Martin Delany, the father of American Black Nationalism, moved to Chatham, Canada West, in 1856. Chatham was once heralded as the Black Man’s Mecca for its critical embrace of fugitive slaves, but perhaps more beguilingly in 2003 it was crowned the twin city of Harpers Ferry, Virginia, the town where, in 1859, messianic abolitionist John Brown led twenty-one white and black soldiers into the dizzy cul-de-sac of thwarted slave insurrection. Such geographical sanctioning of Harpers Ferry by way of Chatham, this mirroring of cities, proposes a symmetrical relationship between the two on two counts: the first, in Chatham, Delany met with John Brown to discuss the Underground Railroad as well as Harpers Ferry, but Delany refused to participate in the future raid; and the second symmetrical relationship, in his novel _Blake_, Delany does what Brown did, that is, his persona Henry Blake secretly orchestrates slave rebellion in the American South, and then later in Cuba, a geographical movement which Eric Sundquist sees as “a kind of twin, a shadow play, of the American South” (185), only for the serialized novel to break off on the cusp of final insurrection. _Blake_ ends as a character known for brandishing a carving knife “left the room to spread among the blacks an authentic statement of the outrage: ‘Woe be unto those devils of whites, I say!’” (313). The novel as we have it today is resolutely irresolute, and this narrative incompleteness circumstantially becomes another refusal of violence on Delany’s part.

Refusal, I argue, accomplishes what twinning accomplishes: it corrects a preconceived singularity or single-mindedness (both Brown’s), and therefore renders asymmetrical the overtly symmetrical act of twinning. The Twinning Proclamation for the municipality of Chatham-Kent “recognizes the importance of twinning with other communities as a means of providing both leadership and historical knowledge to local residents and visitors to the community” (Corporation of the Municipality of Chatham-Kent). These official words describe Delany’s own goals as an exemplary Black leader, which are precisely predicated on rejecting a twinned identity with John Brown and Harpers Ferry. While the twinning “will allow Chatham-Kent to further explore its shared cultural history with that community” (ibid.), Harpers Ferry, and what was portentous, violent, and unsuccessful about 1859, will rather be recuperated by Chatham and by Delany himself. Delany is made into a kind of _doppelganger_ of Brown: bound to him, chastising him, shadowing him – and I use “shadowing” with all the racial implications behind it. I aim to see Delany as a facilitator of urgent hyperbolic suspense, and I will risk the American literary trope of blackness, that trope of white anxiety articulated
by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*, by calling Delany a proponent of gothic leadership. If, as Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith claim, “The Gothic is the perfect anonymous language for the peculiar unwillingness of the past to go away” (4), then Delany’s serialized ethic will not go away, will in fact keep extending itself, until it encroaches upon every subject’s territory.

What is at stake, beyond the obvious, in thinking of Martin Delany as a corrective to John Brown and to his efforts at insurrection and emancipation? It is difficult to deny that the old saw of the exceptional American figure categorically binds Delany to Brown and both Delany and Brown to someone like John Wilkes Booth. Each mobilized a conspiracy for the liberation or redemption of a larger body (although Delany did so in fiction). To construct this continuum of leaders from Brown to Delany and Delany’s Blake to Booth by way of Abraham Lincoln, circa 1856 to 1865, might seem counterintuitive, because politically one would then be aligning Delany’s fiction with Brown’s raid and Booth’s assassination, the two contradictory-to-each-other violent public actions of the few in the service of the many which retrospectively bracket the American Civil War. These events trouble and delegitimize the claim of the few or the one to speak for a people, whether Brown for slaves or Booth for the South. Both actions, regardless of intent, are immediately neutralized by the media and the state, such that antislavery and proslavery causes are temporarily rendered interchangeable or negligible, only to become untangled in posterity.¹

The synecdochical dangers of a minority’s small numbers are Delany’s too, both in reality and in fiction, but unlike Brown’s or Booth’s leadership, Delany’s only approaches the brink of violent or even overt action. Speaking about the Chatham conference, Robert S. Levine tries to recreate Delany’s mindset: surely “Brown would liberate but, Delany may have wondered, would he regenerate?” (183). This thought allows us to read Delany’s refusal

