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Pathways and Porticos: Martin Delany's *Blake* and the Politics of Being¹

Mario Chandler

It is my pleasure to stand before you this second and last time as CLA President to deliver the opening address. These past two years in this seat of leadership have been among the most personally gratifying periods of my life. Having had the opportunity to work closely alongside brilliant, hardworking, and dedicated colleagues like those who make up the CLA Executive Committee, has made my job as President—a responsibility filled with challenges topped by triumphs, effort trumped by achievement—one filled with awe knowing that I have walked in the footsteps and example of the esteemed list of CLA Presidents who have preceded me. It has been a sincere honor. To the Executive Committee, thank you for tireless work and integrity on behalf of the College Language Association. And to the wider membership, thank you for entrusting me, with your confidence in my ability to lead and to make a constructive contribution to this, our treasure, our organization.

I would be remiss if I did not use this opportunity to introduce our newest addition to the CLA Executive Committee. Please join me in formally welcoming Howard University's Dr. Sandra Shannon as the new editor of the *College Language Association Journal*. Dr. Shannon has hit the proverbial ground running. Within the three months since her official start, Dr. Shannon has already shown herself, even in these early stages of the journal's transition, as a powerhouse of organization, energy, and ideas in leading *CLAJ* into a new era of leadership. I assure this body that wonderful things are on the horizon for the *CLAJ*. Our patience and understanding with the processes of the transition will certainly pay off with the exciting changes that are in the pipeline for the journal.

Shepherding the transition of the *CLAJ* has been one of the highlights of my presidency—not an easy task in the least—a colossal task, in fact, that required a great deal of background work spanning almost the duration of my presidency. There were many mid and high-level meetings, as well as multiple personal visits to the warehouses counting, boxing, and cataloguing invaluable back issues of our organization's "intellectual treasure." A large portion of these important tasks fell on the shoulders of the only two Atlanta-based executive committee members, myself and Dr. Elizabeth West, our Assistant Treasurer, whom I must recognize for accompanying me on a number of occasions to Morehouse's campus to supervise

and facilitate this important undertaking. Undoubtedly, the entire executive committee should be commended for its careful deliberation, its prudence, and its consistent thoughtfulness of the interests and will of the membership in situating the journal and securing its integrity and legacy for many generations to come.

An extended flight back from West Africa a few days ago (and for which I am still feeling the effects of jet lag) afforded me the opportunity to re-read a text that I have not had the pleasure of reading in some time. Martin R. Delany's *Blake or the Huts of America*, among the first novels written by an African-American, was in its original iteration, published serially in the *Afro-Anglo American Magazine*, from January to July of 1859. The complete text appeared a few years later in 1862, not too long after the start of the U.S. Civil War. *Blake* is a remarkable piece of work in its espousal of an unusual tone of black militancy cultivated within the setting of slavery in the America. *Blake* was set and written prior to the U.S. Civil War, in the midst of slavery in the United States and elsewhere. Yet, in that seemingly constrictive setting of the "peculiar institution," Delany's activist fiction anticipates 20th-century Black Nationalist movements that would be led by iconic figures like Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X. The nationalism expressed by Delany's plural-identified protagonist, Henry, born *Carolus Henrico Blacus*, later and for the purposes of stealth, Anglicized to *Henry Blake* can be viewed as an unexpected (and from the creative impetus of Delany, unexplored) seed of resistance that resided in the hearts and minds of blacks enduring slavery, not only in the United States, but beyond U.S. borders, to points south in particular. It is the space "beyond" that catches the author's creative gaze. His protagonist, Blake, is himself an intriguingly multi-faceted and complexly multi-layered character whose identity is shared between two geographic spaces: the U.S. South, where we are first introduced to Blake, and the Caribbean island of Cuba, where we learn later in the text, that the protagonist was born free. Cuba, of course, also serves as the site of the novel's denouement.

Indeed, the novel ties in remarkably well to our conference theme, "Pathways and Porticos: The Caribbean and the South as Catalyst in Language and Literature," as I will try to tease out in this short opening talk. Our initial introduction to Blake occurs immediately after his wife, Maggie, has been unceremoniously sold off of the Natchez, Mississippi, plantation by landowner, Colonel Stephen Franks (we learn later that Franks is Maggie's biological father). Blake's reputation as a proud and intelligent man who equals, and in some respects, exceeds his white master, looms large throughout the novel. Blake's commanding reputation precedes his physical appearance in the opening chapters of the novel. The text describes him as follows: "Henry was a black—a pure Negro—handsome, manly and intelligent, in size comparing well with his master.... He was bold, determined and courageous,

but always mild, gentle, and courteous, though impulsive when an occasion demanded his opposition” (16-17). The author’s emphasis on Blake’s black racial purity itself is unique in its defiance of the mulatto character motif that dominated nascent black literary works contemporary with Delany’s novel. Works by William Wells Brown, the Kentuckian, come immediately to mind. Though clearly an enslaved man owned by Colonel Franks, outside of his slave title, Blake is in few ways comparable to his more domesticated peers on the Natchez plantation. Prior to learning that Maggie has been sold, Blake had been away, in fact, assigned to a horse-selling mission in Baton Rouge. This keeps Blake “off-site” at the moment of his wife’s removal from the plantation, which heightens the plot’s tension upon his return. Moreover, the protagonist’s “freedom” and mobility within the southern slave system is hinted to by his initial absence from the plantation at the start of the narrative.

