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Martin R. Delany's* Blake *and the Shape-Shifting Afro-Cubans

Martin Delany's portrayal of Henry Blake in the eponymous novel *Blake* incorporates all the elements traditionally embodied by the classical hero. In the archetypal quest narrative, whether or not the hero realizes the full implications of his task, he nevertheless embarks on a journey that will ultimately redeem his lagging community and return it to prosperity. Jessie L. Weston explains that "the misfortune which has fallen upon the community is that of a prolonged drought, which has destroyed vegetation and left the land Waste; the effect of the hero's [realization of his quest] is to restore the waters to their channel, and render the land once more fertile" (19). Fully aware of the deplorable conditions of the enslaved African community, Blake, the hero of Delany's novel, sets out to rescue his wife from slavery in Cuba. A free native of Cuba who was captured by Americans at a young age and sold into slavery in Mississippi, Blake concurrently spreads a secret plot for general insurrection and "the successful overthrow of slavery" (Delany 39). Hence, Blake harkens upon a larger quest to instill within the slaves of three nations the urge to fight for their liberty, acting as a Moses for his race (Levine 180). Blake's task carries him around the United States, to Cuba, and to Africa at a time when the black individual traveling alone faced great personal danger, especially in the southern U.S. The obviously hyperbolic manner in which Delany depicts Blake's travels -- he strides easily between states and countries without any real effects of time, fending for himself by stealing or killing as he deems necessary -- makes Blake's role one of didactic performance both for blacks, showing how to overthrow repression, and for whites, displaying blacks' counter-power.

In each town and plantation through which he passes, Blake spreads his plot for a grand insurrection not only amongst slaves but also Native Americans, seeking support from all repressed classes. Interestingly, Blake's ability to operate across cultures closely parallels the

opportunities possessed by Cuban free blacks, particularly during the 1850s when Delany wrote the novel, to conspire with captive slaves to organize large-scale uprisings (Simons 134). Similar to the way in which Blake embraces multiple cultures in order to further his own goals, the free black population of Cuban had a long history of facilitating connections between themselves, the Europeans, and the Native Americans, forging an integral bond between African traditions and the Cuban creole culture (Benitez-Rojo 68). Further, free Afro-Cubans possessed practical skills that enabled them to corner the market on service-oriented jobs, making them an influential economic force for centuries prior to the publication of *Blake*. A key turning point for ethnic relations in Cuba came with the sugar boom in the late eighteenth century, which gave rise to a plantation system dependent on slavery, similar to the one at work in the antebellum United States. By the mid-nineteenth century, racial interactions in Cuban society had taken a serious downturn, and the white hegemony in Cuba attempted to repress the free black society by instituting a hierarchical class structure that confused differences with inequality, and made equality dependent on sameness (Martinez-Alier xvii). Despite forced deportation and general white vigilance, Afro-Cubans resisted maltreatment and used their long-acquired social influence to act as leaders in the fight for black liberation. Free blacks had repeatedly proven themselves to be a threat to white Cuban slaveholders since all were known to be capable of revolt if given the opportunity (Hall 128). Accepting Blake as a prototypical Afro-Cuban, it becomes possible to see how his transmutable body mirrors the ways in which Cuban blacks themselves moved easily among racial strata, using their cultural influence as a tool to instigate revolt in an attempt to reinvigorate their community.

