How do you describe a social practice that is legal, practiced widely, and defined as ethically appropriate even though it clearly conflicts with the basic standards of a society’s religious, ethical, and constitutional principles? This is the challenge faced by Americans beginning four centuries ago with the transporting of Africans to this country against their will and classifying them as slaves, totally subject to the will of their masters, with virtually no human rights, powers of self-determination, or means of escape.

And this in a nation established on the principle that “all men are created equal [and] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,” including “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

During the 1830s, southern political leader John C. Calhoun introduced the term “peculiar institution.” This phrase acknowledged that the position of enslaved Africans differed from that of white citizens but it supported the practice as being suitable and for the benefit of all concerned.

Although white society defended the legitimacy of this system, allowing it to continue until the Civil War rejected its basic forms, black people objected with increasing clarity and power during the same years that white people were supporting it. From constant experience, they knew that slavery was a terrible way of life and was in sharp conflict with the principles that white society used to describe and support their own place in the social order.

In his book Peculiar Rhetoric: Slavery, Freedom, and the African Colonization Movement, Southard focuses attention upon three inter-connected aspects of the nineteenth century context for this rhetorical and political struggle: (1) growing unrest across the country because of slavery; (2) the emergence of debate about the peculiar institution aimed by some to support its continuing legitimacy and by others to do away with it; and (3) the emergence of organizations and processes, especially the American Colonization Society, intent upon overcoming this institution in ways that could be affirmed by white societies in the north and south. Southard is interested in the rhetoric that was in the middle, existing between competing traditions in white society, drawing ideas from each side without uniting them. Although this rhetoric may have reduced conflicts.
between opposing sides, it did not resolve these differences and thus found it difficult to motivate people on either side to act.

As befits a professor of communication studies (at the University of Georgia), Southard devotes much of this book to the study of major deliberative discourses and related correspondence and writings during the nineteenth century. Three were the work of white men—Henry Clay, Elias B. Caldwell, and Abraham Lincoln. The first two, whom Southard discusses in chapter one, were active leaders during the development of the colonization movement in 1817 and thereafter. Lincoln’s addresses and actions took place during his presidency, nearly half a century later and are analyzed in chapter five. Chapters two, three, and four, half of the book, analyze discourses and papers by black authors, including a memorial by “the Free People of Colour of the District of Columbia” and writings by Louis Sheridan and Hilary Teague.

Clay, sometimes referred to as “the great compromiser, was a senator from Kentucky and one of the most influential national leaders in that era. In late December of 1816, he chaired a meeting in Georgetown, Maryland, called “to discuss the creation of a colony of free blacks” in Africa. In his opening remarks, Clay stated that “free blacks ‘neither enjoyed the immunities of freemen, nor were they subject to the incapacities of slaves, but partook in some degree of the qualities of both.’ The “unconquerable prejudices” existing in the states were too strong to overcome this peculiar situation. Furthermore, Clay argued, colonization had moral benefits: it would “interact and introduce ‘the arts, civilization and Christianity;’” return blacks to their homeland; and “through their support of colonization could ‘extinguish a great portion of that moral debt which she [America] has contracted to that unfortunate continent [Africa]’” (p. 27).

Caldwell was a lawyer serving as clerk of the Supreme Court in Washington, D. C., and was part of group of influential people who were developing plans to establish a colonization society and process. In his address, the major presentation at this meeting, he discussed ideas similar to Clay’s but at much greater depth. Southard provides three tables that outline the major points in Caldwell’s address. He dealt with the propriety, practicality, and expediency of colonization. Confident that these arguments would be persuasive to people across the wide spectrum of opinion, he assured his audiences that funding would come. He believed that free blacks would respond positively by the prospect of developing a new freedom for themselves and their families in the new world that Africa would be for them rather than “remaining in a hopeless state of degradation” here in the United States (p. 30). By the close of this meeting, the participants had established the African Colonization Society (the ACS). The National Intelligencer announced this action on December 24, 1816, and in this same issue published the speeches of Clay and Caldwell.