While the other slaves speak a colorful “slave dialect,” Blake does not. His command of standardized English goes against the conventional speech employed by most of the other black characters in the novel. When told by his mother-in-law, Mammy Judy, that his wife has been sold, she tries to use a combination of fate and Christian faith to console Blake and to get him to accept the misfortune as God’s will. Blake curses the Colonel’s cruel act, but Judy chastises and implores: “So, Henry! yeh ain’t gwine swah! hope yeh ain’t gwine lose yah ‘ligion? Do’n do so; put yeh trus’ in de Laud, he is suffishen fah all!” (15). The stark contrast in Blake’s reply in expression and in content is noteworthy. He says in perfect English expression: “Don’t tell me about religion! What’s religion to me? My wife is sold away from me by a man who is one of the leading members of the very church to which both she and I belong! Put my trust in The Lord? I have done so all my life nearly, and of what use is it to me? My wife is sold from me just the same as if I didn’t” (16). Here and throughout the novel, the protagonist exhibits a remarkable ambivalence to Christianity, frequently putting a spotlight on the hypocrisy of whites’ use of religion as a tool of power, control, and domination of blacks.

Blake’s wife sold away and the breakup of his family imminent, his choice is to flee the plantation. His journey begins, then, in flight. Rather than a first-time discovery of freedom, Blake’s journey is a return to a freedom that he once knew as he was born free, the child of wealthy black Cuban tobacco merchants. Throughout his period in slavery in the U.S. south, Blake nurses an awareness of freedom that he intentionally suppresses as a survival strategy, having been tricked and sold into servitude on a southern plantation, much like a Cuban Solomon Northup. Indeed, Solomon Northup’s presence is strongly echoed in part one of *Blake*. Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* was published in 1853, just five years before the release of the first installment of *Blake*. In a powerful confrontation with the

southern white plantation owner, Colonel Franks, the protagonist makes clear his awareness of his own freedom as well as his having been swindled out of it. Blake affirms: "I'm not your slave, nor never was and you know it! And but for my wife and her people, I never would have stayed with you till now. I was decoyed away when young, and then became entangled in such domestic relations as to induce me to remain with you; but now the tie is broken!" (19). Blake's words make clear, therefore, that the domestic life that he has hitherto lived in Natchez was a product of a circumstantial "entanglement" rather than a paternal objective for domesticity. Blake's decision to take on the role of husband and father up until the family's displacement was undoubtedly a choice, but the motive behind that choice, in light of "entanglement" to which Blake refers, is elusive. What is certain is that with the domestic "glue" now removed from the equation, Blake reverts to a state of freedom that is propelled by a journey that carries him from Mississippi and throughout the U.S. south and southwest on a clarion call to like-minded slaves who dare to take their destiny into their own hands. The revelation of Blake's mission to ignite a spirit of awareness among his fellow slaves throughout the "huts of America," in other words, throughout the hamlets and villages in the Americas (not just North America) where "black folk" reside, comes to Blake in a metaphor of light during his journey from New Orleans to Mobile, Alabama. The text reads: "Light, of necessity, had to be imparted to the darkened region of the obscure intellects of the slaves, to arouse them from their benighted condition to one of moral responsibility, to make them sensible that liberty was legitimately and essentially theirs, without which there was no distinction between them and the brute" (101).

The U.S. south, then, constitutes an important symbolic representation within the text. The South can be viewed as a *tabula rasa* on which a new script of black self-fashioning and self-determination can be written, not only for Blake but also for other blacks inspired by the protagonist's example. As restrictive and as confining as the slave South was, in Delany's novel, there are channels of possibility that turn that restrictive space on its head. It is in the southern space that Blake succeeds equally as a conventional husband-father figure and as an unbridled revolutionary and maroon-like figure. Little wonder that the powerful mystics, the Dismal Swamp conjurers who Blake visits during his North Carolina sojourn, anoint him in the name of "[...] some of Virginia and North Carolina's boldest black rebels, then the names of Nat Turner, Denmark Veezie [sic], and General Gabriel [...] held by them in sacred reverence" (113). It is in the U.S. southern space that Blake is compelled and inspired to supplant a traditional Christian worldview with a spiritualism that is more material focused and African-centered.

