New North Star, 2024; 6: 56-61

Reading *Blake* after the George Floyd Rebellion

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The novel of what has now been termed the George Floyd Rebellion was written during the nineteenth century. Martin R. Delany's *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859, 1861–62) better represents the summer of 2020 than other media to date. Likewise, the uprising clarifies the most frustrating and unresolvable dilemma in Delany's tale,[1] namely, why Black revolution in the text is always about to occur—yet seemingly never does. In a recent article, Alex Moskowitz takes *Blake*'s persistent non-depiction as an occasion to pose a larger question about Blackness and literary culture. "Why won't literature directly represent Black revolution?" he asks.[2] We can answer this question by reading *Blake* via the George Floyd Rebellion, and in a very material, historical way. The rebellion confirms and furthers what a line of scholarship on the text has sometimes claimed. Delany's (non-)portrayal of Black revolution is meaningfully one of deferral because deferral captures the historical reality of Black revolution in the U.S. In this way, *Blake* depicts a revolutionary tempo.

My thinking here is very much motivated by my experience of what I've come to call "rebellious 2020." We're still in the early stages of theorizing and analyzing what happened, but there are points of emerging consensus. In general, I'm drawing from my own observations as well as the writing of the best interpreters of the rebellion, including Tobi Haslett, Jarrod Shanahan, and Zhandarka Kurti. What's now known as the George Floyd Rebellion was a series of nationwide and even international protests beginning in late May 2020 after the police murder of George Floyd, then continuing through the summer and, in some places, into the fall. It's hard to overstate the scale of what happened, although I think it's very easy for us to minimize it now. In what has become the defining critical essay on the uprising, Tobi Haslett writes, "This was open black revolt: simultaneous but uncoordinated, a vivid fixture of American history sprung to life with startling speed." According to Haslett, "The whole country seemed to tilt: sacked shopping malls in Los Angeles and pillaged luxury outlets in Atlanta, a siege on New York's SoHo and flaming vehicles from coast to coast. Pictures of Philadelphia and Washington DC [sic] showed whole neighborhoods bristling with insurgency, crowds smashed the lordly windows in Chicago's Loop, and rioters set fire to the Market House, where slaves were bought and sold, in Fayetteville, North Carolina, the town where Floyd was born."[3] Unfortunately, the "open black revolt" that momentarily held such promise has been in some ways forgotten, swallowed up by what Kurti calls "liberal amnesia."[4]

We have to remember, then, how the uprising unfolded. One of its most notable characteristics was its unevenness or differentiation across space: that alongside the burning of the

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[1] "A Tale of the Mississippi Valley, the Southern United States, and Cuba," Martin R. Delany, *Blake; or, The Huts of America*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 1.
[2] Alex Moskowitz, "The Racial Economy of Perception: Reading Black Sociality in the Nineteenth Century," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 56, no. 1 (2023): 3, Doi.org.
[3] Tobi Haslett, "Magic Actions," *n+1* 40, (2021): 10.
[4] Zhandarka Kurti and Jarrod Shanahan, "States of Incarceration: Zhandarka Kurti and Jarrod Shanahan with Tobi Haslett," by Tobi Haslett, *The Brooklyn Rail,* October 2022, Brooklynrail.org.

Minneapolis Third Precinct, the storming of the security fence at Trump's White House, and street clashes with police in major cities, there were also peaceful demonstrations all around the country, including in rural and majority White communities. The uprising's decentralization in and of itself necessarily implies an unevenness or differentiation across time. From the standpoint of any single location, it was hard to make claims about the state of the rebellion—were things escalating toward a fully revolutionary situation? How long would that take? Were these events momentary flareups, or did they signal something significant about the conditions of racial capitalism in the early twenty-first century U.S.? Many radicals watched and waited for what would happen next.

Add to this another characteristic of the uprising—that it occurred in multiple waves that each had their own politics—and we can say that the George Floyd Rebellion constituted a moment of something like revolutionary time. By this I mean a lived experience of the contingency of social and political struggle. Shanahan and Kurti, especially, have built on early accounts of the summer to produce a timeline of the rebellion as moving from a militant first wave, driven not by longtime activists but by the dispossessed, to a more reformist, recognizably activist second wave. "As the flames of Minneapolis still smoldered," they write, "liberals scrambled to recast the rebellion as *nonviolent civil disobedience*, the opening act for *dialogue* and *healing*, as part of *America's long overdue reckoning with systemic racism*, or else an urgent clarion cry for *police reform*." But the problem wasn't simply portrayal. The composition and actions of the uprising really did change: "After a few months, it was safe to say the George Floyd Rebellion had run its course. Even by mid-June riots and direct confrontations with police had largely given way to leftist rituals: endless marches, kneeling in the street, and seasoned activists policing militancy to make sure nobody engaged in the sort of tactics that had catalyzed the rebellion in the first place."[5] The neat, coherent trajectory in Shanahan and Kurti's analysis is, of course, retrospective. In the moment, revolutionary time feels fractured, disrupted, staccato. While the rebellion was underway, it was unclear exactly where things stood or were headed. For the rebels of 2020 and their allies around the country, the lived experience of the George Floyd Rebellion was one of expectancy, uncertainty, and, eventually, disappointment.

