple tongue
A gift like human eloquence possessed,
And with such art and copious numbers sung,
That all who heard, a prodigy confessed.

(Tasso, qtd. in Sims 100; see appendix, #3)

Richard Douglass-Chin – to my knowledge the only critic to have analysed nineteenth-century Liberian travel narratives from a literary point of view – is partly right in regarding this passage as expressive of a “Romantic” sensibility that renders the “African landscape [...] in terms of aesthetic interpretation” (“Landscapes” 242); after all, Sims's narrative was written at a time when Romanticism had profoundly reshaped the genre of travel narratives more generally, into a form that records “not only a literal journey but also a metaphorical ‘inner’ journey of self-discovery and maturation” (Thompson 117). However, Douglass-Chin's emphasis on the “Romantic” spirit of this passage is also misleading because he fails to acknowledge that these verses are in fact taken from a Renaissance epic. Importantly, Tasso's epic constitutes a mythologised account of the First Crusade, focusing among other things on such themes as the struggle against ‘non-believers’ and the “progress from Fall to Redemption” (Fichter 267). More specifically, the passage Sims quotes is taken from the section of *Jerusalem Delivered* that is set in the garden of Armida: a pagan sorceress who converts to Christianity in the final stanzas of Tasso's text (see Gough 524). Naturally, the theme of conversion would have resonated with Americo-Liberians like Sims, as would the poem's emphasis on internal divisions and “distractions that kept the crusaders from their primary tasks” (Davie vii). The crusading epic of *Jerusalem Delivered*, this is to say, echoed some of the key concerns of an Americo-Liberian settler community with complex, divided loyalties that nevertheless saw itself as entrusted with a mission to Christianise the ‘heathens’ in their very own promised land.

Intertexts: Travel Narratives between Conventionality and Self-Expression

To argue that some of the intertextual references in Sims’s narrative carry very specific interpretive significance is, of course, not to say that intertextuality as such ought to be considered unusual within the broader genre of travel writing. For example, Carl Thompson argues that invoking the figure of Robinson Crusoe is an entirely conventional gesture in “male accounts of heroic travel,” where it is used to signify “self-sufficiency and survival against all odds” (190). This gendered dimension is important in the present context, for as Robert Murray suggests, “[t]he rhetoric surrounding Liberia, from both its Euro-American supporters and African American settlers, focused on a masculine civilizing mission, taming both the landscape of Africa and its inhabitants” (118). It therefore ought not to come as a surprise that Sims references Crusoe early on in his narrative, when describing how he and the twenty-seven indigenous Africans that accompanied him on his journey traversed “a dark gloomy forest”:

Robinson Crusoe, on his lonely isle, never wished more sincerely for the sight of a sail than I did for an opening in the bush. About four o’clock, to my great joy, we reached a large open field, with a few fruit trees, and a stream of delicious water. To us, the place was a little paradise on earth. I felt like one just released from a long and weary bondage. (94)

It is striking that Sims sees no contradiction here between, on the one hand, comparing himself to Robinson Crusoe – who in many ways “embodies the ideology of white supremacy” (Thomson 90) – and, on the other, describing his experience in the African jungle as a release from “bondage”: a term that clearly invokes the rhetoric of anti-slavery. In this, Sims is not unlike Euro-American colonisationists, who routinely embraced both an anticolonial, revolutionary republicanism and the idea that Liberia was “the vanguard of the United States’ global republican mission,” thus collapsing “anticolonial and settler-colonial frameworks within a common ethos of Eurocentric civilizationism” (Mills 55–56).