¹ For example, on February 27, 1860, Abraham Lincoln delivered a speech at the Cooper Union in Manhattan to officially distance the Republican Party from John Brown’s image and his “peculiar” and “absurd” raid (125). He does so by rhetorically transmuting Brown into an “enthusiast” and the raid into an “affair”: “That affair, in its philosophy, corresponds with the many attempts, related in history, at the assassination of kings and emperors. An enthusiast broods over the oppression of a people till he fancies himself commissioned by Heaven to liberate them. He ventures the attempt, which ends in little else than his own execution” (125). Similarly, in a study of newspapers, speeches, and letters from the week after Lincoln’s assassination, Thomas Reed Turner observes the “relative infrequency with which the assassin’s name was mentioned in sermons … almost as if Booth did not exist as an individual. The lack of urgency that most pastors felt about the apprehension of Booth also shows that they believed he was merely a tool” (80). This co-optation of representative claims is a response to the seemingly anti-democratic provocation of small numbers and, as Arjun Appadurai argues, “the associated dangers of nepotism, collusion, subversion, and deception” (240). Speaking of Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1855), in which a slave revolt is orchestrated to the point of invisibility, Sundquist contends that Melville “wrote in a culture in which every gesture toward slave subversion was itself open to countersubversion – if not by proslavery polemicists then by the forces of northern political and popular culture,” such as minstrelsy (139).
to participate in terms of posterity (regeneration as an end) and not methodology (armed insurrection as the means). With respect to posterity, it is instructive to consider how Delany mourns President Lincoln’s assassination.² He calls for “every individual of our race [to] contribute one cent” (392) towards the creation of a “very African” statue of commemoration: “an ideal representative genius of the race, as Europa, Britannia, America, or the Goddess of Liberty, is to the European race” (394). The statue works as a tribute to the Emancipation Proclamation and, more significantly, to numerical accountability: the statue is reverential, but also material and financial. The call for many first transactions as freepersons envisions future enfranchised transactions, which will leave behind, or create the sediment of, a “very African” quasi-national symbol. Delany writes, “The penny, or one cent contribution, would amount to the handsome sum of forty thousand (40,000) dollars, as a tribute from the black race … and would not at all be felt” (393), which satirically contrasts the excessive emotion elicited by Lincoln’s funeral processions with Delany’s sober response (which punningly “would not at all be felt”).³

The project of African regeneration was for Delany often unwieldy, and his career vacillates and heaves between commitments and ideologies. Arm ing slaves with pikes is desirable, but not simple; one must also be armed with education and community.³ Paul Gilroy calls Delany “a figure of extraordinary complexity whose political trajectory through abolitionisms and emigrationisms … dissolves any single attempts to fix him as consistently either conservative or radical” (20). Delany’s restlessness of thought is crucial for understanding his exemplarity, which every critical study of Delany must personify with a litany of his Renaissance man doings. Here, for example, is Robert S. Levine’s list: “social activist and reformer, black nationalist, abolitionist, physician, reporter and editor, explorer, jurist, realtor, politician, publisher, educator, army officer, ethnographer, novelist, and political and legal theorist” (2003a: 1). Delany’s serialized novel Blake; or The Huts of America was written and published over the years 1859 and 1861-62, and it metamorphosed as Delany wrestled with the concentrated blunders and surrenders of the United States in the 1850s, such as the Fugitive Slave Law, the Dred Scott ruling, the raid on Harpers Ferry, and the debates around emigration versus colonization and the possible American annexation of Cuba. In short, his career and book are similarly fluctuating.

The eclecticism of his career divests Delany of the exclusionary monomania of John Brown. He is so thoroughly embedded in the realpolitik of a black activist under slavery that it is more fitting to say that Delany is an incessantly inclusive presence, which means that as a kind of racial agnostic

² I am fusing together two separate notices published 13 May and 10 June 1865 in the Weekly Anglo-African.
³ Delany differs from Brown on these two matters. Paraphrasing David Reynolds, Jonathan Earle writes that “the raid reflected Brown’s overconfidence in white people’s ability to rise above racism and black people’s willingness to rise against their masters in armed insurrection…” (29).
he must reexamine his own beliefs as the legal and social status of blacks is blocked, upended, or destroyed. For instance, his emigrationist stance paused when Lincoln made Delany the first black major during the Civil War in 1865. The fictional Henry Blake reflects this self-effacing self-reappraisal as well: Bruce A. Harvey notes that Blake has the “visionary faculties of a millennial redeemer. He never suffers, however, from religious delusions or the self-absorption of the fanatic” (227). There is one overt Blake-as-Moses parallel in the novel, but it is brief, literary, and not at all delusional. On the shores of the Red River, Blake intones,

Could I but climb where Moses stood,
And view the landscape o'er;
Not Jordan's streams, nor death's cold flood,
Could drive me from the shore! (69)

