

“Much Learning Makes Men Mad”: Classical Education and Black Empowerment in Martin R. Delany’s Philosophy of Education

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1. Introduction:

Education, or more appropriately, the denial of access to education, was the bedrock of enslavement and segregation in America. Keeping Blacks (slave and free) ignorant and uneducated provided slaveholders justification for enslavement, subordination, and the denial to them of rights, privileges and opportunities afforded Whites. It was no coincidence, therefore, that, early in their struggles, Blacks realized the critical importance of education, and it assumed preeminence in their liberation thoughts and strategies. Thus, gaining knowledge became, for leading Blacks, a countervailing repertoire of resistance; the antidote for overcoming subordination and impoverishment; and ultimately achieving true freedom and equality. The pursuit of knowledge became the lifeline to freedom and equality; an existential goal.

The linkage of education to freedom and equality prompted many to engage seemingly insurmountable obstacles in the quest for knowledge. In his epic autobiography, Fredrick Douglass captured a poignant moment of existential epiphany: the sudden revelation of the dialectics of education and freedom. Douglass was a slave who escaped, and subsequently published, among many other works, a *Narrative* (1842) of his life. He recalled, with dramatic effects, the moment his master Thomas Auld berated his wife for teaching Douglass the alphabet. Within earshot of Douglass, Auld pleaded with his wife to terminate the lesson on the ground that it was both “unlawful and unsafe” to teach slaves to read (Blight, 2003, p. 63).

Auld informed his wife that,

learning would spoil the best nigger in the world...if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master...It would make him discontent and unhappy. (Ibid)

According to Douglass, Auld's words

sank deep into my heart, stirred sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entire new train of thoughts...I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the White man's power to enslave the Black man. It was a great achievement, and I prized it highly. (Ibid, p. 64)

Douglass would not soon forget this moment. He now, “understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (Ibid). Though Mrs. Auld, in deference to her husband, terminated the lessons and became mean-spirited, once ignited, Douglass' desire for knowledge would not be extinguished. He would go on to self-educate, and Thomas Auld's words proved prophetic. The attainment of literacy fired Douglass's desire for freedom. Subsequently, he escaped. Such revelation, however, was not a uniquely Douglassian experience. It was an experience shared by many of Douglass's contemporaries.

Thus, the quest for education became a burning desire among Blacks, free and slave, and it would dominate the debate within the leadership of the evolving free Black community in the early nineteenth century. The question “Why Education?” became a recurrent theme in Black liberation thought. Along with the “Why?” there was also the “Which?” Which form of education would best guarantee the desired freedom and meaningful equality? On this question, the free Black leadership was divided into two opposing viewpoints: those in favor of classical education, also referred to as collegiate or education of the mind; against advocates of industrial education, also referred to as practical, normal or education of the hand. Prominent disputants included William E. B. Du Bois, who was identified with the classical education camp. A Harvard trained historian, Du Bois was an activist, first through the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), of which he was a founding member, and later in the Pan-African movement. Booker T. Washington towered above everyone in opposition to Du Bois on the subject of education. A graduate of Hampton Institute, and a staunch advocate of practical education, Washington would go on to help establish a trade school that would train generations of Blacks: the Tuskegee Institute.

Though the question “Which Education?” shaped the debates and

discussions for much of Black American history, modern discourses betray deep-seated and enduring distrust of the core values and philosophy of American education. Among leading Blacks, there persists a historically rooted vision of America as still very much driven by racist core values that continue to nurture an educational environment and culture inimical to Black progress (Gresson, 2008; Shujaa, 1995; Woodson, 1935/2000). In other words, six decades after the epochal *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, which overturned discrimination and segregation in education, Blacks had yet to fully overcome historical misgivings about American education. Hence, the demand by some for a separate education space and paradigm; racially configured, infused with, and driven by, values derived from the African heritage: Afrocentric education. Proponents deemed this the ideal epistemological foundation for Black elevation and empowerment (Asante, 1980/87, 1991; Keto, 1995).

Unfortunately, this article will not address contemporary debates on the state of Black education in America. Several scholarly studies have researched this subject (Aldridge, 1999, 2003; Banks, 2002; Gresson, 2008; Ogbu, 2002; Shujaa, 1995; Watkins, 2005; Watkins, Lewis, & Chou, 2001; Young & Braziel, 2003). Rather, it is an historical reconstruction and analysis of the educational thoughts and philosophy of the one individual who seemed to have anticipated, and theorized about, much of the themes and values that would dominate discourses on education among Black Americans: Martin R. Delany (1812-1885). Curiously, he is barely acknowledged in the historiography of African-American education (Anderson, 1988; Bullock, 1967; Butchart, 1980). Admittedly, Delany was not a professional educator. Notwithstanding, in his writings and speeches, Delany highlighted education as a critical foundational institution for achieving meaningful freedom and equality in America. His contributions to the philosophy of education addressed both the “Why?” and the “Which?” dimensions of education. His answers would resurface in the ideas and philosophies of future generations of American educators.

