“LOOSE” BUT NOT FREE: POSTCOLONIAL AMBIVALENCE AND AMBIGUITY IN MARTIN R. DELANY’S *BLAKE*

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ABSTRACT

Martin Delany’s novel *Blake* depicts international resistance to the slave trade and colonial power, as well as the pursuit of liberation for black people in the US. It is also characterized by ambivalence and ambiguity, which are also present in the author’s life and historical context. Through postcolonial critique and historical insights into the authors life and milieu, I read the novel through its ambivalence—as advancing both anti-colonial ideas and colonial ideas—and its ambiguity, which results in a text that is highly open to interpretation, anticipation, and speculation.

INDEX WORDS: literary criticism; American literature; Martin Delany; postcolonial criticism; ambivalence; ambiguity

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As a storm rages during the Middle Passage, the slave ship *Vulture* is riven by conflict within. Distracted by the storm and struggling to keep the ship afloat, the officers are unable attend to the enslaved people below, who release each other "from their fetters" and arm themselves (*Blake* 236). A young midshipman catches a glimpse of the leader of the slave revolt in a flash of lighting and is terrified by the sight.

> "You don't understand me sir, the negroes, the negroes are—"
>
> "What?"
>
> "Loose!" (*Blake* 237)

Martin Delany's *Blake: Or, The Huts of America* can largely be understood through this central image. A group of oppressed black people, distributed across the nations of the world, lie "below" the colonial power structure and political system. They are unshackled by a "master spirit," prepared for revolt (*Blake* 236). In the words of midshipman Spencer, they are "loose," but they are not yet free. Their status is ambivalent, and that ambivalence recurs throughout the novel. The would-be slave revolt aboard the *Vulture* is interrupted by their arrival in Cuba, and the plotted general revolution of people of color in Havana is interrupted by the historical loss of *Blake*'s final chapter. These interruptions generate ambiguity, which characterizes the aesthetic of the novel.

Blake depicts a quest for the liberation for black people. That quest is often frustrated, often deferred, and ultimately unresolved; but in its progress, in how the novel investigates and

explores the conditions of liberation, it offers potential. The novel details the organization and leadership of a transnational slave revolt that seeks to strike at the heart of colonial power. I read this novel through postcolonial theory as well as an appreciation of the novel's historical context, finding in its liberatory theology and cultural symbolism powerful anti-colonial ideas. At the same time, *Blake* doesn't neatly fit in the box of anti-colonialism. In its depictions of the conditions and means of liberation it is profoundly ambivalent, and the political context of its writing is equally characterized by ambivalence. Ultimately, I argue for an appreciation of that essential ambivalence to Delany and *Blake*, and the centrality of ambiguity to interpreting the novel.

With ambiguity, I am describing a literary effect, following William Empson, that includes any "verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (1). I am interested in how Delany's novel consistently, persistently, "gives room" for its reader, opens itself up to possibility. In this, I am shifting the focus from individual-word- and line-level authorial choice, Empson's subject, to nuances in plot and dialogue. I find Empson's fifth type of ambiguity resonant in describing *Blake*: a type that "occurs when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing, or not holding it all in his mind at once, so that, for instance, there is a simile which applies to nothing exactly, but lies half-way between two things when the author is moving from one to the other," summed up in the word "blurring" (155, 171). This emphasis on a moment of transition, on a meaning that lies in the interstices between items in a sequence, resonates with both the specific plot elements of *Blake*—in which characters continually move in and out of locations, states of being, and identities—and its publication context as a serial novel. Jared Gardner defines the genre of the serial novel by "the unique practice and pleasures of serial production and consumption, which

invited an ongoing and interactive relationship with readers and required the consumption of the serial novel in conjunction with a range of periodical paratexts around a series of scheduled deferrals and interruptions" (290). "Deferrals and interruptions" are prominent in the plot of *Blake* and produce this interstitial ambiguity. Gardner also describes "the shared anticipation and speculation enforced by serial publication" (298). Along with the "interactive relationship" between text and reader, this "anticipation and speculation" underline the genre's openness to possibility, a quality *Blake* epitomizes. Pursuing his analysis of the fifth type of ambiguity, Empson describes a poem as "fruitful disorder" (174). "The serial novel . . . was always a messy, interactive, and cacophonous affair," writes Gardner (290). Through its productive messiness, its deferrals and refusals, *Blake* produces ambiguity, opens itself up to the "anticipation and speculation" of the reader.

By ambivalence, I am describing the state in a person or group of people of embodying contradictory (or seemingly contradictory) values or orientations. In this, I was inspired by Tunde Adeleke's description of the man in his study *Without Regard to Race*: "For the greater part of his life and career, Delany represented very complex, diverse, and *ambivalent* values and idiosyncrasies that underscore an equally complex and much more pragmatic personality, radically different from and often diametrically opposed to the militant nationalist that modern scholars highlight and exalt" (xxi; emphasis added). In this study, I am interested in political and social ambivalence: in the ways in which individuals and classes embody (or seem to embody) contradictory values, whether values they espouse or values they are assigned. I understand ambivalence as being in correspondence with ambiguity; the effect of ambiguity responds to the state of ambivalence.

I have begun with the Middle Passage, and I go on to focus mainly on the novel's latter part, set in Cuba, where the novel tackles the international, broadly colonial nature of oppression. In the second chapter, I provide a review of critical work on *Blake* as a postcolonial text, introduce the idea of postcolonial ambiguity, and connect it to the "mixed" nature of black life in the antebellum US. In the third chapter, I explore the anti-colonial dimensions of *Blake*; first, the theological dimension, arguing that Delany formulates a decolonial theology of black liberation; second, I turn to the dimension of cultural production in the novel, reading the motifs of banjo and carving knife as powerful symbols of decolonial art and resistance. In the fourth chapter, I consider the ambivalent anti-colonialism of *Blake*; the ways in which *Blake* and Delany contradict a binary decolonial reading. In the fifth chapter, I turn to the intellectual history of Delany and his time. The author's biography, far from limiting interpretation of the work, provides vital context that can enrich interpretation, through an appreciation of Delany's political thought and intellectual milieu, and the ambivalence between and within his influences. Throughout the work, I aim to account for the many kinds of ambivalence within the novel and its author. Such ambivalence punishes simplistic interpretation, but the ambiguity, the openness, that responds to it contains endless possibility and rewards speculation.

CHAPTER 2

POSTCOLONIAL AMBIVALENCE

Soon after Blake arrives in Havana, the city is caught up in a festival celebrating "the nativity of the Infanta Isabella" (242). Held at the Morro Castle, a symbol of colonial authority if there ever was one, it is overseen by flags of several nations. "Morro Castle was on this occasion decorated with all of the national colors: the Spanish Protective, merchantman, man-of-war, and Spanish flags. From the British and American flag-staff also waved their national pendants" (246). Overseen by the national symbols of a triumvirate of Spanish, British, and American flags, the colonial authorities on the island make merry. Their merriment facilitates their potential undoing, however, as a general holiday for slaves brings them together in potent proximity: "all within ten leagues of the city poured in from every direction, like the gathering of black and threatening clouds, necessary to a fearful storm, while the cannon from the castle roared in tones as thunder preceding a tempest" (246). The storm metaphor recalls the scene aboard the *Vulture*; having dissipated at sea, revolutionary potential reforms on land. In his pursuit for the conditions and means of liberation, Blake finds himself opposing the triumvirate of national powers that established, governed, and profited by the Atlantic slave trade. It is this opposition that makes *Blake* a compelling subject for postcolonial critique. As I will demonstrate in Chapters 3 and 4, colonialism is one of the several areas within the book that are ambivalent rather than positively oriented. Yet, postcolonial theory can account for ambivalence, too.

In outlining the theoretical approach of this study, some discussion of prefixes is inevitable. Seeking to explore the dimensions of *Blake* vis-à-vis colonialism, I draw from

multiple theorists and critics, who variously identify with one or other of "post" or "de"-colonial studies. However, my analysis of the novel seeks to historicize whenever possible, and advocate for an interpretation of the literary work that is both deeply rooted in the immediate historical context, and also the rich, idiosyncratic intellectual context, of its writing. This is sometimes at odds with the theoretical traditions or trends represented by the two prefixes. As Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo puts it in his important essay, the idea of "coloniality," upon which the critical project of decolonial theory increasingly relies, functions as a "neologism" that "supervenes [epistemological and political distinctions] and makes power into a supernumerary entity whose discursive articulations are severed from any objective material referents" (62). This criticism can be extended to the corollary concept in postcolonial studies of "postcoloniality." The decolonial approach, specifically, in its tendency to reify "origin, locus of enunciation and situatedness, which is in of itself a symptom of the epistemologically and politically debilitating form of identity politics characteristic of advanced liberal-capitalist political orders," is ill-suited to fully appreciating a work that reflects a promiscuous intellectual genealogy that could hardly be described as straightforwardly reflecting its immediate "origins" (Vázquez-Arroyo 59). As such, while taking advantage of the insights provided by decolonial thinkers—especially in Chapter 3, where I explore the resonance of *Blake*'s theology with liberation theology—I prefer the postcolonial nomenclature, attaching this study to a critical tradition with more room for nuance, contradiction, and hybrid forms.

