

## The Specter of Conspiracy in Martin Delany's *Blake*

With his serialized novel *Blake* (1859-62), Martin Robison Delany carried the message of militant revolution into a discourse dominated by the often more temperate and sentimental approaches favored by his contemporaries Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe. However, *Blake's* popular reception was disappointing, certainly due to many complicated contributing factors, not least of which were its promotion of black insurrection and its disjointed publication at a time when much of Delany's prospective black audience had turned their attention to the possibility of emancipation encouraged by the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Despite Delany's efforts, *Blake* would not move quickly from serialization to publication in book form, as would the much-lauded *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Delany's representation of organized, violent resistance would fade into virtual obscurity until Floyd J. Miller's 1970 reprint of the extant chapters in novel form.

Upon its re-release, *Blake* was again received by audiences wary of its radical message, which remained so even in the 1970s, despite the fact that the novel's central image of slave revolt was no longer immediately significant. Skeptical critics like John Zeugner both lamented Delany's literary skills and compared him to representative "recent militants" James Baldwin, Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael. Zeugner credits the novel as representing "the birth of the black militant position, at least in fictional presentation," and yet provides a narrow reading almost entirely focused on the violence in the novel (102). Zeugner's one allowance is that Delany maintains a consistency of position in this novel that is not present in his other published works, identifying the violence of insurrection as the central and surprisingly consistent message of the novel (98). However, violence serves a secondary rather than central function in *Blake*, presented as a lamentable but ultimately embraceable response to the betrayal of African American human rights and as a means to an end rather than as a discrete solution. Zeugner's argument that "[v]iolence is the essential message Henry carries from plantation to plantation, as he imparts his 'secrets' and builds an insurrectionary organization" (99) is an assumption that overlooks the possibility that this community-building secrecy is, in and of itself, the central and consistent insurrectionary message of the novel. If, as Roger W. Hite has claimed, Delany's novel functions as "artistic support" (194) for his political views, then the novel's apparent literary shortcomings, especially its ostensible vagaries of plot, can be read instead as a formal reflection of its politics of secrecy.

Recent critics have looked more deeply at the implications of the historical context in which Delany produced *Blake*, and have found it to be both timely and perceptive. Eric Sundquist argues that "in its narrative inconclusion, *Blake* is a most appropriate final account of New World Slavery—and of the antebellum world of slaves and masters alike—at the moment of its revolutionary cataclysm" (221). Patricia Okker evaluates Delany's serialized novel as an important text both for its timely "engagement with the slave trade" and for its literary distinction in depicting the slave trade as "global and systemic" as well as "local and personal" (104). John Ernest goes so far as to suggest that Delany was something of a trickster who "devoted the narrative above all to a determined mystery," a claim that brings to mind the many apparent contradictions of Delany himself (*Resistance and Reformation* 111).

Employed at different times in his life as “journalist, editor, doctor, scientist, judge, soldier, inventor, customs inspector, orator, politician, and novelist” (Gilroy 19), Delany was an enigmatic personality, volatile and elusive.

By the time of *Blake*'s original publication, increasing sectional animosity, rumors of aggressive abolitionism, and images of corrupted slaves turning against their masters had contributed to a climate of fear and paranoia among slaveholders in the South. In *Blake*, Delany capitalizes on this fear through the suggestion of the unthinkable, that blacks had a distinct culture of their own and an organized network of communication beyond the plantation home. I would like to suggest that Delany's approach to the novel was informed by his belief that the threat of black community was more frightening to whites than the threat of black violence, because community among blacks, both locally and on a national scale, fundamentally undermined the system of slavery by creating a place, albeit unsteady, where slaves could see themselves as something more than “socially dead” (Patterson 38), and with capital and resources for the struggle ahead. Communities, as Saidiya Hartman observes, are “not expressions of an a priori unity,” but must be enacted (60). In *Blake*, black community is enacted through plotting, spreading, or protecting the knowledge of black conspiracy, even and especially maintaining the illusion of conspiracy where there is none. Through *Blake*, Delany exploits white fear of black conspiracy to promote his vision of a unified black community.

### Conspiracy as Threat and Threat as Conspiracy

The impending revolt that Blake has been working to organize throughout the novel never materializes, at least not in the extant chapters. There is, of course, the question of whether Delany wrote additional chapters, including an alternative ending, that did not survive.<sup>3</sup> The available text of *Blake* begins with the sale of the title character's wife from their home plantation in Natchez, Mississippi, despite previous promises of her safety, while Blake is away on business for the master. Upon learning of his master's treachery, Blake renounces the bonds of slavery, escapes, and travels throughout the Southern states, planting the seeds for his widespread slave revolt. During his travels, Blake both extends and relies upon an already established system of communication among slaves in distant parts of the country. Once he has made his rounds in the slave states, Blake removes to Cuba, recovers his wife, and continues to gather his forces in Cuba. From Cuba, he travels to Africa and back on a slaver, as the tension supplied by the looming revolt builds. Ever suspicious, white slaveholders interpret any suggestion of slave conspiracy as credible threat. While several local incidents occur, mostly incited by paranoid whites, the larger culmination of transnational synchronized violent resistance we are expecting is never realized.

Whether or not an alternative ending does exist, conspiracy is the operative word, inseparable from both the community it creates and the violence portended by the very existence of a transnational black community of resistance, including those both slave and free. The threat of organized black violence Delany so painstakingly establishes in *Blake* is not an empty one, yet the realized violence of revolt is a consequence of Delany's community rather than the foundation on which community is built. In other words, the illusion of conspiracy is not less valuable in terms of creating and sustaining community if the violence it has threatened is finally executed; instead, maintenance of the illusion and the community it creates must exist before any successful unified action can occur. Of *Blake*, Ernest observes: “Delany could imagine a community not yet realized, and in that way formulate an

ideological map of destiny, gathering together a fragmented community under the banner of revolutionary resistance to the mechanisms and assumptions of a white supremacist culture" (*Liberation Historiography* 131). The projected revolt itself is a mere dot on the map of Delany's destiny. The vision of community he crafts in *Blake* is more than the creation of an insurrectionary army; it is the foundation for an autonomous black nation sustainable beyond emancipation and beyond any one instance, however grand, of revolutionary violence.

