In the Service of God and Humanity

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CHAPTER 2

Violence

Martyrdom vs. Survival

One of the challenges Delany confronted in the course of his travels to Black communities as abolitionist and antislavery lecturer was how best to frame his ideas on how Blacks could effectively develop a foundation and culture of empowerment and self-determination at a time when they were also beginning to consider and debate violence as resistance strategy. It should come as no surprise that as overwhelming as the challenges they confronted and, as bleak as the prospect seemed, perhaps because of this reality, some Blacks seriously considered violence as a viable option. Throughout the nineteenth century, Black abolitionists had to confront this matter. The fundamental and nagging question was: how viable and realistic was violence as reform strategy? Attempts to answer this question preoccupied delegates at several of the early national and state conventions. As Delany became involved in the abolitionist movement, he too had to engage this subject, and he offered his views and insights. It was evident from his writings and thoughts that Delany was no blind advocate of violence. Though at some points, he might have considered the necessity of violence, he was also careful to underscore its challenges and constraints.

Violence preoccupied the attention of Blacks in early nineteenth-century Pennsylvania. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that violence was in the air! Most whispered the subject quietly. A few openly debated it and offered sobering and insightful opinions. In fact, Carter Jackson states the “perennial question” of political thought which Blacks sought to answer as: “Is violence a valid means of producing social change?” The central theme of her book is that violence was very much embedded in the transformation of the nation and the status of Blacks in the antebellum period. Focusing on the activism of Black abolitionists, she contends that there was a noticeable shift in Black leadership
orientation in post-1850 toward violence due to the failure of moral suasion. Black leaders now combined “protective violence” (self-defense) with the threat of violence. They had come to the conclusion that, like the violence of slavery, abolitionists needed to apply “force and violence” in response. Carter Jackson ascribes this shift to the noticeable failure of moral suasion; an ideology that implied “the unstated assumption that Black people were equal.” White negative responses to Black success belied this assumption. Moral suasion had not stemmed the tide of “disenfranchisement, kidnapping, unemployment, segregation and increased violence.” In essence, the anti-Black violence and race riots of the 1830s and 1840s exposed the limitations of moral suasion as well as nonviolence.

The Black community Delany encountered in Pennsylvania in 1831 was therefore starting to view violence differently; agitated no doubt by the 1830 failed Nat Turner’s insurrection in Southampton County Virginia. Though it occurred in a distant state and failed, the episode, particularly Nat Turner’s bravery, assumed mythic proportions among Blacks in Pennsylvania, as in other parts of the country. Delany immersed himself in the excitement and it was precisely at this time that, according to his authorized biographer, Frances (“Frank”) Rollin, Delany “consecrated himself to freedom, and registered his vows against the enemies of his race.” This consecration, however, should not be misconstrued as endorsement of violence. As committed to, and as passionate as Martin Delany was about, the quest for Black freedom in America, he was equally clear and unambiguous concerning how far he was willing to go, the limits of the strategy he would adopt, and how much he was willing to sacrifice for that end. In his judgment, though no sacrifice was too high for the cause of Black freedom and equality in America, sacrificing one’s life, or recklessly endangering it, was definitely not one of them. This is a reflection of how deeply Delany was influenced by the two individuals who helped shape the ideological contours of the Black abolitionist movement during its early beginnings in Pennsylvania: the Reverend Lewis Woodson and William Whipper. They were among leading advocates of nonviolence during Delany’s formative years in Pittsburgh. In their writings, both Woodson and Whipper argued for and stressed the imperative of survival. They considered survival most crucial to one’s ability to advance the cause of Black freedom and empowerment in America. Delany began his education in 1831 at the African Methodist Episcopal Church Cellar School in Pittsburgh cofounded by Reverend Woodson. The year also coincided with the official launching of the Negro National Convention movement which birthed the Black abolitionist movement. These were momentous and exciting times for Blacks. They were not only independently creating their
movement and institutions but also several of their leaders began to engage in spirited and productive debates about procedures and strategies and about ideas and ideals for the burgeoning Black abolitionist movement.

As a young man, Delany gained as much knowledge as possible from these debates. Their ideas impacted him for the first part of his antislavery career, and one might argue, also for the rest of his life; Delany did not deviate from the nonviolence philosophy and strategy they propagated. To underscore this point, Rollin described Delany as someone nature had “marked for combat and victory and not for martyrdom.” To understand Delany’s attitude and disposition toward violence, one needs deeper understanding of the broader context and ideological debates that shaped those crucial early years of the Black abolitionist movement, which, as pointed out, coincided with Delany’s formative years. There is therefore no better starting point than analysis of the controversies over violence in the deliberations of early to mid-nineteenth-century Black national and state conventions. Though, violence generally was not a popular option among Blacks, there were occasions during both national and state conventions when delegates spiritedly debated and considered violence as means of advancing the cause of Black liberation. Nonetheless, for much of the first half of the nineteenth century, Blacks remained faithful to moral suasion and nonviolence as abolitionist philosophy and strategy. In other words, though violence was a minority option; it was never completely ruled out of consideration. As a young observer, and newcomer to the scene who was also struggling to gain education, Delany did not actively participate in, or contribute to, these early deliberations. However, as he matured and as his antislavery zeal blossomed, Delany would assume a pivotal role in the propagation of abolitionist ideas and became a major contributor to the debate and controversies about violence and its place in, and relevance to, the Black struggle.

Debating Violence

Although the subject of violence featured in the deliberations of some of the state and national Negro conventions of the 1830s and 1840s, it came into sharper and more contentious focus at the August 1858 convention of the Colored Citizens of Massachusetts held in New Bedford. Two issues provoked spirited debates among the delegates. The first was the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law (FSL) which pledged federal support for the pursuit, apprehension and return of fugitive slaves. The second, and perhaps more contentious, was the recently rendered Supreme Court decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), which concluded that
Blacks “had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order; and altogether unfit to associate with the White race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the White man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit.” Put simply, Blacks were not considered citizens of the United States and were stripped of all rights. For several days the delegates discussed the implications of the FSL and considered violence as an appropriate response. One consideration was whether free Blacks could and should foment revolutionary ideas among, and incite the insurrection of, slaves. Some delegates thought so. Ohio delegate Charles Lenox Remond was unequivocal and uncompromising. He insisted that the days for talks and resolutions were over. It was time for action. According to the minutes of the meeting, Remond wanted, “a position taken, a defiant position towards every living man that stood against them, towards legislatures, and congresses, and supreme courts.” He believed that “the colored people would gain nothing by twiddling and temporizing . . . they were strong enough to defy American slavery.” Thus, Remond urged Black men “to stand up for and by themselves.” To accomplish this objective, he proposed the creation of “a committee of five . . . to prepare an address . . . to the slaves of the South to create an insurrection.” He urged slaves to “rise with bowie-knife and revolver and muskets.” According to one delegate, violence was “by far the most spirited discussion of the convention.” Passions ran high. However, when Remond’s proposal was put to vote, it lost by a wide margin.

As hinted earlier, this was not the first time Blacks debated whether or not to use violence as a weapon of change. It had featured prominently in the deliberations of at least three previous National Negro Conventions—Buffalo and Troy, New York, in 1843 and 1847 respectively, and Cleveland, Ohio, in 1848. In fact, at the 1843 convention, delegates considered a motion to adopt as a platform, Henry H. Garnet’s incendiary address to the slaves proclaiming, “Let your motto be Resistance! Resistance! Resistance! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance.” The motion lost by one crucial vote cast by Frederick Douglass, who was, at that time, according to one authority, “a revolutionary who opposed violence.” Also, at the 1848 convention in Cleveland, Ohio delegates lamented that Blacks were “far behind the military tactics of the civilized world” and therefore resolved to “recommend to the Colored Freemen of North America to use every means in their power to obtain that science, so as to enable them to measure arms with assailants without and invaders within [emphasis in original].” They further resolved to “appoint Committees in the different States as Vigilant Committees to organize as such where the same may be
deemed practicable.”¹⁹ These declarations suggested that there was recognition among Blacks of the need for some form of violent resistance. Yet, they were also very cautious. Despite their frustrations and alienation, Blacks would not fully commit to violence. Still in its formative years, the Black abolitionist movement was very much driven by integrationist aspirations, and Black abolitionists were overwhelmingly optimistic. Consequently, they embraced moral suasion which emphasized nonviolent change through hard work, thrift, education, and character reform; values rooted in the Protestant Work Ethics (PWE). Moral suasion became the philosophy of the Black abolitionist movement in its early phase.²⁰ Developments in the 1850s, however, changed the dynamics. The Fugitive Slave Law and the Dred Scott decision raised the profile of violence in both State and National Negro Conventions.