Timothy Powell and Gesa Mackenthun offer an invaluable starting point in their postcolonial readings of *Blake*. Both stress the ambivalent nature of the US regarding colonialism. Powell contextualizes his literary subject in the writing, thinking, and policymaking of its time, namely, the antebellum United States. While acknowledging 1776 as a

"fundamentally important moment of postcolonial rupture," Powell marks the Monroe administration as giving rise to a "unique brand of American colonialism" (350-51). For Powell, this "brand," which he pithily calls "postcolonial colonialism," is characterized by a vigorous expansion of external colonialism through the acquisition of territory and markets, the demarcation and domination of internal groups as internal colonies, and the overarching ideological mechanism of "self-cloaking" used to justify these forms (351). Mackenthun also emphasizes the U.S.'s "ambivalent political status as a nation that was postcolonial and colonizing at the same time" (11). This "ambivalent political status" makes applying postcolonial theory to U.S. literary productions an unpopular practice. Powell and Mackenthun take different routes to contextualizing *Blake* in postcolonial terms.

Powell, whose literary reading largely focuses on the novel's stateside action, develops his theory on the notion of internal colonization, defining three sub-groups: "*economically imposed internal colonies*, *self-imposed internal colonies*, and *externally imposed internal colonies*" (353). He points to *Blake* as a literary exploration of the intersection of each of these strains of internal colonization. Mackenthun takes the alternate, even opposite path of describing colonialism as a totalizing world system. She uses "an extended definition of colonialism not merely as a bilateral relationship between mother country and colony but as a whole system of economic, political, and cultural relations based on the subjugation, exploitation, and displacement of 'primitive' peoples" (11). The antebellum U.S. is a particularly ripe area for postcolonial analysis, given its continued, tacit or covert support of the slave trade: "a serious consideration of the period before the Civil War in terms of its postcoloniality allows us to see the transnational and interhemispheric complexity of the involvement of the United States in the Atlantic colonial system" (17). Given this understanding, Mackenthun uses "postcolonial" to

refer to a "particular critical attitude of [texts] toward the political reality of colonialism, a reality from which they seek to extricate themselves" (18). This "political reality" is defined by the "Atlantic colonial system," which sees its fullest expression in the slave trade.

Powell aptly identifies and emphasizes the anti-colonial aspects of the novel, as in the "shared sense of internal colonization externally imposed" that Blake shares with the the Choctaw chief, the "self-imposed internal colony of the Dismal Swamp," and the "culturally syncretic imagined community" assembled in the revolutionary movement on Cuba (358, 359, 361). Powell asserts that Delany "effectively deconstructs" or "dismantles" the "self-cloaking mechanism" of American colonialism (358, 360). Taking up Powell's reading, it is clear that much of Delany's fictional and non-fictional work alike engages with the expansionist mode of American imperialism, as well as the status of black and indigenous peoples in the United States as internal colonies. However, Delany's work also engages with colonialism in a broader sense. In *Blake* and in his non-fiction, Delany demonstrates a sensitivity to the global currents of colonialism, especially as it relates to and through the institution of slavery.

Jeffory Clymer places *Blake* in conversation with Franklin Pierce's 1852 electoral rhetoric, which featured the President-elect openly championing expansion: "our attitude as a nation and our position on the globe render the acquisition of certain possessions not within our jurisdiction eminently important" (quoted in Clymer 711). Noting that the refitting of a merchant ship for a slave trading voyage is juxtaposed with Pierce's election in the text, Clymer concludes that "demystifying the rationales for claiming ownership in both 'certain possessions not within our jurisdiction' and in persons are closely related projects for Delany" (711). In *Blake*, oppression is not limited to the borders of the nation, and in exploring the conditions of liberation, a correspondingly larger scope is needed. The "closely related" way in which *Blake*

associates slavery and imperialism reflect Delany's concerns in the period preceding the novel's publication. In an 1855 address to the Board of Commissioners of the National Emigration Convention, Delany presented, in the context of elucidating the situation of black people in the hemisphere, an overview of nations facing colonial oppression (*A Documentary Reader* 280). From Hawaii, to Haiti, to Cuba, to Nicaragua, Delany demonstrates an acute awareness of what he terms "American cupidity," or the appetite for neo-colonial expansion that was driving US foreign policy (*A Documentary Reader* 287). Specifically, he understands this expansionism in the context of slavery and racist ideology. The annexation of Hawaii, he writes, would result "in the total extinction of every right and privilege belonging to that people, the whole being usurped and swallowed up by the impudent assumption of 'white superiority'" (*A Documentary Reader* 286). To Delany, colonialism, and more specifically US neo-colonialism, is inseparable from white supremacy. Indeed, it is the primary reason for expansion: "the sole object of the Americans in desiring a foot hold in foreign territories, is the servitude and enslavement of the African and colored races" (*A Documentary Reader* 288). US neo-colonialism, then, is first a threat to existing political sovereignty of people of color, as in Hawaii, but also promises their ultimate subjugation through the expansion of slavery.

Ambivalence and ambiguity can also be related to postcolonial theory. Homi Bhabha brought the term from psychoanalytic theory to postcolonial studies. "The discourse of post-Enlightenment English colonialism often speaks in a tongue that is forked, not false . . . mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (126). This "forked tongue" relates to a doubling or splitting effect, which Bhabha calls ambivalence, that mimicry reveals: "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess,

its difference" (126; emphasis original). This "excess or slippage" that ambivalence produces "does not merely "rupture" the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence" (127). In Bhabha's understanding, colonial subjects are "fixed" as ambivalent themselves as a result of this nature of colonial discourse.

Emily Lee clarifies Bhabha's work describing ambivalence as an experience that colonized subjects must face: "Although the colonizers' project ambivalence onto the colonized—the colonized experience the ambivalent situation. They must live in the environment of ambivalence established by those in situations of power" (58). Building on the work of Merleu-Ponty, Lee adds ambiguity to Bhabha's equation, describing it as "Ambivalence's other" (66). For Lee, ambiguity is a way that colonial subjects can avoid "passively accept[ing] such ambivalent knowledge and instead find means to play with, if not make messy, this knowledge" (66). This notion of "making messy" recalls the "messiness" and "fruitful disorder" with which I defined ambiguity in the literary sense. To Lee, ambiguity is a behavior that "resolves the contradictions that mire ambivalence" (58). In this way, ambiguity as a behavior responds to ambivalence. In literature, I suggest that ambiguity as a literary effect can also be read as a response to ambivalence in the context of its production. Drawing on postcolonial theory, postcolonial ambivalence—both the ambivalent discourse of colonial authority and the ambivalent status in which its subjects are "fixed"—can be reflected in literature, and its "other," ambiguity, responds to it in a productive or "fruitful" way. The "openness" of ambiguity, its speculative and aspirational nature, seems to counteract or ameliorate the effects of ambivalence, which forecloses possibility and relegates the colonial subject to an uncertain, "partial" experience.

Thus far, I have been describing my theoretical approach in broad terms. This is appropriate to a certain extent because *Blake* registers the broad effects of colonialism, and concerns itself with broad questions about liberation within colonial and postcolonial contexts, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 3. It is vital to keep in mind, however, the particularities of the novel's context. The immediate context of the novel, in terms of its author, his milieu, and its audience, is rooted in the experience of the free black subject in the nineteenth-century US. As Powell and Mackenthun have shown, this experience can be connected to the broader concerns of postcolonial theory, but the more our reading of the novel is rooted in the granular contexts of its production, specifically in the experience of the free black subject of the antebellum US, the greater our appreciation of its broader resonances will be. In Chapter 5, focus on Delany's political and intellectual context. For now, I will develop the idea of postcolonial ambivalence with a closer look at the experience of free black people in the antebellum US, and describe the "environment of ambivalence" they inhabited in more specific terms.