When Delany turned to writing *Blake*, arguably in the early to mid-1850s, the country's sectional divisions, first manifest in what David Grimsted terms "[t]he sectional crisis of 1835," had reached a second point of urgency in anticipation of the Civil War (13). Northerners, even those opposed to abolitionism, had had enough of the proslavery South's bullying of those who would not explicitly support Southerners' rights as slaveholders. Moderate Northerners responded, if not to the immorality of slavery, to the attempted violation of their own right to decide for themselves. Proslavery forces had initiated a reign of terror, mob violence, and forced expulsion in Kansas, against which Free-Staters retaliated, creating a high-profile and symbolic battle of wills that would eventually end in Free-State victory in 1857. As violent attacks against abolitionists, their property, and their presses increased in both sections of the country, so did anti-slavery resistance. Proslavery factions interpreted this resistance as the work of abolitionists, whom they also suspected of conspiring with and inciting slaves to revolt. The white paranoia Delany fashions and manipulates within his novel reflects the dominant contemporary paranoia of the Slave Power conspiracy and its inverse, a result of "earlier images of subversion [that] took on sharper relief in the 1850s and became reified as two supremely menacing forces" (D. Davis 19).<sup>4</sup>

A well read journalist and politically active writer, Delany would undoubtedly have known of the increasing and arbitrary attacks on suspected abolitionists in the Southern states, as well as Southern insurrection panics, in which whites instrumented extralegal violence against blacks suspected of conspiring to revolt. Such panics were spurred by actual uprisings like Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion in Southampton, Virginia; abolition mailings, purportedly including David Walker's *Appeal* (1829); and anxiety about outsiders, among other things. Yet all insurrection panics exaggerated or concocted facts based on white fantasies of black violence either founded on genuine fear, mass hysteria, or willful ignorance. Confessions and evidence against other blacks were obtained by severely whipping and beating the accused, for, "[h]aving begun killing, citizens of the area set out to prove a plot" (Grimsted 139). This sadistic reversal of any logical sequence of events would not have escaped Delany's attention.

Delany acutely dramatizes white manipulation of both blacks and other whites and of information, in order to prove the existence of an insurrectionary plot. He embellishes recent historical accounts to illustrate the prominent role of whites in creating and enabling insurrection panic to produce the insurrection. One scene in *Blake* bears a striking resemblance to Grimsted's account of an 1835 insurrection scare in Livingston, Mississippi, in which a white woman, Madam Lathan, supposedly overhears a slave woman discussing the killing of a white child. Lathan keeps the information to herself for almost two weeks. No immediate action was taken in Livingston, but eventually, after whipping a confession of sorts out of one slave, "the mob more efficiently proved insurrection" and began hanging other slaves as well as several white men accused of conspiracy (Grimsted 145). In Delany's novel, we see a remarkably similar episode in which American proslavery forces in Cuba claim to have "discovered in the plot" (296) a coming insurrection by black slaves on a nearby plantation. The report is substantiated only by a planter's wife's raving of her own part in the supposed rebellion. What is dramatically different in Delany's account is the obvious insanity of the planter's wife, who "had doubtless from

impressions made upon her mind by the reality, become a maniac" and who is suffering hallucinations of "black ghosts," as Count Alcora calls them (297). While the Americans want Alcora to send troops, he declines: "So frequent were these complaints to the Captain General that he often gave them a summary dismissal," Delany tells us in a footnote (297).

In *Blake*, as in Livingston, information at first ignored or doubted is later reconstituted when the time is most opportune. Angered by Alcora's refusal, the Americans ply "a stupid, demented slave" with liquor and "dreadful tales of horror" before

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they loose him on the blacks' ball on the night of King's Day. The abused slave is ushered into the hall, screaming of blood and calling for the Negroes to rise, and then is forced out into the street by the ball's attendees (302-03). The Americans' plot is, of course, successful; the National Guard is deployed, the city is thrown into a frenzy, the screaming slave is shot, and "[a]rrrests were continued during the night, with reports most extravagant" (303). Delany's description of the resulting mayhem may at first appear wholly exaggerated, but his embellishment, when compared with recent historical accounts of similar situations, is cleverly calculated.

Panic in the wake of the distribution of David Walker's *Appeal* provides an especially convincing example of white fear of forceful organized resistance, both physical and rhetorical, as the depth and breadth of the white response significantly overshadowed the abstract violence of Walker's text. Despite a lack of substantiated physical violence, North Carolina passed new laws intensifying punishments, further restricting gatherings of slaves and free blacks, and prohibiting literacy among slaves, including reading of the Bible (Grimsted 139). Southern whites also passed new laws limiting the mobility and authorizing imprisonment of free black mariners (Hinks xl). Free or runaway blacks, including those living in the maroon communities of Virginia and North Carolina, posed a special threat to the fiction of docility and contentment among those still enslaved and were accordingly dealt special punishments: "When such outliers—as they were called—were captured, the most infamous were often summarily executed, after which their severed heads were placed on long poles that were displayed prominently on a point of land directly across the Cape Fear River from the town's main wharves, brazenly called 'Nigger Head Point' by locals" (Hinks xviii). The white community responded to Walker's manifesto with the fear that the blacks in their areas, duly inspired by the common experience of hearing the tract and moved to solidarity, would become impassioned and find strength in unity that they had not yet realized. The immediate white response was to separate blacks from their existing or potential communities, whether through legal channels or with intimidation and extralegal violence. That the predominant white response to Walker's *Appeal* was often as brutal and expansive as it might have been to a physical act of violence or to a specific (if imagined) threat suggests that the possibility of an organized black community of resistance trumped or at least rivaled physical violence in terms of generating fear among whites.

