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Item Type	article;article
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Download date	2025-05-17 20:52:13
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/823



March 2007 Newsletter

Teaching Martin R. Delany's *Blake or the Huts of America*

By Traore Moussa [1]

The aim of this paper is to design a course of readings around the teaching of Martin R. Delany's *Blake or the Huts of America* (1970). In doing so, I analyze aspects of anti-slavery struggles and the identity issues raised in Martin R. Delany's *Blake or the Huts of America*, which constitutes my primary source. I will also refer to C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins; Toussaint L'ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1963), which locates the slave trade in a more global context by pointing out the world political, economic and social factors that initiated, sustained and influenced the slave trade. Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1996) provides the main framework within which I analyze the identity component of the paper. In *Cities of the Dead*, Joseph Roach views the slave trade in a broader and more complex manner, by resorting to the notion of "circum-Atlantic" trade, instead of the limiting concept of trans-Atlantic trade. Roach's use of the term "circum-Atlantic" helps reveal the full dimension of the slave trade, by pointing out the role that Europe, America and Africa played in the molding of a new identity, as a corollary of the slave trade.

Robert S. Levine's *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass and the Politics of Representative Identity* (1997) allows me to locate Delany's *Blake or the Huts of America* within the context of the anti-slavery American novel. I use Kenneth S. Greenberg's *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (1996) in order to bring in other instances of slave revolts,

and to see how those other rebellions help us to arrive at a better understanding of Delany's *Blake*.

The main notion which comes to the mind of most readers once the slave trade is mentioned is the concept of the triangular trade conducted between Africa, America, and Europe in the 18th century, as a consequence of the circumnavigation of Africa. In *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (1986), Ali Mazrui captures, with accuracy and irony, the main impact that the triangular trade had on Africa:

Because Africa was hard to circumnavigate, explorers such as Christopher Columbus set sail westwards instead, looking for alternative sea routes to the Orient. Yet history did have its cruel revenge upon Africa. Christopher Columbus did not realize what damage he was doing to the African continent by discovering the American hemisphere. In a relatively short time, the demand for slaves in the "New World" played havoc with population patterns and social institutions in western Africa. A substantial part of Africa's population was dragged off, kicking and screaming, and shipped to the new plantations of the Americas. The maritime and nautical achievements of Europe and the "discovery" of new worlds to conquer did irreparable damage to Black Africa (103).

The long time that the slave trade lasted, and the determination with which the Europeans carried it out, find their explanation in Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead*. Roach contends that slave labor was indispensable to the European economy and, as a consequence, "carrying a different cargo along each leg of the Atlantic triangle comprising the Americas (raw materials), Europe (manufactured goods), and Africa (human beings), the holds of merchant ships never had to cross blue water empty" (8).

In *The Black Jacobins*, C. L. R. James exposes how the triangular trade fuelled the economic prosperity of European economy:

The slave trade and slavery were woven tight into the economics of the eighteenth century. Three forces, the proprietors of San Domingo, the French bourgeoisie and the British bourgeoisie, thrive on this devastation of a continent and on the brutal exploitation of millions (26).

These excerpts capture one aspect of the slave trade: its economic and the social repercussions. The array of sources considered here should be addressed with the overarching theme of broadening the scope with which we examine the slave trade. The institution of slavery must be examined as a circum-Atlantic phenomenon in order to embrace all the parts of the world which were affected by this practice, like Africa, the United States of America, Latin America with areas like Cuba and Brazil (which poignant cases for the examination of certain dimensions of the slave trade), the Caribbean islands, and Europe. Secondly, only a circum-Atlantic consideration of the slave trade enables us to examine the full scope of that institution's cultural impacts. Beyond the commodification of human flesh in order to obtain capital, the slave trade brought into contact various cultures, and this system, which operated through the usurpation or annihilation of some values by others, had the effect of producing a tremendous cultural hybridization which manifests itself in performances across the world. Joseph Roach presents the centrality of the diasporic element in *Cities of the Dead*:

The most revolutionary commodity in this economy was human flesh, and not only because slave labor produced huge quantities of the addictive substances(sugar, coffee, tobacco, and -- most insidiously -- sugar and chocolate in combination) that transformed the world economy and financed the industrial revolution. The concept of a circum-Atlantic world (as opposed to a transatlantic one) insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity (4).

In "Nineteenth-Century United States Literary Culture and Transnationality," John Carlos Rowe undertakes a thorough examination of the issues nationalism, nationality, colonialism, postcolonialism, and also the identity conflicts or complications associated with these notions. He delves into the specific case of the United States, and re-maps the USA and Africa, in the light of the slave trade and its impact on the borders which had hitherto been girded around the USA and Africa.