Enslaved black people in the antebellum US were denied recognition of personhood and rendered property. Personhood, however, was distinct from humanity; the concepts were split by slavery. Jeannine DeLombard clarifies this distinction in her study of African-American gallows literature, *In the Shadow of the Gallows*: "Americans had little difficulty distinguishing—in thought, if not always in words—those flesh-and-blood beings who were endowed with reason and souls (humans) from those artificial or natural bodies that incorporated a bundle of legally defined rights and responsibilities (persons)" (7). One of the only ways the personhood of an enslaved human could be acknowledged in this time was through criminality, interaction with criminal courts, and in the print culture of gallows literature, and this is the premise of DeLombard's study. The simultaneous denial of their personhood and their ultimate

answerability as persons to criminal law gave enslaved people a "mixed character": "What the Rev. James W. C. Pennington deplored in *The Fugitive Blacksmith* (1849) as 'the chattel principle, the property principle, the bill of sale principle' worked best, in fact, when slaveholders' exploitation of blacks' humanity was coordinated with legal authorities' occasional recognition of slaves' culpable personhood" (8). In this way, the black experience in the antebellum US was defined by the ambivalence caused by splitting humanity and personhood, and the vacillating, "mixed" nature of their relationship to civic life. DeLombard notes that ambivalence held true for freedmen as well:

> Liberation from property status no more ensured freedpeople's citizenship than designation as chattel nullified slaves' humanity. In roughly ascending order, acknowledgment as a human being in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America did not guarantee access to: legal personhood (as a criminal defendant, for instance); civic presence (as a participant in the public sphere); civil standing (as a signatory to a deed or contract); citizenship (as a formal member of the polity); or the franchise (as an eligible voter or office-holder). . . . Those who would transform slaves into Jacksonian men through print had to do more than "inscribe their selves . . . in language" through authentic literary production. They had to detach black personhood from the criminality in which it had become firmly rooted and graft it onto a civil personality that might, then, flower into full-blown citizenship. (10-11)

Their simultaneous status as "free," in that they were not considered property and their humanity was acknowledged, but having no political liberty and no civic rights, is a form of ambivalence specific to the experience of freed black people in the antebellum US, even as it resonates with the postcolonial ambivalence identified by Bhabha. It is a form of ambivalence that, I argue, directly informs *Blake*.

Here, I return to the scene aboard the *Vulture*, in which the captured Africans aboard the slave ship free themselves from chains. They are described as "loose," but at sea and in the hold of the ship, they do not have liberty. The scene describes a stand-off in which neither the captured Africans nor the slavers can proceed, a stand-off that is never truly resolved in the book. The ambivalence of being "loose," free from active constraint, and not at liberty, registers the ambivalence of the freedman's experience as described above. This ambivalence, a discursive ambivalence but one that, in the words of Lee, its subjects "must live in," shapes the novel. *Blake* is concerned with the struggle for liberation; not just the liberation of the body from immediate constraint or the recognition of humanity, but the kind of civic liberty that DeLombard describes. Depicting this struggle, exploring the means and conditions of liberation, sometimes places *Blake* in opposition to colonialism, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

ANTI-COLONIAL DIMENSIONS OF *BLAKE*

Delany's Theology of Liberation

"What's religion to me?" asks Blake, a moment after his introduction in the novel (17). The rhetorical question is prompted by the central tragedy of the book—Blake's wife has been sold, torn from her husband and child, a loving family destroyed by the institution of slavery. This despite the Blakes nominally sharing a religion with the man responsible for this imposition; as Henry goes on to observe: "My wife is sold away from me by a man who is one of the leading members of the very church to which both she and I belong!" (*Blake* 17). Answering this question, and thereby revising and renegotiating the fundamental purposes, practices, and philosophies of Christianity, emerges as a central concern for Delany in the novel. From these first pages through the novel's abrupt conclusion, religion is given a prominent place: it is a central concern to Delany's fictional characters, and it eventually facilitates a liberatory, international slave rebellion. While the religious dimension of the work has been discussed in recent criticism, the political implications of Delany's spiritual ideas have not been fully explored.[1] The position of *Blake* within and in opposition to colonialism has been analyzed.[2] But these readings have not explored religion as an arena of this anti-colonial or decolonial element. I argue that in *Blake*, Delany formulates a theology of liberation that opposes and seeks to de-link

[1] The rhetorical and literary function of religion in the novel has been the main focus, including typological readings that see religion as providing a metaphorical framework used to enhance the legibility of fictional characters and further the didactic aims of the text. Where scholarship has examined the broader political and philosophical implications of Blake's theology, its findings have been limited within the emigrationist and nation-building political models. See McGann, Marx, Hite, Shreve, and Levine.

[2] The novel has been read as an example of American postcolonial literature and for the ways in which it advances decolonial thinking. See Powell, Henderson, Fagan, Zamalin, and Mackenthun.

from institutions of colonial power, especially the white supremacist colonial power of the antebellum United States. I contextualize the novel in Delany's history as an abolitionist lecturer and his published criticism of Northern black churches who opposed radical political action and rhetoric. I also explore the resonance of the religious element of *Blake* with more recent understandings of anti-colonial liberation theology, especially Black Theology[3]. Religion in *Blake* is more than a metaphor or rhetorical device, and it has implications that reach beyond the political project of emigrationism. In his imaginative fiction, Delany reformulated Christianity to serve as a means of liberation and decolonial thinking in ways that can illuminate past and ongoing liberatory movements.

In his study of Delany's early career as an itinerant lecturer throughout the North and contributor to the abolitionist newspaper *The North Star* in the late 1840s, Tunde Adeleke shows how Delany's formative experiences in the abolitionist movement were defined by theological and institutional conflicts with black churches, specifically surrounding the issue of providential design. While black churches in the North were a vital part of social life for their worshippers, Delany was bitterly disappointed by the cold reception they gave to the abolitionist movement. Many of these Northern churches "seemed reluctant or hesitant to endorse and propagate any activist reform measures that directly or indirectly questioned prevailing doctrinal teachings and could potentially alienate their more powerful, and still dominant, white sponsoring or 'parent' affiliates" (Adeleke 8). Central to these "prevailing doctrinal teachings" was the idea of providential design. The theology of providential design cast the suffering of black people as "constituents of a divine plan meant to better prepare them for God's Kingdom" (Adeleke 16). Many black churches in the North, troubled by the abolitionist movement's emphasis on material

[3] I am referring here not to black expressions of theology in general but in the specific sense used by Cone and Antonio.

concerns, closed their doors to Delany, who often had to lecture in private homes. Delany connected the theology of providential design to the continued influence of white religious authorities on black churches, which were "always regarded as subordinates to their white 'sponsoring' institutions" (Adeleke 19). In an 1849 column in *The North Star*, as part of a sequence of articles on "Domestic Economy," Delany notes the difference in how white practitioners engage with the notion of providential design: "Our masters have been so accustomed to teach us how to live in the world to come that they have forgotten to teach us how to live in this world, but are always very careful to teach their own children and themselves, however religious they may be, how to make a living *here*, while in this world" (emphasis original). Delany places an urgency on the need for black subjects to "live in this world," in addition to preparing for a world to come. The rejection he experienced from black churches early in his abolitionist career, and the conclusions he drew from that experience, would form the basis of the liberatory theology he puts forth in *Blake*.

Early in the novel, Blake rejects the formulation of the Christian religion that serves the interests of the slaveholders and colonists: "They use the Scriptures to make you submit, by preaching to you the texts of 'obedience to your masters' and 'standing still to see the salvation,' and now we must begin to understand the Bible so as to make it of interest to us" (*Blake* 43). This critical, utilitarian approach to religion is a striking departure from the subservient religiosity of Daddy Joe and Mammy Judy. Interpretation of the religious text becomes a crucial aspect of Blake's philosophy of liberation and a part of how it is communicated. Departing from the interpretation of the colonists and of the "old people," Blake asserts "with me, 'now is the accepted time, to-day is the day of salvation'" (*Blake* 31). In *Blake*, Delany continued the effort he began in his abolitionist newspaper work, using theological arguments to advance the cause of

liberation, and specifically critiquing the idea of passive reliance on providential design as an element that serves the purposes of the oppressors. In the newspaper, Delany carefully offers a hermeneutical argument, stressing the differing sources and audiences of the quote by Moses, on the one hand—"stand still, and see the salvation of God"—and the quote in Corinthians, on the other—"*now* is the *accepted* time" ("Domestic Economy"). He asks his readers: "Whom shall we obey, Christ or Moses— God or man?" ("Domestic Economy"). In *Blake*, through its titular character, he is free to be much bolder, stridently criticizing the "old people" and offering an unapologetically utilitarian interpretation to make the Bible "of interest to us." "Standing still to see the salvation" is recast from a passive acceptance of oppression based on the hope of external salvation to an active anticipation of participatory, liberatory action, and becomes a watchword of and symbol for the cell-based insurrectionary strategy of Blake.

Religion is not just a matter of interpretation, it is a lived institution, and in the context of slave societies and colonialism, an institution that is part and parcel of oppressive systems. The institutional aspect of religion is explored later in the novel, as Blake organizes his rebellion in Cuba. While much of the theological thematic in the book emerged from the context of Delany's experiences in Northern black churches, its continued emphasis in Catholic Cuba underscores its broadly anti-colonial thrust. In order to perform the ceremony of marriage, members of the plot are married at the Catholic "church of the Ascension" in Havana (*Blake* 280). Montego, one of the principal Cuban leaders of the revolt, lectures his African fiancée on the role of priests. "To be 'God-fearing' is to do the will of God… and these men have neglected the letter of the law 'Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.' These are the words of His divine injunction, every letter of which these men have neglected either to carry out themselves or to enforce" (*Blake* 280). The hypocrisy of these "God-fearing" priests is laid bare,

but it is not just an individual shortcoming. As one of them places a wedding ring on a finger, he describes it as "a type of our holy religion; in substance as pure as the incorruptible gold" (*Blake* 282). The irony between the notions of "purity" and "incorruptibility" of the Church and its open hypocrisy is clear. The corruption of the colonial church is further illustrated when the priests charge exorbitant prices of the group for their services, as the cook Gondolier observes: "These 'men of God' make most ungodly charges for their services; a doubloon apiece for the two little gold rings the ladies got" (*Blake* 282). The doubloons are as golden as the rings they are exchanged for, and highlighting the inequality of this exchange, and the profit derived by the priests thereby, indicates the extent of complicity in the slave economy of the Church as an international colonial institution.