From the start of his novel, Delany pointedly sets his hero in opposition to the white community. In his first description of Blake, the author tells us that "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" (Delany 16-17). Here I will draw from the philosophies of race outlined by Colette Guillaumin, who proposes that "blacks" as a group did not preexist slavery, but were labeled as such during the late seventeenth century after Europeans had imported Africans as bodies to perform labor in their dominions. "People were enslaved wherever they could be and as need dictated" (Guillaumin 141). Guillaumin argues that the "marking" of the Africans' bodies as black is an after-the-fact attempt to create a grouping of individuals with certain pseudo-*natural* characteristics that both precluded their enslavement and differentiated them from their oppressors (133). This marking, "neither recent nor exceptional," arose out of a need to visually make known the groups in a society, and varies in form from tattoos on concentration camp prisoners, shaven faces for domestic servants, wigs on married women, to the gender-specific clothing still visible today (Gillaumin 140). Yet cultures tend to portray the effects of social relations upon the dominated group as *natural*, characteristics internal to each member, which endure the relationship with the oppressor (Guillaumin 141). Guillaumin thus uncovers the "mask of naturalness": "For logically if one takes the suggestions of natural realism literally (and not figuratively), having seven white great-grandparents certainly means being white. But this is not so! You are not white, you are 'black', for it is the social system which decides" (137). By honing in on fragmentary, isolated traits and collectively labeling them as the *natural* causes of a given social relationship, societies submerge the group's actual multiplicity. Accepting this argument, it becomes possible to view Delany's marking of Blake and Blake's subsequent transcendence of cultural boundaries as a sign that black bodies are in fact able to bypass the hierarchical structure of slave societies, particularly omnipresent in nineteenth-century Cuba. Whereas Delany's contemporaries were celebrating the possibilities of the mulatto, the result of ongoing miscegenation during the time of slavery, he breaks away from such theories. William Wells Brown, for example, presents the mulatto as a conglomeration of white

and black blood who has enough European blood to function in white society, while depicting the full-blooded black as the real danger to white slaveholders. Brown's theory reinforces the hierarchical structure of anglocentric cultures that placed whites and blacks on opposite ends of a vast continuum. Delany does not deny mulattoes a role in his novel; in fact, Blake's wife, Maggie is the child of her master, Colonel Franks and one of his slaves. However, Delany's insistence on a full-blooded black hero who navigates white culture without the slightest impediment shows that Blake, an unmistakably black figure, can diminish the boundaries placed upon him by "race" through his inherent intelligence, education, and communication skills.

Despite its accommodation of the oppressors' stereotypes, William Wells Brown's theory poses race as "something that is 'performed' within racist culture," a point which is vital to Blake's success at operating across cultures (Levine, introduction to *Clotel* 23). W.E.B. Dubois describes the "double consciousness" of the African American which enables this performance of race:

> The Negro is . . . gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (qtd. in Lively 169).

Adam Lively interprets Dubois' idea of double consciousness as existential, begging the question "is there a true 'self', or are we composed of the shifting roles that a complex society forces us to play out?" (170) As seen throughout nineteenth century African American literature, in characters such as Brown's Clotel and Frank J. Webb's Clarence Garie, blacks in racially-divided societies would commonly attempt to work their way up the racially-determined social hierarchy by pretending to be white or mulatto. This "passing" implies a conscious choice on the part of the

black (or partially black) individual about their outer identity, a concept that breaks away from the stereotypical notion that race is somehow natural. Instead, it demonstrates how to some extent, behavior decides class. Taking this one step further, nineteenth-century black-face minstrel performances, "the most popular form of theater" at the time, entailed the enactment of black artistic material usually by whites (Lively 218). Specifically, black-face minstrelsy was a white parody of black life wherein a white actor would paint his face black and perform blackness from a white perspective. According to Lively, this use of parody is "inseparable from the complex interaction, the hybridity, of white and black American cultures" (214). To complicate matters more, blacks themselves would sometimes perform minstrel shows, catering to white audiences; thus performing, as a black, a white idea of blackness. Hence, Dubois' double consciouness gains new significance in that race, either realistically or satirically can be adopted to suit certain purposes. In Blake's case, we know that he has been unlawfully captured and remains with the Franks family in Mississippi only because of his wife's enslavement (Delany 19). Yet he pretends to be a slave whenever he encounters a white on his journey, knowing that he will be accepted in this role. To prove the point, the white slaveholders in the book actually come to appreciate and depend on Blake. For example, during Blake's passing a white ship captain praises him for his intelligence and value as a slave, expressing surprise that his master was able to part with him (Delany 81). By playing to the desires of whites and acting the part of the obedient slave, Blake repeatedly gains the trust of slaveholders which enables him to pursue his subversive plans unwatched on the plantations.