John Carlos Rowe bases his work on some the anti-slavery novels that constitute the backbone of this research: Harriet Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851), Delany's *Blake*, Kenneth S. Greenberg's *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (1996), Eric Sunquist's *To Wake the Nations* (1993), and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Rowe's new map of the USA is based on the effects of the slave trade. He poses that the USA is indeed made of two or three nations and each of these nations has a special identity and culture that is proper to it, and at the same time, each of these nations cries for "self-recognition" or "self-assertion." The various countries or nationalities that Rowe sees in America include the south, or the bastion of slavery, and the industrial north, which stands as the refuge for runaway slaves. Within the south we see two groups, the black slaves and the whites. The former are presented as "symbolic heirs of the biblical diaspora -- the exiles of Israel -- who found themselves colonized in a foreign land" (84). One trait that runs across the fugitive slave narratives is the danger involved in the crossing of the border between southern slavery and northern freedom and in Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, William Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom* (1860), and several other factual or imaginary narratives of the perilous escape from slavery, the reader discovers the political and racial borders of the United States.

In "Nineteenth-Century United States Literary Culture and Transnationality," the other component of America is Canada, which has a special character in the antebellum context. Like the industrial north of the USA, Canada epitomizes the land of freedom, and this accounts for the central role which Canada plays in the activities of the abolitionists and leaders of the anti-slavery struggle. Henry in *Blake* flees to Canada, and many fugitive slave narratives remind us of the absence of border between the USA and Canada: there is no material border, since the

Underground Railroad runs north to Canada. Rowe also uses a more contemporary factor to prove the non-existence of borders between the USA and Canada: the hegemonic policy of the USA who have always granted a minor place to Canadian studies, while magnifying the importance of USA-related studies. Rowe denounces the American anti-Canadian hegemonic enterprise in these terms:

Canada's significance in nineteenth-century United States political and social struggles may be understood as an anticipation of the cultural colonialism the United States still exercises over Canada, epitomized by how peripheral Canadian studies have been to mainstream American studies and even in recent discussions of how to organize global literatures. Too often in nineteenth-century United States culture, Canada figures primarily as an imagined place of ultimate freedom and its border a sort of psychic double for the internal border dividing South from North (85).

Rowe repositions the Afro-Caribbean and West African communities, focusing on the ties between those communities and the African American communities, in the anti-slavery context. He gradually fragments the gap which nationalism-oriented studies have created between these communities. Stowe points out the retentions that shape nineteenth-century African American and Euroamerican studies. These retentions discarded the unity that Afro-American, West African, Afro-Caribbean, and European communities showed in the struggle against subjugation. Gabriel Prosser's insurrection in 1800 in Richmond, Virginia, Denmark Vesey's plan to revolt in 1822 in Charleston, South Carolina, and Nat Turner's Southampton insurrection of 1831 were doubtless inspired by the Toussaint L'Ouverture's San Domingo revolution, and Sunquist exposes that correlation in these terms in *To Wake the Nations*:

African American efforts to revolt against slavery drew on "the trope of San Domingo," the mythic status of its leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and the historical reality of the Haitian revolution as the successful slave rebellion of the Western Hemisphere (32).

Cuba is also given a new location in the examination of the new borders generated by the anti-slavery struggle. Cuba becomes the crucible in which the weapons of the anti-slavery struggle are produced, and at the same time, Cuba stands as the nexus where several imperialist and cultural trends meet. Cuba represents the nest of slave insurrection and also the terrain of Spanish imperialism and its cultural influences and relations with the United States in the nineteenth-century.

Roach's understanding of the circum-Atlantic practice and Rowe's transnational and cultural examination of slavery provide the theoretical framework with which we can examine a number of sources. Those two texts provide a guiding rubric for reading and analyzing the following, tentative list of rebellion accounts and how they contribute to our understanding of the slave trade and rebellions by enslaved communities:

D. Winthrop Jordan. *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974.

The work draws upon information from psychology, anthropology, linguistics and literature, and addresses the ideas, problems and propositions that were the object of much reflection for the English speaking people of the 16th through 19th centuries: why the "Negro" was "black;" what "blackness" means; where the "Negro" belonged in the "Great Chain of Being;" and how intelligent the "Negro" was compared to the white person. This work by Jordan will introduce students to the basic and fundamental theories which created racism.

D. Winthrop Jordan. *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993.

Jordan provides a vivid picture of a plantation slave community in southwestern Mississippi, in 1861. He focuses on the composition and distribution of the slave community, the degree of mobility permitted enslaved persons, and the ways information was passed around slave quarters and from plantation to plantation. This work presents the treatment enslaved laborers received at the hands of their owners, the resentment they harbored, and the various ways in which they viewed freedom. The work will familiarize the students with a rebellion in which enslaved persons try to overthrow and kill their masters in order to gain their freedom. Jordan also introduces the students to a pattern which characterizes all the rebellions that fail, and which tends to deter other insurrectional attempts: the conspirators are arrested, tried, and hanged.

