

Transformation in *Blake; or the Huts of America*: The Structure for Land and Enslaved Labor in the South

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In *Blake; or the Huts of America*, Martin Delany offers a scathing critique of the system of enslaver rape, the consequences of which are visible throughout the American South. Delany uses the timeframes of what we can now call the Anthropocene to show the proliferation of mixed-race peoples, much like we might use time-loops to show gradual deforestation. Delany shows the impact of racial-mixing becoming more and more present in the South especially because it remains an unspoken, spectral, aspect of the story. In *Blake*, Henry Blake, the protagonist, accomplishes revolution over the system of enslaver rape as a spectral figure, moving both in and out of time. By engaging with time at a macro scale to show the historical proliferation of racial-mixing within White culture, Delany indicates the reliance whiteness comes to have on the transformation and reproduction of Black labor—the same system which is pervasive in Southerners’ treatment of the land.

Transformation, as a system typically associated with the cultivation of the land, is described by cultural critic Achille Mbembe, as a system he extrapolates from Hegel, as a reduction of wilderness so that land might meet the needs of man, in a process he refers to as Transformation. He says:

First, the human negates nature (a negation exteriorized in the human’s effort to reduce nature to his or her own needs); and second, he or she transforms the negated element through work and struggle. In transforming nature, the human being creates a world; but in the process, he or she also is exposed to his or her own negativity. (14)

Critics in race and environmental studies have discussed the ways in which this system came to define how White men, especially in the South, came to think of other races. Paul Outka describes the system of transformation and its relationship to race as “the reduction of the human to a locus of agricultural productivity, fertility, or a commodified and domesticated animality” (51). Outka explains that this transformative system “was not simply the treatment of Black people as if they were part of nature that underpinned slavery, in other words, but in making Black people coextensive with a nature that existed solely to be exploited and ‘improved’ by whites” (53).¹

Delany attempts in *Blake* to overthrow the system of transformation pervasive in the South. Although the unfinished Part II of *Blake* does not give the full details to the state of the new republic after Black rebellion and leaves its exact plans clouded, through Part I’s condemnation of the plantation system, both by its crops and its slavery, Delany’s *Blake* can be read as a novel based in revolution as an alternative to the system of transformation which defines the South’s sexual and agricultural economies. The system that Blake hopes to replace is one he identifies as principally related to the plantation system, which is intent upon reproducing extracted value,

¹ David Silkenat, Raj Patel, and Jason Moore reference a system which viewed enslaved peoples as transformable. Roderick Nash and Jedediah Purdy have also referenced it with concern to Indigenous peoples as they describe how White settlers intended to “cultivate” Indigenous peoples. Historically, even W.E.B Du Bois references White attempts to “improve” Black populations.

whether by crop or by labor, in the most easily controlled manner that is compatible with increased profits and efficiency.² This chapter emphasizes an element of the larger process of transformation, an element by which enslaved persons came to be understood as a distinctive form of commodity, reproduced by enslaver rape. By producing more enslaved persons and making them steadily less Black, rapists made more commodities and made each of those commodities more valuable through chattel slavery, however, just as with land, the continued reproduction of this exhaustible commodity thrust the definitions by which White's understood the commodity into chaos.

Implicit in the White Southerners' system of commodification is a racial hierarchy privileging European Whiteness as the pinnacle of man, while relegating Blackness to a less-than-human classification. The "improvements," or racial-mixing through rape, White enslavers forced on enslaved populations destabilized the condition that was imposed upon them, that of commodity and object, in the same way that 'improvements' destabilized the ecologies of farmlands. As he historicizes 18th and 19th century Southerners' beliefs on slavery, Mason Lowance describes the definitive aspects of Whiteness which purported to differentiate enslavers from enslaved. Lowance explains, "Hierarchical classifications of race led to conclusions of superiority and inferiority based on relative cultural standards such as literary genius, religious practices, and long traditions of civilized behavior" (251). Individuals who fought for racial equality argued against this type of racial hierarchy by illustrating the literacy and religious conversion of Black figures such as Phyllis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano. Among these figures was Fredrick Douglass who argued against a racial hierarchy in his speech "The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered." Delany also wrote against the "racial science" which purported such racial hierarchy.³ One of the ways which Delany opposes "racial science" is by showing that the same system of transformation through enslaver rape is modeled in enslavers' treatment of the land as they attempt to transform wilderness into private property and how that system is destabilized by the fetishization of Whiteness within mixed-race peoples.

The conversation surrounding *Blake* and its treatment of racial-mixing is still being developed, especially as it concerns enslaver rape. Eric Sundquist suggests that "Delany does not develop the themes of patrimony and miscegenation with much rigor" (191). This is a claim that I dispute, for I find that the entirety of Part I has a (relatively) unspoken tension between Blake's Black revolution and the system of enslaver rape which pervades the plantation. In her history of former enslaved peoples' conceptions of mixed-race sexual unions, Fay Yarbrough references consensual and nonconsensual sexual relationships between Indigenous peoples and enslaved peoples in *Blake* but does not associate the same with spectral relations of enslaver rape.

Scholarship on *Blake* tends to emphasize the creative acts of resistance which Delany instills in Henry Blake's narrative. Jonathan Gaboury clarifies that although Blake is a revolutionary and resistant, *Blake* only brings Black Nationalism to the edge of violence without engaging. Instead, one of the ways Blake resists is through the idea of "specter" which has become a critical term of inquiry for *Blake* scholars. Rebecca Biggio deploys the "specter of conspiracy" to describe Blake's ability to operate in and out of time as an agent of the taboo (to enslavers) revolution. Her treatment of specter fits within the unexplored paradigm where Colonel Frank and

² Donna Haraway's terming of "making killable" in *When Species Meet* and Paul Outka's description of the transformation from "man to brute" in *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* has resonant meanings within this definition as well.