In a very real sense, moreover, Sims stakes his claim to being ‘civilised’ precisely by including a broad range of intertexts, beyond the conventional reference to Robinson Crusoe. Sarah Meer’s comments on the use of intertextuality in U.S. slave narratives are pertinent here:

[O]ne important indicator of slave narratives’ sense of their own place in the world of letters lies in their intertextuality, their insistence on making reference to other texts. [...] Insofar as slave narratives must insist on

what their narrators share with their readers – human qualities like decency, domesticity, and familial affections, and cultural attributes, in which Christian and American values loom large – it is not surprising to find the narratives demonstrate this commonality in their form as well as in their content. Thus the narratives make allusions, borrow phrases, and use quotations to attest to their access to a shared culture. (Meer 74)

As documented in the appendix, Sims’s twenty-page narrative contains nineteen different intertextual references to this “shared culture”: novels, Shakespearean drama, secular and religious poetry, missionary tracts, travel narratives, historical writings, and the Bible. Indeed, the fact that Sims always uses quotation marks when incorporating an intertext shows that he wanted his audience to notice and appreciate these references as such. In a later, postmodern context, travel narratives featuring such intertextual multi-voicedness may, perhaps, constitute an attempt to decentre the “monologic imperiousness of vision” that characterised earlier, Eurocentric versions of the genre (Thompson 127). In a mid-nineteenth-century Liberian context, however, Sims’s conspicuous inclusion of intertexts instead serves to stabilise a beleaguered settler-colonial identity, as a sign of cultural distinction that bolsters Americo-Liberians’ claims to ‘civilisation’ and African whiteness.¹

A lengthy excerpt from Sims’s “Scenes in the Interior of Liberia” may serve to illustrate how, precisely, the deployment of different intertexts allows him to navigate the fraught territory of Americo-Liberian identity – which, as we have seen, requires a simultaneous identification with and distancing from indigenous Africans. Describing a region called Barlain, Sims admires what he regards as the comparative sophistication of its inhabitants:

They are the most industrious people in this part of Africa, and, with the exception of the Manni-Mohammedans, are the most civilized. [...] They are very hospitable to strangers, and even kind to their enemies, and, as a general thing, they are milder and more placid than any of their neighbors; but regularity of life, and industry, honesty, and a “reverential regard for their parents and rulers,” are the most prominent traits in the character of the Barlains.

The soil is exceedingly fertile, producing the finest sugar cane, tobacco, corn, cotton and ground-peas I ever saw in Africa. [...] In short,

¹ That the inclusion of intertexts can be a stabilising as well as a decentralising force constitutes one example for what Michel Foucault has termed the “tactical polyvalence of discourses” (100).

Barlain is one of the most productive spots I have met with, and it is certainly

“—A goodly sight to see
 What heaven hath done for this delicious land,
 What fruits of fragrance blush on every tree,
 What goodly prospects o’er the hills expand.”

Nature has certainly dealt out her blessings in some parts of Africa with a lavishing hand. India is not the only place where “every prospect pleases.” (108)

Sims begins this passage by praising the inhabitants of Barlain, noting in particular their hospitality and placidity – traits that may be laudable in certain contexts, but that are also rather convenient for a settler-colonial trader like himself. Moreover, by highlighting that the people of Barlain are “even kind to their enemies,” Sims styles them as ‘Christians in waiting’ – and the first of the three intertextual references in this passage (i.e. the phrase “reverential regard for their parents and rulers”) is appropriately taken from T. J. Bowen’s 1857 book *Central Africa*, which in its subtitle stresses the centrality of “*Missionary Labors*” (appendix, #7).

More tellingly still, the two other intertextual references in this passage serve to qualify Sims’s initial praise of the peaceful, semi-Christ-like Barlains. Sims prepares the ground for this rhetorical move by shifting the emphasis of his praise from the native Africans to the country they inhabit: from “the character of the Barlains” to Barlain as “one of the most productive spots.” He then proceeds to quote four lines from Canto I, stanza 15 in Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (appendix, #8). In this and the following stanzas, Byron’s speaker contrasts the beauty of the Portuguese landscape with the character of the Portuguese: a nation so “sworn with ignorance and pride” (Canto I, stanza 16; line 222) that one puzzles over why Nature would “waste [...its] wonders” on such “paltry slaves” (Canto I, stanza 18; lines 234–235). Having initially praised the character of a group of indigenous Africans – no doubt to counter Euro-Americans’ racist assumptions about the inborn inferiority of all black people – Sims’s intertextual reference to Byron immediately undercuts the idea that they might be considered equal to the Americo-Liberian settlers; they may be hospitable and kind, but as heathens they are nevertheless also “sworn with ignorance” and thus undeserving of the bounteous land that they inhabit.