How better to describe my own experience years ago on first reading Delany's sole fiction? Published serially in *The Anglo-African* and then in the *Weekly Anglo-African Magazine*, the tale depicts the formation of a global rebellion of the enslaved. The narrative follows the eponymous Blake out of enslavement and around the U.S. as he travels from plantation to plantation organizing an insurrectionary conspiracy. Blake eventually transports a group of family and friends to Canada before continuing his campaign in Cuba, including an excursion to the western coast of Africa aboard a slave ship. The problem for scholars, of course, is that the ending appears to be missing, unfinished, or just disconcertingly abrupt and anti-climactic. Blake's revolution seemingly never arrives. The sense of deferral is worsened by the overall composition. We never learn any details of Blake's conspiracy; he vanishes from the text at pivotal moments; and whenever the narration appears to reach a climax, it shifts focus entirely, abandoning important plot threads with little or no resolution. At almost every level, Delany gives us a tale of what I call insurrection interrupted.

The text's persistent interruption of revolution has grown into its most persistent interpretive conundrum. In his recent article on "the racial economy of perception," Alex Moskowitz offers a reading of *Blake*'s "nonrepresentational scenes of revolution." For Moskowitz,

[5] Jarrod Shanahan and Zhandarka Kurti, *States of Incarceration: Rebellion, Reform, and America's Punishment System,* (London: Reaktion Books, 2022): 11, 63.

Blake reveals a constitutive problem for Blackness in literary culture. Like the social relations underlying the commodity form were for Marx, Black revolution and its social life are ultimately unrepresentable, at least in the White imagination, for Moskowitz.[6] This is Black revolution as aporia.[7] Moskowitz reads Delany as picking up and extending Melville's critique of White perception in *Benito Cereno* (1855). "Both texts," he argues, "point toward an indisposition of the white sensorium to be able to process Black revolution because of its sociality," which is to say, because of White supremacy's inability to recognize Black people either collectively or individually as political agents. In this reading, Delany again and again interrupts scenes of revolt in order to stage White "imperception." Here Moskowitz suggests that the distinction between the object of criticism and the critique blurs for Delany; I would suggest that it blurs for Moskowitz as well. "But whereas on the plantation the plans for revolution were simply omitted," he writes, "on the *Vulture* the text itself seems to reach the limit of what it can represent by drawing an equivalence between the white sensorium's inability to make sense of an expression of Black sociality and the text's own refusal to depict revolution."[8] In the end, it's unclear if Delany knowingly comments on White perception with *Blake* or inadvertently replicates it within the text. If even the period's most militant Black American fiction formally adopts the standpoint of White ignorance, then does that, in practice, mean that that militant literature cannot actually imagine Black revolution?

I like and admire Moskowitz's argument, but I want to assert something different: for better or worse, *Blake* actually captures the concrete reality and lived experience of revolutionary time, which is to say, of revolution, exactly what Moskowitz argues Delany either cannot or refuses to represent. *Blake* poses a participant's view of Black revolution as contingent, and therefore always expected yet also potentially frustrated. Delany's fiction tells us less about White perception than it does about Black revolution's circumstantial difficulty, particularly in the U.S. After all, this is a text full of interruption: at the level of specific rebellious activity, at the level of the plot, and at the level of the text itself. Adélékè Adéẹ̀kọ́ touches on this feature of the text and plausibly accounts for it. "As innovative as these stories [Black-authored depictions of enslaved rebellion from the nineteenth century] are, the problem of historical plausibility as dictated by conditions in the United States limits the imagination," he writes. Simply put, the prospects for "successful land-

[6] Moskowitz, "The Racial Economy," 3, 13.

