

The Ambiguity of the Sea and Gender Roles in Martin Delany's *Blake; or The Huts of America* (マーティン・ディレイニーの『ブレイク』にお ける海の表象とジェンダー・ロールの曖昧性)

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SUMMARY IN JAPANESE: 本稿は、海洋文学『ブレイク』における、マーティン・ディレイニーのジェンダー観を考察する。ディレイニーは、父権主義的なジェンダー・ロール観を表明しているようでありながら、黒人の解放という目的のため、共に戦い支え合う同士としての女性の役割や権利、黒人男女間の平等性を支持する。こうしたディレイニーのジェンダー観に見られる曖昧性は、小説に描かれる海の二項対立をも覆す流動性・曖昧性と呼応する。本作品における海の描写に注目し、19世紀のアングロ・アメリカンによる海洋文学と比較する。ディレイニーは、父権主義的な男性性のイデオロギーや、二項対立的なジェンダー・ロール観から超越・脱却し、黒人男女が自由を求めて共に戦う場所として海を描いていることを明らかにする。作者のジェンダー観における曖昧性を反映した海は更に、19世紀のアングロ・アメリカンの海洋文学に描かれたアメリカ例外主義という神話を否定し、黒人のアフリカへの帰還という自身の政治的目標を主張する場として機能する。

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Introduction

Martin Delany's *Blake; or The Huts of America* (1859-1862) is one of the traditional sea narratives in 19th-century black Atlantic literature. As critics such as Elizabeth Schultz and John Watford DeStafney point out, the sea holds a duality in its nature. Because of its literal fluidity and mobility, it sometimes represents freedom, chaos, unfettered states, limitlessness, and the power to overthrow hierarchy. At the same time, however, it also symbolizes restraint, order, fettered states, limitedness, discipline, and confinement due to its connection with ships. This duality of the sea becomes more conspicuous in African American literature because of the history of the Atlantic slave trade and the Middle Passage. Both as a route or means of escape from slavery and also as a signature element of the brutal Atlantic slave trade, the sea is described in many various and often conflicting ways in 19th-century slave narratives and novels written by African American authors such as Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs. The purpose of my paper is to examine the role of the sea in *Blake* and clarify how the sea connects to the notion of gender roles of the main character, Blake. Close examination of the text shows that the representation of gender roles in *Blake* is contradictory and ambiguous. There is a parallel between the nature of the sea and Delany's concept of gender roles in terms of their ambiguity and uncertainty. Although critics have discussed Blake's concepts of gender roles, no attention has been paid to this parallel. However, discussing the text through a discourse on the tradition of antebellum sea narratives allows readers to acknowledge the deep connection of these two themes: gender and African American sea narratives.

To analyze the connection between gender and *Blake*'s aspect as a sea narrative is significant because it reveals how *Blake* functions "as part of [Delany's] argument for black emigration to Africa" (McGann xxiv). In the words of Paul Gilroy, Delany is the "principal progenitor of black nationalism in America" (20) as the novelist strongly believes in the necessity of emigration somewhere outside America for black people to form a self-governing black nation-state. As Jerome McGann points out, *Blake* was published "as part of an argument for black emigration to Africa and as part of a scheme to raise money for his [Delany's] emigration project" (xxiv). Therefore, Delany depicts Blake as a main black male character who explores

not only inside the United States, but beyond its national borders, such as Canada, Africa and Cuba. Because of this transnational aspect of Blake's life, images of the sea flow through his entire narrative. Through a literary and historical analysis of the primary sources of Delany's political writings, I would like to shed light on his argument about gender roles and examine how they are manifested in Blake and how they connect to Delany's descriptions of the sea in the text. Although the text uses two names, Blake and Henry, for the main protagonist, hereafter I will refer to him as Blake.

While critics such as Brad S. Born and John Watford DeStafney examine the novel through a discussion of the contrast between land and sea and emphasize the important meaning of the possibility of freedom on land for Blake, I will pay closer attention to Blake's mobility as one crossing the borders of land and sea, rather than separately through the geographical difference between them. For Blake, the goal of his journey is to prove the importance of self-emancipation and formation of a self-governing nation-state. As if he himself were a ship, he navigates among plantations by using his seaman's skills whether he is on the land or on the sea. However, he does not try to achieve the goal only by himself or only with other black male characters. Rather, he carries out his plan with black women as well and encourages them to be actively involved in the meetings. By throwing light on Delany's depictions of the sea and analyzing them through the lens of the tradition of antebellum sea narratives, I will argue that Delany uses the sea as the stage for manifesting his ambivalent concept of gender roles, thereby justifying his emigration project to Africa.

The Ambiguity of Gender Roles

Previous critical commentaries on Delany's *Blake* have been devoted to discussions of his position on women's rights as problematic because of his limited notions of patriarchal masculinity. As Gilroy recognizes him as "the progenitor of black Atlantic patriarchy" (26), it seems that Delany insists on the need for women's education only for motherhood. In "The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States Politically Considered," Delany writes:

Let our young women have an education; let their minds be well informed; 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* [emphasis in the original].