Born Carolus Henrico Blacus, Henry Blake continually switches names, languages, and identities to suit the tastes of each group he encounters, and to prevent detection. He idealizes his relationship with the West Indies. "I am the lost boy of Cuba," Blake admits to his friend and cousin, the Cuban poet, Placido (Delany 193). Halfway through the book, Blake, having

completed his work in the U.S., sails to Cuba, purchases his wife's freedom, and sets about liberating his race there (Delany 195). Just as his good reputation preceded him in the United States, Blake relies on his natural intelligence to gain Cuban supporters for his behemoth plot. Indeed, I would argue that Blake employs the sort of "sly civility" named by Homi K. Bhabha for the "devious strategy" of repressed cultures adapting elements of the oppressive culture to suit their own purposes and beliefs, while falsely creating the sense that they have accepted the hegemony (97). Colonialist power requires "that the Other should authorize the self, recognize its priority, fulfill its outlines, replete, indeed repeat, its references and still its fractured gaze" (Bhabha 98). Simply, the colonial system, certainly at work in nineteenth-century Cuba, depends upon the validation of the repressed. The colonial subject who retains a level of reservation about the oppressor's ideology, in effect, topples the system since any sense of power felt by that oppressor is a myth. While Blake has a good understanding of the powers at play amongst the various groups he encounters, presumably a result of his high aptitude, he never loses sight of his own great plan. For example, early on Blake rejects Christianity as his "oppressor's religion," and strongly emphasizes that blacks' faith should take a separate form from that of whites, since discipline in religion is simply another method of subjugation (Delany 197). Yet, he repeatedly cites the Bible as justification of blacks' right to freedom ("now is the accepted time, today is the day of salvation," 29) and their right to steal from the whites to liberate themselves ("God told the Egyptian slaves to 'borrow from their neighbors' -- meaning their oppressors," to take wealth as they found it and leave Egypt, 43). Like his sentiments on Christianity, Blake dismisses the beliefs of Gamby Gholar and the other African conjurers in the Dismal Swamp as mere superstition, yet accepts the title of High Conjurer as another means of gaining respect among the slaves. He explains that he will "do anything not morally wrong to gain [blacks'] freedom," even relying on the ignorance of the slaves (Delany 126). In this manner, he subtly twists the various

belief systems of the repressed to prove both the necessity for their rebellion and his rightful place as their leader.

Upon his arrival in Cuba, Blake wanders the "great roads," where "a Negro could travel without suspicion" and questions those he meets about the conditions of the country (Delany 170-71). He manages to locate his wife by befriending a black overseer who reveals that the owner of his plantation has a penchant for purchasing "handsome slave girls" (Delany 178). Once he has rescued Maggie from her servitude, Blake wins over a Portuguese slave-ship sailor by sharing his knowledge of the slave trade and gains a place as sailing-master on his ship (Delany 201). Blake quickly takes advantage of his role on the "Vulture" to throw a jab at the whites on board and gain the respect of the slaves by permitting the slaves to sing while they work. When a white captain complains, he openly defends the slaves' singing: "'Less noise was the command, and they sung easier though it may have been more cheerfully. My people are merry when they work, especially at sea; and they must not be denied the right to sing, a privilege allowed seamen the world over!" (Delany 208)

During the rest of the sea journey, Blake comes and goes as he pleases, relying on constant disagreements between the other sailors to avoid their attention. In Africa, for instance, Blake "availed himself of the time and communicated with many of the natives opposed to the king, among whom he took his fare and lodging, except when concealed in disguise in the mansion, dressed as a native, being known only to the servants" (Delany 219). He returns to the ship shortly before it is to again set sail, and meets the reprimands of an American sailor: "Where the mischief have you been! . . . Get about there, get about! Or the knot-end of a tar rope may teach you how they make smart blacks in America" (Delany 221). Blake responds with a threatening glare, and the American is soon distracted by the teasing of a lame and ironic slave. Further, the other sailors warn the American that Blake is not a "common Negro" and needs to be