2. Historical Background

Delany was born a “free Black” in Charlestown, Virginia (now in West Virginia), at a time when it was against the law to educate Blacks. Like other slave states, Virginia proscribed the education of slaves. This policy became even more stringent in the aftermath of the bloody Nat Turner revolt of 1830 in Southampton County. The Virginia General Assembly passed more restrictive laws criminalizing teaching slaves and free Blacks to read and write (Aptheker, 1983; Brophy, 2013). Thus,

Delany soon discovered that in Jeffersonian Virginia only White kids were allowed through the classroom doors. This realization occurred when he accompanied his White playmates to school and was refused entry (Sterling, 1971). Delany's opportunity came when his parents acquired a copy of the *New York Primer and Spelling Book* from an itinerant peddler. The family kept the treasured acquisition a secret and held nocturnal study sessions. Soon, every member had attained literacy. Word spread that the Delanys had broken the law and prosecution seemed imminent. The family escaped to Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, in September of 1822. They quickly discovered that Chambersburg was little better than Charlestown. Despite a more permissive environment, racism persisted there. Notwithstanding, Delany was able to continue his elementary education in the public school system, where he encountered values that were meant to imbue acceptance of the prevailing perception of Blacks as inferior, and of Africa as a continent of barbarism. The persistence of derogatory images of Africa only bolstered Delany's determination to seek the truth (Rollin, 1868; Sterling, 1971).

At the completion of his elementary education in Chambersburg, and with no opportunities for further education, Delany moved to Pittsburgh in July of 1831. There, he encountered a thriving, energetic, and equally determined community of free Blacks, mostly migrants like himself, all of whom thirsted for knowledge. Delany enrolled in the Cellar School of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, where he took classes in the Arts and Humanities. History was his favorite subject, which he considered fundamental to enlightenment and mental emancipation. Delany made tremendous progress at the Cellar School and was promptly promoted to advanced levels. He supplemented his schoolwork with private study and discussions with his roommate, one Mollison Clark. The two frequently discussed and debated diverse issues. To encourage similar activities among other Blacks, they founded the Theban Literacy and Debating Society (Hutton, 1930; Rollin, 1868; Ullman, 1971).

After attaining the equivalence of a high school education, Delany turned his attention to choosing a profession. He noticed a troubling “slavish” disposition among free Blacks: the tendency to gravitate toward menial and servile occupations. He deplored this development, and insisted that Blacks needed to aspire for higher occupations through higher education. Delany lamented what he characterized as “the menial position of our people in this country,” and their “seeming satisfaction” with seeking after menial positions to a degree “unknown to any other people.” According to him:

There appears to be, a want of a sense of propriety or self-respect, altogether inexplicable; because young men and women among us, many of

whom have good trades, and homes, adequate to their support, voluntarily leave them, and seek positions, such as servants, washing maids, coachmen, nurses, cooks...when they can gain a livelihood at something more respectable, or elevating in character. (Delany, 1852, p. 198)

Delany was determined not to replicate this self-degradation. Consequently, he rejected the invitation of his friends and colleagues to become a barber (which was then considered a “nigger job”), and chose instead to pursue a career in medicine (Rollin, 1868). After being rejected by the University of Pennsylvania, Jefferson College, and the medical colleges of Albany and Geneva in New York, Delany entered Harvard University in the spring of 1850. That same spring, Harvard also admitted two other Black students sponsored by the American Colonization Society. Unfortunately, the tenure of all three Black students ended prematurely after a semester as a result of a protest by several White students, who maintained that the admission of Blacks compromised Harvard’s academic standards (Cash, 1980; Takaki, 1978).

3. Crusading for Black Education: The Why and Which?

Notwithstanding the Harvard episode, by 1850 Delany had effectively been freed from the mental shackles of ideological bondage. He had attained a level of education that enabled him to think independently, to question prevailing normative and racist ideas about Blacks and Africans, and most significantly, he had developed a critical consciousness which helped him feel much more positive, self-confident, and motivated. He then embarked on a mission to assist other Blacks attain similar self-emancipatory consciousness through education. Like Frederick Douglass, Delany rebelled against the dominant society’s attempts to keep him ignorant. The denial of access to education had ignited in Delany a burning desire to unearth the mystery undergirding the obsessions of Whites with keeping Blacks ignorant. He quickly discovered a fundamental explanation for the obsession: the emancipatory power of education. Inspired to challenge and destroy the pervasive culture of black ignorance, Delany would ultimately spearhead a crusade to popularize education among Blacks.

In the broader struggle to encourage education among Blacks, Delany confronted a dilemma. While there seemed to be a growing awareness of the utility of education, opinions remained sharply divided on the “Which” question. Which education was best for Blacks? Ironically, Delany found the answer in the very limitations of his own classical-rooted education. Though enlightened intellectually through classical education, Delany remained without an economically viable livelihood (Delany, 1849d).

Intellectual emancipation was one thing, “making a living,” he quickly discovered, was a different challenge. On a few occasions, he had to rely on charity for livelihood. The quest for dignity and self-respect had inspired Delany’s desire for knowledge, but the experiences and challenges he encountered raised doubts about the viability of classical education as solution to the problem of Black poverty. He became convinced that classical education would not advance the economic development of Blacks. He encountered many Blacks with collegiate education who were as impoverished and marginalized as their less fortunate and illiterate counterparts. The lessons of his experience, and those of other Black professionals, suggested to Delany that something was seriously wrong with an education that only liberated the mind (education of the mind) without arming the “liberated” individual with the means of economic livelihood (education of the hand). The latter, also referred to as “practical education,” did not mean education for “industrial” occupations. Encouraging Blacks to aspire for “industrial” training and occupations, at that time, would have been both unrealistic and problematic. Given the racist context, it would most definitely have provoked bitter resentment. Yet, Delany was unequivocally opposed to any education that steered Blacks towards “menial” jobs. By “practical” education, Delany and other advocates meant education or training that would enable Blacks to develop skills (education of the hand) with which to “make a living”; one that helped enhance their entrepreneurial skill.

