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Martin Delany's *Blake* and the "Secrets of His Organization"

Caleb Doan
Francis Marion University

In January 1859, Thomas Hamilton introduced Martin Delany's *Blake* as a work that "differs essentially from all others heretofore published." He asserts that the novel "not only shows the combined political and commercial interests that unite the North and the South, but gives in the most familiar manner the formidable understanding among the slaves throughout the United States and Cuba."[1] Hamilton rightly identified a central thrust of *Blake*'s critique—its representation of coordinated political and commercial interests that undermine abolition and racial equality in the U.S. By emphasizing the "formidable understanding among the slaves," he also recognizes the novel's power as a tool of resistance. This introduction observes Delany's coupling of critique and political alternatives in *Blake*, implicitly agreeing with its premise that deconstruction is necessary for the construction of something better. This essay expands Hamilton's focus to consider the novel's "secrets of . . . organization" amongst free and enslaved people of color in the Atlantic world.[2]

We know that Martin Delany had hoped that *Blake* would help raise money for his emigrationist project in West Africa. His letter to William Lloyd Garrison in February 1859 candidly states his economic interests: "I am anxious to get a good publishing house to take it, as I know I could make a penny by it, and the chances for a negro in this department are so small, that unless some disinterested competent persons would indirectly aid in such a step, I almost despair of any chance."[3] His doubts about the publication possibilities for Black fiction writers proved too true. Garrison never responded, and Delany was otherwise unable to secure its publication in book form. Despite his opposition to emigration, Thomas Hamilton printed two separate, incomplete runs of *Blake* in the *Anglo-African Magazine* and *Weekly Anglo-African.* Clearly, Hamilton saw the novel as more than an appeal to emigrate. I think Hamilton understood *Blake*'s potential to enlighten and empower his transnational Black readership.

This essay illustrates that vision of the novel. *Blake* takes up weighty questions about the condition, elevation, emigration, and destiny of Black people that Delany had been wrestling with for over a decade. It also engages with antebellum literature, from Black radical writings by David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet to slave narratives, popular fiction, poetry, songs, and prayers. Delany variously employs or subverts conventions and incorporates references to, as Jerome McGann notes, achieve a "startlingly innovative aesthetic result."[4] The analysis that follows closely examines Henry's/Blake's strategies for organization to track the novel's overarching arguments and various modes of engaging readers.[5]

In *Blake,* the protagonist's attempt to reunite with his wife, cruelly sold and separated from her family, transforms into a broader mission to unify Black communities from the Americas to

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[1] Editors, "Blake; or, The Huts of America," *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 1 (January 1859): 20, Babel.hathitrust.org
[2] Martin Delany, *Blake; or The Huts of America,* ed. Jerome McGann (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2017), 5. Subsequent references will be noted parenthetically in the text.
[3] Martin Delany, "Letter from Martin Robison Delany, 157 Church St., New York, to William Lloyd Garrison, Feb. 19, [18]59," Massachusetts Collections Online, Digital Commonwealth, Digitalcommonwealth.org.
[4] Jerome McGann, introduction to *Blake; or The Huts of America,* by Martin Delany, ed. Jerome McGann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), xvi. Subsequent references will be noted parenthetically.
[5] The hero is called Henry Holland in Part I and revealed to be Carolus Henrico Blacus, or Blake, in Part II.

Africa. In Part I, Henry organizes slaves throughout the Southern U.S. for a general insurrection that he cannot personally join and leads a small party of fugitive slaves to Canada. In Part II, Blake frees his wife in Cuba, sails to Africa, and returns to Cuba to organize a revolutionary movement that never finally incites revolution. Like other major antebellum writers, Delany dramatizes the tension between the individual and the collective—and between intellectual and spiritual enlightenment and physical resistance.

I. Launching the plot

"Chapter 1: The Project" offers a curious start. The chapter consists of three paragraphs. It introduces major characters in the United States and Cuba, who are "entirely absorbed in an adventure of self interest," which involves "refitting the old ship the *Merchantman*" (5). Nearly teasing readers, the second paragraph begins: "Here a conversation ensued upon what seemed a point of vital importance to the company; it related to the place best suited for the completion of their arrangements." The paragraph relates an argument about whether Baltimore or Havana is the best site for their operation, but it doesn't state the point of their conversation in the first place. Literary critic Martha Schoolman calls this first chapter "almost inexplicable."[6]

While the lack of context and details is disorienting, this introduction arguably offers insight into Delany's expectations for his audience. Tellingly, the first sentence of the first chapter of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Blake* both focus on a meeting between "gentlemen" (5). Of course, Stowe's narrator then didactically undercuts the gentlemanly status of the slave-trader Haley and more subtly interrogates the position of Shelby, as he demands a minstrel performance from Eliza's son and negotiates the sale of his human chattel. Delany's narrator, on the other hand, merely points out the "self interest" driving their adventure. He neither encourages nor directs his reader's moral judgment. But Delany likely expects his audience to know that these officials' interests don't relate—or are in direct opposition—to his readers' interests and, further, that a meeting between American and Cuban elites must somehow involve slavery.[7]