Maroon communities, like those sought out for punishment in the wake of insurrection panics following the distribution of Walker's *Appeal* and Turner's uprising, represented a powerful and continuous source of white fear primarily because of their ability to organize and maintain their own separatist communities. In *Blake*, Delany connects his revolutionary hero with Turner, Vesey, Prosser, and the patriots

of the successful Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) through Henry's association with Gamby Gholar and Maudy Gamus, leaders of the maroon communities, High Conjurers, and "old confederates of the noted Nat Turner," whom Henry meets during his travels through Virginia's legendary Great Dismal Swamp (112). As Sundquist suggests, "Delany recognized that maroon communities represented one of the most significant threats to planters—simply by encouraging other slaves to run away, by staging periodic raids on plantation supplies and robbing whites, or by more openly engaging in violent uprising" (195-96). These American maroon communities are further reminiscent of the original maroon societies of San Domingo, "on the edges of plantations, or in the towns, which had helped sustain a culture of autonomy and the networks that connected various plantations" (Dubois 55). This autonomy and network structure embodied by maroon communities represented both what white slaveholders most feared and what Delany most wanted to convey through the character of Henry Blake. Henry's experience in the Great Dismal Swamp literally and figuratively gives him power to embrace his mission as a great and authentic patriot leader, and at the same time, associates him and his mission with the most elusive and therefore most ominous element of the Haitian Revolution.

In *Blake*, white fear of black conspiracy is more than a side effect of black community; it is the very basis on which that community is formed. The suggestion of a separate and unknowable culture among blacks, as well as the organization, communication, and potential for action implied therein, creates the most resounding threat to white supremacy. In *Blake*, Delany takes his cue from the white method of staging and producing slave insurrections and manipulates the interdependency of the oppressed and oppressor to enact a unified black community defined by its opposition to slavery. Hartman describes the local communities created by African American slaves as groups "belonging together in terms other than those defined by one's status as property, will-less object, and the not-quite-human" (61). Accordingly, blacks in Delany's novel come together through their commitment to the appearance of conspiracy, whether or not one actually exists.

## Toward Community

Delany's dedication to creating a coherent African American community long predates his foray into fiction with *Blake*. In his earlier political writings, emigration tracts, and discussions of Freemasonry, Delany's arguments consistently espouse his separatist philosophy and his belief in a distinct African American culture, not separate from but part of a larger black nation. In both *Blake* and in his better known political writing, Delany would reach far beyond the goal of emancipation, asserting in his most representative work, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852), that even free blacks "occup[ied] the very same position politically, religiously, civilly and socially" as their brothers and sisters in bondage (14). While Delany's proposals would vary and at times appear contradictory, his vision of black elevation always rested on a commitment to African American communal unity.

In his speech to the 1854 National Emigration Convention of Colored Men, "Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent," Delany's rhetoric pronounces reconciliation between blacks and whites in America impossible when he observes that "[t]he rights of no oppressed people have ever yet been obtained by a voluntary act of justice on the part of the oppressors" (269). Delany's hostile tone implies that these rights are to be obtained instead by force, although his

ostensible argument in this speech is for emigration to Central and South America. While advocating violence only indirectly, he presents insurrection as the only alternative to emigration. Even free blacks in America were de facto slaves, and Delany pointedly reminds them that "the first great modern Bill of Rights was obtained only by a force of arms; a resistance of the people against the injustice and intolerance of their rulers" (270). For African Americans, to submit to the apparent benevolence of white Americans, to believe that one day blacks might be equal to whites in America, was to continue to live in degradation and to condemn their children to the same future. Rather than insurrection or emigration, the ultimate goal for Delany is a cohesive separatist community prepared to command its own destiny.

Delany argues more consistently for emigration in *Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party* (1861), in which he envisions African American emigration to Africa (the "fatherland") as an opportunity and a responsibility to fight American slavery by attacking the source, the African slave trade. In addition, he views Africa as a place where he can enact the sort of black elevation that he desired in the United States. Consequently, the "civilizing" effects of black Americans on Africans would uplift the natives as well: "Of what avail, then, is advanced intelligence to the African without improved social relations—acquirements and refinement without an opportunity of a practical application of them—society in which they are appreciated?" (349). In *Official Report*, an African colony that could compete in the global economy becomes the seat of Delany's black nationalist vision, a place where African Americans could achieve "the possession of territorial domain, the blessings of a national education, and the indisputable right of self-government," none of which he, at least at this point, considered possible in the United States (351). Both *Official Report* and "Political Destiny" neglect to fully consider the implications of Delany's colonization plans for South American or African natives, but both texts indicate Delany's seriousness and continued interest in the potential benefits of African American emigration.

