

“Loose,” but not Free: Ambiguity and Liberatory Potential in Martin R. Delany’s *Blake*¹

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As a storm rages during the Middle Passage, the slave ship *Vulture* is riven by conflict within. Distracted by the storm and struggling to keep the ship afloat, the officers are unable to attend to the enslaved people below decks, who release each other “from their fetters”² and arm themselves. A young midshipman catches a glimpse of the slave revolt’s leader in a flash of lighting and is terrified by the sight.

“You don’t understand me sir, the negroes, the negroes are—”

“What?”

“Loose!”³

As a whole, Martin Delany’s *Blake: Or, The Huts of America* (1859–62) can be understood through this central scene. A group of oppressed Black people lie “below” the colonial power structure and political system. They are unshackled by a “master spirit,”⁴ prepared for revolt. In the words of midshipman Spencer, they are “loose,” but awaiting the revolutionary moment, they are not yet free. Their status is ambiguous, and that ambiguity recurs throughout the novel. The scene is a moment of tension—between unbearable conditions and unthinkable action—that mirrors the post-Fugitive Slave Act, pre-Civil War historical moment of its writing. This tension is never fully resolved in *Blake*. The would-be slave revolt aboard the *Vulture* is interrupted by the ship’s arrival in Cuba, and the plotted general revolution of people of color in Havana is interrupted by the historical loss of *Blake*’s final chapter. These interruptions are another source of ambiguity, which characterizes the aesthetic as well as the thematic effect of the novel.

Blake depicts a quest for the liberation for Black people. That quest is often frustrated, often deferred, and ultimately unresolved; but in its progress, in how the novel investigates and explores the conditions of liberation, it offers potential. *Blake* doesn’t neatly fit in a binary interpretive box, and neither does its author. Against descriptions of Delany as a Black nationalist, Theodore Draper wrote in 1970 that the life of Delany “was filled with contradictions and dualities,” and drew attention to the brevity of Delany’s radical period: “the consistently emigrationist portion of his life filled only about ten years.”⁵ Building on Draper, Tunde Adeleke explored these contradictions and dualities in his study, concluding that “Delany represented very complex, diverse, and ambivalent values and idiosyncrasies that underscore an equally complex and much more pragmatic personality, radically different from and often diametrically opposed to the militant nationalist that modern scholars highlight and exalt.”⁶ As a text, despite its radical elements, *Blake* reflects this ambivalence in its depictions of the conditions and means of liberation. While the book should be appreciated for its radical, speculative approach, and the insights it offers about anti-colonial religion and culture, it is ultimately incomprehensible without

¹ In addition to a portion presented at the Delany Symposium in 2021, this essay is adapted from my MA thesis. See Brown, “‘Loose’ but Not Free.”

² Delany, *Blake*, 236.

³ Delany, *Blake*, 237.

⁴ Delany, *Blake*, 236.

⁵ Draper, “The Father of American Black Nationalism.”

⁶ Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race*, xxi.

an appreciation of that essential ambivalence to Delany and *Blake*, and the centrality of ambiguity to interpreting the novel. In this essay, I read *Blake* through a postcolonial lens, and with an analytic of affiliation sensitive to the ways in which the book is bonded to the history of its author, publication, and world. I find that the book is ultimately an expression of potential: through ambivalence and ambiguity, it creates an alternative space within the oppressive systems it is linked to, a space of political potential for the oppressed.

Timothy Powell and Gesa Mackenthun offer an invaluable starting point in their postcolonial readings of *Blake*, taking different routes to contextualizing *Blake* in postcolonial terms. Powell, whose literary reading largely focuses on the novel's stateside action, points to *Blake* as a literary exploration of the intersection of several strains of internal colonization.⁷ Mackenthun takes the alternate path of describing colonialism as a totalizing world system and uses "postcolonial" to refer to a "particular critical attitude of [texts] toward the political reality of colonialism, a reality from which they seek to extricate themselves."⁸ This "political reality" is defined by the "Atlantic colonial system," which sees its fullest expression in the slave trade.⁹ In *Blake* and in his non-fiction, Delany demonstrates a sensitivity to the global currents of colonialism, especially as it relates to and through the institution of slavery. Reading *Blake* in terms of postcolonial theory helps us appreciate the way it contests these systems and institutions, and points to a kind of alternative space within these structures. As Raymond Williams observed, a social system, no matter how oppressive, "always potentially contains space for alternative acts and alternative intentions which are not yet articulated as a social institution or even project."¹⁰ This essay is concerned with exploring such potential, alternative, not-yet-fully-articulated "spaces" through literature. Powell and Mackenthun both acknowledge an ambivalence when it comes to thinking of the U.S. in terms of postcolonial theory. Powell marks the Monroe administration as giving rise to a "unique brand of American colonialism," in some ways both colonial and anti-colonial, which he calls "postcolonial colonialism."¹¹ Mackenthun also emphasizes the U.S.'s "ambivalent political status as a nation that was postcolonial and colonizing at the same time."¹² Much of Delany's fictional and non-fictional work alike engages with the expansionist mode of American imperialism, as well as the status of Black and indigenous peoples in the United States as internal colonies, as Powell demonstrates. As Mackenthun makes clear, Delany's work also engages with colonialism in a broader sense, as a system of international oppression. Postcolonial analyses of *Blake* have hitherto passed over the depictions of religion and cultural production within the novel, and have tended to focus entirely on reading it strictly for oppositional qualities, not fully accounting for the novel's ambivalence, and the ambiguous spaces within the "postcolonial colonial."

One critic more attuned to the complexities and ambiguities of the novel's political value is Paul Gilroy, whose *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* featured *Blake* as an important starting point. Gilroy's exploration of "the black Atlantic politics of location," and his aim to deconstruct the political binary between "authentic ethnic" and European perspectives, finds in Delany's shifting identities and allegiances an ideal subject.¹³ In Gilroy's brief treatment of *Blake*, he finds on the one hand a productive "affirmation of the intercultural and transnational,"

⁷ Powell, "Postcolonial Theory in an American Context," 353.

⁸ Mackenthun, *Fictions of the Black Atlantic*, 18.

⁹ Mackenthun, *Fictions of the Black Atlantic*, 17.

¹⁰ Quoted in Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, 29.

¹¹ Powell, "Postcolonial Theory in an American Context," 350–51.

¹² Mackenthun, *Fictions of the Black Atlantic*, 11.

¹³ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 19, 30–31.

especially in the critical, syncretic approach towards religion.¹⁴ On the other hand, in the novel and in Delany’s own biography, he sees problematic links to his European-Enlightenment political context: Delany’s eventual embrace of American identity, or “the shell of . . . patriotism,” is explained by the “resolutely elitist” quality of his Black nationalism.¹⁵ Taking up these strands of Gilroy’s analysis, I intend to follow them further in this study, with greater attention to the connections between *Blake* and the historical context of Delany’s world. In this, I am inspired by Gilroy’s own description of the Black Atlantic as a “webbed network,” along with Edward Said’s call for an analytic of affiliation: “to study and to recreate the bonds between texts and the world.”¹⁶ There is more to be said, and more that historicization can reveal, about the ways *Blake* is bonded to its world.

Having begun with the Middle Passage, I go on to focus mainly on the novel’s latter part, set in Cuba, where the novel tackles the international, broadly colonial nature of oppression. In the first two sections, I explore the anti-colonial dimensions of *Blake*; the theological dimension, arguing that Delany formulates a decolonial theology of Black liberation; and the dimension of cultural production in the novel, reading the motifs of banjo and carving knife as powerful symbols of decolonial art and resistance. Lastly, I turn to the intellectual history of Delany and his time. The author’s biography, far from limiting interpretation of the work, provides vital context that can enrich interpretation, through an appreciation of Delany’s political thought and intellectual milieu, and the ambivalence between and within his influences.