Chapter Two then follows Colonel Stephen Franks, one of the Americans, back to his plantation in Natchez, Mississippi, and it quickly introduces the central critique identified by Hamilton. Like the first, this chapter with Franks and his guest Arabella Ballard, the wife of a judge in the North, is obliquely about slavery: "The conversation, as is customary on the meeting of Americans residing in such distant latitudes, readily turned on the general policy of the country" (6). Arabella, speaking as a representative Northerner, tells Franks, "We can have no interests separate from yours; you know the time-honored motto, 'united we stand,' and so forth, must apply to the American people under every policy in every section of the Union" (6). She continues, "You, I'm sure, Colonel, know very well that in our country commercial interests have taken precedence of all others, which is a sufficient guarantee of our fidelity to the South" (6). For her (and presumably Delany), the U.S. is not bound by a shared political ideology or a commitment to certain inalienable rights. Instead, the nation is held together by its states' vested economic

[6] Martha Schoolman, "Martin Delany, *Blake; or, the Huts of America* (1859–1862)," in *Handbook of the American Novel of the Nineteenth Century,* ed. Christine Gerhardt (De Gruyter, 2018).

[7] In Part II, it is revealed that the *Merchantman* is refitted as the *Vulture* for a transatlantic slave voyage involving a cargo of two thousand slaves (205).

interests.[8] Disparate regional interests are subsumed into a single national interest when the focus is on the dollar, and slavery will continue, strengthen, and even grow as long as it remains profitable.

Blake also launches its restorative community-building project in the opening chapters. After she rejects his sexual entreaties, Franks sells Maggie, a decision that catalyzes Henry's radicalization. Maggie's mother, Mammy Jude, breaks the news to Henry, suggesting that it would be better if she had died or submitted herself to his demands (17). Outraged by the latter suggestion, Henry prepares an oath that Mammy censors, urging him not to swear or "lose [his] 'ligion" (17). Henry responds, "Don't tell me about religion! What's religion to me? 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! Put my trust in the Lord! I have done so all my life nearly, and of what use is it to me? My wife is sold from me just the same as if I didn't" (17). Henry seems ready to adopt Delany's own lines from *Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny:* "Talk not about religious biases—we have but one reply to make. We had rather be a Heathen *freeman*, than a Christian *slave.*"[9] But here Delany is not crafting a polemic. He's searching for a way to make faith unify a community in spiritual and mental darkness. Soon Henry rejects the "oppressor's religion" and the slave-holding preacher's advice to stand still and see the salvation (22). Instead of waiting on "heavenly promises" (18), he insists, "'Now is the accepted time, to-day is the day of salvation.' . . . [T]his is very different to standing still" (23). From here onward, Henry uses this ethos to fuel an earthly mission for the salvation of his oppressed race.[10]

II. Imparting the "secrets of his organization"

Franks's attempt to deceive his wife about Henry's sale provides Henry with the opportunity, as he calls it, to "become a runaway" (33). Before leaving, Henry shares his mission with his enslaved friends and allies Charles and Andy: "I now impart to you the secret—it is this: I have laid a scheme, and matured a plan for a general insurrection of the slaves in every state, and the successful overthrow of slavery!" (40). He claims his plan is "so simple that the most stupid

[8] James Fenimore Cooper views slavery similarly in *Notions of the Americans*: "It is difficult to imagine a state of society where there is so little competition, (the source of all discord,) between its members, as is to be found in the United States. The unfortunate and lamentable grievance of slavery ceases to be an evil in this respect. That momentary collisions of opinion do arise between northern and southern, between eastern and western policy, is undeniable; but they are far more the results of the right to complain, than of any natural disability to maintain the connexion." He then goes on to discuss how regions rely on a shared national commerce (Cooper, *Notions of the Americans* [New York: Stringer and Townshend, 1850], 339).

[9] Martin Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852), Gutenberg.org.

[10] *Blake*'s framing of Christianity stands out compared to other appeals to Christianity. Consider, for instance, William Apess's "An Indian's Looking-Glass for the White Man" (1833) and Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852), two works whose titles explicitly identify their audience. They both seek to transform the moral conscience of the White reader, in part, by appealing to true Christianity. Believers in a single vision of Christianity with clear moral directives, Apess and Douglass seek to expose the hypocrisy of Christians, whose immoral practices—from land theft to slavery—are decidedly unchristian. For them, a wicked slaveholding Christian is not really a Christian at all. Meanwhile, Martin Delany takes an approach that may be described as either profoundly cynical or maybe postmodern. He seems skeptical of one *true* Christianity and presents multiple interpretive possibilities, which individuals choose based on how those beliefs align with their self-interests. Read unfavorably, the novel weaponizes Christianity for political ends; read favorably, the novel encourages its readership to adopt a Christianity that defends human rights and empowers Black communities.

among the slaves will understand it as well as if he had been instructed for a year" (40). He continues: "So simple is it that the trees of the forest or an orchard illustrate it; flocks of birds or domestic cattle, fields of corn[,] hemp[,] or sugar cane; tobacco[,] rice[,] or cotton, the whistling of the wind, rustling of the leaves, flashing of lightning, roaring of thunder, and running of streams all keep it constantly before their eyes and in their memory, so that they cannot forget it if they would" (41).[11] Rather than clarifying, this catalogue only further befuddles Charles and Andy. Henry never explains the meaning of the list. Read quickly, this long sentence seems to suggest that Nature offers the best illustration of slavery's wrongs.[12]

Henry's list, however, includes things that are not a part of the natural environment. This catalogue juxtaposes trees from a forest with those from an orchard; birds with domestic cattle; fields of corn, hemp, and sugar cane and the agricultural products of tobacco, rice, and cotton with natural phenomena involving lightning, thunder, and rushing streams. It's impossible to definitively claim how these things "illustrate" a plan for insurrection. At this moment, the author's intended meaning is less important than the reader's process of interpretation, which requires imagination and self-reliance. In uncultivated environments, slaves can find free living beings; they can observe elements of the land, sea, or sky that break past constraints or explode to produce balance and equilibrium. In cultivated environments, slaves can equate their existence to domesticated animals; they can see the animals and plants that they grow, care for, and process profit others besides themselves. No matter where slaves with unbridled imagination look, they can build a case against their enslaved condition. For Henry (and Delany), interpretive ambiguity opens the door to empowerment.

