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“The Season of Exaggerated Hopes”: Richard T. Greener in the Reconstruction University

KEVIN J. HARRELSON*

ABSTRACT Richard T. Greener was the first Black graduate of Harvard College in 1870, and he served briefly as a professor of philosophy at the University of South Carolina from 1873 to 1877. Historians and biographers have uncovered many of the facts of his unusual life, but to date his philosophy has remained unappreciated. This essay reconstructs his philosophy from published and archival sources, evaluating it in relationship to the work of his better-known mentor, Frederick Douglass. I argue that Greener’s account of Reconstruction politics, especially his arguments on land redistribution, race, and Black intellectual history, possess notable advantages over Douglass’s views. Of particular importance is that he defended a more robust republican state than did his hero, while rejecting the originalism and constitutionalism that characterize Douglass’s liberalism.

KEYWORDS Richard T. Greener, Frederick Douglass, Reconstruction, republicanism, race, Charles Sumner, land redistribution, amalgamation, assimilation

In the wake of the US Civil War, Republican leaders of South Carolina devised a plan to racially integrate their state university. Secretary of State Henry E. Hayne, one of the state’s many Black elected officials, took a first important step by registering for the medical program in 1873. The expected backlash was immediate: all three members of the medical faculty resigned upon Hayne’s first appearance on campus.¹ Nonetheless, other politicians soon followed his example and enrolled for professional degrees, six young men transferred from the newly formed Howard University, and a steady influx of students would eventually lead the university to become majority Black.² Governor Franklin J. Moses announced a second stage of the plan when he addressed the legislature that December: “For the first time in the history of South Carolina one of the literary chairs in her highest institution of learning is worthily and acceptably filled by a colored Professor.”³ The person

¹Ginsberg, *Moses of South Carolina*, 160–61.

²Foner, “Black Elected Officials”; and Parry, “Irrespective of Race or Color.”

³Quoted by Mounter in “Richard T. Greener,” 114; and in “African American Individual,” 13.

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in question was Richard T. Greener, a Cambridge-raised and Harvard-educated scholar who had, a month prior, assumed the post of Professor of Metaphysics and Mental Philosophy. Greener would remain at the university for less than four academic years, however, since by early 1877, Wade Hampton and his gangs of ex-Confederates dismantled the state's Reconstruction efforts.⁴ It would be almost a century before the school would reintroduce, in 1963, more Black students and faculty.⁵

Today, a statue of Greener stands on his old campus in Columbia, belatedly erected in 2018 next to the Thomas Cooper Library. A few historians have documented his life and achievements, a playwright has composed a drama about him, and Katherine Chaddock has published an excellent biography.⁶ If Greener is no longer a figure entirely forgotten, then neither is the singular phenomenon of the Reconstruction university. The University of South Carolina has celebrated its earlier experiment with conferences and publications, and the famous *1619 Project* has included a mention of it.⁷ In this essay I wish to supplement these developments by examining Greener's philosophy on the basis of published and unpublished sources, evaluating it in the context of late and post-Reconstruction debates about education, land redistribution, and race. My emphasis will be on Greener's Platonic defense of the Reconstruction agenda, his practices of comparative political analysis and intellectual genealogy, and his critiques of ethnology and racial nationalism.

As a Black liberal and public intellectual during Reconstruction, Greener stood in the long shadow of Frederick Douglass. His philosophy nonetheless differs substantively from Douglass's, and I present the contrast throughout.⁸ I argue in particular that Greener supplied a deeper metaphysical basis for Reconstruction politics and a broader, more circumspect set of arguments on land issues and race. Section 1 details how Greener's early Platonism provided novel solutions to the standard problems of postbellum political thought. His embrace of Platonism and his rejection of originalism allowed him to avoid the positions on patriotism and constitutionalism for which Douglass is famous. Section 2 presents Greener's Millian, global approach to labor questions that enabled him to outshine his hero during the land debates of the late 1870s. Section 3 deals with his arguments against racial nationalism, which involve a deep engagement with Black intellectual history and lead him to challenge both Eurocentric and anglophone narratives of world history. Section 4 discusses Greener's view of America's racial future. He differed from Douglass by conceiving of political cooperation among races without

⁴Recent biographers of Hampton, including Ackerman and Andrew Jr., portray him as something of a moderate, a benevolent racist, and a minimal defender of civil rights. Whatever truth there is in such an evaluation, however, his election rather clearly marked the end of Reconstruction.

⁵See Greene II, "Before 1963," 106–15.

⁶Anderson and Darby, "Reconstruction-Era University"; Chaddock, *Uncompromising Activist*; and Tuttle, *White Problem*.

⁷Remarkably, in 1873 the University of South Carolina became the only state-sponsored college in the South to fully integrate, becoming majority Black—just like the state itself—in 1876" (Jones, *1619 Project*, 29).

⁸In particular, I follow the condensed, four-thesis version of Douglass's philosophy that Mills presents in "Whose Fourth of July?" These points—especially originalism (thesis 2) and the anomaly theory of racism (theory 3)—best illustrate the contrast between the two major thinkers of Black Reconstruction: Douglass and Greener.

demographic assimilation, proposing that the multiracial republic should embrace Black leadership in the South. Needless to say, his vision went unrealized. I thus conclude by reflecting on the place of Greener's republicanism in the history of American philosophy.

I. PLATONISM AND RECONSTRUCTION

As a teenager in antebellum Cambridge, Greener was surrounded by the icons of abolition-democracy who set the context for his politics and worldview. By his own account, he heard Douglass speak as early as 1855, when he was eleven and Douglass about thirty-eight ("Reminiscences," 291). Like his hero, Greener absorbed the abolitionist creed of William Lloyd Garrison, which he later described in the agnostic variation as "the Fatherhood of Good and the Brotherhood of Mankind" ("Socrates," 59). Although forced to leave grammar school at fourteen to assist his mother financially, he nonetheless made the acquaintance of educated Bostonians who recognized his potential.⁹ He worked as a porter for George Herbert Palmer, later a professor of philosophy at Harvard, and Augustus Batchelder. Palmer tutored Greener in Greek, and Batchelder supplied tuition money for Oberlin, Andover, and Harvard. Greener spent eight years absorbed in the classical curricula of these schools, becoming the first Black graduate of Harvard College in 1870.¹⁰

Scholarship in the classics became, for Greener, a lens through which to understand the history taking place around him. He employed classical and biblical terms to dramatize events in the lives of local heroes such as Garrison, Theodore Parker, and Wendell Phillips, praising them for overcoming false gods and refusing "the brazen calf which slavery had set up."¹¹ The Peloponnesian War in particular was his favorite antecedent to the recent American context, and he described the former as the "culmination of 'the irrepressible conflict' between the North and South of that day" (13). This enabled him to compare variously Douglass or John Brown to Socrates.¹² His abolitionist heroes had, like the Greek sage, introduced a strict moral idealism into a culture of sophistry and decline. By contrast, his favorite insult was to compare his enemies to sophists or other Athenian leaders, slights no doubt lost on his less classically educated adversaries.¹³

⁹In addition to his teenage apprenticeship with Palmer and Batchelder, Greener eventually became popular with elite Boston politicians. Mounter, "African American Individual," 132–33, recounts the story of how Greener's "Gray Collection of Engravings" earned him the friendship of Sumner.

¹⁰Others had attended Harvard prior to Greener; Martin Delany, for instance, had an abbreviated stay in the medical school in 1850. See Sollors, *Blacks at Harvard*, 19–20; and Takaki, "Blacks at Harvard Medical School," 80.

¹¹Greener refers to Phillips and Parker as "denounced, threatened and mobbed because they refused to bow down and worship the brazen calf which slavery had set up" ("Socrates," 60) after describing Garrison as "led . . . through the streets of Boston with a rope around his neck" (59).

¹²In "Socrates," Greener writes of the speech near the end of Plato's *Apology*: "In the simplicity, directness of the original Greek, it stands unrivaled and unapproachable, except in the episode which our country contributed in 1859, when a gray haired hero, wounded in body but whole of heart, from the squallid [*sic*] Court House of Charlestown [*sic*], Virginia, made that memorable speech to a slave-holding court" (61).

¹³E.g. he casts Denis Kearney, an Irish-American labor leader from California, as the Athenian general Cleon ("Socrates," 2–3).

Casting Douglass or Brown in the role of an American Socrates suggests that we might imagine Greener as an aspiring Plato, and he did attempt to provide something of a metaphysical basis for the Reconstruction polity. This point is most salient in his 1874 tribute to the recently deceased Senator Charles Sumner, a text that laces a defense of abolition-democracy with references to the *Republic*. The subtitle of his lecture, published as *Charles Sumner, The Idealist, Statesman and Scholar*,¹⁴ indicates the Platonic strain in its main thesis: statecraft of the reconstructive sort requires idealism and scholarship, in the sense that it should be guided by permanent principles of justice that are rooted in historical and philosophical study.¹⁵ He saw this as the defensible core of Plato's philosophy, thereby transposing the "philosopher-king" idea into a republican context. The new American Republic, he argued, should be constructed as a modification of the Socratic *kallipolis*, led by principled statespersons versed in ancient texts and committed to ideals of justice and equality.