McD. Hilary Beckles. *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989.

This book by Beckles deals with the social, economic and labor history of enslaved females in Barbados, from the 17th to mid 19th century. It provides students with contemporary documents and records, newspapers, and personal correspondences, which confirm the central role that women played in the plantation economy of Barbados. Beyond the economic exploitation of enslaved women and children, Beckles' study helps students to discover the precise nature of the family structures in the context of slavery, and the complexities of interracial unions. This work also introduces the female anti-slavery fighter, through the violent and non-violent resistance put up by enslaved women.

David Robertson. *Denmark Vesey: The Buried Story of America's Largest Slave Rebellion and the Man Who Led It*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999.

Robertson exposes students to the enigmatic figure of a charismatic, literate, and professional ex-slave who planned a daring rebellion that would have changed the face of the antebellum south had it been successful. The other relevance of the book stems from the fact that it connects enslaved persons' experiences across the world, and traces the roots of Denmark Vesey's actions to the achievement of the black revolutionaries in Haiti.

B. Stephen Oats. *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1975.

This book by Oats assembles extensive evidence to present a gripping and insightful account of the Nat Turner's rebellion. It is a biography of Nat Turner that tells his story with empathy and accuracy, through dramatic narration. Oats carries students back to Nat Turner's time, so that they see the suffering in the world of slavery in the south. This book also attempts to exclude the excesses, additions and omissions which have been done to Nat Turner's confessions and his activities in general.

C. James Malin. *John Brown and the Legend of Fifty Six*. Philadelphia: Lancaster Press, 1942.

The author uses minute research from several scholars in order to produce a biography of an individual who is often referred to as "the old hero." Malin highlights John Brown's exploits of 1856, his relentless efforts to wipe away slavery through projects in education, agriculture, and many other areas. This book adds another dimension to the anti-slavery struggle: a white man takes up the defense of the cause of enslaved blacks, and one of the culminating points of John Brown's work is the insurrection in which he led five blacks and sixteen whites in an anti-slavery battle.

R. Douglass Egerton. *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

Egerton presents how a young enslaved man, Gabriel, became inspired by the unrest, discord and rumors of impending disunion during Spring of 1800, and conceived of the most extensive slave conspiracy in Southern history. This reading enables students to see how the plethora of documents which were produced about the conspiracy of the one who was given the name of his owner, Henry Prosser, fail to render the full dimension of Gabriel Prosser's plans and actions.

Christopher Martin. *The Amistad Affair*. London: Abelard-Schuman Limited, 1970.

Martin exposes the abduction in April 1839 of a group of Africans by Portuguese, who shipped them to Havana, Cuba. In June 1839, the Africans were purchased by two Spanish men and put aboard the schooner *Amistad* for a voyage to Principe. The Africans seized the boat, killed two of the crew and attempted a return to the West African coast, but failed. The *Amistad* was seized in New York and the Spaniards were freed while the Africans were imprisoned in Connecticut. This work provides students with a clear picture of the various Western powers that were involved in the slave trade and it shows how Western laws were applied during the slave trade, ensuring the interests the slave trader most of the time, while sorting out conflicts between the colonial powers over human commodities.

A chronology of the main events of slave rebellions in America, Cuba, and the Caribbean can be charted as follows:

Dates	Slave Revolts and Related Places
1519	Africans revolt in Spanish Hispaniola
1522	Revolt in Puerto Rico
1530	Revolt in Mexico
1550	Revolt in Panama and Peru
1630-1697	Thousands of enslaved Africans establish Palmares, Brazil
1639	First British West Indies African revolt (Providence Island)

- 1655 Revolt of 1,500 Africans in Jamaica

- 1663-1739 Nearly 76 years of insurrections by enslaved Jamaicans

- 1674 Revolt in Barbados

- 1687 Revolt in Antigua

- 1691 First revolt in Haiti

- 1712 New York City's Africans accused of "freedom fires"

- 1715-1763 Enslaved Africans revolt in Surinam

- 1739 Stono, South Carolina enslaved Africans revolt

- 1741 Suspected city-wide arson plan by New York City's enslaved Africans

- 1760 Major revolt in Jamaica led by "Tacky"