Our females must be qualified, because they are to be the mothers of our children. As mothers are the first nurses and instructors of children; from them children consequently, get their first impressions, which being always the most lasting, should be the most correct. Raise the mothers above the level of degradation, and the offspring is elevated with them. (212)

Gilroy points out that Delany emphasized the necessity of women's education "but only for motherhood" and notes Delany's idea that "the public sphere was to be the sole province of an enlightened male citizenry" (26). These statements by Delany seem to prove that he holds on to the ideal of patriarchal masculinity.

As many critics point out, it is safe to say that the concepts of ideal masculinity for black men in 19th-century America were constructed under the strong ideological influence of their white masters.¹ The concepts of ideal masculinity for black men were socially and historically constructed through their experiences under slavery and oppression by whites, which bell hooks calls the fatal effect of "the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy upon black masculinity" (4). Delany is no exception to this. He keeps trying to be a protector and provider for his family, and a father to other black people to save them from the cruelties of slavery and lead them to claim the right of ownership of themselves. Tolagbe Ogunleye points out that Delany considered Yoruba "as a 'truly civilized' nation that gave men the 'coarser and heavier' work and women the 'finer and lighter' tasks" (642) when Delany traveled throughout Yorubaland in West Africa in 1859. In this way, Delany's idea of masculinity seems to be based on a dominant patriarchal conceptualization of masculinity.

However, contrary to hooks and Ogunleye, Delany's concept of gender roles is quite ambivalent because he also believes in the necessity of black women's education for black people's claim of equality with whites. In the columns of his paper *The Mystery*, he states:

Men were never raised in social positions above the level of women: therefore men could not be elevated without women's elevation; further, that among the nations of the world where women were kept in ignorance, great philosophers or statesmen failed to be produced, as a general rule. And under the existing state of female education among the Americans of African descent, the hope of seeing them equal with the more favored class of citizens would be without proper basis. (qtd. in Rolling 49-50)

While he embraces dominant patriarchal values, he also believes that women are necessary for the "elevation" of Americans of African descent, both black men and women. His statement that "[m]en were never raised in social positions above the level of women" contradicts the dominant conceptualization of patriarchal masculinity which tends to treat male social positions as superior to female ones.

In addition, as Martha S. Jones records, in the National Convention of Colored Freedmen (NCCF) held in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1848 (two months after the Convention on Woman's Rights at Seneca Falls), Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany "petitioned for women to be 'speaking and voting as men did'" (59), and their resolution passed, which became the NCCF's "definite message regarding black male support of the rights of women" (Lemons 21). Jerome McGann also points out that "in the Emigration Convention that Delany organized in 1854, women had equal voting rights" (328). If Delany believed in the necessity of women's education "only for motherhood" and held the idea that the public sphere is only for male citizens as Paul Gilroy points out (26), he would not have supported women's voting rights. Contrary to his ideal of patriarchal masculinity and values, Delany was a strong advocate of women's rights and equality.

This contradiction in terms of Delany's concept of gender roles seems to be manifested in his concept of "manhood" as well. While pointing out Delany's sense of traditional patriarchal values, Tommie Shelby also argues his unique point of view about Delany's understanding of "manhood":

No doubt, Delany was not using "manhood" in a purely gender-neutral way, and I am not at all suggesting that he did not embrace many traditional patriarchal values (e.g., a belief in a conventional domestic

sexual division of labor and the “practical” education of women to equip them for child rearing). He certainly did hold such views, as of course did most at the time. But it is also important to recognize that, despite these typical but inexcusable sexist prejudices, Delany clearly wanted women to cultivate this “manly” character, though perhaps not to the same extent or in quite the same ways as men. “Vigor” would perhaps have been a more appropriate and less masculinist term to describe the relevant ensemble of traits. (669, 670)

In his discussion, Shelby examines how Delany believes “manly character” or “vigor” can be demonstrated in black women. As Shelby’s argument shows, a space for predominately male activities is quite ambiguous in Delany’s concept of gender roles.

As Shelby’s discussion of “manhood” defined by Delany’s idea of gender roles suggests, these statements of Delany in his political writing and behaviors in the conventions lead us to think that he might hold an idea that black women, once educated, should be treated the same way as men. Upon this reading, his visions of gender roles are quite complicated. This ambivalent stance of Delany regarding gender roles is manifested in his novel *Blake* as well. Before shedding light on the role of the sea in the novel, I will examine how Delany’s ambiguous concept of gender roles is manifested in the text.