In 1858 in Massachusetts, however, legislative reversals notwithstanding, most Blacks remained skeptical of violence. Josiah Henson, a Canadian delegate, then resident of Ontario, Canada, cautioned against Remond’s suggestions. Born and raised of slave parents in Charles County, Maryland, in 1789, it would not be an exaggeration, therefore, to infer that slavery was no fairy tale to Henson. He had experienced and witnessed operations of the South’s peculiar institution in all its inhumane and brutal dimensions. It was no surprise, therefore, when in 1830 he escaped to the small town of Dawn, close to Dresden in Kent County, Ontario (Upper Canada), where he established the Dawn settlement, which became a magnet for fugitive slaves from the United States.²¹ Subsequently, Henson became active in the Underground Railroad and, according to one estimate, assisted over two hundred slaves in their escape to Canada.²² At its height, and under the management of the Henson family, the Dawn Settlement became economically self-sustaining, with a population of over five hundred fugitives.²³ It seems plausible to suggest therefore that contrary to popular Uncle Tom mythology, Henson was no coward. His actions required tremendous courage.²⁴ In 1858 in Massachusetts, however, his was the voice of caution. He urged delegates not to embark rashly and hastily upon a strategy which, he was convinced, would fail and with disastrous consequences for slaves. Though Henson believed it was appropriate for Blacks to express public outrage against the injustices of slavery and racism, he deemed the call for violent confrontation unreasonable because, in the event of a failure (a very high probability), he had no doubt that Blacks, particularly the slaves, would be subjected to unspeakable reprisals.

Standing firmly against violence, and rejecting Remond’s accusation of cowardice, Henson cautioned that “he didn’t want to see three or four hundred thousand men hung before their time... everything would be lost.”²⁵ He doubted if
free Blacks like Remond who talked tough and uttered violent rhetoric could be trusted to stand by, and with, the slaves if and when violence actually erupted. In this declaration, Henson advanced a utilitarian and existential theory of violence. For him, the choice of violence had to come with the certainty of victory—and victory meant physical survival, triumph, “whipping somebody.” Anything short of this assurance, particularly if engaging violence had the potential of one being the “whipped,” which could mean defeat and possibly death; then, violence was to be approached with the utmost caution, and avoided at all cost. Another delegate, Captain Henry Johnson who also opposed insurrection, informed the delegates: “If an insurrection occurred, he wouldn’t fight.” Reacting to Remond’s violent rhetoric, Johnson opined: “It was easy to talk, but another thing to act.” His assessment of the power dynamics led him to one conclusion: “If we were equal in numbers, then there might be some reason in the proposition.” In other words, Blacks simply did not have the “numbers” to launch a successful violent insurrection. What happened in Massachusetts in 1858 reflected a nationwide dilemma. Though some delegates endorsed violence as a weapon of change, the thought of failure compelled caution. They considered violence viable only with the certainty of victory. Blacks must engage violence from a position of strength; in which they would be doing the “whipping.” Thus, a certain survivalist and existential ethos informed Black responses to violence in the nineteenth century. In fact, many known advocates of nonviolence insisted they were not inherently opposed to violence, but only apprehensive of its failure. They would embrace violence if it would succeed.

Delany, Moral Suasion, and Violence

Few nineteenth-century Blacks embodied this utilitarian and existential conception of violence as Martin R. Delany. His philosophy of violence reflected deep personal experiences. As suggested earlier, being a “free” Black did not protect him from the brutalities and inhumanities that defined Black lives in Jeffersonian Virginia. Like other “free” Blacks, therefore, Delany grew up frustrated, angry, and alienated. His paternal grandfather Shango, who was captured in Africa and enslaved in Virginia, had once escaped with his family to Toronto, Canada, before being apprehended and returned to the United States. He was later killed in “an encounter with some slaveholder, who attempted to chastise him into submission.” His father, Samuel Delany, bore a permanent scar on his face, the result of injury caused by a large stone hauled at him by a posse of nine
men, including the sheriff, sent to arrest him for daring to resist “one Violet, as
he was endeavoring to inflict bodily punishment on him.” According to Rollin,
Delany witnessed the “mark of brutality” and “humiliations and bestial associa-
tions to which (his) hapless race was subjected,” with growing sense of bitterness
and a determination to “root out every fiber of slavery and its concomitants.”

Delany’s own encounter with violence, or one might say “baptism of fire”
ocurred on the evening of Wednesday the 28th of May 1848 in the small Ohio
town of Marseilles. Accompanied by Ohio native John Mercer Langston, Delany
had come to organize and deliver an antislavery lecture as part of his Western
lecture circuit for Fredrick Douglass’s paper, the *North Star*. They were greeted
by an angry mob of anti-abolitionists composed mostly of “the principal men
of the place,” who lined the main street and shouted “darkie burlesque” repeat-
edly. This was accompanied by the beating of “drums, tambourines, clarinets,
violin, jaw-bone of a horse and other instruments.” Someone in the crowd called
for “tar and feathers” and shortly thereafter a burn fire was started in the town
square. The crowd outside grew increasingly restive with repeated chants of
“Burn them alive—kill the Niggers! They shall never leave this place—bring
them out!” This went on for over four hours with Delany and Langston con-
fined to their hotel rooms and terribly scared. The drumming and festive atmo-
sphere continued through the night. As Delany surmised, this “exceeded any-
thing I have ever witnessed.” Late into the night, the pandemonium subsided
and the crowd dispersed, several vowing to return in the morning. This gave
Delany and Langston the opportunity to slip safely out of town.

Delany’s background and experiences notwithstanding, he attained intel-
lectual maturity in an environment that shaped a very conservative mindset
and consciousness. As mentioned earlier, he began his education in Pittsburgh,
Pennsylvania, in the early 1830s at the AME Church Cellar School and was
immediately thrust into an atmosphere dominated by spirited discourses among
leading Blacks in search of a philosophy for the emerging and burgeoning Black
abolitionist movement. In fact, Delany was educated and mentored by a lead-
ing discussant—one whose ideas helped shape the conservative thrust of the
early Black abolitionist crusade—the Reverend Lewis Woodson. Woodson was
a highly respected educationist who had cofounded the AME Church Cellar
School. He and another Black leader, William Whipper, lectured and spoke at
length about strategies for the Black struggle. Both evinced strong faith in moral
suasion and campaigned passionately against violence.

In his writings, Woodson rejected violence because of his belief in the essential
goodness of America. He believed that Blacks were denied and underprivileged
because of individual conditional and situational deficiencies which could be remedied though moral reform. Success in this regard would enhance the cause of integration.\textsuperscript{59} But more significantly, Woodson opposed violence because, in his view, it violated a fundamental law of nature—survival. He declared “self-preservation” to be “the first law of nature.”\textsuperscript{60} In order to succeed in their struggles, according to Woodson, Blacks would have to prioritize survival. As he poignantly affirmed, “I can do more by living than by dying, especially in our cause.”\textsuperscript{61} Woodson also invoked the scriptures to argue that escape from life-threatening locations and condition was consistent with God’s injunction. According to him, “Christ directed his disciples when persecuted in one place to seek refuge in another.”\textsuperscript{62} Then, he posed a rhetorical and existential question: “As Christians . . . have we morally the right to allow ourselves to be deprived of life, rather than suffer the infliction of a physical wrong?” His answer was unequivocal: “We are morally bound by the sacred scriptures, to answer in the negative. The scriptures nowhere inculcate the idea that a man may deprive himself, or suffer others to deprive him, of life, in order to escape the infliction of physical evil.”\textsuperscript{63} Escape from violent and life-threatening situations, therefore, was a divine injunction. Invoking religion to bolster his philosophy of nonviolence, Woodson claimed that God’s policy “shows that it is better to bear our wrongs in silence than to aggravate them by fruitless attempts at their overthrow.”\textsuperscript{64} Whipper equally wrote at length on nonviolence. He characterized nonviolence as divine; it drew humans closer to the divine nature, whereas violence reflected irrationalism, which drew humans closer to animals. To be nonviolent, therefore, he suggested, was to manifest reason, a divine quality.\textsuperscript{65} Whipper described violence as a product of “the rude passion” that animates humans, denying them peace and stability. He believed that humans possessed the capacity to expunge this “rude passion” through the exercise of reason.\textsuperscript{66} To be violent, according to Whipper, was to risk alienating God—the only power able to rescue Blacks from their predicaments. Furthermore, violence exemplified disorder, a violation of “nature’s first law: Order.”\textsuperscript{67} He opined that Blacks could not end slavery and racism through vengeance: only through the exercise of reason, which linked humans to God, who alone is able to end human suffering. Thus, Whipper sought to enlighten Blacks on the divine and ennobling power of patience and nonviolence. Further invoking scriptural authority, the Messiah, he declared, “commands us to love our enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you.” Violence, therefore, constituted a violation of “moral and divine law.”\textsuperscript{68} Both Woodson and Whipper characterized violence as self-destructive and insisted that the Black struggles
of their times had no place for martyrdom. They deemed risking one’s life for a cause, however justifiable, ill-advised. Nonetheless, Woodson affirmed the right of the individual to self-defense, especially when attacked. However, this was not an absolute right either. Self-defense should carefully be balanced with consideration for one’s safety and survival. Rather than defend yourself and risk death, Woodson endorsed emigrating to a safer environment.49