As the corruption of the colonial church is laid bare, Blake develops his anti-colonial theology while preparing for revolution in Cuba. Characterizing his previous religious practice as "shadow without substance," he advocates that the oppressed "drop the religion of our oppressors and take the Scriptures for our guide and Christ as our example" (*Blake* 199). Crucially, Christianity itself is not seen as "the religion of [the] oppressors," but as something compromised by a specific interpretation and institutionalization, which can be countered by a new form of interpretation and practice. This new form takes shape later in Blake's experience on the island. Blake's "rainbow coalition" of Africans, Creole Cubans and Americans of color, both enslaved and free, is accompanied by a correspondingly diverse range of Christian denominations: Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and even Swedenborgian (*Blake* 259). How can these differences be resolved? Blake offers a radical solution:

> We have all agreed to know no sects, no denomination, and but one religion for the sake of our redemption from bondage and degradation, a faith in a common Savior as an intercessor for our sins; but one God, who is and must be our acknowledged common Father. No religion but that which brings us liberty will we know; no God but He who owns us as his children will we serve. (*Blake* 259)

Blake is advocating a specifically liberatory theology: with “that which brings us liberty," theology has a pointed orientation but is also instrumental. In rejecting “the religion of the oppressors” and formulating a new theology of liberation, Delany is attempting to decolonize the religious sphere.

The conflict between the theology of established religion and the reality of the oppressed, and Delany’s attempts to resolve that conflict in his written work, can be compared with the questions and tasks of liberation theology as it was formulated in Latin America nearly a century later. Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez describes an “imprint” left on society by “a new presence of the poor, the marginalised, and the oppressed,” an “imprint” caused by the downtrodden coming to “see themselves as subjects of their own history, as being able to take their destiny in their own hands” (21). It is this social impression that demands a response from theology; for Gutierrez, the “challenge” responded to by liberation theology comes “from the ‘non-persons,’ those who are not recognised as people by the existing social order” (28). While separated by a temporal and geographical gulf, the issues Delany responds to share some affinities with those of Gutierrez, most notably a shared concern with those classed outside of human society, and a realization of their burgeoning subjectivity. The theological challenge Delany rises to meet is that of a religion at odds with the lived experience and subjectivity of black people in the antebellum United States. In *Blake*, Delany’s protagonist declares that black

Christians "must begin to understand the Bible so as to make it of interest to us"; that is, theology—the "understanding" of the Bible— should reflect the imprint of a black social subjectivity—"us"—which aligns with Gutierrez's description of an underclass that consciously begins to take "their destiny in their own hands."

In *Blake* and in his newspaper work, Delany also emphasizes a shift in approach to the daily practice of the black Christian, epitomized in his theme of "liv[ing] in the world." He makes a distinction between "the world to come" and "this world," and calls for a new theology to take the latter as its starting point. Delany emphasizes a grounding in material reality: in space—"living *here*"—and in time—"*to-day* is the *day*." In the novel, this theme is born out in the opposition between the passive "standing still" and the active "to-day is the day of salvation." Gutierrez identifies a similar emphasis underpinning liberation theology, describing "theology," or the reasoning and discourse about the nature of faith and God, as the "second task," only to follow the first task of "practice," which is connected to serving the poor and advancing the task of liberation (29). It is practice, faith in action, Gutierrez argues, that "give[s] theology its *raison d'être*," not the other way around (29).

Latin American liberation theology is not the only form of liberation theology. Unsatisfied with the Biblical hermeneutics and theological arguments of the white supremacist, colonialist religious institutions of the Americas, Delany seeks to formulate a theology that accounts for the oppression of black people, and most importantly, informs their liberation from that oppression. Edward Antonio understands "liberation theologies" in the plural, a field of theology "marked by a wide-ranging pluralism," in which the Latin American strain, while the most recognized, is not paradigmatic (35). Antonio posits black Theology as a kind of liberation theology, one that shares affinities with other liberation theologies but diverges from them in

important ways. While black Theology shares with other liberation theologies an interest in the nature of oppression and liberation, and a devotion to ending all forms of oppression, it is also distinct in that it marks "a particular kind of discursive difference by the manner in which it inscribes race at the center of its analysis of oppression" (Antonio 41-42). For its most prominent advocate, James Cone, Black Theology "arises out of the need to articulate the significance of black presence in a hostile white world… The purpose of Black Theology is to place the actions of black people toward liberation in the Christian perspective, showing that Christ himself is participating in the black struggle for freedom" (53). The determined utilitarianism of Blake as he sets out to make Christianity "of interest to us" epitomizes Cone's notion of Black Theology making Christianity relevant "for their lives." Cone's Christ—a Christ that actively participates in liberatory struggle—offers another way to understand the theological framing of the novel. Rather than viewing the novel purely in terms of "providential design," it instead reflects a shift from a theology of "design" to one of participation—both of believer and God. In his final prayer with the rebel cell in Cuba, Blake emphasizes the active participation of God: "be our great captain, I pray thee; for it is written in thy holy word, 'the Lord is a man of war, for the Lord is his name'" (*Blake* 293). Gondolier aptly provides the counter-example: when Abyssa cries "Lord have mercy on us," his response is "Ef He don't I will!" (*Blake* 312). For Gondolier, a God who would stand idly by, behind the mandates of a "providential design" that allowed such oppression, is not a god worth following.

Blake also exemplifies the connections between Black Theology and critical discourses about/against colonialism, whether under the terms of "decolonial" or "postcolonial." Antonio adopts a definition of "the postcolonial" that encompasses a broad range of expression within and without historical, institutional colonialism: "a discursive structure of moral, political, and

religious/theological protest situated not beyond the colonial but within it" (301). Understanding postcoloniality as a discursive framework of protest or opposition to colonial power, in a way similar to contemporary use of "decoloniality," allows us to see the connection between Black Theology and anti-colonialism. Antonio identifies several "meeting places" where Black Theology and his notion of "the postcolonial" converge (304). The first is the "theological moment of slave protest," which he marks as a "fundamental source" for twentieth-century Black Theology (301). In this moment, Antonio claims, the enslaved "critically appropriated Christianity… and in the process transformed it into 'slave religion' for all human beings" (301). The second is in a tradition of "black critical social theory," a tradition in which Delany is included by name, that, in pursuit of liberation and equality, "presupposed a postcolonial order as a social ideal" (303). The third is in the "anticolonial international communities and movements of struggle and solidarity" that arose out of the aforementioned traditions (304). *Blake* represents each of these "meeting places." It promotes a pluralized, appropriative version of Christianity, as we see in Blake's injunction to "know no sects, no denomination, and but one religion," truly a "'slave religion' for all human beings." It also composes one of the many, varied, contributions Delany made to the tradition of "black critical social theory," and is distinguished by its form as a serialized novel, which provides imaginative space for these discourses to "meet." It also depicts an international community that anticipates in many ways the "movements of struggle and solidarity" of later generations.

"Formidable Instruments" of Decolonization

Continuing from his approach to religion, in which new forms opposed to the institutions and interpretations of slave society are called for, *Blake* has more to offer in the anti-colonial vein. As the conspirators gather for the first time at Madam Cordora's, the atmosphere is

described thus: “There was no parade or imitative aping, nor unmeaning pretensions observed in their doings… They were… discarding everything which distracted from their object” (*Blake* 254). In their plot to revolt against the powers of colonialism, their attitude towards the cultural expressions or behaviors of colonialism is oppositional. By rejecting “imitative aping,” Delany advocates for the abandonment, the “discarding,” of the standards, styles, and methods of the colonial power. To Delany, these elements are inherently connected to the strength and focus of the decolonial movement. If the colonial forms are to be abandoned, what should take their place? Delany offers two powerful symbols of anti-colonial resistance in two instruments: the banjo and the carving knife.