Delany’s Theology of Liberation

“What’s religion to me?”¹⁷ asks Blake, a moment after his introduction in the novel. The rhetorical question is prompted by the central tragedy of the book—Blake’s wife has been sold, torn from her husband and child, a loving family destroyed by the institution of slavery. This despite the Blakes nominally sharing a religion with the man responsible for this imposition; as Henry goes on to observe: “My wife is sold away from me by a man who is one of the leading members of the very church to which both she and I belong!”¹⁸ Answering this question, and thereby renegotiating and reforming some of the fundamental practices and philosophies of Christianity, emerges as a central concern for Delany in the novel. From these first pages through the novel’s abrupt conclusion, religion is given a prominent place: it is a central concern to Delany’s fictional characters, and it is used to facilitate a potential international slave rebellion. In his imaginative fiction, Delany reformulated Christianity to serve as both liberatory thinking and the means of liberation, in ways that are linked to the historical context and legacy of Black Christianity, specifically the African Methodist Episcopal church in which he was educated, and through affiliation to the liberation theology of the subsequent century.

Religion played a significant role in Delany’s early life, education, and political development. Delany’s biographers and contemporary scholars are in agreement on the pronounced influence of Reverend Lewis Woodson on Delany’s life.¹⁹ In order to understand the

¹⁴ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 29.

¹⁵ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 25.

¹⁶ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 175.

¹⁷ Delany, *Blake*, 17.

¹⁸ Delany, *Blake*, 17.

¹⁹ See Ullman, *Martin R. Delany*, 18; Rollin, *Life and Public Services*, 38; Adeleke, *Without Regard*, 45.

religious element in *Blake*, we need first to understand how the text is linked with the religious world of Delany, Woodson, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Founded by the Reverend Richard Allen and Daniel Coker in Philadelphia in 1816, the A.M.E.'s fundamental value, beyond Wesleyan piety, was self-determination for Black Christians.²⁰ The seed of the new denomination was Bethel Church, founded by Allen in 1794 as an independent Methodist congregation in the wake of increasing racial discrimination in the mainline Methodist church in Philadelphia.²¹ Bethel fought for its independence in court against the White leadership of the mainline Methodists, who sought to impose their leadership on the congregation.²² This resistance to coercive White authority over matters of the soul, and a corresponding self-sufficiency, can be traced through the congregations that followed, notwithstanding the politically diversity of their membership.

The Reverend Lewis Woodson came to Pittsburgh from Ohio in the early 1830s and became the A.M.E. minister there.²³ He founded a school, and Delany was one of his first students.²⁴ He epitomized the independent spirit of the A.M.E.—in Dennis Dickerson's estimation, "Woodson, more than any other antebellum A.M.E., articulated a capacious view of black self-determination that transcended both integrationist and nationalist ideologies."²⁵ Woodson advocated for an organized, self-sufficient, self-advocating Black community that did not tolerate marginalization, even if it came from religious institutions. He chose the name "Augustine" to write a series of anonymous letters in *The Colored American* (New York; 1837–1841), a significant choice, as Augustine of Hippo was championed as a Black church father in Woodson's milieu due to his African origin.²⁶ As Augustine, he championed a number of causes for Black Americans, many of which find echoes in Delany's later work: an emphasis on education, the importance of founding independent religious institutions, and emigration to form autonomous communities. Overall, his political solution for Black Americans was a program of moral elevation through practical activity. Gayle Tate, while viewing Woodson as a "nationalist" thinker, sums up his approach thus: "Essential to Woodson's philosophical contours of nationalism was the tenet of moral and collective elevation."²⁷ Over political change at the U.S. national level, he held that Black people could best improve their situation through action within themselves and their immediate communities. As a result, the letters are highly pragmatic—one details the operations of banks and advocates the use of savings accounts and stock investments.²⁸ But a consistent theme is an emphasis on action as opposed to passivity, especially in a religious context.

Against critics of his call for establishing separate Black churches, (one called it "heretical"²⁹) Woodson justified action over passive dependence as Christian: "God has created us all free and equal, . . . and never intended that one should labor exclusively for the benefit of the other, but that everyone should rely on his own exertions for obtaining whatever was necessary for

²⁰ Dickerson, *The African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 40–41.

²¹ Dickerson, *The African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 31, 35.

²² Dickerson, *The African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 36.

²³ Miller, "The Father of Black Nationalism," 311.

²⁴ Miller, "The Father of Black Nationalism," 311.

²⁵ Dickerson, *The African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 100.

²⁶ "Preamble and Constitution of the 'Zion Baptist Anti Slavery Society,'" *The Colored American*, 23 December 1837. This periodical widely reported on the independent Black church movement, especially African Methodism. See Baldwin, "The Colored American and Its Reports on African Methodism in 1837."

²⁷ Tate, "Prophesy and Transformation," 231.

²⁸ "THE WEST – No. 3," *The Colored American*, 2 March 1839.

²⁹ "DEATH VS. ESPATRIATION," *The Colored American*, 27 October 1838.

his comfort or convenience.”³⁰ Perhaps the best statement of his pragmatic approach to Christianity is this line from a response to one of his detractors: “It is expected that there will come an age of universal and entire righteousness; but from present appearances, we suppose that that age is yet far on; and until it comes we must adapt our thoughts, words and actions, to the age, and world in which we actually live.”³¹ Woodson’s belief in moral uplift placed his emphasis for reform on individual Black people and their communities, as opposed to politics at a higher level, but he was clear-eyed about the limits of White institutions when it came to liberation. Rather than a passive faith that looked for external aid, he saw a divine mandate within Christianity to improve the lot of the individual and the collective. Delany would build on these ideas as he began his own career as a political commentator and activist.

When their 1847 speaking tour brought Frederick Douglass, already famous, and William Lloyd Garrison through Pennsylvania, they were so impressed with Delany as a public speaker that he was invited along to speak at the next stop.³² When Douglass started the *North Star* a few months later, Delany was on the masthead, and would strike out on his own speaking tour in the following year.³³ It was this tour, and the published work that it produced, that show us Delany’s development as a thinker before the period that produced *Blake*. The experience was defined by theological and institutional conflicts with Black churches, specifically surrounding the issue of providential design. While Black churches in the North were a vital part of social life for their worshippers, Delany was bitterly disappointed by the cold reception they gave to his abolitionist speaking tour. In his study of this period of Delany’s career, Tunde Adeleke explains that many of these Northern churches “seemed reluctant or hesitant to endorse and propagate any activist reform measures that directly or indirectly questioned prevailing doctrinal teachings and could potentially alienate their more powerful, and still dominant, white sponsoring or ‘parent’ affiliates.”³⁴ Central to these “prevailing doctrinal teachings” was the idea of providential design.

The theology of providential design cast the suffering of Black people as “constituents of a divine plan meant to better prepare them for God’s Kingdom.”³⁵ Many Black churches in the North, troubled by the abolitionist movement’s emphasis on material concerns, closed their doors to Delany, who often had to lecture in private homes.³⁶ Delany connected the theology of providential design to the continued influence of White religious authorities on Black churches, which were “always regarded as subordinates to their white ‘sponsoring’ institutions.”³⁷ Institutional Christian theology, he saw, was structured by power to ease the oppressor and cow the oppressed. In an 1849 column in *The North Star*, as part of a sequence of articles on “Domestic Economy,” Delany notes the difference in how White practitioners engage with the notion of providential design: “Our masters have been so accustomed to teach us how to live in the world to come that they have forgotten to teach us how to live in this world, but are always very careful to teach their own children and themselves, however religious they may be, how to make a living *here*, while in this world.”³⁸ Delany shifts the priority: from preparing for a world to come, to living “in this world.” The rejection he experienced from Black churches early in his abolitionist

³⁰ *The Colored American*, 29 December 1838.

