

AFRO-AMERICAN IMAGES OF AFRICA:

Four Antebellum Black Authors

by

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(The four books which this paper uses throughout as its source material were chosen because they are the best known and most easily accessible of each of the four Afro-American authors.¹)

Of Douglass, Walker, Brown and Delany--the four black authors under examination here--Frederick Douglass is traditionally considered the most conspicuous and aggressive; yet Douglass would scarcely be called a radical black by current standards. As evidenced by his classic autobiography, *Life and Times*, Douglass based his pre-Civil War appeals for "black liberation" squarely on a white, middle-class moral foundation. To a large extent he directed his appeals to the dominant white power structure which he hoped to influence, the implicit consequence being that his appeals were (unduly) dependent on whites and white institutions for their implementation and efficacy. He did not approve of the "revolutionary" tactics of a John Brown at Harper's Ferry; nor did he care at all for the separatist crusades (inspired by blacks or whites, or both) intent on expatriating Afro-Americans to a "land of redemption," be that land Africa or elsewhere. He viewed these efforts as hypocritical and false proof that the two races could not flourish on the same soil. Rather, he had as twin goals the renovation of the public mind and the encouragement of public sentiment which would end slavery and restore "liberty and the pursuit of happiness" to his black countrymen.

Douglass was a redoubtable anti-slavery lecturer, author, and newspaper editor. He was deeply concerned with developing programs for racial self-improvement and solidarity. Douglass argued that the stereotypic estimate of the black American as an inferior member of the human race made it incumbent on him to change this estimate by demonstrating his capacity for a more exalted civilization than slavery and prejudice had assigned him. The self-serving proposal put forth by Douglass for doing so was for a black-run newspaper (*The North Star*) which, by calling out and making black Americans acquainted with their own latent powers, by

enkindling their hope for a future and developing their moral force, would prove a powerful means of removing prejudice and awakening an interest in them. Another proposal--this one concerned with establishing an "Industrial College" for free blacks--was more clearly and characteristically subsumed in the issue of full American citizenship. This proposal he addressed to the white authoress, Harriet Beecher Stowe, in 1853. It reads:

*...we must become mechanics; we must build as well as live in houses; we must make as well as use furniture; we must construct bridges as well as pass over them, before we can properly live or be respected by our fellow men.*²

It was believed by many more articulate, mid-century blacks than Douglass alone, that by achieving middle class moral and economic respectability, blacks would earn the respect of the whites, counteract prejudice, and ease the way toward recognition of their manhoods and their American citizenship.

Both David Walker and William Wells Brown are less well known black abolitionists. Walker began his writing career nearly a decade before either Douglass or Brown escaped from bondage; indeed, it was Walker who in 1829, inaugurated the militant anti-slavery crusade with his seminal publication *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. As Douglass and Brown would later do, Walker rooted his anti-slavery arguments firmly in the Declaration of Independence and in the books of the Old and New Testaments. All three men inveighed against a schizophrenic society which professed the ideals of the American Revolution and true Christian religion, but which appeared dedicated to the "unrepublican and unchristian" doctrine of racial inequality. Unlike Douglass and Brown, who addressed their abolitionist appeals mainly to white audiences, Walker addressed his *Appeal* directly to the slaves themselves. Walker especially did not choose to moderate his language in his vigorous denunciation of slavery and slave-holders; instead, he employed throughout his *Appeal* the incendiary language of the American Revolution and the vengeful language of the Old Testament. "Are they not the Lord's enemies? Ought they not to be destroyed?"

Walker wrote: "Remember Americans, that we must and shall be (as) free...as you are....And wo, wo, will be to you if we have to obtain our freedom by fighting." And Brown, author of the first novel written in America by a

black man, affirmed through the black hero of *Clotelle*:
"...the day will come when the negro will learn that he can get his freedom by fighting for it; and should that time arrive, the whites will be sorry that they have hated us so shamefully." But Walker went one step beyond Brown and suggested to the slaves:

*...if you commence (your fight for freedom) make sure work--do not trifle, for they (the whites) will not trifle with you...therefore, if there is an attempt made by us, kill or be killed. I ask you, had you not rather be killed than be a slave to a tyrant...? ...and believe this, it is no more harm for you to kill a man, who is trying to kill you, than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty.*³

In addition, Walker believed that the "God of the Ethiopians" would assist black men on the day of their redemption. But he argued that first there must be a willingness on their part for God to be moved to action.