Introduced as musical accompaniment to the reception of Blake as a liberator among the group of sympathizers, the “African bango” appears in the hands of Pino Golias, the “leading amateur musician in the city,” for whom it is “the favorite instrument of his fatherland” (*Blake* 249; 253). It is immediate set in opposition to an instrument associated with the colonial power: “In solos of strains the sweetest the Spanish guitar proved but a secondary instrument compared with the touching melodies of the pathetic bango in the hands of this negro artiste” (*Blake* 253). First, the bango is better suited to the “hands” of the colonial subject, in its connection to the “fatherland.” Second, Pino Golias finds a role through this use of the instrument: that of “negro artiste.” The banjo then becomes a symbol for cultural decolonization, the work of artists and artisans that provide colonial subjects with a “melody.” The importance of this cultural decolonization is emphasized in the subsequent passage:

> This instrument, heretofore neglected and despised by the better class among them, at once became the choice and classically refined by the nearest and dearest historic reminisces among them, by an association with the evening of the great gathering from a

> seclusion of which, the momentous question of immediate redemption or an endless degradation and bondage was to be forever settled. From these associations and remembrances, the migration bango could be thenceforth be seen in the parlors and drawing rooms of all of the best families of this class of the inhabitants. (*Blake* 253)

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

In Laurent DuBois' history of the banjo, he highlights both the memorial and the synthetic qualities that the banjo unites. In its inception, which DuBois situates in the eighteenth-century plantation society of the Caribbean:

> [The banjo] became a way to connect with both the past and the present, to build a bridge of memory and recall. It welcomed different styles, generating solidarity and community through its sound. The child of the Middle Passage and the bewildering situation of exile and oppression in the plantation world, it brought together traditions of instrument making from various parts of West and Central Africa. In this way, it offered something vital to those on the plantation: it was recognizably African, an instrument capable of offering familiar melodies and rhythms, but without being clearly derived from the traditions of any single African ethnicity. It was the first African instrument. (56)

The "African bango" is African not in its authentic origin but in its synthesis of experience. It is part of an invented Africa that DuBois details; one invented for the comfort and community of the enslaved. Beyond its Caribbean roots, DuBois chronicles the instrument's use in the nineteenth-century US: "The banjo had, by the 1840s, long been rooted in many of the communities of the enslaved in North America. . . . Just as it had in the Caribbean from the

earliest days of its invention, the banjo offered a space for solidarity, to sound out the possibility of a world of freedom" (143). DuBois also notes the use of the banjo in *Blake*, and writes that Delany must have imagined "banjo music as a rebel sound that could ultimately upend the landscape of the plantation, a space usually dominated by rhythms and sound of labor" (157). From its origins in the Middle Passage and the harsh plantation life, the banjo always stood for a kind of resistance. Its "rebel sound" had the power to disrupt the plantation system. In the banjo, Delany powerfully symbolizes the importance of decolonial cultural production, made with an instrument suited to those who wield it.

Another implement is given special attention in Delany's narration of the meeting at Madam Cordora's. It is connected first to the notion of defense: the "caterer" Gondolier Gofer is offered the position of guard, and the mulatto officer Castina offers him his sword as part of the office. Gofer refuses to take it, declaring "I got a better thing than this!" (*Blake* 255). He produces a carving knife, a "formidable instrument" whose breadth is "that of the widest common carving knife" (*Blake* 255; 256). To the astonishment of his genteel companions, the lower-class Gofer designed the weapon himself: "I cut the pattern out of a barrel stave, and had the knife made to order" (*Blake* 255). As the "African bango" is preferred to the Spanish guitar, the carving knife takes precedence over the Spanish sword. Gofer comically enacts the preference, "holding out and looking at the sword, with a wag of his head" (*Blake* 255). Rather than being primarily superior due to its origin in the African "fatherland," however, the carving knife is preferred for practical reasons. Gofer designs the weapon so "that on a general rising the blacks in every house might have good weapons without suspicion" (*Blake* 255). He elaborates: "…By making a carving knife, I present something that comes in general use as a domestic and family convenience, with which every person may supply himself without suspicion, especially

the blacks, who are not only great imitators of the whites as they say we are, but also great eaters as we know ourselves to be," intelligently explained Gondolier. (*Blake* 255-56)

The reason for choosing the carving knife is eminently practical: it allows for the distribution of weapons to the widest possible group of sympathizers. But this has implications that go beyond practicality. By refusing the sword of the officers and preferring a carving knife distributed as widely as possible, and marking a lower class position, Gofer puts forward a fundamentally democratic vision of revolution, in which the instruments of decolonial violence are not controlled by a small group of elite officers but by the masses.

This carving knife, with its ability to take the place of a sword, highlights the domestic nature of violence, its proximity to "home." In this way, the carving knife in *Blake* recalls the carving knife in Samuel Otter's reading of Frank J. Webb's 1857 novel *The Garies and Their Friends*. In describing a lavish wedding supper scene, "Webb emphasizes the carving knife as weapon, furnishing it with "hilt," like a dagger or sword" (257). The carving knife is "imagined as a sword, the meat as its victim: 'you might plunge your knife to the very hilt without coming in contact with a splinter.' At this American supper, violence is not the distant, forgotten origin of civilized manners but their current incitement" (260). Otter's reading of *The Garies* intersects with *Blake* in that both novels point out the latent violence of the "common," domestic arrangement in a slave society. In Delany's novel, this underlines the notion that potential revolutionaries are just as likely to be found in the kitchen as on the shipboard.

Both instruments are vital to the revolutionary movement, although their natures are quite different. The banjo, representing cultural production, is connected to the "fatherland," emphasizing the importance of memory. The carving knife, representing material resistance, is an opportunistic creation most valuable for its practicality. The two instruments, with their

varying purposes, signs, and ideals, are unified in the purpose of decolonial revolution. At first glance, it may seem that they are suited to two types of people, two classes. After all, the role of elite "artiste" is aptly filled by Pino Golias, a surgeon who is the "most accomplished banjoist and guitarist in the city" (*Blake* 249). Gondolier Gofer, a lower-classed servant, seems suited to the dirty work of violence by his characteristic pugilism— this is the character whose threatening words end our edition of the text, after all: "Woe be unto those devils of whites, I say!" (*Blake* 313). Yet Gondolier confounds such classification by unifying both symbols in his person. He is just as apt to take up the banjo as the carving knife, as evidenced by his desire to pick it up before the "sweet strains" of Golias' playing have fairly ceased to echo: "ef you han' me that thing out here, ef I don't make 'er hum I wouldn't tell you so" (*Blake* 254). In fact, Gofer rivals the genteel Golias in musical proficiency. He is valued by his masters for "his skill on the Spanish guitar, or African bango, especially the latter instrument in which he had few, if any equals" (*Blake* 265). The distinction between Golias and Gofer dissolves, as the cleverly contradictory words of the text place them as equals in accomplishment— the "most accomplished" versus the one with "few if any rivals". Rather than restrict the vital roles of cultural production and material resistance to classes or groups of people, Gofer is valorized as the ideal revolutionary, one who can take up both carving knife and banjo as the situation requires and wield either with virtuosity.

In Gondolier Gofer, who wields both banjo and carving knife, Delany communicates the importance of cultural production in the context of anti-colonialism. The importance placed on breaking from colonial forms, epitomized by these "formidable instruments," is resonant with Fanon's work on national culture in *Wretched of the Earth*. After anti-colonial tensions rise, Fanon writes, there are "repercussions on the cultural front" (172). These repercussions result in

a radical shift within cultural production, one that expands consciousness and inspires the people to revolt:

> By imparting new meaning and dynamism to artisanship, dance, music, literature, and the oral epic, the colonized subject restructures his own perception. The world no longer seems doomed. Conditions are ripe for the inevitable confrontation. (Fanon 176)

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

In the liberatory theology that it advances, and in the symbology of the "formidable instruments" of cultural production, *Blake* contains an anti-colonial dimension. This dimension resonates with contemporary understandings of decoloniality, as explored above. Yet, for as much as the novel explores alternatives to colonial models of religion and culture, it accepts and promotes colonial models in other things. Its anti-colonialism is, rather than being fully recognizable as decolonial, ambivalent.

CHAPTER 4

BLAKE'S AMBIVALENT ANTI-COLONIALISM

As Blake's partisans gather in the home of his father in Havana, revolutionary hope is in the air: "Monday was another day of promise to the oppressed race of Cuba" (283). Today is the day that the council, chosen by the mass of oppressed people of color on the island, will decide on the character, or "policy," of the revolutionary movement. As talks progress, Blake underscores the stakes: "What say you, brethren, shall we rise against our oppressors and strike for liberty, or will we remain in degredation and bondage, entailing upon unborn millions of our progeny the insufferable miseries which our fathers endured and bequeathed to us?" (288). The response from the gathered council is unanimous: "Liberty or death!" (288). The councilors of Blake's nascent nation are consciously undertaking a liberatory struggle, a revolution. This revolution is also anti-colonial. This is underlined later in the proceedings, as Blake defines their relationship to the outside world: "Should we under such circumstances strike for liberty, it must also be for independent self government, because we have the prejudices of the mother-country and the white colonists alike to contend against" (289). Their struggle is not just for individual liberation, but national self-determination in opposition to both the colonial power of Spain and the neo-colonial power of the United States, represented by the filibusters or "white colonists." Thus far, *Blake* is legible as a decolonial text, one that advances a vision of society that diametrically opposes coloniality. Yet the movement established by proceedings of this council meeting is not wholly recognizable as a binary opposition of colonial power.