In the novel, it is noteworthy that everything starts with the sale of Blake’s wife, Maggie. Although the text mentions that Maggie has been in danger of sexual abuse by her master, it is only after she is sold during Blake’s absence that he activates his sense of self-emancipation and refuses to obey his master. Although this plot can be interpreted as a manifestation of his patriarchal masculinity in protecting his wife, it is also interpreted as a manifestation of his belief in what Ogunleye considers as “the complementary relationships among males and females” to “build strong marital and family bonds” (634). Blake regretfully confesses that he used to be satisfied to remain with his master Franks, believing his wife would be freed someday and explains what makes him change as follows: Franks’ “bad treatment gave me courage, and made me determined to throw off the yoke, let it cost me what it would” (128). What he means by Franks’ “bad treatment” here is not about his attempt at sexual abuse of Maggie, but about

his decision to sell her, since Blake does not take any action before she is sold even though he knows she has been in danger of rape for a while. When Mammy Judy tells him that it would have been better if she was raped rather than sold, Blake is surprised and says, “What!—Do you tell me mammy she had better disgraced herself than been sold! By the—!”(17). Although being helpless over his master’s attempted sexual abuse of Maggie could be a threat to his patriarchal masculinity as her protector, it was not devastating enough for Blake to fight against injustice. To be separated physically from her is what has changed him and made him decide to leave the plantation. This image of the couple’s figures side-by-side is clear when he resists Franks’ command to be in company with him and his wife, saying, “when I last rode that horse in company with you and lady, my wife was at my side, and I will not now go without her! Pardon me—my life for it, I won’t go!” (20). For Blake, Maggie’s presence next to him and mutual support, or “the complementary relationship” with her, is crucial and necessary for survival and self-determination.

This is why when Blake tells his cousin, Placido, his story, he says, “My story, Placido, is easily told—the particulars you may get from one who will be more ready than I to give you details” (196). Blake wants Placido to know that his wife, Maggie, should be the one who can tell him about Blake’s life in detail. At first, it sounds strange because Blake and Maggie have been apart for ten years since she was sold. She does not know anything about his heroic success of leading his fellow black people to Canada. He does not even brag about his success in gaining his wife’s freedom as her protector. He explains to Placido what happened before he met Maggie, but he does not mention anything about what he has done after he escaped from the plantation. It is because what she knows about him and his life is pretty much everything about his life. For him what he has done with her is what he has achieved.

Considering this, it makes sense that Delany did not make the mutiny on the *Vulture* succeed in the novel. As Jeffery A. Clymer points out, at first it seems “very odd and has largely puzzled the novel’s critics” (723) that the mutiny does not succeed. If the mutiny fails to succeed, why does Delany put the scene in his plot in the first place? In fact, it has an important implication that Blake cannot achieve his goal if he is apart from his wife. As Ogunleye argues, “Delany recognized . . . that African American liberation

and autonomy would not be obtained if men struggled apart from women and if women struggled apart from men" (637), Blake needs to go back to his wife to give her an education for her sense of self-emancipation and accomplish a successful rebellion in Cuba. Right after he succeeds in buying his wife's freedom, he "as rapidly as possible, detail[s] to her his plans and schemes" (193). His "strangely passive" (238) attitude toward the mutiny is a manifestation of Delany's argument that black people's self-governing nation-state cannot be established without the education of women. Therefore, it is interesting that right before he leaves Matanzas, Blake asks a boy to "[t]ell *her* I shant be gone long!" [emphasis added] (204) after he gets the letter from Placido. Even though he says so to prevent white people around him from noticing his secret plan, he knows that he will come back to his wife soon to make his plan succeed.

After their reunion, Blake always makes efforts to educate Maggie and explain to her the political conditions and morals for the rebellion he has been planning. When she tells him her opinion, "I don't know, husband, I may be wrong, and I expect you will say so; but I think our people had better not attempt any such thing, but be satisfied" (194), Blake gives her a lesson:

"My dear wife you have much yet to learn in solving the problem of this great question of the destiny of our race. I'll give you one to work out at your leisure; it is this: Whatever liberty is worth to whites, it is worth to the blacks; therefore, whatever it cost the whites to obtain it, the blacks would be willing and ready to pay, if they desire it. Work out this question in political arithmetic at your leisure, wife, and by the time you get through and fully understand the rule, then you will be ready to discuss the subject further with me." (194)

As Delany claims that "men could not be elevated without women's elevation" (qtd. in Rolling 49), Blake constantly educates Maggie as he proceeds to achieve his scheme of insurrection.

Interestingly enough, not only Blake but also Placido shows his ambivalent concept of gender roles. When Maggie laments the fact that Blake is chosen to be "General-in-Chief of the army of emancipation of the oppressed men and women of Cuba" (243), Placido states:

The position of a man carries his wife with him; so when he is degraded, she is also, because she cannot rise above his level; but when he is elevated, so is she also; here, the wife of Henry the slave was Maggie the slave; but the wife of Mr. Henry Blake will be Mrs. Maggie Blake; and the wife of General Blake will be Mrs. General Blake. What objections have you to this, cousin? (244)

On the one hand this account of Placido makes him identifiable as an advocator of gender equality because the position of a wife is automatically either degraded or elevated in accordance with that of her husband. On the other hand, however, as Jerome McGann notes that this passage “presents women as properly subordinate to men” (328), it shows Placido’s idea of women’s subordination to men because he believes that the position of a woman is necessarily forced to correspond to her husband’s social position.

