INTRODUCTION

Martin Delany’s *Blake* was at once the most important and the least influential work of fiction published by a black writer in the nineteenth century. Most important because of its intellectual scope; least influential because it caught the attention of almost no one for nearly one hundred years after its publication.

Consider first of all its importance. No work of American fiction proposed a more ambitious investigation of the history and vicious social conditions that characterized the emergent American Empire in the nineteenth century, wracked as it was by its original racist sin of slavery. But while we now recognize *Blake* as “one of the more profound novels of the entire ante-bellum oeuvre,” that view has been a long time coming. Some of the reasons for its neglect are easy to see. For one thing, it was only published in serial form in two short-lived periodicals. Delany himself broke off the publication of the first serialization (in 1859) after some two dozen chapters, and historical misfortune stepped in to truncate the second, which survives in only a single copy. Besides, just at the moment of its second serialization, 1861–1862, the Civil War broke out. *Blake* disappeared from view.

*Blake* was written and published when the American system of slavery was struggling to secure itself against growing threats to its power. *Blake* can be seen as part of the movement that for decades had been working, unsuccessfully if not ineffectually, to terminate what was daintily called “that peculiar institution.” Delany was one among an inspiring company of black men and women who fought against it. They founded newspapers and periodicals to raise the consciousness of both blacks and whites, they organized regular meetings and conventions to form common policies for practical action, they spoke, they wrote, they worked in their localities and neighborhoods and traveled far to build community solidarity. In every one of these endeavors, Martin Delany was not only active throughout his life, he was a commanding figure and was recognized as such.

The ideas, scenes, and arguments presented in *Blake* all reflect Delany’s rich life experience. He founded two newspapers in his lifetime and co-founded a third. Besides *Blake*, he published six other major books as well as a handful of less substantial works. He was a practicing physician. He worked closely with nearly every important black activist of the period and
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aided John Brown. A recognized intellectual with an unusually—perhaps uniquely—broad range of skills and interests, he sought to realize his ideas in the real world of society and politics.

Delany’s Life

Martin Robison Delany was born in Charles Town, Virginia (now in West Virginia), on May 6, 1812. His father was a slave but his mother was free, so Martin was born free, according to the laws at the time. His mother moved the family to Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, after being charged with teaching her children to read and write (antiliteracy laws in Virginia made it illegal to educate black children). In 1831 Martin moved to Pittsburgh. There he apprenticed to a physician, Andrew McDowell, in 1833, and soon after started his own medical practice. By the late 1830s he had become an activist in the black community. In 1839 he made an extended tour through the South to learn what he could about the social and political condition of blacks there. This trip provided the material for Chapters XVII–XXVI of Blake. When he returned, he began formulating an emigrationist approach to the problem of race in the United States.

In 1843 he married Catherine Richards, the daughter of a local merchant, and started a newspaper, The Mystery, that extended his political work and drew the attention of the celebrated black abolitionist Frederick Douglass. In 1847 Douglass asked Delany to help found and coedit a new antislavery newspaper, The North Star. They worked together on the newspaper for two years, during which time Delany traveled throughout the Midwest to lecture, seek subscriptions, and report on his travels. Eventually the two men fell out over differences concerning the destiny of African Americans in the United States; Douglass favored an assimilationist approach, while Delany favored emigration.

Delany applied to Harvard Medical School in 1850 and was admitted, but three weeks later he and two other black students were dismissed when a group of white students objected to their presence. He returned to Pittsburgh, where he wrote two of his most important books: The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered (1852) and The Origin and Objects of Ancient Freemasonry; Its Introduction into the United States and Legitimacy among Colored
Men (1853). During the early 1850s Delany and Douglass grew further estranged over their differing views about how to cooperate with white abolitionists. Their differences were most sharply marked by their backing of two contrasting national black conventions. One, held in Rochester, New York, in 1853, was put together by Douglass to establish black organizations in the United States; the other, held in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1854, was organized by Delany to promote black emigration. Neither man attended the other’s meeting.

In February 1856 Delany moved with his family to Chatham, in the territory of Canada West, an area with thriving communities of blacks who had escaped slavery by means of the Underground Railroad. He established a medical practice and continued his political work, including forming a plan to set up a community in Africa run by free blacks from America. In May 1858, he helped John Brown with a secret convention held in Chatham to plan a black insurrection, which culminated in the unsuccessful attack at Harpers Ferry the following year. In the summer of 1859, Delany and a small company of colleagues left for a year’s stay in West Africa, where he made arrangements to found a community in the Niger Valley, in present-day Nigeria. He then went to England for six months to raise money for the operation and to make contact with the English scientific community. After he returned home at the end of 1860, he prepared and published his Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party (1861). But the report’s sanguine expectations for a settlement were thwarted by the “increasingly complex web of British imperial designs upon West Africa.”

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 and the demise of his emigration scheme in 1862–1863 combined to move Delany to a more flexible view of how blacks should deal with racism in the United States. When his son Toussaint L’Ouverture (named for the leader of the Haitian Revolution) enlisted in the Union army in the spring of 1863, Delany followed by becoming a recruiter of blacks for the army. In 1865 he met with President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and was formally commissioned a major of infantry, with no assigned regiment. His duties were “recruiting and organizing colored troops” for the federal government, a position he would hold for more than six years.

He was transferred to Charleston, South Carolina, shortly after the fall of Richmond in April 1865 and the final surrender at Appomattox. He was soon reassigned to the Freedman’s Bureau (in Hilton Head, South Carolina), the
federal agency set up to administer the government’s postwar Reconstruction plans, which involved activities such as settling blacks in farming, establishing schools for black children, and helping to organize voting.

Delany continued to write, hold political office, and do community work in South Carolina. In 1870, he wrote and published *A Series of Four Tracts on National Polity: The Freedman.* Through the 1870s, however, he could see that the racist South and the racist North had scarcely changed so far as American blacks were concerned and that the liberal hopes that had launched Reconstruction were fading. The situation deteriorated in 1877, following the disputed presidential election of 1876 between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel Tilden, which resulted in the so-called Compromise of 1877: Hayes was named president on the understanding that he would effectively end Reconstruction by removing federal troops from the South. The one-hundred-year reign of Jim Crow had begun.