Henry continues, "such is the character of this organization, that punishment and misery are made instruments for its propagation, so—" (41). Andy's and Charles's constant interruptions illustrate their thirst for knowledge; they also serve to build up readers' anticipation for Henry's responses. Betraying more of his plans, Henry asserts, "Every blow you receive from the oppressor impresses the organization upon your mind, making it so clear that even Whitehead's Jack could understand it as well as his master" (41). The violence, lust, moral hypocrisy, theft, and deception of slaveholders build the obvious and urgent intellectual case against slavery. The system itself creates the resistance movement *if and only if* it is actively understood by individuals who then organize and respond collectively.

Then Delany pulls a trick on his readers. Charles and Andy shout, "We are satisfied! The secret, the secret!" (41). Henry delays a bit by first praying, and then the narrator relays, "whilst yet upon their knees, Henry imparted to them the secrets of his organization" (41). Readers never learn the "secret." The move allows Delany to retain a certain mystique. Is the secret so explosive that it can't be printed? Withholding information also could be a subversive display of authorial

[11] Admittedly with a heavy editorial hand, I have added commas to illustrate my reading of the idiosyncratic syntax.
[12] Henry's words could thus resemble Madison Washington's soliloquy in *The Heroic Slave*. For Douglass's hero, birds and snakes offer a model of freedom denied to the abject slave: "What, then, is life to me? it is aimless and worthless, and worse than worthless. Those birds, perched on yon swinging boughs, in friendly conclave, sounding forth their merry notes in seeming worship of the rising sun, though liable to the sportsman's fowling-piece, are still my superiors. They live free, though they may die slaves. They fly where they list by day, and retire in freedom at night. But what is freedom to me, or I to it? I am a slave,—born a slave, an abject slave,—even before I made part of this breathing world, the scourge was platted for my back; the fetters were forged for my limbs. How mean a thing am I. That accursed and crawling snake, that miserable reptile, that has just glided into its slimy home, is freer and better off than I." Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave,* in *Autographs for Freedom* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1853), Docsouth.unc.edu.

mastery over certain readers.[13] Nonetheless, most importantly, by hiding the blueprint for war, the scene prioritizes the pathway to organization, emphasizing building solidarity over staging violence.

Framed as a meeting about "a general insurrection," this chapter focuses on individual enlightenment that can lead to collective resistance. Henry's actual plan for organization *is* quite simple. "All you have to do," he says, "is to find one good man or woman—I don't care which, so that they prove to be the right person—on a single plantation, and hold a seclusion and impart the secret to them, and make them the organizers for their own plantation, and they in like manner impart it to some other next to them, and so on" (42). Before Henry ever travels to Cuba, there is an archipelagic logic to his scheme, as the revolutionary power of his scheme lies not in a single plantation—a solitary island—but a network of plantations—an archipelago of resistance. Henry's rally with Charles and Andy, however, ends on an unexpected note, as he urges them to collect all the money they can "for when we leave for the North" (44). While his listeners don't register any surprise, this parting note first informs readers that Henry doesn't intend to fight in the revolution of his own design.[14]

III. Touring the South

Henry leaves Natchez for his tour of Southwestern and Southern states. His rhetorical dialogues throughout his journey exemplify how blows received from the oppressor impress the organization upon the minds of the oppressed. In Louisiana, in his first exchange, Henry asks Aunt Dolly about living conditions—their treatment, food, clothing, housing, and so on. Their responses build a case for the unbearable nature of their state. As Henry travels onward, it becomes increasingly obvious that his interviews resemble the narrator's broadly non-interventionist approach with his audience. The most mundane question—"What time do you get to wash your clothes?" or "How much [cotton] must the women pick as a task?"—allows slaves and Delany's readers to open their eyes to an untenable situation (76, 78). Without ideological instruction or promises, his dialogues reflect their lives back to them to process it anew.

Occasionally, he praises resistance. He tells young women to "die before surrendering to such base purposes as that for which this man who holds you wishes to dispose of you" (80). To the same women, he learns of a cruel Black overseer. Henry promises them that the man soon will "never whip another" (79), and the narrator reports that on the following day the man never was seen again. This Black man—an abuser of his own race—stands as the only one whose life Henry takes over the course of the work.[15] Later, along the Mississippi River, Henry meets a kidnapped man, stolen from freedom, and he encourages him to kill his master in his sleep instead of

[13] Potentially, he was inspired by Frederick Douglass's refusal to reveal the means of his own escape in *Narrative*. Douglass flexes his authorial power over his slaveholding reader by withholding this information: "Let him be left to feel his way in the dark; let darkness commensurate with his crime hover over him; and let him feel that at every step he takes, in pursuit of the flying bondman, he is running the frightful risk of having his hot brains dashed out by an invisible agency." Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* ed. William L. Andrews and William S. McFeely (New York: Norton, 2017), 69.