³¹ *The Colored American*, 19 January 1839.

³² Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity*, 19.

³³ Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity*, 20.

³⁴ Adeleke, “‘Today Is the Day of Salvation,’” 8.

³⁵ Adeleke, “‘Today Is the Day of Salvation,’” 16.

³⁶ Adeleke, “‘Today Is the Day of Salvation,’” 11.

³⁷ Adeleke, “‘Today Is the Day of Salvation,’” 19.

³⁸ Delany, “Domestic Economy,” emphasis original.

career, and the conclusions about religious priority he drew from that experience, would form the basis of the liberatory theology he puts forth in *Blake*.

Early in the novel, Blake rejects the formulation of the Christian religion that serves the interests of the slaveholders and colonists: “They use the Scriptures to make you submit, by preaching to you the texts of ‘obedience to your masters’ and ‘standing still to see the salvation,’ and now we must begin to understand the Bible so as to make it of interest to us.”³⁹ This critical, utilitarian approach to religion is a striking departure from the subservient religiosity of the older generation of slaves depicted in the novel. Gilroy notes this aspect of religion in *Blake*—describing a “skepticism and strictly instrumental orientation toward religion”⁴⁰—but his analysis misses the bond between this approach and the tradition of Black Christianity represented by the A.M.E. and epitomized by Delany’s teacher, Woodson. In *Blake*, emerging out of the movement that proclaimed Black Christians “must adapt . . . to the world in which we actually live,” critical pragmatism is not separate from true piety, and cannot be “strictly instrumental.” Faith and virtue are still central to this understanding of Christianity. It does, however, offer greater “use” to the Christian, in that it gives more opportunities for participation.

One arena for active participation is interpretation of the religious text, which becomes a crucial aspect of Blake’s philosophy of liberation and a part of how it is communicated. Departing from the interpretation of the colonists and of the “old people,” Blake asserts “with me, ‘now is the accepted time, to-day is the day of salvation.’”⁴¹ In *Blake*, Delany continued the effort he began in his abolitionist newspaper work, using theological arguments to advance the cause of liberation, and specifically critiquing passive reliance on providential design as serving the purposes of the oppressors. In the newspaper, Delany carefully offers a hermeneutical argument, stressing the differing sources and audiences of the quote by Moses, on the one hand—“stand still, and see the salvation of God”—and the quote in Corinthians, on the other—“*now* is the *accepted* time.”⁴² He asks his readers: “Whom shall we obey, Christ or Moses—God or man?”⁴³ In *Blake*, through its titular character, he is free to be much bolder, stridently criticizing the “old people” and offering an unapologetically utilitarian interpretation to make the Bible “of interest to us.” “Standing still to see the salvation” is recast from a passive acceptance of oppression based on the hope of external salvation to an active anticipation of participatory, liberatory action, and becomes a watchword of and symbol for the cell-based insurrectionary strategy of Blake.

Religion is not just a matter of interpretation, it is a lived institution, and in the context of slave societies and colonialism, an institution that is part and parcel of oppressive systems. The institutional aspect of religion is explored later in the novel, as Blake organizes his rebellion in Cuba. While much of the theological thematic in the book emerged from the context of Delany’s experiences in Northern Black churches, it goes further, expanding the scope of critique to international oppression within a broadly colonial church as the action shifts to Catholic Cuba. In order to perform the ceremony of marriage, members of the plot are married at the Catholic “church of the Ascension”⁴⁴ in Havana. Montego, one of the principal Cuban leaders of the revolt, lectures his African fiancée on the role of priests. “To be ‘God-fearing’ is to do the will of God . . . and these men have neglected the letter of the law ‘Whatsoever ye would that men should

³⁹ Delany, *Blake*, 43.

⁴⁰ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 28.

⁴¹ Delany, *Blake*, 31.

⁴² Delany, “Domestic Economy.”

⁴³ Delany, “Domestic Economy.”

⁴⁴ Delany, *Blake*, 280.

do unto you, do ye even so unto them.’ These are the words of His divine injunction, every letter of which these men have neglected either to carry out themselves or to enforce.”⁴⁵ The hypocrisy of these “God-fearing” priests is laid bare, but it is not just an individual shortcoming. As one of them places a wedding ring on a finger, he describes it as “a type of our holy religion; in substance as pure as the incorruptible gold.”⁴⁶ The irony between the notions of “purity” and “incorruptibility” of the Church and its open hypocrisy is clear. The corruption of the colonial church is further illustrated when the priests charge exorbitant prices of the group for their services, as the cook Gondolier observes: “These ‘men of God’ make most ungodly charges for their services; a doubloon apiece for the two little gold rings the ladies got.”⁴⁷ The doubloons are as golden as the rings they are exchanged for, and highlighting the inequality of this exchange, and the profit derived by the priests thereby, indicates the extent of complicity in the slave economy of the Church as an international colonial institution.

As the corruption of the colonial church is exposed, Blake develops his anti-colonial theology while preparing for revolution in Cuba. Characterizing his previous religious practice as “shadow without substance,” he advocates that the oppressed “drop the religion of our oppressors and take the Scriptures for our guide and Christ as our example.”⁴⁸ Crucially, Christianity itself is not seen as “the religion of [the] oppressors,” but as something compromised by a specific interpretation and institutionalization, which can be countered by a new form of interpretation and practice. This new form takes shape later in Blake’s experience on the island. Blake’s “rainbow coalition” of Africans, Creole Cubans and Americans of color, both enslaved and free, is accompanied by a correspondingly diverse range of Christian denominations: Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and even Swedenborgian.⁴⁹ How can these differences be resolved? Blake offers a radical solution:

We have all agreed to know no sects, no denomination, and but one religion for the sake of our redemption from bondage and degradation, a faith in a common Savior as an intercessor for our sins; but one God, who is and must be our acknowledged common Father. No religion but that which brings us liberty will we know; no God but He who owns us as his children will we serve.⁵⁰

Blake is advocating a specifically liberatory theology: with “that which brings us liberty,” theology has a pointed orientation and is tangible rather than transcendent. In rejecting “the religion of the oppressors” and formulating a new theology of liberation, Delany is attempting to “decolonize” the religious sphere—to contest the oppressive structures of power within the Christianity of his day.

The conflict between the theology of established religion and the reality of the oppressed, and Delany’s attempts to resolve that conflict in his written work, can be compared with the questions and tasks of liberation theology as it was formulated in Latin America nearly a century later. Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez describes an “imprint” left on society by “a new presence of the poor, the marginalised, and the oppressed,” an “imprint” caused by the downtrodden coming to “see themselves as subjects of their own history, as being able to take their destiny in their own hands.”⁵¹ It is this social impression that demands a response from theology;

⁴⁵ Delany, *Blake*, 280.

⁴⁶ Delany, *Blake*, 282.

⁴⁷ Delany, *Blake*, 282.

⁴⁸ Delany, *Blake*, 199.

⁴⁹ Delany, *Blake*, 259.

⁵⁰ Delany, *Blake*, 259.

⁵¹ Gutierrez, “The Task and Content of Liberation Theology,” 21.

for Gutierrez, the “challenge” responded to by liberation theology comes “from the ‘non-persons,’ those who are not recognised as people by the existing social order.”⁵² While separated by a temporal and geographical gulf, the issues Delany responds to share some affinities with those of Gutierrez, most notably a shared concern with those classed outside of human society, and a realization of their burgeoning subjectivity. The theological challenge Delany rises to meet is that of a religion at odds with the lived experience and subjectivity of Black people in the slave societies of the Atlantic. In *Blake*, Delany’s protagonist declares that Black Christians “must begin to understand the Bible so as to make it of interest to us”; that is, theology—the “understanding” of the Bible—should reflect the imprint of a Black social subjectivity—“us”—which aligns with Gutierrez’s description of an underclass that consciously begins to take “their destiny in their own hands.”