Delany’s efforts in the 1870s to forge “a combination of the two races in one great southern party” were thwarted by a cabal of South Carolina Democrats eager to reclaim white power and end Reconstruction, and Northern Republicans wary of Delany’s close working relations with Southern whites. In a move to destroy his political influence in South Carolina, he was charged with fraud and theft in 1876 and found guilty. In 1878 he was removed from his office as trial justice in Charleston.

But his commitment to political action for the uplift of blacks did not alter. In 1878 he worked, unsuccessfully, to save the American Colonization Society’s plan to send an emigration ship to Liberia. These efforts were remarkable, since he believed that black communities should be run by black leaders, and he had long despised the white-run colonization society. He eventually ended his association with the society and returned to practice medicine in Charleston. In 1879 he published his last book, *Principia of Ethnology,* where he presented an account of the history of the human races that opposed traditional claims of white superiority. Delany died of tuberculosis in Xenia, Ohio, on January 24, 1885.

*Blake’s Narrative Action: Fiction with a Purpose*

*Blake* clearly reflects Delany’s conviction that intellectual commitments require practical action. Like Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* (1855–1857) or Steinbeck’s
The Grapes of Wrath (1939), Blake was written to bring about actual social change. Its core ideas had been maturing in Delany’s mind since at least the late 1830s, and he had been promoting them ever since in both fact and print. It was the appalling Dred Scott decision (1857), which held that black people were not US citizens, that finally drove him to write what would be his only work of fiction. Blake represents the polemic of an exasperated imagination, reflecting a long, tormented history that did not end with the end of the Confederacy, and indeed has not ended even today.

Blake imagines an escape from that history through a vision of black redemption. That imagined escape, it seems to me, is successful. But tempering that success is the history of Blake’s lack of success as a publication, its nearly one-hundred-year disappearance. When it reemerged to attention in the volatile 1960s, that historical gap, Blake’s mute afterlife, would energize readers’ attention, shifting our sense of the work into deeper and more challenging directions. To understand the full significance of Blake’s strange and profound achievement, then, we must look carefully at Delany’s purposes for his work and how they were executed.

As John Ernest and other close readers of Blake have long insisted, Delany believed that black emancipation was impossible without the “elevation” of black consciousness. This conviction was fed and sustained by his long involvement with black Freemasonry, about which he published an important polemical history. Because of its commitment to ideals of enlightenment, liberty, and individual enterprise, the Freemason movement held great attraction for Delany. All of his works, not the least Blake, are fundamentally educational, written to restore enlightenment to “a broken people.” In Blake, this enlightenment is driven by the story’s hero, called Henry Holland in Part I and Henry Blake in Part II. The first of Henry’s three journeys is specifically undertaken to bring blacks in the American slave states to what he calls, at the climactic moment of his tale, “this solemn responsibility of self-emancipation” (Chapter LXX). When he initially strikes out on his mission of freedom, black “insurrection” is his explicit “theme” (Chapter XI), and it looms over the action more ominously than ever as the story is coming to a conclusion.

Blake’s tale, however, involves much more than large-scale insurrection. At the plot level, the work’s most “solemn responsibility” is the quest for freedom, and that quest has succeeded, has been succeeding, from Chapter VI forward. Blake’s central argument is that the primal act of insurrection
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is an individual’s first conscious commitment to personal independence. “Freedom or the grave,” Henry declares as his watchword (Chapter XI). Henry’s defiance of Colonel Franks’s power establishes the model for self-emancipation, and it is quickly emulated throughout the Franks plantation when the slaves conspire in Henry’s escape.

When he departs the plantation (Chapter XI), Henry has left behind a people who are, despite their formal condition as enslaved, already free. That is why, when he returns to lead a band to freedom in Canada (Chapter XXVII), the second of his three journeys of freedom, they are prepared. In his final act before leaving on his first journey (Chapter XI), he reveals to Charles and Andy, his first followers, his “plan for a general insurrection of the slaves in every state.” Both understand right away and are amazed at the simplicity of “the secrets of his organization.” It is a scheme “adapted to all times and circumstances” because it involves a personal choice that anyone anywhere can make. That is its “secret.” Slightly misquoting Lord Byron, Delany had publicized this concept many years before when he put these words on the masthead of his first publishing venture, *The Mystery*: “Who would be free, themselves must strike the first blow.” It is the same motto that the black abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet took as inspiration for his famous “Address to the Slaves of the United States” (1843), one of Delany’s sacred texts, which called for slaves to take up arms against their masters.9

This thought becomes an operating “plan” or “scheme” when, as Henry tells Charles and Andy in Chapter XI, “You must now go on and organize continually. It makes no difference when, nor where you are . . . as the scheme is adapted to all times and places.” For the first journey, the most forthright expression of the great “secret” of freedom comes in Chapter XIX, when Henry talks with the enslaved man Sampson, who has been saving up money to make his escape from a plantation in Texas; for the second journey, it comes in Chapter XXVIII, when Henry explains to Andy and Charles how to use the North Star as a guide for traveling to safety in Canada. More than lessons in economics or celestial navigation, which are their respective literal subjects, those episodes dramatize Delany’s touchstone for freedom: self-emancipation through a commitment to practical reason.10

Rediscovering the work in the 1950s and 1960s, readers were struck by Delany’s unusually forthright and sympathetic presentation of black insurrection. *Blake* proved especially influential on the Black Power and
Pan-Africanism movements. Whereas the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) presages a work like Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Why We Can’t Wait* (1963), the lineal children of *Blake* are *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (1965), and George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* (1970). Unlike those celebrated and controversial books, however, *Blake* was ignored by reviewers, even black reviewers, at the time of its publication (1859–1862). And then it simply disappeared. *Blake* is not even mentioned in Frances Rollin’s laudatory 1868 biography of Delany, and after Rollin the silence about *Blake* and about Delany himself is deafening. Between 1862 and the early 1940s, *Blake* seems to have been referred to in print only four times, each reference brief and perfunctory; and while Delany’s nonfiction writings were well known and greatly influential for his contemporaries, his name and those writings, too, fell from attention for decades. Yet in his lifetime he and Frederick Douglass, the cofounders of *The North Star*, were dominant voices in a company we now regard with awe, so difficult, even dangerous, were the conditions they worked in.

