

## “Diaspora Literacy and the Africanization of Cuba in Martin Delany’s *Blake*”

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In fall 1853, the *Daily National Intelligencer* commented on a report that was “calculated to startle”: Great Britain was intervening into foreign affairs to accelerate the abolition of slavery in Cuba, not only sounding “the knell of slavery in the Antilles” but also signaling their intentions of “wresting the island from the dominion of Spain.” The article details a concerted British effort to facilitate gradual emancipation in Cuba by “introducing apprentices from Africa into Cuba, with the consent of Spain and under the protection of British ships-of-war, to be worked for ten years as slaves; with the further agreement that slavery shall cease to exist in the island at the end of fifty years.” Deliberately undermining its stated purpose of quelling national anxieties over Great Britain doubly violating the Monroe Doctrine (intruding into both US-American foreign policy with Spain and domestic debates over slavery), the article fanned the most unspeakable fears of Southern enslavers by contextualizing the potential emancipation of 800,000 enslaved people in Cuba with a reminder that “slavery has long since been extinguished in the large French Island of Hayti.”<sup>1</sup> Not only would the abolition of slavery in Cuba sever the illegal routes for human trafficking that continued to feed Southern demands for captive labor, but the immediate proximity of enormous free Black populations in Haiti, Jamaica, and Cuba would also exacerbate their worries about a domino effect. The British, the report insinuates, were acutely aware of this uneasiness because of uprisings throughout their own colonies after failed attempts at gradual emancipation in the 1830s. Furthermore, the article suggests the British would leverage these fears to pressure the United States into abolishing slavery, thereby leveling the economic playing field among imperial powers. However accurate or exaggerated these reports were (most coverage dismissed the scandal as blustery posturing among Atlantic nations or annexationist propaganda), their impact on US-American thinking about Cuba was demonstrable. Racist fearmongering and the centrality of Cuba in (inter)national news transformed their catchy characterization of this scheme as the “Africanization of Cuba” into a commonplace expression in the mid-1850s.<sup>2</sup>

So, what exactly did concerns about the “Africanization of Cuba” mean, and what connotations would this phrase accumulate circulating in transnational political discourses? Most

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<sup>1</sup> “The Cuban Question—Extraordinary Rumors,” Washington, D.C. *Daily National Intelligencer*, 22 October 1853.

<sup>2</sup> The abolitionist press shows “Africanization” to be a discursive locus where anxieties about foreign policy were negotiated. Newspapers arguing that the British were interfering, like the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, quickly condemned the scheme on ethical grounds, reprinting an article forecasting the geopolitical nightmare of reopening the African slave trade under the guise of gradual emancipation (“The Africanization of Cuba,” 17 November 1853). Other outlets identified the rhetoric as a cover for either U.S.-American annexationists or European anti-annexationists. For more on how imperial contests shaped this discourse, see Urban, “Africanization;” Foner, *History of Cuba*, 75–85; May, *Southern Dream*, 46–76; Rauch, *American Interest*, 275–94; Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny*, 19–144; and Horne, *Race to Revolution*, 82–99.

concisely, I contend that it names a process of demographic and cultural changes that would result in Cuban institutions assuming the character of African “barbarity” in contradistinction to Euro-American “civilization.” The nominalization was relatively new, however, and therefore pliable, entering English usage just a decade earlier. Furthermore, the fact that it emerges more or less contemporaneously with the advent of “Americanization” proves instructive.<sup>3</sup> For example, the abolitionist *National Era* accused slavery’s advocates and expansionists of fabricating fears that the British were “plotting to arrest our territorial expansion” by supporting the Cuban apprenticeship program “so as to prevent, by its Africanization, its Americanization.”<sup>4</sup> Here, “Americanization” signifies both a transformation of political status (annexing the Spanish colony to the United States as a state) and culture (assimilating Cubans into the United States as citizens). Efforts to colonize Cuba through subjugation and assimilation not only expressed the white nationalist ethos of Manifest; they also established “Africanization” as a similarly self-conscious and violent scheme that competing imperial powers advanced to obviate the culmination of Manifest Destiny. By framing “Americanization” as a preventative measure against “Africanization,” the latter term ultimately serves to conjure the white nightmare of another Haiti—a self-emancipated Black state with self-governing Black population fostering Africana culture(s)—while also justifying preemptive colonization as upholding the Monroe Doctrine and protecting the “righteous” U.S.-American hegemony in the Americas.<sup>5</sup> Through this juxtaposition, the white gaze reveals the anxieties of whiteness embedded in the ambitions of imperial expansion. “More than any other area,” Reginald Horsman writes, “Cuba attracted southern interest in the 1850s,” exacerbating sectional rifts between North and South, but “also revealing . . . the constraints placed on American expansion by new racial ideas.” Proponents of annexing Cuba, for example, nevertheless expressed concerns that the island was “too densely populated to be ‘Americanized,’” lamenting that the promise of annexation was tempered by the impracticality of “changing the racial characteristics of the [majority Black and biracial] population” in Cuba.<sup>6</sup>

