Conclusion

 Ahead of His Time

[M]y mission is to assist in the elevation of the oppressed and down-trodden of our land, in order faithfully to do which we must speak the truth and expose error, and this I shall do though the “heaven fall.”

—Martin R. Delany, “Report from Cincinnati, Ohio, May 20, 1848”

In his June 4, 1848, report to Frederick Douglass on his visit to Cincinnati, Ohio, Martin Delany reminded Douglass: “You know I care little for precedent, and therefore, discard the frivolous rules of formality, conforming always to principle, suggested by conscience, and guided by the light of reason [emphasis added].” Two weeks later, in the June 18 report from Milton, Ohio, Delany elaborated:

I am aware that I shall be subject to censure, by both friends and foes, for the course I have pursued in thus liberally expressing my opinion, but as I have taken my stand as one of the sentinels on the watch-tower of the liberties of our brethren, I never intend to leave the ramparts, nor suffer an approach of the enemy unmolested, until my colors first be grounded in the hands of the fallen helpless victims, who dared, in the midst of a tempest of oppression, such as now surrounds us, stand upon the citadel, and unfurl its proud drapery to the gaze and dismay of the enemies of our race, and the dearest rights of man.²

Delany wrote these statements in 1848 in the course of executing his duties at the North Star, which entailed visiting cities across the North, Northeast, and Midwest to promote the paper as well as deliver antislavery lectures and propagate moral suasion. In the statements, Delany introduced three vital attributes of, while also providing insights into, the courage and determination that would
define his experiences for the rest of his life. First, he underlined the twin forces or agencies that determined the ideas he promoted as well as the choices and decisions he made. These two forces constituted the existential dynamics of his philosophy of life: conscience and reason.

The ideas and strategies Delany promoted, the choices he made, and the alliances he embraced would be determined and driven primarily by the agencies of his conscience and reason. What ideological positions he defended at any given time and the affiliations he identified with derived from these two forces. Second, he underlined the existential dynamics of his thoughts, motivations, decisions, and choices: elevation of the oppressed and downtrodden. Third, he affirmed his awareness and acknowledgment of the probability of censure, opposition, resentment, and rebuke from all quarters (friends and foes alike) and the courage to hold steadfastly to his convictions. Delany would boldly express, espouse, and defend his views, choices, and decisions and would stand firmly by them, as long as his conscience and reason dictated they were the best for advancing the cause of the oppressed and downtrodden people. This would explain his willingness to advocate controversial and unpopular ideas and choices and the boldness with which he both condemned the prevailing racism and bigotry and defended provocative strategies for bridging the racial, socioeconomic, and education gaps, even when they conflicted with the positions and views of dominant groups. It would also account for his versatility as well as his capacity and willingness to advocate for the underprivileged and powerless and to engage such controversial subjects as the abuses and misuse of religion, the neglect of female education, the need to empower women in a society and culture of patriarchy, and the efficacy and challenges of violence as reform strategy. It also underscored his optimism about the malleability of America, as a result of which he encouraged Blacks to be hopeful even in the context of the most dehumanizing of experiences.

Though the American society Delany fought against was imperfect, nonetheless he was optimistic that it could, and would be, perfected. When this optimism proved wrong, Delany sought for, and was amenable to exploring, whatever strategies and solutions he thought would help advance change. The fundamental question at the core of his thoughts was: what shall we do to better our condition? In the course of answering this existential question, Delany offered insightful ideas and commentaries on some of the strategies his counterparts and the entire nation were debating and experimenting with, including education, violence, religion, and politics. Not only did Delany contribute to the discourses and debates his contemporaries had on these subjects, but
also his ideas far outlived him and his times. He could rightly be described as someone who was far ahead of his contemporaries on many of the issues of the time. His ideas and solutions would resurface in those of future generations. For example, in 1863 when General Benjamin Butler founded the Butler School for Negro children, the curriculum then considered ideal for elevating Negro children included subjects such as reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and grammar were precisely the same subjects Martin Delany had proposed during the 1840s. Furthermore, when General Samuel Armstrong established the Hampton Agricultural and Normal School, the curriculum emphasized industrial education that would impart trade and business skills. This was also the pedagogy Delany advocated again and again in the 1840s that ultimately became the model that produced Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee Institute.