³ Russert Britt argues that in *Blake*, Delany "empties antebellum science of its rational core, revealing how the many fields of natural science, including but not reducible to the fields of racial science, are animated by a supernatural and mystical encounter with Blackness itself" (803).

other enslavers like him are unable to speak about the specter of Black revolution because implicit in Henry’s Black revolution is his revolt against the system of enslaver rape. Other critics such as Marlene Daut delineate Delany’s desire for his version of revolution, as distinct and separate from rebellion. She says, “the novel does not seek to use prior slave rebellions and revolutions as a blueprint” (84). The concept of revolution—outside the system, as distinct from rebellion—within the system, has become an important distinction for *Blake* scholars. Sean Gerrity, for example, locates Blake’s resistance as acts of marronage, saying, “Marronage emerges as a set of practices untethered from the extremes, from the codified poles of enslavement as totalizing unfreedom and freedom as emancipation through the fantasy of revolutionary actualization” (3). Although this project primarily concerns itself with the system from which Blake revolts, Part II of the novel deals with the international colonialist representation of independent Black nationalism.⁴

The conversation surrounding Blackness and nature is one which has grown in the last few years. Scott Hess argues that Frederick Douglass’ ownership of Cedar Hill as a “literary landscape” modeled the land-owning privilege of White authors, while also complicating an African-American nature. Hess says:

As a number of studies have documented, African American environmental traditions tend to conceptualize nature differently than white traditions: not as pristine and “untouched” wilderness, ostensibly separate from human impact, but instead as fully implicated in human society and history, including a long history of intertwined environmental exploitation and racial oppression (592).

For my purposes, Douglass’s willingness to engage with White institutions serves as a foil to Delany’s independent Black nationalism. This difference between the two men also illustrates Delany’s feelings towards racial mixing and consequently the transforming system illustrated in a nature wherein (White) ‘Man’ transforms.

Recently David Silkenat has brought attention to the history of slavery and land development as tied to Southern economies. Although he does not make distinctions about mixed-race people as tied to the same transforming system, both he and W.E.B Du Bois separately indicate the growing proliferation of change, through deforestation, and racial mixing occurring at the same time. Silkenat, without specifically referencing mixed-race peoples, indicates that slavery and deforestation were related when he says, “The rate of deforestation only increased as slavery spread into the Lower South” (59). As deforestation, the exhaustion of Southern soil, and slavery spread, enslavers found that the economically feasible way to sustain their way of life was by creating a surplus of enslaved peoples. Du Bois suggests that the reproduction of enslaved peoples was the primary means of increasing enslaved populations in the American South (4). For plantations who depended on enslaved labor in order to function, reproduction through rape was a way to guarantee a continued labor stream. References to this type of thinking have historical evidence as Olaudah Equiano writes, “Mr. James Tobin, a zealous labourer in the vineyard of slavery, gives an account of a French planter of his acquaintance, in the island of Martinico, who shewed him many mulattoes working in the fields like beasts of burden; and he told Mr. Tobin these were all the produce of his own loins! And I myself have known similar instances” (126). In

⁴ Relevant scholarship includes Eric Sundquist’s *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* and Sharada Balachandran Orihuela’s “The Black Market: Property, Freedom, and Piracy in Martin Delany’s *Blake; or, The Huts of America*.”

addition to guaranteeing a continued presence of enslaved labor, mixed race enslaved peoples were also more highly valued than wholly Black enslaved peoples.⁵

In addition to guaranteeing a cheap labor force, enslaved peoples were valued as an industry in and of themselves. Value was found within mixed-race enslaved peoples, and specifically women because of white Southerners' fetishization. White Southerners' fetishization is evinced by Paul Outka in his study into the conflation of race and nature. Outka argues, "the most valuable female slaves—often light skinned . . . were sold expressly for concubinage" (71). Outka details how enslaved women were fetishized for several reasons including their sexual availability, and their varied appearance as either White or Black women. Gavin Wright shows in his study into the economic value of slavery in the South, that the commodity-value of mixed-race enslaved peoples for enslavers was often higher than the value for their land; therefore, the extra value that a mixed-race enslaved person might provide for an enslaver was often more economically important than their labor (Wright, 70). This shows not only that enslaver rape was an economic institution, but a systemized one which "cultivation" rivaled that of Southern farming.

Although economically profitable, enslaver rape, and race-mixing in general, was still considered taboo with the South and because of this it remained an unspoken open secret on the plantation.⁶ However, Joshua Rothman, in his history of mixed-race peoples in the American South, notes, "No visitor to the antebellum South could fail to notice that slaveowners and other white men had sex with enslaved Black women and that they often did so by force" (133). Not only did enslaver rape serve as a violation of publicly accepted Southern morals, it also destabilized the economic system designed to uphold the "racial hierarchy" by which commodification became possible.

Where Whiteness was defined by the hazy definitions related to literacy, religion, and White considerations of "civility," by engaging in enslaver rape, Southerners viewed mixed-race enslaved peoples as inhabiting Whiteness or White attributes. Many enslavers viewed this favorably, expecting mixed-race peoples to be more easily controlled and not as "wild." We see the presence of this type of thinking in fictional accounts of the South from the 20th century which draw attention to the proliferation of mixed-race peoples and White male Southerners' fascination with them and wilderness. In "The Old People," William Faulkner uses Sam Fathers as an example of Blackness lying with wilderness and Whiteness lying with tameness.⁷ In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner compares Thomas Sutpen's enslaver rape to breeding horses.⁸ As Faulkner describes, the task of transforming the "wild slave" fell to the enslaver, while the labor of the enslaved was tasked to transform the land. Nevertheless, enslaver rape did destabilize enslaved peoples' commodified status, as seen through the gradual shifting number and privileges of mixed-race people over wholly Black.