The ideas Woodson and Whipper espoused profoundly shaped Delany’s formative years. It was no coincidence therefore that moral suasion and nonviolence became the central tenets of his abolitionist philosophy. He began an active abolitionist career in the late 1830s a dedicated moral suasionist who had been properly schooled in the Woodson-Whipper philosophy of nonviolence. Throughout the 1840s, Delany emphasized and prioritized moral suasion in his antislavery lectures.50 From 1843, when he launched his short-lived newspaper the Pittsburgh Mystery to 1847 through 1849 when he served as coeditor of Frederick Douglass’s paper, the North Star, Delany helped spread the gospel of moral suasion to free Black communities in the Midwest, Northeast, and across the nation. The 1840s was a crucial period in the Black abolitionist movement when delegates at state and national Negro conventions debated, among many other subjects, the utility of violence. In his contributions, Delany advised Blacks to prioritize moral and character reform.51 In both state and national conventions, during public lectures, and in many of his publications, he argued passionately for the adoption of moral suasion as reform strategy. Success in moral and character reform would constitute “truths as evident as self-existence . . . beyond the shadow of a doubt,” which would radically transform not just the Black condition, but the entire nation.52 Ironically, his moral suasion convictions notwithstanding, Delany soon developed a radical reputation. This was no doubt due to the “radical,” “violent,” and vitriolic contents of his antislavery lectures. For this, some mistook him for a violent character, someone who would not hesitate to pick up arms against injustice and oppression. This was only partially true. Even the near-death experience in Marseilles, Ohio, could not dent Delany’s faith in moral suasion abolitionism, and he would continue his antislavery lecture circuitry for another year. This was however about to change. Circumstances would soon compel Delany to rethink his views on moral suasion and nonviolence.

Delany, the Fugitive Slave Law, and Violence

The late 1830s through the 1840s were particularly violent years for free Blacks attempting to survive in so-called free Midwestern and Northern states. Not
even “liberal” Pennsylvania was spared the virulent and rampant anti-Black violence. Pittsburgh was among the cities hardest hit. Delany became actively involved in organizing resistance to protect Black institutions (churches, schools, and cooperative societies), businesses, and private dwellings. This development seemed to reflect a statewide attempt to deny Blacks their due rights and privileges. At a state reform convention in 1837, the state constitution was amended granting suffrage to poor Whites, while excluding Blacks who owned property and paid taxes. The introduction of the word “White” in the Third Article of the constitution effectively eliminated Blacks as citizens. Outraged, Delany joined other Blacks to protest. In March of 1837, he participated in a meeting organized by Blacks in Allegheny County to deliberate on further actions. The intensification of anti-Black violence, especially in Pittsburgh, led to the organizing of resistance to protect Black institutions and property. The mayor sought Delany’s assistance in organizing a biracial vigilante committee for law and order. Delany gave further hints of his evolving views on violence as reform strategy at the National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio. As chair of the Business Committee, Delany helped to draft several resolutions, one of which, referenced earlier, clearly recommended the consideration of violence and it is worth recalling verbatim. Resolution 22 read thus: “Whereas, we find ourselves far behind in the military tactics of the civilized world, therefore, Resolved, that this convention recommend to the colored freemen of North America to use every means in their power to obtain that science, so as to enable them to measure arms with assailants without and invaders within; therefore, Resolved, that this convention appoint committees in different states as vigilant committees, to organize as such where the same may be deemed practicable [emphasis added].”

The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law (1850) seemed to finally change Delany’s view of violence. The law was part of the Compromise of 1850 meant to diffuse the growing sectional conflict over the expansion of slavery. Among its provisions, the law guaranteed federal support for the pursuit, apprehension and return of fugitives. It now made it illegal for a state not to assist with enforcement. The law, in Carter Jackson’s words, “resurrected” the abolitionist movement that had been dormant. She describes it as the “final turning point in a failed campaign for moral suasion.” It immediately enhanced the appeal of violence as an appropriate response. Furthermore, she contends, the law “radicalized Black abolitionists” and nurtured the growth of nationalist ideas and sentiments. It also made “violence the new language for the oppressed.” It ignited mass protests in several cities and Black abolitionists vowed to use violence in defense, if necessary. In several Black conventions, according to
Jackson, resolutions were passed which reflected Black frustrations and determination to resist. The resolutions sanctioned violence by both fugitives and abolitionists. Black leaders therefore manifested a resolve to render the law unenforceable.\textsuperscript{60} Blackett argues that the law galvanized resistance in Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Illinois, and Michigan. Gripped by fear of “invasion of slave catchers” and probability of being re-enslaved, many “scrambled to evade recapture” by escaping to a distant place like Vermont; some going as far as Canada.\textsuperscript{61}

Delany interpreted the law as indisputable proof that Blacks would never be granted their due rights and privileges in America.\textsuperscript{62} In a lengthy critique, he concluded:

By the provisions of this bill, the colored people of the United States are positively degraded beneath the level of the Whites—are made liable at any time, in any place, and under all circumstances, to be arrested—and upon the claim of any White person, without the privilege, even of making a defense, sent into endless bondage. Let no visionary nonsense about habeas corpus, or a fair trial, deceive us; there are no such rights granted in this bill.\ldots [emphasis in original]\textsuperscript{63}

Delany concluded that the law was a racist proslavery law designed to rid the nation of free Blacks and vowed to resist its implementation with violence if necessary. At a gathering of Allegheny County officials, including the mayor, senators, and congressmen, he vented his frustrations by threatening violence against anyone, regardless of authority, who ventured into his space in pursuit of fugitives. His justification of violence is worth quoting at length:

Honorable Mayor, whatever ideas of liberty I may have; have been received from reading the lives of your revolutionary fathers. I have therein learnt that a man has a right to defend his castle with his life, even unto the taking of it. Sir, my house is my castle; in that castle are none but my wife and my children, as free as the angles of heaven, and whose liberty is as sacred as the pillars of God. If any man approaches the house in search of a slave,--I care not who he may be, whether constable or sheriff, magistrate or even judge of the supreme court—nay, let it be he who sanctioned this act to become law, surrounded by his cabinet as his bodyguard, with the Declaration of Independence waving above his head as his banner, and the constitution of this country upon his breast as his shield,--if he crosses the threshold of my door, and I do not lay him lifeless corpse at my feet, I hope the grave may
refuse my body a resting place, and righteous heaven my spirit a home. O, no! he cannot enter my house and we both live.\textsuperscript{64}

In the passage above, Delany invoked the Constitution, Declaration of Independence and America’s revolutionary heritage to affirm the legitimacy of violence in defense of personal liberty. These were not empty words or bravado. Delany was now willing openly to confront violence if necessary. As secretary of the Philanthropic Society of Pittsburgh, an organization committed to helping fugitives, Delany became actively involved in operations of the Underground Railroad. According to one estimate, within one year, the society helped close to three hundred fugitives escape to Canada.\textsuperscript{65} By mid-1853, Delany had helped create a very active anti-Fugitive Slave Law vigilante committee in Pittsburgh. Delany, John Peck, W. M. Webb, and Thomas Burrows became the public face of this committee. They vowed to resist implementation of the law by forcibly intervening to prevent the recapture and return of fugitives. The committee made national and international news when it rescued a young Jamaican boy who had been decoyed from his homeland and was being taken through Pittsburgh for enslavement in Tennessee. The boy’s freedom secured, he was placed in Delany’s custody.\textsuperscript{66} The influx of emboldened slave catchers and bounty hunters to Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and New York galvanized what Manisha Sinha characterizes as “Abolitionist Underground” of vigilance committees.\textsuperscript{67} These committees existed, in the words of William Still, “not only to rescue self-emancipated slaves from being re-enslaved but also to free slaves brought by their masters to the North.”\textsuperscript{68}

These fugitives (or self-emancipated slaves) inspired and radicalized Black abolitionists, notably Martin Delany.\textsuperscript{69} Not surprising, his state of Pennsylvania had the highest number of runaways and thus became the epicenter of vigilantism.\textsuperscript{70} Kidnappers, bounty hunters, and slave catchers who came to Pennsylvania encountered hostile environment of the Vigilance Committee and Fugitive Aid Society.\textsuperscript{71} Carole Wilson highlighted this point in another study of vigilantism and the enforcement of the FSL. She noted that “one store in Pittsburg [sic] sold, in one day, last week, over thirty revolvers from four to six barrels each and twice as many bowie knives, to the colored people and their friends.”\textsuperscript{72} Two years after the passage of the FSL, Delany published his seminal work \textit{The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People} (1852) in which he advocated emigration, arguing, on the basis of the FSL, that America was irredeemably racist and predicted the imminent nationalization of slavery. Slavery, he opined, would become national in scope as it spreads into, and consumed, the
North. He also discussed the role of slavery as a unifying economic institution; the glue that held both sections of the nation. Delany’s conclusions were not baseless. In fact, as Blackett contends, the crises, anxiety and instability and displacement of Black lives that the FSL exemplified occurred simultaneously in an environment of opposition to Black presence, “symbolized by the state promotion of colonization.” This was clear message that Blacks were not wanted.