The renewed attention to Delany that slowly emerged in the 1940s swelled through the fifties and the sixties. So far as *Blake* is concerned, it culminated in the Beacon Press edition of 1970, edited by Floyd J. Miller, the only time it has been published as a book. That book inspired a raft of important scholarly and critical writings on Delany and *Blake* that has continued to the present. Unfortunately, the weaknesses of the edition are considerable, both with respect to the basic text it presents—it is full of errors—and to the account it gives of the work’s textual and historical context. Because scholarly and critical discussion since 1970 has relied so heavily on this edition, serious misunderstandings about Delany’s remarkable work are common. That situation prompted me to prepare a new edition, which I initially saw simply as a scholarly obligation. But working on the edition in 2014–2015, when the enduring violence of American racism once again commanded attention, I came to appreciate the disturbing—and for a scholar, especially—the inspiring bravery of Delany’s work.

While distinguished literary scholars now study *Blake* and Delany with careful attention, the common view—and it is an understandable one—is that he was a very bad novelist. I turn my commentary on the work to this matter because the judgment, while not mistaken, is misguided. Delany was not a novelist—he was a polemicist, even a kind of prophet, who deployed various conventions of traditional fiction to make an argument
about what black emancipation in America meant and how it was to be achieved. As a work of fiction, Blake has clear ties to extended apologues like Pilgrim’s Progress or—even more aptly because of its invocation of history—to several of John Neal’s books, such as Logan (1822) and Rachel Dyer (1828), or to works like James Fenimore Cooper’s dark prophecy The Crater. Blake marshals a host of realist and even factual details, and it constructs a series of representative scenes, many comic and satiric, all of them effective polemical commentaries. As we shall see, proceeding in these ways, Delany achieved a startlingly innovative aesthetic result.

Blake presents a critical account of Euro-American racism and how to escape its authority. Because many scenes and events in Blake show great social acuity, and because the book’s plot structure is carefully organized, Blake exhibits novelistic features. But the artistic function of these features is rhetorical rather than mimetic: to advance an argument, to persuade readers of the truth of its vision. So it is that none of Blake’s characters, not even its hero, have any psychological depth. All are representative figures moving in a complex social tableau.

Part I of Blake is organized around a recognizable American social world populated by a representative set of characters. The story is even dated to a specific time period, 1852–1853, though Delany points out in a note that these dates make for certain plot anomalies. Realism is heightened by the use of concrete details that Delany’s contemporaries would have recognized: the actual names of riverboats and of British Atlantic cruisers working to thwart the slave trade, of actual white planters and slave drivers, of actual buildings, places, people, and social organizations like the Brown societies, the Great Dismal Swamp maroons, and the state-sponsored slave patrols. Signal events of the recent past are referred to: the Seminole Wars; and the slave revolts of Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, and Nat Turner. Delany also peppers his work with footnotes that augment those public events with more personal observations that underscore his firsthand relation to the social history being reflected in the story. This groundwork of contemporary detail lends thickness to the great social realities that organize and are the chief focus of the action: the Underground Railroad, the Amistad revolt, the Atlantic slave trade, the Compromise of 1850 and the Dred Scott decision, and the legal and political conditions in Cuba in the 1840s and 1850s, including the Conspiracy of the Ladder and its aftermath.
In Part II, however, realism recedes when the narrative makes a decisive turn to fantasy in Chapter XLII. The great force of Blake’s political argument—its prophetic import—hangs on that remarkable shift in genre. From that point on, the chapters that take place in Cuba are defined by the presence of the Cuban poet Placido (Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés) and the insurrectionary history he represents. Placido was executed in 1844 as one of the leaders of the failed slave insurrection called the Conspiracy of the Ladder, or La Escalera. When Delany resurrects Placido in Part II, he uses the dead poet to replay historical events that had occurred more than ten years before. Blake returns to those events in order to rethink their significance for the future of black liberation. Delany saw that future from the perspective of 1857–1861, but his book would outlive that important historical moment and gain new life a century later.

I am unaware that any other American novel or fiction of the nineteenth century, whether by a white or a black author, saw or seized the opportunities that could be gained by the startling stylistic move that occurs in Part II of Blake. It lays bare two matters of great consequence for understanding the nature of the argument that Delany is advancing. The first involves the vexed problem of Blake’s narrative conclusion—the missing half-dozen or so chapters. Placido’s anachronistic appearance in Blake helps us to see how and where Delany probably intended to conclude his story—that is to say, how he proposed to give imaginative shape to a redemptive black future, the fourth journey that would have climaxed the action. At the same time, in constructing that imaginary future, Delany was driven to introduce a historical perspective—a kind of future perfect temporality for Blake—that necessarily escaped both his intention and his limited historical purview. It is a sobering perspective that calls out to later readers of Blake, not least of all ourselves and our children.

Had Blake introduced a character like the historical Placido into the narrative, the tale would have maintained its fictional stability. But Placido’s historicalness tilts the machine, drawing our attention away from the narrative and toward its artificer. The deliberate anomaly of Placido throws into relief the question of how Delany has organized his work. For all the excellent scholarship given to Blake, it is a question that readers have not examined with sufficient care. In fact, when we look closely we see a structural design pervading Blake that clarifies not only the argument Delany is
making, but how he was preparing to complete the action in those final missing chapters.