The third intertextual reference in Sims’s passage well and truly hammers home the point that even the “most civilized” Barlains are inferior to

black Christian settler-colonists from the United States. The phrase “every prospect pleases” comes, as Sims’s reference to India confirms, from a “Missionary Hymn” by Reginald Heber, an English clergyman who served as Bishop of Calcutta from 1823 until his death in 1826. Like Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Heber’s hymn contrasts the “prospect that pleases” with its “vile” inhabitants: “In vain with lavish kindness / The gifts of God are strown, / The Heathen in his blindness / Bows down to wood and stone” (see appendix, #9). The implication of this triad of intertextual references – Bowen, Byron, and Heber – thus becomes clear. No matter how nearly civilised the “reverential” Barlains may be, they nevertheless remain in “Heathen [...] blindness,” and, like all other indigenous Africans, they therefore depend for racial uplift on the benevolent Christian paternalism of Americo-Liberian settler-colonists like Sims.

Abolitionist Colonisers: Byronic Blackness

As Sims continues to strive for a depiction of Africans as less uncivilised than Euro-Americans might expect, yet still not civilised enough to be able to do without the blessings brought to West Africa by Americo-Liberian settler-colonists, his strategic use of intertextuality gains in complexity and, perhaps, playfulness, too. To demonstrate this, we must examine another long excerpt from Sims’s narrative that likewise includes references to three different intertexts:

According to tradition, Barlain was once inhabited by the Kpellays, the most uncivilized, with the exception of a portion of the Pessahs, I have yet seen. King Bassee, great grand-father of the present King, drove the Kpellays out and took possession of the country. The Kpellays, however, have been waging a very destructive war with them ever since. However, there have been no wars in Barlain now for several years. The last fight they had with the Kpellays, if what they say be true, was bloody in the extreme. [...]

“Long time the victory in even balance hung.”

However, the Barlains prevailed. The Kpellays were put to flight. [...] The Barlains pursued them to the banks of the river, where many of them, seeing no way to escape, plunged in and perished. Several bush fights took place after this. At length, “grim” visaged war smoothed his wrinkled front in Barlain, and “capered nimbly” over (perhaps) to Russia, where “brain spattering” was carried on in a more civilized manner. (113)

On the surface, this depiction of protracted ‘intertribal’ warfare confirms Euro-American stereotypes of African savagery and might therefore play directly into the hands of white supremacists.

However, the intertextual references included in this passage all serve to dilute and qualify such a racist assessment. The first quotation, for example – “Long time the victory in even balance hung” – is taken from William Jones’s poem “Caissa: or, The Game of Chess” (1763; appendix, #12), which depicts a flirtatious chess match between the nymph Delia and the shepherd Daphnis. In the present context, what matters is that the game of chess does not, of course, pitch black against black (as is the case in the warlike African scenes in which the quotation appears). Instead, the game revolves around “two bold kings [who] contend with vain alarms, / In ivory this, and that in ebon arms” (Jones 51), i.e. a conflict of white against black. As one would expect, Jones’s poem continues to emphasise the contrasting colours of the pieces on the board: how they stay “[t]rue to the colour, which at first they chose” (54), and how they “rush from black to white, from white to black” (55). Even the final line of the poem – “And peaceful slept the sable hero’s shade” – emphasises the question of colour, in a parodic echo of the last line of Pope’s translation of the *Iliad* (“And peaceful slept the mighty Hector’s shade”; Jones 62n1). The inclusion of Jones’s poem, in short, complicates the black-vs.-black dynamic of the tribal conflicts that Sims describes by juxtaposing them with a game that manifestly pits white against black, as if to remind the racist segment of his audience that “destructive war” is not the exclusive preserve of supposedly more barbaric and villainous Africans. The next intertextual reference, moreover, reinforces this point, as the image of a “‘grim’ visaged war” that “smoothed his wrinkled front” and then “capered nimbly” to a different location echoes a set of lines from act 1, scene 1 of William Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (appendix, #13). In this way, Sims not only references one of the most villainous (and white!) characters of all time, but also reminds his readers that Shakespeare’s eminently civilised history plays are filled to the brim with blood-soaked content (in the case of *Richard III*, the protracted dynastic strife known as the War of the Roses, 1455–1485).