- 1763 Major revolt of enslaved Africans in Dutch Surinam

- 1765 Revolt by enslaved Africans in Honduras

- 1768 Discovery of revolt plot on St. Kitts

- 1773 Enslaved Jamaicans in major revolt

- 1791-1803 Some 500,000 enslaved Africans successfully revolt in Haiti

- 1796 Enslaved Africans revolt in St. Lucia

- 1800 Gabriel Prosser and 1,000 fellow Africans plot Virginia revolt

- 1801 Revolt of enslaved Africans in Guadeloupe

- 1811 Revolt of enslaved Africans in St. John's Parish, Louisiana

- 1816 Attempted revolt in Fredericksburg, Virginia

- 1819 Attempted revolt in Augusta, Georgia

- 1822 Revolt plot in South Carolina by Denmark Vesey and 5,000 enslaved Africans

- 1823 Major slave revolt in Guyana

- 1828-1837 Revolt of enslaved Africans in Brazil

- 1831 Revolt of enslaved Africans in Antigua

- Major revolt in Jamaica, led by Samuel Sharpe

- Major U.S. enslaved Africans revolt under Nat Turner in Virginia

- 1844 Revolt of enslaved Africans in Cuba

- 1848 Revolt of enslaved Africans in the Virgin Islands

In American literature, several works have addressed the institution of slavery, especially from the perspectives of anti-slavery movements and the issues of identity which are the concern

of this paper. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) play their roles in anti-slavery combat by exposing the real face of the practices of slavery, each work doing so in a specific way. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Stowe succeeds in presenting slavery in a more complex and "touching way," in order to call the attention of the reader to its atrocities. She provides an incisive exhibition of the cruelty, financial greed, and sexual exploitation that are at the center of the practices of slavery. Mr. Shelby and his ally Mr. Haley trade enslaved persons among themselves, and rejoice at the "samboist" performance of slaves like little Harry. Eliza provides a pathetic twist to the book, with her attempt to flee and protect her son Harry from being sold away, with uncle Tom.

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* carries out a similar task, by approaching slavery from the angle of domesticity, focusing on the sexual exploitation of an enslaved woman who attempts to run away to the industrial north in order to escape the harassment of her master and owner, Dr. Flint, who leaves no stone unturned in order to add this enslaved servant to the "harem" of his mothers of mulattoes. Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Stowe present an enslaved woman at the front of the scene, being subjected to the crude violence which slavery exercises on the female who, like the males, is subject to a property claim by her owner. The two writers succeed in tracing the reasons behind the fallen female slave in the plantations of the south, since Charles Dickens's term "fallen woman" cannot be used here, for people who were owned. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Stowe puts her message across, using a device which really fits the occasion: the focus on the culture and the language of the enslaved laborers, in a manner which approximates Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Martin Delany in *Blake*. These works have a folkloric characteristic, and they grant a predominant importance to the language of the enslaved. This emphasis on the culture and

language of the enslaved laborers resulted in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* being considered by some readers as a mere narration that lacks the qualities of a good novel.

One trait of vital importance in this paper, and which runs across *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is the advocacy of a return to Africa as the ultimate solution to the problems of African Americans who sought to escape subjugation. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ends with the return of slaves to Africa, in order to transmit or propagate the “good values” or the “light” which they have acquired in America, especially Christianity. Formerly enslaved persons step into the shoes of their masters, and become masters to the benighted Africans. This is where Stowe's work loses part of its poignancy. It replaces slavery with colonization. Nonetheless, the work remains a brilliant attempt by a female writer to castigate slavery and the laws that sustain it, especially the ones which provided that fugitive slaves should be returned to the south. Several other female writers, like Frances Harper and Harriet Wilson, also played their role in the anti-slavery struggle.

Martin Delany and Frederick Douglass are also voices that cannot be underrated in anti-slavery writings, and I focus on these two writers here, mainly because of the leadership contest that they created within the anti-slavery struggle. Each of them aimed at standing as the “spokesperson” of the “American Negro,” to such an extent that they tried to overshadow numerous female writers. As Anna Julia Cooper puts it, “the self-representation of black men could obscure the crucial work of BLACK WOMAN in the regeneration process of a race” (Levine 2).

Delany and Douglass occupied two positions that diverged and often overlapped in the anti-slavery struggle. Delany's main agenda in his work is the recognition of the values of African Americans, the importance of Africa to African American identity, the harmful effect of

slavery, and the need for abolition, just like the main point in Frederick Douglass's agenda, but the divergence stems from the manner in which that salvation of the "Negro" can be achieved. The dissention between them is less about what needs to be done, but rather more about how it should be done, or who should do it. Douglass advocates an integrative approach, urging the African Americans to struggle and assert themselves, within the borders of America. Delany on his side recommends revolutionary and emigrationist approach. He focuses on the race issue, and this accounts for his classification among radical separatists. Delany always saw himself as the representative of the black race in America and disregarded others like Douglass, due to the fact that Delany was born to black parents, a free seamstress and a slave plantation while Douglass was born to an enslaved woman and a white master. Delany does not conceal his pride for his black identity and cannot see ways in which people of African descent can be assimilated in America. He advocates a unity among all blacks in a pan-Africanist way, in order to fight the domineering white system, and a return home to Africa.