treated well (Delany 222). Soon after the incident, the slaves aboard the "Vulture" manage to escape from the hatch. While the whites attempt to quench the revolt, Blake remains "strangely passive . . . strictly attending to the duties of his office in silence, except when speaking to a black, or spoken to by a white; but was suspicioned by the Americans of being the instigator of the plot" (Delany 237). The white sailors decide that the slaves' revolt has lowered their value and made it impossible to sell them in the United States, so rather, the slaves are taken to Cuba for sale there. As soon as the ship has docked, "Blake went immediately on shore, and was soon lost among the gazing spectators who assembled on the quay" (Delany 237). These passages illustrate Blake's fluidity; like a wave, he washes in amongst the various others, soothes them with his knowledge, awes them with his skill, deceives them with his appearance, and betrays them in his wake while they remain powerless to stop him. Bhabha describes such a force as a "mutation, a hybrid . . . such a partial and double force that it is more than the mimetic but less than the symbolic, that disturbs the visibility of the colonial presence and makes the recognition of its authority problematic" (111). A native West Indian black, Blake inherently knows how to transmute since his people have a long-established history of interaction with European and native American cultures, and have learned to flourish through adaptation.

Antonio Benitez-Rojo contends that Cuba's culture has been more Africanized than any other Caribbean island except Haiti; this is apparent through the African traditions of Cuban religious beliefs, music, dance, painting, literature, and folklore. One reason for this overarching influence lies in the late introduction of the plantation to Cuba, since before the adoption of the plantation system creole culture was "characterized by the participation of the Negro, slave or not, in conditions advantageous to him as an acculturating agent" (Benitez-Rojo 68-9). During the seventeenth century, the cult of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre appeared, a fusion of the cults of Atabey (Taino), Oshun (Yoruba) and Our Lady "constituting also an early appearance of

the creoles' integrationist desire" (Benitez-Rojo 52). Cuban oral tradition tells that the Virgen miraculously rescued three humble men from their sinking boat. The names of the men were Juan Criollo, Juan Indio, and Juan Esclavo, representing within the Virgen de la Caridad "a magical or transcendental space to which the European, African, and American Indian origins of the region's people were connected" (Benitez-Rojo 52). Benitez-Rojo explains that this myth and the popularity of the cult illustrates the creole desire to "reach a sphere of effective equality" where the cultural differences created by conquest, colonization, and slavery could coexist peacefully. Other signs of the integration of cultures can be found in Cuban cuisine; for example, the oldest and most prestigious dish, *ajiaco*, is a soup made of native (maize, potato, *malanga*, boniato, yucca, *aji*, tomato), European (squash, beef, pork, and chicken), and African ingredients (plantains and yams). Also, early creole music and dance merged African and European components and traveled quickly across the country (Benitez-Rojo 53). By the time that the plantation system began to really take hold at the end of the eighteenth century, the mobility of the free black population had already created a significantly Africanized creole culture in Havana and other Cuban environs.

Additionally, black celebrities played a vital role in the acculturation of the Afro-Cuban community, since their popularity transcended cultural boundaries. As Michael Bennett describes, "Minority celebrities ease racial tensions in that they--the foreign, 'Other' bodies--enter personal space in the most comfortable manner," in this case, through the modes of writing, music, dance, or other performance. Nineteenth-century Afro-Cubans boasted numerous celebrities, including the poet Gabriel de la Concepcion Valdes, or Placido. According to Paquette, "Placido was probably Cuba's most renowned person of color in 1840" (110). In 1834, at twenty-five, he won a poetry contest against twelve popular white opponents in Havana. "His victory made him the darling of white aristocrats," who, along with free blacks, paid him to write

poetry for baptisms, weddings, and dances (Paquette 110). In *Blake*, Placido plays an apt sidekick for the hero's journey through Cuba due to the wide respect he enjoyed throughout the country. Although the poet actually died several years before Delany published the novel, his role as Blake's cousin in the book provides an inroads for Blake to easily reach the elite whites of Cuba.