Placido’s consignment of women to a subordinate position contradicts what Delany argues in *The Mystery*, stating, “[m]en were never raised in social positions above the level of women: therefore men could not be elevated without women’s elevation” (qtd. in Rolling 49). What is important here is that it is Placido, not Blake, who argues the idea of women’s subordination. While Placido gives her this lecture, interestingly, Blake remains quiet. He neither agrees nor disagrees with him. He just continues educating and explaining to Maggie about the next day’s assembling of the Gala Day and gathering at Madame Cordora’s after Placido leaves them. In addition to Placido’s ambivalent stance on gender roles, this silence of Blake and Delany’s decision to let Placido, not Blake, insist on women’s subordination to men demonstrates Delany’s contradictory, complicated, and ambivalent concept of gender roles.

Blake starts to educate not only Maggie, but also other black women in Cuba. Whenever he holds any meetings or seclusions, he always includes black women as well. In *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba*, Aisha K. Finch illustrates the black women’s engagement of rebellion in Cuba especially through the meetings occurring inside black women’s homes (124). Although white people tended to deny the fact of active participation of insurrections by black women, black women did engage in the insurrections (99, 100). Like the cases of black women Finch records, black women described in *Blake* actively join the meetings for rebellion. Blake encourages his black

female members to even lead the conversations in the gatherings of the Council, and answers each question raised by them, especially by Maggie and Madame Cordora, to educate them. Ogunleye argues that Delany's political argument is based on his belief in women's rights and "the mental acumen and leadership potential of 19th-century free and enslaved African women" (630), and likewise Blake trusts in women's rights and their leadership potential.

Blake's belief in women's rights and their leadership potential is implicit in the "Huts" of the novel's title as well. In many cases, when he visits huts of other black slaves in the U.S. plantations, the text often describes the hut for men and women such as "the hut of Mammy Judy and Daddy Joe" (29). Moreover, whenever he enters slaves' huts, both husbands and wives are equally described in detail such as the cases of aunt Dolly and uncle Nathan, of Sampson and his wife Dursie, of Seth and his wife Phebe (although their place is described not as a hut but as a house), and of Uncle Jerry and Aunt Rachel. He never forgets to mention those wives' names along with their husbands' names. Unlike Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, whose title shows Uncle Tom's possession of his cabin, in *Blake* huts are equally for both husbands and wives.

As these cases of black husbands and wives in the U.S. described in the text show, it is clear that Blake treats not only black men but also black women as prospective leading figures of the insurrection. When he asks his friends, Andy and Charles, to spread his scheme for insurrection among other slaves of other plantations, he gives instruction as follows:

All you have to do, is to find *one good man or woman* [emphasis added]—I don't care which, so that they prove to be the right person—on a single plantation, and hold a seclusion and impart the secret to them, and make them the organizers for their own plantation, and they in like manner impart it to some other next to them, and so on. In this way it will spread like smallpox among them. (42)

Although most of the time he seems to focus on black men/husbands to impart his secret, he tells his friends to find "one good man or woman" to spread the seeds of his plan. He does not dehumanize black women who often become a subject of black men's manifestation of manhood as their

protector. Rather, as Ogunleye points out, “Delany . . . realized that in African Americans’ strivings for liberation and self-determination, women’s contributions were equally as valuable as men’s” (634), and he educates black women so that black men and women can build a “complementary relationship” to elevate their status and situations.

Blake does not miss any chances to talk to both female and male slaves while he visits slaves’ huts in each plantation or meets them on his way. For example, when he meets aunt Dolly, he asks her many questions before he meets her husband, uncle Nathan. He could have talked only to uncle Nathan if he considered women’s opinions do not matter for his scheme. But he interviews both aunt Dolly and uncle Nathan. It is the same when he meets with the married couple Sampson and Dursie. Even though Dursie shows her worried face when Blake talks about his scheme, he does not exclude her from the conversation and lets her attend the meeting. The text does not fail to impress the paired image on the readers, by describing both husband and wife together when he leaves the hut. He never leaves their huts without the presence of their wives.

Moreover, when Blake meets uncle Moses, who is the perfect figure of leadership that he is looking for, he also does not ignore the cotton girls he meets in the same plantation and interviews them as well. Through the interview, the text depicts their stubbornness and their mental strength against their master’s will to sell them. Although instead of imparting his secret scheme to those cotton girls he asks them whether they know any men, “a real clever good trusty man” (79), which leads him to uncle Moses, the text describes Blake’s hope and confidence in both of them equally as follows: “Leaving the plantation of Crane with high hopes and great confidence in the integrity of *uncle Moses and the maiden gang of cotton girls*” [emphasis added] (81). In fact, when he interviews them, Blake is shocked to hear that they must pick cotton as a daily task in the same amount as men, saying, “That can’t be possible!” (78). He implies the idea based on his patriarchal masculinity that men should take those tasks to be a protector and provider of women. However, contrary to his patriarchal values, he finds some hope equally in both Moses and the cotton girls for the success of his scheme.