Importantly, if these first two intertextual references to “Caissa” and *Richard III* merely pose an implicit challenge to stereotypes concerning black barbarity, the third intertext included in this passage, Byron’s *Don Juan* (1819-1824; appendix, #14), renders Sims’s caveat more explicit. In part, this has to do with Byron’s general stature within black abolitionist literature. As Matt Sandler has shown, “practically every well-known

black writer of the nineteenth century quoted the poet and worked through his influence” (29). Among other things, these “Black Romantics [...] saw in Byron’s commitment to Greek independence an example of how to pledge oneself to the cause of others’ freedom” (41). Sandler notes that *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812-1818) in particular served as a source of inspiration to black abolitionist authors (26–27), and we have already seen that Sims’s narrative includes a reference to this work. According to Sandler, what appealed to black Romantics about Byron is that his texts presented them with “a renegade, exiled form of masculinity, grappling with deep psychosexual pain and alienation,” while at the same time “identifying that struggle with the revolutionary spirit of the age” (29). Black abolitionist authors thus reinterpreted the torments and resilience of the Byronic hero in light of the trauma of, and the struggle against, the evils of slavery. Accordingly, Sims’s inclusion of Byron, in and of itself, evoked a fiercely abolitionist sensitivity that was bound to resonate with audiences in the U.S. – especially with black Americans, who tended to view Liberian colonisation with skepticism, to the point of questioning the settlers’ commitment to anti-slavery.

Moreover, while any reference to Byron by a mid-nineteenth-century Americo-Liberian would have evoked the way in which black abolitionists appropriated the English poet’s work, Sims’s specific reference to *Don Juan* highlights more directly that the barbarity of war is certainly not limited to indigenous Africans or people of colour more generally. In the above passage from Sims’s narrative, the description of war as a “brain spattering” activity is taken from stanza 4 of Canto IX in *Don Juan* (appendix, #14). The latter constitutes a bitter attack on the Duke of Wellington, arising out of Byron’s “conviction that all the bloodshed of the Napoleonic wars had only reestablished the legitimacy of tyranny in Europe” (Marchand 39).² A European hero like Wellington – Byron writes – might well be glorified as “Saviour of the Nations” or “Europe’s Liberator,” but in fact such men merely lead lives full of “assault and battery,” while leaving the masses “still enslaved” (Canto IX, stanza 5; lines 35 and 39–40). This is not to say that Byron was a pacifist who rejected war *per se*; after all, he explicitly writes that “War’s a brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting art / Unless her cause by Right be sanctified” (Canto IX, stanza 4; lines 27–28). However, the point to be made regarding Sims’s reference to this passage from *Don Juan* is that barbaric violence is clearly not limited

² See John Lauber, who reads *Don Juan* as an anti-epic in which Homeric heroes were “no more deserving of honor than their modern counterparts who will spill blood in even greater quantities” (619).

to ‘savage’ Africans, but has long been part of European ‘high culture,’ too – though, as Sims sarcastically suggests, in a supposedly “more civilized manner.”

In this context, the term *savage* itself deserves some attention, for unlike the seemingly similar term *primitive*, *savage* denotes a lack of civilisation but not any irredeemable backwardness. Robert Murray has summarised succinctly the argument put forward by earlier scholars:

Savagery denotes a horizontal spatial relationship: a side by side evaluation of two things determined by a value judgment. Most importantly, savagery lacks a temporal element. [...] The “savage” can become tamed by changing his or her thinking and adopting “civilized” patterns of life; lines can be crossed within this framework. “Primitive,” however, replaces the spatial hierarchy with a temporal one. Within this model of thinking, Europe has simply progressed beyond its neighbors. [...] Primitiveness suggests an inability to progress from a sort of defect. (79)

Importantly, the idea that the term *savage* constitutes a less fundamental type of othering than the concept of the *primitive* does not imply that the former is necessarily harmless; indeed, accusations of savagery could easily serve as a “useful excuse for the violent suppression of indigenous Africans” whenever they “refused to adopt ‘civilized’ manners” (Murray 80).