In *Blake* and in his newspaper work, Delany also emphasizes a shift in approach to the daily practice of the Black Christian, epitomized in his theme of “liv[ing] in the world.” He makes a distinction between “the world to come” and “this world,” and calls for a new theology to take the latter as its starting point, echoing the words of Woodson: “the world in which we actually live.” Delany emphasizes a grounding in material reality: in space—“living *here*”—and in time—“*to-day* is the *day*.” In the novel, this theme is born out in the opposition between the passive “standing still” and the active “to-day is the day of salvation.” Gutierrez identifies a similar emphasis underpinning liberation theology, describing “theology,” or the reasoning and discourse about the nature of faith and God, as the “second task,” only to follow the first task of “practice,”⁵³ which is connected to serving the poor and advancing the task of liberation. It is practice, faith in action, Gutierrez argues, that “give[s] theology its *raison d’être*,”⁵⁴ not the other way around. Consonant with liberation theology, true religion in Delany’s published work is borne out through corporeal, contemporary action.

General comparison with Latin American liberation theology should not limit interpretation of Delany’s religious writing. Unsatisfied with the Biblical hermeneutics and theological arguments of the White supremacist, colonialist religious institutions of the Americas, Delany seeks to formulate a theology that accounts for the oppression of Black people specifically, and most importantly, informs their liberation from that oppression. Edward Antonio understands “liberation theologies” in the plural, a field of theology “marked by a wide-ranging pluralism,”⁵⁵ in which the Latin American strain, while the most recognized, is not paradigmatic. Antonio posits Black Theology as a kind of liberation theology, one that shares affinities with other liberation theologies but diverges from them in important ways. While Black Theology shares with other liberation theologies an interest in the nature of oppression and liberation, and a devotion to ending all forms of oppression, it is also distinct in that it marks “a particular kind of discursive difference by the manner in which it inscribes race at the center of its analysis of oppression.”⁵⁶ For its most prominent advocate, James Cone, Black Theology “arises out of the need to articulate the significance of black presence in a hostile white world The purpose of Black Theology is to place the actions of black people toward liberation in the Christian perspective, showing that Christ himself is participating in the black struggle for freedom.”⁵⁷ The determined utilitarianism of *Blake*

⁵² Gutierrez, “The Task and Content of Liberation Theology,” 28.

⁵³ Gutierrez, “The Task and Content of Liberation Theology,” 29.

⁵⁴ Gutierrez, “The Task and Content of Liberation Theology,” 29.

⁵⁵ Antonio, “Black Theology and Liberation Theologies,” 35.

⁵⁶ Antonio, “Black Theology and Liberation Theologies,” 41–42.

⁵⁷ Cone, “Black Consciousness and the Black Church,” 53.

as he sets out to make Christianity “of interest to us” epitomizes Cone’s notion of Black Theology making Christianity relevant “for their lives.” Cone’s Christ—a Christ that actively participates in liberatory struggle—offers another way to understand the theological framing of the novel. Rather than viewing the novel purely in terms of “providential design,” it instead reflects a shift from a theology of “design” to one of participation—both of believer and God. In his final prayer with the rebel cell in Cuba, Blake emphasizes the active participation of God: “be our great captain, I pray thee; for it is written in thy holy word, ‘the Lord is a man of war, for the Lord is his name.’”⁵⁸ Gondolier aptly provides the counter-example: when Abyssa cries “Lord have mercy on us,” his response is “Ef He don’t I will!”⁵⁹ For Gondolier, a God who would stand idly by, behind the mandates of a “providential design” that allowed such oppression, is not a god worth following.

Blake also exemplifies the connections between Black Theology and critical discourses about colonialism, whether under the terms of “decolonial” or “postcolonial.” Antonio adopts a definition of “the postcolonial” that encompasses a broad range of expression within and without historical, institutional colonialism: “a discursive structure of moral, political, and religious/theological protest situated not beyond the colonial but within it.”⁶⁰ Understanding postcoloniality as a discursive framework of protest or opposition to colonial power, in a way similar to contemporary use of “decoloniality,” allows us to see the connection between Black Theology and anti-colonialism. Antonio identifies several “meeting places” where Black Theology and his notion of “the postcolonial” converge.⁶¹ The first is the “theological moment of slave protest,” which he marks as a “fundamental source”⁶² for twentieth-century Black Theology. In this moment, Antonio claims, the enslaved “critically appropriated Christianity . . . and in the process transformed it into ‘slave religion’ for all human beings.”⁶³ The second is in a tradition of “black critical social theory,” a tradition in which Delany is included by name, that, in pursuit of liberation and equality, “presupposed a postcolonial order as a social ideal.”⁶⁴ The third is in the “anticolonial international communities and movements of struggle and solidarity”⁶⁵ that arose out of the aforementioned traditions. *Blake* represents each of these “meeting places.” It promotes a pluralized, appropriative version of Christianity, as we see in Blake’s injunction to “know no sects, no denomination, and but one religion,” truly a “‘slave religion’ for all human beings.” It also composes one of the many, varied, contributions Delany made to the tradition of “black critical social theory,” and is distinguished by its form as a serialized novel, which provides imaginative space for these discourses to “meet.” It also depicts an international community that anticipates in many ways the “movements of struggle and solidarity” of later generations.

“Formidable Instruments” of Liberation

Beyond a theology of liberation, *Blake* offers another set of alternatives within the oppressive power structures of its world through symbols of independent cultural production. As the conspirators gather for the first time at Madam Cordora’s, the atmosphere is described thus:

⁵⁸ Delany, *Blake*, 293.

⁵⁹ Delany, *Blake*, 312.

⁶⁰ Antonio, “Black Theology and Postcolonial Discourse,” 301.

⁶¹ Antonio, “Black Theology and Postcolonial Discourse,” 304.

⁶² Antonio, “Black Theology and Postcolonial Discourse,” 301.

⁶³ Antonio, “Black Theology and Postcolonial Discourse,” 301.

⁶⁴ Antonio, “Black Theology and Postcolonial Discourse,” 303.

⁶⁵ Antonio, “Black Theology and Postcolonial Discourse,” 304.

“There was no parade or imitative aping, nor unmeaning pretensions observed in their doings . . . They were . . . discarding everything which distracted from their object.”⁶⁶ In their plot to revolt against the powers of colonialism, their attitude towards the cultural expressions or behaviors of colonialism is oppositional. By rejecting “imitative aping,” Delany advocates for the abandonment, the “discarding,” of the standards, styles, and methods of the colonial power. To Delany, these elements are inherently connected to the strength and focus of the liberation movement. If the colonial forms are to be abandoned, what should take their place? Delany offers two powerful symbols of resistance in two instruments: the banjo and the carving knife.