Booker T. Washington is memorialized in American history as the exemplar of compromise and accommodation. He is vilified by some as someone whose ideas set the stage for the “Separate but Equal” Jim Crow culture that emerged in the late 1890s. While it is true that Washington advocated accommodation and compromise, he was not the first prominent Black leader to espouse and defend such policies. Martin Delany preceded him in advancing these ideas by at least two decades. A few excerpts from Delany’s book *The Condition* (1852) contain similar ideas and strategies Washington would highlight almost half a century later in his Atlanta Exposition address. For example, in his criticism of Blacks’ failure to prioritize practical and business skills Delany observed, “One of our great mistakes—we have gone in advance of ourselves. We have commenced at the superstructure of the building, instead of the foundation—at the top instead of the bottom.” He went on to write, “we should first be mechanics and common tradesmen and professions as a matter of course would grow out of the wealth made thereby.” Further lamenting what he discerned as overemphasis on Classical education, he wrote, “We as heretofore, have been on the extreme; either no education at all, or a collegiate education. . . . We jumped too far, taking a leap from the deepest abyss to the highest summit; rising from the ridiculous to the sublime, without medium or intermission.” Delany made similar observations in many of his reports for the *North Star* in the 1840s. In addition, his Freedmen’s Bureau reports during Reconstruction had specific recommendations for the education of freedmen. Delany’s criticisms and recommendations would resonate with, and be trumpeted by, future generations of Black leaders, most notably Booker T. Washington. Delany’s influence and legacy were not limited to education. He advocated gradualism in politics, deemphasized social
equality, and insisted that Blacks who aspired for positions of political responsibility be qualified and experienced. Decades later, Washington would amplify these classic Delanyean ideas in his 1895 epochal Atlanta Cotton Exposition address. Take for example these excerpts:

First,

Ignorant and inexperienced, it is not strange that in the first years of our new life we began at the top instead of at the bottom; that a seat in Congress or the state legislature was more sought than real estate or industrial skill; that the political convention or stump speaking had more attractions than starting a dairy farm or truck garden.⁹

Second,

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. . . . It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges.¹⁰

There are three classic Delanyean ideas in the above extracts from Booker T. Washington’s speeches: gradualism, prioritizing industrial skills, and deemphasizing social equality. Like Delany before him, Washington also suggested that Blacks be “prepared” for the exercise of the privileges they sought. The insistence on Blacks being “prepared” and “qualified” before aspiring for, and ascending to, positions of political responsibility was a point Delany stressed whenever he had the opportunity in the early years of Reconstruction.¹¹ This idea, as this study has shown, positioned Delany at odds with the mainstream Black political leadership.

Echoes of Delany’s political ideas reverberated beyond the 1890s. They remain audible even in today’s dysfunctional political landscape. Concepts and phrases such as “bipartisanship,” “reaching across the aisle,” and “forging biracial alliances” are among the ideals most commonly invoked, but rarely practiced, in modern political discourses, especially in America. They have become clichés, empty political slogans. Martin Delany both preached and practiced these ideals. Let us recall the political context. This was after a bloody and divisive Civil War, when emotions were still very raw over slavery and the entire Reconstruction program. Passions ran high on both sides. It was precisely at this critical moment when it would have been considered imprudent for a Black leader to
venture across the ideological and racial divide that Delany defied conventions and, propelled by the dictates of his conscience and reason, reached out to former ideological and racial antagonists and attempted to forge compromise and reconciliation. He exemplified courage propelled by the most intimate and personal of convictions. Booker T. Washington would popularize these approaches almost two decades later. Delany also further demonstrated that it was possible to combine Black nationalism with a conservative economic agenda. In order to empower Blacks, one could and should pursue mainstream middle-class values of self-help, self-reliance, and economic development. In the 1920s, Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican immigrant and leading Black nationalist and Pan-Africanist would combine his vision with Booker T. Washington’s brand of conservative economics. Martin Delany manifested this disposition at the onset of his antislavery activism. This was reflected in numerous articles and reports in the *North Star* during the late 1840s. This same consideration would inspire him during Reconstruction to advocate deemphasizing political rights in the pursuance of programs of self-help, self-reliance, and economic elevation.