Martin Delany was one of those in leadership position who thought it was time for Blacks “to turn their back on America for a future elsewhere.” He presented emigration as the only means by which Blacks, as a people currently living in a country in which they did not “constitute an essential part of the ruling element (and) would be able to both “secure their liberty” as well as “control their own political destiny.” The Delany who had once condemned and opposed colonization, and described by Blackett as Pennsylvania’s “most ardent opponent of colonization,” the ACS and its Liberia scheme, was now loudly and openly advocating what to many seemed like a similar scheme. David Brion Davis also asserted that previous opposition to Liberia and colonization did not deter Blacks in the 1850s from embracing emigration. However, many, like Delany, were careful to distinguish emigration from colonization. Emigrationists like Delany argued that “the elevation of Blacks depended on removing at least some . . . from a malignantly prejudiced environment.” This was what led Delany to declare by 1852 that Blacks were excluded permanently from the laws and privileges of the country, as represented by the FSL. He likened the status of Blacks to that of marginalized and oppressed European minorities such as Poles, Hungarians, and Jews, and even far worse than these.

Delany’s forceful defense of emigration in The Condition provoked rebuke from the renowned White abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison who accused Delany of fomenting separatist consciousness. Underlining what he discerned as the racial essentialist undertone of the book, Garrison portrayed Delany “‘the author of this work,’ as both ‘Black and comely’ . . . so Black as to make his identity with the African race perfect.” He then lamented Delany’s “tone of despondency,” and what he characterized as “an exhibition of the spirit of caste.” Delany responded with a strong affirmation of his existential right to resist oppression. “Were I a slave,” he wrote, “I would not live to live a slave, but boldly STRIKE for LIBERTY, for FREEDOM or a martyr’s grave [emphasis in original].” Were Delany a slave, based on his vitriolic reactions to the Fugitive Slave Law, it is reasonable to infer that he would most likely have been the “Nat Turner” type. But he was never a slave. Delany was a free Black. Yet, despite the relative latitude that came with being a “free Black” in America, he did not
actively engage in any violent subversive plots. He valued his “freedom”—the freedom to be alive and thus in position to organize and plot against the system in ways that did not endanger his life. Survival was paramount for Delany. Put differently, as a “slave” Delany possibly would have risked martyrdom than have his liberty trampled upon. As a “free Black,” however, he ruled out martyrdom. He would not risk death. His life and thought evinced an existential aversion to violence, especially one that seemed doomed to failure. In the Hensonian sense, and consistent with the contention of his authorized biographer cited above, Delany would rather “whip” someone else than be “whipped.” One episode in his life which clearly underscored his aversion to, as well as ambivalence on, violence was his response to John Brown’s revolutionary scheme.

Delany, John Brown, and Violence

John Brown, the fiery and “crazy” White abolitionist had concluded that only a violent revolution would upstage slavery, and with just a handful of die-hard revolutionaries, he believed that he could initiate and lead a movement that would destroy slavery. Brown was born in 1800 in Torrington, Connecticut, into a poor but religious home. His father, Owen Brown, was “earnestly devout and religious,” a quality young John Brown seemed to imbibe. He embraced the lifestyle of an ascetic and like Delany, avoided hard liquor and disdained tobacco. “If I had the money that is smoked away during a single a day in Boston,” Brown once lamented, “I could strike a blow that would make slavery totter.” His religious convictions strengthened after 1805 when the family relocated to Ohio where he became actively involved in local church activities. Brown’s entire life was marked by a crisis of direction as he struggled to gain viable and permanent employment. As Brown matured, his family was plagued by tragedies that seemed to push him to the brink of total alienation from society. The seemingly unending quest for gainful employment kept Brown constantly on the move. Through such movements, he gained broader perspectives on slavery which he came to regard as contrary to God’s plan. His understanding of the Bible further reinforced his conviction that God wished the destruction of slavery, and that he, John Brown, would be the instrumentality for actualizing that end. Most objective analysts considered Brown’s revolutionary scheme reckless, suicidal, and insane. But he would not be deterred.

Convinced of the justness of his cause, Brown surged ahead and actively solicited the support of leading Blacks in the United States. Unfortunately, his expectations were dashed. After careful consideration, most Black leaders, including
Frederick Douglass, wisely kept Brown at a respectable distance. In fact, Brown met Douglass on several occasions to discuss his scheme and solicit support. The first meeting, according to Douglass, was at Brown’s home in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1847. Douglass left this meeting sympathetic to Brown’s contention that “Slavery could only be destroyed by bloodshed.” In subsequent meetings in Douglass’s home in Rochester, New York, several years later, Brown elaborated his plan which, to Douglass, now seemed reckless and foolhardy. What had happened? According to Douglass, Brown’s initial plan had not included an attack on the United States. It was simply a scheme to spread disaffection among slaves. By the late 1850s, however, Brown’s plan had morphed into open assault on the United States government, a move Douglass deemed ill-advised and suicidal. As he explained, “I at once opposed the measure . . . such measure would be fatal to . . . slaves . . . fatal to all engaged in doing so.” Douglass was equally troubled by the demographic disadvantage; “The slave is a minority, a small minority, the oppressors are an overwhelming majority. The oppressed are three million; the oppressors are several millions. The one is weak; the other is strong. The one is without government; the other possesses every advantage in these respects; and the deadly aim of their musketry holds the slave down.” Invoking Hensonian existential theory of violence, Douglass insisted he was willing “to combine, and even to conspire against slavery” but only “when there is a reasonable hope of success.” In other words, Douglass, like Josiah Henson, would fight only if he would be doing the “whipping.” Convinced that Brown “would never get out alive” and that his plans would “rivet the fetters more firmly than ever on the limbs of the enslaved,” Douglass calmly and wisely rejected Brown’s entreaty.

Not easily deterred, Brown then turned to Delany, who at the time was living in Chatham, Canada West, believing that he would endorse his scheme without hesitation and unconditionally. Brown had become convinced that he would find a receptive audience to his violent scheme among fugitives in Canada; those who had daringly and bravely manifested their disdain for slavery by escaping. He was optimistic that none would be more receptive than Martin Delany. During their very first meeting, according to Delany, Brown informed him that he had been advised by “distinguished friends of his and mine, that, if he could but see me, his object could be attained at once.” Brown therefore seemed to hinge everything on Delany’s support. As he reiterated during their meeting, “I have come to Chatham expressly to see you. . . . I have much to do but little time before me. If I am to do nothing here, I want to know it at once.” Delany was astonished by “the conclusion to which my friends and himself had arrived.” Nonetheless, he assisted in summoning and organizing Brown’s Constitutional
Convention in Chatham in May of 1858, which was supposed to serve as the recruiting platform for his revolutionary army. In principle, Delany seemed to endorse Brown’s proposal for violence against slavery. The role he played in helping to organize the Chatham convention led many to believe Delany was deeply involved in the conspiracy. As one aggrieved Virginian surmised, “Delany . . . with other fugitive negroes and American White abolitionists and cut-throats, conspired and planned to attack and conquer the Southern States by means of servile insurrection and massacre.” Also, survivors of the raid and other close associates of Brown confirmed Delany’s supportive role.