The linguistic parity between the Latin title of Plato's book and the name of the new political party was no matter of chance for Greener, and he claimed that the Reconstruction State should be built "not for a day but for all time" (*Sumner*, 27).¹⁶ He summarized Plato's "abiding and comprehensive thought" in the interrogative: how ought the "ideal Commonwealth" combine individuals with the state "in mutual union, reciprocal protection—the one assisting in the work of the other" (9)? The point was to forge a delicate balance between the classically anglophone emphasis on individual liberties—Greener's other towering influence was John Stuart Mill¹⁷—and Plato's more centrally administrative program. Confederate interpretations of republicanism were a relevant foil in this regard, since the rebels considered federal powers to be limited to matters such as currency.¹⁸ By contrast, Greener followed Sumner, who had argued that since "liberty and equality are more than dollars and cents, they should be national also and enjoy the same security."¹⁹ Platonism for Greener was thus one method of resolving the constitutional disputes that led to the rebellion: republicanism requires a deep relationship between individuals and a centralized polis, not merely the loose confederation of independent states preferred by the secessionists.²⁰

Greener and Sumner likewise adopted something of Plato's emphasis on state-sponsored education: education is a national issue, and equality in education ought to be the first priority of the Republican State. As in Plato's text, the main

¹⁴Greener delivered this lecture on "Public Day," June 29, 1874, and it was published a month later by the aptly named "Republican Printing Company" in Columbia.

¹⁵Greener writes, "In his political faith and private life [Sumner] was a loyal disciple of 'the truth-loving Plato'" (*Sumner*, 9).

¹⁶Greener writes that Plato's "treatise on Political Science, called *The Republic*, anticipates all the modern themes of the State" ("Socrates," 30).

¹⁷Greener lauds Mill in an early essay, "Individuality," calling him "the foremost metaphysical thinker of the century." Greener's arguments in this brief, early journalistic piece are chiefly Millian: "what reform has triumphed save through the very difference of opinion?" But the same is true of his dissertation, "Tenures of Land in Ireland," written a year earlier. See my analysis of this text and Mill's influence on it below, in section 2.

¹⁸For an intellectual history of confederate federalism, see DeRosa, *Confederate Constitution of 1861*.

¹⁹See Sumner, "Are We a Nation?," 5.

²⁰See DeRosa, *Confederate Constitution*, chaps. 1 and 2.

function of the polis is to “educate the individual in the truest manner” (*Sumner*, 9), and Greener emphasized Socrates’s tendency to engage the public “without distinction of rank, of person or condition” (“Socrates,” 20). Educational equality had been a lifelong agenda for Sumner, who argued for integrated education as early as 1849’s *Roberts v. Boston*.²¹ Although the court ruled in favor of the defendant, Sumner pushed a bill through the state legislature in 1855.²² Greener was among the immediate beneficiaries of that victory, which came ten years prior to his entry to Harvard. He and Sumner were thus natural friends, and Greener himself campaigned for integration when he was briefly principal of Sumner High in Washington, DC (1871–73), and he did further work on these issues in South Carolina.²³ Both men fought also for the inclusion of an educational amendment to the ill-fated 1875 Civil Rights Bill, and its deletion was among the chief disappointments of both their lives.²⁴

Greener’s heavy course load at the University of South Carolina gave him further opportunities to promote the union-federalist aspects of his philosophy. He taught a required course for seniors on the US Constitution in addition to his lectures on logic, metaphysics, and the history of philosophy. His metaphysics course was based on Bowen’s *Hamilton*, and his history of philosophy course employed a new translation of Albert Schwegler’s *Handbook*.²⁵ These courses display Greener’s diverse engagements with the thought of his time, as he immersed himself in Scottish Common Sense philosophy and German Idealism in addition to the Greeks.²⁶ But most notable in this context, however, is his application of all these streams of thought to the pressing issues of his day, which he advances most clearly in his course on the Constitution. His final exam presents two evaluative prompts that urge students respectively to propose remedies for minority rule and to describe the shortcomings of the Confederate Constitution (“Constitution”). By asking for the differences between the preambles of the US and Confederate texts, Greener solicited his students to criticize the latter’s antifederalist phrase, “We, the people of the Confederate States, *each state acting in its sovereign and independent character*” (*Confederate*, emphasis added).²⁷

Greener’s understanding of republicanism also appealed to a natural law tradition extending to antiquity. For him, there was a single “true Republican doctrine” that should guide Reconstruction, and he credited the Stoic notion of natural equality with inspiring Sumner to “[save] Kansas from slavery, and [help] to form the great Republican party” (*Sumner*, 18). He characterized this principle in Sumner’s specific phrasing of “equality before the law,” by which both men meant

²¹The text of Sumner’s argument appears in Sumner, *Argument of Charles Sumner*. The unfortunate legacy of this case, however, lies in its having been cited in *Plessy* for the doctrine of “separate but equal.”

²²See Prager, “Strange Bedfellows,” 51–75.

²³See Mounter, “African American Individual,” 133–34.

²⁴For a recent account of the educational provisions in the 1875 Act, see François, “Brand of Inferiority.”

²⁵Schwegler, *Handbook of the History of Philosophy*.

²⁶“Socrates” demonstrates Greener’s reasonably deep understanding of German philosophy, despite the fact that this movement influenced the Harvard curriculum only after the hire of Josiah Royce in 1883.

²⁷For discussion, see DeRosa, *Confederate Constitution*, 20–25.

to express fidelity to a naturalistic, francophone reading of Stoicism (10).²⁸ This deep tradition of egalitarian thinking, moreover, had the effect of minimizing controversies specific to American institutions and documents. Greener did not take Jefferson or Madison, for instance, to hold correct views about property or equality. The slaveholding and retrograde views on race by these men, as a result, were less significant to him than they had been to Douglass or Garrison.²⁹

Greener's approach to the leftover political divides among the earlier abolitionists, such as the questions of patriotism and constitutionalism, also applies Platonic metaphysics and deep genealogies in a way that lends him advantages over his hero Douglass. The latter had rather famously struggled with idea of a patriotism for freedpeople. At times, he argued that ex-slaves could not love a country that made no place for them.³⁰ His famous 1852 speech "On the Meaning of the Fourth of July for the Negro," still widely disseminated almost two centuries later, was just one of his many discourses on this subject.³¹ In *Sumner*, Greener addresses Douglass's worry in what would become his typical fashion, extending the debate beyond national boundaries while also idealizing his answer. He first recalls a quip by Lessing that patriotism reflects "an heroic weakness" (28).³² Greener's reply is that Lessing, and so presumably Douglass, conflated patriotism with partisanship to an existing polity. The proper object of the sentiment is rather "that Republic of Nations destined at some time to exist on the earth" (28).

A similar line of reasoning discouraged Greener, and to a lesser extent Sumner, from overstressing fidelity to America's founding documents. The constitutionality of slavery had been among the most hotly debated topics for abolitionists of the antebellum era. Garrison's position was the primary reference point for most abolitionists on this issue.³³ He had long placed the perceived endorsement of slavery by the founders at the forefront of his political agenda, and he described the Constitution as a "covenant with death" and an "agreement with hell" ("The War—Its Cause and Cure," 165).³⁴ Anyone who opposes slavery, Garrison reasoned, should reject political unions with slaveholders. Whereas Douglass split with Garrison on this issue around 1851, arguing that the Constitution did not

²⁸In *Roberts v. Boston (Arguments of Sumner, 6)*, Sumner's argument leans specifically on the formulation of natural equality presented in the *Encyclopédie* by Diderot and D'Alembert ("Egalité naturelle," 5:415).

²⁹In his 1880 essay "Intellectual Position of the Negro," Greener offers a nuanced and sympathetic view of Jefferson, acknowledging the latter's hypocrisy and racism but also criticizing the misappropriation of *Notes on the State of Virginia* by ethnologists. His main point, however, is that both Jefferson and Madison accepted political equality at best, without ever advancing to a belief in natural equality. See "Intellectual Position," 188; and *Sumner*, 10.

³⁰"I cannot agree with my friend Mr. Garrison in relation to my love and attachment to this land. I have no love for America, as such; I have no patriotism. I have no country. What country have I? The Institutions of this Country do not know me—do not recognize me as a man" (Douglass, "Antislavery Cause," 57).

³¹For analysis, see Boxill, "Frederick Douglass's Patriotism."