A distinctive formal feature of Blake is the pattern of repetitions between Part I and Part II. The abduction of Cornelia Woodward (in Chapter XXXV) is plainly meant to echo Blake’s initiating event, the threatened rape of Maggie by her master, Colonel Franks (Chapter III). The histories and social structures in Cuba and the United States were very different, but, in Blake, they share a racist heritage that produces important symmetries. The structure of racism in Cuba is portrayed as being a milder version of the deadly form it took in the United States. The tense union between Northern mercantile racists and Southern plantation racists in the United States is echoed by the volatile coalition of Castilian aristocrats and plantation Creoles in Cuba. Calling attention to the similarities as well as the differences is a key function of all of Blake’s repetitions. Chapter X (“Merry Making”) gets its Cuban replay in Chapter LXXII (“King’s Day”). The plots and counterplots at the Franks plantation are reprised in Cuba, and the fear of black insurrection pervades both worlds. But as Delany’s story makes very clear, crucial differences emerge when the two social scenes are thrown into comparison, as it is one of Blake’s intentions to do.

Perhaps the most consequential of Blake’s repetitions is the one developed between the insurrection planned and eventually prevented in New Orleans, and the insurrection that is mounted in Cuba. The traitorous “brotha Tib” in New Orleans is paralleled in Cuba partly by the captain-general’s slave Hober and partly by the volatile Gofer Gondolier. Gofer’s hatred of his masters is clearly shown as dangerous to the success of the insurrection. When Montego warns Gofer that his precipitance is a serious “failing,” his language echoes Henry’s remarks to the New Orleans conspirators:

“You must have all the necessary means, my brother,” persuasively resumed Henry, “for the accomplishment of your ends. Intelligence among yourself on everything pertaining to your designs and project. You must know what, how, and when to do. Have all the instrumentalities necessary for an effective effort before making the attempt. Without this, you will fail, utterly fail!” (Chapter XXII)
Henry’s warning is especially resonant because brotha Tib replies in words that clearly recall what Henry himself, at the outset of his career, had spoken: “Den ef we got wait all dat time, we neveh be free!” gruffly replied he. ‘I goes in for dis night! I say dis night!’”¹¹⁸ As it happens, yet another repetition joins these two events. Henry flees the Franks plantation the very night before he is to be sold, and he flees New Orleans lest he get caught up in the repri-sals that are about to be brought against the city’s blacks after the revolt is crushed.

These events in Blake recycle and reflect a deep American preoccupation among both blacks and whites: the tormented urge to flee, the dream of “A World Elsewhere.”¹¹⁹ Delany’s experience of racist America birthed the presiding idea of his life, though he held it in abeyance during the years of Reconstruction: emigration.²⁰ This theme appears in Blake in a song that Delany notes, in a footnote, he once heard sung by “a little black boy, sitting by himself on a fence in the south, musing”: “I’m a goin’ to Afraka / Where de white man dare not stay” (Chapter XLVII).

Let me pause to comment on a significant aspect of this passage: the nonstandard orthography. Delany worked assiduously throughout Blake to represent various dialects of both blacks and whites. He made many revisions in the dialect orthography for the second version (printed in 1861–1862) in an effort to make it more accessible to readers.²¹ Blake is strewn with dialect variations that are carefully deployed as indices of different levels of mental and moral awareness. The speech of the blacks who have retreated to the Great Dismal Swamp shows them to be the least enlightened of their race, though even their diminished powers of communication are less benighted than what we see in the white Mississippi River ferryman (Chapter XXX). Chapter XXVIII (“Studying Head Work”) gives a use-fully clear representation of the differences between the speech of Charles, Andy, Daddy Joe, and Mammy Judy.

A thorough analysis of these dialect orthographies would repay scholarly attention. But lacking that we still can see that in Blake, Delany is critically assessing a society and culture through representative forms of oral discourse. Henry and the omniscient narrator each present a norm of enlightened black speech against which all the other characters are measured. The work’s run-on and truncated sentences, dangling constructions, and loose or incorrect syntax are also essential features of its oral style. They
define the work in relation to the social spaces where human beings interact, rather than in relation to formal prose exposition. We must not forget that Blake is the work of a man who was a public lecturer and a politician. Delany knew the world through interactions with people from many different places and social circumstances. Most of all, he knew them in his role as a free black community organizer.

Of course he also knew the world, and the world knew him, through his nonfiction writings. Blake, by contrast, is not an exposition; it is a fiction, and as such, it operates with fiction’s usual forms, which are representational, not expository. It is, however, a highly unusual, even, I should say, unique, fictional work for its period. For if Blake is a “historical” fiction, it is not like one of Walter Scott’s or James Fenimore Cooper’s historical fictions, or even Charles Chesnutt’s The Marrow of Tradition (1901) (based on the 1898 massacre of African Americans in Wilmington, North Carolina). More like Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle (1906), which exposed the appalling conditions of the meat-packing industry, Blake’s fiction enters upon a living and terrible present with a focused purpose: to argue why and how to change it. But unlike the world of the slaughterhouse, harrowing enough as that certainly is, the terror in Blake is far more terrible because of its historical and geopolitical extent.

At the same time, Blake moves to undermine the power of white terrorism by embedding it in a much larger frame of reference. This is the discourse of an ongoing biblical perspective, which marks the action as shot through with providential design. But in Blake, that design is consciously colored black in order to redeem sacred scripture from its racist American history. Henry lays out his black perspective on the Bible as he is beginning his flight to freedom, and it is vigorously reinforced later when the action is reaching its climax in Cuba. In formal terms, this polemical design is executed twice in the book: first, in the plot of the action, the career that Henry undertakes; and second, even more, in Delany’s construction of that career as a prophecy of black liberation. In the first case, the design comes about as a fictional representation; in the second, as a conscious effort by Delany, often speaking in his own voice, to promote and participate in the achievement of that design.

The reframing in terms of providential design operates at three distinct levels of representation. At the level of the plot, Henry deliberately chooses to become the instrument of a providential God, a choice that throws him
into precarious circumstances. At one point he is actually “deranged” (Chapter XXVI), and at others his weaknesses, limitations, and uncertainties are exposed.

The immediate agent of the story is Blake’s narrator, who dominates the work’s second level of representation. This third-person omniscient voice tells the story largely through free indirect discourse, which lets him relate the action from a position inside the story. But his position is such that he can, at certain moments, step away and comment at a remove of critical awareness beyond what is possible for Henry. These moments are most recognizable when the narrator suspends his tale-telling in order to make general social, political, or historical observations, which happens recurrently.