Delany however denied explicit knowledge of Brown’s violent intention and insisted that Brown was very secretive and that it was not clear at the convention what exactly he was up to. As Delany contended, the Harper’s Ferry raid contradicted the spirit of the convention, which was primarily to reorganize and strengthen the Underground Railroad by diverting fugitives to Kansas instead of Canada. No one anticipated violence. Had Brown been open about his violent scheme, Delany was “doubtful of its being favorably regarded.” The deliberations of the convention, however, clearly suggested that Delany did not enthusiastically support the scheme. Delany’s claim that Brown was secretive about violence is, however, contradicted by eyewitnesses who remembered Delany “as having objected to many propositions favored by Captain Brown as not having the chance of success,” prompting Brown to react disappointingly: “Gentlemen if Dr. Delany is afraid, don’t let him make you all cowards.” Delany’s attempt to deny knowledge of Brown’s violent intention is understandable given that in the aftermath of the failed raid on Harper’s Ferry, Virginian authorities went after anyone remotely associated with Brown. Most Black leaders, including Douglass who once sympathized with, and offered, Brown moral support, publicly disavowed any knowledge of, or association with, the scheme. Nonetheless, Delany’s denial is difficult to sustain, given that Brown went to Canada to confer with him, and he subsequently helped summon the convention. It was evident however that Brown had misjudged Delany’s “radical” disposition. However deeply opposed he was to slavery, there was a limit to the risk Delany was willing to take in demonstrating his opposition. Endangering or sacrificing his life was not an option. Little wonder then that when Brown found himself outnumbered and outgunned at Harper’s Ferry by a formidable United States government force, Delany, nurtured in the Woodson-Whipper School of self-preservation, tactfully retreated and, consistent with the Woodsonian injunction, opted for the relative security and comfort of relocation (emigration). He was in distant Africa!
Delany was no John Brown! Self-preservation had become the foundation of Delany’s philosophy of life and struggle. In order to be an effective agent of change, a Black leader must, a priori, stay alive. Thus, while Delany vehemently defended the individual’s right to self-defense, he would not embrace any organized violent scheme that seemed reckless and doomed. Consistent with the teachings of his mentor, Rev. Lewis Woodson, Delany believed that the individual must first guarantee and secure his physical survival in order to be in a position to struggle on behalf of other Blacks. Such survival resulted from the avoidance of strategies which endangered life. The organized use of violence by Blacks was doomed. Like Douglass, Delany was troubled by the demographic imbalance—what he characterized as the “numerical feebleness” of Blacks. Here Delany was no doubt responding to the growing sentiments in some of the state and national Negro Conventions of the late 1840s and early 1850s during which some delegates seriously considered violence as a response to the FSL. Proceedings of several of the conventions underscored growing sympathies for some form of militant resistance. Delany spoke against what he discerned as a suicidal strategy and urged Blacks to consider instead the safety and comfort of emigration—of relocating to a safer environment rather than risking it all in suicidal violence.

The only organized violence Delany would endorse was one that he was convinced was divinely sanctioned and thus had the possibility of success. Like many of his contemporaries, therefore, Delany upheld the right to utilize violence when personally cornered and affronted—self-defense. He was however opposed to collective acts of organized violence, unless it was in cooperation with Whites and, ipso facto, from a position of strength which guaranteed success. In this situation, Blacks would not be the principal actors, but constituents of a broader and stronger force aimed at a goal that had a chance of succeeding. This was Delany’s conception of Black participation in the Civil War, which he fully endorsed. He not only embraced the war and campaigned forcefully for Black enlistment; he too enlisted and was commissioned the first combat Black major in the Union army. One of his sons also enlisted in the 54th Massachusetts Colored Regiment. In fact, he described the Civil War as an act of divine intervention. Soon after the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, a delegation of Black leaders, which included Frederick Douglass, had petitioned his successor Andrew Johnson for the expansion of Black political rights. In a letter to the delegation, Delany counseled caution and moderation and urged the leaders: “Do not forget God. Think, O think how wonderfully he made himself manifest during the war. . . . He still lives. Put your trust in him. . . . Wait! Stand still and see his salvation.”
Delany’s ambivalent response to violence was not unique. This was a defining attribute of nineteenth-century Black abolitionists. Though they acknowledged the necessity for violence, Black abolitionists generally refused, or were reluctant, to endorse violent schemes. Due to the demographic disadvantage, Black leaders considered violent confrontation irresponsible and unwise, however justifiable. The only violence worthy of execution was the one that ensured victory, the one induced by a providential deterministic agency. The subsuming of violence within providential determinism thus became a pervasive feature of nineteenth-century Black leadership discourses on reform strategies. There was a conscious attempt to situate violence outside the orbit of human causality. The process entailed a curiously ambivalent formulation that combined acknowledgement of the theoretical relevance of violence, and the ascription of violence to some external divine agency. What this established, however, was that although theoretically the Black experience called for, and justified, violent response, violence was both empirically impracticable and unethical, and Blacks lacked the capacity to execute successfully and unaided. David Walker and Henry Garnet, two acclaimed Black militants, reflected this ambivalence in their writings. Theoretically, both conceded that the conditions of Blacks justified the adoption of violence. But they made equally strong and compelling case for conceding to divine intervention.

David Walker’s powerful book, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829), provoked angry reactions among Southerners and proslavery advocates nationwide. Walker denounced White Americans in violent terms, and predicted, sans repentance, their imminent destruction. As he warned: “O Americans! Americans!! I call God—I call angels—I call men, to witness, that your DESTRUCTION is at hand, and will be speedily consummated unless you REPENT [emphasis in original].” Some critics have interpreted this, and similar denunciations in the book, to suggest that Walker endorsed the violent overthrow of slavery. Yet, nowhere in the book did he explicitly call for violence. Instead, in several passages, Walker utilized a biblical sermon style to denounce America. He predicted that Whites would suffer divine retribution and punishments if they failed to change. Walker made it clear that it was not the responsibility of Blacks to wreak vengeance and punishment on Whites, but God’s. However angry and militant Walker sounded, he did not call upon Blacks to unleash violent attacks against the proslavery establishment. Blacks were incapable of initiating and successfully executing such violence without divine intervention.

The same was true of Henry Garnet’s famous “An Address to the Slaves of the United States” (1843) which was equally hailed as a call for violent rebellion.
Violence

This was not Garnet’s intention. Though he urged slaves to adopt as their motto “Resistance, Resistance, Resistance” as Harry Reed noted, the violent rhetoric in Garnet’s “Address” was conceived within a providential determinist Weltanschauung. According to Reed, “The most militant assertions of Garnet were quickly followed by disclaimers of the expediency of an armed revolt.”

Although Garnet insisted that “no oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance,” he did not suggest violence as a strategy. He left the very nature and timing of this resistance open, telling Blacks: “What kind of resistance you had better make, you must decide by the circumstances that surround you and according to the suggestion of expediency [emphasis added].”

Then, he pleaded with them to “Trust in the living God.” In fact, as noted above, Garnet’s “Address” to the slaves was voted on at the 1843 Negro National Convention in Buffalo, New York, and lost by one vote, a margin that, some suggested, reflected popular support for violence. The vote, however, was not whether or not to endorse violence as a strategy, but simply whether to adopt the speech as part of the conference memorandum. This is significant. Had the delegates been asked to vote on the adoption of violence as a strategy, the margin of rejection would most certainly have been much wider. Even as Blacks in Pennsylvania, and other parts of the North experienced increased anti-Black violence, they did not completely abandon moral suasion. Rather, they chose to emphasize political and immediatist strategies as well.

Like most free Blacks of his generation, therefore, Delany unequivocally affirmed the individual’s right to self-defense. He would risk anything, including his life, in defense of his personal liberty. But like most other Blacks, he was equally opposed to acts of organized violence despite the fact that his and their collective freedom was very much circumscribed by the violence of slavery. Though “free” Black leaders manifested “bravery” in defense of personal liberty, but these “brave” leaders were most reluctant, even with the latitude of freedom, to initiate collective acts of violence against slavery. Two important questions beg for consideration: First, why the reluctance and refusal of free Blacks to embrace violence as a reform strategy? Second, how did free Blacks view the utility of violence? The answer to the first is fairly obvious, and many free Black leaders directly or indirectly answered the question. Douglass, for example, made it clear in his The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1882), and in his response to John Brown. Douglass considered the individual’s right to self-defense inviolable, and thus acknowledged the legitimacy and necessity of self-defense. Yet, he was reluctant to endorse collective acts of violence, which he regarded as both impracticable and suicidal. In his fight with the infamous slave-breaker Covey,
Douglass fully exercised his right to self-defense. He also agreed in principle with John Brown that violence against slavery was justified. Yet, he would not go along with Brown because of the probability of failure, in the event of which, Douglass believed, and rightly so, that Blacks would suffer the worst reprisals. Blacks viewed the utility of violence in existential terms: violence was functional only if it did not threaten life; its adoption had to include the certainty of survival (i.e., triumph).