While the racist roots of “Africanization” are perhaps unsurprising, this essay asks what the term communicated to Black organizers in the United States, and how its license to define what Africanized cultural institutions were (and could be) informed Black internationalist writing about a majority Afro-descended colony like Cuba. As Stuart Hall argues, “Africa” is, in the Derridean sense, “necessarily ‘deferred’—as a spiritual, cultural, and political metaphor” that Euro-Americans have normalized and fixed “by freezing it into some timeless zone of the primitive, unchanging past.”<sup>7</sup> It serves as a homogenizing container that reduces an eclectic continent of cultures and histories into a pretended common denominator (Blackness), thereby subserving supremacist fantasies and authorizing racial capitalism. For Black internationalists though, a monolithic Africa was a useful fiction that animated possibilities for diasporic solidarity. As a principle and practice of stabilizing these bonds, then, the political potency of “Africa” requires deft navigation of the diverse genealogical and geographical trajectories that originate there and

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<sup>3</sup> “Africanization, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2021, Oed.com; “Americanization, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2021, Oed.com.

<sup>4</sup> “Africanization of Cuba,” *The National Era*, 8 December 1853. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* similarly contrasted the terms, arguing that “Americanization” would be “the most dire calamity which could befall” Cuba (“The Cuban Question,” 23 June 1854).

<sup>5</sup> See Alexander, *Fear*. On the impacts of the Haitian Revolution on Cuba, see Ferrer, *Freedom’s Mirror*; on the fears of Cuba becoming “another Haiti,” see Helg, *Our Rightful Share*, 23–54.

<sup>6</sup> Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 281, 283. In the mid-1800s, Afro-descended people became the majority in Cuba, exacerbating uneasiness among affluent white *criollos* and enslavers (Murray, *Odious Commerce*, 159–240).

<sup>7</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity,” 231.

thereby theoretically unite the diaspora; at the same time, it also requires a recognition that the continental coherence of “Africa” only obtains in transatlantic slavery’s wake. Hall employs diaspora “metaphorically, not literally,” dismissing a formulation of “scattered tribes whose identities can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return.” Instead, “the diaspora experience” is characterized not by appeals to origin or essence but rather through identities that are “constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference,” yielding manifold relations in which cultural differences “are continually repositioned in relation to different points of reference.”<sup>8</sup> Because “Africa” becomes an imagined community through transatlantic slavery, it is in this sense always a diasporic construct. But rather than reconstructing a fictitious past or envisioning an impossible return though, diaspora leverages the utility of a metaphorical “Africa”—rooted in shared histories emanating from the “traumatic ruptures” that “enforced separations from Africa”—to consolidate and preserve those differences into a political community.<sup>9</sup>

Building on Hall’s formulation, this essay tracks how Black internationalists like Martin Delany adopted Africanization amid debates over Cuba’s annexation to the United States. The Black disidentification with this concept speaks back against both its weaponization by annexationists and its discursive homogenization of the continent in service of transnational white supremacy.<sup>10</sup> Whereas Euro-Americans viewed the Africanization of Cuba as a devolution into “barbarity” that threatened to resonate throughout the Americas, the texts I consider here conceptualize it as a reorganization of American societies to more closely resemble what “Africa” signifies to its diaspora: a metaphor for the liberationist organization of a diverse coalition of African Americans (in its broadest sense) that are “*both the same and different*,” and in which “the difference *matters*.”<sup>11</sup>

By regarding Martin Delany’s serial novel, *Blake, or the Huts of America* (1859; 1861–1862), as a laboratory for experimentality with reclaimed understandings of Africanization, I expand on Eric Sundquist’s pioneering reading of how the Cuban El Día de los Reyes celebration in its final chapters “demonstrated the necessary syncretism that infused any Afro-New World society” and “provided, in its ritual breaking down of the regulating power of the slave regime, a model for the eruption of revolution.”<sup>12</sup> While Sundquist provocatively claims that these African cultural retentions constitute “an indigenous account of ‘Africanization’ that powerfully reorients the role of Afro-Cubans among the various factions pitted against the Spanish slave-holding regime,” I argue that these events culminate an evolving strategy throughout *Blake* that expands far beyond Cuba. Indeed, Delany’s novel traces a network of religious, cultural, and political assemblages in the U.S. American South, Cuba, and West Africa to unveil its theory of diaspora, wherein Africanization represents both the means and ends of the hemispheric Black confederation that Delany envisions in the novel. By elaborating a reading strategy championed by the novel itself, I divulge how Black organizers in *Blake* accumulate local knowledge from their distinctive

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<sup>8</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity,” 235.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity,” 227. DuBois’s writings on Pan-Africanism further relieve the defining duality of diaspora: in calling for “intellectual understanding and cooperation among all groups of Negro descent in order to bring about at the earliest possible time the industrial and spiritual emancipation of the Negro peoples” (“Pan-Africa,” 242). Even as “Africa” unites diverse populations through their ancestry, their agenda is transnational Black liberation enacted through local actions and global cooperation, not a romantic return to Africa, recovery of history, or reconsolidation of disparate populations.

<sup>10</sup> See Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.

<sup>11</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity,” 227.