³²Lessing's own target was Kleist. It is also possible, however, that the wider context of Greener's reference was a speech by Bismarck given the same year (1874) in Strasbourg. Lessing's text—"eine heroische Schwachheit, die ich recht gern entbehre"—may be found in *Gesammelte Werke*, IX.185.

³³For recent studies of Garrison's anticonstitutionalism, see Hunter, *Conflicts of Law*; and Osborn, "Garrison and the United States Constitution," 65–88.

³⁴Garrison's reference appears to be Isaiah 28:18.

endorse slavery, Sumner revised the question by removing the emphasis on the intentions of the founders.³⁵ His arguments in favor of integrated schools rest rather on a novel antitextualist legal philosophy, by means of which he attempted to avoid the vexing question of how to reconcile the aspirational egalitarianism of American democracy with its slaveholding reality.³⁶ Greener's innovation was to supplement Sumner's antitextualist argument—Sumner had argued that the meaning of equality should be determined by the needs of the present rather than the intentions of the authors—by appealing to the ancient roots of the egalitarian tradition and downplaying the contributions of American slaveholders like Jefferson.³⁷

Greener's fidelity to Plato's famously inegalitarian *kallipolis* might seem hard to reconcile with his commitment to natural equality, an idea that he traces instead through Roman law to Zeno of Citium.³⁸ But his appropriation of the *Republic* was unabashedly presentist, and his opposition to inequality focused mainly on the color-based aristocracy of the American South. Like other Harvard alumni of his time, he remained elitist about the outcomes of education.³⁹ His 1880 lecture "Socrates as a Teacher" acknowledges the Athenian's full program for education, and Greener describes the underlying Socratic principle that "only they who had been trained to rule, bred up, as it were, for the affairs of the State, should be allowed a share in the conduct of the high offices of Government" ("Socrates," 58). His early objections to the racial caste system rest rather on the fact that color is "the feeblest of all accidental properties," and so presents an inadequate method for distinguishing leaders in thought or action (*Sumner*, 36). He thus saw the meritocracy that would result from equal access to education as an extension of the republican principle of equality.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this early philosophy is the extent to which it displays the optimism of Reconstruction. Greener accepted the Socratic moral equation of vice with ignorance, and he showed something of a liberal attitude toward reconciliation.⁴⁰ One consequence of this view was that slaveholding had been rooted in ignorance, so that education and forgiveness were the keys to reconstructing the decaying Southern culture. In his very last publication, a 1917 tribute to Frederick Douglass in *The Champion Magazine*, he described the Reconstruction era as the "season of exaggerated hopes for the Negro" ("Reminiscences," 292). The point was likely as much confessional as it was analytical, and the hopeful tone of his writings disappears after 1876. Hampton

³⁵For recent accounts of Douglass's constitutionalism, see Myers, *Frederick Douglass*, 88. See also Mills, "Whose Fourth of July?" For Greener's assessment of Sumner's anti-originalism, see *Sumner*, 17.

³⁶Frasure, "Rights of the Negro," captures the antitextualist aspects of Sumner's legal philosophy.

³⁷For the completion of Greener's argument on this point, see my analysis of "Intellectual Position" in section 3 below.

³⁸The genealogy of egalitarianism, for Greener, runs through Ulpian's digest to Helvetius and Diderot ("Intellectual Position," 188). Greener was probably mistaken in his claim that Ulpian derived his view of natural equality from Zeno (of Citium). See Honoré, "Stoic Influence."

³⁹On this topic, see Greener, "Academic Life," 14–15.

⁴⁰"Intelligent action is right action, and hence knowledge and ignorance are the grounds of right and wrong" ("Socrates," 41). At a few points (esp. *Sumner*, 23), he indicates an awareness of the rising redemption. Greener references Sumner's forgiveness of Preston H. Brooks (18), who infamously caned Sumner on the Senate floor. For a recent account of this episode, see Hoffer, *Caning of Charles Sumner*.

narrowly won the gubernatorial seat that autumn, just before Hayes and Tilden reached their famous compromise in Washington, DC. South Carolina closed the university immediately, and Greener was deposed from his professorship. In early 1877, he absconded to Washington, DC, with his wife, Genevieve, and their two small children. He had a fresh law degree in hand, however, earned between lectures on metaphysics and supplemental duties as college librarian. This enabled him to join the struggling law department at Howard, where he continued to lecture on classical subjects such as Socrates, Michelangelo, and Egyptology.⁴¹ But his attention would turn gradually to topics current to the late 1870s: the emigration of freedpeople from the South and the new paternalistic versions of ethnology.

2. MIGRATION AND LAND QUESTIONS

Greener was twenty-six years old when he became the first Black graduate of Harvard College in 1870. This fact was the result, partly, of his uneven elementary education and his long road through Oberlin and Andover back to Cambridge. The close of war probably also influenced his acceptance finally in 1865, although during the war Harvard was ruled already by more-or-less socially liberal Republicans.⁴² Whatever the reasons, Greener received his degree at a stage of intellectual maturity far beyond the norm, as evidenced by his outstanding dissertation entitled “The Tenures of Land in Ireland.”⁴³ Six years later, Harvard would grant its first doctorates in history for works of comparable scope and quality.⁴⁴ The College at least recognized Greener’s exceptional work with a First Bowdoin, and he presented his work publicly at College Chapel on June 23, 1870.⁴⁵

The topic of Irish land tenure was significant for a variety of reasons. In the first place, it was among the most hotly debated political issues of the previous decades, with luminaries such as Mill devoting scores of articles to the subject in the 1840s and 1850s.⁴⁶ Just as importantly, however, studying Ireland was an indirect method for Greener to prepare for a career in racial advocacy: the arguments levied by English politicians against the Irish foreshadowed what Greener would see brought against Black Americans in the 1880s and 1890s. Writing about the fortunes of an oppressed people in a foreign place likewise enabled Greener to examine the plight of freedpeople in a global context. For that reason, among others, he would come to reject all references to the special qualities of racial groups, excoriating the new waves of ethnological treatises while also rejecting the racial nationalisms common to Black thinkers of the subsequent generation.

⁴¹Greener’s lecture on Michelangelo is preserved at the Schomburg Center in New York. Unfortunately, his lectures on Egyptology are lost.

⁴²See Ware, *Political Opinion*.

⁴³Preserved in Greener’s hand, with some annotations apparently added afterward (by either Greener or Schomburg), at the Schomburg Center.

⁴⁴Lodge’s “Anglo-Saxon Land Law” is the text that most closely resembles Greener’s own work of 1870, and a judicious examiner would be hard-pressed to rate Lodge’s PhD dissertation above Greener’s text.

⁴⁵So indicate the notes written at the top of the first page of Greener’s copy.

⁴⁶Kawana, “Politics of the Irish Land Question,” refers to forty-three articles by Mill just in the *Morning Chronicle* during late 1846 and early 1847.

Land and property issues were also central to wartime and early Reconstruction politics, even where they were not included in the Harvard curriculum. As early as 1863 during “Sherman’s raid through Georgia,” as Du Bois would later tell it, lands from Florida to the Carolinas had been designated for lease to freedpeople (*Souls*, 375). In May 1864, Sumner sponsored a Senate bill that would consolidate federal authority over both appropriated lands and the fate of freedpersons (375). This first iteration of a Freedman’s Bureau Act, which did not pass in the House, included the language of “forty acres” that was later etched into the national mythology.⁴⁷ Although a modified Act passed in 1865, the provision of lands was later abandoned. Du Bois would eventually (1903) dramatize the conclusion in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

It had long been the more or less definitely expressed theory of the North that all the chief problems of emancipation might be settled by establishing the slaves on the forfeited lands of their masters,—a sort of poetic justice, said some. But this poetry done into solemn prose meant either wholesale confiscation of private property in the South, or vast appropriations. Now Congress had not appropriated a cent, and no sooner did the proclamations of general amnesty appear than the 800,000 acres of abandoned lands in the hands of the Freedmen’s Bureau melted quickly away. (375)

Thaddeus Stevens and his allies in the House proposed further redistributive land bills in 1866, so that Greener could not have ignored the American analogies when he came to study the so-called “Irish Problem.”⁴⁸ Although the direct context for this assignment was Gladstone’s First Irish Land Act, proposed in December 1869, a series of clear though subtle allusions to the American South runs through Greener’s treatment of the question. A few of these concern the material conditions of Irish peasants: he notes that the Irish peasants had no protection under English law, with the result that they had “no security for the land on which [their] cabin is built—no right to the improvements [they] may have made” (“Land Tenure,” 4); Greener describes the Irish as at times “reduced to slavery, some even sold to Barbadoes [*sic*] by Cromwell” (18); and he claims that they were often teased by a “fraudulent hope of Emancipation held out . . . only to be snatched away as it had ever been” (20).⁴⁹

The deeper points of comparison pertain not mainly to the details of exploitation, which Greener argued remain similar everywhere, but rather to the various species of argument levied by the English against Irish rights. On these points, he deploys a series of replies that he draws partly from Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy*, but which he will apply for the next two decades equally to the Irish and American contexts. The first point concerns the beneficial status of political union between England and Ireland. “Land Tenure” begins with a lengthy historical review of English rule in Ireland—formally established in 1800 but traceable back nearly a millennium—oriented to this question. One common

⁴⁷Kerr-Richie, “Act of Bad Faith.” For a much older but very compelling account of the forty acres mythology, see Fleming, “Forty Acres and a Mule.” Fleming finds the language of ‘forty acres’ in documents from as early as 1860, but he locates the addition of ‘mule’ in 1866. The text of the 1865 Act appears in Lyons and Brown, *Redress*, 493–94.