Those moments link directly to the third level of representation, where Delany himself is the principal agent. This is the level of the work’s composition and publication, a level where the work’s aesthetic features and political intentions come together as the public act of an author writing with a political purpose. It is the level where we can observe the artifice of the fiction as a political move and where we can track and assess the work’s action in the world. At this level Delany himself, the man as author-agent, becomes as much a focus of our critical attention as does his hero, Henry. In that narrative perspective, the reader’s knowledge of history becomes Delany’s monitor, just as the narrator of Delany’s work monitors the actions of Henry and the story’s other characters. At this third level Delany’s black Masonic convictions—enlightened self-interest, practical social action—come into full play. He chooses to argue that a call and response for black liberation collaborates with the providential design of world history. In making that argument, Delany, like his fictive hero, submits himself and his work to the hazards of his writing purposes. He becomes an instrument of black historical progress.

While plot is the chief engine of Blake’s providential design, that power keeps a steady presence in the religious convictions of the black characters, in the pervasive biblical discourse, and in the frequent quotations from spiritual songs and anti-establishment poetry. From the opening chapter, human beings set in motion acts that are directed or redirected in unforeseen or unexpected ways. Given the political situation in America, plans for outfitting the slave ship, the narrator observes, would have been better arranged from Cuba. But “for some reason” it turns out otherwise. Key plotlines and consequences unfold from that initial decision by the slave
merchants. Most important, “for some reason” conceals a muted, scarcely detectable glimpse of the providential action that Delany is arranging in his work’s unfolding action.

Of the turns of event that occur in *Blake*, two prove crucial. The first comes when Henry’s master, Colonel Franks, decides to sell Henry because of his insubordination. Trying to prevent that injustice, the colonel’s wife schemes to have a friend purchase Henry so that he can be restored—still as a slave—to his wife, Maggie, who has been taken to Cuba. Apprised of his own wife’s intentions and determined to prevent her plan, Franks secretly devises a counterplan that could cause Henry to be viewed as a thief and a runaway, not least of all by Franks’s wife, and so to be captured, beaten, and perhaps even executed.

As Henry is about to be sold at the public auction where Mrs. Franks intends to have him purchased, a rainstorm drives the entire company into a nearby church (Chapter VIII). The delay lasts just long enough for Henry to be removed from the sale by the unexpected intervention of Colonel Franks’s letter to the auctioneer. The rainstorm allows Franks’s devious scheme to thwart his wife’s benevolent scheme. But as it happens, his scheme is itself thwarted. The operational details of Franks’s plans become the means by which Henry escapes to carry out his own plans to begin working for a general black “insurrection” and war against white oppression.

The rainstorm in Chapter VIII forecasts the most consequential plot redirection in *Blake*, which comes in Chapter LIV. As Henry is planning his Cuban insurrection, he signs on to be the sailing master on the *Vulture*, the slave ship introduced in Chapter I, with the intention of commandeering it in a replay of the mutiny on the *Amistad*, but, this time, in order to bring a war of liberation to Cuba. But just as the rebellion is poised to occur, a great storm comes up that prevents a revolt on the ship. The storm also thwarts another carefully laid plan: the slavers’ intention to sail the ship to Key West. The *Vulture* is storm-driven to Cuba, thus leaving it available for the “war upon the whites” (Chapter LXX) that Henry, Placido, and the other free blacks have committed themselves to undertake.

As these scenes suggest, God’s plans in *Blake* often emerge by means of Nature, especially grand natural phenomena, for, as the narrator tells us about the storm at sea, “it was then that the vastness of Omnipotence was felt and realized in all its grandeur” and, reciprocally, that “the human heart manifested its most delicate sympathies” in response (Chapter XLVI).
While the ship waits to be taken over by the conspirators in Matanzas, they meet for a last “seclusion” in Havana (Chapter LXX). Henry addresses them in a final speech that emphasizes the fatality of what is unfolding. The narrator recounts Henry’s warning that “like the approach of the evening shadow of the hill tops, there was no escape.” The event would “overtake them whether or not they desired it.” Throughout the tale Henry has emphasized the need for careful planning when actions are being undertaken. Circumstantial complexities impinge from every direction, and unless they are anticipated, an action “will fail, utterly fail” (Chapter XXII). Because Henry believes their plan is both sound and sanctioned by God, he opens his final speech with the confident assurance that he can “now” and “in the name of God . . . declare war against our oppressors.” But the declaration comes with a striking caveat: “provided Spain does not redress our grievances.” He closes his speech with an explicit reference to the purposes of God: “Then let us determine to be ready, permitting nothing outside of an interposition of Divine Providence to interfere with our progress.”

Now set this final speech beside Henry’s angry words as he begins planning his escape from the plantation to rescue his wife and launch his “scheme” of black redemption (Chapter VI): “Don’t tell me about religion! What’s religion to me?” “You want me to be satisfied with a hope of heaven. I won’t do any such thing; I have waited long enough on heavenly promises. I’ll wait no longer.” At that point, having been so long enslaved to “the religion of my oppressors” and its manifest wickedness, Henry rightly sees that he cannot “stand still and see the salvation.” In *Blake*, the arm of the Lord begins to awake when Henry wakes up and goes to meet the Lord’s righteousness.

Religion dominates the political action in *Blake*. It maps the struggle between what is perhaps the most basic repetition and comparison in the work: between a false religion that justifies and promotes racist oppression and a religion of promise. Who is to be “master” and whose “will” is to be obeyed are the issues at stake. So when Blake and his friends are poised for their Cuban insurrection, the question of God’s will remains imperative. What is God’s will for the Cuban uprising? The presence of Placido and the foreshadowing cast by the aborted New Orleans rebellion answer that question and allow us to foresee the action in the lost final chapters. *Blake* will conclude with a replay of La Escalera. Placido and the other conspirators will be seized and executed.
But that is far, indeed, from the end of the story. We want to remember that Delany wrote and published *Blake* as part of an argument for black emigration to Africa and as part of a scheme to raise money for his emigration project. In *Blake*, we are to see divine “interposition” in the *Vulture* lying at anchor in Matanzas. A providential God has ensured that the ship was not taken at sea by Henry and the mutinous Africans—a plan that Henry had not thought out with enough care—or allowed to sail to Key West, as the slavers had planned.