More popular today perhaps than either Walker or Brown is Martin Delany. Co-editor for a short time with Douglass on *The North Star*, Delany was in many ways the antithesis of Douglass. Delany's fictional piece, *Blake*, was a militant socio-political statement written during the 1850's, a decade of great discouragement to blacks--free and slave alike--who were adversely affected by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 (which opened the western territories to the penetration of slavery), the decline of anti-slavery societies, and the southern ascendancy in the national government which culminated in the Dred Scott Decision (1857). But while Douglass used the concepts of racial solidarity and self-help in a manner which he viewed as prerequisite to the Afro-American's struggle to obtain equality and integration in American society, Delany used the same concepts in a manner which, while not completely divorced from the thinking of Douglass, showed a commitment to black liberation--or better, black redemption--extrinsic to an American identity.⁴

IMAGE OF AFRICA

Central to Delany's commitment to black redemption was his thematic use of pure black and African imagery in *Blake*. Here in the most important novelistic offering of a black

author to be published before Emancipation was a deft and affirmative use of racial consciousness: "A black--a pure Negro," was how Delany described Henry Blake, the novel's chief protagonist. Furthermore, here was a black writer clearly linking his own skin color with Africa, portraying fictional black men who claimed for themselves an unequivocal identity with the African race. For instance, at one point in Blake's peregrinations of the South (during which he spread his plan of unified rebellion against slavocracy), Delany had his protagonist hold up Africa and Africans as an object lesson in national and racial resistance against white domination:

*You should...remember (Blake told the Chief of the United Indian Nation) that the Africans have never permitted a subjugation of their country by foreigners as the Indians have theirs, and Africa is still peopled by Africans, whilst America, the home of the Indian--who is fast passing away--is now possessed and ruled by foreigners.*⁵

Later in his expansive treatment of Cuba, Delany introduced another character, the Creole poet-rebel Placido, who in concert with Henry Blake assisted in refining the author's views on racial consciousness: "I hold," said Placido, "that colored persons, whatever the complexion, can only obtain an equality with whites by the descendants of Africa of unmixed blood."

*The whites assert (Placido went on to say) the natural inferiority of the African as a race: upon this they premise their objections, not only to the blacks, but all who have any affinity with them. Now how are the mixed bloods ever to rise? The thing is plain....The instant that an equality of blacks with whites is admitted, we being the descendants of the two, must be acknowledged the equals of both.*⁶

To be sure, Delany felt this was a sufficiently important point: that mulattos themselves became cognizant of their struggle against "white over brown" as being but a phase of the larger struggle against "white over black"; additionally, this perhaps explains why Delany used the Creole Placido to express his own sentiments in order that they might be better received by the racially mixed audience

than if they had been articulated by a black partisan. But Delany obviously had a wider and deeper concern than describing the relationship mulattos sustained to Africa as a country and her people as a nation. Delany believed that racial consciousness was more than direct affirmations of blackness. He believed it involved a self-consciousness in terms of self-reliance and self-elevation. Yet before black self-reliance and self-elevation could become operational, the image of Africa would have to be redeemed--that image of Africa as being desolate, the inhabitants of which were "savage, lazy, idle, and fit only for bondmen," contributing nothing to the world save that which was extorted from them as slaves.

Let us prove (Delany-Placido exhorted his audience) not only that the African race is now the principal producer of the greater part of the luxuries of enlightened countries, ...but that in Africa their native land, they are the most industrious people in the world, ...that ere long they and their country must hold the balance of commercial power by supplying as they now do as foreign bondmen in strange lands, the greatest staple commodities in demand...from their own native shores,...and that race and country will at once rise to the first magnitude of importance in the estimation of the greatest nations on earth, from their dependence upon them for the greatest staples from which is derived their national wealth.⁷

One of the mulattos to whom Placido had been addressing his convictions acknowledged her indebtedness to the poet-rebel for her new image of Africa. "I never before felt as proud of my black as I did my white blood," she allowed. "How sensibly I feel, that a people never entertain proper opinions of themselves until they begin to act for themselves." To which Placido declared: "Let us then make ourselves respected."

This declaration, drawing as it did upon Delany's singular, redemptive image of Africa and racial consciousness, define "respect" in terms of the African race. He referred to them as "the principal producers" and "the most industrious people in the world," and maintained that they were the sole rightful beneficiaries of the fruits of their labor. This concept of wealth is strikingly

different from Douglass' assimilationist economic viewpoint. Thus, Delany stands poles-apart from Douglass' position, not only in regard to socio-political aspects of Black Liberation, but in the assertion that the control of the "luxuries" of "enlightened countries" should be in the hands of those who labored to produce them.