Furthermore, Delany illustrates notable female leadership to denote his belief that active involvement by women is crucial for liberation of black people. It is a black female character, Phebe Seth, who acts as an important

gatekeeper to invite Blake to their secret gathering in another room of the house. Unlike other black wives he meets in the U.S. who passively get interviewed and join the conversation about Blake's scheme, the text points out how Phebe actively leads their meeting as follows: "After a little conversation, in which freely participated Mrs. Seth, who evidently was deservedly the leading spirit of the evening, they soon became reconciled to the character and mission of their unexpected and self-invited guest" (103). Soon after that, Phebe opens the door of the room occupied by a party of fifteen "who that night had gathered for the portentous purpose of a final decision on the hour to strike the first blow" (103) to invite Blake to the meeting. Although her husband, Jason Seth, is also at their first meeting, he lets Phebe open the door. During the big meeting of "the representatives of the heads of that many plantations" (103), Phebe actively and passionately leads their conversation.

In addition to Phebe's active participation in the meetings, another example of female leadership can be found in *Blake* through the single quote from the Bible, "Arm of Lord awake!" (70, 226, 258) which is mysteriously repeated throughout the text. In the text, this quote is repeated three times in each different important stage of this novel, on U.S. soil, during the Middle Passage, and in Cuba; first, it is used by Blake right before he crosses the Red River in the U.S. (70); secondly by a female slave named Abyssa, on the vessel *Vulture*, in the Middle Passage (226); and lastly again by Abyssa, but this time responded to by members of the Council held for both black men and women at Madame Cordora's in Cuba with "With strength and power!" (258). This quote from Isaiah 51.9 raises the slaves' morale for the insurrections in the text. It is noteworthy that the quote is first used by a black male, Blake, the leader of the whole scheme of rebellions, and then by a black female slave, and then finally used in a call and response style among all members of both male and female slaves of the Council. This process of handing the words down from a male leader to a female leader and then to the whole community seems to accord with Delany's concepts of complementary relationships between men and women and of the necessity to educate women for their liberation and elevation of social position.

These concepts of the reciprocity between black men and women, rather than a relationship of one controlling the other, is also demonstrated in three main scenes of wedding ceremonies for both black people and white people

in the text because they emphasize how black men and women build a mutually supporting relationship, unlike white people. On the one hand, the first wedding scene is for the couples of Charles and Polly, Andy and Clara, and Eli and Ailcey, celebrated right after they successfully escape to Canada. The second wedding scene is for that of Cornelia Woodward and Augustus Seeley in Cuba. The third scene is for the marriages of Gofer Gondolier and Abyssa Soudan, and General Juan Montego and Madame Cordora, celebrated right before they rise in rebellion in Cuba. The weddings of black people in both Canada and Cuba, since their marriages seem to symbolize their success in escaping from slavery by working together as men and women, or their future success after rebelling through mutual support, are described as the bonds of complementary relationships by which they have liberated and elevated themselves.

On the other hand, the wedding of the white couple is described as the one which Mr. Seeley is forced to agree upon because of his need to keep proving his manhood. Cornelia can succeed in persuading him to marry her by using her letter to him which “appeal[s] to his manhood” (168). Playing the role of a Victorian lady who seeks a man’s protection and control, Cornelia gains his protection through their marriage, which the text sarcastically concludes with the exact same phrase as the one for black couples in Canada, “man and wife forever!” (168). This is an interesting comparison between these black couples’ weddings and the white couple’s wedding. Although the black male Gofer shows his strong desire to be the protector of his wife, unlike Mr. Seeley, all black couples decide to marry based on their own active will and desire to build a mutual relationship to fight against injustice and for their freedom.

This ambivalent concept of gender roles which shows a reciprocal relationship while holding on to patriarchal masculinity is also manifested in the very last scene of the novel. This unfinished novel ends with an incomplete debate among black members who are planning an insurrection in Cuba about the victimization of black women by white people and how to rebel against it. The brutal event happens when Ambrosina Cordora is physically abused by a white man at a store. She states firmly, “I wish I was a man, I’d lay the city in ashes this night, so I would” (313), and laments that unless black men deal with the situation and find solutions to protect black

women immediately, they will end up finding shelters in white men's bosoms, which her mother tries to convince her not to think of as a possibility:

You speak rationally, my child, regarding yourself, that is just what white men desire to do, drive colored women as a necessity to seek their protection that they may become the subjects of their lust. Do you die first before thinking of such a thing: and let what might come, before yielding to such degradation as that I would be one of the first to aid in laying the city in ashes! (313)

The whole debate ends with Montego's promise that he will avenge her, which Ambrosina responds to by saying, "I thank God, then there is still some hope!" (313).

At first, it seems that the text justifies Delany's ideal of patriarchal gender roles that black women should find their protection in black men and do nothing, rather than stand against the violence by white people. No other black women support Ambrosina's statement that she wished she were a man so that she could burn everything down because they think it will just make things worse. Even Ambrosina, who tries to stand against the violence by herself, thinks that a man is necessary for her to fight back. All the women in the room seem to be unable to come up with any good ideas to avenge her by themselves but leave that hope to black men.