Still, as Murray asserts, it is significant that “the term ‘primitive’ is almost completely absent from the colonization rhetoric presented in the *African Repository and Colonial Journal* [i.e. the ACS’s key publication] and the letters pouring in from Liberia” (80), as the possibility to civilise ‘heathens’ was a key ideological justification for African colonisation. Similarly, throughout his narrative Sims refrains from using the term *primitive*; instead, he consistently refers to “savage” people and practices (102, 104, 113, 121). In this, Sims differs from a later Americo-Liberian traveller, Benjamin J. K. Anderson, who in his *Narrative of a Journey to Musardu, the Capital of the Western Mandingoes* (1870) does at one point use the term *primitive*, when commenting on the “primitive, barbarian industry” of some native Africans that he encounters (188). Perhaps Anderson’s use of the term constitutes a first textual trace of a broader paradigm shift among the settler-colonists from *savagery* to *primitivism*? Could this, in other words, be a first textual symptom of how Americo-Liberian views of their indigenous neighbours hardened in the second half of the nineteenth century, from a relatively flexible Christian paternalism to a more rigid, pseudo-scientific, and evolutionist racism? These are in-

triguing historical questions – but sadly they exceed the scope of the present inquiry.

Conclusion: The Textual Repercussions of the Black-White Man's Burden

This essay has not provided a fully-fledged reading of James L. Sims's "Scenes in the Interior of Liberia"; it does not, for example, analyse the text's narrative structure, its techniques of characterisation, or its use of figurative language. More broadly, much critical work remains to be done in the field of Liberian travel writing. In addition to a thorough examination of the paradigm shift from *savagery* and *primitivism*, for example, a systematic consideration of these travel narratives' gender dynamics would surely prove fruitful, given that, by and large, the "colonizationists advanced their agendas through politics and public forums dominated by men" (Murray 118). Moreover, if Lorenzo Veracini is right in suggesting that most nineteenth-century settler colonists dreamed of neutralising class conflict through spatial displacement (15–16), then one might profitably interrogate Sims's and other travel writers' rhetorical strategies with a view to the increasing social differentiation within Americo-Liberian settler society, which was occasioned in part by "the shift within Liberian immigration from free blacks and mulattoes to poor and less worldly manumitted slaves" (Ciment 102), as well as by the increasing presence of recaptured Africans (Shick 66–71) and a small but important group of immigrants from Barbados (e.g. Banton 14–16). Did increasing diversity and incipient class conflict in the settlers' small coastal settlements engender a desire for further displacement, in the form of a more aggressive push into the far interior? Or was this primarily a reaction to the increasing pressure exerted, from the 1870s onwards, by the imperial powers of Britain and France? And how are such internal and external conflicts refracted in later Americo-Liberian travel narratives like Anderson's, for example in their depiction of indigenous Africans?

What the argument has shown, however, is that the numerous intertextual references in Sims's narrative constitute more than merely an attempt by a black author to stake his claim for literature and civilisation – though, importantly, they are that as well. Beyond such claims to be regarded as 'civilised,' Sims's intertexts serve rhetorically specific functions: to emphasise the 'crusading spirit' of Liberian colonisation (e.g. by referencing Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*); to highlight the sup-

posed discrepancy between, on the one hand, an African landscape favoured by God and, on the other, the sometimes kind but nevertheless heathen inhabitants of this same landscape (Bowen, Byron, and Heber); and to deflect racist images of black people as inherently more violent and barbaric than the proponents of ‘white civilisation’ (e.g. *Richard III*). For Sims, “Africa is Africa all over” (123); in a proto-pan-African gesture of inclusion, he imagines all black people as sharing a common, indelible bond. At the same time, Sims makes it clear that indigenous Africans can only develop their full potential through contact with those ‘civilised’ black Americans who, by migrating to Liberia, acquired independence and African whiteness. In short, indigenous Africans might be “black but comely,” as Sims puts it, quoting chapter 1, verse 5 of the Song of Solomon (KJV); nevertheless, they cannot do without the uplift that only Americo-Liberian settler-colonists can provide, as part of their civilising mission. The tone of Sims’s text may, as Fairhead et al. have noted, be surprisingly “humorous” (49), yet his narrative is shaped profoundly by this ‘black-white man’s burden’: to re-fashion himself from an African American into an Americo-Liberian; to vindicate the Liberian settler-colonial endeavour as such; and to stave off the competing and conflicting ideological claims of indigenous Africans, of Euro-Americans, and of black abolitionists in the U.S.³ The dexterity with which Sims has confronted this task should not blind us to the fact that his intertextual balancing act remains a merely imaginary solution to the intractable social contradictions of Americo-Liberian existence – contradictions that would continue to haunt the Republic of Liberia well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.⁴