Prior to the Cuban sugar boom, Cuba was a settlement colony existing of small ranches, tobacco farms, and small towns. Between 1511 and 1762, only a few thousand African slaves entered Cuba, approximately two hundred and fifty per year, and the majority of these slaves did not work on sugar plantations but were distributed amongst different localities and types of service. Compared to other Caribbean islands before the late eighteenth century, the relations between masters and slaves were relatively personal, due to Cuba's stage of economic development more than lack of difference in cultural heritage (Knight 5). At the bottom of the Cuban social hierarchy were the most recent arrivals from Africa, *bozales* or *negros de naciones*, who usually did fieldwork on the plantations (Paquette 35). While field slaves as a group clung to the bottom of the social ladder until Spain abolished slavery in 1880, those who learned to communicate in Spanish or Afro-Spanish patois graduated to *ladinos* and might have been eligible for less demanding work (Paquette 38). *Criollo* slaves were born and raised in Cuba, and fared better, obtaining more advantageous positions as artisans, drivers, urban slaves for hire, or house slaves (38). As compared with field slaves, urban slaves worked fewer hours, so they had leisure time to enjoy city diversions such as taverns, dances, nonwhite social clubs, and cockfights. During this period, slaveholders in cities relied more on colonial acculturation than on violence to guide slave behavior -- specifically, slaves were taught to behave because society expected it of them. Additionally, an abused slave could readily turn to priests, government officials, or white patrons for help, and a *sindico*, or protector of slaves, would intervene to

ensure that the slave obtained a new master (Paquette 38 and Knight 62).

Later, during the early part of the nineteenth century, slaves located in cities often rented themselves out, reaching an agreement with their masters on how much they could earn. Thus, they had the opportunity to save enough cash to buy their freedom, allowed by slave owners to relieve animosity over servitude (Howard 12). This, in turn, gave rise to Cuba's unusually large free black population. Urban slaves who could not earn the money to pay the cost of legal emancipation would often flee to the homes of free blacks outside of the city. Such alliances worked to evade white slaveholders from recapturing runaway slaves, and further increased the free black population (Howard 14). In the 1840s, Spain passed a decree that granted freedom and five hundred pesos to any slave who reported Afro-Cuban conspiracies (Howard 7). In fact, throughout the first half of the century, Spain, bowing to pressure from Britain, granted Cuban slaves and free blacks certain rights that according to Philip Howard, "gave rise to expectations of a better life than slavery" (1). Free blacks were able to join the Cuban military after the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) and earned such benefits as *fuero militar* (the right in certain cases to escape civil jurisdiction and to be tried by military courts), pensions, preferred employment, and preferred burial sites. They were also permitted to command the team of colored dockworkers in the cities, a privilege that carried much prestige among the Afro-Cubans. By confirming the place of free black militiamen in defense of Cuba, Spain had indirectly prepared them for leadership roles among their people (Paquette 107-8).

In addition to the less stringent demands on slaves, free Afro-Cubans also fulfilled a major role in the Cuban economy before the growth of the plantation system. According to Paquette, "free people of color had entered Cuba's skilled trades. . . they literally served whites from the womb to the grave: free colored midwives brought them into the world; free colored undertakers ushered them out" (39). Whites considered positions of service degrading, leaving

them open to free blacks, who took advantage of the opportunity to build respectable careers as masons, wagoners, cooks, grocers, butchers, singers, confectioners, shoemakers, and seamstresses, among other professions (Howard 16). Howard even notes that many successful free black artisans earned enough money to buy slaves of their own (16). Outside of cities, free blacks also had a significant presence. Thousands of free blacks held small farms, and many more worked as drovers or herdsmen on white farms. In 1846, seven percent of overseers and twelve percent of estate administrators were free blacks (Paquette 40). This overwhelming economic role both inside and outside of Cuban urbanity adds another route on free Afro-Cubans' path to personal mobility within the society.

Most Afro-Cubans, free and slave, belonged to *cabildos*, brotherhoods designated according to African ethnicity that administered to the spiritual and social needs of the community (Paquette 108). A carry-over from Africa, cabildos preserved tribal cohesion by educating members in the rituals and theology of the tribe, and first emerged in Cuba during the late sixteenth century (Howard 21 and 27). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, cabildos had become the most popular form of mutual aid within the Afro-Cuban community. Since the cabildos generally met in members' homes, they were free of the limitations placed on other groups that met under the auspices of the Catholic church. The leader of the cabildo, the *capataz*, represented the cabildo in grievances to the Spanish, assumed responsibility for crimes of its members, and paid members' fines (Paquette 109). On festival days, which in nineteenth-century Cuban society accounted for approximately one day in four, cabildos communally reaffirmed their African past, modified by their American setting (Paquette 34). In many ways, religion within the societies diverged drastically from the Catholic faith, for the African followers made no differentiation between the natural and the spirtual worlds. Afro-Cubans incorporated a ritualized belief in power distribution into their religious practices, a notion often overlooked by

whites who dismiss the religion as animal fetishism (Howard 61). However, Cuban culture did sythesize certain aspects of the African religious tradition with Catholocism. For instance, the greatest festival day was on the sixth of January, the Epiphant of the Catholics, and also coincided with traditional African celebration of the winter solstice. On this day, Afro-Cubans would dress in colorful costumes and march down city streets in ritual festivity (Paquette 109). Geoff Simons notes that