<sup>12</sup> Sundquist, *Wake the Nations*, 212, 213.

constituencies to facilitate recruitment and augment their revolution's impact—they must learn what makes their African (American) allies *different* and then communicate across those differences to elucidate what makes them the *same*.

### Learning “Diaspora Literacy”

In unfolding its expansive political imagination, *Blake* relies on heavy-handed didacticism. Not only does it stage Socratic dialogues designed to wither proslavery arguments and internecine arguments for more conservative approaches to Black liberation (e.g., waiting for legislative action), but it meticulously instructs readers in concrete actions for organizing Black communities. Foremost among *Blake*'s lessons is a masterclass in what Vèvè Clark terms *diaspora literacy*. Responding to (white) U.S.-American readers' frustrations with difficult Afro-Caribbean writings, Clark contends that these texts are only inscrutable insofar as they issue “a command from indigenous, cultural perspectives beyond the field of Western or westernized signification.” In other words, if white readers struggle with Afro-Caribbean texts, it is because they were not written for them; and if they wish to understand them, they must learn to read on the texts' own terms: “It is a skill for both narrator and reader, which demands a knowledge of historical, social, cultural, and political development generated by lived and textual experience.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite journeying across the South in 1839, traveling as a journalist for the *North Star*, living in Canada from 1856 to 1859, and leading the Niger Valley Exploring Party in 1859–60, Delany could hardly be said to possess exhaustive familiarity with his novel's many locales. Still, *Blake* inculcates its readers into intensely local intelligence (e.g. curfew laws, restrictions on mobility, and cruel/permissive enslavers), often in crucial moments of crisis where that expertise represents the difference between capture and escape, between life and death. Thus, although *Blake* occasionally adopts supercilious tones toward African cultures and their adaptations in the South, developing diaspora literacy becomes paramount to its project. For diasporic subjects, understanding “indigenous cultural perspectives” of *other* diasporic subjects is table stakes for diaspora's political potency. Accumulating knowledge and facilitating communication through diaspora literacy not only enable the navigation of the circum-Atlantic routes necessary for amassing a revolutionary army, but they also unravel the manifold false consciousnesses (class, nation, color, caste, etc.) that might otherwise inhibit the development of a more expansive diaspora consciousness.

We see *Blake*'s investments in diaspora literacy most immediately in religion. Henry's project depends on an extended process of making religion that rejects the racist structures of existing worship “to create a new religious establishment that protects black people.”<sup>14</sup> At the novel's outset, Henry repudiates Christianity as an instrument through which white institutions reinforce servility, passivity, and complacency: “Don't tell me about religion! What's religion to me? . . . Put my trust in the Lord! I have done so all my life nearly, and of what use is it to me?”<sup>15</sup> These rhetorical questions illustrate that religion's utility to Henry is as a means of liberation and enlightenment: “You must make your religion serve your interests, as your oppressors do theirs.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Clark, “Developing Diaspora Literacy,” 41–42. On the deliberate challenges that Black Atlantic aesthetics present readers, see Brodber, “Head-Hurting Fiction”; and Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas*.

<sup>14</sup> Shreve, “The Exodus of Martin Delany,” 465.

<sup>15</sup> Delany, *Blake*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Delany, *Blake*, 43.

Henry employs this strategy throughout his travels, and we see its culmination once he gathers the Grand Council of the Army of Emancipation in Cuba. His call for an inaugural prayer at the meeting briefly derails its business as dissent emerges from the Catholic Afro-Cubans. Henry responds by enumerating the myriad sects their shared cause has convened, only to assure them that none of these faiths are alone sufficient: “No religion but that which brings us liberty will we know; no God but he who owns us as his children will we serve . . . [Our ceremonies] are borrowed from no denomination, creed, nor church: no existing organization, secret, secular, nor religious; but originated by ourselves, adopted to our own condition, circumstances, and wants, founded upon the eternal word of God our Creator, as impressed upon the tablet of our hearts.”<sup>17</sup> What Grant Shreve calls Henry’s investment in “religious novelty”—repudiating existing religions and instead drawing on useful aspects of multiple belief systems to forge a heterogeneous assemblage—describes practices ubiquitous throughout the diaspora.<sup>18</sup> Enslaved Africans and their descendants retained their religious-cultural beliefs, but they also eventually adopted and integrated Christian doctrines into these beliefs, either by evacuating the religious aspects of African cultural practices to square them with Christianity or by borrowing distinct elements from each culture to develop new expressions. Religious novelty, then, blends elements of Euro-American and African religions by blending the secular and sacred, the political and the providential. In this way, these beliefs and practices function “not only as an implement humans use to make transnational connections, but also as a thickly lived set of connections to the material that allows the subject to access something outside of the nation-state—that orients the individual otherwise.”<sup>19</sup>

It is fitting, then, that Henry eventually articulates the political expediency of developing a shared, novel religion to unify the African diaspora around a common goal. Recruiting a revolutionary army depends upon his accumulation of knowledge about the myriad Black cultures that have developed in highly localized and disparate contexts. In doing so, Henry imagines diasporic intimacies that develop in the lived experiences of Blackness and then exceed local and national affiliations; or, as John Ernest frames Henry’s project, “What is required is the development of a mode of religious interpretation that extends beyond the purely spiritual realm, one capable of reading the world.”<sup>20</sup> Ernest’s phrase “reading the world” proves doubly insightful. When directed at the white world, *Blake*’s endorsement of religious novelty is a *reading* of white Christianity in the Black vernacular sense, where “to ‘get read’ or ‘be read’ is to be dressed down, or told about yourself”; but when directed at the Black world Henry consolidates through his revolutionary enterprise, *reading* the Black Atlantic requires a polyglot versed in the diverse dispersed communities that would comprise its constituents.<sup>21</sup> This is diaspora literacy.