The song’s “coulds” place the Biblical precedent at an arm’s length, and in the novel there are several hesitations by Blake about whether he is fit to be a representative of the race. Indeed, to frame the song, we are told that “a feeling of humbleness and a sensibility of unworthiness impressed him” (69). Hesitation is narrated, is engaged with, because the necessity of liberation demands coordination, which demands a leader, but these necessities do not build a space for any particular person, the arbitrariness and necessity of which demands some leader sooner rather than later, more preventative than perfect. Yet, even as Delany refuses the arbitrariness of the position of leader, he is nevertheless insistent on the rightness of himself, maybe not as leader but as example (Levine wryly claims that “clearly he protested too much” [2003b: 71]). In Blake, Henry Blake is described as “the singular black man” (79), and we are told that “Henry was a black – a pure Negro – handsome, manly and intelligent” (16). Blake’s persuasive skin color (part of a doctrine of Ethiopia-nism) is contrasted with a variety of complexions, such as the “orange-peel” (192) of the Cuban poet Placido, just as, outside the text, William Lloyd Garrison’s description “black as jet” (qtd. in Levine 2003b: 69) positions Delany himself against Frederick Douglass, the other prominent public spokesman for black identity, whose skin is lighter. For Delany, the “pure Negro” will make the best case for equality to whites.4

Delany struggles with the tension between ego and community that is inherent in action. On the one hand, he insists on what Harvey calls the “secretive enclaves” of Black Freemasonry for their discipline and elitism,

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4 Addressing what Harvey sees as “Delany’s elite politics of black male leadership” (205), Ifeoma Nwankwo raises the issue that in Blake “[t]he expansion of the territorial boundaries of Blackness does not lead to an expansion of the gender boundaries of Blackness or the definition of a true race leader” (57). I am lenient toward the novel’s smooth-it-away operations because they themselves are unstable in their assertions. By the end of the novel, Blake the leader has “nothing to say” (311), Placido, his right-hand man, has been “mutilated and crippled” (308), and a violated Ambrosina, of the prominent Cordora family, reluctantly professes her faith in a smoothed-out group, “My lot is cast with that of my race, whether for weal or woe” (313), right before Gondolier gets the last word.
and where Delany can position himself as the exemplary Black leader (233). On the other hand, he espouses the vision of a Pan-African community that defies national precincts and resists what Gilroy calls "ethnic absolutisms" (29). Maurice Wallace sees Delany as a "disciplinary individual" (404): a deliberately crafted model, a black image to be transmitted through time, one that is "typical, general and reproducible," according to Mark Seltzer (qtd. in Wallace 397). Wallace theorizes that "the disciplinary individual submits his body, Pauline fashion, to the will and muscles of the body politic" (404), and in this submission we can see why in part two of Blake, as he travels to and across Cuba, Blake is "strangely passive" (Delany 236). A lengthy affair in the second half of the serialized novel sees Blake aboard the slave ship Vulture, home to its own conspiracy, and Delany’s prose exchanges the singularity of Blake (his narrative primacy) for the sublime sensationalism of natural and moral parallels, sympathies, and doublings:

The black and frowning skies and raging hurricane above; the black and frowning slaves with raging passions below, rendered [the scene] dreadful without, fearful within, and terrible all around. Whilst captain, mate, and crew were with might and main struggling against the fierce contending elements above, the master spirit of the captives seized the opportunity to release his fellow slaves from their fetters (234).

Like the language, the slave insurrection roils without ever running over; the weather breaks. Levine suggests that by making Blake a spectator, detached from this conspiracy, Delany “may be giving expression to his own fears … that uncontrolled revolution could erupt as a form of intemperance” (208). However, this “self-directed critique,” in Harvey’s words (233), is doubtlessly courted in structural terms since the novel’s extension into Cuba repudiates a series of self-enclosed circles of meaning: Blake as a lone leader, slavery as a concrete entity or merely Southern institution, the United States as a site for regeneration, and the American Revolution as a model for rebellion.5

The conspiracy’s hemispheric expansion cannot be diluted by a charge of monomania, which is mad Ahab’s disease, inaugurated by the trauma of a torn limb: in other words, one may call John Brown a monomaniac, but how could we ever risk calling Delany one? According to Robert E. McGlone, in his book on John Brown, “[m]onomania became a catchall term for the single-minded pursuit of a chimeraical goal, the cliché malady of the ambitious or obsessional, and a facile explanation for isolated acts of violence” (176), such as a mother killing her child. McGlone claims that American physicians who used the term “banished those who were so alienated from or incensed by the indifference or depravity of society as to abandon a settled vocation and inflict their madness on the world” (177). This nineteenth-century diagnosis “banished” deviant or errant elements from society, and we can see how this charge would be farcical if applied to Delany: he is already banished because he is disenfranchised. In Blake, what Delany gives us instead of the banish-

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5 See Andy Doolen’s essay about how “the Revolution … cannot serve as the ideological origin for a black independence struggle that exceeds national time and space” (157).
ing monomania of Brown is an inflected, sympathetic, dispersed, but still obsessive, monomania. As he recruits members for the mission, Blake recites his credo:

All you have to do, is to find one good man or woman – I don’t care which, so that they prove to be the right person – on a single plantation, and hold a seclusion and impart the secret to them, and then the organizers of their own plantation, and they in like manner impart it to some other next to them, and so on. In this way it will spread like smallpox among them” (41).