Du Bois, writing over fifty years after the Antebellum era, references the proliferation of mixed-race people. Note his scathing use of the word "improve" as he says:

⁵ This claim is addressed below.

⁶ According to Joshua Rothman, "In most circumstances white community members clucked their tongues behind closed doors more than they complained to legal authorities" (2).

⁷ Robbie Etheridge argues that "tameness," for Southerners, resides with Whiteness, as he says, "Interestingly, Sam's Whiteness also renders him just tame enough to be Ike's mentor" (139).

⁸ Faulkner writes, "The wild blood which he had brought into the country and tried to mix, blend, with the tame which was already there, with the same care and for the same purpose with which he blended that of the stallion and that of his own" (70).

Sexual chaos was always the possibility of slavery, not always realized but always possible: polygamy through the concubinage of Black women to white men; polyandry between Black women and selected men on plantations in order to improve the human stock of strong and able workers. The census of 1860 counted 588,352 persons obviously of mixed blood—a figure admittedly below the truth. (35)

Du Bois is deliberate in designating the enslaver perspective as attempting to “improve” their commodity with Whiteness. Read from an economic perspective, the proliferation of this system led to a (relative) shortage of “Blackness” and thereby enslaved labor. Du Bois suggests that this enterprise to “improve” Black populations was abandoned. He argues that during Reconstruction, “[t]he great republic of the West was trying an impossible experiment. They were trying to make white men out of black men. It could not be done. It was a mistake to conceive it” (632). Instead, Du Bois details how the exploitation of Black labor was solidified by outlawing mixed-race couples through anti-miscegenation laws, as well as the installation of the “one drop” rule (492, 632). Delany, writing in the 1840’s and 50’s, was unaware of the future shift and argued against mixed-race people being considered Black. Delany’s politics are shown through Blake, who personally suffers from the effects of enslaver rape when his wife, the enslaved daughter of the plantation owner, is sold into hard labor in order to hide her father’s impropriety from his wife. As a result, Blake, a man on the run, travels the South drumming up support for a Black revolution. During his travels, Blake witnesses the growing proliferation of mixed-race peoples, who, while still enslaved but privileged with Whiteness, serve as a class of people seen as more easily controlled commodities.

For Delany, the presence of mixed-race people as economic superiors to “wholly Black” individuals was detrimental to the cause of Black Nationalism. At several junctures in *Blake*, Delany shows Blake’s cause deterred by the system of mixed-race peoples. Delany’s views on racial-mixing and “Black purity” can be found in his early work, specifically his pamphlet, “The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States of America” (“Condition”), where Delany argues:

The elevation of the colored man can only be completed by the elevation of the pure descendants of Africa; because to deny his equality, is to deny in a like proportion, the equality of all those mixed with the African organization; and to establish his inferiority, will be to degrade every person related to him by consanguinity; therefore, to establish the equality of the African with the European race, establishes the equality of every person intermediate between the two races. (IX)

Although Delany writes in *Blake* that mixed-race people would be invited into his hypothetical Black nation, he illustrates at several points that he views mixed-race peoples as separate from Black nationalism.

While the transforming conception of nature expressed by Mbembe was a dominant of the time, Delany sought for Black Nationalism to join the world on a global scale, where they might be competitors to White economic standards. Delany sought for this more utilitarian conception of nature, to replace the one implicit in Mbembe/Hegel’s nature of transformation. In “Condition” Delany illustrates this utilitarian view towards nature as he discusses resources lying in nature waiting for extraction, when he says, “The land is ours—there it lies with inexhaustible resources; let us go and possess it” (Appendix). The events of Part II show Blake after revolution, once he

has successfully escaped from Colonel Franks and the specter of enslaver rape, and as such, Blake attempts to grow the capitalist machine for Black Nationalism which Delany envisioned.⁹

Writing in the late 1850s, Delany did not anticipate the installation of the “one-drop rule” which decreed that “one-drop of Black blood” would designate that person as Black. Rothman describes unspecific attempts to codify into law definitions of Blackness in the 18th century, but that racial mixing, and the descendants of such unions, if publicly acknowledged, were generally treated on a case-by-case basis. He also describes the movement which would eventually lead to the “one-drop rule,” and which gathered momentum in the 1850s, before the Civil War (10). However, its widespread installation would not happen until after the war, during Reconstruction. Where the limits of a transforming view towards enslaved peoples rendered “Blackness” exhaustible through inter-racial couplings, the “one-drop” rule signified an end to the ownership of Black bodies as commodities in the form of enslavement toward a future exploitation of the labor produced by those bodies. As a result, we can trace the installation of the “one-drop rule” as tied to the transition between a transforming and utilitarian South.

Current readers will know the history of exploitation by White-controlled institutions over Black labor within a paradigm of Utilitarian Nature during Reconstruction. Without that historical benefit, Delany was hopeful for Black Nationalism to join capitalism as its own entity. Part of his hope was tied to his view that White involvement in Southern economies were minimal. He says, “An endless forest, the impenetrable earth; the one to be removed, and the other to be excavated. Towns and cities to be built, and farms to be cultivated—all these presented difficulties too arduous for the European then here, and unknown to the Indian” (VII). Rather than cultivators of the land, Delany identifies European enslavers as benefactors over a system intent on having them work as little as possible, an endeavor they accomplish most efficiently, through enslaver rape.