In what follows, I highlight African religious-cultural practices that pervade the novel and invigorate the diasporic praxis that *Blake* champions. Before proceeding, however, I want to clarify that I am not claiming that Delany deliberately wrote these references into *Blake*. Instead, though largely unfamiliar with and uninterested in African religions, Delany was nevertheless invested in what W. E. B. DuBois calls “a certain spiritual housecleaning” in which “intellectual understanding and cooperation” requires that “Negroes, West Indians, West Africans and South

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<sup>17</sup> Delany, *Blake*, 259.

<sup>18</sup> Shreve, “The Exodus of Martin Delany.”

<sup>19</sup> Jaudon, “Obeah’s Sensations,” 718. While *religious novelty* might also be called “syncretism,” I avoid this term, as critics highlight its tendency to reify constituent religions as “real” while downplaying the realness of “syncretic” religions.

<sup>20</sup> Ernest, *Resistance and Reformation*, 132.

<sup>21</sup> Foreman, *Activist Sentiments*, 3.

Africans must proceed immediately to wipe from their minds the precepts of each other which they have gained through white newspapers” and see one another on their own terms.<sup>22</sup> My contention, then, is not that Delany sounded a deep reservoir of knowledge regarding African cultures to sprinkle references throughout his work. Instead, I argue that diasporic readers *could* recognize these allusions in the text regardless of intentionality and that such interpretations would be meaningful and useful to developing real-world corollaries to the novel’s transnational revolution. Whether Delany understood himself to be authoring allusions is irrelevant because he nevertheless intuitively recognized that symbolism depends on interpretation. *Blake* could therefore signify “simultaneously” by “allow[ing] readers who do not always enjoy shared fields of cultural and social to take multiple interpretive paths through narratives.”<sup>23</sup> More interpretive paths, Delany realized, meant more opportunities for the novel to activate diverse Black audiences and could therefore help organize that diaspora of readers into a politically efficacious body.

These tensions between Delany’s internalized U.S.-American exceptionalism and his recognition of diaspora literacy’s utility materialize throughout *Blake*. Its polyglot protagonist routinely communicates across languages and cultures. Introduced to readers as “a man of good literary attainments . . . having been educated in the West Indies,” this edification shapes his scheme.<sup>24</sup> Not only does he learn to read, write, and speak several languages in Cuba, but his vocational education at sea also teaches him about navigational routes, naval operations, international commerce, and what Julius Scott calls the “common wind” of Black maritime communication networks.<sup>25</sup> As Henry moves throughout the South in the first half of the novel, for example, he gathers knowledge from local informants (e.g. names of enslavers, recent gossip, and individual plantations’ cultures). In “Come What Will,” for instance, Henry secures passage on a steamer as “Gilbert,” an identity he performs based on his familiarity with trade and horseracing along the Mississippi River, while in “What Not,” he learns of extensive gossip networks that have already disseminated his plot for him, allowing locals to anticipate his arrival and facilitate his movements. Similarly, in “A Flying Cloud,” he mistakenly attempts to present himself as a free Black man, only to learn of a statewide restriction on free Black people’s movements in South Carolina, prompting his premature retreat from the state and his more surreptitious movements through Charleston in the subsequent chapter. In sum, these lessons instruct Henry that mobility and accruing regional knowledge are mutually constitutive and mutually enriching. As we will see in the next section, this learning serves him well as he begins to navigate the particulars of the diasporic milieu of colonial Cuba, West Africa, and Black Atlantic.

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<sup>22</sup> DuBois, “Pan-Africa,” 247. For all the details of disease, topography, climate, and politics in his *Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party* (1861), Delany’s remarks on regional religions are spartan, overshadowed by arguments that renewed investments in missionary work are “essential to the success of civilization” in Africa (342). His collaborator, Robert Campbell, however, writes extensively on these matters in recounting the same journey; See *Pilgrimage to My Motherland* (1861). On Delany’s assimilationist ideas for Black-led African colonization; See Adeleke, *UnAfrican Americans*, 43–69; Moses, *Golden Age*, 32–55; Sterling, *Making*, 176–218; and Tomek, *Colonization and its Discontents*, 187–218.

<sup>23</sup> Foreman, *Activist Sentiments*, 6. Erna Brodber’s reflections on the “flying man” trope and her own writing have deeply influenced my thinking here. To explain her seemingly subconscious invocation of the trope despite her lack of familiarity, she concludes, “the tale of the flying man might have been brought from Africa but even if it didn’t pre-exist, it would have to be made in Africa of the diaspora” because “it is natural for the imprisoned who see no hope of being released and who know that there is another kind of life, to think in terms of flight” (“Beyond a Boundary,” 20, 19).