This dissention between Delany and Douglass recreates the binary which had existed between W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, or the binary of DuBois and Marcus Garvey. Delany's position approximates Garvey's emigrationism, while Frederick Douglass can be associated with DuBois's policy of the "Talented Tenth," which urges all blacks to assert themselves through their achievements, especially at the artistic level. It might be necessary to bear in mind that this binary does not stand throughout, since Delany and Douglass got involved in several tasks together. They co-edited the *North Star*, and gave lectures that aimed at recalling the position of Africa as the cradle of Science and the centrality of Africa to the development of Western culture. Delany strikes these themes in his speech *The Origins and Objects of Ancient Freemasonry* (1847), by stating that blacks are the originators of Masonry:

Was it not Africa that gave birth to Euclid, the master geometrician of the world? And was it not in consequence of a twenty-five years' residence in Africa that the great Pythagoras was enabled to discover that key problem in geometry -- the forty-seventh problem of Euclid -- without which Masonry would be incomplete? (Levine 8).

Frederick Douglass's "Claims of the Negro" (1965) shares much with Delany's *Origins and Objects of Freemasonry*. It underscores the need to create an empowered black community by limning a glorious African past, and subsumes white culture to black culture through a "blackening" of Egypt.

This difference between Delany's radical separatism and Douglass's integrationism accounts for the difference with which they received Harriet Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Douglass welcomed Stowe's work as a text that demonstrates the potential for black elevation in the United States, and materialized his support to Stowe in 1853 by sponsoring a national black convention in Rochester, New York that aimed at using *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to undermine the prestige of Delany's emigrationism. Delany on his side saw in Stowe's novel "the work of a racist colonizationist." He condemned Douglass's "naïve celebration" of Stowe, and sponsored a national black convention in Cleveland in 1854.

Frederick Douglass emerged the victor in this competition of views, and Delany was cast into relative oblivion, despite his versatility and the volume and importance of his writings.

Robert S. Levine sums up Delany's fate in these terms:

An abolitionist, editor, doctor, novelist, political and racial theorist, inventor, explorer, orator, and judge, Delany was a prolific writer who seems to have been unable to conceive of political action apart from writing. But perhaps because of the prominence modern critics have given his separatist position, he has suffered the typical fate in traditional fields of study of the black separatist: he has been marginalized, and for the most part, ignored. Indeed, it could be said that Delany as the reified Black Separatist, even with the attention garnered by the 1970 book publication of *Blake*, has been separated from US literature (3).

Delany's *Blake* opens with the picture of the ordinary American South, where slavery reigns unperturbed. Christianity plays its role as an efficient subjugating tool which maintains enslaved persons under the authority of their masters/owners. The image of religion on the first pages of *Blake* tallies with Marx's notion of "opium for the people." Enslaved laborers readily turn the other cheek after one of them has been beaten by a white master. They are depicted as welcoming all events with passivity and approval in a fatalistic way. Such fatalism stems from the image of a Christianity that "aligns the African American right to overthrow slavery with modern rebellions by the Greeks, the Poles, the Hungarians, our Revolutionary sires" as Garrison put it in his Review of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Old Joe and Mummy Judy wallow in the passive approval of the atrocities which Colonel Franks and other slave owners commit. When the transactions are over between Colonel Franks and The Judge, and Maggie has to be sold away to Cuba, the girl's supplications are answered with her mother's glorification of the name of the Lord:

At the conclusion, Maggie, clasping her hands, examined in suppressed tones, "O mammy! What shall I do? O, is there no hope for me? Can't you beg master -- can't you save me!" "Look to de Laud, my chile! Him ony able to bring yeh out mo'nah conkeh!" was the prayerful advice of the woe-stricken old mother. Both, hastening into the kitchen, falling upon their knees, invoked aloud the God of the oppressed (9).

The reaction of Maggie's father is not different. Daddy Joe considers his daughter's situation as the materialization of God's will, a predestined event ordered by determinism. His prayers are not different from those of his wife, except that he asks God to let his daughter come back:

Falling upon his knees, in the fence corner, the old man raised his voice in supplication of Divine aid. "O Laud! Dow has promis' in dine own wud, to be a fadah to de fadeless, an' husban to de widah! O Laud, let dy wud run an' be glorify! Sof'en de haud haut ob de presseh, an' let my po' chile cum back!" (11).