Delany makes the slow proliferation of racial-mixing visible to readers through Blake’s interactions with differing modes of mixed-race peoples—showing a progression as mixed-race peoples become a more and more present aspect of society. By taking a wide view of the proliferation of mixed-race peoples within *Blake* we see how Henry’s interactions with a radically changing subclass of mixed-race peoples changes over time, by putting the great intervals of time between changes of mixed-race peoples. Through Henry's interactions, the distinction of inhuman vs human becomes increasingly hazy.¹⁰ By viewing these changes, we further can see that the dominant culture of Whiteness creates a narrative of separation between Black and White which both empowers its ability to objectify enslaved peoples, as well as creating the necessity for self-deception within the Southern culture as plantation owning rapists argued for their own moral righteousness while hypocritically using enslaved women as sexual objects. It is through that hypocrisy that the commodified status of Black peoples becomes questioned, and thereby creates upheaval in the binary racial paradigm.

Delany argued for a transformation of Black nationalism as separate from White nationalism because of a feeling of inferiority assigned at birth by what Delany calls in “Condition” a “corruption of blood” (XVI). He says:

⁹ W.E.B Du Bois argues that the system of child rearing to grow enslaved labor was a peculiarity specific to the American South within the Americas (*Black Reconstruction*, 4). Delany may have viewed escape to Cuba and other areas outside of the American South, as also an escape from the specter of enslaver rape, explaining why he feels compelled to tell his audience, at the outset of Part II, of Maggie’s parentage.

¹⁰ In his history, Paul Outka discusses the history of mixed-race women used as sexual objects and says, “the less natural, the more “human”—read white—she seemed, the more the whole justificatory structure of slavery was called into question” (72).

By corruption of blood is meant, that process, by which a person is *degraded* and deprived of rights common to the enfranchised citizen—of the rights of an elector, and of eligibility to the office of a representative, of the people; in a word, that no person nor their posterity, may ever be debased beneath the level of the recognised basis of American citizenship. This debasement and degradation is "corruption of blood"; politically understood—a legal acknowledgement of inferiority of birth. (XVI)

The “corruption” Delany speaks of is related to the commodification of Black bodies, however, his feelings towards racial-mixing clearly indicates that he views mixed-race people as something different from Black. What this shows is a clear link between enslavers’ feelings towards nature, where their ability to transform land led to ownership of valuable landed property, aligning with their feelings towards human chattel.

The first instances of enslaver rape within *Blake* are subtle. The exact circumstances for Maggie’s (Henry’s wife) dismissal from Colonel Franks are not known until much later in the novel where Delany writes, “Goaded and oppressed by a master known to be her own father, under circumstances revolting to humanity, civilization and Christianity, she had been ruthlessly torn from her child, husband and mother” (193). Here, Maggie’s character serves multiple functions as her character symbolizes the impetus (both metaphorically and literally) to the system of rape on the plantation (both Colonel Franks, and the broader, historical plantation). Through her character, Delany shows a progression of mixed-race enslaved peoples and their roles within Southern society—essentially showing how the taboo of racial mixing (primarily born out of fear of Black sexuality) hid the growing number of mixed-race enslaved peoples born of enslaver rape.¹¹ From a wider perspective, Delany indicates that initial rape of enslaved peoples operates in ambiguity, with Colonel Frank’s rape of Mammy Judy left unspoken and outside of the narrative. Regardless, his rape creates a fear of enslaver rape in the rest of the enslaved population on his plantation.

The same fear of enslaver rape is shown early in the novel as well where Ailcey, an enslaved woman, is being questioned about Henry’s missing child, and admits her fear of an unidentified figure in the night, whom she ascribes to Colonel Franks. She says, “Ah tho’t ‘twah maus Stephen afteh me” (49). Although Ailcey references Colonel Franks accosting her in the night as a ploy to avoid questioning, fear of the enslaver created a system wherein non-enslaving Whites did not speak of enslaver rape for fear of taboo violation, and the enslaved dare not directly speak of enslaver rape for fear of enslaver retribution. Delany shows the culture of fear which

¹¹ Joshua D. Rothman provides a history of this institution. He says, “A white man might reasonably believe he could act toward Black women sexually as he chose. So long as he kept his affairs quiet and comported himself respectably before his neighbors and colleagues, no legal or public repercussions were likely to follow. Interracial sexual abuse reminded enslaved women that their bodies were never their own. It placed Black men on notice that their families were insignificant and their pretenses to protecting their wives, daughters, mothers, and sisters from harm ultimately futile. White women, meanwhile, responded to the extramarital affairs of their spouses with a combination of resignation, denial, and displaced hostility and vindictiveness toward their slaves. If a slaveowner recognized his Black family in his will with emancipation or financial assistance, it often posthumously compounded the emotional and psychological injuries to his white family, who were compelled to confront what they may have been able to deny while their husband, son, father, or brother lived. From the colonial era to the Civil War, thousands of rapes of Black women went unreported and untried. Thousands of white wives maintained public silence while their husbands turned their private lives into a series of painful and tumultuous betrayals, thousands of neighbors whispered to one another behind closed doors, and thousands of Black men stood by anguished while their loved ones were sexually assaulted” (133–134).

permeates the plantation, because of the potential of enslaver rape. The primary motive of Ailcey's confession is to weaponize her fear against the enslaver's inquiry: by alluding to Colonel Franks rapacity, she stops him from asking any other questions for fear that his rapes be made public. Here is the first instance in which the specter of revolution is masked by enslaver's inability to acknowledge the specter of enslaver rape. However, her actions also instigates Colonel Franks' rage and shows his need for dominance.