The undercurrent of violence in "Political Destiny" is not apparent in *Official Report*. However, Delany's association with John Brown in the months before his trip to Africa, and his further exploration of violent resistance in *Blake* indicate that he had not altogether abandoned insurrection as an option. In May of 1858, just nine months before the first chapters of *Blake* appeared in the *Anglo-African* in January 1859, he met several times with John Brown in Canada at Brown's request, once as chair of a secret convention in support of Brown's plans to organize and lead slaves in rebellion (Levine, *Identity* 178). Delany's relationship with Brown, and, by association, with Henry Highland Garnet, suggests that he also seriously considered and even openly favored violent insurrection as a means of anti-slavery revolution. Garnet, like Brown, saw the need for militant resistance and the impotence of "moral means" (*Minutes* 13). Delany's contention in *Blake*, invoking 1776, that freedom is worth as much to the black man as it is to the white man echoes Garnet's 1843 address to the National Convention of Colored Citizens in Buffalo, New York, in which Garnet "advised the slaves to go to their masters and tell them they wanted their liberty, and had come to ask for it; and if the master refused it, to tell them, then we shall take it, let the consequence be what it may" (*Minutes* 13).<sup>5</sup> Both Garnet and Delany openly assert that African Americans are ready to fight and die for their freedom. Nevertheless, Delany failed to accompany Brown to Harper's Ferry in October of 1859, having left for Africa in July in pursuit of "African regeneration" (Levine, *Identity* 179), a decision that would again seem to indicate Delany's preference for emigration over insurrection, at least in the most practical of terms.

Delany seems at all times to have been open to every possibility for the advancement of his people, all of which depended on their commitment and dedication to the formation and preservation of a unified, resolute, and loyal community.

Blake's partial serialization in the *Anglo-African* in 1859 and then the appearance of the full text in the *Weekly Anglo-African* from 1861-1862 suggests that Delany was contemplating violent insurrection within the United States even as he argued the merits of African emigration. We cannot separate Delany's life or work into distinct periods of insurrectionary thought and emigrationist thought. Blake, in fact, merges Delany's two seemingly divergent passions into what Ernest calls "a reconfigured government of mind" (*Resistance* 114), a unified black community which depends neither on place—Henry Blake travels throughout the American South, to Canada, Cuba, and Africa—nor time, for, as Ernest has noted, "Delany alters and conflates historical events, recasts historical figures, and he either finished, added to, or revised portions of the novel after returning from what must have been a life-changing journey to Africa" (111). Delany's frustration with the lack of a spatial resolution through African emigration or a temporal resolution through organized violent insurrection, would have led him to seek unity through less tangible means, namely a community of conspiracy rooted in his lifelong devotion to Prince Hall Freemasonry and his signature belief in the inherent equality, if not superiority, of African Americans.

### Leadership and Secrecy

For Delany, Freemasonry offered a model for African American community that relied on dismantling and reconstructing a dominant ideology rather than physical resistance through violence or emigration. Prince Hall Freemasonry provided an alternative identity for the African American male, an ancestry with which he could identify that did not necessarily include the enslavement and degradation of his people. Instead, Freemasonry's artisanal ideal insisted that African Americans take pride in their African heritage, and even in their more recent American heritage. In this view, African American craftsmanship was not a result of the lessons of slavery but of an earlier "historical inheritance" (Wallace 195) that flourished *in spite of* American slavery. In its suggestion of a different history, Freemasonry also offered a prototype for a different future, one in which African Americans could be seen by others as well as themselves as valuable, productive members of society rather than as savages, natural slaves, or "socially dead." In *Blake*, Masonic values of secrecy and of community predicated on social relations—"a social existence outside of [the] master" (Patterson 38)—take precedence over the novel's more obvious focus on insurrection.

In emphasizing Freemasonry as a special inheritance of people of clear African descent, as he does in *The Origins and Objects of Ancient Freemasonry; Its Introduction to the United States, and Legitimacy Among Colored Men*, delivered to St. Cyprian Lodge, No. 13, of Free and Accepted Ancient York Masons on June 24, 1853, Delany highlights one of the potential limitations of Freemasonry as a model for his community of conspiracy. In the novel, Blake's transnational community is not limited by nationality, by skin color, by social or economic class, by free or slave status, as the diversity of the representative rebel guests at Madame Cordora's gathering indicates. In addition to the "leading persons," among whom are "the wife and daughter of a deceased wealthy mulatto merchant," "a wealthy young quadroon widow," "a wealthy black tobacco dealer," "his wife and daughter," "a refined wealthy mestizo lady," and "a distinguished black artist," others "of note, but humble pretensions" are accepted into the company assembled at Madame Cordora's, including "Mendi, the captive chief; and Abyssa, the trading woman of Soudan" (249).

The representative leadership of Delany's transnational black community is especially diverse, and certainly not exclusively black. Delany's support of and interest in John Brown's mission and his service as chairman at a May 8, 1858 meeting in Chatham (Levine, *Identity* 182) also indicate that Delany's vision of a community of resistance was not limited by a simple notion of race.

However, Delany is explicit about the importance of elevating "true" blacks in both his Freemasonry tract and in *Blake*. Through a dialogue between Madame Cordora and Placido in *Blake*, Delany presents an argument in which he theorizes the positive results of black elevation as the first step toward eradicating racial hierarchy altogether. The poet explains:

The whites assert their objections, not only to the blacks, but to all who have any affinity with them. . . . Now how are the mixed bloods ever to rise? The thing is plain; it requires no explanation. The instant that an equality of the blacks with the whites is admitted, we being the descendants of the two, must be acknowledged as equals of both. (261)

Placido's logic serves to reconcile Delany's apparently contradictory emphasis on black pride and purity with his multinational, multiracial vision of community in which race is secondary to allegiance. All of those gathered at Madame Cordora's gain membership in the community through their devotion to the conspiracy and their dedication to resistance rather than through their membership in any definitive racial or cultural category. Similarly, in *Origins and Objects*, Delany's argument for African authenticity is inclusive rather than exclusive: "Truly, if the African race have no legitimate claims to Masonry, then it is illegitimate to all the rest of mankind" (Levine, *Reader* 66).