**Delany’s Blake: Violence and Providential Determinism**

In the late 1850s, Delany began serializing his fictional work, *Blake, Or, The Huts of America*, in the *Weekly Anglo-African Magazine*. In 1970, Floyd Miller published the first edited volume which for decades was the standard edition most scholars relied on for study and interpretation of the novel. It should be noted that the Miller edition was not complete. It was missing the closing chapters, and many suggest, concluding part of the novel’s plot. Recently, Jerome McGann has published a “corrected” edition, which also is missing the closing chapters. In essence, *Blake* remains incomplete. The missing chapters may never be found. Notwithstanding, in my judgment, the serialized and published chapters contain the core of Delany’s thesis: to demonstrate the challenges and problematic nature of violence as reform strategy. In *Blake*, Delany developed a much more robust contextual and moral defense of nonviolence and emigration. As I argue in this study fiction offered Delany an alternative and effective medium for dramatizing the limitations of violence as a weapon of change. The late Ronald Takaki underscored that the fictional medium served as a “less intimidating” avenue for articulating nonfictional political views. “Much more than editorial, letters or autobiographies,” Takaki wrote,

> fiction . . . permits the writer to express dreams and deeply felt emotions he may have not been able or willing to articulate in speeches or nonfictional writing. Under the guise of fiction, Delany may have felt less intimidated in telling the truth, especially to Whites and perhaps even to himself. Delany’s *Blake* seems to reveal more about the father of Black Nationalism than all of his political essays and tracts.

Takaki was right. In *Blake*, Delany was much more forthright about his political beliefs, especially his views on violence. Yet, most modern critics ignore Delany’s central thesis: that though violence seemed an appropriate response to the challenges confronting Blacks, its adoption and ultimate success depended on
divine intervention and agency. Instead, critics have interpreted Blake through the prism of Delany’s “radical” nationalism. Blake is popularly interpreted as a plot for a hemispheric uprising and revolution. For instance, in Vincent Harding’s view, Blake “demonstrates that Delany carried the stream of Black radicalism deeper than almost any other man of the post-David Walker generation.”117 Another critic, John Zeugner, identifies the central message in Blake as “insurrection, violent purification through insurrection.”118 The fictional hero, Henry, according to Zeugner, constructs revolution as a three-way process: alienation, organization, and violence.119 In Jean Yellin’s analysis, Blake both celebrates “The Nat Turner Figure” and outlines “the organization of a guerilla army of Black liberationists.”120 Addison Gayle describes Delany as anti-accommodation and Henry as the “first Black revolutionary character in Black fiction.”121 In his review, Roger Hite represents Henry as a radical who cried “revolution now!”122 These interpretations are rehearsed in more recent studies and analyses of the book. Some scholars have highlighted Delany’s construction and utilization of geographical space, to reinforce the regional and global reaches of the “revolution” in Blake. This use of space, Judith Madera for example, argues, enabled Delany to “romanticize the scope of transnational antislavery resistance, with Blacks from the United States, the Guinea Coast, and Cuba brought in alliance.”123 Similarly, Martha Schoolman describes Blake as “the quintessential North American geographic novel”—a novel whose spatial purview interlaced Canada, the United States and Africa.124 While it is true that resistance and revolution permeate the novel, they are not the raison d’être. I argue that in fact the plot of revolution serves more as a conduit for the far more profound message Delany sought to convey: the imperative of focusing on and prioritizing emigration. Blake, I contend, is autobiographical. It is the fictional dramatization of Delany’s real-life experiences and the economic, political, and cultural ideas and programs he espoused and defended.

In Blake, Delany chose a hero with whom he shared qualities. Henry Blacus was very Black and also intelligent. Unlike Delany, however, Henry was a slave, who had been decoyed from his country, Cuba, and enslaved to one Colonel Steven Frank of Natchez County, Mississippi. Like Delany, Henry abhorred slavery, against which he declared total war after Colonel Frank sold Henry’s wife into slavery. He vowed to destroy slavery through the instigation of servile insurrections. He planned to travel through the length and breadth of the American South inciting insurrection among slaves. Embarking upon his scheme, Henry attacked religious determinism. Reacting angrily to the pleas of his aged in-laws to leave everything to God and “stand still and see his salvation,” Henry retorted,
“Don’t tell me about religion! What is religion to me? Put my trust in the Lord! I have done so all my life and of what use is it to me?” Henry was angry because religion, in his estimation, subverted Black consciousness. Nevertheless, he was not an atheist. As he quickly pointed out, “I do trust the Lord as much as ever: but I now understand him better than I used to.” His better understanding taught him that God was opposed to injustice and oppression. God’s own natural law sanctioned equality of rights. Henry, therefore, rejected the precept “stand still,” because it induced complacency and indifference.

By denouncing “stand still,” Henry, mimicking Delany of the late 1840s, sought to liberate Blacks from the mental shackles of a religious worldview that rationalized slavery on the promise of a better world beyond: the otherworldly gospel. He urged Blacks instead to struggle for their rights here: “I want a hope on this side of the vale of tears. I want something on this earth as well as a promise of things in another world.” He described Black liberation as the central mission of true Christianity. This was in fact the subject of a series in Delany’s reports on his Western lecture tour in the 1840s. In that series, Delany deplored what he characterized as a domineering and pervasive otherworldly religion which he blamed for subverting the self-deterministic aspirations of Blacks.

At every stop in his journey through the heart of American Slavery, Blake’s hero, Henry, infused in slaves a defiant self-deterministic consciousness, just as Delany had done during his tour for the North Star discussed earlier. He found slaves generally receptive to his revolutionary scheme. In Cuba, where the search for his wife eventually took him, Henry became commander-in-chief of a “revolutionary movement,” organized by aggrieved Blacks. Paradoxically, towards the end of his trip, Henry suddenly changed course and urged the slaves not to revolt but instead to “stand still and see the salvation of God” This about-face surfaced earlier during a visit to New Orleans where one overzealous old slave proclaimed, “War Now!” but Henry quickly cautioned:

My friend, listen a moment to me. You are not yet ready for a strike; you are not yet ready to do anything effective. You have barely taken the first step in the matter—and you must have all the necessary means, my brother—you must know WHAT, HOW AND WHEN to do. Have all the instrumentalities necessary for an effective effort before making the attempt. Without this, you will fail, utterly fail! [emphasis added]

But the old man was indignant. He wanted War “dis night” because “if we got wait all dat time, we neveh be free! I goes in for dis night. I say dis night.” Unfortunately, the other slaves seemed not quite ready. Meanwhile, news of the
“revolutionary” plan leaked to the government which responded with full scale harassment and intimidation of Blacks. Also, in Nashville, Tennessee, where, according to Henry “the harvest was ripe and ready for the scythe,” he counseled moderation, advising the slaves to “Stand still and see the salvation!” Many were disappointed. None more so than another old man, Daddy Luu:

“How long me son, how long we got wait this way?” he inquired.
“An, how long dat gwine be honey? Case I’s mighty tired waiting dis way!” Daddy Luu persisted.

“How long me son, how long we got wait this way?” he inquired.
“I can’t tell exactly, father,” Henry replied, “but I suppose in this, as in other good works, the Lords own anointed time.”

“I can’t tell you how long, father,” Henry responded, “God knows best.”136

Critics of Blake have failed to explain why, despite his alienation, Henry repeatedly urged caution and moderation. Unlike Nat Turner, Henry’s abhorrence of slavery did not result in any violent attempts at its overthrow. Why? The answer lies in his attitude to violence and religion, and in his strong faith in an alternative to revolutionary violence: emigration.

Personally, Henry loathed violence. In a discussion with Charles and Andy, two other slaves of Colonel Frank, soon after his Southern trip, Henry confessed his inability to use violence against his master for selling his wife. “The most I could take courage directly to do,” he admitted, “was to leave him.” (i.e., emigrate)137 In fact, he had returned to Mississippi to convince other slaves to escape (emigrate) to a more favorable environment (Canada). Henry confronted a dilemma: “mature reflections” justified the use of violence against slavery. Since slavery depended on violence, its destruction could and should come through violence. But, Henry lamented, “I cannot find it in my heart to injure an individual.”138 Emigration, therefore, enabled him to resolve this dilemma. He also regarded violence as against God’s plan and incompatible with Christianity. In the course of a debate on violence, the “Revolutionary Council” in Cuba split into two conflicting ideological camps: radicals and conservatives. Tired of incessant police harassments, the radical group opted for “revolution now.”139 No one expressed this determination better than Gondolier—the quarter master general of the movement. In a veiled criticism of Henry, the commander-in-chief, he opined:

We ought to by this time be able to redress our grievances. Some men are born to command and others to obey, and it is well that this is the case, else I might be a commander, and if I was, I might command when orders should not be given.140
Another concerned member, Ambrosima, daughter of Montego, a leading conservative, advocated revolution: “I wish I was a man, I’d lay the city in ashes this night,” she lamented. Her father, Montego, however, disagreed: “We should not hate our fellow man, as God made us all.” He opposed indiscriminate violence, arguing that not all Whites hated Blacks; “there are some good ones among them.” Violence, insisted another conservative, “would precipitate us into more trouble.” The conservatives opted for caution, moderation and Christian love. They conceived of violence as immoral and impracticable. They seemed to have won the debate.