Delany launched his crusade for Black education during his collaboration with Douglass which began in 1847. That year, Douglass carved an independent Black abolitionist path, after years of tutelage under the White abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison. He began publishing his newspaper *The North Star*, in Rochester, New York, and invited Delany to serve as coeditor and roving lecturer. Douglass hoped this publication would more accurately reflect, articulate, and advance the interests and aspirations of Black Americans. He and Delany were eager to use *The North Star* to promote moral suasion as the means of eradicating Black poverty and “moral decadence.” Moral and material improvement became indispensable to Blacks’ quest for elevation and equality. Education was an important component of moral suasion; but not just any education; the one that prepared Blacks to become producers as opposed to their present status as consumers of wealth (Adeleke, 1998; Bell, 1958).

As a roving lecturer and coeditor of *The North Star*, Delany was in position to influence and dictate strategies for advancing the moral and material development of Blacks. He quickly noticed two troubling conditions during his travels through Ohio to Pennsylvania, Michigan, New York, and Delaware. First was the depth of poverty and ignorance

among Blacks, slave and free, and second, was how this wretchedness had induced self-denigrating consciousness. Furthermore, he found Blacks overwhelmingly in menial/servile occupations, and most disturbingly, they seemed satisfied. He observed that menial occupations and servility had become almost “second nature.” In these so-called free states, Delany lamented that freedom had apparently not rid Blacks of slavish characteristics (Delany, 1852/1968, pp. 198-199). Though he acknowledged the efforts of industrious Blacks in several states, Delany equally lamented the fragile and transient nature of Black entrepreneurship, which he attributed to deficiency in practical education. Delany’s faith in moral suasion thrust practical education to the center stage of his philosophy of education. An appreciation for practical education had to begin at the elementary education level. He advised Blacks to give their children education for “useful practical business,” what he also described as “education for the Store and Counting House” (Ibid, p. 193). Thus, in his travels and reports, Delany focused attention on “colored” elementary schools. His visits to these schools exposed unsettling realities, many of which he addressed in *The North Star*. In several such schools in Pennsylvania, he noticed that free Blacks generally prioritized classical education. Students were taught English, Latin, Greek, Arithmetic, Music, Poetry, and Dance. He further concluded that Blacks generally possessed a skewed and shallow conception and understanding of the objective of education. Teachers devoted a greater proportion of the school time to preparing pupils for exhibition and entertainment. The ability to sing a few verses and recite a few stanzas of poems usually fooled Black parents into a false sense of satisfaction that their children had “done going to school” resulting in premature termination of the children’s education (Delany, 1848e). He also observed that Black parents seemed obsessed with classical education as a foundation for preparing their children for professions such as the Law and Medicine, often without “consulting the children’s propensities.” Over time, according to Delany, this had resulted in the premature creation of a professional class of lawyers, doctors, journalists, clergies, and other specialists the Black communities could neither patronize nor sustain. He portrayed classical education as “suited for the wealthy, or those who have a prospect of gaining a livelihood by it.” Blacks had yet to attain this level of affluence, demonstrated by the marginalization and impoverishment of the few Black professionals who, shunned and rejected by Whites, could not find clientele and sustenance within the Black community. Delany characterized this as “one of our greatest mistakes.” He concluded that Blacks had gone in advance of themselves. They had commenced at the “superstructure” of the building instead of the foundation, “at the top

instead of the bottom.” Advocating a reversal, Delany wrote, “we should first be mechanics and common tradesmen, and professions as a matter of course, would flow out of the wealth made thereby” (Delany, 1852, pp. 193-199).

Delany also deemed the approach of free Blacks to education too theoretical. Teachers made no attempts to teach Black children how to apply the knowledge acquired to their daily activities. For example, he noted that few students were able to apply the arithmetic they learned in school to business purposes. Delany described this lack of relevance to the practical realities of life as perhaps the most critical flaw of classical education. He placed much of the blame on the curriculum and on the teachers who, ill-prepared and trained in antiquated teaching methods, failed to lead their pupils along the path of what he termed, “reformed and approved schools” which would have developed and enhanced their practical abilities (Delany, 1848e, 1849a). Consequently, Delany advised all such teachers to take a one-month leave of absence to acquaint themselves with the practical and applied dimensions of their respective disciplines. As he put it:

I could wish that teachers would abandon their old style and method of teaching altogether. It would be worth the while if every school-teacher who is not conversant with new systems, would suspend their schools for a month, and give their whole attendance during that period to making themselves acquainted with new and approved methods. (Delany, 1849a)

Delany also estimated that almost nine-tenths of colored children who were turned out into the world as having “finished education” were miserably deficient in the elementary principles of English language and composition (Delany, 1849a, 1848c). The situation in Black schools in Ohio was particularly illustrative of the racist context of state-run public education. Black Ohioans who lived under the most oppressive “Black Law” ever enacted were taxed to support a public education system from which they derived little benefits. The Ohio legislature introduced a measure authorizing school districts with less than twenty school-age Black children to admit such children, provided resident White taxpayers approved. Districts with more than twenty school-age Black children, however, would have to provide funds for separate Black schools. Not surprisingly, according to Delany, the allocation for Black education in the latter districts was barely sufficient to educate twenty Black children in any given quarter (Delany, 1848a, 1848b). This limitation forced Black Ohioans to assume greater responsibility for the education of their children. Many established private schools which, unfortunately,

were as ineffective and superficial as the state-run schools. Regardless of the context, Delany noted that Black parents were quick to deem the education of their children “finished” as soon as they could read a few Biblical verses and scribble a few lines of handwriting. In Cincinnati for example, he witnessed intelligent Black youth concentrate on the study of poetry and oratory with a devotion and passion that shut other options completely out of consideration (Delany, 1848c, 1848b, 1849c).