Earlier in the evening, some time is spent in broader justification of the insurrection. What emerges is a more similar to the ideology of colonialism, specifically US neo-colonialism, than it is a straightforward contradiction of it. As the deliberations are summarized, what emerges is a justification made in terms of the Monroe Doctrine and the "self-cloaking" idea of liberation through domination.

> Their justification of the issue made was on the fundamental basis of original priority, claiming that the western world had been originally peopled and possessed by the Indians—a colored race—and a part of the continent in Central America by a pure black race. This they urged gave them an indisputable right with every admixture of blood, to an equal, if not superior claim to an inheritance of the Western Hemisphere. (*Blake* 287)

Invocations of "the western world" and specifically the "Western Hemisphere" invoke Monroe directly. Delany is also repurposing the racial dimension of the "self-cloaking mechanism" through the use of an explicitly racial "claim" to ownership of the hemisphere. Thus, *Blake* does not simply "deconstruct" or "dismantle" the "self-cloaking mechanism"— to an extent, it also constructs and fortifies it. This tendency could be better understood by thinking about American "postcolonial colonial" justification in terms of ideology instead of a discrete mechanism. *Blake* may be an anti-colonial text, but its idiosyncratic anti-colonialism is not fully recognizable under the terms of decoloniality. When it comes to colonialism, *Blake* contains ambivalence.

The notion of property inheritance is an important starting point in exploring this ambivalence. The writings of John Locke, whose liberal philosophy of property rights, self-consciously connected to America and colonial expansion, found echoes in the drive to westward expansion in the early republic[4]. To Locke, property was at once the foundation of his system of

[4] See Witgen.

natural law—the right to property is the "original law of nature"—and the basis of distinguishing the European from, and thereby excluding, the indigenous American—for this law is observed only "amongst those who are counted the civilized part of mankind" (112-113). Property, for Locke, is predicated upon labor:

> God, when he gave the world in common to all mankind, commanded man also to labour, and the penury of his condition required it of him. God and his reason commanded him to subdue the earth, i.e. improve it for the benefit of life, and therein lay out something upon it that was his own, his labour. He that, in obedience to this command of God, subdued, tilled, and sowed any part of it, thereby annexed to it something that was his property, which another had no title to, nor could without injury take from him. (113-114)

Mankind, then, has a natural right to "subdue the earth," at least, parts of earth that have not already been "subdued" through some form of labor. While Locke acknowledges that mankind shares a claim in "common" to the world, by instrumentalizing his notion of "labour," he is able to strengthen the claim of one group over another. God "gave [the world] to the use of the industrious and rational (and labour was to be his title to it), not to the fancy or covetousness of the quarrelsome and contentious," or, in other words, not the lazy and irrational (114). It is the latter group, he implies, that inhabits America. To Locke, America is still in its natural state, like the world encountered by Adam and Eve: "the wild woods and uncultivated waste of America, left to nature" (116). It is "rich in land, and poor in all the comforts of life; whom nature having furnished as liberally as any other people with the materials of plenty, . . . yet, for want of improving it by labour, have not one-hundredth part of the conveniencies we enjoy" (117-118). In Locke's analysis, through their laziness and irrationality, indigenous Americans have failed to

"subdue" the land. Therefore, it remains open to subjugation to those who are industrious and rational.

In *Blake*, Delany complicates a Lockean understanding of property by introducing the idea of the "original priority" of race, and proposing a kind of continuity between American indigeneity and African diaspora, yet he still imagines the "Western Hemisphere" as in a natural, unsubjugated state, and subject to the inheritance of the worthy. This idea is expressed earlier in the novel as Blake meets the poet Placido in Havana. As the pair conclude a discussion on religion, an opposition is set between freedom of the mind and freedom of the body: "We have much yet to learn to fit us for freedom," says Placido, but Blake contradicts him: "we know enough now, and all that remains to be done, is to make ourselves free" (*Blake* 199). Bodily, material action is required, not mere intellectual activity. And the constraints against achieving liberation are not the bounds of an underdeveloped mind, but the bounds of geographical space. Alex Zamalin interprets this scene in terms of decolonization, arguing that Blake is rejecting, in Placido's statement that the black rebels have yet to be "fit for freedom," the knowledge of the colonists. In this way, "Delany decolonized freedom by unmooring it from the requirement of reasonable expectations and acculturation" and "delinking … black freedom from white reasoning" (Zamalin 28). However, if Delany advances a decolonized approach to knowledge in the first part of this passage, his approach to power is all too reliant on colonial thinking. Delany continues: "We want space for action—elbow room; and in order to obtain it, we must shove our oppressors out of the way" (*Blake* 199). This emphasis on "space," evocatively described as "elbow room," reveals that Delany's response to colonialism is based in part on the logic of expansion that undergirds colonialism itself. Missing from the equation, between "we" and "our oppressors," is any notion of indigenous sovereignty. By figuring the greater Americas as "elbow

room," and "space" that is clear for action, Blake perpetuates the colonial ideology that recognizes the Western Hemisphere as "uncultivated waste."

Delany's belief in the need for expansion, of the need for re-settlement of black people outside of the United States, is only hinted at in *Blake* in terms of "elbow room." Yet it was an explicit part of much of his early political work and writing. To Delany, at least in the antebellum period, black people could never obtain political sovereignty in the United States. In the same address to the Board of Commissioners of the National Emigration Convention cited in the first section, Delany expounds on this idea of sovereignty: "The only successful remedy for the evils we endure, is to place ourselves in a position of potency, independently of our oppressors" (*A Documentary Reader* 289). Yet in pursuing this sovereignty, this "position of potency," Delany found it necessary to adopt a colonial model.

In his 1952 non-fiction book *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, Delany explicitly connects his advocacy of emigrationism with the practice of settler colonialism: "Go with the fixed intention—as Europeans come to the United States—of cultivating the soil, entering into the mechanical operations, keeping of shops, carrying on merchandise, trading on land and water, improving property—in a word, to become the producers of the country, instead of the consumers" (187). Going to other countries as "Europeans come to the United States" is to be settlers, and necessarily to replicate the dynamics of settler colonialism, despite the political goals that animated Delany's emigrationism. According to Zamalin, Delany's "fascination with the utopian theme of discovery blinded him to the possibility of cultural imperialism" (31). More than that, by placing such emphasis on "cultivating the soil," "improving property," and by sharply delineating the "producers of the country" from "the consumers," Delany advances the Lockean justification of colonialism itself.

This becomes even more explicit in Blake. Before the rising cries of "liberty or death" at the council meeting in the Blacus family home, the justification of insurrection continues: "The whites in these regions were there by intrusion, idle consumers subsisting by imposition; whilst the blacks the legitimate inhabitants, were the industrious laborers and producers of the staple commodities and real wealth of those places" (288). In *Blake*, Delany contests Locke to a degree, marking the colonists as the true idlers, and the oppressed as the industrious, rational heirs of the world. Yet this substitution does not ultimately contradict the colonialist basis of Locke's philosophy. Delany's writings in *Condition*, and the justification for rebellion offered in *Blake*, demonstrate how Delany's anti-colonialism can be understood less as a "decolonial" philosophy binarily opposed to its "colonial" other, but a philosophy that is more ambivalent, critiquing some aspects of colonialism and advancing others.

The novel is also based on an understanding of political rights and power that does not fully diverge from the legal logic upholding US imperialism. Gregg Crane's analysis of *Blake* in comparison with Chief Justice Roger B. Taney's *Dred Scott* opinion reveals the ways in which Delany critiques, but in some ways, perpetuates, Taney's jurisprudence. Crane marks the majoritarian element of Delany's political vision: "Though differently constituted, Delany's figure of a 'homogeneous population' implies the value of consensus and cultural unity to the acceptance and enforcement of natural law in a manner similar to Taney's figure of the 'sovereign people,' whose consensus determines constitutional intent" (543). The result of this holdover, Crane writes, means that "the jurisprudential question of minority rights" goes unanswered, and put into practice, this philosophy would risk "reinstantiating the Dred Scott vision of rights as the perquisites of the powerful" (544, 547). As Crane details, Delany's critique of *Dredd Scott* in *Blake* is both novel, and in a certain sense radical (547). Yet in its majoritarian,

dominating sense, it advances a colonialist philosophy of political rights. Not only does the "elbow room" approach, with its demand for a homogenous cultural group as a basis for natural law, fail to respond to the political problems faced by minority groups within nations, it perpetuates colonial, and specifically settler colonial, ideas about political power. Nancy Shoemaker typologizes settler colonialism thus: "Large numbers of settlers claim land and become the majority." This is essentially what Delany proposes in this vein as the cure for the political ails of black Americans. When put into practice, the settlement of other nations, whether in Latin America or Africa, with such a philosophy in place would bode poorly for minority groups such a settlement would encounter.