³ In *The Journal of an African Cruiser*, Horatio Bridge reports that an African king referred to the Liberian settlers as “*black-white* people” (45).

⁴ See Fredric Jameson, who argues that the “production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions” (64).

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**Appendix: Overview of Intertextual References in James L. Sims’s
 “Scenes from the Interior of Liberia” (1858)**

#	Quotation from Sims’s Narrative (incl. page number)	Source Text	
		Bibliographical Entry	Corresponding Passage (incl. page number)
1	“Robinson Crusoe, on his lonely isle, never wished more sincerely for the sight of a sail that I did for an opening in the bush.” (94)	Defoe, Daniel. <i>The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe</i> . [first published in 1719]	n.a.
2	“It is said by some writer that when the sun goes down all Africa dances.” (97)	Golberry, Silvester Meinrad Xavier [Sylvain Meinrad Xavier de Golbéry]. <i>Travels in Africa</i> . 1802. Translated by W. Mudford, 2nd ed., vol. 2, London, Jones and Bumford, 1808.	“[I]t may be asserted, that during half of every night in the year, all Africa is dancing.” (246)
3	““With purple beak, and rainbow colors flung At random o’er his plumes, among the rest, Was one pre-eminent; his supple tongue A gift like human eloquence possessed, And with such art and copious numbers sung, That all who heard, a prodigy confessed.”” (100)	Tasso, Torquato. “The Song of the Bird in the Garden of Armida: Translated from the ‘Jerusalem Delivered’ of Torquato Tasso – Canto xvi.12.” 1581. <i>Tat’s Edinburgh Magazine</i> , February 1845), p. 84.	“With purple beak, and rainbow colours flung At random o’er his plumes, among the rest Was one pre-eminent; his supple tongue A gift like human eloquence possessed, And with such art and copious numbers sung, That all who heard, a prodigy confessed, The birds grew mute, and, charmed by his sweet lay, The rustling breezes ceased through heaven to play.”

#	Source Text	
	Quotation from Sims's Narrative (incl. page number)	Bibliographical Entry
4	<p>“Hapless children of men, when shall the cherub hope smile on you from heaven, and with a compassionate voice, call you to the pleasures of reason?” (105)</p>	<p>Whelpley, Samuel. <i>A Compend of History from the Earliest Times</i>. 1st rev. ed., vol. 1, Philadelphia, Kimber & Conrad, 1808.</p>
5	<p>“If a correct account could be given of all the wars fought in Africa, during the last century, together with the suffering and desolation that inevitably must have followed, it would be a tale too horrible for ‘ears of flesh and blood’ [...]” (105)</p>	<p>Shakespeare, William. <i>The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark</i>. c. 1600. <i>The New Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works</i>, edited by Gary Taylor et al., Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 1993–2100.</p>
6	<p>“When they have accumulated a considerable amount of goods, they invariably return to their own country: they are as restless as Tartars, and in making bargains will ‘cavil on the ninth part of a hair.’” (106)</p>	<p>Shakespeare, William. <i>The History of Henry the Fourth</i>. c. 1597. <i>The New Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works</i>, edited by Gary Taylor et al., Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 1275–1354.</p>