At several junctures in Part I, Colonel Franks shows a compulsive need for control over the enslaved. Delany writes, "The will of the master being absolute, his commands should be enforced, let them be what they may, and the consequences what they would" (15). Clearly Colonel Franks' controlling aspect fits within the paradigm which Mbembe describes when he says, "The human negates nature (a negation exteriorized in the human's effort to reduce nature to his or her own needs)" and, as we might expect, Franks' labor is primarily spent attempting to control the enslaved. However, because he primarily views them in relation to their labor, his ability, or desire, to understand the inner workings of culture and communication among the enslaved is limited by his understanding them principally as commodities (14). Where his control would seem to be most integral is with Maggie, with whom he identifies with more humanely, as her father.

Delany suggests a differing liminality between Maggie and other enslaved peoples, by going out of his way to describe her in the most proximal language to Maria Franks, the Colonel's wife. Delany writes, "The conduct of Mrs. Franks toward her servant was more like that of an elder sister than a mistress, and the mistress and maid sometimes wore dresses cut from the same web of cloth" (8). Maggie's privileged station is ostensibly related to her beauty, but this too is related to the pale complexion of her skin. Delany writes, "She was a dark mulatto of a rich, yellow, autumn-like complexion, with a matchless, cushion-like head of hair, neither straight nor curly, but handomser than either" (8). In both cases Maggie is described as inhabiting the same social sphere as Maria, while also being valued for specifically White and Black physical attributes. Outka describes the attraction White Southern men had for mixed-race enslaved women when he says:

This contradiction—in which slave women were simultaneously rendered as chattel that could be exploited without qualm or limit, and as sexual objects whose monetary value to their white masters increased in direct proportion to their distance from chattel—turned the slave woman's body and sexuality from the site of self-possession into a racially saturated locus of conflicting definitions, a battle ground both semiotic and intimately physical (72).

Maggie's privilege becomes problematic for Colonel Franks when he perceives her as being difficult to control. Her ability to resist his control is principally related to her inhabiting a station of authority more in line with her place as his daughter, than as his property. He says, "I have been watching the conduct of that girl for some time past; she is becoming both disobedient and unruly" (10). By virtue of privileging the Whiteness within his daughter, Colonel Franks' power over Maggie is brought into question to such a point that her status as object on the plantation becomes in question. Douglass also refers to the removal of enslaver progeny as a defense against hierarchy destabilization. He says, "Masters are frequently compelled to sell this class of their slaves, out of deference to the feelings of their white wives" (10). Such a relationship is hinted at in *Blake* where Delany describes Mrs. Franks treating Maggie as a younger sister (8). Broadly, this becomes the foundational problem for the plantation culture, as the existence of mixed-race enslaved peoples creates ambiguity with consideration to their commodification.

Part of the issue for enslavers controlling enslaved peoples was related to their inclusion in spreading economic spheres. Whereas enslaved peoples were principally field or domestic workers, doing the labor of agrarian life, as their usefulness to enslavers grew they began to inhabit different economic spheres. Indeed, enslaved peoples were more useful to enslavers based on their ability to do so, and as Southern economies relied on enslaved labor in other spheres, the more enmeshed they became in Southern culture. Andy Doolen argues that this enmeshment defines American society when he says, “In *Blake*, slavery is neither isolated to the South nor contradictory to national institutions and principles. Slavery is the crux of U.S. society” (157). Blake clearly agrees as he points out that in “Condition,” enslavers have no real economic purpose outside of their role as enslavers. *Blake* shows Doolen’s argument most clearly when, while Henry is on the run, he witnesses a group of Southerners arguing over the presence of enslaved peoples in varied aspects of Southern life. One unnamed man asks Colonel Sprout, “Then, Colonel, we’re to understand you to mean, that white men can’t live without n—,” and Colonel Sprout replies, “I’ll be hanged, gentlemen, if it don’t seem so, for wherever you find one you’ll all’as find tother, they’s so fully mixed up with us in all our relations!” (97). The reaction to Sprout’s admission is shock and anger before Sprout plays it off as a joke. Sprout’s proclamation is sensational, not only for its revelation that the reproduction of enslaved labor is the foundation of Southern society, but also for its suggestion of sexual liaisons between enslaved peoples and enslavers. Sprout’s admission suggests that the once isolated and taboo rape of enslaved women has become a deeply enmeshed aspect of Southern culture: one which, as Rothman’s history suggests, is publicly rejected while privately ignored or even supported. In the privacy of his party, Sprout’s proclamation, and his contemporaries’ shocked reactions, indicates that racial-mixing continues to be taboo, despite its growing influence. Sprout is able to make a passing joke in the country, surrounded by other White men, and Rothman’s history makes clear that public accusations of enslaver rape were rare, and thereby rarely punished.

Colonel Sprout’s joke among his company is the most explicit linguistic reference to enslaver rape until the revelation of Maggie’s parentage. Instead of linguistic evidence, Henry witnesses the steadily increasing proliferation of mixed-race peoples on each subsequent plantation. The first instance features a family which privileges its mixed-race children, if not as the same, very similarly to White. Dolly, Henry’s guide says, “Yes, hunny, yes; da good culed folks any body. Some five-six boys an five-six gals on ‘em; da all rich” (73). Henry’s first explicit experience with racial-mixing shows the ability for enslavers to privilege the “Whiteness” of mixed-race peoples over their “Blackness.” The interaction with Dolly suggests the problematic consequences to the system of transformation which had defined the plantation culture, and while this differentiation is able to be contained in an isolated case, the novel shows that its continued proliferation necessitates greater mental gymnastics.