The list of guests at Madame Cordora's gathering reveals a second contradiction between Delany's fictional rendering of his diverse group of rebels and Freemasonry as a model for black leadership, namely, the role of women in a system of closed fraternity. Delany's earlier claims about women and family in *The Condition* assert that "[n]o 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" (199). On one hand, I would like to suggest that this claim about women's role in the struggle for racial equality reflects a logic very similar to Placido's explanation of the role of "the descendents of Africans of unmixed blood" (260) in elevating those of mixed descent. This would seemingly situate women in an interesting position of privilege. However, this argument is problematic when compared with Delany's position that "[w]omen were to be educated but only for motherhood. The public sphere was to be the sole province of an enlightened male citizenry" (Gilroy 26). Perhaps the most satisfying answer lies not in placing women on a parallel with "unmixed" blacks but rather in considering Delany's habit of working for change through and within systems of oppression. If, in terms of black elevation, Delany is willing to use the logic and limitations of a racist society to the advantage of his people, perhaps he is also making a similar case for gender in *Blake* by working through the constraints of a patriarchal society. In order for women, the measure of a people's success, to be elevated to their full potential, the men must first be resituated socially and culturally. It remains that Delany's vision of community is often limited and problematic.

The presence of women within this secret gathering, and even more so the active role they take in the Council, ostensibly undercuts Freemasonry as a model for Delany's conspiratorial community. In *Blake*, while many women are present at this meeting of the "Grand Council," only men hold prominent leadership roles and titles in "the provisional organization" and in the "Army regulations" (256). The women present, although not titled, are recognized as "members of the Council" and are described as "seeming earnestly engaged" (257). If we take Freemasonry



strictly as fraternal order, then women are rendered outsiders, like the white slaveholding community. In Delany's formulation, the model is slightly altered; women are privy to and keepers of the secret just as are the men. Moreover, their role in the Council is not passive but active. They ask questions, challenge premises, and offer support during the meeting. The model of Freemasonry on which Delany creates his community of resistance is predicated on insider and outsider status, as is the preservation of conspiracy, whether real or imagined. In *Blake*, however, the division between insider and outsider is not determined by race or gender but by commitment to the cause and dedication to the secret. It is Free-masonry's emphasis on secrecy—and the keeping or sharing of the secret by which insider and outsider status is maintained—that Delany found most appealing.

Delany's subtle rendering of various political positions and leadership strategies in *Blake* above and beyond his seemingly incompatible interests in insurrection and emigration reflect the multiple possible political manifestations of community as resistance. The familial devotion and self-sacrifice displayed by Henry Holland in the early pages of the novel points to the possibility of manipulation of the system from within, survival by playing the expected role, as well as to an investment in the more personal, local aspects of empowerment and resistance. The separatist, secretive, and sacred resistance of the High Conjurers with whom Henry communes and by whom he is inducted, secluded in Virginia's Great Dismal Swamp, points to a tradition of historical patriotism manifest in the legacies of mythical revolutionary leaders Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and Gabriel Prosser, to an investment in a distinct African American folk culture. Later in the novel, Blake's methods are hyper-organized, reminiscent of military or paramilitary activity, with an emphasis on carefully gathering forces and waiting for the proper time to rise—all the while living above ground in the midst of the dominant culture. Blake's initial escape to Canada and his voluntary removal of his family to Cuba reflect an apparently conflicted interest in emigration within the Americas, while the pervasive American presence and scenes of violence and discrimination against free blacks in Cuba anticipate Jim Crow and render the success of such a solution unlikely. Blake's multiple and significant social transformations belie the apparent incoherence of Delany's multiple political interests.

As the above examples suggest, Delany's local community and broader nation operate by playing with and against various political positions and possibilities. His performative mode is a matter of knowing how to operate in a complex ideological field rather than how to come up with a clear ideological position. Ernest's analysis of the *Anglo-African Magazine* as a "multivocal forum" in which writers "could respond to the ideological incoherence of the dominant culture" by expressing their multiple political and philosophical viewpoints (*Liberation Historiography* 313), offers a solid historical and textual basis through which we can read *Blake* as well, as it is a forum representative of Delany's position within the conversation. The magazine's editors and authors, primarily Northern black activists and white abolitionists, endeavored to make sense of the insensible world around them and to "both reflect and create community—reflect it in its present condition, and create it on the principles that would lead to its liberation from a system of oppression" (Ernest, *Liberation Historiography* 321). Delany in *Blake* represents the status quo, a black American South enslaved and oppressed by a dominant white community. Delany's idea of community recognizes and exploits, to use Ernest's term, the "mutually contingent relation-[ship]" (329) between blacks and whites by playing on the fears of white slaveholders. His community is not devoted to any one political position but rather to the specter of conspiracy.

That Delany withholds information about Blake's activities and the ostensible impending insurrection from his reading audience is in keeping with his dedication to Masonry and the value of secrecy. At the close of *Origins and Objects*, Delany

stops himself, as he is detailing the African origins of Freemasonry, from revealing too much:

Was it not Africa that gave birth to Euclid, the master geometrician of the world? and was it not in consequence of a twenty-five years' residence in Africa that the great Pythagoras was enabled to discover that key problem in geometry—the forty-seventh problem of Euclid—without which Masonry would be incomplete? Must I hesitate to tell the world that, as applied to Masonry, the word—*Eureka*—was first exclaimed in Africa? But—there! I have revealed the Masonic *secret*, and *must stop!* (67)

The keepers of the secret—here Delany and those already privy to the information he wields—are united in both the valuable knowledge that they possess and in the act of preserving that knowledge for a select audience loyal to the cause. “Masons, Brethren, Companions and Sir Knights,” Delany continues, “hoping that for this disclosure, by a slip of the tongue, you will forgive me—as I may have made the world much wiser—I now commit you and our cause to the care and keeping of the Grand Master of the Universe” (67). In this last comment, Delany’s slip of the tongue is deliberate. He must reveal a certain amount of information to those outside of the group to make his point effective, but he must control the distribution of that information and stop before he reveals too much. Here Delany is speaking in a way that is meant to be overheard by an implicit secondary audience, beyond the Masonic community and beyond the African American community. The implication is exclusionary—that there is more to know and be known, but this knowledge remains beyond the reach of those outside of the fold. Controlled secrecy is an effective tool if the secret remains both desirable and preserved, a delicate balance of which Delany was clearly aware.