⁴⁸For a recent analysis, see Svabek, “To Break the Slave Power.”

⁴⁹As always, Greener mixed in explicit references to ancient sophistry, echoing Thrasymachus by describing the English rule over the Irish as “the right of the stronger” (“Land Tenure,” 22).

framing of the issue, according to which the civilized English slowly led Irish brutes into modern life, became useful for Greener when he was later confronted with what he called the “school of slavery” argument: in his more dramatic prose of 1894, he would write, “The negro has no tears to shed over that ‘wonderful school of slavery, under Providence’” (“White Problem,” 362).⁵⁰ But the core of his view on this issue was formed in relation to the Irish in 1870.

Just as damaging to the cause of justice as this “school of slavery” argument were two further fallacies that Greener located among English leaders throughout the long history of the colonization of Ireland: first, that the condition of the Irish would be improved because the interests of the landlords would demand it; second, that the economic troubles of Ireland (i.e. the famines of the 1840s) resulted from defects of Irish character. In the former context, Greener supplied the sole direct reference to chattel slavery in his undergraduate dissertation:

Now, nothing could be more absurd than to talk about it being against the landlord’s interest to convict, because he will not readily get another tenant, when three tenants stand ready to take any one farm that is to be let. It reminds us of the old argument used by the apologists for slavery. Slaves could not be so badly treated as was alleged, branded, excessively whipped, families separated, etc. because it was plainly not in the planter’s interest to do so. (“Land Tenure,” 60)

Greener’s reply is that this kind of thinking hinges on a misapplication of “the principles of political economy,” whereby one imagines that perceived inevitabilities of commercial transactions may substitute for affirmative legislation promoting “the good of the many rather than the enrichment of the few” (53). One ought not, he claims, appeal to apparently reasonable interests on the part of landlords to ensure against exploitation. Political economy rather requires, as he would repeat in 1879 against Douglass, affirmative legislation guaranteeing the prosperity of the masses. He considered the English argument to be not only married to a civilizationist and theocratic perspective that he rejected, but also insufficiently rooted in the otherwise correct English emphasis on democratic majority.

Regarding the common ethnologic assertion that famine and poverty derived from shortcomings in Irish character, Greener appeals to a second Millian principle. After noting that the empirical claims in question were already refuted by migration history (viz. Irish immigrants to both New Zealand and America had proved hardworking, productive, and law-abiding) (55), so that the Irish were not constitutionally prone to criminality, drunkenness, or laziness, Greener recites Mill’s now-celebrated methodological argument:

Of all vulgar modes of escaping from [the consideration of] the effect of social and moral influence[s] on the human mind, the most vulgar is that of attributing the diversities of conduct and character to inherent natural differences. What race would not be indolent and insouciant when things are so arranged, that they derived no advantage from forethought or exertion? (*Principles of Political Economy*, 197, quoted in “Land Tenure,” 57–58)

⁵⁰The phrase “school of slavery” was common in antebellum South Carolina, and Greener likely took it specifically from debates there about church segregation. See Eric Rose’s recent MA thesis on this topic.

Greener's expertise on Ireland—and his disdain for ethnological argument—would make him a unique contributor to migration debates of the subsequent decade. His first opportunity arose in 1879, a time when tens of thousands of Black Americans fled the Gulf region for Kansas.⁵¹ In 1925, Carter G. Woodson would refer to this episode as the “first great upheaval deeply affecting the Negro” after the Civil War (*Negro Orators*, 452). Throughout this episode, Greener would appeal to his prior expertise on Ireland to counter Douglass, who opposed the migrations.⁵² After several rounds of lectures in Washington, DC, the two leaders participated in a symposium at the 1879 Social Science Congress in Saratoga, NY. According to William H. Ferris's laudatory and perhaps exaggerated retrospective, Greener “vanquished” the older philosopher on this occasion (*African Abroad*, 2:773).

Migration questions had long occupied Douglass and other Black thinkers of the antebellum period, most notably in the context of “colonization” to Africa. Wilson J. Moses has argued in numerous books that answers to the colonization question reflect the basic division between radical egalitarians like Douglass and conservative nationalists like Alexander Crummell.⁵³ Douglass was an opponent of colonization who preferred to see Black Americans as Americans first and foremost, whereas Crummell, devising plans for migration to Africa throughout the 1850s, viewed his people as “a nation within a nation.”⁵⁴ On this application of the issue, Greener, who had been much too young to weigh in directly regarding Africa, acknowledged the justice of Douglass's position. But he differed from his hero in treating the Kansas migrations of 1879–80 as a question distinct from the antebellum controversies.⁵⁵ He also differed from Douglass in the consistency of his liberal philosophy: Douglass had debated Crummell from within the discourse of racial attributes, with Douglass seeing the supposed “home-feeling” of the Black race as a virtue and Crummell viewing it as a lamentable shortcoming and obstacle to his desired project (“Negro Exodus,” 459).

In the 1879 debates, Douglass retains much of the nationalist argument, thereby playing into the hands of Greener's Millian emphasis on environmental causes. The former's essay, “The Negro Exodus from the Gulf States,” begins with the claim

⁵¹In Kansas, freedpeople were entitled to land, and a Black Tennessean named “Pap” Singleton had earlier set up a colony. See Painter, *Exodusters*.

⁵²By Greener's count, Douglass gave six lectures against the Kansas migrations, with titles such as “The South Knows Us.” The editors of the *Frederick Douglass Papers* report that the most complete of these is “The Negro's Exodus from the Gulf States,” which Douglass sent to Saratoga for the Social Science Congress, and which was read by the organizer before Greener delivered his own “Emigration of the Colored Citizens from the Southern States.” Here I cite the text of Douglass as well as that of Greener from Woodson, *Negro Orators*.

⁵³See esp. Moses, *Golden Age*; and *Liberian Dreams*.

⁵⁴Interestingly, the source text for the expression “a nation within a nation” seems to be a comparison of European and African American peasant classes in Delany's *Condition*: “Such is the condition of the various classes in Europe; yes, nations, for centuries within nations, even without the hope of redemption among those who oppress them. And however unfavorable their condition, there is none more so than that of the colored people of the United States” (3).

⁵⁵The failure of the analogy between African colonization and migration to the west may be stated in this way; the one was worked up by slave-owners in the interest of slavery; this one springs spontaneously, according to Mr. Douglass's view, from the class considering itself aggrieved; one led out of the country to a comparative wilderness; the other directs to better land and larger opportunities here at home” (Greener, “Emigration of Colored Citizens,” 481).

that only the freedpeople can withstand the brutal conditions of cotton plantations in the South.⁵⁶ He also casts Southern Black people as “a remarkably home-loving race” who could not adjust to becoming migratory, and he questioned whether such people would flourish in the climate of Kansas (459). These ethnological platitudes inspired in Douglass a philosophy of patience, and he predicted that the necessity of Black labor in the cotton regions would lead Southern whites to make concessions.⁵⁷ He also wrote, perhaps regrettably, that enduring the then-current hardships should strengthen the population: “suffering and hardships made the Saxon strong, and suffering and hardships will make the Anglo-African strong” (“Negro Exodus,” 461).

In these lectures, Douglass thus made all three species of argument that the younger Greener had identified as fallacious: appeal to special racial attributes instead of social causes; appeal to rational interests of the landlords instead of the rights of laborers; and appeal to a civilizationist account of racial progress. To Greener, such arguments prevented any serious appreciation of just how the problems suffered by the Southern Black population were a temporary product of exploitative practices by landlords and enslavers. To understand the point, it was necessary to engage in global comparisons of disfranchised peoples. Greener’s full reply to Douglass, entitled “Emigration of Colored Citizens from the Southern States,” thus opens by broadening the question and drawing on his earlier study of the Irish debates.