Everything in Delany’s life shows that his revolutionary consciousness was grounded in a black religious consciousness. In terms of actual history, God’s plan is to drive a new birth of human freedom through the agency of an emancipated black consciousness. Recognizing that plan, hearing God’s call, Delany passes it along to his contemporary world. *Blake* is an account of Delany’s response to that call, and within the plot of the fiction we glimpse how this divine scheme will work itself out. A saving remnant of the conspirators will commandeer the *Vulture* in Matanzas, rename it again, and sail for Africa to establish a black city on an African hill. The pan-Americans Henry and Maggie will be among that company, and so will the pan-Africans Mendi and Abyssa. It is an escape foreshadowed at the end of Part I, when Henry delivers the company of runaways to Canada West, where three marriages signal the founding of a free black community.26

*Blake*’s careful structure of narrative repetitions shows us how Delany would have ended his story. Among those repetitions, Placido and La Escalera occupy a privileged place. They show how Delany approached the question of a history that might appear to be an appalling record of subjection, cruelty, and murder on one hand, and of failed rebellions on the other. When Delany replays La Escalera, however, he executes a countermove against that entire dreadful inheritance. Placido and La Escalera are precisely not replayed in *Blake* as sacred talismans that can be recovered and then used to inspire “insurrection.” Slave rebellions, free black rebellions, even white-led risings like John Brown’s—all would have seemed like recycled, traumatized history for Delany when he conceived and published *Blake*. When white history is recovered through a deep black perspective it reemerges as a history of alienation.27

In *Blake*, the very word “insurrection” becomes slowly glossed as a white word drawn out of white history. Delany argues that when blacks look at
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the past, white culture and history encourage them to see it in a white perspective. Translated into a black perspective, this history emerges as a series of either martyrdoms or weak accommodations. Harriet Beecher Stowe gave famous names to both: Uncle Tom and Dred. (Uncle Tom, of course, is the loyal, doomed slave in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* [1852]; Dred is the black leader of a never-realized rebellion in Stowe’s eponymous second novel, *Dred* [1856].) But the plan for freedom being imagined in *Blake* lies beyond either insurrection or accommodation.28

*Blake* is Delany’s plan for freedom laid out not by expository argument—what he tried to do, with partial success, in *The Condition*—but as a story that reimagines the past.29 Black emigration from America, from white American Memory, is the only way to freedom for both blacks and whites because it is the only sure way to see history from multiple perspectives. For, as Lord Byron—one of Delany’s enlightened whites—wrote: “There is no freedom, even for Masters, in the midst of slaves.”30

Delany’s religious orientation is fundamental to this argument. His theory of history is actually a theory of multiple histories that Delany extrapolates from the biblical account of the sons of Noah, contending that each of Noah’s three sons founded a different human race—black, yellow, and white.31 Simplistic as we might judge such racial historicism, it functions very well as a path through white racist appropriations of the monotheist Bible. The sons of Noah serve Delany as a set of elementary analytic distinctions for understanding the complexities of global social history, which is driven by multiple agents. For Delany, the black sons of Ham have been called to a world-historical mission because of their contemporary circumstances and history. Even Christianity can be critically reconceived beyond “the religion of our oppressors.”

In all these respects *Blake* is arguing the necessity of emigrating from white racist America, emigrating “to Afraka.” Given *Blake’s* conscious historical perspective, “Afraka” is not “Africa.” It is an orthographic sign that there is “a world elsewhere” of black actualities and black truth.

But emigration is easier to conceive in critical theory and to execute in aesthetic practice than it is to achieve in the circumstantial human world. Come the Civil War, come the defeat of the Confederacy, come Reconstruction, come Jim Crow . . . come even random years of American grace or terror like 1963 and 2015: as *Blake* moved, for the most part invisibly,
through these different sociohistorical epochs, its argument was being reshaped by time and change. This is one of the great messages carried through the afterlife of *Blake* between 1862 and the present.

**Martin Delany, Blake, and Us**

Delany’s life, ideas, and commitments pervade the fiction of *Blake*. Although the coming of the Civil War produced a marked shift in his strategic views, his two guiding principles never changed: black elevation and black self-reliance. When Delany wrote *Blake* in 1858–1859, his long-held allegiance to black emigration was an idea that he finally decided should be realized in fact. His view of the United States was not fundamentally different from what he thought in 1849. If anything, it had grown darker:

> The United States, like the great prostitute of Revelation, who sat at her door inducing all who passed along, has been for the last three-quarters of a century sitting upon the highway of political and historical fame, with the enchanting words of Justice, Freedom, Liberty, Equality, Democracy, and Republicanism on her tongue... until the peasant-subjects of every nation of Europe have... learned to love America...; and under such circumstances, depend upon it, it is next to impossible to muster an army in England or any other European nation, who would be willing to wage war against the United States.32

Settling in Canada in 1856, as Delany did, came to seem, especially after Dred Scott, a mere compromise and way station. In 1858, when he helped John Brown organize a convention to plan an insurrection against America’s indurated racist power, he clearly accepted the possibility of armed resistance.33 But while he was willing to help Brown and those who took Brown’s militant line, Delany did not join Brown’s company. Still committed to emigration, he began thinking the exodus should set its sights to the east, rather than—as he had once thought—to the south of the United States. In May 1859, he and his planning group left for the Niger Valley in Africa to prepare the way for the emigration community. He first stopped in New York City to halt the publication of the initial printing of *Blake*,...
The future of a revolt from racist America, whether by insurrection or emigration, was about to be decisively engaged. ‘Now is the accepted time, today is the day of salvation’ (Chapter VII).

When he returned to the United States at the end of 1860, John Brown was dead, but Delany was certain that his emigration community would be realized. He had made the practical arrangements in Africa, had begun raising the funds in England, and now turned to write the report that would publicize the plan and help assemble the emigration party. Late that year he began revising Blake in light of his African travels. The Civil War had broken out, but it seemed only to reinforce the importance of his emigration scheme. The South was winning, and Lincoln was looking for a way to save the union, even if it meant accepting Southern terms.