How then does the Caribbean island of Cuba function in *Blake or the Huts of America*? Cuba, the focus of Part II, and where Delany's text diverges greatly and uniquely from the traditional slave narrative parameters that inform Part I, cannot be divorced from its relationship with the U.S. south. In Part II, Blake manages to travel with sympathetic whites on a boat bound for Cuba. The "lost boy from Cuba," as Blake describes himself, returns to his country of origin. While Blake's stated motive in returning to his Caribbean birthplace is locating and reuniting with his wife, Maggie, what becomes apparent is that a reestablished domesticity does in no way extinguish the revolutionary fervor that had already been ignited back in the U.S. south. Upon locating his wife in Cuba, sounding much like her mother, Mammy Judy, Maggie urges Blake with the achievement of their reunion, to "be satisfied as we are among the whites, and God, in His appointed time, will do what is required" (192). However, Blake's response reinforces that domesticity, whether in the U.S. south or in Cuba, has never been his objective but, rather, an important means to an end. He responds to his wife in a paternalistic tone:

My dear wife, you have much yet to learn in solving the problem of this great question of the destiny of our race... Whatever liberty is worth to the whites, it is worth to the blacks; therefore, whatever it cost the whites to obtain it, the blacks would be willing and ready to pay for it, if they desire it. Work out this question in political arithmetic at your leisure, wife, and by the time you get through and fully understand the rule, then you will be ready to discuss the subject further with me. (192)

Blake's search for Maggie throughout the "huts" of Cuba, as we have just seen, has the effect of a successful reunion with his wife, which is ultimately achieved because like-minded Afro-Cuban comrades in struggle, such as the Dominico family, are able and willing to put him on the right track in his quest (177). More importantly, Blake's ability to speak the local language, Spanish, as well as navigate a terrain that, remarkably, he still remembers (the Cuban setting of the novel is focused between two places: Matanzas and Havana), combined with a new-found black-focused militancy, allows the protagonist to extend his mission to dismantle and to destroy the U.S. southern slave system onto the Caribbean stage, an objective that goes far beyond simply rescuing his wife and re-assuming a domestic role in Cuba. Slavery in Cuba, as conceived in Delany's novel, is articulated less as a colonial institution inherited from Spain than as a hotbed of U.S. southern economic interests. It is this fact that explains why Blake's wife was sent to Cuba in the first place. Her masters on Cuban soil, brother and sister, Adelaide and Peter Albertis, are U.S. southerners who, among a number of other white characters in the text, are attempting to duplicate the U.S. slave system in Cuba. Nevertheless, the unique laws that govern slavery and manumission on the Caribbean island are

not only referenced as tools used to facilitate black liberation; but, in addition, the white southerners' ignorance of those laws is highlighted along with their inability to successfully oppose them (183). Blake's use of the local law to gain his wife's freedom is as much an attack against U.S. southern slavery as it is a gesture of rescue for his beloved wife. In many ways, the former is weightier than the latter in this text. The Caribbean space of Cuba facilitates this uniquely executed *coup de grace*.

Blake, then, emerges as a force that will attempt to thwart white southern economic interests on "his land," in his Cuba, though the reader is not privy to the outcome of the insurgency, as the ending of Delany's novel is incomplete, likely explained by the start of the Civil War, which certainly occupied the author's attention considering his role as the first commissioned black field officer in the U.S. Army during that war. Spanish as well as Cuban creole presence is referenced but minimized in the text, taking a back seat to Afro-Cuban agency lead in action by Blake and in ideology by none other than Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, also known as Plácido, a true-to-history Afro-Cuban poet-activist, who appears as a fictional character in the novel not only as Blake's biological cousin but, more importantly, as an additional Afro-Cuban voice of resistance, support, and artistic inspiration, and whose poetry and presence permeate the latter half of the novel. Interestingly, the historical, Plácido was killed by Spanish authorities in 1844, a decade before the chronological setting of the novel, accused of sedition in the famous Escalera Conspiracy, a clandestine insurrection lead by Afro Cubans and which, once revealed to authorities, resulted in the death, imprisonment, or exile of hundreds of black Cubans, free and slave. Clearly, through his novel, *Blake or the Huts of America*, Martin Delany reveals himself to be an early visionary of the definitive ties that bind U.S, Caribbean, and African blacks in struggle and in their mutual liberation. Delany's text is a text of diaspora. Blake as a character functions effectively between multiple grey spaces between enslaved and free, between U.S. Southern and Caribbean, between North American and Latino, between English and Spanish. In this intriguing novel, both the Caribbean and the South are two faces of the same coin of catalyst, and the catalyst is action, though the outcome is that action remains elusive.

Notes

¹ The following remarks were given on Thursday, March 27, 2014, as the Presidential Address at the 74th annual convention in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Work Cited

Delany, Martin. *Blake or the Huts of America*. 1862. Boston: Beacon P, 1970.