<sup>24</sup> Delany, *Blake*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Scott, *Common Wind*.

## The Africanization of Revolution

Written in the mid-1850s, *Blake* responds to intensifying U.S.-American efforts to annex Cuba (e.g., the 1854 Ostend Manifesto) and the failed filibustering missions of Narciso López. “To have Cuba as a United States territory the Americans are determined,” Delany wrote for the *North Star*, “but what is to be done to prevent a scheme fraught with such fearful consequences as this project of annexation of Cuba?”<sup>26</sup> *Blake* is his answer. Foreshadowed in its opening chapters, the novel’s turn to Cuba in part 2 elaborates its anticolonial arguments and the dual objectives of Henry’s revolution: primarily concerned with annihilating slavery throughout the Americas, his mission must also prevent the annexation of Cuba to the United States, which would further entrench slavery in an expanding U.S.-American Empire.<sup>27</sup>

When Henry arrives in Cuba, he must adapt the lessons learned about vernacular knowledge, religious novelty, and diasporic cultures to the local milieu. Whereas *Blake* relegates Conjure in the U.S.-American South to the Dismal Swamp, for example, the Africanist presence in Cuba literally takes centerstage during El Día de los Reyes in “King’s Day.” The dancing and drums of this sensational, business-halting festival consume the streets of Matanzas, creating cover for Henry, Placido, and their co-conspirators to convene secretly. More than simply providing a distraction though, the festival’s African roots prove equally important to the revolutionaries’ covert machinations. Because *Blake* discloses the festivities through the (white) ethnographic gaze of “a popular American literary periodical” from which the narrator quotes, the event appears as a lurid bacchanalia, brimming with elaborate costumes, lascivious dancing, and unruly masses of *bozales* (Africans) and Afro-Cubans.<sup>28</sup> For white onlookers (whether the Cuban *criollos* or the U.S.-American readers of either the original newspaper account or *Blake*), these scenes physically manifest the threat of Cuba’s Africanization: “One cannot help thinking of the menace of the Spanish Government that Cuba shall be either Spanish or African, and when we see these savages in their play more like wild animals than human beings, the idea what their rage would probably be, makes the boldest shutter.”<sup>29</sup> The account further insinuates that the Cuban colonial government actively encouraged the performances and that by “prolong[ing] for three days the privileges of the day to the Lucumis, the most warlike tribe of the African slaves in Cuba,” they effectively terrorized white *criollos* with “the standing threat that Cuba must be Spanish or African.”<sup>30</sup> As a spectacular performance of Africanness, then, the festival formed part of a racial-colonial disciplinary apparatus designed to suppress anticolonialism among white *criollos* by activating their fears of racial genocide and insinuating that the holiday’s excesses were a faint approximation of what the island’s Africanization would bring.

While such fearmongering aimed to temper anticolonial sentiment, *Blake* suggests that it also emboldened antislavery and anticolonial activism among Afro-Cubans. Although the novel reproduces a white ethnographic gaze that renders the festival’s performances as hedonistic excess, it also effectively *holds* that gaze, providing a distraction while the revolutionary conspirators’ Gran Council convenes to plan its next steps. Historically, El Día de los Reyes celebrations were

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<sup>26</sup> Delany, “Annexation of Cuba,” *North Star*, 27 April 1849.

<sup>27</sup> On *Blake* as response to the annexation debate, see Clymer, “Transnational Politics”; Nwankwo, “Promises and Perils”; and Leary, *Cultural History*, 23–43.

<sup>28</sup> Delany, *Blake*, 299.

<sup>29</sup> Delany, *Blake*, 301.

<sup>30</sup> Delany, *Blake*, 302.

organized by *cabildos de nación*, or ethnocentric Afro-Cuban social organizations designed to preserve African languages and cultures, while also cultivating a political consciousness. Thus, beyond “imply[ing] a secretive African dimension” in Cuban society that unnerved white audiences and emboldened Black ones, the festival advances *Blake*’s argument that local knowledge and diasporic cultures (here, the Yoruba traditions and rituals communicated through drumming and dancing) are vital tools for Black liberation.<sup>31</sup> For example, the passage’s allusion to the “warlike” Lucumí (as the prominent Yoruba are known in Cuba) nods to enslaved uprisings around Matanzas, including La Escalera (1843–44), which resulted in hundreds of enslaved Cubans and their allies (including Plácido) being executed for supposedly plotting a slave rebellion on Christmas Day—or, put differently, during the lead-up to El Día de los Reyes.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, as Jane Landers notes, the investigations into the conspiracy “uncovered a supposed connection between the free blacks of Matanzas and plantation slaves, many of whom turned out to be members of the Lucumí nation. . . . The rebellion allegedly involved witchcraft that would renders the whites ‘stupid’ and their weapons useless.”<sup>33</sup> The allusion to “witchcraft” here suggests that white *criollo* fears not only stemmed from the robust Lucumí *cabildo*, but also from the knowledge that “Lucumí” likewise refers to followers of La Regla Lucumí, a Santería sect endemic to Cuba. Unlike Conjure, which is largely divorced from divinity, La Regla Lucumí is an overtly religious practice that interweaves the Yoruba pantheon with the Catholic canon of saints and martyrs.<sup>34</sup> “Lucumí” therefore aggravates a constellation of white anxieties, including the formalization of Black social networks, the potency of folk knowledge (especially herbology and toxicology), and the “Africanization” of Cuban institutions, including Catholicism.