Delany shows enslaved people’s knowledge of enslaver rape permeating the plantation when Henry comes into contact with a mixed-race woman, Nancy, who lacks for clothing while working and who is treated brutally by the Black driver, Mr. Dorman. At the same time, enslavers still continue to engage in a form of “wilderness” transformation. When asked why she and her other female compatriots do not desire to work in the plantation homes, Nancy alludes to the system of rape as control when she says, “Case we gals won’ go! Da been mo’n a dozen plantehs hear lookin’ at us, an’ want to buy us for house keepehs, an’ we wont go; we die fus!” (79). Nancy’s shows that the initial fear of enslaver rape has permeated the plantation culture and has necessitated the transformation of enslaved peoples to controlled commodities be relegated to other enslaved peoples. While Mr. Dorman’s fully Black status, and Nancy’s resistance to having her sexuality

commodified are not indicative of widespread resistance, it does provide the outline and initial impetus to the sub-classes creation, while also illustrating the resistance to transformation. In addition, the power dynamics between Mr. Dorman and Nancy suggest that rather than having to “transform” the entirety of their enslaved labor, enslavers rather employed a few enslaved peoples to do the transforming for them.

Delany also illustrates resistance within Black and Indigenous peoples’ communities. One of Henry’s ventures takes him into contact with members of the Chickasaw and Choctaw tribes, where their members are identified as enslavers. Regardless of their separate oppressions, Delany’s portrayal of Indigenous peoples in *Blake* suggests Indigenous peoples as allies to Black nationalism. When Henry comes into contact with a Chickasaw and Choctaw tribe which enslaves Blacks, Chief Culver tells him, “The difference between a white man and Indian holding slaves. Indian work side by side with Black man, eat with him, rest with him and both lay down in shade together In our Nation Indian and Black all marry together” (87). Not only are mixed-race relations spoken at this moment, but they are celebrated as a way of forming alliances. The contrast between White and Indigenous enslavement is found in the nature of enslavement. Delany frames Indigenous enslavement of Blacks as in-name-only enslavers, especially as Henry gains the support of the Chief in his aim for rebellion. However, by virtue of Indigenous peoples being allowed to be enslavers, it is clear that White conceptions of Indigenous peoples align them more with transformers, rather than the transformed, and as such privileges them above Blacks in the White racial hierarchy.¹²

The discourse surrounding the transformation of wilderness out of non-White peoples has historically emphasized White relationships with Indigenous peoples. Jedediah Purdy said, “The ‘savage,’ literally a creature of the *sauvage*, the forest, was the arrogant, ‘lordly’ enemy of common progress—the worst thing in a young republic of property-hungry settlers. The savage represented static, unchanging nature, without the galvanizing power of labor The savage stood against providential design” (81). In his history of wilderness, Roderick Nash, in agreement with Purdy, says, “The whites also had a word for the natives: ‘Savages.’ They were to be conquered and transformed (or eliminated), just like the wild country” (xxi). Despite equating Indigenous peoples with the land, their forced assimilation and transformation had no direct economic advantage for White Southerners, after the theft of their land, because Indigenous peoples could not be sold as chattel.

Whereas Indigenous peoples stood against plantation owners as a warring force, White Southerners’ economic incentive relied on Indigenous absence in order to prosper. Forced assimilation among Indigenous peoples was largely an attempt to further create Indigenous absence, through cultural genocide, which included attempts to introduce them to Judeo-Christian religion. According to Rothman, the same type of transformation was controversial to enslavers for potentially bringing into question the “racial hierarchy” (204). At the same time, religion becomes controversial in *Blake* for the controlling aspect it instills in Mammy Judy, as Henry rebukes her for her faith early in the novel. Still, enslavers sought a way to increase the value enslaved peoples brought them. One way was teaching trusted Blacks trades that they might bring surplus value back to their enslavers. This is shown early in *Blake* where Delany shows Henry returning after having made Colonel Franks money while away. However, the primary method of increasing enslaved peoples’ value was through reproduction (Du Bois, 4). This constituted the primary difference between Indigenous and enslaved peoples, where, while making arguments for Black inferiority under all other races, enslavers additionally had an economic incentive to

¹² Frank Kelderman suggests that Indigenous slavery was structured and controlled by White colonists (2).

transform enslaved peoples: first into commodities capable of being sold through slavery, and then again into more valuable (and seemingly more easily controlled) commodities, as mixed-race offspring born into slavery. In this way, the transformation of enslaved peoples is more closely aligned to the transformation of land than Indigenous peoples’ forced assimilation.

Whereas Henry’s initial experiences with the sub-class of mixed-race peoples are primarily contained on the plantation, its proliferation soon finds the system within Indigenous tribes and then in urban life where Henry visits Charleston with its “‘Brown Society,’ the bane and dread of the Blacks in the state, an organization formed through the instrumentality of the whites to keep the Blacks and mulattos at variance” (112). For the purposes of transformation, the “Brown Society” symbolizes the ability for White colonizers to not only relegate the labor of transforming the land, but also the transformation of labor as to perpetuate the transformation of the land. Henry finds the full expression of transformation within the “Brown Society” in his discourse with a “mulatto gentleman” with a White gentleman standing by. The “mulatto gentleman” tells Henry, “you know that no free negro is permitted to enter this state. You are a runaway, and I’ll have you taken up!” (112). Despite a wholly White gentleman standing by, the duty of punishing Henry falls upon the “mulatto gentleman.” From a wide temporal perspective the “Brown Society” shows the full destabilization of the notion of transforming “wild” bodies into tractable ones, and the relative impermanence, or short-comings, of the future “one-drop” rule—that the fetishization of Whiteness within mixed-race peoples suggests a compulsive need to humanize them, and throw their status as object into question. In addition, with the creation of a subclass of mixed-race peoples taken to its logical conclusion, White Southerners have left themselves no real purpose within the economic system, an argument which Delany supports in “Condition.”