The land question is no new one; at the present time there are difficulties in England, Ireland, Scotland, and India with regard to this tenure of land; and when we come to study them, we find many cases analogous to those in America. There are remarkable coincidences and wonderful similarities of conditions, complaints and demands, which show conclusively that injustice and wrong, and disregard of rights and abuses of privilege are not confined to any one country, race, or class. As a rule, capital takes advantage of the needs of labor. (473–74)

Censuring Douglass for not examining the migration issue in the international context of labor exploitation, Greener highlights his central contention, at least in 1879, that there was not a unique “Negro Question”—no political question that pertained to one population only. They were faced rather only with special instances of the global phenomenon of capital and the rights of laborers.⁵⁸ This perspective enabled him to cast the Southern freedpeople in relation to other groups seeking land in the West, and he expected freedpeople from the Gulf region would succeed in Kansas alongside “Swedes, Norwegians, Mennonites . . . and Irish Catholics” (484). One might object to this, in retrospect, that Greener’s optimism and consistency prevented him from foregrounding issues specific to anti-Black racism. In the subsequent decade, he would acknowledge as much,

⁵⁶“The standing apology for slavery was based upon a knowledge of this fact. It was said that the world must have cotton and sugar, and that only the Negro could supply this want, and that he could be induced to it only under the ‘beneficent whip’ of some bloodthirsty Legree” (Douglass, “Negro Exodus,” 455).

⁵⁷“This Exodus has revealed to southern men the humiliating fact that the prosperity and civilization of the South are at the mercy of the despised and hated Negro” (Douglass, “Negro Exodus,” 454).

⁵⁸In 1894’s “White Problem,” Greener would complain that Black Americans were “not . . . allowed to grow in any one of the . . . ways, in which other American citizens are allowed to grow” (355).

though in the context of these debates about land distribution, he did supply the superior arguments.

Greener also saw Douglass's argument as minimizing the effects of redemptionist tendencies and thereby insufficiently emphasizing the union-federalist position. Douglass had confidently asserted that the "permanent powers of government"—especially the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments—would rescue Black people in the South from injustices implemented at the state levels ("Emigration of Colored Citizens," 464).⁵⁹ On this point, our two speakers were revisiting something of the antebellum disputes over federal powers while also forecasting the judicial atrocities of the 1880s and 1890s: How much of the equality and security of the people should be guaranteed by federal legislation? How much may be left to state legislatures or to markets? Douglass was satisfied by the constitutional amendments,⁶⁰ whereas Greener's more robust federalism required additional interventions in order to prevent dispossessions of land and right. Douglass even insisted that it is not the business of government to encourage migrations, thereby imposing explicit limits on the federal government even where he petitioned for protection (466).

While Greener also portrays the situation in the South more negatively than does Douglass, this part of the argument is less about facts than it is about principles (474).⁶¹ What disturbed him most was the autonomy of the Southern states caused by the compromises of 1877, or earlier in the case of Virginia, to which he had been witness in his South Carolina days. He worried—rightly, it turned out—that the constitutional amendments were insufficient to prevent the return of what he had called "the color-aristocracies" (*Sumner*, 36). Douglass, for his part, does not so much fail to acknowledge these facts, but instead preaches patience in regard to them. On Greener's characterization, which seems fair enough given all these passages, Douglass's approach stemmed from a philosophy of "all will be well" ("Emigration of Colored Citizens," 483).⁶²

Finally, Greener also imagines that relocating to Kansas will serve as a kind of cultural refresher for Black populations, removing freedpeople from the corrupt influences of the Southern gentry and enabling them to establish a productive culture on their own. On this point, he again redeployed an argument that Mill had used in regard to the Irish, anticipating that new land and new laws would breed new habits.⁶³ This reflects Greener's belief that all the hardships suffered by

⁵⁹By 1883, the Supreme Court ruled that the Reconstruction Amendments supply no protection against violence by nonstate actors.

⁶⁰In Douglass's defense, the Supreme Court imposed limitations on the amendments only in 1883 and after. Douglass scholars such as Sundstrom (in "Frederick Douglass's Longing") also rightly point out that Douglass was aware of possible limitations on the amendments.

⁶¹"Negro representation went first; next the educational system, which the carpet-bagger had brought to the south" (Greener, "Emigration of Colored Citizens," 474).

⁶²In "Emigration of Colored Citizens," Greener claims that ex-Secretary McCulloch "also has faith that all will be well," thereby indicting Douglass by implication (483). By contrast, Greener writes that "we legislate for" the four million Blacks and two million whites suffering under the return of the plantation system (474).

⁶³"The Negro needs contact with all that is healthful and developing in modern civilization, and by emigration the Negro will learn to love thrift" (Greener, "Emigration of Colored Citizens," 477); cf. Mill: "When the peasant feels that he is somebody—that he counts for something on the earth—that

disfranchised groups—Irish, Black, Jewish, etc.—had only environmental and not racial or ethnological causes. The tendencies to see Black people as exceptional or unique, on the other hand, led those like Douglass to exempt them from the assistance that US policies had already extended to other groups.

Mr. Douglass is not willing to have Congress or capitalists help these wanderers, to whom we gave nothing when we freed them. We did better than that by fugitives forty years ago, and I see no good reason why Northern philanthropy should close its hand and ears now to a cry which is as despairing as that which rang from Ireland in 1848, or from yellow fever sufferers, a twelvemonth ago. (482–83)

While Greener's outlook is thus considerably more unionist than is Douglass's, his solution to the migration crisis rests within the tendencies of post-Reconstruction ethnic organizing. He laments the lack of affirmative legislation of the type that Stevens had sponsored a decade earlier, and he proposes in its stead the formation of a company.⁶⁴ This point prefaces something of the decline in Greener's significance as a race leader. He was a bibliophile and professor who regarded state institutions as the solutions to social problems, and he remained something of a Reconstruction philosopher even after the so-called Redemption of 1877. Decades later, Ferris would complain that Greener never became the kind of leader that Crummell and Du Bois did (*African Abroad*, 2:774).⁶⁵ But Greener did attempt to lead in 1879, as he had during the 1871 iteration of Sumner's civil rights proposal and the South Carolina elections of 1876.⁶⁶ His failing was only that he led in the manner of a Reconstruction scholar-statesperson, rather than as a Jim Crow-era race organizer.

3. ETHNOGRAPHY AND IMITATION

By the time of his 1879 appearance in Saratoga as the scholarly voice for Black migration, Greener had quit the law department at Howard and begun working in private practice. He litigated a few celebrated cases alongside Daniel Chamberlain, the deposed former governor of South Carolina.⁶⁷ These cases brought him some notoriety without supplying financial stability. His key scholarly contributions from the subsequent years are a pair of essays respectively in *The North American*

he also is one of those for whose sake the institutions of society exist, the consciousness will have the same effect on him which it now has on those above him, and he will not choose to live in wretchedness and squalor on the land which is his own" ("Condition of Ireland," 4).

⁶⁴"We should raise \$200,000 to form a company; we should have a National Executive Committee, and have agents to buy land, and procure cheap transportation" (Greener, "Emigration of Colored Citizens," 487).

⁶⁵"Why didn't he leap to the front as DuBois [*sic*] does now? He lacked the heroic spirit of Crummell and DuBois" (Ferris, *African Abroad*, 2:774).

⁶⁶Throughout 1876, Greener stumped for the Republican incumbent Daniel Chamberlain and against Hampton. See Mounter, "African American Individual," 141, for the dramatic details of how "at every stop along the way Greener and his colleagues were harassed by Democrats and their army of men known as 'Red Shirts.'" There is some evidence that an attempt was made on his life at one campaign stop. Earlier, in 1871, Greener had worked in Philadelphia at the Institute for Colored Youth, which he abandoned in order to represent Black Philadelphians in Washington, DC, in support of Sumner's Civil Rights Act.

⁶⁷One of these cases involved the court-marshalling of his former student from South Carolina, Johnson Whittaker. See Mounter, "African American Individual," 144–45.

Review and *The National Quarterly Review*.⁶⁸ The impetus for his arguments was the increased presence in such media of anti-Black treatises touching on his principal concerns: republicanism, migration, and education. These Northern journals had begun integrating the newest species of paternalistic racial tract, which opposed the migration of freedpeople northward, their participation in democratic practices, and sometimes their entry into institutions of higher education. The main issue concerned the intellectual fitness of Black Americans. To put the question simply: Were they prepared for political participation, education, and general citizenry next to their presumptive superiors? What evidence was there specifically of Black intellectual or diplomatic achievement?

While abolitionists in 1850s Boston inspired the young Greener with the creed of a brotherhood of mankind, leaders of the nation's scientific institutions had revived the old hypothesis of polygenesis. They argued that some human populations, especially Africans and Europeans, constitute distinct species. Louis Agassiz of Harvard lent credibility to this movement in the North, while Josiah Nott of the Medical College of Alabama coauthored its signature tomes with the Egyptologist George Gliddon.⁶⁹ This episode of scientific racism, however, had faded by the mid-1870s.⁷⁰ The key players were by then deceased, and Darwin had already published in 1871 his definitive account of the historical and biological unity of humankind.⁷¹ At this time, the premise that races were actually distinct species was also needlessly strong for the desired political arguments: citizenship was established by the Fourteenth Amendment, and the questions of the day concerned rather integrative processes such as voting, land ownership, and amalgamation.