Brown like Douglass, was a mulatto, and his abolitionist novel, *Clotelle: or, the Colored Heroine*, reeks with the sentimentality of the "tragic mulatto" theme. One would think then that Brown's image of Africa and Africans would be disparaging. Wrong--Brown's image of Africa and the African race is more than passable for "perfectly black" Jerome, the male protagonist in *Clotelle*, is Brown's redemption of Africa and Africans. Indeed, Jerome is the only major character in the novel--white, black or colored; slave or free--who asserted his manhood--and this while in bondage! Perhaps the single most significant scene Brown wrote into the novel takes place inside the jailhouse where Jerome was waiting to be hanged. The magistrate had come to question Jerome as to whether he knew anything of a slave conspiracy; he held out to Jerome the possibility of sparing the slave's life should he betray his alleged co-conspirators. Brown then wrote the following passage:

"Life," answered the doomed man, "is worth nought to a slave....I am free to say that, could I live my life over again, I would use all the energies which God has given me to get up an insurrection."

Every one present seemed startled and amazed at the intelligence with which this descendant of Africa spoke.

"He's a very dangerous man," remarked one.

Brown's identification early in the novel with this "dangerous descendant of Africa" later led to his working through a general reconciliation between blacks and mulattos in the marriage of Jerome to Clotelle, and at the end of the novel between blacks and whites in the persons of Jerome and his white father-in-law, Henry Linwood, slaveholder-turned-abolitionist. The last chapter of the prewar version of *Clotelle* (1853) witnessed Brown binding together the episodic roles he had assigned black Jerome: the redeemer of those of "pure African origin," slaves like himself; the redeemer of the mulattos, also slaves who in concert with blacks tried to realize their personal freedom; and the redeemer of white Americans, slaves to

"prejudice against color," and who were now resolved to eradicate prejudice and slavery in America. The dominant tone of Brown's usage of African images is one of the most progressive examples extant in the writings of *antebellum* black authors.

In the introduction to Douglass' second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), "Negro" reformist J. McCune Smith described Frederick Douglass as "a Representative American man--a type of his countrymen." If we ignore the question of skin color, then the Smith model seems to fit Douglass perfectly, or at least his *antebellum* image of Africa (what we have of it in *Life and Times*).⁹ This image of Africa was plainly conditioned by the larger racist society in which American blacks operated ("blacks, taking their cue from whites," Douglass himself at one point acknowledged). Thus, in the pages of Douglass' autobiography, Africa comes off second best. Of course, this was in consonance with the nineteenth century commonplace of drawing parallels between civilized men and the United States, and between uncivilized, barbaric men and Africa. But though Douglass unfortunately drew these racist parallels, his motives were derived in large part from his capacity as the foremost black opponent of the emigrationist movement. In his letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe, Douglass averred:

*There is little reason to hope that any considerable number of free colored people will ever be induced to leave this country.... The black man (unlike the Indian) loves civilization. He does not make very great progress in civilization himself, but he likes to be in the midst of it, and prefers to share its most galling evils, to encountering barbarism.*¹⁰

What is apropos in the above quote is the implicit observation Douglass advanced: to wit, that in the case of the American black, land, culture and racial origin operate independently of one another. Delany, as we observed in *Blake*, did not stray outside the confines imposed in the land-identity-culture triad. After all, Delany was pre-eminently concerned with redeeming the stereotypic view of Africa as "desolate" (land) and of Africans as "lazy and idle" (identity), "incapable of higher civilization" (culture). Because if the view of Africa and Africans could be redeemed in the eyes of the world, then the whole

black race would be redeemed. On the other hand, Douglass accepted the prevailing view of the African ("he does not make very great progress in civilization himself") but did so because for him the image of Africa was all but irrelevant: the hoary relationship between land, identity and culture did not any longer obtain in the case of the black man long since stolen from Africa. Why? For the very reason that the factor of identity itself was transferable. The black man transplanted to America had formed over a considerable time-span a firm attachment to civilization ("he likes to be in the midst of it") and would prefer not to be alienated from the civilization which he, as much as anyone else (excepting the Indian), now shared in. And anyway, should the black man now transfer his identity back to Africa, he would be (according to Douglass) "encountering barbarism," a fate worse than the most "galling evils" of civilization. Speaking on behalf of the majority of Afro-Americans, Douglass wrote: "We have grown up in this republic, and I see nothing in her character, or even in the character of the American people, as yet, which compels the belief that we must leave the United States."¹¹