Through the entire debate, Henry (commander-in-chief), sat “grave and sober” and silent. His preference for the conservative option was unmistakable. Blake underscored the futility of violence. Each time Blacks organized, whether on the plantations in the Southern states, or in Cuba, the state responded with brutal force. The use of force and intimidation by both state and federal authorities reflected the pervasive nature of racism. Right at the beginning of the book, the reader is impressed with the issue of national consensus on Black inferiority. During a visit to Natchez, Mrs. Arabella Ballard, wife of a prominent Northern judge, assured Colonel Frank and his wife that, especially on the subject of slavery, Northerners were in sync with Southerners. Her husband, Judge Ballard, owned plantations in Cuba, and consequently had a strong economic interest in sustaining slavery. He too pledged his fidelity to Southern values and declared unconditional support for the Dred Scott decision.

Delany used the Ballards, a prominent Northern family, to highlight an issue he had repeatedly drawn attention to in his earlier political writings: the economic and moral bonds uniting both sections of the country. In his view, this shared interest in slavery committed both to upholding the institution. Consequently, he challenged the myth of the liberal North. With such “marriage of minds” the odds in the event of a revolution favored Whites. Blake, nonetheless, did not completely rule out revolutionary violence. For the integrationists, that is, those who, in spite of the odds, chose to remain in the United States, revolution might succeed if, and only if, divine providence interceded. In Cuba, the “revolutionary” movement began and ended all its meetings with calls for divine aid and guidance, emphasizing the centrality of God to the revolution and, equally important, the compatibility of religion with freedom. Within this context, therefore, the farthest Blacks could go was prepare themselves mentally and psychologically for freedom, be conscious of freedom and of their self-deterministic capacity. However, the timing and the nature of the strike depended ultimately on the divine will. Only God knew the “What, How and
When” of the struggle.\textsuperscript{148} Therefore, Henry advised Blacks to turn to nature for signs. Addressing a session of the “revolutionary” council, he informed members that “the time to strike was fast verging upon them,” and he urged everyone to be vigilant and watch for signs, stressing: “Nature being exact and regular in all her fixed laws, suspended nor altered them to suit no person, circumstance, nor thing.”\textsuperscript{149} He did not elaborate on the exact timing and nature of the sign. However, if the prevailing modus operandi of contemporary Black activists and “revolutionaries” were any indication, such signs, were they to manifest, would probably have advised inaction, as demonstrated by the “Twelve Knights of Tabor.” Organized in 1846 in St. Louis, Missouri, by twelve Blacks from the states of Ohio, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee, the “Knights” were sworn to secrecy and dedicated their lives to the violent overthrow of slavery.\textsuperscript{150} A leading scholar described the movement as “one of the strongest and most secret of any organization ever formed by men.”\textsuperscript{151} By 1856, the name had changed to the Order of Twelve, with a membership of about 47,000 “Knights of Liberty,” all pledged and dedicated to “breaking the bonds of our slavery.”\textsuperscript{152} By 1857, with military subdivisions and cells created in several states, membership had grown to 150,000 composed largely of “well-armed men . . . prepared to spread death and destruction through the South.”\textsuperscript{153} They collected ammunitions and held regular drills in readiness for the ultimate assault on slavery.

At the summoning of their commander-in-chief, the Knights were to converge in Atlanta where the mayhem would commence. However, something extraordinary happened in 1857. The commander scanned the horizon for signs and found a clear and unambiguous message: Do nothing! God was about to intervene! In essence, “stand still for his salvation”! According to a report, “it was plainly demonstrated to him (i.e., the commander-in-chief) that a higher power was preparing to take a part in the contest between the North and South.”\textsuperscript{154} As I surmised elsewhere, “what would have been the bloodiest insurrection by free Blacks in American history was abruptly aborted by the specter of divine intervention.”\textsuperscript{155} This should not have surprised anyone. The Knights’ ideology allowed for escape into an alternate universe of providential determinism, one in which a higher power assumed leadership of the “revolution.” Their “revolutionary” zealotry notwithstanding, it was a cardinal belief of the Knights “that the lord God was on the side of right and justice, our faith and trust was in Him, and that He would help us in our needy time.”\textsuperscript{156} It is not clear if Delany was aware of the Knights. Was he involved? No one knows. But the timing of Blake’s serialization, occurring contemporaneous with the Knights of Tabor,
would lead one to infer some awareness in Delany of the existence of the organization. Nonetheless, the central message in *Blake* underscores a coincidence of conviction. Delany shared the Knights’ faith in divine intervention.

In *Blake*, Delany clothed revolutionary violence in divine robes to highlight a point he had made repeatedly: that left alone Blacks could never successfully launch a revolution. Only God knew the appropriate time for the revolution and the form it would take. Those who chose revolutionary violence, therefore, must “stand still” and wait for God’s salvation. They were to watch for some mysterious signs from nature. This mystification is not coincidental. It symbolizes the visionary nature of the violent option. It should be acknowledged that this intersection of revolution and religion was not unique to Delany’s *Blake*. Several critics have also noted with respect to David Walker’s *Appeal*; most notably Eddie Glaude Jr., that Walker “explicitly called for armed Black resistance against the institution of slavery (resistance sanctioned by the Grace of God) and prophesied America’s fall and destruction unless the nation repented for this evil.”

Eddie Glaude further contends that Walker coupled violence with divine intercession: “the two went hand-in-hand: for African Americans couldn’t wait for God to liberate them. They had to act for themselves” and yet “such action had to emanate from him.” Human aggression and agency alone would be ineffective.

Underlining this intersection of revolution and religion, Grant Shreve argues that “most accounts of the Black nationalism on display in *Blake* discounts its theological investment by granting Delany a sweeping political imagination, but neglecting his religious creativity.” Counteracting this, Shreve draws attention to “the religious experimentalism animating and shaping not only the novel but also Delany’s nationalism more broadly” and contends that “*Blake*—its strange history and missing final chapters notwithstanding—is the fullest expression of the metaphorical and political-theological possibilities of emigrationist thinking, a novel that reimagines the relationship between religious beliefs and public life as a strategy for contending with the global dispersion of racial discourse.”

In Shreve’s view, therefore, emigration, an unpopular and failed option in the 1850s, nonetheless “produced” a discourse that was “endowed with unique speculative capacities that find their most charged expression in *Blake*. Delany’s novel aspired to think at the outer limit of the Exodus paradigm to reveal what a Canaan for African Americans was for and to envision what such a new order might actually be.”

Henry’s preference, like Delany’s, was unmistakable: emigration. I argue therefore that though violence is a central theme in *Blake*, it is not the thrust of the novel. Delany introduced the idea of violence in order to demonstrate its
impractical, unviable, and visionary nature. The disagreement between Montego and his daughter represented generational conflict over violence. Yet, the fact that moderation ultimately triumphed suggested the problematic nature of the violent option. Ultimately, *Blake* made emigration an attractive and viable strategy. Though Henry (like Delany) moved to Canada, it was temporary. His destination was Africa. Members of the “revolutionary” movement in Cuba discussed the immense economic potentials of Africa. During one meeting, Placido urged his colleagues to endeavor to:

Prove not only that the African race is now the principal Producers of the greater part of the luxuries of enlightened Countries . . . but that Africans are among the most Industrious in the World and before long must hold the Balance of commercial power . . . and the race will at once Rise to the first magnitude of importance in the world.\(^{161}\)

But Madame Cordora questioned the possibility of Africa ever “becoming a great country [sic].”\(^{162}\) Placido reassured her that “not only hope, but undoubted probabilities existed for that, and, at no distant day.”\(^{163}\) He further emphasized that the foundation of all great nationalities depended on three principles: territory, population, and staple commodities; and Africa possessed all in abundance.\(^{164}\) Here is a strong reaffirmation of an enduring faith in the potency of an externally situated and economically viable Black State—the essence of Delany’s nationalism. Jerome McGann acknowledges this much in the introduction to his “corrected” edition. Arguing that Delany wrote *Blake* “as part of an argument for Black emigration to Africa and as part of a scheme to raise money for his emigration project,” McGann also underlines the religious underpinnings of the novel’s plot. As he rightly underscores,

Everything in Delany’s life shows that his revolutionary consciousness was grounded in a Black religious consciousness. In terms of actual history, God’s plan is to drive a new birth of human freedom through the agency of an emancipated Black consciousness. Recognizing that plan, hearing God’s call, Delany passes it along to his contemporary world. *Blake* is an account of Delany’s response to that call, and within the plot of the fiction, we glimpse how this divine scheme will work itself out.\(^{165}\)

In essence, McGann reiterates “*Blake* is arguing the necessity of emigration from White racist America, Emigrating “to Afraka.” Reimagining of an escape to “a world elsewhere” in *Blake* called “Afraka.”\(^{166}\) Robert Carr advances a similar interpretation. He represents *Blake* as the fictional articulation of Delany’s
overarching agenda of creating “a Pan-African/American nation-state that would undermine Southern slave economy and thus position Africa as the epicenter of a thriving Black commercial empire.” Finally, reiterating this interpretation, Grant Shreve writes: “In Blake, we can see anew how emigrationist thought expanded the field of view in Black Exodus politics to question what kind of social world order needed to be established to sustain an independent Black nation after liberation.”