America's foremost presidential biographer of these decades was James Parton, an educated Northerner who took pride in his sympathy for Black America. His 1878 entry to the race debates, a short tract called "Antipathy to the Negro," made him Greener's opponent in his 1880 "Intellectual Position of the Negro."⁷² In "Antipathy," Parton distances himself from the earlier ethnographers by satirizing their style and rejecting their main thesis: Black and white Americans are not distinct species like "the canary and the yellow-bird, the rattlesnake and the copperhead" (482). By discrediting the earlier naturalists, he attempts to signal his good intentions, and he allows that the races are capable of living together democratically. The caveat arises in the context of his exegesis of Jefferson's notorious *Notes on the State of Virginia*, where the third president had claimed that he "never yet could . . . find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration" (*Notes*, 233; "Antipathy," 487). Parton's unfortunate assertion is that the new century had not disproved him.

⁶⁸"Intellectual Position" appeared in the latter in July 1880, and "Future of the Negro," in which Greener would again write alongside Douglass, appeared in the former in July 1884.

⁶⁹Nott and Gliddon's chief works are *Types of Mankind* and *Indigenous Races of the Earth*. They supervised the translation of de Gobineau's notorious *Essay on the Inequality of the Races*, and were followers of Morton, author of the much earlier *Crania Americana*.

⁷⁰There are exceptions among survivors from the earlier generation: Winchell, *Adamites and Preadamites*, which Greener references in "Intellectual Position," appeared only in 1878.

⁷¹Darwin, *Descent of Man*.

⁷²"Antipathy to the Negro" appeared in *North American Review* in 1878. Parton had published *The Life of Thomas Jefferson* in 1874, and several other presidential biographies in the previous decades.

We cannot fairly deny that facts give support to the opinion of an inherent mental inferiority. It is ninety years since Jefferson published his "Notes," and we cannot yet name one negro of pure blood who has taken the first, the second, the third, or the tenth rank in business, politics, art, literature, scholarship, science, or philosophy. To the present hour the negro has contributed nothing to the intellectual resources of man. ("Antipathy," 488)

This premise of intellectual backwardness—albeit supported only by casual observation and literary judgment rather than craniology—prefaces Parton's political proposals. Black Americans, he claims, had "improved under slavery from generation to generation" with the result that they were now prepared "for the paradise of freedom" (490). But a further graduated introduction is required, and the records show (he thought) that the election of Black individuals to political office during Reconstruction had proved disastrous (491).⁷³ Despite his removal of the naturalistic theory of racial difference, Parton likewise preserves the key premise that Black Americans possess "a fatal facility of imitation" and so might participate in democratic civilization only after extended tutorship (488). The Black intellect, he concluded, is not creative or original, though it is capable of eventually acquiring European or anglophone culture. Freedom from bondage and even some sorts of education are thus justified, in 1878, but political representation and higher education would reflect an unduly hurried level of integration.

The trope of imitation runs through almost the entirety of nineteenth-century anti-Black thought, including the polygenist ethnography of the 1850s and this apparently more benevolent and paternalistic assimilationism of the 1870s and 1880s. Appropriation of the trope in turn inspires some of the central rhetorical moves of Black letters from the period, including Greener's reply to Parton.⁷⁴ As an empirical claim, such as it ever was, the evidence began and nearly concluded with passages like Jefferson's famous canard from *Notes*. Parton's argument thus begs for a record of Black intellectual achievement and a proof that the doctrine of imitation is false, which lends Greener the premise for his reply in "Intellectual Position." Greener's answer is twofold: records published by the Abbé Grégoire and others reveal extensive cases of Black people whose achievements in literature, diplomacy, and the arts had been celebrated even by Europeans; and to whatever extent these African heroes had imitated white people, that process was not appreciably different from the processes of cultural influence underlying European nations themselves.

Greener's first response to the imitation argument was to recite his list of Black American favorites, such as Phillis Wheatley and especially David Walker ("Intellectual Position," 171).⁷⁵ But such domestic examples of the nineteenth century were no proper answer to Parton, who viewed any intelligence on display as due rather to the contribution of European ancestry. Parton dismissed this whole

⁷³"The cruelest stroke ever dealt the negro, since the time when he was torn from his native land, was hurling him all unprepared into politics" (Parton, "Antipathy," 491).

⁷⁴See Wilson, "Racial Politics of Imitation."

⁷⁵Greener insists that Walker's *Appeal* was "the best anti-slavery book published in America" and that he was "the precursor of William Lloyd Garrison, and the single volume of the *Appeal* anticipates every phillippic [*sic*] from the file of the *Liberator*" ("Intellectual Position," 171).

issue in advance by chastising Grégoire, whose 1808 *De la littérature des Nègres* was a reply to Jefferson, for substituting ‘mulattos’ for ‘negroes’ (“Antipathy,” 488).⁷⁶ Although Greener contests the justice of Parton’s limitation of the subject to Africans “of pure blood,” he concedes the point arguing by reproducing some of Grégoire’s examples of unmixed Africans whom Europeans had recognized as accomplished in arts and letters:⁷⁷ an artist called Higiemundo, Anton Wilhelm Amo,⁷⁸ Benoit de Palermo, Olaudah Equiano, J. E. J. Capitein, and a slew of other African-born individuals who, for one reason or another, were transported into European lands where they demonstrated ability in various pursuits. Greener’s list culminates, appropriately, with the Haitian statesmen Toussaint L’Ouverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the former of whom Wendell Phillips had rated above Napoleon (thereby generating the entire scandal among Northern elites).⁷⁹

Greener understood well, however, that a mere tribute to distinguished African men and women would be unconvincing to the likes of Parton. More central to his ultimate strategy than the first salvo—call it “the argument from Black intellectual history”—is rather his bullet-biting reply to the charge of imitation. He had begun the relevant line of argument already in the previous year’s “Emigration of Colored Citizens”: after granting that his people possessed a tendency to imitation, he countered that it was a general truth about oppressed peoples. That enabled him to turn the tables against white Southerners, who, after all, were decidedly not a people who should be imitated: “the South is a wretched place for any people to develop in, but especially for the Negro; because, like all subject races, he imitates the life about him” (477). In “Intellectual Position,” Greener repeats the idea by noting that imitation is the main characteristic of any “enslaved or proscribed race, cut off from all its own traditions” but also formulates something of a general theory of “the infancy and childhood of nations” (“Intellectual Position,” 187):

Keener students of metaphysics and closer observers of the processes of mental development in the infancy and childhood of nations have led us to believe that, next to memory, the power of imitation is almost the *sine qua non* of permanent intellectual success. To an enslaved and proscribed race, cut off from all its traditions, imitations are what judgments are in the process of reasoning, the conditions precedent from which and through which the third thing—knowledge, invention, thought—whatever we may term it, must be evolved. (187–88)

⁷⁶In reality, it was Jefferson who lacked a clear mixed-versus-pure notion of Blackness, as Greener notes, whereas Grégoire indeed distinguished “les Mulâtres” from “les Nègres.” Greener (“Intellectual Position,” 177) quotes a long passage from Grégoire on this subject: “Les écrivains nègres sont en plus grand nombre que les Mulâtres” (*De la littérature des nègres*, 190). Interestingly, Greener claims to be reading from the copy that Grégoire sent Jefferson himself, and notes an inscription: “À Mr. Jefferson, Président des États Unis, de la part d’auteur.” As in previous cases, it is difficult to discern the extent to which Greener is serious.

⁷⁷Greener writes about “pure blood,” without elaborating his objection, in this context: “Whatever that phrase might mean when applied to human beings” (“Intellectual Position,” 176).

⁷⁸Amo has since been recognized by scholars of modern European philosophy. See Amo, *Dissertations on Mind and Body*; and Smith, *Human Difference*, 207–30.

⁷⁹Wendell Phillips (1811–84), a follower of Garrison, was a Boston pastor whose 1863 oration “Toussaint L’Ouverture” presents its hero’s biography “as an argument . . . that the Negro race, instead of being that object of pity or contempt which we usually consider it, is entitled, judged by the facts of history, to a place close by the side of the Saxon” (513–14).