[14] When Henry confronted Franks about Maggie, he told him, "I'm not your slave, nor never was, and you know it! and but for my wife and her people, I never would have staid with you till now. I was decoyed away when young, and then became entangled in such domestic relations as to induce me to remain with you; but now the tie is broken!" (21). Henry thus has an unusual insider-outsider relationship to his fellow slaves.

[15] The death count of animals is higher.

submitting to continued captivity (83). In the "Indian Nation near Fort Towson, Arkansas," Henry discusses with Chief Culver the possibility of an alliance between Natives and slaves echoing the partnership between Seminole Indians and maroons and free Black people (88).

While Henry champions resistance in the cases above, he also consistently frames the revolution as anticipatory, not immediate. The narrator uses a metaphor about sowing seeds for an abundant harvest to describe the future "devastation and ruin to the master and redemption to the slave" enabled by Henry's organization (84).[16] Somewhat ironically, in the gatherings throughout the South, Henry appropriates the master's imperative to "stand still and see the salvation" (108).[17] A warning about the consequences of premature action occurs in New Orleans when Brotha Tib, a man "bent on mischief" and working in cooperation with White slaveholders, insists "now or neveh!" (105) and incites a rebellion. The result is a predictable failure, which yields an increased state of surveillance that only threatens to doom future freedom efforts. To no avail, Henry had pleaded with Brotha Tib, "Have all the instrumentalities necessary for an effective effort before making the attempt. Without this, you will fail, utterly fail!" (106). Still, Henry escapes to carry his message forward and returns to Natchez with the "brightest hopes and expectations for the redemption of his race in the South" (126).

Back with Charles and Andy, Henry discusses how a "good master" is the very worst of masters, which opens a conversation on the violence of resistance. Talk of head chopping ensues. Charles and Andy bluster about their psychological preparedness to kill their masters, along with their beloved mistresses. Henry tempers their passions, "There's neither of you, Andy, could muster up courage enough to injure a 'good master' or mistress. And even I now could not have the heart to injure Mrs. Franks" (129). Undoubtedly relieved, Andy suggests, in fact, he would cut off "anybody's head" attempting to hurt his mistress, and they all break down laughing (129).[18] Then Henry provides a justification for the "general insurrection" he just attempted to organize:

> "A slave has no just conception of his own wrongs. Had I dealt with Franks as he deserved, for doing that for which he would have taken the life of any man had it been his case—tearing my wife from my bosom!—the most I could take courage directly to do, was to leave him, and take as many from him as I could induce to go. But maturer reflection drove me to the expedient of avenging the general wrongs of our people, by inducing the slave, in his might, to scatter red ruin throughout the region of the South. But still, I cannot find it in my heart to injure an individual except in personal conflict."
>
> . . . "I have taught the slave that mighty lesson: to strike for Liberty. 'Rather die as freemen, than live as slaves!'" (129)

Delany appropriates Garnet's call to "*die freemen, than live as slaves*" for Henry's speech, notably keeping it in quotes to highlight its intertextuality. But Henry includes neither himself nor Andy

[16] For other references, *see* 74, 113, and 124.

[17] *See* 81 and 123.

[18] This shocking conversation brings to mind a passage in *My Bondage and My Freedom* in which Douglass references dialogues between him and his fellow slaves on Freeland's plantation: "Thoughts and sentiments were exchanged between us, which might well be called very incendiary, by oppressors and tyrants; and perhaps the time has not even now come, when it is safe to unfold all the flying suggestions which arise in the minds of intelligent slaves." Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom,* ed. John David Smith (New York: Penguin, 2003), 197.

and Charles in this general grouping of slaves.[19] While they could never kill a "good" master or mistress, "a slave has no just conception of his own wrongs." Henry dumps the moral burden of war and its necessary mass violence on the other slaves. For those slaves, the effort to secure freedom is moral, regardless of the actions required. In his address, Henry Highland Garnet reframes the conversation on morals to posit "VOLUNTARY SUBMISSION" to slavery as "SINFUL IN THE EXTREME" and the use of "EVERY MEANS, BOTH MORAL, INTELLECTUAL, AND PHYSICAL," to abolish slavery as a "moral obligation" and "IMPERATIVE DUTY."[20] Delany reflects ambivalence by emphasizing the conditional application of this moral code. This passage divulges Henry's reticence for violence.

IV. Seeking refuge in Canada

To escape slavery personally, Henry opts for flight, not fight. A mentality of self-reliance undergirds the fugitive's pathway, just as it informs the noble rebel. Henry shows his small party of friends and family how to use the stars to find the North Star, "the slave's great Guide to Freedom!" (134). In case stars cannot be seen, they should "depend alone upon nature for your guide" and feel for moss on the trees: "[W]herever you feel moss on the bark, that side on which the moss grows is always to the north" (134). Lastly, he teaches them how to use a compass. After that, he insists, "Now, I've told you all that's necessary to guide you from a land of slavery and long suffering, to a land of liberty and future happiness" (135). Read literally, this statement feels exaggerated; surely the ability to identify North isn't *all* that's necessary. Read figuratively, the geographic route from the land of slavery becomes an allegory for the intellectual and spiritual path to living free. Robert Levine has rightly noted that Henry's conspiracy relies on "oral forms of communication" rather than "literacy" insisted upon by Douglass and other Black abolitionists.[21] Henry also empowers his fellow slaves with instructions to read the environment, not books. This pragmatic lesson falls in line with what Henry later tells Placido: "we know enough now, and all that remains to be done, is to make ourselves free, and then put what we know into practice. We know much more than we dare attempt to do" (199). As Jerome McGann notes, such episodes "dramatize Delany's touchstone for freedom: self-emancipation through a commitment to practical reason" (xiv).