The coherence of Blake’s militant movement is less dependent on the actual realization of the violence than on a community *capable* of realizing the violence they portend, on a community both able and willing to kill their enemies. In terms of Blake’s community of conspiracy, the fictional presentation of this militant and unified population anticipates Phillip Brian Harper’s analysis of Black Arts poetry in the 1960s: “[I]t appears that the material is meant to be *heard* by blacks and *overheard* by whites. . . . [W]hile Black Arts poetry very likely does depend for its effect on the division of its audience along racial lines, it also achieves its maximum impact in a context in which it is understood as being *heard* directly by whites and *overheard* by blacks” (247). Similarly, Delany’s authority in *Blake* relies less on the nature of the secret knowledge his black characters possess than on the white audience’s overhearing of enough to know that an unknowable secret exists. In other words, Delany’s white audience must think they are overhearing something meant for blacks only, when instead the message has been manufactured especially for them. This functions doubly within the fictional world of the novel and in the real world of Delany’s reading audience.

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. He is able to dispose of Jesse, the cruel black driver, without any evidence of violence; Jesse is simply “missed, and never after heard of” (79). Blake’s victory over Colonel Joel Sprout’s prized dogs is equally inscrutable and heroic: “The dogs were the best animals of the kind, and quickly trailed out their game; but Henry, with a well-aimed weapon, slew each ferocious beast as it approached him, leaving them weltering in their own blood instead of feasting on his” (97). We are never privy to Blake’s methods, nor do we know how he learned these mysterious, magnificent skills. For the present-day reader as well as

the contemporary reader of the *Anglo-African Magazine*, Blake's unexplained prowess might evoke the possibility of military or paramilitary training, thereby compounding the perception that a legitimate and well planned slave conspiracy does exist, with Blake at its head. Regardless, Blake's heroism and ability to lead are predicated on mystery and secrecy, both from his enemies and from the uninitiated reader as well.

While the exclusivity and mystery of white American Masonry inspired general paranoia among the uninitiated, the degree of suspicion with which whites looked on black American Masons is less clear. In the nineteenth century, the determination of white Masons to preserve the secrecy of their organization, coupled with fears of the unknown from without, provoked a specific period of Antimasonry and a corresponding political movement from the 1820s to the 1840s, during which "Antimasons first argued that Masonry's secrecy, exclusivity, and power all made it incompatible with a republican society based on equal rights and popular sovereignty" (Bullock 281). Alternately, Loretta J. Williams suggests that generally "Black Masons have been invisible to white society, and their existence and activities have not been acknowledged by society. Only white Masons, and perhaps not many of them, have remained aware of black Freemasonry. . . . It could also be that paternalistic social attitudes blocked awareness that blacks could function on the level of abstract philosophy" (89-90). At the same time, Williams notes that investigations by white Masons into the activities of black Masons did occur, the first of which appears to have been an 1818 "inquiry into the regularity of the black organization. The committee reported that the body was clandestine, but no court action was taken" (72). Many factors, including political contests over slavery and the status of free blacks, the predominant paternalistic fiction, and issues of secrecy in general, certainly amplified where blacks were concerned, would have combined during the nineteenth century to create very complex and varied attitudes toward black American Freemasonry for those who would have been aware of its existence.

However, white American Masons' continued refusal to acknowledge black American lodges as legitimate suggests that black American Masons did indeed pose a significant threat to the social order. Masonry, symbolic of education, free-thinking, and philanthropy (Williams 10), qualities normally attributed to whites, caused so much fear and anxiety in white populations when many of the same qualities were also found among blacks at this time. Beginning with Prince Hall's successful petition to the British Masons for the initiation of the first African Lodge in 1775 (H. Davis 21), white American refusal of African American legitimacy exemplified a disconnect within the principles and practices of American democracy, microcosmically contained within the fractured fraternal order of Freemasons. Perhaps the relatively mild treatment ostensibly transgressive black lodges received from their white brethren exemplified this paradox. For white American Masons to aggressively refute black Masonry was to acknowledge its veracity; to engage in a battle, legal or otherwise, over the practices of black Masons was to open up a dialogue concerning larger cultural practices of discrimination and subjugation. Black Masonic lodges consistently sought recognition rather than assimilation, and, as Williams observes, "[a]n organized body of 'free men of color' was an anomaly in a system reaping the benefits of both the slave trade and the slave labor system" (20). Such an admission would have meant recognition not only of African Americans' right to control their own economy, labor, and spirituality, but also their ability to effectively organize themselves to do so.

In Part I of *Blake*, Delany establishes the possibility of an extensive underground network of communication among the enslaved. In Part II, Delany takes the action to Cuba, where a large community of free blacks complicates the cultural dynamics, and to Africa, where his overarching vision of a distinct transnational black culture—a new nation—begins to emerge. In the African scenes, we see the cruelties of the African slave trade and its perpetuation by African blacks, selling

their own brothers and sisters into slavery. In this context, where blacks are pitted against blacks, divided by national identity, free or slave status, and socioeconomic class, Delany's apparently contradictory political positions—in support of emigration and of insurrection—are somewhat reconciled in light of his dominant goal of unified black community. The African scenes in *Blake* dramatize Delany's arguments in *Official Report*, in which he envisions African American emigration to Africa as an opportunity and a responsibility to fight American slavery by attacking the source—the African slave trade. Delany's brand of black nationalism and leadership, as is apparent in *Blake*, involved the construction of a black nation that is not entirely or even primarily based on African heritage but on society and shared goals for the future “produced by their militant struggles against slavery” (Gilroy 28). Those shared goals are manifest in a unity wrought from the Masonic values of secrecy and community.