Introduced as musical accompaniment to the reception of Blake as a liberator among the group of sympathizers, the “African bango [sic]” appears in the hands of Pino Golias, the “leading amateur musician in the city,” for whom it is “the favorite instrument of his fatherland.”⁶⁷ It is immediately set in opposition to an instrument associated with the colonial power: “In solos of strains the sweetest the Spanish guitar proved but a secondary instrument compared with the touching melodies of the pathetic bango in the hands of this negro artiste.”⁶⁸ First, the banjo is better suited to the “hands” of the colonial subject, in its connection to the “fatherland.” Second, Pino Golias finds a role through this use of the instrument: that of “negro artiste.” The banjo then becomes a symbol for cultural decolonization, the work of artists and artisans that provide colonial subjects with a “melody.” The importance of this cultural decolonization is emphasized in the subsequent passage:

This instrument, heretofore neglected and despised by the better class among them, at once became the choice and classically refined by the nearest and dearest historic reminiscences among them, by an association with the evening of the great gathering from a seclusion of which, the momentous question of immediate redemption or an endless degradation and bondage was to be forever settled. From these associations and remembrances, the migration bango could be thenceforth be seen in the parlors and drawing rooms of all of the best families of this class of the inhabitants.⁶⁹

Two functions of culture are emphasized in this passage: association and memory. The culture produced with the banjo facilitates the memory of “the great gathering,” transmitting its values to future generations.

In Laurent Dubois’ history of the banjo, he highlights both the memorial and the synthetic qualities that the banjo unites. From its inception, which Dubois situates in the eighteenth-century plantation society of the Caribbean, the banjo was connective, bridging the traumatic disruption of slavery:

The child of the Middle Passage and the bewildering situation of exile and oppression in the plantation world, it brought together traditions of instrument making from various parts of West and Central Africa. In this way, it offered something vital to those on the plantation: it was recognizably African, an instrument capable of offering familiar melodies and rhythms, but without being clearly derived from the traditions of any single African ethnicity. It was the first African instrument.⁷⁰

The “African bango” is African not in its authentic origin but in its synthesis of experience. It is part of an invented Africa that Dubois details; one invented for the comfort and community of the

⁶⁶ Delany, *Blake*, 254.

⁶⁷ Delany, *Blake*, 249, 253.

⁶⁸ Delany, *Blake*, 253.

⁶⁹ Delany, *Blake*, 253.

⁷⁰ Dubois, *The Banjo*, 56.

enslaved. Beyond its Caribbean roots, Dubois chronicles the instrument’s use in the nineteenth-century U.S.: “The banjo had, by the 1840s, long been rooted in many of the communities of the enslaved in North America. . . . Just as it had in the Caribbean from the earliest days of its invention, the banjo offered a space for solidarity, to sound out the possibility of a world of freedom.”⁷¹ Dubois also notes the use of the banjo in *Blake*, and writes that Delany must have imagined “banjo music as a rebel sound that could ultimately upend the landscape of the plantation, a space usually dominated by rhythms and sound of labor.”⁷² From its origins in the Middle Passage and the harsh plantation life, the banjo always stood for a kind of resistance. Its “rebel sound” had the power to disrupt the plantation system.

Placing banjos in a Cuban context is a leap of imagination, for the banjo did not truly hold a place of influence in Cuba as it did elsewhere in the circum-Caribbean. As Tony Thomas notes, “major areas of African population in the Caribbean with prolonged and intense exchange with Central and West Africa, such as Cuba . . . yield no reports of early banjos.”⁷³ However, the banjo in *Blake* can serve as a symbol for the very real nature of music throughout the Black Atlantic as a unifying and empowering force, just as the banjo itself is a product of syncretic invention. Writing long before Paul Gilroy coined the term, Alejo Carpentier seems to describe the Black Atlantic in his history of *Music in Cuba*: “there is much that American musicology stands to gain in studying the music of the continent by *geographic zones* subject to the same ethnic influences, to the same migrations of rhythms and oral traditions, *rather than by region or country*.”⁷⁴ The concept of a shared influence of “rhythm” throughout the African diaspora in the Caribbean has been revisited more recently by Njoroge Njoroge. Njoroge uses the concept of “polyrhythm” to analyze an “unmistakable family resemblance between the musics of the African diaspora, a kinship based upon lineage and history and shaped in and by the ‘Caribbean crucible.’”⁷⁵ In Cuba specifically, “essential rhythmic elements and generative principles from sub-Saharan Africa were rearticulated, notated, and wed to European harmony” through “clave,” a pattern that forms the “root of Afro-Cuban music.”⁷⁶ The banjo may have not been present in the typical nineteenth-century Afro-Cuban salon. Yet there was still a link, a “kinship” of rhythm if not instrument, between the music of the African diaspora in Cuba and in the Southern U.S. The banjo in *Blake* symbolizes this kinship, this affiliation. Njoroge goes on to argue that Afro-diasporic music played a crucial role in the anti-colonial movement of the twentieth century. In this movement, “music becomes a means to realizing unity in the flux of constantly changing social and political relationships.”⁷⁷ In the novel, banjo performance becomes inextricably connected with the “question of immediate redemption or an endless degradation and bondage.” In this way, *Blake* seems to anticipate the importance of music in facilitating liberatory movements. Through the banjo, Delany powerfully symbolizes the importance of independent cultural production with an instrument suited to those who wield it.

Another implement is given special attention in Delany’s narration of the meeting at Madam Cordora’s. It is connected first to the notion of defense: the “caterer” Gondolier Gofer is offered the position of guard, and the mulatto officer Castina offers him his sword as part of the

⁷¹ Dubois, *The Banjo*, 143.

⁷² Dubois, *The Banjo*, 157.

⁷³ Thomas, “The Banjo and African American Musical Culture.”

⁷⁴ Carpentier, *Music in Cuba*, 60–61, emphasis original.

⁷⁵ Njoroge, *Chocolate Surrealism*, 9.

⁷⁶ Njoroge, *Chocolate Surrealism*, 51.

⁷⁷ Njoroge, *Chocolate Surrealism*, 12.

office. Gofer refuses to take it, declaring “I got a better thing than this!”⁷⁸ He produces a carving knife, a “formidable instrument” whose breadth is “that of the widest common carving knife.”⁷⁹ To the astonishment of his genteel companions, the lower-class Gofer designed the weapon himself: “I cut the pattern out of a barrel stave, and had the knife made to order.”⁸⁰ As the “African bango” is preferred to the Spanish guitar, the carving knife takes precedence over the Spanish sword. Gofer comically enacts the preference, “holding out and looking at the sword, with a wag of his head.”⁸¹ Rather than being primarily superior due to its origin in the African “fatherland,” however, the carving knife is preferred for practical reasons. Gofer designs the weapon so “that on a general rising the blacks in every house might have good weapons without suspicion.”⁸² He elaborates: “By making a carving knife, I present something that comes in general use as a domestic and family convenience, with which every person may supply himself without suspicion, especially the blacks, who are not only great imitators of the whites as they say we are, but also great eaters as we know ourselves to be.”⁸³ The reason for choosing the carving knife is eminently practical: it allows for the distribution of weapons to the widest possible group of sympathizers. But this has implications that go beyond practicality. By refusing the sword of the officers and preferring a carving knife distributed as widely as possible, and marking a lower class position, Gofer puts forward a fundamentally democratic vision of revolution, in which the instruments of violence are not controlled by a small group of elite officers but by the masses.

This carving knife, with its ability to take the place of a sword, highlights the domestic nature of violence, its proximity to “home.” In this way, the carving knife in *Blake* recalls the carving knife in Samuel Otter’s reading of Frank J. Webb’s 1857 novel *The Garies and Their Friends*. In describing a lavish wedding supper scene, “Webb emphasizes the carving knife as weapon, furnishing it with “hilt,” like a dagger or sword.”⁸⁴ The carving knife is “imagined as a sword, the meat as its victim: ‘you might plunge your knife to the very hilt without coming in contact with a splinter.’ At this American supper, violence is not the distant, forgotten origin of civilized manners but their current incitement.”⁸⁵ Otter’s reading of *The Garies* intersects with *Blake* in that both novels point out the latent violence of the “common,” domestic arrangement in a slave society. In Delany’s novel, this underlines the notion that potential revolutionaries are just as likely to be found in the kitchen as on the shipboard, and that the means and power to resist lie in plain sight, ready to be taken up at a moment’s notice.