In chapter 2, Southard discusses the response to these speeches in “Counter Memorial” a document published in the National Intelligencer less than a week later, on December 30, 1816. Its authors described themselves as “free persons of colour, resident in the district of Columbia, born in the United States, and of parents born there also.” They “denounced the peculiar argumentation of the ACS and offered reasons to oppose the removal of blacks against their will.” They proposed that “the prejudices of color would be remedied ‘at once natural, easy and efficacious’ through ‘amalgamation,’ wherein the races would mix socially and, perhaps, sexually” (pp. 40-1).

Southard devotes much of the chapter to discussing the three voices in this document, three ways of understanding the authors’ intention: serious, ironic, and signifying. Its impact was to
undercut the arguments that white society was advancing, at times mocking those arguments, and all the while insisting that people of colour were fully able to speak on their own behalf. They made it clear that they had no interest in going to Africa and instead wanted to stay right here in America.

Some blacks, however, decided that they were interested in relocating to Africa and engaged in what Southard describes as “the Negotiation of Diasporic and Deliberative Discourse.” One of these persons, Louis Sheridan, was an emancipated black man who became a wealthy person, skilled writer, friend of the governor, and slaveholder. The written record that he left behind, discussed in chapter three, consists primarily of his correspondence and negotiations with the ACS. Sheridan found himself in an increasingly difficult position. Despite his freedom and other strong qualities, he was still a black man whose freedom and opportunities were more and more constrained by white policies. It was as though he had become a non-person. When he outlined his questions about the process of making the journey to leaders of the ACS, he was largely ignored. He gradually shifted from representing what Southard refers to as Afro-Optimism to afropessimism. At the end, Sheridan gave up on the African Colonization Society and with others emigrated to Liberia with another company. One of Southard’s conclusions to this chapter is that “across the years of letters described throughout this chapter, it was clear that Sheridan grappled with colonization and could neither unequivocally support nor denounce the venture” (p. 83).

Chapter four is devoted to an examination of the “peculiar obligations” that faced colonists in Liberia as they created a civic identity for their new political undertaking. The central figure in the chapter is Hilary Teage, colonial settler who was “an ordained minister in a Baptist church, a merchant, a founder of the Liberia Lyceum, and a colonial agent for the ACS. “It is safe to say that no single settler colonist had more impact on public life in colonial Liberia than Teage.” Southard begins the chapter by stating that Teage “was Liberia’s Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison” (p. 86).

Teage framed the task of creating a civic identity that faced the Liberian settlers as a moral fight in contrast to the conflict they had already faced when driving “the invading native from our door.” These were “bloody conflicts with indigenous people worsened by the hardships of colonial life” (p. 87). The primary source of Teage’s ideas that Southard uses are his Liberia Lyceum Speech delivered on May 21, 1845, and his Anniversary Speech delivered on December 1, 1846. It is clear that the colonists, including Teage and his family, faced a more complex moral challenge in their ongoing challenge by “governing forces an ocean away.” They were promised freedom and liberty in exchange for their willingness to move to Liberia. Their relocation would also serve a missionary purpose, bringing Christianity to the native African populations they would encounter. The ACS failed to deliver on these promises, leaving many settler colonists feeling first gratitude for the opportunity to be free, and then disappointment that such freedom was denied. Unlike their peculiarity in America, where free blacks existed in a liminal social space between free whites and enslaved blacks, settler colonists in Liberia existed in a liminal space between the promise and the lie of freedom (p. 91).
In these addresses and in his many labors, Teage sought to lead his compatriots in developing a civic and governmental system that drew upon their previous experience in America and at the same time revised them to take into account the shortcomings they had experienced. An example is the revision of Jefferson’s language in the Liberian Declaration of Independence. “We recognize in all men certain natural and inalienable rights: among these are life, liberty, and the right to acquire, possess, enjoy, and defend property” (p. 112). When Teage died an early death in 1853 at the age of forty-six, much work remained to be done in developing the civic life of the Liberian colony.

Southard’s exposition of Lincoln’s peculiar rhetoric on the issues of race is based on the president’s second Annual Message which he delivered to Congress on December 1, 1862. Lincoln seemed keenly aware of the tension between supporters of slavery and supporters of freedom and developed a pragmatic way of moving forward that included compensated emancipation and colonization. These two measures would not resolve the tension between North and South, nor that between white and black, but Lincoln’s proposal was designed to make it possible for the two sides to work together for the well-being of the nation. Initially, Lincoln considered these two measures as “compromise-as-mutual ease” but he gradually shifted his position, understanding them to be “compromise as mutual concession” (p. 125). Lincoln’s plan included support for colonization, which “provided some relief,” Southard writes, “for those members of Lincoln’s audience for whom the prospect of living among free blacks would disqualify the president’s proposal as a viable solution. Compensated emancipation alone could not address these prevailing racists’ ideologies, at least for the current generation” (p. 128).