However, in this scene, there is no description about Blake or his opinion about the conclusion in the meeting. Right before Ambrosina is attacked, in the meeting where some black men and women gather including Blake, Madame Montego says the same thing, "Thank God, . . . there is yet some hope!" (310) when she hears that a black man, Carolus Blacus, promises those women not to submit to the oppressions by white people. Right after her response to Carolus Blacus, the text highlights Blake's response as follows: "Blake during the whole of these scenes was grave and sober; having nothing to say" (311). He keeps his silence and neither agrees nor disagrees with Blacus. Like the time when the mutiny on the vessel is suppressed, Blake acts "strangely passive" (238) throughout the debate. This silence of Blake is similar to when Placido tells Maggie about women's submission to men. He always avoids stating his concrete opinion about these issues. Therefore, it is possible to interpret this last scene as a manifestation of Delany's ambivalent

concept of gender roles. While he describes black men as the ones who hold the patriarchal masculine identity of being a protector, he never makes any decisive statement that black women should find protection under men and remain passive toward the rebellions since he always includes them in the meetings and encourages them to join the council actively. If he thought women were just an object that men can manifest their masculinity through, there would be no necessity to invite them to the rebellion. Interestingly, since the novel remained incomplete and we can never know the ending of this debate or the result of Blake's scheme of insurrection, the conclusion of the debate is wide open to readers.

Blake as a Seaman

What is the source of Blake's ambiguous opinions about women's rights and gender roles? Blake's identity as a seaman is a key to answering this question. In accordance with the ambiguous and uncertain nature of the sea, a seaman's life at sea teaches him the drawbacks of holding any certain clear-cut concepts of social hierarchies or dichotomies. Although the seaman's life is bound up with strict hierarchies on board, these hierarchies are not stable. Nationalities, social hierarchies, names, and identities are highly influenced and shaken by mutinies, the political status of their ships, and shipwrecks. Moreover, this uncertainty of the nature of the sea becomes crucial in considering Delany's concept of gender roles because, as Robin Miskolcze argues in her book *Women & Children First: Nineteenth-Century Sea Narratives & American Identity*, the sea and images of the sea in literature perform as a center stage for the discourse on gender roles for Anglo-Americans during the antebellum period. Before examining Delany's concept of gender roles through the lens of the tradition of antebellum sea narratives, I will clarify how Blake's identity as a seaman shapes his life and his understanding of the uncertainty of the nature of the sea.

Blake's personality and survival methods are shaped by his career as a sailor. He regards most of his life as being that of a sailor, as Placido recognizes him by saying, "And you are also a sailor, Henry!" (196) when Blake tells him that he had traveled as a seaman from when he was seventeen until he was sold as a slave. Blake admits that he "served the hardest

apprenticeship at the business” by going “through all the grades, from common seaman to first mate” (196). Bryan Charles Sinche is right when he states that seamanship is what Blake uses and teaches to other black people when he visits plantations, and that the sea “is a place where blacks can learn transferable skills that aid them in their quest for freedom” (220). His knowledge of sailing, for example, leads to his successful journey to Canada with his group:

You see these seven stars which I've drawn on this piece of paper—number 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7? From the peculiarity of the shape of their relative position to each other, the group is called the 'Dipper,' because to look at them they look like a 'dipper' or a vessel with a long handle. . . . Now trace the dotted line from 6 through the center of 7, and it leads directly to 10. This is the North Star, the slave's great Guide to Freedom! Do you all now understand it? (132-34)

He teaches them not only knowledge of the constellations, but also how to use a compass:

One more explanation and then we'll go. Do you see this little round metallic box? . . . The little box of which I was speaking, has in it what is called a compass . . . [It] always points in one direction, and that is to the north. . . . Now I've told you all that's necessary to guide you from a land of slavery and long suffering, to a land of liberty and future happiness. Are you now all satisfied with what you have learned? (134-35)

His leadership, the use of a compass, and navigating by constellations, which he learned as a sailor, led them to freedom. Without these seaman's skills, he could not have achieved his goal of spreading the seeds of self-respect for their liberation in Canada. Blake's identity as a seaman is the center of the whole plot of the novel.

Moreover, while Blake visits each plantation to spread his scheme, he changes his name to hide his identity, which is similar to vessels in the Middle Passage. The names and identities of vessels are frequently changed in the novel. For example, the name of the vessel *Merchantman* is changed to

Vulture, which hides its true color as a Spanish slave ship with the American flag by just one command of “Run up the Stars and Stripes” (230). Just like these vessels’ names and identities, Blake changes his names and manages to pass through the plantations without getting caught. It is interesting that Castello and Paul, white people who are on the vessel *Vulture*, wonder why Blake changes his name when he works as a seaman, concluding, “No matter; I suppose he wants to conceal his identity in the business!” (205). This skill of changing his name and hiding his identity must have been gained through his seamanship.

Since his seamanship is a critical element of the entire plot in *Blake*, even the hardships and difficulties he faces on land are frequently compared to the ocean: “stormy sea of trouble and oppression” (19), “troubled waters” (191), or “turbid waters of oppression” (84). The border between land and sea is almost absent in his mind. As if he himself were a ship sailing the ocean of plantations with his seaman’s skills, Blake visits each hut of black people throughout the plantations to spread his knowledge of seamanship in preparation for rebellion. By sailing through the land and ocean, leading black men and women on board his ship and teaching them his skills of seamanship, he finally goes back to the hut where he can be with his wife to claim the rights and freedom of black people.