> [in] fact the cabildos often fulfilled a religious role, though not always one the Church approved: the cabildos participated in religious processions, akin to those of medieval Seville, but with the displayed figures and costumes tending to preserve elements of African mythology. One traveller describes 'free and enslaved negroes' assembling 'to do homage with a sort of grave merriment that one would doubt whether it is done in ridicule or memory of their former condition' (101).

The fact that the traveller questions the motivations of the Afro-Cuban religious rituals points to their Blakean transmutability. Clearly, cabildo members utilized elements of European culture in ways that benefited their own interests, yet they did so in harmony with Cuban traditions which shows that they have both a stake in the larger culture and the capabilities to preserve it.

In addition to the celebratory aspect of the cabildos, blacks also used the organizations to trade information, communicate ancestral beliefs, and offer emotional support to one another (Paquette 109). Cabildos pooled their resources and purchased property as well as freedom for enslaved members. According to Howard, "they served as both models for their enslaved countrymen and threats to a sociopolitical system that equated blackness with subservience" (34). Delany includes a description of the cabildo meeting organized by Blake, held in the drawing room of Madame Cordora, a wealthy creole. The group sets up a governmental structure and outlines the details for an army (Delany 256). Delany warns that "thus organized, the

oppressed became a dangerous element in the political ingredients of Cuba" (257). In fact, as noted by Paquette, high levels of education and general enlightenment amongst cabildo members made them extremely politically aware, and created within the organization a sort of political hothouse (117).

The capitalist-driven sugar boom originated in Brazil in the late sixteenth century, quickly declined, and then moved from one Caribbean colony to another for the next four centuries (Paquette 29). In 1791, slave revolts in Saint-Domingue, Haiti crushed sugar production there and brought the plantation system to Cuba. Seeking to profit from the sudden demand for sugar, Spanish colonists in Cuba began to convert small farms to large-scale plantations. This included a drastic increase in the importation of slaves: the figure jumped from sixty thousand between 1512 and 1761, to four hundred thousand between 1762 and 1838 (Knight 10). Unlike the earlier African influence, and despite the growing proportion of slaves within the Cuban population, African slaves during the plantation era were reduced to living under harsh conditions that prevented any sort of cultural influence upon the Europeans or creoles (Benitez-Rojo 70). Worse, Cuban slaves now lived within a deculturating regimen that resented and punished African language, religion, and customs (Benitez-Rojo 70). Once Cuban planters began to consider African laborers a priceless commodity, they began a regiment of abuse and violent treatment that affected both the slaves and the free blacks (Knight 10). Slaveholders purposely separated slaves from other members of their tribes to prevent communication, forced them to work inconceivably long hours, and regularly tortured them; life expectancy for an African slave under these conditions did not reach ten years (Benitez-Rojo 66). Verena Martinez-Alier emphasizes that by the early nineteenth century, legal and social discrimination of free blacks increased (4). Cabildos fell under the whites' suspicion and free blacks were often ordered out of the country, yet slaveholders drastically underestimated the

strength of the Afro-Cubans, as free blacks continued to clandestinely plot with the slaves and successfully staged numerous revolts throughout the latter nineteenth century.