		Source Text	
#	Quotation from Sims’s Narrative (incl. page number)	Bibliographical Entry	Corresponding Passage (incl. page number)
7	<p>“They are very hospitable to strangers, and even kind to their enemies, and, as a general thing, they are milder and more placid than any of their neighbors; but regularity of life, industry, honesty, and a reverential regard for their parents and rulers, are the most prominent traits in the character of the Barlains.” (108)</p>	<p>Bowen, T. J. <i>Central Africa: Adventures and Missionary Labors in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa, from 1849 to 1856</i>. Charleston, Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857.</p>	<p>“Another virtue of these people is a reverential regard for their parents and rulers, for the aged, and in fact, for all superiors.” (290)</p>
8	<p>“In short, Barlain is one of the most productive spots I have met with, and it is certainly ‘—A goodly sight to see What heaven hath done for this delicious land, What fruits of fragrance blush on every tree, What goodly prospects o’er the hills expand.’</p> <p>Nature has certainly dealt out her blessings in some parts of Africa with a lavishing hand. India is not the only place where ‘every prospect pleases.’ (108)</p>	<p>Lord Byron. <i>Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage. A Romance</i>. 2nd ed., London, John Murray, 1812, pp. 15–17.</p>	<p>“Oh, Christ! it is a goodly sight to see What Heaven hat done for this delicious land, What fruits of fragrance blush on every tree! What goodly prospects o’er the hills expand!” (15; Canto I.15, lines 1–4)</p>
9		<p>[Heber, Reginald]. “Missionary Hymn.” <i>Hymns Adapted to the Sunday Services of the Church of England: To Which Are Added, Prayers for Sunday Schools Etc.</i> 4th ed., Dublin, Samuel B. Oldham, 1802, p. 115. [Attributed to Heber in: Cogswell, William. <i>The Assistant to Family Religion, in Six Parts</i>. Boston, Crocker & Brewster, 1827, pp. 347–348.]</p>	<p>“What though the spicy breezes Blow soft o’er Ceylon’s isle, Though every prospect pleases, And only man is vile; In vain with lavish kindness The gifts of God are strown, The Heathen in his blindness Bows down to wood and stone.” (347)</p>

#	Quotation from Sims's Narrative (incl. page number)	Source Text	
		Bibliographical Entry	Corresponding Passage (incl. page number)
10	<p>“The principle <i>Sali-Shirong</i> is called <i>Ngamu</i>: and like ‘Eugun,’ the great devil of the Yoruba people (as described by an American traveller) is a ‘tall fellow,’ (about ten feet) ‘fantastically clad from face to foot,’ and is, with some tribes, ‘a personification of the executive or vindictive power of the government, but all women are required to believe that he is a terrible spirit who takes vengeance on violators of the law.’” (110)</p>	<p>Bowen, T. J. <i>Central Africa: Adventures and Missionary Labors in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa, from 1849 to 1856</i>. Charleston, Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857.</p>	<p>“As the grand <i>órisha</i> of the <i>Egbás</i>, <i>Oro</i> is a personification of the executive or vindictive power of the government, but all women are required to believe that he is a terrible spirit who takes vengeance on violators of the law.* * Another personification of executive power is called <i>Egugun</i>, literally bones. <i>Egugun</i> is represented by a tall fellow, fantastically clad from face to foot, who appears in the streets with a drawn sword in his hands, and speaks in a hoarse sepulchral voice.” (141)</p>
11	<p>“All the tribes I met with have some notions of a supreme being, ‘the unknown, the cause and preserver of all things,’ they have a name for God, but are ignorant of his true character.” (111)</p>	<p>Bowen, T. J. <i>Central Africa: Adventures and Missionary Labors in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa, from 1849 to 1856</i>. Charleston, Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857.</p>	<p>“No man has ever believed in two gods, or that the Jupiters and Astartes which he worshipped, were really gods at all. To some they were merely personifications, to others real persons, but all have looked beyond these to THE GOD, the Unknown, the Cause and Preserver of all things.” (310)</p>
12	<p>“Long time the victory in even balance hung.”</p>	<p>Jones, William. “Caissa; or, The Game of Chess.” 1763. <i>The Works of the British Poets, with Lives of the Authors</i>, edited by Robert Walsh, Jr., vol. 35, Philadelphia, Samuel F. Bradford, 1822, pp. 51–62.</p>	<p>“Long time the war in equal balance hung; Till, unforeseen, an ivory courser sprung, And, wildly prancing in an evil hour, Attack’d at once the monarch and the tower [...].” (60)</p>