The instruments symbolize aspects of an anti-colonial movement in two distinct ways. The banjo, representing cultural production, is connected to the “fatherland,” emphasizing the importance of memory. The carving knife, representing material resistance, is an opportunistic creation most valuable for its practicality and its latent potential, lying just under the noses of the oppressors. The two instruments, with their varying purposes, signs, and ideals, are unified in the purpose of liberation. At first glance, it may seem that they are suited to two types of people, two classes. After all, the role of elite “artiste” is aptly filled by Pino Golias, a surgeon who is the “most accomplished banjoist and guitarist in the city.”⁸⁶ Gondolier Gofer, a lower-classed servant, seems

⁷⁸ Delany, *Blake*, 255.

⁷⁹ Delany, *Blake*, 255, 256.

⁸⁰ Delany, *Blake*, 255.

⁸¹ Delany, *Blake*, 255.

⁸² Delany, *Blake*, 255.

⁸³ Delany, *Blake*, 255–56.

⁸⁴ Otter, *Philadelphia Stories*, 257.

⁸⁵ Otter, *Philadelphia Stories*, 260.

⁸⁶ Delany, *Blake*, 249.

suited to the dirty work of violence by his characteristic pugilism—this is the character whose threatening words end our edition of the text, after all: “Woe be unto those devils of whites, I say!”⁸⁷ Yet Gondolier confounds such classification by unifying both symbols in his person. He is just as apt to take up the banjo as the carving knife, as evidenced by his desire to pick it up before the “sweet strains” of Golias’ playing have fairly ceased to echo: “ef you han’ me that thing out here, ef I don’t make ‘er hum I wouldn’t tell you so”⁸⁸ In fact, Gofer rivals the genteel Golias in musical proficiency. He is valued by his masters for “his skill on the Spanish guitar, or African bango, especially the latter instrument in which he had few, if any equals.”⁸⁹ The distinction between Golias and Gofer dissolves, as the cleverly contradictory words of the text place them as equals in accomplishment—the “most accomplished” versus the one with “few if any equals.” Rather than restrict the vital roles of cultural production and material resistance to classes or groups of people, Gofer is valorized as the ideal revolutionary, one who can take up both carving knife and banjo as the situation requires and wield either with virtuosity.

In Gondolier Gofer, who wields both banjo and carving knife, Delany communicates the importance of cultural production in the context of liberatory struggle. The importance placed on breaking from colonial forms, epitomized by these “formidable instruments,” is resonant with Fanon’s work on national culture in *Wretched of the Earth*. After anti-colonial tensions rise, Fanon writes, there are “repercussions on the cultural front.”⁹⁰ These repercussions result in a radical shift within cultural production, one that expands consciousness and inspires the people to revolt:

By imparting new meaning and dynamism to artisanship, dance, music, literature, and the oral epic, the colonized subject restructures his own perception. The world no longer seems doomed. Conditions are ripe for the inevitable confrontation.⁹¹

Delany describes such a shift in consciousness in his Cuban rebels, who embrace the banjo by “association” with the resolution of “the momentous question of immediate redemption or an endless degradation and bondage.” Cultural production in the form of music paves the way for rebellion, the “inevitable confrontation” that the novel builds toward before its abrupt conclusion. Music is just one of the many ways in which “the colonized subject restructures his own perception” throughout the book, but the careful attention paid by Delany to questions of cultural production is epitomized in these instruments.

In the liberatory theology that it advances, and in the symbology of the “formidable instruments” of cultural production, *Blake* contests and disrupts colonial power. Yet, for as much as the novel explores alternatives to colonial models of religion and culture, Fanon’s “inevitable confrontation” never arrives. The rebellion planned by Blake in Havana never progresses past the preliminary stage, just as the domestic slave revolt he seems to build in the U.S. is interrupted by his sudden flight to Cuba. While the novel puts forth, in these ways, an alternative to the oppressive power structures of its time, it is still firmly within those structures, still inextricably linked to the context of thought that it arose out of. That this alternative space that the novel creates is defined also by ambiguity can be understood better through the ambivalence of its world of ideas.

The Ambivalent Delany

⁸⁷ Delany, *Blake*, 313.

⁸⁸ Delany, *Blake*, 254.

⁸⁹ Delany, *Blake*, 265.

⁹⁰ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 172.

⁹¹ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 176.

The act of rebellion on board the *Vulture* during the Middle Passage crossing seems to promise a violent denouement, one that would achieve either liberty or death for the enslaved combatants. With the storm raging, the uncouth American mate Royer cautiously peers into the hold, and sees the powerful Mendi prepared for battle: “Yes, there he is armed to the teeth, and all his [n****s] armed.”⁹² But the storm suddenly breaks. “Suddenly the wind changed, the clouds began to disperse, and lightning ceased to be seen and heard.”⁹³ And with the clouds, the threat of violence unaccountably dissolves as well. “The hatches being secured,” the ship’s crew take no further notice of their enslaved cargo, despite the fact that they are “loose” and “armed to the teeth.”⁹⁴ The *Vulture* cruises into port at Matanzas without further incident, and Blake disembarks without a backward glance: “Scarcely had she landed than without waiting for the adjustment of his engagement, Blake went immediately on shore, and was soon lost among the gazing spectators who assembled on the quay”⁹⁵ Nothing is said about how the armed, unfettered Africans were subdued by their captors on deck. Their sale proceeds without a hitch the next day, although the rumor of insurrection, spread by Blake and Placido, lowers the selling price, allowing “agents” of the conspiring pair to purchase them.⁹⁶ The lack of resolution of this moment of powerful potential, and the abrupt, forestalled nature of its conclusion, are striking. This episode produces a pervading sense of ambiguity, one that produces more questions about what the novel ultimately says about violence and politics than answers.

It would be difficult to fully account for the ambiguity in *Blake* regarding revolutionary violence without a nuanced understanding of the schools and events that formed its author’s political thought. In this section, I argue that Delany as an individual was shaped by two broadly considered categories of influence in his political thinking, and that these influences make themselves felt in *Blake* as well. Namely, Delany was influenced by the European political and political-economic traditions of republicanism and liberalism, and the radical insurrectionism of Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and others. The ambiguity of *Blake*, especially regarding revolutionary violence, responds to the ambivalence between and among these intellectual sources.

Delany’s political philosophy was strongly influenced by republicanism, unsurprising given his context as a man educated towards the end of the early republic period in the United States. Republicanism, to most nineteenth-century Americans, was a fundamental part of how they understood the reality and potential of politics. In his analysis of Vermont farmer Hiram Harwood’s diary, Robert Shalhope writes that “Republicanism—a familiar ideology permeating all walks of his life—shaped his thought; it provided him with meaning in his life and a sense of identity,” and that this “may be representative of great numbers of nineteenth-century Americans.”⁹⁷ Republicanism constituted the political horizon of nineteenth-century Americans. Given this, it is not surprising that Delany would go on to couch much of his political writing in terms of republicanism, even directly quoting some of its canonical thinkers. As Robert Gooding-Williams observes, Delany’s argument for emigration in 1854 drew upon explicitly republican concepts. In his speech *Political Destiny of the Colored Race, On the American Continent*, delivered to the National Emigration Convention of Colored People, Delany “relies on the sovereign principle to elaborate a republican notion of political liberty that supports his critique of

⁹² Delany, *Blake*, 237.

⁹³ Delany, *Blake*, 238.

⁹⁴ Delany, *Blake*, 238.

⁹⁵ Delany, *Blake*, 239.

⁹⁶ Delany, *Blake*, 239.