### Conspiracy in Black and White

As it was in America in the 1850s, paranoia is a way of life in Delany's Cuba. Despite the prevalence of false alarms and hypersensitivity, paranoia remains valuable for Delany's white characters, because, “[i]n the rhetoric of the paranoid style, slavery has always been the inevitable fate of any people who fail to heed alarms and unite against subversive enemies” (D. Davis 52). 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. Delany describes the life of a Cuban or American slaveholder as a “sleeping wake or waking sleep, a living death or tormented life” (305). These slaveholders are “most unhappy people” (305), because they live in constant fear, always distrustful of each other, of their slaves, of the free blacks in their communities. Their fear is a byproduct of their precarious power, power dependent on the smooth functioning of the system and universal adherence to the predetermined roles of dominant and dominated. The slaveholders' suspicions enhance the power of Blake's secret, and the suggestion of Blake's secret conspiracy exacerbates the slaveholders' misery.

Delany capitalizes on this rampant paranoia in *Blake* by acknowledging his own community's overt powerlessness and, therefore, their lack of need for paranoia. Because whites were *undoubtedly* conspiring against blacks to keep them enslaved and degraded, black paranoia was moot. Early in the novel, Delany's narrator observes that “slaves, in their condition, are suspicious; any evasion or seeming design at suppressing the information sought by them frequently arouses their greatest apprehension” (11). Slaves are apprehensive, watchful, and suspicious, but never paranoid, because for slaves or for free blacks in a country where blacks are routinely enslaved, fear is entirely rational. Therefore, in the world of the novel, because they already know the worst, fear of the unknown has virtually no power over slaves, while it is crippling for most slaveowners. The hope of the slave and the fear of the slaveholder are intertwined: “Of the two classes of these communities, the master and the slave, the blacks have everything to hope for and nothing to fear, since let what may take place their redemption from bondage is inevitable. They must and will be free; whilst the whites have everything to fear and nothing to hope for” (305). Embrasure of this explicit powerlessness and the complete commitment to the freedom it offers are the first steps toward the community of conspiracy Delany has conceived in *Blake*. Blake's mode of resistance, then, is the establishment and extension of an

alternative community rather than an overt violent action. Blake must establish that the foundation of the white supremacist myth is under attack, and the dominant slaveholding community will, through their own paranoia, destroy themselves from within. The central theme of the paranoid style is "the conviction that an exclusive monolithic structure has imposed a purposeful pattern on otherwise unpredictable events" (D. Davis 72). Delany's community of conspiracy is just such an exclusive monolithic structure.

In the wake of the twin parties at Count Alcora's and Madame Cordora's, we see Delany's manipulation of this theory through the actions of Count and Lady Alcora. The Alcoras begin with vague suspicions that Gondolier and Madame Cordora are involved in the plotting of an insurrection, based on Gondolier's presence at Madame Cordora's soiree, "where doubtless a grand scheme will be disclosed for a general rebellion among the Negroes" (265). It is the threat of community implied in the use of the word "soiree" to denote a gathering of sophistication and organization that first alarms Lady Alcora. The Alcoras then begin to interpret insignificant events as evidence of their suspicions. Delany's creation of this scene renders irrational and ridiculous their progression from suspicion to certainty. They are floundering against an unknown and ultimately inconceivable enemy with only their paranoia to protect them. Once Lady Alcora's suspicions have been raised, she suddenly recalls other recent happenings that support her fears. She has recently dreamed of Africa, and she now interprets her dream as a premonition warning of the coming insurrection. The Count, unconvinced, responds with "ludicrous seriousness," a phrase that mocks the entire conversation, including his own role in it, even as he scorns his wife's fears (266).

Alternately, the Count's lack of concern over Gondolier's possession of a carving knife and his reported plans to use it as a weapon against whites is evidence of Alcora's complete misconception of his own sociopolitical position and of the facts at hand. Representative of the dominant white community, Alcora cannot separate real threats from paranoid expressions, and he declares that "an idle boast about using it on the whites would not be out of place to swell his importance" (265). The Count's dismissal of Gondolier as boastful reflects Alcora's own arrogance, his certainty that he can predict the behavior and know the intentions of his supposed inferiors, even while his statement proves the opposite. Gondolier has, in fact, upon revealing his newly constructed knife in trusted company at Madame Cordora's mansion, "implied that the carving he had reference to was quite of a different kind," and he does so silently "[w]ith a significant shake of the head" (225). In fact, he does not boast at all, or even verbalize his intentions. As Levine argues, "[t]he conspiratorial fears that so seize the white imagination owe as much to the politics of Alcora as to the plottings of Blake" (*Identity* 213). The Count's paternalistic assuredness leads him to dismiss the one piece of evidence against Gondolier that has any merit at all.