The antipathy Douglass showed toward emigration was also shared by David Walker a quarter century earlier. Indeed, Walker devoted almost one-half of his *Appeal* to the question of emigration and colonization. Walker called the colonizing plan a satanic trick, because its advocates were bent upon sending blacks to Liberia, "not for the glory of God, but on the contrary the perpetuation of slavery in this country."

Walker saw the U.S. as mother country to black Americans; thus he had only harsh words for those black emigrationists who were ignorant enough to be "fooled" off to Africa. As for whites, he wrote:

*Do they think to drive us from our country and homes, after having enriched it with our blood and tears, and keep back millions of our dear brethren, sunk in the most barbarous wretchedness...? They think we do not feel for our brethren, whom they are murdering by the inches, but they are dreadfully deceived.*¹²

These are very nearly the words of Douglass who wrote that, "...the love of country,...and the thought of seeming to desert their 'brethren in bonds,' are a powerful check upon all schemes of colonization, which look to the removal of the colored people, without the slaves."

Let us pause here for a moment and reflect upon what we have observed so far in the four black authors: three of them, Douglass, Walker and Brown, were seen in their writings as insistent on the Afro-American's American citizenship, while one, Martin Delany, was seen stressing the Afro-American's African identity. In our discussion of Delany it has been shown how in *Blake* the stance of the author was mirrored in his image of Africa and the use he made of it as an ideological device. Now let us go on and analyze the degree to which Brown, Douglass and Walker made use of the image of Africa and Africans.

Walker approximates Delany in the affirmative use of racial consciousness. Brown, it might be noted here, is runner-up, while Douglass places last. Walker held very positive images of Africans as a race and of blackness. "For instance, Walker wrote that learning originated among the sons of Africa." But he did not hold a commensurately high regard for Africa, because to his way of thinking Africa was immorally linked to the attempts of the Southern-led American Colonization Society to repatriate black Americans to Liberia. Adopting the words of one "Negro leader" to express his own similar feelings on the subject Walker wrote:

*Any coloured man of common intelligence, who gives his countenance and influence to that colony (Liberia), further than its missionary object and interest extend, should be considered as a traitor to his brethren, and discarded by every respectable man of colour.*¹³

Although coming down hard against wholesale efforts to remove black Americans from "their rightful soil," Walker nevertheless realized that individual cases might appear for which emigration from the States was the only possible solution. "If any of us see fit to go away," Walker allowed, "go to those who have been for many years, and are now our greatest earthly friends and benefactors--the English. If not so, go to our brethren, the Haytians, who, according to their word, are bound to protect and comfort us."

To Walker's way of thinking Africa, or Liberia, was not synonymous with freedom--Africa/Liberia being a patent plot to strengthen the American system of human bondage. Freedom for Walker was, "to be delivered from the most wretched, abject and servile slavery, that ever a people was afflicted with...."

The supposed equality of environment as it related to the concept of freedom was a topic to which Delany later addressed himself in *Blake*. A minor character named Andy, who had escaped to Canada with Henry Blake, was made by Delany to exclaim: "Is dis de good ole British soil...? De lan' whar black folks is free?" "Poor fellow!" editorialized Delany:

*he little knew the unnatural feelings and course pursued toward his race by many Canadians....It never entered the mind of poor Andy, that in going to Canada in search of freedom, he was then in a country where privileges were denied him which are common to the slave in every Southern state.... When he heard (of these things) an emotion of unutterable indignation would swell the heart of the determined slave, and almost compel him to curse the country of his adoption.*¹⁴

It is significant that the hero of Delany's novel, Henry Blake, discovered ultimate liberation only after leaving Canada for Cuba. There the blacks were the "legitimate inhabitants," while the whites were there by intrusion. "'On this island,' said Blake, 'we are the many and the oppressors few; consequently, they have no moral right to hold rule over us, whilst we have the moral right and physical power to prevent them.'" Crying "Freedom is ours!" Henry Blake simultaneously began the revolution against white physical and psychological oppression and the creation of a black nation-state.