Domination also turns inward in *Blake* and *Condition*. In his provocative critique of the novel, Robert Reid-Pharr indicts it for domination that occurs within the black population. To Reid-Pharr, Delany's conception of nation relies on making a distinction between the freedman and the enslaved: "Delany's work [in *The Condition*] involves the production of a national 'we' through comparison with an enslaved other that acts as the mirror of a heretofore invisible community" (74). In Reid-Pharr's reading, the character of Blake epitomizes the valorization of the freedman, and the elevation of free black people over the enslaved.

His adventures, however, are ones not simply of exploration but also of conquest. Blake's work is to define the contours of the new African community, but the process of this definition necessarily involves the "domestication" of many parts of Afro-America and the out and out excision of others. (78).

In Reid-Pharr's analysis, the national subject of Delany's new nation is first and foremost a freedman, masculine, and disciplined. There is little room for the currently enslaved in this formation. Women are also another "potentially unruly other" that must be disciplined (Reid-

Pharr 91). Gilroy also notes the patriarchal character of Delany's ideal polity, specifically as expressed in *Condition*. "The public sphere was to be the sole province of an enlightened male citizenry," and this for Gilroy is borne out in *Blake*, which he interprets as a "narrative of familial reconstruction" along patriarchal lines (26). I want to consider this theme of internal patriarchal domination as an extension of dominance and colonial thinking in the novel, the "conquest" and "domestication" occurring within Delany's nation as well as without.

Far from uniformly advancing a decolonial vision of alternative political forms, *Blake* displays an ambivalent anti-colonialism. In some ways *Blake* and Delany advance colonialist ideas despite their critiques. By representing the less-colonized regions of the Western Hemisphere as "elbow room," ripe for expansion, the novel rehearses Lockean justifications of colonialism. In its race-based majoritarianism, it preserves a settler colonial political philosophy. It also turns domination inward, suppressing the enslaved and women in favor of a freed, masculinized political subject. The novel's ambivalence on this and other themes repeat the ambivalence within the author's political influences and intellectual milieu, which I explore in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

DELANY'S POLITICAL CONTEXT

The act of rebellion on board the *Vulture* during the Middle Passage crossing seems to promise a violent denouement, one that would achieve either liberty or death for the enslaved combatants. With the storm raging, the uncouth American mate Royer cautiously peers into the hold, and sees the powerful Mendi prepared for battle: "Yes, there he is armed to the teeth, and all his niggers armed" (237). But the storm suddenly breaks. "Suddenly the wind changed, the clouds began to disperse, and lightning ceased to seen and heard" (238). And with the clouds, the threat of violence unaccountably dissolves as well. "The hatches being secured," the ship's crew take no further notice of their enslaved cargo, despite the fact that they are "loose" and "armed to the teeth" (238). The *Vulture* cruises into port at Matanzas without further incident, and Blake disembarks without a backward glance: "Scarcely had she landed than without waiting for the adjustment of his engagement, Blake went immediately on shore, and was soon lost among the gazing spectators who assembled on the quay . . ." (239). Nothing is said about how the armed, unfettered Africans were subdued by their captors on deck. Their sale proceeds without a hitch the next day, although the rumor of insurrection, spread by Blake and Placido, lowers the selling price, allowing "agents" of the conspiring pair to purchase them (239). The lack of resolution of this moment of powerful potential, and the abrupt, forestalled nature of its conclusion, are striking. This episode produces a pervading sense of ambiguity, one that produces more questions about what the novel ultimately says about violence and politics than answers. This ambiguity responds to the ambivalence of Delany's political context.

It would be difficult to fully account for the ideological ambivalence in *Blake* regarding colonialism without a nuanced understanding of the schools and events that formed its author's political thought. Rather than determining the interpretation of the work, such an understanding would serve as important context. The political horizons of possibility for Delany were different than those we tacitly accept today, and replacing those horizons with our own risks rendering the man and his work largely unintelligible. In this chapter, I argue that Delany as an individual was shaped by two broadly considered categories of influence in his political thinking, and that these influences make themselves felt in *Blake* as well. Namely, Delany was influenced by the European political and political-economic traditions of republicanism and liberalism, and the radical insurrectionism of Nat Turner Denmark Vesey, and others. The ambivalence of *Blake*, especially regarding colonialism, reflects the ambivalence between and among these intellectual sources.

Delany's political philosophy was strongly influenced by republicanism, unsurprising given his context as a man educated towards the end of the early republic period in the United States. Republicanism, to most nineteenth-century Americans, was a fundamental part of how they understood the reality and potential of politics. Robert Shalhope's analysis of Vermont farmer Hiram Harwood's diary reveals that "Republicanism—a familiar ideology permeating all walks of his life—shaped his thought; it provided him with meaning in his life and a sense of identity," and Shalhope argues that this "may be representative of great numbers of nineteenth-century Americans" (66). Republicanism defined the political horizon of nineteenth-century Americans. Given this, it is not surprising that Delany would go on to couch much of his political writing in terms of republicanism, even directly quoting some of its canonical thinkers. As Robert Gooding-Williams observes, Delany's argument for emigration in 1854 drew upon

explicitly republican concepts. In his speech *Political Destiny of the Colored Race, On the American Continent*, delivered to the National Emigration Convention of Colored People, Delany "relies on the sovereign principle to elaborate a republican notion of political liberty that supports his critique of racial oppression" (Gooding-Williams 79). He explicitly links his notion of "the sovereign principle" with republican political theory by quoting Montesquieu: "Said a great French writer: 'A free agent, in a free government, should be his own governor'; that is, he must possess within himself the *acknowledged right to govern*: this constitutes him as a *governor*, though he may delegate to another the power to govern himself" (quoted in Gooding-Williams 79). In Gooding-Williams' analysis, Delany critiques the US for failing to live up to its republican ideals by sustaining racial oppression: "white rulers collectively oppress black Americans as a group (as a "people") when, rather than treat them severally as sovereign citizens . . . they disavow the sovereignty of each member of the group, treating each member as well as the collective accordingly—that is, according to the dictates of their unchecked collective discretion" (82). Delany's political critique is not of the founding principles of the United States, but rather he holds the nation to those same avowed principles, and finds it lacking. In this early period, he was pessimistic about the nation ever acknowledging black citizens as sovereign, as their own governors, hence his advocacy of emigration.

It may seem incongruous to include republicanism and liberalism in the same intellectual category. By doing so, I am not trying to suggest an equivalence, but rather to think about the ways in which Delany's political thought was in continuity with his contemporaries in the US as a whole. For while in the abstract republicanism and liberalism diverge, they found a unity of sorts in the nineteenth-century American political atmosphere. Summing up his synthesis of the republican-liberal debate, Shalhope cites a consensus that describes how "republicanism,

liberalism, and other traditions of social and political thought interpenetrated to create a distinctive and creative intellectual milieu" (54). This may go some ways to explaining the aforementioned parallels between Delany's "elbow room" conception of settling property and Locke's proto-liberal philosophy. Delany's more immediate intellectual milieu was defined by what Shalhope describes as "liberal tendencies—the aggressive, materialistic pursuit of individual gain" (66). Delany's initial education and political mentorship was defined by connections with relatively prosperous middle-class black figures. As Adeleke details, this included John Vashon, "one of the most economically successful blacks in Pittsburgh," and other well-to-do businessmen (*Without Regard* 46-47). For these men, their "individual triumph over adversity, particularly economic poverty, inspired a sense of hope and optimism and the conviction that other blacks could equally attain economic elevation" (47). In this way, Delany's political thought was in continuity with the synthesis of republicanism and liberalism in nineteenth-century American. As noted in Chapter 2, this synthesis contained a marked ambivalence when it came to colonialism: the US defined itself against one form, but participated in another.

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

> It was also about the winter of 1831-2 . . . the little ripple, destined to be the great anti-slavery wave, against which the ship of state would madly contend, was noticed; for, almost simultaneously with the outbreak for freedom at Southampton, Va., known as Nat

> Turner's Insurrection, appeared 'Garrison's Thoughts on American Colonization.' . . . Now, there is a dark significance in that solitary figure, looming up in the dark background of slavery as an offering on the altar of freedom, in the home of Washington, preceded by that attempted at Charleston with Denmark Vesey at its head, followed by the closing scene at Harper's Ferry. . . .
>
> "When that great heart broke, 'twas a world that shook;
> From their slavish sleep a million awoke;"
>
> when Virginia, the cradle of slavery, became its burial-place, the Smithfield of freedom's martyrs, and the battle-ground of a slave-founded Confederacy. . . . With the scene of Nat Turner's defeat and execution before him, [the young Delany] consecrated himself to freedom; and, like another Hannibal, registered his vow against the enemies of his race. (39-40)

While the passage is subject to Rollins' own interpretation of her subject, it clearly connects Delany with Turner, Vesey, and John Brown, and places him as a successor of their insurrectionary spirit. It celebrates Turner as a martyr to freedom, and connects Delany to the cause of freedom in a sacrificial sense, as he "consecrated himself." In the image of the solitary figure "looming up" over the nation, and in the paraphrased lines of Orpheus C. Kerr's poem "Avenged," with its lines about awakening a sleeping nation, show violent insurrection as a needed corrective against the "enemies" within the US.[5] Taking into account Delany's call to emigrate in *Political Destiny*, despite a fundamental belief in republican ideals and the appeal to the example of the American Revolution, this conflict within the nation was grave enough to

[5] See *The Palace Beautiful: And Other Poems*, pg. 47.

require drastic action. *Blake* explores the possibilities of what resolving this conflict could look like.