Lincoln argued that his plan was just and would overcome the burden that slavery had created for the nation. Although it would be costly, the costs of the war that was shaping up, he argued, would be much greater. It would take time, with 1900 as the final date, for slavery and its effects to be fully overcome. The states, however, would be free to take action along these lines much earlier. Lincoln was not able to bring about the compromise that he promoted so vigorously. “It was a failed attempt at compromise and was, by the standards of many people at the time, and certainly many more people today, morally questionable at the least” (p. 131).

The Civil War and the Reconstruction amendments altered American life but did not resolve the struggle to reshape American life and establish real freedom to black people. Moving to Africa continued to be promoted, but under a new guise, increasingly empowered by black people. Colonization was replaced by Emigration. Although the achieving of life, liberty, and property seemed possible in the United States, it did not seem likely, which made relocation to Africa seem like a reasonable goal for American blacks. Southard discusses two people who took the lead in trying to achieve relocation in this new character.

Henry McNeal Turner, converted at a camp meeting in the 1840s, “made preaching his vocation in 1853” and later became interested in emigration, first to Haiti. By 1875, he turned his attention to Africa. Emigration, he believed, was “the only way “to rehabilitate black manhood, to restore African Americans’ self-respect, and secure the respect of other races and nations” (p. 134). He insisted that the nation owed black people billions of dollars in reparations and therefore it was just that the nation fund emigration. He aligned himself with a group of American
legislators “who still believed in the inferiority of blacks” in the hope that federal funding for emigration could be achieved.

Despite his eloquence and persistence, Turner’s efforts were unsuccessful. One reason was opposition to emigration by significant black leaders, with Frederick Douglass a prime example. Throughout the later years of the century, Douglas continued to insist that “assimilation and not isolation is our true policy and natural destiny.” He and others like him always viewed colonization “as a ruse, a trick to avoid granting full and unfettered rights to African Americans” (p. 136).

Southard brings his narrative into the twentieth century by discussing Marcus Garvey and the Back-to-Africa Movement, and then continuing with the opposing ideas championed by W. E. B. DuBois. Garvey enlarged the purpose of the return to Africa by advocating that “blacks everywhere work to reclaim Africa from European colonizers.” Garvey’s movement reversed the power relation because it “was not led by white people telling the blacks where to go; it was led by blacks telling the whites where to go” (p. 137). His plans led to temporary alliances with antiblack racists and white supremacists such as Senator Theodore Bilbo from Mississippi. It also incited strong opposition from W. E. B. Dubois who described Garvey as “without doubt, the most dangerous enemy of the Negro race in America and in the world. He is either a lunatic or a traitor.” About 5,000 American blacks did emigrate to Liberia where they joined a population of some five hundred thousand people. These emigrants, members of settler-colonist class, soon held nearly all elective offices in the nation. “At least one colonist openly maintained that the native Africans ought to be the slaves to the colonists” (p. 138).

The final paragraph of this book develops the assertion that the “examination of peculiar rhetorics in this book demonstrates the value of a turn toward the middle. . .It allows for reexamination of texts whose meanings have been settled or glossed by history.” Although the “process of understanding the rhetorics of race” will never be finished or settled, Southard writes, the discussion “ought to account for the complexity of racial issues” (142).

Although I am greatly interested in the topics discussed in this book, I have found it difficult to understand and assimilate despite the fact that the author is a professor of communication studies. For me, the book’s most important contribution is the attention it gives to the varied responses of African Americans to the colonization movement, thus filling in an aspect of my understanding of American history that has been virtually empty. I appreciate his strong emphasis upon paying attention to rhetorics in the middle as a way to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of inter-group struggle and debate. Despite the hard work of reading this treatise, I recommend it to others, especially everyone interested in helping Americans give intelligent ethically just shape to the multi-racial culture that is emerging in this nation in our time.