Henry's discourse on flight is twice linked to another concept: the "white gap." First mentioned when sharing the secrets of his organization with Charles and Andy (44), he dilates further on the concept with Sampson and Drusie in Texas during his Southern tour:

> "Your most difficult point is an elevated obstruction, a mighty hill, a mountain; but through that hill there is a gap; and money is your passport through that White Gap to freedom. Mark that. It is the great range of White Mountains and White River which are before you, and the White Gap that you must pass through to reach the haven of safety. Money alone will carry you through the White Mountains or across the White River to liberty." (86)

[19] Henry Highland Garnet, "An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America" (1848), *Electronic Texts in American* Studies: 8, Digitalcommons.unl.edu.
[20] Garnet, "An Address," 5–6.
[21] Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 195.

Here the geography of the nation is racialized as White. The characterization of the U.S. as the "White Gap" suggests that the spaces on either side of the border are *not* White and therefore present safety and freedom. Henry registers degraded, disempowered, and enslaved Black people as not just a "nation within a nation"—as Delany does in *Condition*—but as a Black nation trapped inside the White nation by its very physical terrain. The concept creates its own implicit case for emigration, as the national environment is inimical to Black people.

Ironically, the fugitive party's escape to Canada offers lessons about defusing racial tensions. Immediately after leaving Franks's plantation, they need to cross a river on a "lightly built yawl, commanded by a white man" (130). Asked for a pass, Henry hands him a "half eagle" for himself and, after further insistence, seven half eagles for the rest of his crew. Sure enough, the money works. With coins in hand, he makes "the quickest possible time to the opposite side of the river" (131). The second skiffman they meet initially rejects written passes as "nigger passes" (136). Here is Henry's response and the skiffman's revised comments:

> "Then I have one that will pass us!" presenting the unmistaking evidence of a shining gold eagle, at the sight of which emblem of his country's liberty, the skiffman's patriotism was at once awakened, and their right to pass as American freemen indisputable.
> … "Now, gentlem'n, I done the clean thing, didn't I, by jingo! . . . I dont go in for this slaveholding o' people in these Newnited States uv the South, nowhow, so I don't. Dog gone it, let every feller have a fair shake!" (137)

This scene is more overtly satirical. The narrator's commentary is expanded and the newly won over skiffman's comments take on a near comic effect. Both interactions emphasize that the nation's core values revolve around money, extending the critique first established by Franks's and Arabella's conversation in Chapter 2. Intriguingly, by appealing to their self-interests with money, Henry overcomes their racism and even prompts the second man to rhetorically embrace equal opportunities for all.

In a later interaction, Henry appeals to a comically confused ferryman insisting on his national duty to follow the "Nebrasky Complimize Fugintive Slave Act, made down at Californy": "My friend . . . are you willing to make yourself a watch-dog for slaveholders, and do for them that which they would not do for themselves, catch runaway slaves? Don't you know that this is the work which they boast on having the poor white men at the North do for them? Have you not yet learned to attend to your own interests instead of theirs?" (141). The initial hostility eases, and Henry coaxes the ferryman to help them evade capture by slaveholders in pursuit. Henry takes a pragmatic approach with these boatmen. He does not waste his fine rhetorical powers by appealing to higher moral or political principles when money talks. He finds a way to disarm their prejudice—to neutralize their White nationalism—and transform their relationship. Henry's methods diverge from the more confrontational rhetorical approaches typically taken by activists and abolitionists, and perhaps they offer a fleeting vision of how a focus on economic materialism could open the door to racial equality and equity.

I say "fleeting vision" because the capture of the fugitives underscores the nearly insurmountable systemic forces faced by enslaved and free Black people. Dave and Adaline Starkweather are first alerted of the group's fugitive status when they hear them singing about Canada. With lines alluding to British pressure on the U.S. to abolish slavery, their song offends

the White couple's sense of nationalism, built on ahistoricism (145). The Starkweathers direct the fugitives to stay with William and Sally, a free Black couple, who ultimately hand them over to the White townspeople. Sally urges William to not betray them, but he reminds her, "yeh knows we make our livin' by de wite folks, an' mus' do what da tell us, so whar's de use talkin' long so" (148). While ostensibly free, Bill and Sally are effectively enslaved, stripped of self-reliance and trapped by so-called economic necessity. The scene dramatizes David Walker's critique of free people of color in *Appeal*: "Do any of you say that you and your family are free and happy, and what have you to do with the wretched slaves and other people? . . . Look into our freedom and happiness, and see of what kind they are composed!! They are of the very lowest kind—they are the very dregs!—they are the most servile and abject kind, that ever a people was in possession of!"[22]