The full transformation back to human for mixed-race peoples is shown while Henry is in Richmond. There, Henry finds mixed-race peoples who not only replace White labor, but are seen as White themselves. Delany writes, “a mulatto or quadroon who proved [through documentation] a white mother was themselves regarded as white” (117). By virtue of Blackness lying with the mother, once again Black or mixed-race women are seen within the system of transformation, as objects of labor, not only for domestic and field work, but also for their ability to reproduce extracted labor through their children. Delany discusses in “Condition” the importance of dignity lying with women when he argues, “No people are ever elevated above the condition of their *females*; hence, the condition of the *mother* determines the condition of the child. To know the position of a people, it is only necessary to know the *condition* of their *females*; and despite themselves, they cannot rise above their level. Then what is our condition?” (XXIII). Delany’s point here draws attention to the plight of Black women all throughout the Antebellum South. What such a legal situation would suggest is that not only does the system of Blackness lying with mothers show the specific desires of white Southerners, but also that at this time in history Delany believed extracted labor to be less integral to the South than *total control* over extracted labor. Thus we can surmise that mixed-race people began to be seen as White as a result of the ruling classes’ inability to control mixed-race peoples. Despite mixed-race peoples finding some form of agency within the new alignment, the experience of Black individuals, specifically seen through Blake, remains objectified. Blake’s goal, an independent Black nation, relies on the eradication of the system of objectification, and as a result he searches for the inspiration to create such a society.

In order to establish a culture away from the system of extracted labor, Blake finds an outpost of wilderness, in the Dismal Swamp, where “a number of the old confederates of the noted Nat Turner were met with” (113). The wilderness Blake finds is not only a refuge from White transformation, but also an escape from the conditions of linear time which measure the system of

extraction. Andy Doolen's argument shows the conditions of the removal from linear time when he discusses Delany's use of the Revolutionary War as inspiration for Blake's rebellion. He says:

Delany treats the Dismal Swamp as a subaltern archive of Black resistance and independence, repositioning it at the center of his revisionist history of the Revolutionary War. Some of the maroons tell Blake that they had been patriots in the American Revolution. Within the temporal framework of the white Revolution, the statement is clearly false, but the Dismal Swamp revises the chronology of the war. In this way, the Dismal Swamp represents the imbrications of time and space in Delany's philosophy of history. (158)

As Doolen argues, one of the necessities for removal from a social system is rebellion, which is based within the Dismal Swamp; however, Blake's goals are more far-reaching based in revolution.

Although Blake is able to find refuge and relative safety within the Dismal Swamp, it does not offer the full potential for a Black culture, because it is reliant on White Southerner's depictions of "wilderness" in order to function, essentially adopting the distinction/label that Whites forced upon Blacks. The inclusion of Nat Turner is instructive, because Turner's rebellion specifically had to rebel *against* a system, whereas Blake's vision is for a revolution and redefinition of a system. Instead, Blake instills, as Gerrity writes, "a total refusal of the racial, social, economic, and political logics by which their enslavement is rendered ideologically coherent" (5). Thus, Blake's refuge within the "wilderness" of the Dismal Swamp relies on White decisions to not transform the swamp, especially as the representations of Whiteness surround the swamp. Doolen, in the same vein, argues:

While the maroon world is emblematic of pan-African identity formation, the Dismal Swamp demonstrates ultimately that it is sterile ground for a revolutionary politics Delany's revisionist history presents the U.S. national model as barren ground for a Black revolution in the western hemisphere. (160)

Part of the problem with basing Black revolution within a temporal frame of American Revolution is that it fails to account for the specific divorce Blake values from American tradition. Commenting on this separation, Marlene Daut says:

Blake, like much of the transatlantic literature of slave resistance and rebellion published in the nineteenth-century *Atlantic World* by both Black and white authors, does not narrate a stable, already prescribed, and universal future that would necessarily follow in the path of the Haitian Revolution or *The Amistad*, but attempts to imagine new ways for sustained and permanent Black liberation to occur. (84)

Thus, while the Dismal Swamp offers Blake the ability to step out of linear time, it is time which has the potential to be transformed, just as the Dismal Swamp does. Instead, what the Dismal Swamp offers for Blake is the recognition of his abilities, that he might inspire his fellow people. Blake tells Charles, "It makes the more ignorant slaves have greater confidence in, and more respect for their headmen and leaders" (127).

Separate from the Dismal Swamp, Blake has the potential to step out of time independently from the experience of “wilderness.” Stephanie LeMenager argues that “Henry Blake's abolitionist environment was homologous to that of his opponents, his colonizers, and yet destabilizing insofar as it was drawn from the perspective of a human commodity” (55). The destabilization LeMenager references is drawn specifically from Blake's agency, from having been educated in the Caribbean, while also being entrenched in a system that views him as a commodity. As Lemenager shows, the perspective of Blake, still seen as a commodity, allows him to bend the transformed conditions of time and space, even separated from the “wilderness” of the Dismal Swamp.