This attitude of such enslaved characters can be explained by the circumstances in which Christianity has been “forced” into their lives. The slave traders worked strenuously to completely break the will, both physically and psychologically, of enslaved laborers whom were then introduced to Christianity. In *The Black Jacobins*, C. L. R. James presents the conditions in which the encounter between Christianity and the enslaved took place:

The purchasers examined them for defects, looked at their teeth, pinched the skin, sometimes tasted the perspiration to see if the slave’s blood was pure and his health as good as his appearance. Some of the women affected a curiosity, the indulgence of which, with a horse, would have caused them to be kicked 20 yards across the deck. But the slave had to stand it. Then, in order to restore the dignity which might have been lost by too intimate an examination, the purchaser spat in the face of the slave. Having become the property of his owner, he was branded on both sides of the breast with a hot iron. His duties were explained to him by an interpreter, and a priest instructed him in the first principles of Christianity (9).

The slave traders tried to conceal the inhuman nature of their attitude under the pretence that slavery was the sole way in which the Africans could meet salvation, by concocting and exhibiting a picture of war-like African tribes, killing each other, before the intrusion of the slave traders. They whitewashed themselves through the writings of Vaublanc and Malouet who paint a salvaging picture of slavery. C. R. L. James unveils the fallacy which informs such works: the tribal wars from which the European pirates claimed to deliver the people were mere sham fights; in many contexts it was a great battle when only half a dozen men were killed (7).

Henry’s entrance on the scene in Delany’s work is the only factor which disrupts this gloom and lethargic picture, and presents someone who questions the acts of the slave owner, and by doing that, attacks slavery as an institution. Henry confronts the white masters for selling his wife Maggie away to Cuba. This young African American shares many traits with Toussaint L’Ouverture (previously called Toussaint Breda). Both are portrayed as “pure-blooded Negroes,” who are physically strong, endowed with an outstanding intelligence, and fully

committed to the defense of the rights of the women, men and children of African descent.

Henry's first act of opposition to the authority of his master is occasioned by the fact that his wife is taken away from his life:

After taking up his little son, impressing on his lips and cheeks kisses for himself and tears for his mother, the intelligent slave left the abode of the careworn old woman, for that of his master at the cotton place. Henry was a black -- a pure Negro -- handsome, manly and intelligent, in size comparing well with his master, but neither so fleshy nor heavy built in person. A man of good literary attainments -- unknown to Colonel Franks, though he was aware he could read and write -- having been educated in the West Indies and decoyed away when young. His affection for wife and child was not excelled by Colonel Frank's for his. He was bold, determined and courageous, but always mild, gentle and courteous, though impulsive when an occasion demanded his opposition (16-17).

In *The Black Jacobins*, Toussaint L'Ouverture has the same qualities that characterize Delany's Henry. Toussaint L'Ouverture's majestic personality reminds the reader of a mythical character. Both Henry and Toussaint are made of the stuff used to build leaders and great heroes. Toussaint L'Ouverture is the sole brain and the main force behind the San Domingo revolution:

From childhood he had been taciturn, which singled him out among his countrymen, a talkative, argumentative people. He was very small, ugly and ill-shaped, but although his general expression was one of benevolence, he had eyes like steel and no one ever laughed in his presence. His comparative learning, his success in life, his character and personality gave him an immense prestige among all the Negroes who knew him, and he was a man of some consequence among the slaves long before the revolution. Knowing his superiority he never had the slightest doubt that his destiny was to be their leader, nor would those with whom he came in contact take long to recognize it (93).

Henry works as the initiator of the insurrection, the idealist behind it, and also the general conceiving and overseeing the implementation of the strategies. He uses rational points to convince his audience who follows him, like a Christ figure. This is the impressive and detailed arithmetic he puts in front of Mammy Judy in to convince her of the pillage of the white owner:

No, mammy, I'm incapable of stealing from anyone, but I have, from time to time, taken by littles, some of the earnings due me for more than eighteen years' service to this man Franks, which at the low rate of two hundred dollars a year,

would amount to sixteen hundred dollars more than I secured, exclusive of the interest, which would have more than supplied, to say nothing of the injury done me by degrading me as a slave (31).

Just like Toussaint L'Ouverture, Henry educates the enslaved and wins them to the cause of the active struggle, or the insurrection:

Clasping each other by the hand, standing in a band together, as a plight of their union and fidelity to each other, Henry said, "I now impart to you the sectre, it is this: I have laid a scheme, and matured a plan for a general insurrection of the slaves in every state, and the successful overthrow of slavery" (39).