By exploiting their White captors' drunkenness, Henry and his crew escape and arrive in Canada. Andy celebrates their arrival with a series of rhetorical questions: "Is dis Canada? . . . Is dis free groun'? de lan' whar black folks is free! Thang God for dis privilege!" (154). The narrator dramatically intervenes by illuminating what Andy doesn't know about the imperfect freedom offered to the fugitive slave in Canada. For one, the narrator highlights how White Canadians have forgotten that Black men fought alongside them to defend their land in the War of 1812 from "Patriots"—a satirical label for Americans whose expansionist zeal is at odds with their sense of postcolonial innocence.[23] This section builds on Delany's advice to free people of color and fugitive slaves about Canada in *Condition*: "We are satisfied that the Canadas are no place of safety for the colored people of the United States . . . . But to the fugitive—our enslaved brethren flying from Southern despotism—we say, until we have a more preferable place—go to Canada. Freedom, always; liberty any place and ever—before slavery." By the close of Part I, the fugitives have escaped slavery; in Part II, Henry leaves North America to explore other possibilities for a "place of safety" in the Atlantic world.

V. Sailing to "Afraka"

Once in Cuba, Blake finds Maggie, who is horrifically abused but soon freed through the process of *coartación,* and reencounters his cousin Placido, the "distinguished poet of Cuba" (194).[24] To Placido, he reveals his next big step: "I go directly to Matanzas, to take out a slaver as sailing master, with the intention of taking her in mid ocean as a prize for ourselves, as we must have a vessel at our command before we make a strike" (200). An experienced seaman, Blake explains that his racial identity makes him desirable for the job: "[N]o white men manage vessels in the African waters, that being entirely given up to the blacks" (196). Unaware that White men were "unable to stand the climate," Placido says this information "opens . . . an entirely new field

[22] David Walker, *Appeal, in Four Articles* (Boston, 1829), Docsouth.unc.edu.

[23] As Delany suggests in Destiny, "[T]here is a manifest tendency on the part of the Canadians generally, to Americanism. That the Americans are determined to, and will have the Canadas, to a close observer, there is not a shadow of doubt; and our brethren should know this in time" (*Condition*).

[24] In *Condition,* Delany remembers the historical figure as "the noble mulatto, . . . the gentleman, scholar, poet, and intended Chief Engineer of the Army of Liberty and Freedom in Cuba . . . shamefully put to death in 1844" (*Condition*). As this part of the novel is set in 1853, McGann argues, "When Delany resurrects Placido in Part II, he uses the dead poet to replay historical events that occurred more than ten years before" (xvii). As I will relate in the conclusion, I am less sure than McGann about how exactly this replay works out.

of thought" (197). He doesn't reveal what he's thinking, but the conversation marks the African coast Black just as the "White Gap" paints the U.S. as White.

From the start of the voyage, racial tension seethes on board the *Vulture.* They are briefly pursued by the *Sea Gull,* a cause of "great anxiety" amongst the White men and "grim satisfaction" for Blake (206).[25] Although the *Sea Gull* is unsuccessful, the failed chase confirms that the Black crew are on the side of justice and international law, while the Cuban and American mariners are renegades on the global stage. Gascar, one of the Black crew members, sings threatening verses, beginning with "I'm a goin' to Afraka, / Where de white man dare not stay" and followed by three rhymed couplets describing acts of violence and the White man's pained responses (212). The narrator relays George Royer's disturbing reflections: "In his own country a white man was all that he desired to be; and out of it, he was no better than a negro" (212). The United States is exceptional for its White supremacy.

As soon as they land, "Blake was on shore and off into the forest," nearly absent from the text throughout their stay in Africa (214). Decentering Blake, the focus moves away from enlightening dialogues at organizations to a symbolically loaded sentimental sequence about a powerful family—the Portuguese slave trader Ludo Draco, his native African wife Zorina, and their daughters Angelina and Seraphina. In Lisbon, Angelina's religious instruction taught her to "love my neighbor as Myself," and she intended to "come home and teach my race" (217). However, back in Dahomey, she is haunted by her father's business and the sights and sounds at the barracoons. Angelina's health collapses at the moral outrage, and Zorina tells her husband, "Oh, Don Ludo, my poor child is almost gone!" (221). In a state of delirium, Angelina exclaims, "Oh, 'tis my mother's race and not his! Yes, 'tis my blood and not his!" (221). At once, Angelina recalls Eva from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the tragic mulatto. Like Eva, the child seems too pure for this corrupted world, and her mixed heritage makes her an object of sympathy for White readers, even as she asserts solidarity with enslaved Africans. Angelina seems prematurely destined for a heavenly home with the angels she's named for. By her bedside, Draco Ludo "promised the distracted Angelina never again to traffic in human beings" (222). Instantly, she springs from bed, and asks, "What is the matter—is anyone sick? Have I been dreaming, or what? I am well now" (222).

Injecting anti-slavery politics into sentimentalism as Stowe did in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or William Wells Brown did in *Clotel,* Delany prepares readers for Angelina's death scene.[26] However, at the last moment, Delany subverts expectations, rejecting the idea that the fictional child must be sacrificed to motivate change in the real world. Instead, Angelina's rather unbelievable and nearly comic turnaround catalyzes a moral transformation that, according to Delany's footnote, echoes a scene that actually took place between a slave trader and his family

[25] According to McGann, it was an actual British patroller that enforced international laws concerning trade and the slave trade (n181, 327).