Delany insisted that Blacks should not be locked into, or limited by, boundaries set by precedent and ideology. He did not view politics as a zero-sum game. On the contrary, he conceived of politics as the arena of accommodation and compromises. He believed that the astute politician had to be willing, open, and ready to explore alternative strategies and approaches and not be held hostage by predetermined ideologies or positions. On religion, Delany clearly argued and demonstrated that religion should be considered a lens through which God revealed to humanity how to be productive and fruitful here and not hereafter. He insisted that Christianity was not just for spiritual salvation but for secular elevation as well—that it embodied deep concerns for the daily challenges of humanity. He quoted copiously from the scriptures to corroborate the argument that religion should fundamentally be about improving the lives of the poor and needy; the less fortunate. In the scriptures, as Delany argued, God clearly endowed humanity with the earthly resources with which to improve the lives of humans here and now. He defined Christianity with a human and humane face. It was, he insisted, a religion that was about connecting with the poor and needy and bettering their lives. Long before liberation theology became popular, therefore, Martin Delany had articulated some of its core and defining ideals. It would, therefore, not be far-fetched to identify Delany among the pioneers of liberation theology.

Furthermore, in the nineteenth century when Black women, and indeed American women in general, were not supposed to be seen or heard publicly
advancing an opinion or staking a position, Delany challenged and defied that
collection. He prioritized the elevation of women. In fact, he premised the
elevation and advancement of an entire race on the status of women. How Black
women were treated, he argued, would determine and reflect the overall con-
dition and experiences of the Black race. He believed that Blacks would not
advance and attain meaningful progress for as long as Black women were op-
pressed and confined to domestic and menial occupations. This was all in the
late 1840s and early 1850s! Delany’s critique of the condition of Black women
and recommendation for their empowerment began during his brief stint at the
North Star. He would advance a much more robust advocacy for Black Women’s
empowerment in the early 1850s in his seminal publication, The Condition. In
this respect, Delany can reasonably be identified alongside of Sojourner Truth
and Harriett Tubman, two courageous and indefatigable abolitionists and
champions of Black women’s rights in the nineteenth century. On the status of
Black women, therefore, it could be argued that Delany was ahead of his time.
Also, the educational reforms he proposed during Reconstruction underscore
how far ahead of the times he was. For example, his calls to ban corporal pun-
ishment, to create a school environment conducive to learning, and to ensure
that schools were adequately supplied with resources that would facilitate learn-
ing are ideas now associated with modern progressive educational reforms. This
all grew out of, and reflected the concerns he felt about, the depth of poverty
and misery that plagued Blacks in his Bureau district in Hilton Head Island,
South Carolina.

Delany is widely acclaimed and remembered today as the father of Black
nationalism. Many represent him as the ideological and philosophical pre-
decessor of the likes of Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael.
While there is justification for this contention, given the contents of his pub-
lications and public pronouncements during the early 1850s emigration phase
of his career, an equally compelling case could be made for a counter-viewpoint
and narrative. Delany could also be described as the father of modern Black
conservatism. As this study highlights, his post-Civil War and Reconstruc-
tion political ideas embodied strong conservative ethos which simultaneously
endangered him to conservative political interests and alienated him from the
more radical elements of the Black political leadership. Delany’s conservatism
anticipated much that scholars and critics would later associate with, and attri-
bute to, Booker T. Washington. As this book underscores, Delany articulated
and experimented with diverse political strategies and ideals. During the early
phase of Reconstruction, he identified with the (radical) Republican Party.
By the mid-1870s, convinced that the party no longer reflected the interests of Blacks, Delany switched political affiliation and joined the (conservative) Democratic Party. He worked tirelessly for racial reconciliation and bipartisanship in South Carolina. In this, he found himself at odds with the mainstream Black political leadership. The prospect and probability of political retribution could not deter Delany from acting according to the dictates of his conscience and reason. That he failed in his predictions should not negate the altruism that infused the decisions and choices he made. The political ideas and strategies he advocated such as bipartisanship, compromise and reconciliation have become much sought after, but elusive, ideals in modern American political discourses.