The ambiguity of identity in the sea is also depicted through the changes of weather at sea. The text emphasizes frequent changes of weather as the nature of the sea as follows: “The sun rose beautifully, overspreading by his reflections the expanded surface of the ocean, as if by the skill of some magic touch, changing at once the silvery to a golden hue” (229). This unstable nature of the weather at sea is what makes the mutiny dramatic as well. A great storm comes right before the mutiny, but by the time the mutiny is suppressed, the weather changes so quickly:

Suddenly the winds changed, the clouds began to disperse, the thunder and lightning ceased to be seen and heard. Late in the afternoon a rainbow appeared above the horizon, telling in distant and silent eloquence as a harbinger of gladness, of a brighter prospect to all, as if conscious of the terror which pervaded the enslavers, and the future that awaited the enslaved. (238)

The mutiny at sea signifies the overturning of the social hierarchy. As the unstable nature of weather at sea symbolizes, any social hierarchy can be overturned. On the ocean, since everything can be changed immediately, identity, names or personality are all uncertain, ambiguous and complex enough to be easily shaken, threatened, and changed. It is possible to consider that Delany's ambivalent concept of gender roles is also manifested in Blake's understanding of the uncertainty of the nature of the sea. In *Blake*, through its nature of uncertainty and ambiguity, the sea functions as a stage to symbolize the deconstruction of ideologies, such as social hierarchy, binary opposition and dichotomy. This function of the sea in the text allows Delany to convey his ambiguous concept of gender roles.

The uncertainty of the nature of the sea is especially important in considering Delany's concept of gender roles. During the antebellum period, the sea and images of the sea in literature served as a stage for Anglo-American men to prove their masculinity and secure the ideology of American exceptionalism. In her book *Women & Children First: Nineteenth-Century Sea Narratives & American Identity*, Miskolcze focuses on images of women at sea in antebellum narratives and points out that the images of Anglo-American women in antebellum sea narratives encouraged a definition of the new masculine individualism: Anglo-American men's ideal masculinity characterized by "the maritime directive (originating in the first half of the nineteenth century) that one should attend to women and children first during sea disasters" (xi). Anglo-American women in antebellum sea narratives "are often portrayed as models of American ideals derived from women's seemingly innate Christian self-sacrifice" (xi). Therefore, for an Anglo-American man, showing an attitude of self-sacrifice and courage to risk his own life to ensure the safety of women and children came to be recognized as a proof of his masculinity.

Interestingly, in *Blake*, Delany also portrays a white woman, Cornelia, as a girl of "elevated Christian graces" (160) and her lover, Lieutenant Augustus Seeley, as an Anglo-American man who saves his woman first rather than pursue his own passions. Like a heroine of sentimental novels, Cornelia laments her miserable life:

Oh I beg of you to hear me, ladies of position and happiness! My home is Pennsylvania in America; I had just finished my education in

Delaware; went to New York expecting to meet my mother to take me home; met the young man, who under solemn promise of marriage, decoyed me away; I, eluding my dear mother, escaped with him on the vessel. Oh! This is the truth! This is the truth, and will you for God's sake believe me, if not for my own! (166)

When she accuses Seeley of being irresponsible and neglecting her by planning to go sailing with other men right after they arrive in Cuba, Seeley leaves the room saying she is crazy. However, soon after she leaves a “touching and chaste” letter to him, it “appeal[s] to his manhood” (168) and they quickly get married the next day. Although this event happened not at sea but on the land of Cuba right after their landing, her miserable life is described like a shipwreck throughout the scene. During the sailing, readers witness her occasional sigh (160), and her broken-heart is described as “heart-wreck” (167). Here, Delany illustrates the way Seeley reclaims his manhood by saving Cornelia at the shipwreck of their relationship, and without hesitation but possibly sarcastically, Delany describes Cornelia as “one of the most perfect of American young ladies” (160).

Delany's description of Cornelia and Seeley as a couple who use the sea as a stage to shape and prove masculinity through the shipwreck of their relationship effectively emphasizes the difference between how Anglo-American women and African American women appear in the sea narratives. While the sea functions as an integral stage for Anglo-American men to prove their masculinity by saving Anglo-American women and children first, African American women were never treated as women who were supposed to be protected by men. For African American men, the sea could never be able to fully function as the stage to manifest their masculinity by saving women and children first because the lives of their wives and daughters were always threatened as slaves, and they were even treated as cargo.