Similar to the one at work in the United States, the social structure within Cuba during the nineteenth century, derived from the burgeoning institution of slavery in the country, took the shape of a hierarchy broadly divided into whites, free people of color, and slaves. Realistically more complex, the major social divisions included numerous subdivisions based on confusing combinations of color, wealth, and privilege (Paquette 35). In *Blake*, Delany comments that "were Cubans classified according to their complexion or race, three out of five of the inhabitants called white would decidedly be claimed by the colored people, though there is a larger number much fairer than those classified and known in the register as colored" (237). For example, a free *pardo,* or person of partial African ancestry received higher status than a free *moreno,* or pure-blooded African, but wealth produced exceptions. Intermarriage (between *pardo* and *moreno,* marriages between whites and blacks were prohibited) provided immediate social benefit to the darker partner and any offspring (Paquette 41). As early as 1795, the Spanish government permitted Cuban mulattoes to buy the right to legal whiteness, or *gracias al sacar*, which illustrates the fact that economic rank overrode the racial hierarchy in determining one's place in Cuban society. Interestingly, Afro-Cuban cabildos did not use skin tone as a criteria for for membership and while some blacks opted to engage the white hierarchical system, most found the ranks oppressive, demonstrating Guillaumin's theory of marking (Howard 29). Additionally, the number of white Cubans almost always equaled that of free and slave nonwhites, and in the mid-1800s one-fifth of the Cuban population were free blacks, a proportion higher than in other Caribbean "sugar islands". Perhaps for this reason the racial boundaries of the country never hardened the way that they did in the antebellum U.S. As Robert Paquette explains, "their continual subtlety and fluidity defies easy generalization" (111).

Like the arbitrary divisions that existed between Cuban people of color, whites endured a social breakdown based on economic roles and hereditary ties to Spain. Long-held oppositions between the *criollos* (Cuban-born) and the *peninsulares* (Spanish-born) pitted the groups against each other mainly due to the influence of Spanish colonial policy (Howard 17). While the peninsulares controlled Cuban commerce, criollos worked the land for a living. According to Knight, Creole landowners could inherit land, but their land could not be sold, sublet, or subdivided. In effect, the Spanish had the real control of Cuban property (10-11). Ironically, the adoption of the plantation system gave rise to high white nobility: of the fifty-six marquis and counts in Cuba in 1840, thirty one had acquired their titles since the turn of the century (Paquette 42). Thus, at the opposite end of the spectrum, Guillaumin's system of marking arbitrarily increases the power of the oppressor. However, at the turn of the nineteenth century, slavery bridged the gap between the classes of whites, since economic success depended on their cooperation and the two groups came to share political power (Howard 18). Most working-class whites agreed that in order to protect their livelihood, slavery must be preserved at all costs. Yet in response to demands from Britain, Spain had gradually taken steps to outlaw the slave trade and had begun to consider abolishing slavery entirely in order to defend their dominance over Cuba.

Slaveholders feared that such a move would permit blacks to submerge the white population and Christian morality itself would collapse: as Simons explains, "such a diabolical *Africanisation* would reduce Cuba to a 'howling wilderness'"(125). Another colonialist force, the United States had been admiring Cuba since the late eighteenth century, as "a natural extension of the American continent," in the words of John Quincy Adams (Simons 168). Simons expounds on the American sentiment towards Cuba: "There would come a time, judged the United States, when the Cuban apple would land in the American lap; until then the main priority

was to keep Cuba out of the hands of Cubans (169). During this time, the U.S. supplied much of the equipment used on the Cuban plantations, and many of the plantations were owned by Americans. A New Orleans company installed gas lighting in Havana in 1844; five years after telephone concessions were obtained by Americans; in addition, the first Cuban railroad was built by an American using British funds (Simons 170). The U.S. had more than a friendly interest in Cuba's future. Beginning with President James Polk's offer to buy Cuba from Spain for $100 million in 1848, several presidents made offers to buy the country, but with no avail. The U.S. did consider taking military action against Spain to gain control of Cuba, but postponed taking such extreme measures in an attempt to avoid a confrontation with the British navy, for whom the Americans were no match (Simons 172). Cuban slaveholders, on the other hand, believed that annexation with the U.S. would preserve the institution of slavery and offer a degree of political independence. In Cuba, the annexationists organized the *Club de la Habana*, comprised of slave-holding planters, intellectuals, and other professionals (Simons 169).