Greener's historicism and classicism play a role in the completion of this second argument. He had long claimed that Jefferson adopted "all men are created equal" from a French reading of Stoicism. Similar borrowings, he adds, were common in European letters: Virgil imitated Homer, Dante imitated Virgil, and Milton imitated all three (188). With this he concedes that his Black intellectual heroes were imitators of white Europeans, but in the same manner in which the English imitated the Italians, the latter the Romans, and so on.⁸⁰ European writers, like his own heroes, had only "imitated the imitators" (186). This acknowledgment raises the whole question of the deep history of European letters, which Greener had studied in his youth through narratives such as Henry Thomas Buckle's *History of Civilization*.⁸¹ Buckle's massive tomes had played the role at Harvard that Hegel's *Philosophy of History* and similar texts had played abroad: it attempted to account for the superiority of European culture by tracing its rise from a pure and unmixed Greek beginning. In reply, Greener observes that the Greeks and Romans themselves had "imitated" the Egyptians. His final touch is to place this acknowledgment in the mouth of a Frenchman, citing the Comte de Volney's *Travels through Syria and Egypt*: that author admitted in print that "we owe our art and science, and even the use of speech, to the race of Negroes" (187n).⁸² The argument from imitation, taken to its end and considered in light of the deep history of European letters, should rather entail the falsity of Eurocentric, civilizationist narratives.⁸³

One of the last remaining missives by Greener is a letter he wrote to Arthur Schomburg in June 1916.⁸⁴ These two bibliophiles exchanged reports on Black history and letters—in this case, a new edition of Wheatley. Greener was then in Chicago, where he would live his final days in relative obscurity. On this occasion, he notes that "Ferris is here" (Schomburg, 1). Ferris was the Yale- and Harvard-educated author of *The African Abroad: The Black Man's Evolution in Western Civilization* (1908, 1913), a massive two-volume work that is arguably still the most complete treatment of its subject. Ferris's entire historical argument in that work proceeds on the assumption that "the Negro is an imitative being," and he purposefully embellishes the extent to which America's Black populations

⁸⁰"It is true, all the examples mentioned are cases of imitation" ("Intellectual Position," 186).

⁸¹See "Individuality," where Greener praises Buckle's originality and boldness, but also "Academic Life," where Greener quotes a lengthy passage about the study of Buckle by the Harvard elite in the early 1860s.

⁸²Greener references "Volney's *Voyages en Syrie*" as if the source were familiar, which it would not have been to many. Constantin François de Chasseboeuf, Comte de Volney was a French philosopher and contemporary of Jefferson. The latter had translated the former's *Ruins of Empire* (see Williams, "Ruins of Empires"). Volney was also a visitor to Monticello, making him a surprising source of evidence of African intellectual achievement. The same passage from Volney appeared in Anonymous, "Negro in Ancient History," 71–72. It is not an exact translation, but Volney wrote, "de penser que cette race d'hommes noirs, aujourd'hui notre esclave et l'objet de nos mépris, et c'est la même à qui nous devons nos arts, nos sciences, et jusqu'à l'usage de la parole" (*Voyage*, 76).

⁸³McClendon and Ferguson ("African American Philosophers," 23–24) discuss Greener in the context of this argument.

⁸⁴Schomburg was a Puerto Rico-born historian whose collections formed the cornerstone of the eponymous Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. Two letters from Greener to Schomburg are preserved there, the one in question from June 22, 1916.

imitate white ones (*African Abroad*, 1:282).⁸⁵ As with Greener, Ferris combines this premise with a low estimation of the Anglo-Saxon intellect, concluding from it that American culture may advance only through the efforts of the mixed-race population of “Negrosaxons.”⁸⁶ So, Greener’s arguments from this stage of his career were not without effect, though they survived mainly among an ignored class of Black writers.

4. ASSIMILATION AND AMALGAMATION

In October of 1883, the Supreme Court reversed the Civil Rights Act of 1875, erasing the legacy of the Radical Republicans and opening the door for further Jim Crow legislation.⁸⁷ As Greener had predicted during his 1879 debate with Douglass, the Reconstruction Amendments proved to be insufficient protection for freedpeople. By the summer of 1884, his reputation as a speaker on such issues had grown, and he toured the South for a series of lectures. By his own count, he was “ordered out of ‘first class’ cars” on four occasions, but he refused each time.⁸⁸ While Jim Crow was thus staking his place in the trains and the courts, Northern periodicals solicited pundits of the day to speculate about America’s racial future. The *North American Review* printed, in the same summer Greener suffered his first experience of the Jim Crow car, a symposium called “The Future of the Negro.” The editors invited ten authors to address the subject, among them seven white men of various affiliations alongside Douglass, Greener, and J. A. Emerson.

These ten short essays present the full range of positions on the 1884 variant of the “Negro Question”: Black people from the South might migrate northward, but miscegenation should be discouraged;⁸⁹ they should stay in the South and advance, ever so slowly, in culture and politics;⁹⁰ they should stay in the South but be kept in subordination to their natural superiors;⁹¹ they will amalgamate with Southern whites, thereby degrading the culture and the people there;⁹² and they must be deported because otherwise they will amalgamate with Southern whites.⁹³ This is the

⁸⁵“I can tell what sort of people the white people of any community are by associating with the Negro” (Ferris, *African Abroad*, 1:282).

⁸⁶“The philosophy of the Declaration of Independence . . . originated in the minds of Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot and the French encyclopedists” (Ferris, *African Abroad*, 1:286).

⁸⁷Civil Rights Cases, 109 U.S. 3 (1883): “Syllabus 1. The 1st and 2d sections of the Civil Rights Act passed March 1st, 1876, are unconstitutional enactments as applied to the several States, not being authorized either by the XIIIth or XIVth Amendments of the Constitution.”

⁸⁸Mounter, “African American Individual,” 149–50.

⁸⁹This is the position of Emerson, the third Black contributor.

⁹⁰Joel Chandler Harris, author of the notorious Uncle Remus stories, gives this civilizationist argument but demands patience (“Future,” 87).

⁹¹J. H. Walworth repeats many of the platitudes of imitation and describes the Black race as generally unthreatening to “the superiority of the educated race” (Walworth, “Future,” 97).

⁹²Charles Gardiner, later Regent of the State University of New York, argues that since (1) the mixed populations of Brazil and Mexico present “results adverse to miscegenation,” and (2) brain measurements suggest the inferiority of people of mixed ancestry, then “Whites [will] be absorbed by negroes, not negroes by whites, and the brain capacity of the mixed race [will] be little superior to that of the pure negro” (Gardiner, “Future,” 80).

⁹³John T. Morgan, an Illinois judge and Hayes appointee, accepts premises similar to those in Gardiner’s contribution. But Morgan employs them as the basis for a new call to colonize the Congo (Morgan, “Future,” 83–84).

rhetorical context in which Douglass presented his arguments for amalgamation, which contemporary philosophers are more apt to view through the lens of Du Bois's later argument about conservation.⁹⁴ But Douglass's arguments were neither retrograde nor wildly implausible, even though we now know his predictions to have been false. His argument is empirical, and he draws it on the basis of fertility rates, migration patterns, and the history of American race-mixing.

Douglass actually published two defenses of his amalgamation hypothesis in the *Review*, the second version appearing in the May 1886 issue and titled "The Future of the Colored Race." In the 1884 symposium, he begins by considering the old claims about the inferiority of mixed races, acknowledging also the new calls for involuntary deportation. He highlights, as Greener also would, the persistence of the Black race in the American South, refuting separatism on the basis of the earlier analogies of European admixture: "It was once degradation for a Norman to associate with a Saxon; but time and events have swept down the barriers between them, and Norman and Saxon have become Englishmen" (Douglass, "Future," 85).⁹⁵ By combining these ideas with the actual history of race-mixing in America—no impersonal topic to someone like Douglass or Greener—a conclusion regarding amalgamation is easily reached.

In the 1886 text, Douglass extends his analysis by considering the rapid physical and intellectual progress made by Black Americans in the first two decades after emancipation. It presents perhaps his clearest statement of the amalgamation hypothesis, though he insists that he is withholding his full evidence for it:

My strongest conviction as to the future of the negro therefore is, that he will not be expatriated nor annihilated, nor will he forever remain a separate and distinct race from the people around him, but that he will be absorbed, assimilated, and will only appear finally, as the Phoenicians now appear on the shores of the Shannon, in the features of a blended race. ("Colored Race," 300)

As this passage makes clear, Douglass's argument is best characterized as a disjunctive syllogism. Four logical possibilities suggest themselves for the nature of the "Negro question," namely, what should or will happen to this troubled race existing within a larger population. The possibilities are colonization or expatriation, permanent separation or segregation, annihilation, and amalgamation. The survival of Black America through several centuries of enslavement makes annihilation appear improbable, though Douglass acknowledges that there are, unfortunately, many historical cases of the disappearance of a given population or other ("Future," 84–85).⁹⁶ Colonization seemed a more plausible plan before the war, when white politicians such as Henry Clay and Black nationalists led by Crummell were in reluctant agreement on the issue. Douglass's syllogism thus reduces to whether

⁹⁴Du Bois, "Conservation of Races."