⁹⁷ Shalhope, “Anticipating Americanism,” 66.

racial oppression.”⁹⁸ He explicitly links his notion of “the sovereign principle” with republican political theory by quoting Montesquieu: “Said a great French writer: ‘A free agent, in a free government, should be his own governor’; that is, he must possess within himself the *acknowledged right to govern*: this constitutes him as a *governor*, though he may delegate to another the power to govern himself.”⁹⁹ In Gooding-Williams’ analysis, Delany critiques the U.S. for failing to live up to its republican ideals by sustaining racial oppression: “white rulers collectively oppress black Americans as a group (as a “people”) when, rather than treat them severally as sovereign citizens . . . they disavow the sovereignty of each member of the group, treating each member as well as the collective accordingly—that is, according to the dictates of their unchecked collective discretion.”¹⁰⁰ Delany’s political critique is not directed at the founding principles of the United States themselves. Rather, he holds the nation to those same avowed principles and finds it lacking. In this early period, he was pessimistic about the nation ever acknowledging Black citizens as sovereign, as their own governors, hence his advocacy of emigration.

It may seem incongruous to include republicanism and liberalism in the same intellectual category. By doing so, I am not trying to suggest an equivalence, but rather to think about the ways in which Delany’s political thought was in continuity with his contemporaries in the U.S. as a whole. For while in the abstract republicanism and liberalism diverge, they found a unity of sorts in the nineteenth-century American political atmosphere. Summing up his synthesis of the republican-liberal debate, Shalhope cites a consensus that describes how “republicanism, liberalism, and other traditions of social and political thought interpenetrated to create a distinctive and creative intellectual milieu.”¹⁰¹ Delany’s more immediate intellectual milieu was defined by what Shalhope describes as “liberal tendencies—the aggressive, materialistic pursuit of individual gain.”¹⁰² Delany’s initial education and political mentorship was defined by connections with relatively prosperous middle-class Black figures like Woodson. According to Adeleke, the “individual triumph over adversity, particularly economic poverty” of these leaders “inspired a sense of hope and optimism and the conviction that other blacks could equally attain economic elevation.”¹⁰³ In this way, Delany’s political thought was in continuity with the synthesis of republicanism and liberalism in nineteenth-century American. Among other things, this synthesis contained a marked ambivalence when it came to colonialism: the U.S. defined itself against one form, but participated in another.

In an important way, however, Delany was also markedly influenced, as were some of his Black abolitionist peers, by another political force, one that marked discontinuity with political thought in the United States. This force was the insurrection represented by several rebels and mutineers, including Nat Turner. Frances Rollin Whipper, Delany’s authorized biographer (*nom de plume* Frank Rollin), indicates the importance of insurrection in Delany’s outlook thus:

. . . almost simultaneously with the outbreak for freedom at Southampton, Va., known as Nat Turner's Insurrection, appeared ‘Garrison's Thoughts on American Colonization.’ . . . Now, there is a dark significance in that solitary figure, looming up in the dark background of slavery as an offering on the altar of freedom, in the home of Washington, preceded by

⁹⁸ Gooding-Williams, “Martin Delany’s Two Principles,” 79.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Gooding-Williams, “Martin Delany’s Two Principles,” 79.

¹⁰⁰ Gooding-Williams, “Martin Delany’s Two Principles,” 82.

¹⁰¹ Shalhope, “Anticipating Americanism,” 54.

¹⁰² Shalhope, “Anticipating Americanism,” 66.

¹⁰³ Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race*, 47.

that attempted at Charleston with Denmark Vesey at its head, followed by the closing scene at Harper's Ferry. . . .

“When that great heart broke, 'twas a world that shook;

From their slavish sleep a million awoke;”

when Virginia, the cradle of slavery, became its burial-place, the Smithfield of freedom's martyrs, and the battle-ground of a slave-founded Confederacy. . . . With the scene of Nat Turner's defeat and execution before him, [the young Delany] consecrated himself to freedom; and, like another Hannibal, registered his vow against the enemies of his race.¹⁰⁴

While the passage is subject to Rollins' own interpretation of her subject, it clearly connects Delany with Turner, Vesey, and John Brown, and places him as a successor of their insurrectionary spirit. It celebrates Turner as a martyr to freedom, and connects Delany to the cause of freedom in a sacrificial sense, as he “consecrated himself.” In the image of the solitary figure “looming up” over the nation, and in the paraphrased lines of Orpheus C. Kerr's poem “Avenged,” with its lines about awakening a sleeping nation, show violent insurrection as a needed corrective against the “enemies” within the U.S.¹⁰⁵ Taking into account Delany's call to emigrate in *Political Destiny*, despite a fundamental belief in republican ideals and the appeal to the example of the American Revolution, this conflict within the nation was grave enough to require drastic action. *Blake* explores the possibilities of what resolving this conflict could look like.

The theme of insurrection is a prominent part of *Blake*. Its titular character is Turner-like in his militancy and his religious rhetoric. But the interrupted, ambiguous nature of the revolts it depicts raise questions about how insurrection in the text actually functions, what political pressures it might be responding to, and what its limits are. Lenora Warren's analysis of *Blake*'s ambiguous depiction of insurrection offers a vital starting point to thinking about Delany's political ambivalence. Within Delany's political thought, Warren detects “a sense that the feats of the American Revolution . . . need to be reenacted and transformed if black autonomy is to be realized.”¹⁰⁶ In the process of “reenacting and transforming” the Revolution, Warren postulates that the interruption of violence in *Blake* may be more about indicating revolutionary potential: “in repeatedly showing blacks in the act of conspiring, he is emphasizing the massive revolutionary potential of an enslaved population. . . . In this way, the power of a collective resides not merely in the threat of violence, but in that collective's ability to capitalize on that threat without firing a shot.”¹⁰⁷ However, Warren ultimately marks the ambiguity of Delany and Douglass's depiction of insurrection as a failure.

This failure by both authors is not merely the failure of imagination but also the failure of revolutionary rhetoric to exceed its limits. The invocation of the American Revolution for the cause of abolition succeeds only in reaffirming the American Revolution's legitimacy. Abolition, burdened by fear of slave insurrection, can only go so far in endorsing black violence on American soil. For a slave revolt to be truly revolutionary, one must face the possibility of slaves overthrowing the nation.¹⁰⁸

To Warren, the failure of *Blake* to realize revolutionary violence is partly a product of ambivalence between revolutionary rhetoric and the constraints of the American Revolution and the abolitionist movement.

¹⁰⁴ Rollin, *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany*, 39–40.

¹⁰⁵ Kerr, *The Palace Beautiful: And Other Poems*, 47.

¹⁰⁶ Warren, *Fire on the Water*, 89.

¹⁰⁷ Warren, *Fire on the Water*, 92–93.

¹⁰⁸ Warren, *Fire on the Water*, 97.