As a case study for the political utility of diaspora literacy in *Blake*, reviewing part two through the lens of these Africanist presences illuminates how its revolution relies not only on the specter of Cuba’s Africanization, but on the diasporic forms of vernacular knowledge and power that develop through the island’s actual demographic and cultural Africanization, resulting from the continued trafficking of Africans to Cuba. Tellingly, the centerpiece of Henry’s plan involves traveling aboard a slave ship (the *Merchantman* of the opening chapters poetically refitted as the *Vulture*), abetting the purchase of kidnapped Africans, fomenting an uprising at sea, and then enlisting those Africans into his Army of Emancipation in Cuba. Two factors complicate this plan. First, the ship’s white officers have no intention of transporting their human cargo back to Cuba. Instead, they plan to smuggle them into the United States via Key West, where both the captives and the ship’s Black crew would be sold into slavery. Second, just as the rebellion in the *Vulture*’s hold begins, a storm interrupts its momentum, allowing the officers to suppress the uprising but forcing them to reroute to Cuba after all. Upon arriving, Henry circulates gossip about the captives’ rebelliousness through his extensive social networks to depress auction prices, enabling the Grand

<sup>31</sup> Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 212.

<sup>32</sup> As Roberto González Echevarría observes more generally, “uprisings and other politically motivated acts were staged during holidays not only to confuse the authorities or to take advantage of the relaxed vigilance and turmoil” (*Cuban Fiestas*, 287).

<sup>33</sup> Landers, *Atlantic Creoles*, 204–30. The Lucumí were strongly associated with uprisings in Cuba, including a series of 1812 revolts led by José Antonio Aponte (a “leader of the Shangó Tedum *cabildo*, a prominent practitioner of Lucumí religion, and a member of the Ogboni, a powerful secret society of Yorubaland” [Reid, “The Yoruba in Cuba,” 116]) and the arrest of Lucumí *cabildo* leader Juan Nepomuceno Prieto on suspicions of fomenting a slave rebellion in 1835. On these rebellions, see Childs, *Aponte Rebellion* and Lovejoy, *Prieto*. On La Escalera, see Paquette, *Sugar*; Reid-Vasquez, *Year of the Lash*; and Finch, *Rethinking Slave Rebellion*.

<sup>34</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*. On La Regla Lucumí and Santería, see Murray, *Santería*; Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World*; Brown, *Santería Enthroned*; Cros Sandoval, *Worldview*; and Olupona and Abiodun, *Ifá Divination*.

Council’s agents to purchase the entire cohort, including the characters of Abyssa and Mende, who played key roles in the aborted maritime uprising and whom Placido purchased personally.

While the storm metaphorically and narratologically functions as one of divine intervention (deus ex machina), *Blake*’s Christian characters would not be the only ones to appraise it as such. Among the kidnapped Africans in the *Vulture*’s hold, disciples of Yoruba and Dahomean Vodun could have interpreted the gathering storm as the intervention of Changó, the god of fire, thunder, and lightning, who, corresponding to Catholicism’s Saint Barbara, became a central figure in La Regla Lucumí in Cuba.<sup>35</sup> The oral nature of Yoruba and its myriad American adaptations make a concise portrait of Changó challenging to render, but Michele Reid aptly describes him as “a warrior” who symbolizes “power and control over difficulties, but also embodies virility and passion,” making him an ideal figure of the impending insurrection.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, as the weather intensifies at the conclusion of “Middle Passage,” the Black crew commence a gleeful rendition of J. E. Robinson’s “We’re for Freedom through the Land” to torment their oppressors. The song quickly develops into a call and response. As the captives sing “We bring light,” Henry replies with an imperative “See!” In response, “a vivid flash of lightning was seen in the distance, presently followed by a heavy rumbling of thunder.”<sup>37</sup> As if restaging Jehovah’s inaugural speech act (“Let there be light!”), the song summons the storms. And yet to interpret this moment within a strictly Christian framework would be incomplete. In fact, the verse that Henry interrupts continues, “We are coming, we are coming! and ‘No league with tyrant man,’ / Is emblazoned on our banner, while Jehovah leads the van!” Thus, the deliberate truncation of the verse excises the explicit reference to the Christian God, thereby rendering the allusion more ambiguous.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, that interruption (“See!”) visually redirects the crew’s attention to the thunder and lightning—signifiers of Changó. Consequently, regardless of which god the Black crew or captive Africans worshiped, this pivotal moment evidenced that *their* god heard their pleas.<sup>39</sup>