He ultimately subverts the enslaving use of Christianity and calls for ways in which blacks can use it in the interest of their own liberation struggle:

"You must make your religion subserve your interests, as your oppressors do theirs!" advised Henry. "They use the Scriptures to make you submit, by preaching to you the texts of 'obedience to your masters' and 'standing still to see the salvation,' and we must now begin to understand the Bible so as to make it of interest to us" (41).

It is necessary to point out that some of the slave characters like old Joe and Mammy Judy who do not voice an open resistance to the institution of slavery on the first pages of *Blake* manifest an internal opposition to slavery. They hate it and Mammy Judy is the one who presents such subtle but deep and efficient rejection of slavery. The old lady wishes her daughter Maggie were not born, just like the courageous women who resort to abortion and the poisoning of children in order to limit the scope of the slave master's territory and the number of his workers in *The Black Jacobin*. In these works, death means release to the enslaved, and also a return to Africa:

Poison was their method. On certain plantations the slaves decimated their number by poison so as to keep the number of slaves small and prevent their masters embarking on larger schemes which would increase the work. For this reason a slave would poison his wife, another would poison his children, and a Negro nurse declared in court that for years, she had poisoned every child that she brought into the world (16).

West Africa occupies a central place in *Blake*, and this raises no surprise, since Delany considered the West African coast as the land to which African Americans could return, not as colonialists, but as returnees who bring along new African American ideas and embrace the values and practices characteristic to Africa. This explains his Niger Valley project which took him to Dahomey (present day Benin), Nigeria, and other areas along the West African coast. Delany's familiarity with West Africa, and the pivotal role that this area was assigned in the return home accounts for the recurrence of West African traditional beliefs in *Blake*. The conjurers' attitude in the Swamp, the names associated with their practice is West African. The "goomba," the snake, the collective incantations, and emotions and unity associated with the blessing they lay upon Henry, their sole hope, are consistent with West African traditional spiritual practices. The men who preside over the ceremony, Gamby Gholar and Maudy Ghamus, bear West African names:

Being now well refreshed-having rested without the fear of detection-and in the estimation of Gholar, Ghamus and the rest of the "Heads," well qualified to prosecute his project amidst the prayers, blessings, wishes, hopes, fears, pow-wows and promises of never failing conjuration, and the tears of the cloudy inhabitants of this great seclusion, among whom were the frosty-headed, bowed-down old men of the Cave, Henry left that region by his usual stealthy process, reaching Richmond, Virginia, in safety (115).

The "voodoo" celebrations in *The Black Jacobins* also show people of African descent aspiring to freedom with all the strength of their soul. They "lived" the insurrections, and preferred death to life in shackles:

One does not need education or encouragement to cherish a dream of freedom. At their midnight celebrations of Voodoo, their African cult, they danced and sang, usually this favorite song:
Eh! Eh! Bomba! Heu! Heu!
Canga bafio te!
Caga, moune de le!
Canga, do ki la!
Canga, Li!

“We swear to destroy the whites and all that they possess; let us die rather than fail to keep this vow”(18).

In *Blake*, the deep roots of Henry’s task stretch into the previous insurrections which remain holy moments in the memory of the African Americans and freedom fighters. In his tour, Henry meets a number of old confederates of Nat Turner, and the people of the Swamp worship the names associated with the previous slave insurrections:

In this fearful abode for years of some of Virginia and North Carolina’s boldest black rebels, the names of Nat Turner, Denmark Veezie, and General Gabriel were held by them in sacred reverence; that of Gabriel was a talisman. With delight they recounted the many exploits of whom they conceived to be the greatest men who ever lived, the pretended deeds of whom were fabulous, some of the narrators claiming to have been patriots in the American Revolution (113).

The international influence which rebellions and insurrections exercise on one another transpire in *The Black Jacobins* where the French Revolution of 1789 galvanized the San Domingo slaves and led them to the battle:

And meanwhile what of the slaves? They had heard of the revolution and had construed it in their own image: the white slaves in France had risen, and killed their masters, and were now enjoying the fruits of the earth. It was gravely inaccurate in fact, but they had caught the spirit of the thing. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. Before the end of 1789 there were risings in Guadeloupe and Martinique. As early as October, in Fort Dauphin, one of the future centers of the San Domingo insurrection, the slaves were stirring and holding mass meetings in the forests at night (81-82).

The influence of the French Revolution on the San Domingo rebellion becomes evident when Toussaint L’Ouverture writes in the call he issued on August 29, 1793: “I have undertaken vengeance. I want Liberty and Equality to reign in San Domingo” (125).