Blake's ability to manipulate time and space principally relates to his spectral figure. Throughout the narrative, Blake seemingly appears without warning or explanation of how he arrived. In these moments, Blake operates in different forms, specifically hiding his identity from White viewers who would otherwise hinder him. Rebecca Biggio argues that Blake operates within a specter of conspiracy and says:

Blake's multiple identities—indeed, his very ability to shift from one social role to another—and the success of his multiple political strategies are dependent on secrecy, as is Delany's vision of community. During his travels throughout the hostile American South, Blake's survival depends on, and his masculinity is defined by his ability to remain hidden and to conquer adversaries through mysterious skills that are never really explained in the narrative. (448)

As Biggio argues, Blake operates within differing liminal spheres, and his ability to avoid detection relies on his being both revolutionary and objectified simultaneously. For example, early in his escape from Colonel Franks, Blake uses the objects of horse-riding as both bed and disguise. Delany writes, “Henry had a bridle, halter, blanket, girt, and horsewhip, the emblems of a faithful servant in discharge of his master's business The blanket, a substitute for a saddle, was in reality carried for a bed” (69-70). Blake's ability to inhabit multiple spheres, to be seen as an enslaved man while acting as a revolutionary, allows him to portray specific motivations, while planning differently. This is seen specifically in the specter of rebellion Biggio writes about where she argues that the specter of rebellion distracts Blake's adversaries from his true aim, revolution. She says:

The tension is sustained because readers likely believe that Blake and his rebels are indeed plotting a violent insurrection. This is the delicately held secret that Delany and Blake control. The challenge for the white slaveholding community is to find a balance between obsession and caution, a position which Delany carefully manipulates for his own ends. (450)

Of course, Blake's spectral figure is integral to his depiction of enslaved labor transformation and is aided by his manipulation of the sexual economy in the South. It is through his spectral form which allows him the aerial view perspective to access a broader understanding of the gradual proliferation of mixed-race peoples.

Part I of *Blake* expresses the dual system of transformation occurring within the American South. As Delany was intent on creating an independent Black state, his conception of Black agriculture varied from the Southern economy in that he considered Blacks capable of thriving in

any environment, and thus their agriculture could flourish in any climate. In “Condition” he says, “Our oppressors, when urging us to go to Africa, tell us that we are better adapted to the climate than they—that the physical condition of the constitution of colored people better endures the heat of warm climates than that of the whites” (XXIII). Thus, when Blake leads his compatriots to Canada and purchases “fifty acres of land with improvements suitable,” we might imagine that they will practice subsistence farming, rather than the monocrop harvesting associated with plantations (156). Humans’ relationship to the land, in that case, is more sustainable with a personal connection, rather than a controlled and reproduced entity from which to extract value.

When Henry leaves his compatriots in Canada, the movement away from the cycle of transformation is complete. The story continues, however, and Delany seemingly shifts focus to a utilitarian consideration of nature, especially as it concerns Black labor supporting economic enterprises. Delany does this when he inserts a seafaring portion of Part II which shows the amount of energy expended in order to sustain the monocrop plantation economy (and its reliance on enslaved labor to power the ships). This continues to support the overarching theme of new economic forms away from the plantation structure. However, during Blake’s revolution he describes his new country’s economy specifically in terms of monocrop harvesting. He says:

Let us prove, not only that the African race is now the principal producer of the greater part of the luxuries of enlightened countries, as various fruits, rice, sugar, coffee, chocolate, cocoa, spices, and tobacco; but that in Africa their native land, they are among the most industrious people in the world, highly cultivating the lands, and that ere long they and their country must hold the balance of commercial power by supplying as they now do as foreign bondmen in strange lands, the greatest staple commodities in demand, as rice, coffee, sugar, and especially cotton, from their own native shores, the most extensive native territory, climate, soil (262).

There is no question that the economy and terms of extraction Blake describes are specifically fitting within the colonialist conception of agriculture and economy, and the terms of power he uses strengthen this same dynamic.

Where Blake ends the unfinished novel in the process of mirroring colonialist economic patterns, there is the potential for relevancy between the argument concerning transformation and post-colonial studies. The system of commodification and transformation in *Blake* makes room for continued conversation in postcolonial theory, where the history of European settlers suggests a will to transform and make “European” all that it might conquer. These mental frameworks are mirrored in the treatment of the land as the thought processes of enslavers to enrich themselves through rape, thereby destabilizing the distinction of Black and White in society. With concern to “racial science” and racial hierarchy, Ania Loomba, in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* says:

Some critics have suggested that racial hierarchies are the ‘magic formula’ which allows capitalism to expand and find all the labour power it needs, and yet pays even lower wages, and allow even fewer freedoms Racial difference, in such an analysis, is more than a by-product of class relations, although it is firmly connected to economic structures. Also important, is the question of internalization of racial ideologies. (135)

The “internalization” Loomba speaks of is resonant of the wider mental frameworks used by enslavers not only in their treatment of enslaved peoples, but also with consideration to how they

viewed the land. Similarly, the presumption that "Man" is superior to Nature also destabilizes the ability for land to create life and, in turn, exposes “Man” to environmental crises and climate change.

What Delany sought principally was for an independent Black nation, one which could support itself and play a part in the global economy. The future exploitative actions European and White American economies would take in objectifying and extracting Black labor after slavery were unknown to Delany. Unable to anticipate the forms of future exploitative practices—which were altered radically by the Civil War and its immediate aftermath—Delany sought for a way out of the sexual economy of transformation through enslaver rape in the South, and while these sexual economies would eventually lead to the fetishization and taboo of mixed-race relationships in the South, along with anti-miscegenation laws, Delany’s *Blake* draws attention to its horrific practice during the antebellum period. The exploitation of Black labor did continue, however, and defined Whiteness and White conceptions of Black populations.

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