⁹⁵This argument forecasts somewhat the extension of the race concept to the various peoples of Europe: instead of retaining the old position that there are four or five human races, writers of the 1890s and 1900s would author tracts with titles such as Ripley, *Races of Europe*, examining, for example, the progress of Gauls and Franks into the French. But there are many other such books, as noted for instance by Du Bois in the opening of "Health and Physique."

⁹⁶He makes his case persuasively in the 1884 piece, mixing empirical and moral argument: "Drive out the Negro and you drive out Christ, the Bible, and American liberty with him" (Douglass, "Future," 84–85).

separation is more likely than amalgamation, and the fondness of white Americans for mating with Black people suggests to him (in the 1884 essay) an obvious answer:

Nor do I think that the negro will become more distinct as a class. Ignorant, degraded, and repulsive as he was during his two hundred years of slavery, he was sufficiently attractive to make possible an intermediate race of a million, more or less. If this has taken place in the face of those barriers, what is likely to occur when the colored man puts away his ignorance and degradation and becomes educated and prosperous? The tendency of the age is unification; not isolation; not to clans and classes, but to human brotherhood. ("Future," 85)

Surprisingly enough given Greener's earlier deflationist positions on race, his contribution to "The Future of the Negro" involves a combination of the separatist and amalgamationist hypotheses. The general argument follows a line similar to Douglass's, with added shots at Madison and Jefferson: Black Americans have repeatedly disproved every claim of inferiority, and their presence in America after two and a half centuries is evidence against annihilation (Greener, "Future," 92).⁹⁷ Separation and amalgamation are thus the only real possibilities. But Greener draws a different conclusion. He agrees that white Americans will seek to absorb the lighter-skinned, mixed-race class of people, and he even claims that "mixed bloods . . . must be absorbed into the white society, where they actually belong" (90). At the same time, however, he predicts the "predominance of pure blacks" in the South, before forecasting their eventual political control of that section (90). The main premise in Greener's argument is that whites' interest in interracial sex is unreciprocated:

In only isolated cases will the negro seek to marry with white people. Few negroes who have any real pride of race ever do. In all experience of forced cohabitation before the war, the white was the persistent miscegenationist, the black was the victim. (90)

This premise, when added to the higher fertility rates of the early 1880s, leads Greener to conclude that "pure Blacks" will constitute a democratic majority in the South (90).⁹⁸ He does not make this striking conjecture, however, without due qualification and an intermediate proposal. He recognizes the need to assuage white fears, "allaying the phantom of negro supremacy," as he calls it, and he gives a concrete proposal toward this end of integrating Black Americans into governance (89). Rising members of that population, especially in the South, needed government positions in the short term that would appear unthreatening to whites. Greener thus suggests that the United States Department of State designate consul positions in Africa for Black Americans (89).⁹⁹ This would conciliate white America's fear of a Black nation while adding "a brilliant stroke of policy for the spread of our commerce" (89). It also would enable Black Southerners to train in diplomacy without giving rise to race wars.

⁹⁷"Every adverse opinion of him . . . has been quietly disproved" (Greener, "Future," 92).

⁹⁸He predicts that white politicians will eventually "seek alliances among the black leaders," and that "the negro of 1984 will be a very different person from the negro of to-day" (Greener, "Future," 90). These lines represent a change in thinking by Greener, whose scepticism about racial purity was stronger in "Intellectual Position." See my references to Jefferson and Grégoire above, in section 3.

⁹⁹"[The Negro] will become, however, more and more interested in the capabilities of the fatherland. From the United States the stream of civilization will inevitably lead to Africa" (Greener, "Future," 89).

We should evaluate these strange arguments from the 1880s in due context, remembering all the while that the initial onset of Jim Crow did not yet include the notorious one-drop definitions of Blackness nor the antimiscegenation laws of the new century.¹⁰⁰ The bimodal racial system of the Jim Crow future simply was not apparent to Douglass or Greener in 1884. For his part, Greener also had deep personal interest in the question of whether Black Americans might assimilate demographically with whites: his wife Genevieve was an extremely light-skinned daughter of the cultured Washington, DC, elite, who by this time would have been considered passing. A decade later, she and their five children changed their name to Greene, disappearing into the white world as Greener had insisted that mixed-race families must.¹⁰¹ Greener refused that route, though it was not phenotypically unavailable to him.¹⁰² He sought instead the other option that he had proposed in “The Future of the Negro”: in May 1898, McKinley appointed him the first Black foreign consul of the United States. His assignment, however, was to the cold shores of Vladivostok, Siberia, instead of his preferred continent of Africa.¹⁰³ He remained in Siberia until the spring of 1906, when his recall to America brought him to a reality unlike the one that he had predicted.

5. GREENER'S LEGACY

“The Future of the Negro” represents Greener’s final appearance in the national spotlight, and his last opportunity to be co-platformed with Douglass. During the following summer of 1885, as he turned a mere forty-one years old, Greener moved to New York in order to take a civil service job. He rose slowly in the ranks of government for thirteen years before the consular appointment of 1898, and his professional success came at the expense of his scholarship. His only major publication from the entire period is 1894’s “The White Problem.”¹⁰⁴ That essay reframes some of his earlier points, advancing what were distinct arguments into a single theory about the race problem. ‘The white problem’ is Greener’s general name for what we otherwise might call anti-Black racism, and the various “phases” of the white problem are just the familiar tropes such as the school of slavery argument, ignorance of Black history, and the theory of imitation. He no longer follows Socrates by equating vice with ignorance, but instead locates the white problem in a “feeling” that follows “some occult reason” (“White Problem,” 355). In contrast to his earlier observations, he discovers this feeling in the North

¹⁰⁰In the 1886 “Future of the Colored Race,” Douglass calls the beginnings of one-drop thinking a “sin against the verity of language” (301), predicting that it will quickly disappear.

¹⁰¹Greener’s daughter Belle became a white woman worthy of biography (Ardizzone, *Illuminated Life*), and it is through this path that Greener’s own biographers have guessed about the timeline of the passing decision.

¹⁰²Chaddock, *Uncompromising Activist*, concludes with an excellent chapter called “The Passing of Richard T. Greener.”

¹⁰³Blakely, “‘Talented Tenth’s’ Dilemma.”

¹⁰⁴He published at least one article about fractional Blackness in the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* (June 17, 1886). See Chaddock, *Uncompromising Activist*, 111; and Mounter, “African American Individual,” 353–54.

as well as in the South, and among Republicans as well as Democrats (355).¹⁰⁵ “The White Problem” thus presents a vigorous conclusion to Greener’s theory of racism, while at the same time illustrating the disappointments of the redemption period: in the precise moment when Greener reached a full theory of racism-cum-white problem, he ceased to think of it as corrigible in the way that he once had.

A fairly obvious correlate to Greener’s decline as a scholar is that his broader views on republicanism and the *kallipolis* had no place left in the America of *Plessy*. His philosophy reflects only a Reconstruction America that never quite came to pass, and which an aged Greener characterized in 1917 as an “exaggerated hope” (“Reminiscences,” 292). In his more circumscribed role as philosopher of the postbellum period, however, Greener still deserves a place in the American pantheon. He lent the politics of Reconstruction one of its more compelling formulations, in some cases with advantages over Douglass, next to whose philosophy Greener’s should take its place. Charles Mills has aptly condensed Douglass’s philosophy into four theses: natural law, originalism, slavery or racism as inconsistent with American democracy, and assimilation.¹⁰⁶ On my telling, Greener gently improved upon his mentor at each turn. His more principled adoption of natural law (thesis 1) required a more robust unionism that should have repelled efforts at Southern redemption. He took a broader historical scope that entailed a rejection of originalism (thesis 2). Most importantly, this enabled him to oppose the theory that slavery and racism contradict some pure set of American founding principles (Mills’s thesis 3). Greener instead placed the American colonists on a lower tier, situating their exploitation of slave labor within global norms and patterns. He thereby also rejected the identification of the American state with a specific ethnic group (thesis 4), and so he offered a more pluralistic alternative to Douglass’s call for racial amalgamation. The result of all this is a principled, unionist republicanism grounded in natural equality and with an appreciation of ethnic and human diversity.¹⁰⁷

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¹⁰⁵“This feeling obtains in the North as well as the South . . . all seemed to think that for some occult reason this infant must not be allowed to grow in any one of the social, religious, or political ways in which other American citizens grow and healthfully develop for the good of their country” (“White Problem,” 355).

¹⁰⁶Mills, “Whose Fourth of July?”

¹⁰⁷The author would like to thank his colleagues in the Josiah Royce Society, especially Tommy J. Curry, Myron Moses Jackson, Dwayne Tunstall, Daniel Brunson, and Kara Barnette. This study resulted from our collective responses to Curry’s work in 2019–20. Thanks also to Katherine Chaddock for reviewing the manuscript before submission.

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