[7] I see this as a version of Michel-Rolph Trouillot's influential argument in *Silencing the Past* (1995). The Haitian Revolution, he argues, has been continually erased or "silenced" from the White historical imagination because it runs so counter to the ideological currents of Western modernity. This occurred contemporaneously, too, even as the Revolution unfolded, according to Trouillot. Versions of his argument have become commonplace, although I find that they often overstate Trouillot's essential insight, implying the a priori impossibility of revolutionary thought or even revolution itself. This line of thinking is especially troubling in light of the demobilizing tendency of Afropessimism and other modes of criticism. *See* Kevin Ochieng Okoth, "The Flatness of Blackness: Afro-Pessimism and the Erasure of Anti-Colonial Thought," *Salvage* 7 (2020): 79–116 and Vijay Prashad and Mikaela Nhondo Erskog, "The Actuality of Red Africa," *Monthly Review* 76, no. 2 (2024): 37–49. I return, again, to the George Floyd Rebellion, an "unthinkable" event in its own right. However shocking or unprecedented the torching of the Third Precinct or the brief siege of the White House may have been, these episodes and others of the rebellion were preceded and succeeded by explicitly revolutionary slogans, writing, and imagery. Moreover, the state's plans for counter-insurgency testify to the fact that it also could imagine such eventualities. Thus, we could say, along with Kurti or with Trouillot in part, that this rebellion was eventually forgotten or silenced. But it was nonetheless eminently "thinkable" in the moment.

[8] Moskowitz, "The Racial Economy," 13, 2, 11.

based slave rebellion" have historically been poor within mainland North America. "Reading the rebellion plot as an integral part of the narrative [*Blake*] helps to explain the story's bumpy focus shifts," Adéèkọ́ continues, because "[a]t every point that the plot shifts into a different journey and narrative register, it is always because a slave insurrection has to be postponed for a more auspicious time."[9] That is, Delany can't entirely get away with the historical implausibility of successful revolt at scale. Or, I would qualify, that historical difficulty is Delany's subject.

Three such interrupted rebellions punctuate and (dis)organize the text: the multiply delayed New Orleans plot, the *Vulture* mutiny, and the final, Cuban leg of Blake's grand conspiracy. The interpretive challenges caused by the text's possibly missing ending are well known.[10] The *Vulture* mutiny, meanwhile, has taken a central place in Jerome McGann's reading as part of his recent corrected edition.[11] I want to consider, instead, the revolt that nearly occurs in Chapter XXII, "New Orleans." On the eve of Mardi Gras in that city, Blake, still known as "Henry," joins a meeting of locally enslaved people. Both predating Henry and spurred on by his presence, the group's plans and organization begin to coalesce into an imminent revolt. However, the text defers the uprising in two concurrent yet unrelated ways, an act of narrative overkill that delays both the local plot and, from the reader's perspective, Henry's conspiracy: Henry first urges the conspirators to wait for a more auspicious time, and then a traitor summons the local patrollers to disrupt their meeting.[12] The effect is of an author taking exceptional pains to delay. The New Orleans episode sets the mold for the subsequent two examples. Whenever rebellion seems most imminent, the narrative actively redirects—or abruptly ends.

If the text seems always unable to bring Blake's conspiracy to fruition, that is because rebellious struggle for Black freedom itself has been so difficult to wage. And if Delany seems

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[9] Adéléke Adéèkọ́, *The Slave's Rebellion: Literature, History, Orature*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 28, 35, 38. Namely, Adéèkọ́ analyzes Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* (1853), William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853), and Delany's *Blake*. I consider Adéèkọ́'s book an invaluable yet underappreciated example of literary criticism on fictive depictions of enslaved rebellion.

[10] I agree with Robert S. Levine when he writes that, "Given the novel's multiple and conflicting sources, purposes, and audiences, and also its truncated ending, we need to be wary of efforts to develop a 'coherent' formalist reading of it." *See* Robert S. Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997): 179. I would add that the text's own formal characteristics, including its rich unruliness and uneven tempo, call for such an approach.

[11] McGann writes of the imminent slave ship revolt, which is deferred during a massive storm, "Pivotal for the unfolding plot, the chapter argues that while man proposes, God disposes. Throughout Part II of *Blake*, Nature emerges as a looming transhuman presence and force. Here the storm and the ensuing rainbow are presented in symbolic terms that intimate God's providential involvement with Henry's 'scheme,' at once advancing it and leading Henry to modify it." *See* Delany, *Blake*, 328 n204. I question McGann's emphasis on "Nature" within the text, as well as his straightforwardly "argumentative" reading. However, I share his fundamental sense of the importance of these interrupted rebellions to the text.

[12] Delany, *Blake*, 106–7. McGann echoes Adéèkọ́'s argument when discussing the episode: "Slave revolts were not common in Louisiana, particularly after the failed 1811 uprising of slaves from plantations along the so-called German Coast, an area just west of New Orleans. But white apprehension of revolt was widespread, and Delany may have had the German Coast uprising in mind here, although if so, he modified the history. In that uprising, several hundred slaves organized themselves into an army that marched toward New Orleans. They were eventually defeated by white militias, and the leaders were executed. In any case, when Part II of *Blake* maps its tale to the Conspiracy of the Ladder (La Escalera) in Cuba, a formal parallel in the narrative action is established with this New Orleans uprising." *See* Delany, *Blake*, 322 n97. I think McGann overstates the "formal parallel," as I am skeptical of such neat readings of such a disorderly text. But McGann is right to read these disruptions, like Adéèkọ́, as being reflective of the historical record of enslaved revolt.