The theme of insurrection is a prominent part of *Blake*. Its titular character is Turner-like in his militancy and his religious rhetoric. But the interrupted, ambiguous nature of the revolts it depicts raise questions about how insurrection in the text actually functions, what political pressures it might be responding to, and what its limits are. Lenora Warren makes this the subject of a chapter in her monograph *Fire on the Water*. Warren posits that *Blake*, in its ambiguous and interrupted depiction of insurrection, and with Frederick Douglass' "The Heroic Slave," "unintentionally white-washed slave violence in such a way that made it impossible to view armed blacks as fully human" (73). This is a response to awareness of white readership: "the gaze of the imagined white reader dogs each text, forcing Delany and Douglass's narratives, in effect, to fade to black before the blood begins to run" (76). Delany specifically, Warren argues, may have "seen the advantages in keeping readers' eyes fixed on the evils of slavery rather than on the full character of the insurrectionists" (93). The idea of Delany being forced to whitewash violence in his book due to the "gaze of the imagined white reader" seems incredible given the context of its publication. *Blake* was published serially in the *Weekly Anglo-African*, a newspaper owned by black brothers Thomas and Robert Hamilton. As Benjamin Fagan observes, the *Weekly Anglo-African* was "a newspaper produced by and for Black Americans," and after the outbreak of war, "brought readers a Black perspective on [it]" (180). The publication of *Blake* continued after the war began, and was published alongside material that cast the conflict as a "war for Black liberation," advocating and championing the participation of black people in it (180). There is a profound disconnect between this publication context and that of the other texts Warren places alongside the serial novel. Douglass's short story was published in an anthology

that he co-edited with white British abolitionist Julia Griffiths, and collected a diverse range of authors in a coalition-building effort; in John McKivigan and Rebecca Patillo's analysis, the collected works were "envisioned as tools to construct a wider and politically more potent antislavery alliance" (35). The other author and periodical that Warren connects the two literary works with are white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and his newspaper *The Liberator*. Both could be more accurately described as appealing to white readers. Published in a periodical owned, edited, and distributed to black readers, *Blake*'s ambiguous depiction of insurrectionary violence cannot be reduced to whitewashing.

Nonetheless, Warren's analysis of *Blake*'s ambiguous depiction of insurrection offers a vital starting point to thinking about the novel's political ambivalence. Within Delany's political thought, Warren detects "a sense that the feats of the American Revolution . . . need to be reenacted and transformed if black autonomy is to be realized" (89). In the process of "reenacting and transforming" the Revolution, Warren postulates that the interruption of violence in *Blake* may more about indicating revolutionary potential: "in repeatedly showing blacks in the act of conspiring, he is emphasizing the massive revolutionary potential of an enslaved population. . . . In this way, the power of a collective resides not merely in the threat of violence, but in that collective's ability to capitalize on that threat without firing a shot" (92-93). However, Warren ultimately marks the ambiguity of Delany and Douglass's depiction of insurrection as a failure. "This failure by both authors is not merely the failure of imagination but also the failure of revolutionary rhetoric to exceed its limits. The invocation of the American Revolution for the cause of abolition succeeds only in reaffirming the American Revolution's legitimacy. Abolition, burdened by fear of slave insurrection, can only go so far in endorsing black violence on American soil. For a slave revolt to be truly revolutionary, one must face the possibility of slaves

overthrowing the nation" (97). The failure of *Blake* to realize revolutionary violence is expressed as a product of ambivalence between revolutionary rhetoric and the constraints of the American Revolution and the abolitionist movement.

With the benefit of hindsight, and the knowledge of reconstruction's failures and betrayals of black citizenry, it is easy to find shortcomings in the politics of black abolitionists of the nineteenth century, in their inability to see beyond the limits of the republic. But to Delany and his milieu, the Civil War, and the opportunity to serve in the military, truly did seem like a revolution. After being offered an officer's commission in the Union Army, Delany gave a speech in his hometown of Xenia, Ohio in full uniform. As reported by the local newspaper, in his speech he explained that while the Constitution of the US had been "conservative" up to the war, "he gloried in the fact, that the Constitution has been 'broken,' that it has been amended, that slavery has been abolished, and that the Government, like that of the British, has been rendered 'progressive'" (*A Documentary Reader* 390-391). This moment, for Delany, composed a fundamental break in the political nature of the nation itself. It was finally possible for the promise of freedom represented by the American Revolution to come true. Adeleke sums up this moment in Delany's life thus: "in Delany's estimation, the Civil War had fundamentally altered race relations, transforming blacks from passive objects into constituents and an 'essential element' of the nation. He himself had never anticipated such a revolutionary transformation" (*Without Regard* 159). To Delany, the war answered in a fundamental way the questions he asked in *Blake*. As an officer in the Union Army, he was no longer simply "loose," but free, recognized as a participant in the civic life of the nation, and empowered to help rebuild a nation according to his underlying values.

The context of political ambivalence, that of Delany's own political makeup and that of his milieu, can explain the ambivalence regarding colonialism within *Blake*, as well as its ambiguous depiction of violent insurrection. This ambiguity, however, is not simply a failure. *Blake* clearly expresses the latent power of an international black community. The novel endlessly anticipates the moment when that power will be unleashed. Delany found his moment in the Civil War; he threw himself into the work of reconstruction and integration, believing that the storm of violence had come, then dissipated, leaving behind a new world. Yet the novel's ambivalence, its ambiguity, and its refusal of closure make it uniquely open to the future; whenever in time it is read, Mendi and his band will be waiting just beneath the deck, "armed to the teeth," waiting for a sign.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Two months after the end of the war in July of 1865, Major Martin Delany delivered a lecture to a group of freedmen assembled near a church on St. Helena Island, South Carolina. The lecture was attended by a Lieutenant Edward M. Stoeber, who kept a watchful eye on the proceedings and reported what he saw and heard to his superiors. According to Stoeber, Delany delivered a fiery speech, warning the freedmen to be wary of exploitation by white employers. He also emphasized that slavery was over, and that it must never return.

> I tell you slavery is over, and shall never return again. We have now 200,000 of our men well drilled in arms and used to warfare, and I tell you, it is with you and them that slavery shall not come back again, and if you are determined it will not return again. (Adeleke, *Civil War* 42)

Even as the Civil War, through a terrible price in lives lost, brought Delany the form of liberation he sought, he remained convinced of the revolutionary potential of his people even after its conclusion. Stoeber complains: "He tells them to remember, 'That they would not have become free, had they not armed themselves and fought for their independence.' This is a falsehood and misrepresentation. Our President Abraham Lincoln declared the colored race free, before there was even an idea of arming colored men" (43). Stoeber doesn't get it. To Delany, black people were not made free by Lincoln's decree. They made themselves free by taking up the carving knife and demanding recognition as a part of the nation's civic life. Delany would go on to become quite conservative, yet the change in his political orientation can largely be understood

as his world changing around him. Some of his beliefs, like that of revolutionary potential, and the primacy of liberty in a republican sense, would be consistent.

Blake is firmly engaged with its present; Delany's imaginative work is rooted in his experience as an abolitionist lecturer and a meticulous concern for the contemporary issues facing black people in both the North and South of the United States, as well as the global experience of all colonized peoples. Its ambivalence reflects this connection; the book is "split" along the same fault lines that divided its author's experience. At the same time, it also anticipates the future. In one sense, it is anticipatory simply in that in putting forth a radical contestation of institutional Christianity as a part of systematic racial and colonial oppression, it resonates with liberation theologies of our more recent past. But in another, more profound sense, it is anticipatory in its form. *Blake* is a novel, the first and last novel Delany would ever publish, and its status as an outlier implies a certain intentionality; the form was a deliberate choice, central to its intended function. When contemporary writer Samuel Delany describes *Blake* as "about as close to an sf-style alternate history novel as you can get," he reveals the function of the form: it facilitates complex, imaginative speculation. It is open to and oriented towards the future, possibility. In that sense, the premature conclusion of the novel can be seen as an opportunity. Delany offers us a rich, imaginative vision of what a movement for black liberation could look like. He leaves it to future generations to finish the story.

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