[26] In Part I, after a brutal minstrel performance involving whipping, the enslaved child Reuben "left time for eternity" (69). The scene comes after an entire chapter involving a discussion amongst slaveholders and the judge about American and Cuban policies about slavery. The introduction and quick departure of Reuben shows Delany employing antebellum tropes, but implicitly questioning their effectiveness at empowering readers. Reflecting on antebellum sentimental literature, R.J. Ellis posits, "Introducing variations upon . . . familiar generic tropes might promote a reconsideration by this genre's readers of their lives . . . and their values. So the untypically overt political strain underlying Eva's generically familiar death-bed scene hints at the need for racial equality in Uncle Tom's Cabin—thereby advancing a radical program (immediate abolition) within established generic conventions." *See* R.J. Ellis, *Harriet Wilson's* Our Nig: *A Cultural Biography of a "Two-Story" African American Novel,* Costerus New Series 149, Series Editors C.C. Barfoot, Theo D'haan, and Erik Kooper, (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2003), 78.

(222). Liberated from the tragic fate dictated by sentimental literature, Angelina shows Africa's promise is a living reality.

Interestingly, mentions of Blake's arrival to and departure from the family's mansion frame this scene, making his absence from it more conspicuous.[27] Still, Blake's background role is emphasized further on the return journey, as the narrator notes, "Blake during the entire troubles was strangely passive to occurring events below, strictly attending to the duties of his office in silence, except when speaking to a black, or spoken to by a white" (238). While the narrator reveals the Americans' suspicion that he was the "instigator of the plot," Blake virtually disappears during the account of the journey home (238). The *Sea Gull* again chases them, and the officers meet no resistance throwing "six hundred" dead or dying men, women, and children "into the mighty deep" to escape their pursuer (231). The next day, a storm arises, awakening the vengeance of the remaining slaves.

The narrator draws parallels between the Africans and the brewing storm: "The black and frowning skies and raging hurricane above; the black and frowning slaves with raging passions below" (236). Mendi, a captive whose name references the crew of the *Amistad,* "stood in readiness for the conflict" (236). Together, the storm and rebellion appear to be a manifestation of God's retribution for the crimes of slavery. However, the storm suddenly stops, and "a rainbow appeared above the horizon, telling in distant and silent eloquence as a harbinger of gladness, of a brighter prospect to all, as if conscious of the terror which pervaded the enslavers, and the future that awaited the enslaved" (238).

In the aftermath of Maggie's sale, Henry twice relates that his "course is laid out" (18, 24), and on the Southern tour, the narrator twice relates that "nothing short" of "Divine Providence" can impede his "progress" (84, 102). Clearly, this is a moment when Providence runs counter to Blake's original plans. While six hundred lives are lost during the Middle Passage and the "mutiny was unsuccessful," the outcome is viewed as favorable: the masters of the ship decide to dispose of the cargo at Matanzas instead of the United States, and Placido engineers a private sale to ensure that "the entire cargo of captives" went "directly into black families or friends" (240).

VI. Organizing in Cuba

Soon after Blake arrives in Cuba, Placido announces that their councils have chosen "Henry Blake General-in-Chief of the army of emancipation of the oppressed men and women of Cuba!" (243). While Henry's organizations in the U.S. were primarily among slaves, the organizations in Cuba include a range of Black people from various social classes, including elite free people of color as well as the newly freed Africans. In the Grand Council meeting at Madame Cordora's house, Blake and Placido cover topics to bring them into deeper solidarity. Addressing religious distinctions that could potentially lead to division in the organization, Blake adopts "one religion for the sake of our redemption from bondage and degradation, a faith in a common Savior" (259). Essentializing race to create racial equality, Placido explains that Black people of "unmixed blood" must be held as equal to White people, and then "the descendants of the two" will "be acknowledged the equals of both" (262). Placido even lays out the "undoubted probabilities" of Africa becoming a great nation, a discussion that provides foundations for emigration to Africa

[27] The scene's closing reference to Blake is ungrammatically tacked onto Angelina's declaration of health. The sentence reads, "'I am well now!' when Blake left the mansion for the vessel, which he reached at so late an hour" (222).

which are not finally realized in *Blake* (263). At a later meeting, Blake also justifies their possession of the island through, as the narrator explains it, "the fundamental basis of original priority" (287). This argument claims "that the western world had been originally peopled and possessed by the Indians—a colored race—and a part of the continent in Central America by a pure black race. This they urged gave them an indisputable right with every admixture of blood, to an equal, if not superior claim to an inheritance of the Western Hemisphere" (287). *Blake* thus also supplies the rationale for emigration in the Americas. Blake and Placido (and Delany himself) use a broad understanding of racial solidarity amongst all people of color to effectively absorb the interests of indigenous people in Africa and the Americas into an agenda that suits the Black emigree.