Further, Warren posits that *Blake*, in its ambiguous and interrupted depiction of insurrection, and with Frederick Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave,” “unintentionally white-washed slave violence in such a way that made it impossible to view armed blacks as fully human.”¹⁰⁹ This is a response to awareness of White readership: “the gaze of the imagined white reader dogs each text, forcing Delany and Douglass’s narratives, in effect, to fade to black before the blood begins to run.”¹¹⁰ Delany specifically, Warren argues, may have “seen the advantages in keeping readers’ eyes fixed on the evils of slavery rather than on the full character of the insurrectionists.”¹¹¹ The idea of Delany being forced to whitewash violence in his book due to the “gaze of the imagined white reader,” unintentionally or not, is dubious given the context of its publication. *Blake* was published serially in the *Weekly Anglo-African*, a newspaper owned by Black brothers Thomas and Robert Hamilton. As Benjamin Fagan observes, the *Weekly Anglo-African* was “a newspaper produced by and for Black Americans,” and after the outbreak of war, “brought readers a Black perspective on [it].”¹¹² The publication of *Blake* continued after the war began, and was published alongside material that cast the conflict as a “war for Black liberation,”¹¹³ advocating and championing the participation of Black people in it. There is a profound disconnect between this publication context and that of the other texts Warren places alongside the serial novel. Douglass’s short story was published in an anthology that he co-edited with White British abolitionist Julia Griffiths, and collected a diverse range of authors in a coalition-building effort; in John McKivigan and Rebecca Patillo’s analysis, the collected works were “envisioned as tools to construct a wider and politically more potent antislavery alliance.”¹¹⁴ The other author and periodical that Warren connects the two literary works with are White abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and his newspaper *The Liberator*. Both could be more accurately described as appealing to White readers. Published in a periodical owned, edited, and distributed to Black readers, the depiction of insurrectionary violence in *Blake*, while ambiguous, can hardly be a product of whitewashing.

With the benefit of hindsight, and the knowledge of reconstruction’s failures and betrayals of Black citizenry, it is easy to find shortcomings in the politics of Black abolitionists of the nineteenth century, in their inability to see beyond the limits of the republic. But to Delany and his milieu, the Civil War, and the opportunity to serve in the military, truly did seem like a revolution. After being offered an officer’s commission in the Union Army, Delany gave a speech in his hometown of Xenia, Ohio in full uniform. As reported by the local newspaper, in his speech he explained that while the Constitution of the U.S. had been “conservative” up to the war, “he gloried in the fact, that the Constitution has been ‘broken,’ that it has been amended, that slavery has been abolished, and that the Government, like that of the British, has been rendered ‘progressive.’”¹¹⁵ This moment, for Delany, composed a fundamental break in the political nature of the nation itself. It was finally possible for the promise of freedom represented by the American Revolution to come true. Adeleke sums up this moment in Delany’s life thus: “in Delany’s estimation, the Civil War had fundamentally altered race relations, transforming blacks from passive objects into constituents and an ‘essential element’ of the nation. He himself had never anticipated such a revolutionary transformation.”¹¹⁶ To Delany, the war answered in a fundamental way the questions

¹⁰⁹ Warren, *Fire on the Water*, 73.

¹¹⁰ Warren, *Fire on the Water*, 76.

¹¹¹ Warren, *Fire on the Water*, 93.

¹¹² Fagan, “Black Newspapers, Novels, and the Racial Geographies of Transnationalism,” 180.

¹¹³ Fagan, “Black Newspapers, Novels, and the Racial Geographies of Transnationalism,” 180.

¹¹⁴ McKivigan and Patillo, “*Autographs for Freedom* and Reaching a New Abolitionist Audience,” 35.

¹¹⁵ Delany, *A Documentary Reader*, 390–391.

¹¹⁶ Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race: The Other Martin Robison Delany*, 159.

he asked in *Blake*. As an officer in the Union Army, he was no longer simply “loose,” but free; recognized as a participant in the civic life of the nation, and empowered to help rebuild a nation according to his underlying values.

The context of political ambivalence, that of Delany’s own political makeup and that of his milieu, can explain its ambiguous depiction of violent insurrection. This ambiguity, however, is not simply a failure. Through its radical treatment of religion and culture, *Blake* clearly expresses the latent power of an international Black community. In its ambiguity, the novel endlessly anticipates the moment when that power will be unleashed. Delany found his moment in the Civil War; he threw himself into the work of reconstruction and integration, believing that the storm of violence had come, then dissipated, leaving behind a new world. Contemporary readers may struggle to reconcile Delany the accommodationist with the radical ideas in *Blake*. Yet beyond the anti-colonial treatments of religion and culture that still resonate today, the novel’s ambiguity, its refusal of closure, makes it uniquely open to the future. Whenever in time it is read, Mendi and his band will be waiting just beneath the deck, “armed to the teeth,” waiting for a sign.

Conclusion

Two months after the end of the war in July of 1865, Major Martin Delany delivered a lecture to a group of freedmen assembled near a church on St. Helena Island, South Carolina. The lecture was attended by a Lieutenant Edward M. Stoeber, who kept a watchful eye on the proceedings and reported what he saw and heard to his superiors. According to Stoeber, Delany delivered a fiery speech, warning the freedmen to be wary of exploitation by White employers. He also emphasized the importance of holding on to the gains won through war: “I tell you slavery is over, and shall never return again. We have now 200,000 of our men well drilled in arms and used to warfare, and I tell you, it is with you and them that slavery shall not come back again, and if you are determined it will not return again.”¹¹⁷ Even as the Civil War, through a terrible price in lives lost, brought Delany the form of liberation he sought, he remained convinced of the revolutionary potential of his people even after its conclusion. Stoeber complains:

He tells them to remember, “That they would not have become free, had they not armed themselves and fought for their independence.” This is a falsehood and misrepresentation. Our President Abraham Lincoln declared the colored race free, before there was even an idea of arming colored men.¹¹⁸

Stoeber doesn’t get it. To Delany, Black people were not made free by Lincoln’s decree. They made themselves free by taking up the carving knife and demanding recognition as a part of the nation’s civic life. In his final published work, the speculative *Principia of Ethnology* (1879), Delany concludes his public life of letters thus: “The regeneration of the African race can only be effected by its own efforts, the efforts of its own self, whatever aid may come from other sources; and it must in this venture succeed, as God leads the movement and His hand guides the way.”¹¹⁹ To the end, he had faith in the blessing of the Christian God upon “effort:” practical action to improve the condition of oppressed people. Delany became quite conservative, yet the change in his political orientation can largely be understood as his world changing around him. Many of his beliefs and values, like that of the revolutionary potential of Black Americans, the primacy of

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Adeleke, *Martin R. Delany’s Civil War and Reconstruction*, 42.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Adeleke, *Martin R. Delany’s Civil War and Reconstruction*, 43.

¹¹⁹ Delany, *Principia of Ethnology*, 109.

liberty in a republican sense, and a divine mandate for Black self-determination, would be consistent.

Blake is firmly bonded to its present; Delany’s imaginative work is rooted in his experience as an abolitionist lecturer and a meticulous concern for the contemporary issues facing Black people in both the North and South of the United States, as well as the global experience of all colonized peoples. Its ambivalence reflects this connection; the book is “split” along the same fault lines that divided its author’s experience. At the same time, it also anticipates the future. In one sense, it is anticipatory simply in that in putting forth a radical contestation of institutional Christianity as a part of systematic racial and colonial oppression, it resonates with liberation theologies of our more recent past. But in another, more profound sense, it is anticipatory in its form. *Blake* is a novel, the first and last novel Delany would ever publish, and its status as an outlier implies a certain intentionality; the form was a deliberate choice, central to its intended function. When contemporary writer Samuel Delany describes *Blake* as “about as close to an sf-style alternate history novel as you can get,”¹²⁰ he reveals the function of the form: it facilitates complex, imaginative speculation. It is open to and oriented towards the future, possibility. Said invites us to imagine the text as “a dynamic field, rather than as a static block, of words,” with “a certain range of reference, a system of tentacles . . . partly potential, partly actual: to the author, to the reader, to a historical situation, to other texts, to the past and present.”¹²¹ In this sense, “no text is finished, since its potential range is always being extended by every additional reader.”¹²² Thus, the premature conclusion of the novel can be seen as an opportunity, an outstretched “tentacle” of open reference. Delany offers us a rich, imaginative vision of what a movement for Black liberation could look like. He leaves it to future generations to finish the story.

¹²⁰ Delany, “Racism and Science Fiction.”

¹²¹ Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, 157.

¹²² Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, 157.

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