The distinctive religious interpretations of the storm are not mutually exclusive, but rather essential byproducts of the simultextual readings that the novels’ commitments to diaspora necessitate. The pliability of signification across multiple religions and cultures is essential to the organization of the Army of Emancipation precisely because assembling the African diaspora under the aegis of revolution requires responsiveness to differences among its constituents. *Blake* carefully textures that diversity even aboard the *Vulture*. For example, the aforementioned African characters, Abyssa and Mende, play pivotal roles in the maritime insurrection, while

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<sup>35</sup> While I want to be careful not to project worldviews onto the fictional captives, the setting (the Bight of Benin—a key locus of Cuba’s illegal slave trade) strengthens the supposition that they were familiar with Changó. Not only is the deity central to many religions and cosmologies in the region (Cros Sandoval, *Worldview*, 223–36), but of the 48,000 Africans sold into transatlantic slavery from Dahomey in the 1850s, Patrick Manning estimates that about 38,000 were Yoruba (Manning, *Slavery*, 335). Determining the ethnicities of enslaved Africans, however, is notoriously challenging in this period because the now-illegal traffic disincentivized recordkeeping and the records that were kept used ethnic monikers that reflected port of sale rather than individuals’ origins (Hall, *Slavery*; Falola and Childs, “Yoruba Diaspora”; and Eltis, “Diaspora of Yoruba Speakers”). Moreover, centuries of trade had transformed many Africans in coastal regions into multicultural polyglots that Ira Berlin famously termed Atlantic Creoles (*Many Thousands Gone*). Though the extent of Delany’s knowledge of these cultures is uncertain, he was at least familiar with Changó. His maternal grandfather was “an African prince, from the Niger valley regions” named Shango “from that of a great African deity of protection, which is represented in their worship as a ram’s head with the attribute of fire” (Rollin, *Life*, 16).

<sup>36</sup> Reid, “The Yoruba in Cuba,” 120.

<sup>37</sup> Delany, *Blake*, 228.

<sup>38</sup> Robinson, “We’re for Freedom,” 187.

<sup>39</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity,” 227.

metonymically signifying the growing revolution's diverse coalitions. Mende's name recalls the 1839 *Amistad* rebellion, in which captive Mende (an ethnic group from modern Sierra Leone) overthrew the ship's crew and successfully navigated from Cuba to the United States, but *Mendi* was also the Black-owned barque that carried Delany to Liberia at the outset of his 1859 voyage to Africa with the Niger Valley exploring party.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Abyssa is originally from Sudan before she relocates to "the Eba country" (Ibo or modern Nigeria), a thousand-mile migration that culminates with her being "sold to Dahomi by the Ibadana."<sup>41</sup> Her origins in East Africa, read alongside the enslavement of West Africans like Mende, chart the slave trade's enduring transcontinental expanse while also providing a cipher for her name: Abyssa alludes to Abyssinia (the colonialist exonym for the Ethiopian Empire), invoking both the ancient history of Christianity in Africa and the Black rhetorical tradition of citing Ethiopia to evidence the atavistic roots of African civilization.<sup>42</sup> Abyssa, herself a convert from Islam to Christianity, therefore represents the deep roots of African Christianity and portends the renewed evangelical efforts Delany espoused in Africa. Significantly, Abyssa converts in the context of her journey from Sudan to Nigeria to West Africa, meaning that hers is a Christianity forged in a transnational, transcultural African context, not an imposition from European colonizers. In this way, she exemplifies both the cultural assemblages endemic to Black diaspora and the religious novelty for which Henry advocates.

Furthermore, *Blake* spotlights several individuals aboard the vessel who, like Abyssa and Henry, can translate across the diaspora's languages, religions, and cultures. Unlike the vertically oriented scenes of instruction and translation witnessed in "Studying Head Work," the revolution's accumulated diversity disperses more evenly the labor of teaching, learning, and practicing diaspora literacy. Before the insurrection at sea begins, for example, an intoxicated white officer hails several Black sailors standing together ("Disperse there, you black clouds! We're not ready for rain!"), to which Gascar—a character Delany models after a spirited "native Greba boy employed on a vessel on the coast of Africa, 1859"—ominously retorts, "But you may have a storm."<sup>43</sup> Delany's "Greba" likely means "Grebo," an ethnolinguistic subgroup of the larger Kru nation in what became Liberia. Because the *Vulture*'s Black crew were "mostly hired slaves," the young Grebo's enslavement critiques Liberia's failure to protect West Africans from the ongoing slave trade.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Henry directly divulges the significance of individuals like Gascar to his enterprise: "I am well acquainted with the native Krumen on the coast, many of the heads of whom speak several European tongues, and as sailing master I can obtain as many as I wish, who will make a powerful force in carrying out my scheme on the vessel."<sup>45</sup> A Kru among the crew, this young Grebo man is not only a witty worker whose repartee distracts the white officers as the insurrection organizes itself, but also a polyglot whose linguistic facility enables communication

<sup>40</sup> McGann, "Notes", 328n206; Delany, *Report*, 252.

<sup>41</sup> Delany, *Blake*, 226.