Delany also commented on the morals of the pupils in the colored schools he visited, and on the quality and relevance of the instructional materials they were given. For example, the standard arithmetic text in Wilmington, Delaware, colored schools was Pike’s *Old Arithmetic* which he deemed unsuitable for a “progressive system” of teaching and incomprehensible to “the tender mind of youth.” He maintained that a “progressive system” ought to emphasize practical applications. Delany’s use of the concept “progressive” referred strictly to a curriculum that was comprehensible to Blacks and designed to develop and enhance their practical skills. In that same school district, Delany visited a colored school taught by a White woman who “appears to teach for the salary,” and whose pupils were deficient “in the first evidence of well taught school”: good manners (Delany, 1849a, p. 2). He discovered yet another problem in Philadelphia (true as well of most other places, with the possible exception of the colored-run schools of Ohio); the conspicuous absence of Black teachers. He observed that the teachers in all the colored public schools in Philadelphia were White. He attributed this to the fact that no Black person, however competent or qualified, was allowed to teach in those schools. Delany discerned a sinister objective in the practice of placing Black children completely under the control of White teachers. He described the objective as “to raise them subservient to pro-slavery will.” He concluded that this practice seemed to be succeeding, exemplified by the servile dispositions of free Blacks, and their seeming satisfaction with superficial education (Delany, 1849b, p. 2). Delany wanted to reverse this debilitating condition. He called for a “well-informed” Black population; men, women,

well stored with useful information and practical proficiency, rather than the light superficial acquirements, popularly and fashionably called accomplishments. We desire accomplishments, but they must be useful. (Delany, 1852, pp. 195-196)

These “useful accomplishments” would materialize with jettisoning of what he termed the “extravagant idea” among Blacks; namely, the depiction of classical education as the essence of education; indeed the end of education (Ibid). His experience, and that of the many Blacks he high-

lighted in his writings, suggested that emphasis on classical education was a fundamentally flawed strategy that bred economic dependence. It focused the minds of Black children, and the attention of their parents, on superficial and ineffective endeavors that had very little bearing upon the fundamental problems they confronted: making a living, and conquering poverty and degradation. What Blacks needed, according to Delany, was education that would qualify them “for active practical business” (Delany, 1848f). Not to be misunderstood, Delany was quick to underscore that he was not fundamentally opposed to classical and profession training, having had the benefit of one. His objective was to dispel what he characterized as a misguided view of classical education as “finished education.” What Blacks critically lacked, and thus urgently needed, was “an education that shall *practically* develop our thinking faculties and manhood” (Ibid [Emphasis added]).

Reporting on Delany’s visit and lecture, a resident of York, Pennsylvania, who was identified simply as “M.C.,” noted that he advised colored people to secure a good practical education for their children. Delany supposedly urged moderation on classical education; that is, “education of the mind.” He had no objections to such education provided it was “attainable” and “not bent on extremes,” because, in his words, “much learning makes men mad” (M.C., 1848). Thus, Delany opined that Blacks had no choice but to redirect efforts and attention toward practical education if they were to become elevated and achieve equality with Whites. Practical education was, Delany believed, the key that would unlock the gates to economic prosperity and elevation for Blacks; indeed, the “indisputable evidence” of “the enterprise and industry” of Blacks which “would not admit of controversy. It would bear with it truths as evident as self-existence” (Delany, 1848f). This prioritizing of practical education was not unique to Delany. This was a widespread conviction among Black thinkers and leaders of his time. Proceedings of the national and state conventions held by free Blacks during the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s underscored the centrality of practical education to the success of the Black liberation struggles in the United States (Bell, 1969; Foner & Walker, 1979, 1980). There were hardly any gatherings of free Blacks at which education did not feature in the deliberations. There was, however, disagreement on the exact form and nature of education deemed appropriate to the success of the struggle. For example, delegates at the Second Annual National Negro Convention in Philadelphia in 1832 stressed the importance of both practical and classical education. However, at the same convention the following year, members appeared to lean in favor of “manual labor” education. Two years later, at the fifth and final National Negro Convention of the 1830s, classical education

assumed preeminence (Bell, 1969). Yet, delegates at the State Convention of the Colored Freemen of Pennsylvania, meeting in Pittsburgh in 1841, recommended practical education. Ten years later at the State Convention of the Colored People of New York, meeting in Albany, the delegates endorsed classical education (Foner & Walker, 1979).

Delany attempted to end the dillydallying on “Which” education by highlighting the benefits of practical education. He exhorted Blacks to prepare their children for useful practical business. As he lamented, Blacks were so attached to classical education that they pushed their young ones aimlessly along its narrow path. He also noted that Blacks had a tendency to “move in advance of themselves”; that is, they began education with the classics instead of practical education. He deplored another disposition of free Blacks: they were either totally illiterate, or trained in classical education, and thus unprepared for entrepreneurship and the business world. Thus, free Blacks, Delany contended, “jumped too far, taking a leap from the deepest abyss to the highest summit, rising from the ridiculous to the sublime, without a medium” (Delany, 1852, pp. 195-196). He believed that Blacks skipped a critical intermediate phase of applied training; one that would have prepared them adequately, at least those who were so inclined and talented, for classical education. As a corrective, he proposed a two-tier educational ladder consisting of a substructure of practical education, and a superstructure of classical education. As he stated, “we should first be mechanics and common tradesmen, and professions as a matter of course, would grow out of the wealth made thereby” (Ibid, p. 193). In Delany’s schema, therefore, practical education constituted the base; the foundation for nurturing of classical culture, the intermediate phase between ignorance and intellectualism.