The twentieth century has gone down in history as a violent era for Black Americans. The anti-Black lynchings that engulfed the country from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries; and the more recent frightening and seemingly endless killings of unarmed Blacks by law enforcement and self-appointed vigilantes underscore the entrenched nature and resiliency of America’s culture of racial bigotry and intolerance. Despite twentieth-century civil rights reforms, rather than abating, the racial intolerance and violence that historically defined the Black experience in America appear to be growing. Ultimately, the persistence of these racially motivated killings galvanized a movement that has become an embedded aspect of Black resistance—Black Lives Matter. The brazen and public nature of these killings broadened and expanded the scope and character of the resistance, becoming not just a Black resistance but an American resistance.¹³

Martin Delany anticipated this outcome over a century and half ago. America today reflects the world and reality Delany encountered and denounced in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The portraits of America Delany experienced and rendered were remarkable for their ugliness and their moral and racial debasement. That America bore uncanny resemblance to, and prefigured, an America he would not live to see: the America of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The chain of racial bigotry and violence extended unbroken from Martin Delany to Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, and Breonna Taylor, to name but few. To appreciate the magnitude of Delany’s foresight, his portraits are worth reproducing in their entirety. Recall the report he transmitted from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in February of 1849 in which he described his disillusionment with moral suasion. In that report, Delany condemned the dissonance between the promises and prospects of Black humanity.
and the “endless outrage and cruelty” Blacks endured (see Chapter 1). About five weeks after publishing that report, Delany wrote a scathing description of “American Civilization,” and lamented that

Not a place is there in the United States of America, whether city, town, village, or hamlet, in which a colored person resides or has ever been, or may go, that they are not continually subject to the abuse, more or less of the Whites—And though at times this abuse may not be corporeal or physical, yet it is at all times an abuse of the feelings, which in itself is a blasting outrage on humanity, and insufferable to the better senses of man and womanhood.

He made the poignant observation that “American people are remarkable for their readiness and aptitude in the persecution of those weaker in number and means than themselves.” All that said, Delany was careful not to be perceived as indicting every American. He made an important acknowledgment and distinction that foreshadowed twenty-first century developments worth quoting at length:

We repeat . . . that there are those good Americans who are utterly opposed to this civil outrage and Christian infamy, even those who make no profession to what is termed abolitionism, many liberal editors of different parties have manfully stepped forth and boldly and freely spoken out against these impositions, ably defending the cause of oppressed humanity; but these are few, comparatively, and least they be charged with “fanaticism” may only speak out when some aggravated outrage is committed, such as to call forth the indignation of public censure [like the murders of Michael Brown, Eric Garner]. It is the colored people who daily witness and experience these moral stabs and civil assassinations, perpetrated in so quiet and mild manner, comparatively, that they are not the subject of public attention, and only become so when the outrage is of such a nature as to become the subject of legal complaint, when, to be which, it must be recognized by the law as a penal offence [such as the horrifying killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks].

Delany then wondered what judgment Americans would have rendered had such atrocities as he described been perpetrated by Blacks elsewhere. As he queried rhetorically, “Did the colored people or their children, anywhere in the world, exhibit such continued evidence of moral baseness, it would be charged against them as the strongest proof of their insusceptibility of an elevated civilization.
Can Americans, as such, lay claim to civilization? This is a question that many today have asked and continue to ask about America.

Again, foreshadowing the future, Delany called for rallying the “voice of outraged humanity . . . against this intolerable crusade against our rights, and insufferable rioting against liberty—reckless trampling under foot our most delicate, and cherished sense of propriety . . . the weight of a nation grinds us in the dust, and we dare make the effort to cast it off.” Everything Delany witnessed and experienced led him to one stark conclusion: “There appears to be a fixed determination on the part of the oppressors in this country, to destroy every vestige of self-respect, self-possession, and manly independence left in the colored people.” In both documents, Delany spoke in a language that leading Black activists today utilize in their reactions to the contemporary state of Black America. Delany’s words and language captured the ugly dimensions and realities of Black existence in nineteenth-century America. In another sense, Delany vividly captured the America of the future. His portraits bore an uncanny and troubling resemblance to the America of today—the one we are all witnessing—the one that birthed Black Lives Matter.