But as the revised serialization appeared through 1862, Delany’s Africa vision ran into serious trouble. A cadre of British missionaries opposed the plan and eventually thwarted it completely. Then came January 1863 and the Emancipation Proclamation, and the next month Delany’s son Toussaint told his father he meant to enlist in the Union army. From that point, Delany began to work for the defeat of the Confederacy and, when that ensued, to take an active role in Southern Reconstruction. For a dozen years, he became an even more active accommodationist than Douglass. That Blake goes unmentioned in Rollin’s 1868 biography, with which Delany was closely involved, speaks volumes. Emigration scarcely seemed a word of power in the years of Reconstruction. But then (again) came another change, the Compromise of 1877, which marked the end of Reconstruction with the withdrawal of federal troops from the South. And more compromises with racism were to follow, as they always have. With the end of Reconstruction came the demonic birth of Jim Crow and then another flight of hope and despair, the Great Migration of blacks from the South to the North, an epoch that would last into the 1960s and even beyond.

In a certain view—a superficial one in my opinion—the civil-rights movement and the election of a black president in the United States have overtaken Blake’s polemic for emigration. Times have changed. But the limitation and even the failure of Blake’s argument are prophetic still, perhaps more so than ever. For if times have changed, as they have, they have also kept up with the past, as they always do. Racism is alive and well today. So is Delany’s Blake.
In *Blake*, Delany assesses the situation in the United States and Cuba during the 1840s and 1850s, drawing specific comparisons between them. What does he see? Here is one set of conclusions I would draw.

Delany executes at the level of his work’s plot the plan or scheme that Henry executes at the level of the story. *Blake* is thus Delany’s reimagining of pan-American history. The retelling of La Escalera is the work’s climactic move, replaying an actual historical event so as to disentangle it from racist history. In *Blake*, La Escalera is made more than a victory in the history of racism and more than a tragedy in the history of resistance. It is reimagined as an escape from both. There is “a world elsewhere,” and in *Blake* it is called “Afraka.” When the great Pan-Africanists of the 1960s took Delany as their spiritual forebear, they were reading Delany’s work in this perspective.

But then history moves on and draws *Blake* and Afraka and ourselves along with it. Delany’s assessment is important exactly because it would already be out of date in 1865, in 1877, in 1898 (the year of the “de facto annexation of Cuba” as a result of the Spanish-American war),36 in 1963, and in our own time. Because *Blake* itself gives a model of what it means to carry out an assessment in comparative terms—both historical and socio-political—it sends a message to the future that echoes the warning Henry gave to the New Orleans conspirators: “You must have all the necessary means.” How uncanny that the passage should call forward to Malcolm X’s most famous words, “by any means necessary” (which he took from a play by Jean-Paul Sartre, however, not from *Blake*).

From my perspective, that passage in *Blake* also constitutes a practical guide to literary interpretation. And it may well remind us of an even more significant matter about the function of the cultural work of the past. Our archival inheritance is perpetually threatened by two gravely naïve readings: that it is important to the present because it has universal human significance, or that the passage of time steals away its meaning, leaving it with merely “historical interest.” But neither is true, or perhaps I should say, both are nowhere true enough. The stories that *Blake* tells and the histories it reimagines have enduring value because they were caught in the grip of time, life, and death.

So does the fragmented record of *Blake* seem to me a gift and a revelation. I may imagine how those missing chapters unfolded, but the truth is that I don’t know. That is why, if we want to take a critical measure of
ourselves and our illusions, it is the dead we want to consult, for they no longer have illusions. Because we do, we keep trying to turn the past to current, however provisional, account. No contemporary works reveal that so well as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, which also suggest how we can keep alive works like *Blake*. More than anything from our living world, works like *Blake* give us a chance to meet and listen to the dead speaking to us about ourselves in our touching, alienated, never-to-be-unalienated, world.

Notes

2 Chatham, Canada West, is the present-day town of Chatham-Kent in southwestern Ontario, about fifty miles from Detroit.
9 Lord Byron was a major influence on nineteenth-century nationalist aspirations throughout the world, and he is the only white writer—other than the American Stowe—whose presence is specially marked out in *Blake*. The language is modified from Childe Harold’s *Pilgrimage*, canto 2, stanza 76 (“Hereditary bondsmen! know ye not/Who would be free themselves must strike the blow?”). Byron’s friend Percy Bysshe Shelley is a signal but less explicit influence in *Blake*.
10 No theme in Delany’s work is more insistent than this: “Brethren, our object is to set you to thinking—thinking for yourselves” (“Domestic Economy,” in Levine, 153). Chapter XIX focuses on economic independence, Chapter XXVIII on learning, especially scientific learning (navigating by the North Star and compass).
11 The four references to *Blake* are in Carter Woodson, ed., *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written during the Crisis 1800–1860* (Washington, DC: Association for the Study of
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Negro Life and History, 1927), 178; Howard Washington Odum, Rainbow Round My Shoulder: The Blue Trail of Black Ulysses (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1928), xxx; Benjamin Brawley, ed., Early Negro American Writers (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933), 216; and Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy (New York: Harper, 1944), 1338. It appears that Brawley and Myrdal were influential in bringing scholars to begin seriously rethinking the importance of Delany, as we see in the increased attention he draws in various black (and other) scholarly periodicals in the 1940s. For more than fifty years after his death, Delany himself was only briefly mentioned in a handful of publications.

12 The Beacon Press edition gives an inaccurate account of Blake's composition history. It has also encouraged a view of its missing final chapters that is far from satisfactory. Finally, it fails to expose the remarkably innovative character of the work's structure.

13 See his note in Chapter XL, “The Confrontment.”


15 The parallel also throws into relief the different responses of Henry and of Lieutenant Augustus Seeley, Cornelia's lover. While Delany's polemical intention is clear, the narrative management is weak and perfunctory. The only other problematic narrative episode, the reunion of Henry and Maggie, has been deplored by readers because it seems so improbable that Henry would not recognize his wife when meeting up with her again in Cuba. I do not share that view, although once again Delany's polemical goal is the cause of the problem. The narrative improbability seems to me an effective strategy for illustrating how slavery disfigures and dehumanizes.