Conclusion

It is my contention, therefore, that like his notable contemporaries (Douglass, Garnet, and Walker), Delany was ambivalent on violence. While he acknowledged the utility of violence and agreed that violence seemed an appropriate response to the challenges confronting Blacks, the certainty of failure compelled caution. It is also clear from his writings and public utterances that Delany both affirmed the individual’s right to self-defense and opposed collective and suicidal acts of violent insurrection. The latter would fail, unless undertaken from a position of strength and with divine guidance. This was consistent with the views of other prominent Blacks, including David Walker, Henry Garnet, and Frederick Douglass. While they endorsed individual acts of violence in self-defense, they discouraged organized and collective acts of violent resistance that had little chance of succeeding.

Delany wrote Blake undoubtedly to reiterate the ideas he had unsuccessfully attempted to popularize in his earlier political tracts: that violence was futile; that Blacks lacked the capacity to launch a successful violent resistance; that such resistance would crumble beneath the weight of state power; that though violence seemed justifiable in principle, its indiscriminate application was doomed and morally reprehensible. The only viable option then was emigration, and the political economy of an external Black State, whose success, he hoped, would confirm the capabilities of Blacks and thus negate racist notions of Black inferiority. The “radicalism” in Blake, therefore, did not go beyond rhetoric. Henry was undoubtedly bitter and defiant. Yet he was unduly cautious. While he acknowledged the need for violence against slavery, Henry objected on practical and moral grounds and directed his followers instead to the economic potentials of Africa. Unlike Nat Turner, Henry’s alienation did not result in violent revolt. He just couldn’t unleash violence against slavery! Blake’s ambivalence is unmistakable. On the one hand, Henry, the “militant,” is defiant and vows to destroy slavery. He successfully stirred his followers from their hitherto quietist
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and fatalistic dispositions. On the other hand, however, this same “militant,” impelled by ethical considerations and cognizant of the enormity of state power, opted for what some critics perceived as an escapist strategy: emigration. Henry perfectly reflected Delany’s ambivalence; he was angry, and seriously considered violence, but was restrained by both moral and pragmatic considerations and faith in divine intervention.

It is worth repeating that Blake remains incomplete; the last missing chapters have not been found. This means that we are left with nothing but speculation on what the likely outcome of the planned revolution would have been. Jerome McGann candidly acknowledges, “I may imagine how those missing chapters unfolded, but the truth is that I don’t know.” Nonetheless, scholars have been very creative in reimagining how the novel ended. While one is free to extrapolate and imagine how the novel ended, what is very much indisputable is that Delany did not leave us in doubt about the likely termination of his novel. As several critics cited here acknowledge, Delany’s ultimate goal and vision was to establish a strong case for emigration. Fundamentally, this was why he wrote the novel. Toward the end, the plot left no one in doubt about the impractical and problematic nature of any attempts at hemispheric revolution. If that were to occur at all, Henry made it clear to his followers to wait for divine intercession, just like the Knights of Tabor. I suggest therefore that Delany wrote Blake not to instigate a hemispheric rebellion that he knew was doomed, but to demonstrate the challenges of the option, and redirect people toward emigration and the potentialities of a successful African/Black nationality. Though Blake clearly mapped the geographical terrain of a hemispheric/Pan-African resistance, it was all in the planning and imaginary. Certain factors compelled reconsideration and caution. In the end, Henry Blacus asked his followers to seek divine guidance.

Delany manifested another curious paradox on violence. Though he refused to embrace violence when John Brown presented the opportunity, Delany seemed to cherish the symbolism of violence or what could be characterized as the moral appeal of militancy. Perhaps under certain circumstances, to be associated with violence, or to be seen as someone potentially of violent nature, had its utilitarian appeal. This could possibly explain why, in an address to a gathering of South Carolina Democrats (conservatives) in October 1874, Delany introduced himself as “A John Brown Abolitionist,” and advocated reconciliation and reunion with these erstwhile, and many would argue, and with justification, still unrepentant, defenders of slavery. It should be recalled that Delany began his post-Civil War career in South Carolina as a Freedmen’s Bureau field agent
who developed a reputation for violent rhetoric enough to prompt one White observer to conclude, after listening to one of Delany’s public addresses, that he (i.e., Delany) was “a thorough hater of the White race.” It is reasonable to infer, therefore, that several, possibly most in the audience in 1874, perceived Delany with trepidation. They saw him as someone who harbored deep hatred of, and potential for violence against, Whites. Therefore, his conciliatory tone and call for reconciliation would seem reassuring and thus comforting to this hitherto hostile constituency. They reciprocated with deafening applause and welcomed him to their movement! Along with Delany, they sang the “Bonnie Blue Flag” (the Confederate anthem)! Notwithstanding, it is worth recalling that John Brown’s scheme was the antithesis of slavery. Brown’s ultimate solution was violence, which Delany refused to endorse.

What then should we make of Delany’s self-characterization as “a John Brown abolitionist? What did being a “John Brown abolitionist” mean in nineteenth-century America? The answer leaves no room for ambiguity: a “John Brown abolitionist” would be someone who confronted violence without being restrained by the possibility or certainty of failure. John Brown did not consider the constellation of forces, neither was he discouraged by the likelihood of failure. Self-preservation was not paramount to John Brown, a key element of Delany’s worldview. It should also be noted that the South Carolina Democrats with whom Delany, this self-acclaimed “John Brown Abolitionist,” sought reconciliation and reunion, pathologically loathed Brown. They most certainly celebrated his failure and demise. To juxtapose Brown with his arch enemies, therefore, was the greatest of contradictions. In death, Brown seemed to have finally found peace with his living detractors! Only the mind of a Martin Delany could have contrived this, and it was obvious that neither he, nor his audience, recognized the contradiction. Of what relevance then was Delany’s invocation of John Brown before such anti-Brown audience? Perhaps, Delany’s action mirrored the changing political context. In the political climate of late Reconstruction South Carolina, an appeal for reconciliation from an avowed advocate of violence seemed consistent with what some political observers characterized as a changing political context and culture, one that was reconciling erstwhile political opponents. As a correspondent of the New York Times reported from South Carolina, “parties are now getting mixed in the South. Other questions than those raised by the War are now making their way into politics . . . which do not leave old party lines clear. . . . Republicans are found acting with Democrats and vice-versa.” This would be the only logical explanation for what, at the time, for Delany, was a political blunder of epic proportions.
It should be stressed that though Delany was ambivalent on violence, he was no coward. His courage and willingness to embrace and undertake violence given certain circumstances was attested to by the role he played in organizing resistance to anti-Black violence and vigilantism against the Fugitive Slave Law in Pennsylvania from the late 1830s through the early 1850s. This was also reflected by his commissioning as the first Black combat major in the Union army and his assistance with recruiting and raising several battalions of Colored troops during the Civil War. Furthermore, Delany undoubtedly encouraged one of his sons to enlist in the 54th Massachusetts Regiment. On violence, therefore, one can surmise that Delany, like Frederick Douglass, Josiah Henson, and many others of his generation, would readily undertake violence if it had a chance of succeeding (if their lives were not threatened). It is worth recalling that, in the words of Rollin, “nature marked Delany for combat and victory and not for martyrdom.” He would boldly confront any violent situation where victory was certain. The Civil War was one such instance of a violent confrontation that these Blacks believed would succeed, and they all endorsed it. Delany saw the “hand” of God in the Civil War and welcomed it. He saw reckless endangerment in John Brown’s scheme, and like Frederick Douglass, kept a respectable distance.