#	Quotation from Sims’s Narrative (incl. page number)	Source Text	
		Bibliographical Entry	Corresponding Passage (incl. page number)
13	However, the Barlains prevailed. The Kpellays were put to flight: a youth hewed himself a passage through the ranks of the Kpellays, and cut away the bridge which cut off the retreat of the enemy. The Barlains pursued them to the banks of the river, where many of them, seeing no way to escape, plunged in and perished. Several bush fights took place after this. At length, ‘grim’ visaged war smoothed his wrinkled front in Barlain, and ‘capered nimbly’ over (perhaps) to Russia, where ‘brain spattering’ was carried on in a more civilized manner.” (113)	Shakespeare, William. <i>The History of Henry the Fourth</i> . c. 1597. <i>The New Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works</i> , edited by Gary Taylor et al., Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 1275–1354.	“RICHARD DUKE OF GLOUCESTER [...] Grim-visaged war hath smoothed his wrinkled front, And now, instead of mounting barbed steeds To fright the souls of fearful adversaries, He capers nimbly in a lady’s chamber To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.” (548, lines 10–14; act 1, scene 1)
14		Lord Byron. <i>Don Juan: In Two Volumes</i> . 1819–1824. Vol. 2, Philadelphia, R. W. Pomeroy, 1841.	“You are ‘the best of cut-throats?’—do not start, The phrase is Shakespeare’s, and not misapplied: War’s a brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting art, Unless her cause by right be sanctified.” (47; Canto IX.4)
15	“The rice was planted, and so was the gree-ree, and the time came when ‘seeds feel the influence of the sun, and unfold themselves in the bosom of the earth, and spring up and grow.’” (115)	Sturm, Christoph C. [Christoph Christian Sturm]. <i>Reflections on the Works of God in Nature and Providence, for Every Day in the Year</i> . 1772–1776. Translated by Adam Clarke, New York, Abraham Paul, 1824.	“[The sun] is the source of life, sensation and joy; for his salutary and vivifying rays are diffused through all the kingdoms of nature. Seeds feel his influence, and unfold themselves in the bosom of the earth. By him all plants and vegetables spring and grow up.” (170)
16	“King Bahmo was ‘black but comely,’ with a countenance indicating shrewdness and intelligence.” (119)	Bible: Song of Solomon 1:5 (KJV)	“I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon.”

#	Quotation from Sims's Narrative (incl. page number)	Source Text	
		Bibliographical Entry	Corresponding Passage (incl. page number)
17	<p>"The Manni people are, for the most part, grave, serious, and thoughtful, and rigid adherents of the Koran. The American missionary, Mr. Bowen, speaking of these people, says: 'I was told of a class of devotees in the tribe, who abstain from war and traffic, and refuse to shake hands with another man's wife.' This is strictly true." (120)</p>	<p>Bowen, T. J. <i>Central Africa: Adventures and Missionary Labors in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa, from 1849 to 1856</i>. Charleston, Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857.</p>	<p>"I was told of a class of devotees in the tribe, who abstain from war and traffic, and refuse to shake hands with another man's wife." (42)</p>
18	<p>"On the 15th of August, I bade adieu to Suloang—Suloang, whose 'melancholy loveliness, once seen, can never be forgotten.'" (120)</p>	<p>M[ackay], C[harles]. "Transatlantic Sketches: Savannah and the Sea Islands." <i>The Illustrated London News</i>, 3 July 1858, p. 3.</p>	<p>"But of all the scenery in and about Savannah the Cemetery of Bonaventura is the most remarkable. There is nothing like it in America, or perhaps in the world. Its melancholy loveliness, once seen, can never be forgotten."</p>
19	<p>"A Bousa man, named Sukea, was the favorite performer. His favorite theme was a story called 'Yandomah,' which is not inferior to any of the stories contained in the 'Arabian Nights.'" (120)</p>	<p><i>Arabian Nights</i>. [first English translation c. 1706]</p>	<p>n.a.</p>