To further complicate matters, slaveholders during the mid-nineteenth century were caught between wanting more and more slaves on their sugar plantations and their constant fear of open slave rebellion (Knight 113). Although Delany positions Blake as the main instigator of slave revolt in Cuba, slave uprisings were in fact a constant threat throughout the nineteenth century. While the various colonialist powers fought amongst themselves for power of Cuba, free blacks used the unguarded opportunity to act in their own interests and collaborate with slaves to organize uprisings, mirroring Blake's behavior on board the slave ship "Vulture". According to Simons, the first documented revolt occurred in 1533 at the Jacabo mines, and involved only four slaves. The four fought to the death against Spanish militia and their heads were displayed in Bayamo to pacify the colonizers (132-33). In 1538, groups of slaves destroyed most of Havana while French pirates attacked the city. Despite the Spanish governor-general's

attempt to quench rebellions with sheer military force, large dispatches of troops did little to repress continual insurrection (Simons 133). By the end of the eighteenth century, vast numbers of Africans had been imported into Cuban slavery, comprising what Simons calls a "repressed and bitter population" (134). The number of revolts continued to increase as the size of the slave population grew. Between 1795 and 1843 there were nine major urban revolts, as well as many other smaller incidents, lending credibility to white planters' fears of slave resistance. Jose Antonio Aponte organized one of the most sophisticated Afro-Cuban conspiracies in Havana in 1812. He planned to stimulate an uprising of field slaves near large Cuban cities by having them set fires to plantations to draw the attention of the military, and then capture urban fortifications (Paquette 124). Violence broke out; slaves razed one plantation and killed several whites. Finally, two slaves in Puerto Principe betrayed the organization, and the Cuban military beheaded Aponte. One among many, Aponte's revolt is reminiscent of Blake's plan for action: "You know my errand among you; you know my sentiments," he announces to his Cuban followers. "I am for war, war upon the whites" (Delany 290). This call for war at a time when colonialists were hedging their bets, waiting for control of Cuba to fall at their feet, speaks to the Afro-Cubans' calculation of how to counter white forces and defend their investment in the culture.

Benitez-Rojo's proposal that Cuba's relatively late adoption of the plantation system created an early fluidity between the various cultural factions living in the country suggests that given the opportunity to act of their own accord, cultures in contact tend to meld. This melding preserves elements of each culture while accenting their differences. As Howard notes, "Afro-Cubans, whether slave or free, were never truly outside of society" (1). Such a natural relationship permits a liberal yet solid social structure based on mutual acceptance. With the capitalist, colonialist venture of the plantation, at its most potent in Cuba during the mid-

nineteenth century, came the arbitrary divisions of racial hierarchy. Whereas earlier, skin color was simply a physical characteristic tending towards flux as cultures intermingled, the plantation ascribed to the human body a stringent set of values based on a capitalist, hegemonic ideology. At issue here is that bodies continue to change no matter what power codes expect of them. The social hierarchy of the Cuban plantation system, as we have seen, works only on paper -- in reality, groups like the Afro-Cuban cabildos subvert such attempts at alignment. As in *Blake*, centuries of actual influence cannot simply be dissolved by outsiders, the Spanish, English and Americans in Cuba's case, concerned only with their own interests. Just as Blake heroically seeks to liberate his repressed community by drawing from long-held African tradition, slyly making himself indispensable to both his white oppressors and Cuban blacks, while actually operating outside his assigned societal role, so do the free Afro-Cubans use their rightful place in society to upend the plantation system and aid the slaves in gaining freedom. The significance of violence points to the health of the Afro-Cuban culture. Cultures in contact will interact. The process is a slow one, barely visible even through documented history. Often, connections to the past are more visible than cultural-crossovers: the slaves in Cuba openly draw from their African roots, aligning themselves by geographic location and tribal association; yet their influence on the Creoles is harder to grasp. The slowness of the process causes this, in addition to the subtlety of the merging of cultures. Like the *ajiaco* soup, the simmering of cultural traditions changes the original elements into something more flavorful and multiplicitous. However, if the interaction is stymied the process turns on itself. Once a group tries to halt the give and take of the relationship, either the culture stagnates or turns violent. Locked in the past, a stagnant culture refuses to let time take its course, and the violent culture fights to stop arbitrary forces from holding it static. Clearly, it takes a stronger culture to break open the floodgates.

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