Blake is monomaniacal because of the single-mindedness of its non-chimerical mission (immediate emancipation) and its method (the initiation and installation of many ones in many places), but more importantly because it promotes single-mindedness and the eradication of racial nuance in whites.

Early in the novel, Colonel Franks reacts to Henry’s impudence by “seiz[ing] a revolver” and when asked about the meaning of this action he responds, “Mean, my dear? It’s rebellion! A plot – this is but the shadow of a cloud that’s fast gathering around us!” (19f). Nuance drops: any and every sign feasts on rebellion, but it is an icon of rebellion composed without reference to the qualities of its rebels, that is, without reference to the worthiness or competence of individual members. The “disciplinary individual’s” sacrificed individualism exploits the sympathetic imagination between blacks and whites: both sides of the chasm obsess about insurrection, and this mutual obsession, another kind of twinning, prolongs a state of emergency. A temporary suspension of nuance surely swallows its children (as revolution is prone to do), but will also hopefully permit what Harvey calls “the tutelary spirit of rebellion” (232) to see emancipation through and to see it into the inevitable future contests around national identity, governance, participation, and dignity. As Gilroy argues,

This anti-mystical racial rationalism required that blacks of all shades, classes, and ethnic groups give up the merely accidental differences that served only to mask the deeper unity waiting to be constructed not so much from their African heritage as from the common orientation to the future produced by their militant struggles against slavery (28).

The cost of the plot, of Blake’s narrative plotting, then, is the anonymity of gothic language: the inflexible and untethered monomania of past terror (the history of slavery) consciously and unconsciously asserting itself in the present such that, to return to Sage and Smith, the present’s “very presentness is diminished and vitiated by irruptive images of the past” (2). If Slavoj Žižek argues that “the properly ‘terrorist’ dimension of every authentic democratic explosion” is “the brutal imposition of a new order” (xxxv), then, since Delany’s novel could not rewrite history by depicting a successful multi-site rebellion, Delany’s impositions can be said to continuously approach, but back away from, the asymptote of brutality, preferring instead to incrementally
dismantle aristocratic and tyrannical habits. These conspiratorial impositions are so broadly social – they are meant to be shared – that the agency of just who is imposing on whom is ambiguous: slaves organize against whites while whitened psychologies, such as the quick-to-the-gun Colonel, participate in dreaming up both the terror and the new world order.

Rebecca Biggio sees the macrocosmic truncation of the novel as that which permits the vital creation of a cultural community: “Whether or not an alternative ending does exist, conspiracy is the operative word, inseparable from both the community it creates and the violence portended” (440). What emerges in Blake is that “community-building secrecy is, in and of itself, the central and consistent insurrectionary message of the novel” (Biggio 439), such that “black community is more frightening than black violence” (440). I think we must add to that creation the agitations of Blake and of Delany himself, which offer up an insurrectionary community that is purposefully pliable (for instance, the novel’s “chronological confusion” [Sundquist 206]) and even at times deferentially disposable (made to look as if it never existed at the drop of a hat). Thus, to return to the final extant words of the serialized novel Blake: Gofer Gondolier goes out “to spread among the blacks an authentic statement of the outrage: ‘Woe be unto those devils of whites, I say!’” The first part, “spread[ing] … an authentic statement,” trumps the content of the second part, the aggressive words themselves, because a continually transmitted insurrection that never comes off but is sustained in anticipation is the task of the black monomaniac.7 In the novel Blake exclaims, “They shall only live – while I live – under the most alarming apprehensions” (192), and by doing so creates a unique politics of the old-fashioned doppelganger. Planning for insurrection under a black Black leader is also planning for a future nationalism under a black Black leader, but before we get insurrection or nationalism, the ego of the leader gets commandeered by genre – black temporarily becomes gothic and organization becomes terror. For Delany, this repeating sequence (black-gothic-black) can anchor a vision of radical community. It is fitting to note that Delany does not emerge as an obvious literary or public voice of the Reconstruction period, even though he lived until 1885; Douglass is certainly the more vocal representative. But Martin Delany, inveterate jack-of-trades and social monomaniac, remains stronger and stranger this way.

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6 For Žižek, Robespierre and John Brown are “figures without habits”: “To cast off the yoke of habit means: if all men are equal, then all men are to be effectively treated as equal; if blacks are also human, they should be immediately treated as such” (xix).

7 As Glenn Hendler claims, “Delany refigures virtually everything in the slaves’ experience as a medium of communication. Again, what is curious is that as far we can tell the revolution consists of nothing but this naturalized and generalized circuit of communicative exchange” (75).
Works Cited