The subjects at the core of Delany’s proposed practical education curriculum underscored a symbiotic relationship between practical and classical education. He identified English, arithmetic, geography, and political economy as the essential disciplines Blacks had to master in order to prepare for practical usefulness. Delany seemed to suggest that practical education was itself inconceivable without a solid orthographic foundation. As he declared; “good orthography is the foundation of all scholarship.” Blacks had to start with mastery of all the basic rules of grammar and composition. He further held that arithmetic and good penmanship were indispensable tools for aspiring Black businessmen and women (Delany, 1848f, 1852/1968). Similarly, he stressed the importance of geography, a subject he defined as “knowledge of the world” (Delany, 1852/1968, p. 194). Finally, for Blacks to develop a vibrant capitalist culture, they needed to study political economy, which he defined as “the science of the wealth of nations—practically, the daily application of

industry for the purpose of making money” (Delany, 1849e). Besides the definitions he offered, Delany did not elaborate on the specific contents of each subject. He did, however, stress the need for a utilitarian and practical methodology of education, and recommended the adoption of books and materials consistent with “the progressive system of teaching” described earlier. Delany insisted that effective classroom materials for Black learners had to be comprehensible to “the undisciplined minds” of the pupils. Furthermore, he urged periodic critique and review of these materials and other teaching aids to ascertain their relevance and, if necessary, be revised and updated (Delany, 1849a).

Delany’s travels exposed him to the dark and ugly realities of the lives of free Blacks in America. He presented as a solution an education that would equip Blacks with the requisite practical skills for livelihood. This remedy would launch Blacks on an irreversible path to elevation and freedom, one that both freed the mind and empowered the hand. Convinced that the issue of Black education deserved the endorsement and commitment of everyone, Delany sought a national platform to espouse his views. The National Colored Convention of 1848 in Cleveland, Ohio, provided the opportunity. As chairman of the strategic Business Committee, Delany succeeded in grafting his beliefs about education into the final reports and resolutions that were later unanimously adopted by the convention. Resolutions two through five all advocated practical education (Bell, 1969).

4. Women’s Education and Black Liberation

Concern for the condition of Black women was also at the core of Delany’s philosophy of education. This concern had existed long before his association with *The North Star*. In an article in *The Pittsburgh Mystery*, a newspaper he established in 1843, Delany highlighted and lamented the wretched condition of Black women in the United States. He ascribed the subordination of Blacks in general to the appalling condition of their women. As he poignantly noted:

No people are ever elevated above the condition of their *females*; hence, the condition of the *mother* determines the condition of the child. To know the position of a people, it is only necessary to know the *condition* of their *females*; and despite themselves, they cannot rise above their level. Then what is our condition? Our *best ladies* being washerwomen, chamber-maids, children’s travelling nurses, and common house servants, and menials, we are a degraded, miserable people, inferior to any other people as a whole, on the face of the globe. (Delany, 1852, p. 199 [Emphasis in original])

Consequently, for Blacks to be elevated, *a priori*, the condition of Black women must change. Women must be prepared for education that would position them beyond menial, servile, and domestic occupations. His article caught the attention of many, including that of the White philanthropist, Rev. Charles Avery of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, who subsequently donated funds for the establishment of a school for Black men and women: the Allegheny Institute and Mission Church (Delany, 1852; Rollin, 1868).

Throughout his tours for *The North Star*, Delany found Black women to be the most illiterate, degraded, and subordinated of subjects, confined overwhelmingly to menial jobs. This discovery confirmed his belief that the poor state of female education, or the almost complete lack of it, had seriously limited the ability and capacity of Black women and, *ipso facto*, Black men, to compete effectively for economically enriching occupations, thus confining the entire race to the servile domain. He maintained that the elevation and empowerment of the entire Black race was contingent upon an educated and enlightened female population. The ultimate solution for blacks, therefore, was not in education *per se*, but in the development of an enlightened female class (Delany, 1852, p. 199). As he further argued:

Raise the mothers above the level of degradation, and the offspring is elevated with them. In a word, instead of our young men, transcribing in their blank books, recipes for *cooking*; we desire to see them making the transfer of *Invoices of Merchandise*. (Delany, 1852, p. 196 [Emphasis in original])

Indeed, women occupied a very special place in Delany's schema for Black liberation. "Mothers," he declared, "are the first nurses and instructors of our children, from whom the children learn their first and most lasting impressions" (Ibid, p. 196). He called on Black women to learn trades and develop practical skills that would generate wealth. Such a productive and economically potent female class would be the foundation for building an equally productive, potent, and economically successful Black populace. An illiterate female population, he warned, would nurture ignorant children, who would in turn become an illiterate and slavish adult population. Nothing disturbed Delany more than the specter of Black men seemingly comfortable with their wives, daughters, and sisters engaged in menial and domestic occupations. As he underscored:

Until colored men, attain to a position above permitting their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters, to do the drudgery and menial offices of other men's wives and daughters; it is useless, it is nonsense, it is pitiable mockery, to talk about equality and elevation in society. (Ibid, p. 48)

During his visit to Wilmington, Delaware, Delany implored the young colored women there and elsewhere employed in domestic services, and living in close proximity, to organize small study-group sessions “for the purpose of moral and mental improvement.” He suggested that they met periodically to study “books of useful knowledge.” He advised the women “to commence with the spelling-book, obtaining the most convenient assistance, taking their lessons by columns, until they have mastered English Grammar, at least sufficiently to write sentences correctly” (Delany, 1848f). One of the books he recommended, which he believed would give the women a sound orthographic foundation, and thus the ability “to write correct sentences,” was Roswell C. Smith’s *English Grammar*, which he described as a very “simple” and “comprehensive” book for beginners (Delany, 1848f).