Other Americans also express plans for Cuba. After Maggie is freed, her former slave mistress, Adelaide Garcia, talks to her brother, Peter Albertis, about the "prospect of a patriotic movement" (188). She wishes to extend the rights that she enjoyed in Louisiana to Cuba, but Peter discusses the impossibilities of the scheme. For one, "negroes are the main stay of Cuba, and can never be induced to join the patriots, who, as soon as they got the island, would deny the negroes the rights they now have" (188). Peter also confirms that the Spanish government would prefer "a negro to white dominion" because Black Cubans would be "more docile, contented, religious and happy" than Anglo-Americans (188). Delany thus articulates White Americans' desires for seizing Cuba, even as he relates their improbability. Still, the narrator's later admission that "speculators as frequent exchanges in Dock, Wall and State streets, backed by the brokerages of Baltimore, Richmond, Charleston and New Orleans" have "openly declared that Cuba and Porto Rico must cease to be Spanish Colonies, and become territories of the United States" further reifies the imperial ambition of the U.S. and the intimacy of political and economic interests (299).

Finally, in Chapter 70, titled "Momentous Step," Blake announces, "I am for war—war upon the whites" (291). Then he qualifies, "In the name of God, I now declare war against our oppressors, provided Spain does not redress our grievances!" (293). Rallying again, he says, "Then let us determine to be ready, permitting nothing outside of an interposition of Divine Providence to interfere with our progress" (294). The revolution seems to be at hand, but Blake clearly positions war as a contingency plan. He gives space for both Spain and Divine Providence to open opportunities to avoid the uprising that he has been planning the entire book.

While Blake contemplates and delays war, the Castilian aristocracy, represented primarily through Count and Countess Alcora, seems prepared to protect and continue its reign of power. At one point, Countess Alcora shares a dream with her husband "of being in the interior of Africa surrounded entirely by negroes, under the rule of a negro prince, beset by the ambassadors of every enlightened nation, who brought him many presents of great value, whilst the envoy of Her Catholic Majesty, sat quietly at the foot of the African Prince's throne" (267). She interprets the dream as a presentiment that "the negroes of Cuba are maturing a scheme of general insurrection!" (267). While her husband at first dismisses the dream, Captain General Alcora "set immediately industriously at work using every covert means in his power, not only to ferret out, but with a determination to implicate if possible some of the suspected parties" in order to preserve his "government" (270).

With only seventy-four of its likely eighty chapters published, *Blake* leaves readers without a definitive resolution about revolution or emigration. Will the brewing revolution in Cuba be a replay of *La Escalera,* the 1844 slave revolt doomed before it began that led to the execution of Placido, or a successful reimagining of *La Escalera*? How will the revolution, unsuccessful or not, impact the geographic trajectory of its characters? If it fails, will it spur Blake to lead a group of

emigrees to Africa to found a Black nation on the hill? If it succeeds, will it spark the general insurrection that Blake laid the seeds for in Cuba, leading to Black rule of the island? How will that revolution, successful or not, impact the United States?[28] Rather than speculate further, I want to focus on the last serialized issue of *Blake* as the actual ending of the novel. While it may appear anticlimactic, the conclusion significantly leaves its characters on the brink of revolution. The novel's final words shouted by an outraged Gofer Gondolier after a series of violent assaults on Placido and others—"Woe be unto those devils of whites, I say!"—could foreshadow a just revolution and divine retribution *or,* more likely, a premature, unsuccessful insurrection that parallels the events in New Orleans in Part I. The line offers a dual warning to White oppressors and Black people fighting for their liberation.

VII. Conclusion

The critical reception of *Blake* focuses on its radical advocacy for slave rebellion in the U.S. and Cuba. Throughout this reading, I have aimed to show how both Henry Blake and Divine Providence often resist the pull of war. In his April 1849 essay "Annexation of Cuba," Delany imagines "at the instant of the annexation of Cuba to these United States" a "simultaneous rebellion of all slaves in the Southern States, and throughout that island."[29] No simultaneous rebellion seems possible in the fictional world of *Blake.* While there is ambivalence towards mass violence, *Blake* offers a guidebook to mass organization and alternative forms of resistance.

Some critics have taken the novel's final words and appropriated them to Delany himself to convert the novel into a political manifesto. But it would be more accurate to apply Frederick Douglass's reflection on Delany's *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852) to *Blake*: "He has written a book—and we may say that it is, in many respects, an excellent book—on the condition, character and destiny of the colored people; but it leaves us just where it finds us, without chart or compass, and in more doubt and perplexity than before we read it."[30] Douglass offers this statement as criticism, but it speaks to the complexity of Delany's work and the flexibility of his vision. While Douglass claims to "expect no plan from him," he rightly identifies Delany's goal, even if he doesn't see it as a "plan" in and of itself: "Brother DELANY has worked long and hard, he has written vigorously, and spoken eloquently to colored people—beseeching them, in the name of liberty, and all the dearest interests of humanity, to unite their energies, and to increase their activities in the work of their own elevation." Similarly, *Blake* aims to build solidarity in a transnational Black community.

[28] McGann predicts that, like in *La Escalera,* the authorities would again seize and execute Placido and others for their role in the larger conspiracy. Henry with Maggie and others will eventually escape, retake the *Vulture*, rename it, and sail to Africa to "establish a black city on an African hill" (xxiv). The emigrationist voyage, in this line of interpretation, is not only an escape from slavery and the Americas, but an escape from a doomed history authored by White people. Perhaps only in "Afraka," an idealized version of Africa introduced through song by the Black sailor Gascar on the journey across the Atlantic (212), can Blake lead his people to redemption and a new history.

[29] Delany, "Annexation of Cuba," *The North Star,* 17 April 1849.

[30] "Martin R. Delany, with Douglass's Remarks," Utc.iath.virginia.edu.