<sup>42</sup> While Black invocations of Ethiopia were common during this period, an especially influential example is Henry Highland Garnet's lecture, "The Past and Present Condition, and the Destiny of the Colored Race" (1848), which not only likely inspired Delany's title for his 1852 tract, but, as Shreve shows, also deeply impacted his thinking on Black nationalism, including *Blake* ("Exodus," 470). Additionally, Abyssa's name parallels Delany naming his youngest daughter Ethiopia, which Tolagbe Ogunleye reads as a manifestation of his investments in the Pan-Africanist philosophy known as Ethiopianism and "his lifelong strivings to awaken Africans in America to the ancient wisdom, traditions, and legendary instructions of that nation as well as to the entire African continent" ("Dr. Martin Robison Delany," 645). On Ethiopianism, see Nurhussein, *Black Land*.

<sup>43</sup> Delany, *Blake*, 223.

<sup>44</sup> Delany, *Blake*, 211.

<sup>45</sup> Delany, *Blake*, 200.

among the diverse Black crew and captives. Positioning him as a universal translator on the ship brings into relief the cutting wit of his joke: his multilingualism transforms disparate Africans and African Americans into an organized revolutionary force (“black clouds” into a “storm” in his metaphoric idiom).<sup>46</sup> In this way, the Black crew and captives might have viewed the *Vulture* as what Solimar Otero calls the “transatlantic crossroads,” where a diasporic deity (Èsù Elegbara in Yoruba, Elegguá in Cuba, and Legba in Haiti and Dahomey) works to “simultaneously intercept and allow communication between different orders of energies in a manner that reorients attention to thresholds and potentiality.”<sup>47</sup> Henry and Gascar, then, emerge as envoys of Èsù, translating across the “disparate religions [that] converge within common space” of the *Vulture* and thereby “mak[ing] and remak[ing] connections” among revolutionary recruits.<sup>48</sup> These characters help translate the storm’s symbolism across different cultures and, in doing so, they literalize the metaphor—the rebellion *is* the gathering storm and vice versa.

Translation, as *Blake* demonstrates, is both a function and an effect of diaspora literacy, and we can further expand the sea storm’s simultextuality with Christina Sharpe’s meditations on meteorology in the wake of slavery: “In what I am calling the weather, antiblackness is pervasive *as* climate. The weather necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies. . . . The weather trans\*forms Black being. But the shipped, the held, and those in the wake also produce out of the weather their own ecologies. When the only certainty is the weather that produces a pervasive climate of antiblackness, what must we know in order to move through these environments in which the push is always toward Black death?”<sup>49</sup> What we must know, *Blake* posits, is one another. Various a sign of the disaster of slavery, the impending revolution, and the righteous anger of Jehovah/Changó, the storm that disrupts the *Vulture*’s voyage also disrupts the climate of antiblackness against which *Blake* rages. Aboard the ship and in its hold, we see diaspora literacy facilitating the development of a new ecology: the forging of Blackness in the crucible of crisis, across and through difference. Indeed, Sharpe’s sense of ecology here (“the branch of biology that deals with relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings; the political movement that seeks to protect the environment, especially from pollution”) provides an apt complement to Delany’s favorite metaphor for Henry’s project: “sowing the seeds of future devastation.”<sup>50</sup> The storm—read through the simultextuality of diaspora literacy—soaks the fecund, expansive terrain of *Blake*’s narrative landscapes, accelerating its revolutionary germination, and cultivating a diasporic ecology of resistance within the total climate of antiblackness.

Ultimately, Africanization becomes a diasporic praxis. For white U.S.-Americans, this prospect provoked fears of multiplying Black revolutions, Black governments, and Black culture in the Americas—what we might, in a longer view of U.S.-Cuba relations, understand akin to the Domino Theory of the Cold War. *Blake* animates and aggravates these anxieties by drawing a direct line between African cultures and transnational Black revolution. But for the predominantly Black readers of the *Anglo-African Magazine* and the *Weekly Anglo-African*, *Blake* demonstrates

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<sup>46</sup> In the 1850s, the Kru were “cultural middlemen as well as boatmen and stevedores” in Liberia, confirming Delany’s observations. “Their work interfaced with the polyglot economies of the Atlantic, and so did their identities. Some learned English and other European languages to facilitate social intercourse . . . they were more or less at home anywhere in western Africa, from Monrovia to Angola” (Clegg, *Price of Liberty*, 77–78).

<sup>47</sup> Otero, “Èsù,” 208. See also Russell, *Legba’s Crossing*.

<sup>48</sup> Pettway, *Cuban Literature*, 146–47.

<sup>49</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 106.

<sup>50</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 106; Delany, *Blake*, 84.

how the Africanization of Cuba models a strategy for building and sustaining transnational Black coalitions rooted in cultural pluralism and routed through the diasporic networks that bind the Black Atlantic.<sup>51</sup> Much like “Africa”—as both a continent and a concept—contains multitudes, *Blake*’s multinational Grand Army recognizes the utility in both unity and diversity. The Africanization of Cuba, then, represented the hope of Black liberation, and perhaps even a Black Americas.

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<sup>51</sup> On these readerships, see Wilson, “Brief Wondrous Life”; and Fagan, *Black Newspaper*, 119–41.

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