5. Race and Black Education

There was, however, another dimension to Delany’s educational crusade that did not become fully manifest until the 1850s: the racial factor. Though on a few occasions in the 1840s Delany drew attention to, and expressed concerns over, the negative impact of staffing Black schools exclusively with White teachers, he did not advocate the total exclusion of Whites. After all, he shared with Douglass, and other leading Black abolitionists, an abiding faith in moral suasion: an integrationist ideology. In fact, the moral suasion ideology Delany propagated, and which shaped the Black abolitionist movement in the first half of the nineteenth century, was predicated on the belief that Blacks were enslaved and discriminated against due largely to the deficiencies of their condition, rather than race. Change the Black condition through self-improvement and moral reform and everything else would fall in place, including the eradication of discriminatory practices. As a critical component of moral suasion, therefore, education became of special interest to Delany and leading blacks (Adeleke, 1998). Due to his faith in moral suasion, therefore, until the late 1840s, Delany’s critique of education focused not so much on the racial and cultural backgrounds of the teachers, but on the curricula and teaching methods, materials used in the schools blacks attended, and on the orientation of Blacks generally toward education. However, this focus changed dramatically in the early 1850s with the failure of moral suasion and the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law (1850). In fact, the failure of moral suasion was evident by the late-1840s. The material, moral, and educational elevation of free Blacks had not induced positive reciprocity from White society, contrary to the expectation of advocates of moral suasion. Instead, Blacks’ efforts

at self-improvement seemed to provoke violent reactions from Whites in both the North and South, as such efforts were deemed threatening to the status quo (Geffen, 1969; Simmons, 1983).

The failure of moral suasion and the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law ignited Delany's nationalist consciousness. The law had pledged federal support and services for the pursuit and apprehension of fugitive slaves. It threatened the already fragile freedoms of many free Blacks who had in fact won their freedoms legitimately. In response, Delany advanced a strong ideological justification for emigration in his seminal book, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852). Here, he underlined the depth and ubiquity of racism, and insisted that Blacks could never achieve true freedom and equality in the United States, regardless of how hard they struggled. Despite advocating emigration, Delany's faith in practical education and in the importance of women's education remained strong. Consistent with his pessimistic outlook, however, in *The Condition*, and in subsequent publications, he called for an end to White control of, and influences on, Black lives, especially in education. He urged Blacks to assume greater control of their destinies. Also, he angrily condemned what he perceived as the misguided consciousness of many free Blacks, whom he accused of surrendering all their initiatives to Whites and forever looking up to Whites for assistance and direction, even on such crucial subjects as education (Delany, 1852, 1855, 1856).

Delany's adoption of race and ethnicity as the definitive and substantive construct for analyzing and defining the Black condition resulted in conflict with his former associate Frederick Douglass. When Delany left *The North Star* in 1849, both he and Douglass tried to minimize emerging conflict over their growing ideological estrangement. It was, however, only a matter of time before that conflict became public knowledge. As Delany embraced emigration, Douglass remained steadfastly optimistic. By the mid-1850s, the two had become leaders of opposing ideological movements represented by two national conventions: an integrationist one led by Douglass held in Rochester, New York, in 1853, and an emigrationist one led by Delany held in Cleveland, Ohio, the following year. Though the two conventions represented broad ideological battlegrounds, education provided a specific, narrow, and more direct subject of controversy. Like Delany, Douglass prescribed education as the cure for what he characterized as the "triple malady" that afflicted Blacks: poverty, ignorance, and degradation. He also considered the pursuit of classical education necessary and viable only after Blacks had built a strong foundation of practical education. For Douglass, as for Delany, practical education constituted the foundation for classical culture.

Again, like Delany, Douglass too maintained that Blacks were not yet in a position to appreciate and utilize the services of professionals. The deliberations of the Rochester convention underscored Douglass's regard for, and prioritizing of, practical education. In its Report, the convention's Committee on Manual Labor stressed the importance of manual labor and industrial education (Bell, 1969). Thus, both men endorsed practical education. However, disagreement surfaced on strategies of implementation. To help implement his platform, the integrationist and still optimistic Douglass solicited the assistance of the White abolitionist Harriett Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe had earlier expressed a desire to assist the cause of Black freedom and had sought Douglass's opinion. Douglass wrote to her suggesting education as the most important area and requested her assistance with establishing in New York, or some other location, an industrial school to train blacks in the various mechanical arts (Douglass, 1853/1969).

Delany's reaction was predictably negative. In a strongly worded response, he denounced Douglass's initiative. Though he endorsed the demand for an industrial school, Delany objected strongly to the solicitation of White assistance, especially on such a crucial matter as the education of Black children. He deemed inviting Whites as both inconsistent and self-destructive. The education of Blacks, he insisted, deserved the prime attention of "intelligent and experienced" Blacks. Stowe, according to Delany, "KNOWS NOTHING ABOUT US, the free Colored people...neither does any White person...and consequently can contrive no successful scheme for our elevation, it must be done by ourselves" (Delany, 1853, p. 4). "Why, in God's name," Delany quizzed, "don't the leaders among our people make suggestions and CONSULT the most competent among THEIR OWN brethren concerning our elevation?" (Delany, 1853) [Emphasis in original]. Douglass fired back, questioning Delany's spirit of self-confidence and independence. Chronic disunity, Douglass retorted, had rendered Blacks incapable of assuming the absolute independence Delany envisioned. He accused Delany of being theoretical and out of touch with the realities of the Black situation, and reaffirmed his own intention to continue to solicit assistance from all quarters (Douglass, 1853). This squabble over the role of Whites in the education of Blacks did not become a dominant theme in Delany's thought precisely because he was much more focused on emigration, which he pursued vigorously from 1852 right up to the outbreak of the Civil War.