In *Blake*, the sea serves not as a stage for black men to manifest their masculinity by saving women and children first, but as a stage for black men and women to stand up and fight against the whites together. When the unsuccessful mutiny occurs on the vessel *Vulture*, Delany highlights two main characters, a black man named Mendi (interestingly his name is the same as the ship's name which Delany took to travel to Liberia in 1859, the year before he published the second half of *Blake*), and a black woman

named Abyssa, among all other black slaves on the ship. Although Mendi seems to be a leading figure for other black slaves on the ship to take action during the mutiny, Delany also focuses on the black female figure who mysteriously whispers "Arm of the Lord, awake!" as though she is trying to raise black slaves' spirits for the mutiny and make them and herself get ready for it. After the mutiny is sustained and the vessel landed in Matanzas, Placido chose these two figures, Mendi and Abyssa, for his plan for upcoming rebellion. Unlike sea narratives which demonstrate how Anglo-American men can prove their masculinity by saving women and children first during a shipwreck, Delany's sea narrative demonstrates a different perspective of the sea in terms of gender roles for African Americans. As the uncertainty of the nature of the sea symbolizes, the sea cannot be the stage for men or women to claim their masculinity or womanhood; the sea does not allow people to read it through the clear dichotomy of these categories.

This role of the sea in the novel which functions as a tool to overthrow any dichotomy or mainstream ideal is also shown in its descriptions of religion as well. Blake explains his lost faith in the "religion of my [Blake's] oppressors" (23) with the image of a shipwreck: "My faith has been wrecked on the stony hearts of such pretended Christians as Stephen Franks [his master], while passing through the stormy sea of trouble and oppression!" (19). Although he believes in God, he clearly distinguishes "a false religion that justifies and promotes racist oppression" (xxiii) which his oppressors force black people to believe from "a religion of promise" (xxiii) which his own experience opens his eyes to hold. Using the image of a shipwreck is a successful means for Delany to depict the importance of transcending dominant values and ideologies.

Combined with the ideology of Christianity, for Anglo-American men during the antebellum period, according to Miskolcze, saving women and children was not only meant as proof of masculinity, but also "became analogous to saving the exceptional nature of the nation" (26). By tracing back to the concept of "sea voyages and ships as representations of what Pilgrims and Puritans perceived as their divinely ordained mission" (3), Miskolcze argues that beginning in 19th-century America, Anglo-American women played an important role as "the moral and Christian strongholds of the home" (26), and since Anglo-American women's presence at sea represented "America's covenant with God" (26), for Anglo-American men,

saving women and children meant not only their proof of masculinity, but also meant preserving the “exceptional nature of the nation” (26).

It is possible to think that by describing a sea narrative that shows mutual support and help between black men and women in fighting against whites, Delany tries to counter the concept of exceptionalism that Anglo-American people struggled to hold on to, and lead readers to the justification of his emigration project. Delany’s *Blake* offers a counterargument against American exceptionalism because the sea narrative proves that the sea cannot be a sanctuary for Anglo-American men’s masculinity and exceptionalism if the same sea can also function in an opposite way for African American people. That is, as a place for both men and women to survive through their complementary relationships. Describing the mutual support and help between black men and women at sea is an ideal way for Delany to question American exceptionalism and open black people’s eyes to the hope and necessity of creating a self-governing black nation-state in Africa.

Delany’s concept of Africa itself manifests his ambiguous stance regarding gender roles. As one of the reasons to recognize Delany as “the progenitor of black Atlantic patriarchy” (26), Paul Gilroy focuses on Delany’s stance of gendering the African homeland. He points out that in Delany’s 1859 report of his trip to Africa, *Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party*, “Delany, even when he referred to Africa with the female pronoun, persisted in calling the continent the fatherland” (25). However, what Gilroy almost ignores here, namely the fact that Delany referred to Africa, the same continent as he calls “fatherland,” with the female pronoun, not a male pronoun, proves that his concept of gender roles is quite ambiguous. It might be that because his voyage to Africa by crossing the sea does not allow Delany to read it through any dichotomy like masculinity and womanhood, it led him to view the continent as one which he could neither simply refer to as a “motherland” nor persist in referring to with a male pronoun, which seems to be more suitable for something called “fatherland.” For Delany, his emigration project to Africa should be achieved through mutuality and reciprocity between black men and women as his concept of gendering Africa itself manifests.

Conclusion

By close examination of the novel's structure of plot, its title, Blake's words and actions, and the sea specifically, Delany's ambivalent position on gender roles which are manifested in his other political writings is revealed. Even though he holds many traditional patriarchal values, his concept of gender roles is complicated in the way that he believes in the necessity of mutual support and help between black men and women. This ambiguity is implied by the dual nature of the sea, whose waves drift throughout the entire novel. Being with Maggie and other females as well and educating them for their sense of self-esteem is necessary for his goal of black people's liberation. Delany uses the sea and the images of the sea as a tool to reflect his ambivalent gender roles through its ambiguous and uncertain nature. The image of the sea in the novel symbolizes the possibility of black gender roles which can transcend the dominant patriarchal norms. What is more, the waves of the sea in *Blake* lead us to the limitation of American exceptionalism, a myth which Anglo-Americans clung to, and justification of his political project of emigration to Africa.

Note

1. For examples of works that discuss black masculine identity constructed in the 19th-century South and assert that it has been defined either in accordance with or against dominant conceptualization of patriarchal masculinity, see Johns; Lussana and Plath.

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