It is not only the spirit of the struggle against oppression which traveled from one community to the other. During the forced migration occasioned by the slave trade, cultural forms also voyaged; some of them remained intact, but most of them metamorphosed, acquired traits from other cultures, and imparted some of their components to other cultures, in a process

analogous to osmosis. Joseph Roach asserts that the imperialist rivalry between the two main European powers of the eighteenth century, Great Britain and France, led to a race towards wealth both on sea and land, tracking tirelessly the whale and the elephant. But this rivalry had another repercussion, a cultural one:

These European interests, however, were intimately connected with Amerindian and African ones. A significant body of recent historical and ethnohistorical research has reexamined those latter interests as dynamic and inventive (rather than inert) in the face of Eurocolonial expansion. My selective history of circum-Atlantic performance draws heavily on this renovated scholarship of encounter and exchange (7).

The voodoo songs and incantations in *Blake* and *The Black Jacobins* are illustrations of the survival of West African cultural practices in the Caribbean. Similarly, the Congo Square of New Orleans is a very powerful symbol of the survival and partial transformation of African culture in America. The location of the Congo Square and the events that it hosted vindicate Mikhail Bakhtin when he says in *Speech Genres* that the most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries. Roach provides the following description of the location of the Congo Square and the influence it played in cultural hybridization:

Outside the original walls and adjacent to the *cimetiere* laid out by De Pauger, was an unofficial public marketplace, once site for the corn feasts of the Poucha-Houmma Indians. Here African slaves, free persons of color, and Native Americans could mingle with relative freedom and sell their goods. Creole custom set aside a portion of the wasteland between the fortified city wall and the swampy ground leading away to the Bayou St. John. Nearby stood the death house for the indigent sick and the cemetery. This patch of ground on the boundary of the colonial city of New Orleans, now generally known to historians of dance and music as Congo Square, witnessed a particularly intense series of transformations and surrogations in its function as a behavioral vortex (64).

The dances of the Congo Square, the music that was played there and the shock of the Anglo-Americans in front of these performances constitutes a perfect the circum-Atlantic matrix:

The dances were lively and fast paced, with quick steps and many pirouettes. There were sensual, even blatantly erotic dances, in which dancers mimicked the

motions of lovemaking. There were bright, joyful dances that reflected the influence of European music; dances that were little more than the stamping of feet; dances with sacred undertone, such as calinda; dances like the carabine, in which the man spun his partner like a top; frenetic dances like the bamboula and the coujaille; and mysterious dances like the pile chactas, in which the man first circles his partner, then sinks to his knees before her and writhes like a serpent. The civic guard looked on from a discreet distance and the horde of white spectators pressed round the gates of the square, their faces registering a mixture of amusement, astonishment, shock, scorn, and indulgence (65).

It is a necessity to introduce this complexity which surrounds the issues of identity and culture in the education system, and the best way to implement that is to introduce that circum-Atlantic vision of identities throughout curricula, from the basic level to the college level. Chinua Achebe recalls the importance of the components of children's literature curricula in "Chinua Achebe: At the Cross Roads." Achebe stresses the need to bring up children on a common vocabulary for the heroic and the cowardly, the just and the unjust. The notion of "common vocabulary" calls for "refurbishing the landscape of the imagination and the domain of stories" which means redesigning the theories, canonical and secondary texts, and oral materials which are used in children's education.

In a review of Raoul Granqvist and Jurgen Martini's *Preserving the Landscape of the Imagination: Children's Literature in Africa* (1997), Osayimwense Osa points out the necessity of raising well-rounded children and young people on a literature that is in touch with their cultural heritage, individual lives, and social functions in order to insure a next generation of engaged, peaceful citizens. The introduction of a broader conception of identity will really benefit our war-torn world where people will begin to view different cultures as components of a global mosaic of cultures, each of them having ramifications in the others, the basis of this interdependence being the historical events that happened in the world, mainly in the eighteen century. In "Who is building the House? Myth, Nation and Culture in Africa and the Caribbean

Children's Literatures," Raoul Granqvist begins to surmount the various barriers that have been erected between the national and continental children's literatures. He highlights the connection between the children's literature in Africa and the African diaspora in the Caribbean. The task awaiting the researcher is to decipher the other innumerable connections that exist between African children's literature, European and Asian literatures, and all the other connections.

This paper has attempted to design a course of readings and reflections on "How to teach Martin Delany's *Blake*" while scrutinizing the issues of slave rebellion and the complex and interesting intricacies of identities and cultures that emerge as results of people's migrations. I have tried to draw connections between the slave rebellion and identity issues in *Blake*, and the slave revolt and identity issues *The Black Jacobins*, and slave narratives like Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This paper was woven around the circum-Atlantic framework, which provided a clearer and more nuanced vision of the issues of slave rebellion and identity politics.

Note

1. The author is a doctoral student and teacher at the Illinois State University.

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