6. Freedmen's Education

The theme of Black independence and self-initiative, induced largely by a growing pessimism, dominated Delany's thought throughout his brief emigrationist phase. The Civil War, however, ushered in a new Delany. It rekindled his optimism, perhaps to an extreme. Like Douglass and many other free Blacks, Delany welcomed the war as the force that would finally destroy slavery. He became a forceful advocate of Black participation. President Abraham Lincoln commissioned Delany the first combat Black major in the Union army, and he became actively involved in the recruitment of several colored regiments. However, it was his role as Sub-Assistant Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, a post he assumed after the war, which afforded Delany the opportunity to refocus attention on Black education. He was assigned to Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, and given jurisdiction over several government plantations. Entrusted suddenly with responsibility over the emancipated inhabitants of these plantations, Delany was anxious to develop means of solidifying their new freedom. Two critical and closely related factors presented themselves: economics (i.e., making a living), and education. Developing a viable economic foundation for the freedmen and freedwomen of the South was almost impossible, he acknowledged, without first ridding them of the ignorance that centuries of enslavement and subordination had imposed. Freedom was empty and fragile, Delany reasoned, without education. Thus, as Sub-Assistant Commissioner, Delany struggled to enhance the economic adjustment of Blacks to freedom through organizing and supervising productive activities on the plantations. He wrote Bureau headquarters arguing that, given the opportunity, the free Blacks in these locales had the ability and intelligence to benefit from schooling (Delany, 1869). He requested increased attention to, and expenditure on, freedmen's education. He drew attention to the failure of the Sub-Assistant Commissioner to provide "expenditure for school house," noting also that

good and suitable school houses are very much needed, there has not been good or suitable school house in the whole sub-district of Hilton Head...teachers being obliged to make use of temporary ill-constructed little 'shanties' in such Churches as they may be permitted to occupy...either of which is ill-adapted to the purpose of a school. (Delany, 1867)

Delany was, however, powerless to impact significant changes on the more crucial education problem, for the Bureau seemed less active in this respect. Consequently, the dominant agents in the education of freed Blacks in Delany's district were private religious and philanthropic organizations, especially the American Missionary Association [AMA]

(Anderson, 1988; Morris, 1981). In his periodic reports to Bureau headquarters, Delany criticized the lack of appropriation for a school from the Bureau for his district, as well as the sub-district of Beaufort and other places. He highlighted the “plight” of the schools in his district; a consequence of neglect by the Bureau, and praised the efforts of private philanthropic organizations in helping to alleviate the situation. He recommended a more active government role in Black education in his, and surrounding, districts.

Delany’s persistent efforts to inspire a deeper commitment to Black education failed due to the fact that Bureau officials saw the situation differently. On one occasion, the Bureau school superintendent described Delany’s requests as “unnecessary” (Delany, 1868). Denied official support, Delany struck a rapport with the AMA teachers. He paid regular visits to their schools to obtain firsthand knowledge of their operations and their impacts on free Blacks. Determined to help undo the damages of centuries of educational deprivation, he advocated adult literacy and encouraged Blacks in Hilton Head, both young and old, to attend school. The local AMA agent acknowledged Delany’s efforts in the area of adult education. In a letter to his superior, the agent wrote,

We succeeded in setting up a day and night school for adults. Major Delany of the Bureau is going to make an effort to arouse the adults and induce them to attend school. I have much faith in his success.
(Wright, 1867)

Delany’s observations of, and comments on, the activities of the AMA-run schools shed further light on the state of education among newly emancipated Blacks during Reconstruction. They also provide further insight into his philosophy of education. He expressed disdain for the prevalence of whipping as a means of disciplining Blacks students, noting that too many teachers resorted to the whip “as the easiest and least troublesome mode of correction” (Delany, 1852, p. 291). Delany advocated its immediate termination. He described corporal punishment as a troubling reminder of the violence and coercion of slavery; one that undermined the ability of students to adapt freely to the school environment. A school, he wrote, “should be a place of the most pleasurable resort and agreeable association of children.” Whipping rendered the realization of “agreeable association” difficult. Frequent resort to the whip, he averred, betrayed a fundamental deficiency on the part of teachers, namely, the inability to adapt to the technicalities of teaching. Properly adapted teachers could and should maintain discipline without resorting to the whip. He believed that those who had difficulty instilling discipline without resorting to whipping were not adequately adapted

to the profession of teaching and should consequently seek other jobs (Delany, 1868).

Delany characterized education as much more than the provision of a school setting. He identified certain social, psychological, and environmental conditions that he deemed constitutive and essential elements of the ideal school: mutual love, admiration, and respect between teachers and pupils; decent accommodations for teachers; comfortable seats and desks for pupils; and adequate recreational facilities for all. Such a school, he maintained, would be a “desirable place of resort” for both teachers and pupils (Delany, 1868). Delany thus investigated and assisted in alleviating many of the problems that rendered the functioning of the colored schools in his district problematic. He often furnished AMA teachers and agents with much needed provisions from the meager produce raised by freed Black farmers in his plantation district. Despite official constraints, he readily assisted with the repairs of dilapidated school furniture, buildings, and other infrastructures (Wilkins, 1867). Elizabeth Summers, an AMA teacher commissioned to the former Lawton Plantation on Hilton Head, mentioned Delany’s visit to her school in one of her letters. According to Summers, Delany “inspected the school houses and teachers’ residences to determine what repairs were needed...He is going to fix our school,” she concluded with satisfaction (Summers, 1867).