Brown, like Douglass and Walker, made no use of Africa whatsoever as the preferable destination for fugitive slaves; rather, he had Jerome flee to Canada and Clotelle to France. Brown made it evident, though, that emigration from the States was an expedient, not the end in itself. While in Canada Jerome "felt for the first time that personal freedom which God intended that all who bore his image should enjoy," yet he was not reconciled to being a stranger in a strange land: "'Though forced from my native land by the tyrants of the South,' Jerome lamented, 'I hope I shall someday be able to return. With all her faults, I love my country still.'" And return Jerome and Clotelle did.

The purpose of this analysis has been to show how the ideological stance of four *antebellum* Afro-American authors has been mirrored in their written images of Africa as a

country and its inhabitants and stolen offspring as a race. One might very well plot these individual images on a continuum, ranked according to tenor and frequency; and were that done, then Martin Delany would be placed at one extreme, Frederick Douglass at the other, while David Walker and William Wells Brown would be situated at *loci* between the two. All of the authors share of course a common denominator --their blackness--but each one uniquely addressed himself to the problems of blackness in white America. Delany, as we saw, differed sharply from the position of integrationism anti-emigrationism advocated by Douglass and Walker, and adumbrated by Brown (in the black characters Clotelle and Jerome). Delany's advocacy of both servile revolution in the American South and a black-controlled Cuba drew heavily upon his redemptive image of Africa, Africans and all colored people. The African race, Delany maintained, was by nature adapted to the tropical regions; it had a moral right to these areas as the "legitimate inhabitants." If some members of the black race might be "immorally" oppressed by white "intruders," they should look for strength and guidance to their "soul brothers," the Africans in Africa, who were the principal producers of the commodities and wealth of other great nations. This reclaimed image of Africa and Africans, as provided by Delany, offered a firm ideological base for a black "nationalist" revolution which sought to end all forms of white oppression against the black race and to establish a black state appropriate of a rejuvenated race.

The other three authors also used African images to underscore their ideological positions. While often affirmative and almost as equally redemptive as Delany's, these images were at other times highly negative; at all times they were employed to buttress positions which maintained, in general, that blacks should remain at home and combat both Southern slavery and Northern discrimination. Douglass, Walker and Brown were above all American patriots,¹⁵ and lashed out at conventions, *de jure* or informal, which denied black Americans their God-given manhood and their rightful citizenship. All four authors defined positions on the ideological continuum over one hundred years ago which their intellectual descendants are still occupying and redefining.

Footnotes

1. (a) Douglass, Frederick, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, New York: Collier, 1962 (1892 ed.)
- (b) Delany, Martin R., *Blake; or the Huts of America*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.
- (c) Walker, David, *David Walker's Appeal*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1965.
- (d) Brown, William Wells, *Clotelle; or the Colored Heroine*, Miami: Mnemosyne, 1969.
2. See Douglass, p. 284 and *passim*.
3. Walker, pp. 25-26.
4. Although the subject of emigration is an inherent part of this analysis, *Blake* itself is not the clearest proclamation we have of Delany's emigrationist sentiments which he held throughout most of the 1850's. See e.g., *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, recently reprinted by Arno Press.
5. Delany, p. 86.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 261.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 261-262.
8. Brown, p. 65.
9. Douglass' best thought-out *antebellum* treatment of Africa and Africans, entitled "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered," delivered at Western Reserve College in 1854, was edited out of his *Life and Times* (revised edition of 1892) as well as the 1855 edition, *My Freedom and My Bondage*. "In this speech Douglass...demonstrated 'the oneness of the human family' and the equality of the Negro with the Anglo-Saxon. Douglass also delved into African history, identifying the Negro people with the splendid cultural achievements of Egypt." (Quoted in Foster, William Z., *The Negro People*, 1970 edition, p. 204.) Douglass' both mentioning the existence of this paper (see Douglass, p. 374) and then choosing to edit out his remarks, we are provided with yet another illustration of where he thought priorities were.
10. Douglass, p. 286.
11. A corollary of Douglass' antiemigrationism was his incipient concept of "black nationhood." Paradoxically, the concept was employed by this archetypal assimilationist to undermine the emigrationists' ideological position: "Individuals emigrate," Douglass wrote, "nations never." See Douglass, p. 286.
12. Walker, p. 68.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
14. Delany, pp. 152-153.
15. Only on the rarest of occasions did his anger and alienation lead Douglass to declare that he could feel no patriotism or love for America. See Douglass, pp. 242-243.