In *Blake*, Delany identifies and deconstructs this tension between, on the one hand, the slaveholding community's insistence on the intrinsic inferiority of African Americans and people of color in Cuba and, on the other, this same community's implicit if unacknowledged fear that their lie will be exposed and their domination, predicated on that lie, will collapse. This is most evident in Lady Alcora's description of the "Negro chase," which reveals her absolute reliance on the stratification of Cuba's unique caste system:

Today while at the amphitheatre exhibition, I observed on the part of the colored officers of the day—those in your confidence—a recognizance of the common Negroes and mulattoes in the pavilion; and on the parade ground in the sports of the Negro chase, so soon as that part of the amusements were announced, I saw an immediate change not only in the countenances, but the conduct of all the Negroes and mulattoes present. And never before had I witnessed anything indicative of insubordination as their manner, when the chase was ordered and the hounds let loose in chase of the Negro prizes. (267)

Both Count and Lady Alcora find it strange and troubling that the "colored officers," those ostensibly loyal to the Count, as well as the implicitly free "common Negroes," would be disturbed by the sight of trained hounds hunting down defenseless black slaves for the amusement of the whites. Clearly, the Alcoras understand that the breakdown of Cuba's color caste system would prove disastrous for them, as the whites would be grossly outnumbered. Moved toward rage and vengeance by this scene, Cubans of African descent, regardless of status or skin tone, vividly recognize the artificiality and instability of the color caste system by which they are governed. That the Count is finally arrested by this information indicates his admission that the caste system is in place at least partly to create dissent among the non-whites and thus prevent the type of unified community that Blake attempts to create. The cruelty exhibited in the "Negro chase," however, is too extreme to withstand the artificial limits of the caste system. It is the type of activity that would *create* community among the oppressed rather than solidify barriers between different groups.

For Blake and for Delany, the performance of conspiracy is both the enacting of sustainable community and an exercise in deconstructing a white supremacist system of oppression and terror. On some level, the slaveholding community desires an actual violent revolt, or at least something that can be construed as a viable threat, because it is something against which they can fight and of which they can manipulate the outcome. The appearance of violent revolt offers whites the opportunity to solidify their collective power, as every revolt effectively put down or prevented seemingly reinforces the dominant power structure and exemplifies the futility of resistance, as evidenced by the history of insurrection hysteria. Unified black community, however, and the threat of insurrection contained therein, retains power despite white efforts to divide and intimidate, despite even displays of ostensible white victory and control. Ultimately, black community, as it is manifest in conspiracy, is more abstract and thus more dangerous.

Nonetheless, Delany's community of conspiracy depends on both commitment and consistency. His people must wholeheartedly embrace the hope and implicit freedom from fear derived from their shared oppression; they must be prepared and ready to act on any threat they might exert, including the shedding of white blood; and, they must maintain, as a people, a unity of purpose, over and above any internal superficial differences. The sustained tension in Delany's novel creates a sense of mystery for the reader, and it mirrors the much less pleasant sense of mystery the possibility of slave revolt once generated within antebellum white supremacist communities. More important is the ability of Delany's characters to maintain the specter of conspiracy; the associated threat of insurrection translates into the ability of an oppressed group to claim agency and responsibility for its own freedom, rather than relying on the possibility of voluntary liberation by the oppressor. Delany manipulates the system from within, finding advantage even within subjugation, and offers a model of black leadership based on the revolutionary prospects of Prince Hall Freemasonry. In *Blake*, Delany offers more than an alternative path to emancipation. His vision is of community is transcendent, and like a well kept secret, also autonomous and sustainable.

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## Notes

1. See Levine's *Identity* for a more complete discussion of the Douglass/Delany debate and reliable biographical information about Martin Delany.

2. Evidence suggests that Delany struggled to find a publisher for his novel in order to garner financial support for his 1859-1860 expedition to West Africa. In a letter to William Lloyd Garrison dated February 19, 1859, Delany exhorts Garrison to help promote publication of the novel in book form, although Thomas Hamilton, editor of the *Anglo-African Magazine*, had already begun printing part of the novel with three representative chapters in the January 1859 issue. These chapters,

"The Fugitives," "The Pursuit," and "The Attack, Resistance, Arrest," are chapters 28-30 in the *Anglo-African* and appear as 29-31 in Miller's reprint. Hamilton then published most of Part I, beginning with Chapter 1 in February of 1859. Levine suggests that at this time Delany was "despairing at the hope of finding a commercial publisher for a novel of black insurrectionism" (*Identity* 178-79). For the full text of Delany's letter to Garrison, see Levine, *Reader* 295-96. The full novel was later printed in the *Weekly Anglo-African* from November 1861 to May 1862.

3. In his letter to Garrison dated February 19, 1859, Delany suggests that the novel "is written in Parts 2, pp. about 550" (Levine, *Reader* 296). Scholars have estimated that the complete novel includes a total of eighty chapters. Miller's reprint contains the first seventy-four of those chapters, and he speculates that approximately six more chapters have not been recovered, along with the "first four issues of the *Weekly Anglo-African* of May, 1862," in which they were probably printed (ix).

4. The term "Slave Power" was used contemporaneously in the nineteenth century to describe political conspiracy on the part of slaveowners. As Smith observes in his introduction to Cairnes's *The Slave Power: Its Character, Career, and Probable Designs*, "Cairnes and other contemporaries used the term 'Slave Power' as shorthand to describe an actual Southern ascendancy in the federal government" (li). The Fugitive Slave Law (1850) and the Dred Scott decision (1856) were often cited by abolitionists as evidence of the Slave Power's success.

5. Garnet's Address and its reception are summarized in the *Minutes*, from which I quote here. The Address was not reprinted in full because it was not adopted by the Convention, as Garnet had hoped. Frederick Douglass, among others, vocally opposed Garnet: "Mr. Douglass said, that would lead to an insurrection, and we were called upon to avoid such a catastrophe [*sic*]. He wanted emancipation in a better way, and he expected to have it" (*Minutes* 13). The full text of Garnet's address is available online via Project Gutenberg in Garnet's 1848 edition of David Walker's *Appeal*.

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