What is most striking about Delany’s view on education in the post-Civil War era was his silence on curricula, and the racial identity of teachers. The fundamental issue for him was that Blacks be educated. Consistent with his renewed sense of optimism about Blacks attaining full citizenship in the United States, it mattered little by whom, and in what form, that education was transmitted. The Civil War and early reforms of the Reconstruction era seemed to have rekindled Delany’s faith in America. Though cognizant of the tense and fragile race relations, especially in the South, Delany remained confident that the fortunes of Blacks would change for the better in an ideal school environment where they not only had unfettered access to learning, but also were provided with the essentials that would make such education effective and meaningful. This mirrored the accommodationist philosophy that defined his social, political and economic worldviews in the aftermath of the war.

7. Conclusion

There was little dogmatism in Delany’s philosophy of education. His conception of education changed with changing circumstances. Three distinct phases can be delineated. In the first, which lasted from the 1830s to the end of the 1840s, the dominant abolitionist ethos of moral

suasion influenced his views about education. During this phase, Delany advanced practical education as the means of transforming the social and material conditions of Blacks. By the late 1840s, however, he became convinced that race, rather than condition, deserved priority, and his philosophy of education assumed racial overtone. This phase reflected his pessimistic view of race relations in the United States. Suspicious and distrustful of Whites during this stage, Delany opposed their involvement in any educational scheme meant for Blacks. In the post-Civil War era, Delany's renewed optimism relegated the racial and cultural identity factor to the background, and he philosophized instead about the ideal school environment, and the ideal teacher-pupil relationship.

What is perhaps most intriguing about Delany's philosophy of education was his approach to the fundamental problem of Black perceptual reorientation. An issue of great interest to modern advocates of Afrocentricity. Delany's own educational odyssey revealed an unrelenting determination to debunk the myths and misrepresentations of Africa, and uncover the truths about his people's past and his own heritage, as well as overcome the epistemological limitations of Black education or lack thereof. Toward these goals, he found the liberal arts, particularly history, most helpful. Then, once he had achieved emancipatory consciousness, Delany struggled to induce similar consciousness in other Blacks. Consequently, he devoted much of his writings to refuting racist views of Africa. However, his preoccupation with the mental and psychological reorientation of Blacks, the "Afrocentric" aspects of his political writings, was not a dominant theme in his philosophy of education. This was particularly evident during the moral suasion phase when Delany outlined strategies for an effective Black education. He prioritized education for economic elevation, which he deemed of more immediate importance than education for enlightenment. His curriculum reform proposal emphasized subjects that, he thought, would facilitate a speedy integration of Blacks into the mainstream middle class United States. It is therefore noteworthy that as high as Delany personally ranked history, a subject crucial to his own mental emancipation, it was conspicuously missing in his list of priority academic subjects identified earlier. Resolving this apparent ambivalence is not difficult. Delany's educational paradigm did not suggest complete jettisoning of perceptual reorientation. He implied, and in fact believed, that the attainment of economic emancipation and progress would create a foundation for, and facilitate the process of, positive self-perception. "Making a living" was the central tenet of his philosophy of education. Future educators and critics of American education, including Booker T. Washington and Carter G. Woodson, would amplify Delany's insistence that the most rewarding

education for Blacks was one geared toward satisfying the fundamental challenge of “making a living.” In fact, Woodson (1935/1990, p. 38) would later describe a fundamental shortcoming of Black education in these words: “they have thereby learned little as to *making a living*, the first essential in civilization” (Emphasis added).

Delany’s observations and critique of United States school curricula and the superficial orientation of Blacks to education were undoubtedly pertinent. Nonetheless, he seemed to overestimate the capacity of Blacks and their ability to initiate and sustain the reforms he advocated. Blacks, especially in the 1840s, lacked the financial wherewithal and the ability to institute the type of educational reforms Delany proposed. With very few exceptions, most of the colored schools he visited were run by Whites and/or totally dependent on White support. Neither Delany nor any other Black leader was in position to implement a philosophy of education contradictory to the establishment. On the controversy over Harriet Beecher Stowe, therefore, Douglass seemed more realistic. Nonetheless, in the course of his crusade, Delany highlighted some of what he characterized as “egregious” deficiencies in the very limited educational opportunities available to Blacks. He also underlined how years of servitude and enforced ignorance had imposed a superficial and conservative conception of education. Perhaps most important, he outlined and discussed modalities for a viable and functional Black education. He theorized about the ideal school environment, about curricula reforms, about gender equality and the need to prioritize female education, and about applied education; that is, making education responsive and relevant to the challenges of making a decent living. These themes continue to dominate contemporary discourses on African American education. Delany was indeed a pioneer Black education theorist/philosopher. His ideas and contributions not only illuminated the challenges of Black education in nineteenth century America, but also advanced solutions appropriated by his contemporaries and future generations of American educators. Long before General Samuel Chapman Armstrong conceived of Hampton Institute, or Booker T. Washington dreamed of Tuskegee, Delany had theorized about the dignity of labor, and industrial education as foundations for a functional and empowering education for American Blacks.

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