unable to explicitly imagine Black revolution, that failure spotlights the long history of defeated Black revolt in the U.S., as Adéẹ̀kọ́ argues, a problem that perhaps changes when we shift focus away from the national frame. A thorough comparative study is beyond the scope of my project; a handful of examples will have to suffice. It should come as no surprise that contemporary Francophone literatures contain forthright and "complete" depictions of enslaved rebellion, unlike the examples that Moskowitz and Adéẹ̀kọ́ examine. If U.S.-based literary depictions of enslaved rebellion are conditioned by that nation's history of revolts, as the latter argues, then the same should be true of depictions from France and its post/colonies with their specific history of revolts, the victorious Haitian Revolution being the *ne plus ultra*. Victor Hugo's early novel *Bug-Jargal* (1826) takes place amid the uprising that initiated the Revolution, for example, cutting its gothic dread from the cloth of White defeat. Louis Timagène Houat's Réunionese novel *The Maroons* (1844) makes enslaved rebellion into a shocking *deus ex machina*, even going so far as to portray the final revolt as laying the foundation for a new maroon army.[13] And the first Haitian novel, Émeric Bergeaud's *Stella* (1859), retells the Revolution as an allegorical, almost fantastic founding epic. These are only cursory examples of the kind of direct depiction of enslaved rebellion that we can find elsewhere, but they begin to outline my point. The problem of interrupted or absent depictions of enslaved rebellion is partly a function of a too narrow focus on the Anglophone world, its histories of Black struggle, and its literatures.[14]

Blake's uneven tempo is not an inherent problem to Blackness within literary cultures of racial capitalism but a reflection of a particular history and a feature of revolutionary time itself. Returning to Moskowitz's compelling question, "Why won't literature directly represent Black revolution?" I would answer in three complementary ways: some literatures straightforwardly do; early U.S. American literatures should be historicized especially in terms of U.S. enslaved revolts; and *Blake*'s attunement to revolutionary time means that it does depict Black revolution, although one could argue only indirectly. My disagreement might seem insignificant, a too subtle distinction as to why Delany never delivers readers a triumphant scene of Black revolution. Or worse, my argument could seem to minimize the degree to which anti-Blackness structures Western modernity, which is perhaps Moskowitz's most urgent point. But I think there are other stakes to my argument. To say that Black revolution is unrepresentable in *Blake* is to foreclose the possibility of imagining it, whether for writers, readers, or, ultimately, revolutionaries. I'll confess to despairing at that possibility. I also find it unconvincing. Much writing on what Cedric Robinson termed the Black Radical Tradition celebrates the creative or visionary aspects of Black resistance.[15] Black-revolution-as-aporia sits uneasily alongside that tradition, in my view. More importantly, 2020's Black rebellion demonstrates that the tempo of revolutionary struggle is such that interruption and possibility are inextricably bound together in reality, just as they are in Delany's fiction. By rereading *Blake* via the George Floyd Rebellion, I'm arguing for an interpretation of the text as well as revolutionary struggle itself in which contingency—and

[13] Louis Timagène Houat, *The Maroons*, trans. Aqiil Gopee with Jeffrey Diteman (New York: Restless Books, 2024): 111–13.

[14] This is not to say that other literatures do not exhibit their own colonialism and anti-Blackness. Rather, my point is to more specifically historicize the apparent non-depiction of Black revolution in Anglophone U.S. literatures.

[15] In particular, Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams* (2002) develops the nascent line of thinking in Robinson's *Black Marxism* (1983) that Black artistic production belongs to the Black Radical Tradition and that its truest form is, for Kelley, a Black surrealism. In light of Kelley's work, especially, I find many versions of the Black-revolution-as-aporia argument untenable.

therefore possibility—is defining. Everything has been and remains up for grabs, including the representability of Black revolution.

Caught between victory and defeat, the characters of *Blake* are no less suspended in revolutionary time than historical rebels, whether in the woods of Bois Caïman or en route to Union lines or in the streets of Minneapolis. Revolutionary subjects who are also subjected to their histories and the array of circumstances before them, at times they must act while at others they must steadfastly wait for conditions to change for the better, or, in the words of Blake himself, "Stand still and see the salvation!"[16]

[16] As Levine points out, Delany's recurring reference to Exodus 14:13 is typologically significant not as a justification for passivity but as an injunction to hold firm in faith, for the Israelites, and, for Delany's characters and readers, in the work of Black revolution. *See* Levine, *Martin Delany*, 194. This lesson strikes me as urgent during experiences of the uncertainty inherent to revolutionary time.