16 Among the numerous lesser repetitions, I note two others. Gofer Gondolier's carving knife has its analog in the bowie knife that Delany associates with extreme white American violence, and the marriage of Abyssa and Mendi recalls the marriages that are celebrated in Canada among the escaped slaves.


18 When Daddy Joe warns Henry against impetuous action, he replies: “I've been 'standing still' long enough; I'll 'stand still' no longer. . . . Now is the accepted time, to-day is the day of salvation” (Chapter VII).

19 I refer here to Richard Poirier's elegant study A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966). But I also mean to argue against Poirier's central thesis, that in the pursuit of such a world, "tensions and polarities are fully developed and then resolved" (xx). The "style" of Blake, and of so much of the greatest American literature, is dedicated not to resolution but to revelation.

20 It is true, as Levine and others have shown, that Delany's commitment to emigration from the United States became fixed after the Compromise of 1850. But that he felt the force of that idea well before 1850 is clear in essays like “Sound the Alarm” and “Annexation of Cuba” (Levine, 141–143 and 160–166). It is also true that he did not turn to a plan for African emigration until after the Dred Scott decision. Before that he explored the possibilities of emigration from the United States to several different areas in Central and South America: see Condition, chaps. 18–22.

21 Stephanie Kingsley's collation of the Anglo-African Magazine with the Weekly Anglo-African exposes the full range of these alterations. See http://stephanie-kingsley.github.io/Blake index.html.

22 All of Delany's nonfiction writings advert to God's directive presence in human history. The following is typical: "God surely is in the work . . . who rules and presides over the destiny of nations" (“Political Aspect of the Colored People,” in Levine, 290).
Most significantly, the decision brings Lieutenant Augustus Seeley and Miss Cornelia Woodward into the action.

That these events unfold in a church is itself doubly significant, since Blake portrays white religion in America as an engine of the slave power. But Blake, of course, is committed to a religion of freedom, whose power and agency are expressed in the plot of the story, which is designed by Delany, not by God.

Natural scenes and references recur in Blake to reinforce this view of the meaning of Nature—as when Delany, quoting the poet Joel Barlow, notes that “Equality of rights is Nature’s plan” (Chapter LXX).

For Delany, while Canada West was somewhere out of the world, and a place of refuge he himself fled to in 1856, it was not far enough. He explicitly commented critically on its close ties to the United States (see Condition, “The Canadas,” chap. 19), and after Dred Scott he was definitely “bound away.” See also Winfried Siemerling, The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past (Montreal: McGill-Queens, 2015), 131.


Delany’s wicked and witty reference to John Brown as “Uncle” suggests his very different view of the Uncle Tom figure. The “Uncle” reference occurs in a letter that Delany wrote to John Kagi (Brown’s associate) a month before Delany helped Brown organize his convention in May 1858, by which time Delany was already laying plans for what would become his Niger Valley expedition. In the letter, Delany wrote that he was “looking and expecting to see something of ‘Uncle’s’ movements in the papers” (Sterling, Making of an Afro-American, 175). Useful accounts of the events from May through September 1859 are in Frank A. Rollin [Frances A. Rollin], Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1868): 83–95; Ullman, Martin R. Delany, 195–200; and Sterling, Making of an Afro-American, 167–175. For most of his life Delany saw Liberia and the American Colonization Society as schemes concocted by nonviolent whites who might well be called, after Stowe, Uncle Johns. See also Hannah Geffert, “They Heard his Call: The Local Black Community’s Involvement in the Raid on Harpers Ferry,” in Peggy A. Russo and Paul Finkelman, eds., Terrible Swift Sword: The Legacy of John Brown (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 23–45, esp. 26–29.

I strongly suspect that Delany was induced to his act of reimagining by the changed circumstances he saw in Cuba between the La Escalera executions carried out by Captain-General O’Donnell—that “monster,” as Delany called him—and the reforms that were introduced in the 1850s by the succeeding captain-generals, Juan González de la Pezuela and José Gutiérrez de la Concha. Not least interesting is the fact that, in the imaginary Blake narrative, the adventurer Narcisco Lopez is executed by the Spanish authorities at the end of Chapter LXXIII. In historical fact, he was executed in 1851. Captain-General Alcora is not a stand-in for O’Donnell but, as his name suggests, for Federico de Roncali, first Count of Alcoy, who began introducing reforms and resisting American annexationists in his years as captain-general (1848–1850).

See Byron’s “Detached Thoughts,” no. 84 (The Works of Lord Byron. Letters and Journals, ed. Rowland E. Prothero [London: John Murray, 1904], 5:451). See also Lincoln’s brief note of 1858 on democracy, which Byron’s remark may well have influenced: “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master” (Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, ed. Roy P. Basler [New Brunswick, N J: Rutgers University Press, 1963], 2132).
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32 “Annexation of Cuba,” in Levine, 163–164.

33 Brown wanted a formal ratification of his “Provisional Constitution for the Oppressed People of the United States.” The document laid out a plan for guerrilla insurrection and the establishment of an independent political organization within areas of the United States that Brown and his army would forcibly liberate from the Slave Power.

34 Particularly notable, so far as Blake is concerned, was an exchange Delany had during the May 1858 convention with an ex-slave who objected to an article in Brown’s Provisional Constitution. It explicitly abjured any plan to dissolve the union or overthrow any government, federal or state. The man “protested that he owed no allegiance to the Stars and Stripes.” Both Brown and Delany defended the article, however, and Delany’s rationale is illuminating: “The independent community that Captain Brown proposes . . . will be similar to the Cherokee Nation of Indians or the Mormons in Utah Territory” (see Sterling, *Making of an African American,* 172). African emigration, Delany’s chief interest for many years, and certainly in 1859–1860, seemed to him no more incompatible with armed insurrection on the American continent than it was with the Haitian Revolution, or than it would be with any other means, say in Cuba, so long as the chief end, black freedom, was the result.
