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## **Mobility and Resistance: Reading Delany's Blake as an Early Green Book**

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**“Mobility and Resistance: Reading Delany’s *Blake* as an Early *Green Book*” by Jack Hoda (he/they)**

**ABSTRACT.** *In his introduction to the 2017 edition of Martin Delany’s ‘Blake; Or, the Huts of America,’ Jerome McGann details the texts and Delany’s history of exclusion from the American canon. McGann writes that ‘Blake’ “was at once the most important and the least influential work of fiction published by a black writer in the nineteenth century” (ix). While the novel, first released in two serialized parts, had an impact in its contemporary context thanks to Delany’s widespread career, both ‘Blake’ and Delany himself disappear from the American literary imaginary. It’s no surprise that ‘Blake’s’ slow reemergence in the twentieth century peaked with the critical attention of the Civil Rights Movement. Since its reemergence in an era of divisive political activism, ‘Blake’ has inspired a wealth of scholarly examination. The novel’s hybrid blend of realist and speculative elements invite readings of regional, transnational, and even gendered black experiences as well as imaginative resistance. Many have credited ‘Blake’ as a precursor to major works of black artists, even recognizing the thematic echoes in works as contemporaneous as Marvel’s ‘Black Panther.’ ‘Blake’ certainly left an imprint on the American literary tradition. I’m especially drawn to Alex Zamalin’s characterization of Delany as the “first black utopian vision[ary]” and his labeling of ‘Blake’ as “the first work of black fantasy fiction” (7). In this essay, Hoda aims to build upon ‘Blake’s’ expanding referential network by identifying a new genealogy connecting the novel’s travelogue form and themes of utopic resistance to the forms and intentions of ‘The Negro Motorist Green Book,’ a serialized Jim Crow era travel guide for African Americans throughout the twentieth century.*



**STUDENT BIO.** Jack Hoda is completing a Master of Arts in English Literature with research interests in contemporary fiction, queer theory, and psychoanalysis. Jack is an activist intellectual, committed to the necessary collaboration of the university and the community. As such, their academic work complements their investment in Mississippi's LGBTQ+ movement through involvement with the Mississippi Safe Schools Coalition and the LGBTQ+ Fund of MS. They submitted their essay titled, "Mobility and Resistance: Reading Delany's 'Blake' as an Early 'Green Book'" in the History & Liberation category on Monday, February 7th, 2022.

### Mobility and Resistance: Reading Delany's *Blake* as an Early *Green Book*

In his introduction to the 2017 corrected edition of Martin Delany's *Blake; Or, the Huts of America*, Jerome McGann details both the text's and Delany's strange history of exclusion from the American canon. McGann writes that *Blake* "was at once the most important and the least influential work of fiction published by a black writer in the nineteenth century" (ix). While the novel, first released in two serialized parts, had somewhat of an impact in its contemporary context thanks to Delany's widespread activism and interdisciplinary career, both *Blake* and Delany himself seem to disappear from the American literary imaginary for nearly one hundred years after this publication. It's no surprise that *Blake*'s slow reemergence in the twentieth century culminated with increasing critical attention during the civil rights movements of the 60s given its investment in black intellectualism and slave rebellion. Since its reemergence in an era of divisive political activism, *Blake* has inspired a wealth of scholarly examination. The novel's hybrid blend of realist and speculative elements invite readings of the narrative's depictions of regional, transnational, and even gendered black experiences as well as its imaginative resistance. Many have placed *Blake* in complex genealogies of intertextual influence, even recognizing the thematic echoes in works as contemporaneous as Marvel's *Black Panther*.<sup>1</sup> Whether consciously or not, *Blake* has left an imprint on the American literary tradition. I'm especially drawn to Alex Zamalin's characterization of Delany as the "first black utopian vision[ary]" and his labeling of *Blake* as "the first work of black fantasy fiction" (7). In this essay, I aim to build upon this expanding referential network by identifying a new genealogy connecting *Blake*'s strategic wanderings and utopic resistance to the forms and intentions of *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, a serialized Jim Crow era travel guide for African Americans

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on Delany's influence on black science fiction through *Blake Panther*, see Valerie Babb

spanning the 1930s to 60s. My argument here is not that *Blake* necessarily had a direct thematic influence on the travel guide but that certain echoes between the two forms of publication beg closer cross-examination of black literary production that works to superimpose narratives of resistance upon oppressive regimes.

*The Negro Motorist Green Book*—also known as *The Negro Traveler's Green Book*, *The Traveler's Green Book*, or just *The Green Book*—ran from 1936 to 1964 and was edited and published by husband-and-wife Victor and Alma Green in New York City (Hall 307). The publication was the most well-known African American travel guide of the Jim Crow era, highlighting communities, businesses, and attractions throughout the United States—and later abroad—that were safe and hospitable for black travelers during a time of both rapidly expanding automobile travel and intense, legal segregation practices. This guidebook set itself apart from others by explicitly racializing the United States landscape, “highlighting demographic profiles, heritage attractions, and non-discriminatory hospitality and services” (Hall 307). Rather than providing detailed itineraries or annotated maps, *The Green Book* took a more characteristically narrative approach to its travel advertising. For example, the guide relied on a personable voice in all its descriptions and often offered helpful tips and “how-to” sections for the amateur motorist. This formal approach to the travel guide expanded its reach and protected African American travelers from discrimination, humiliation, and violence, especially in the Deep South.

While *The Green Book* is not a narrative, it occupies similar territories of realist form and liberatory intention as Delany's *Blake. Blake; Or, the Huts of America* follows Henry Blake, a wealthy free Cuban who is captured and enslaved in the United States, as he travels throughout the US Deep South, Canada, Africa, and Cuba in search of his wife who was sold by their shared

slave owner, Colonel Franks. After Henry escapes the Franks, his covert expeditions lead him through disparate communities in the US southern slave states where he steadily builds an insurrectionist network. During Henry's travels he interviews the slaves he encounters, highlighting the differences and similarities of the conditions of slavery both between individual plantations and across state lines. Part two of the novel sees Blake travel to Cuba where he locates and helps free his wife while continuing to coordinate a hemispheric slave insurrection. The plans and the coalition continue to develop throughout the final chapters of the text; however, the book closes before a rebellion takes place. It is generally accepted that Delany wrote additional chapters detailing the slave rebellion—and likely failure of said rebellion—in Cuba, but those chapters have never been identified (Delany xxiii). While Chapters XVII through XXVI—Henry's catalogic travels through the southern slave states—are the most explicitly travelogue in ways that prefigure *The Green Book*, both texts implicitly work to define black mobility as resistance within legally oppressive regimes, explore the utopic potential of hemispheric coalition, and grapple with tensions between ideologies of liberation and oppression.

After Henry escapes being sold by the Franks, he rapidly maneuvers throughout the surrounding slave states. Over the course of ten chapters, Henry meanders through eleven states, detailing the disparate social hierarchies and slave conditions through dialogue with those he encounters. In each state, Henry holds countless conferences in slave huts—only a few of which are described in detail—“sowing seeds [of insurrection] from which in due season, he anticipate[s] an abundant harvest” (74). What is most striking about each of these stops is the level at which Henry's encounters function to locate both friendly and dangerous places for black people, much like *The Green Book* decades later. Throughout Henry's travels, Delany leans into

realist conventions with recognizable naming of anything from ships to slave owners to organizations to buildings, further crystalizing an intention to portray at least measurably true depictions of referenced locations for readers. The text is occasionally fitted with explanatory footnotes that further insist the reality of certain scenes, especially scenes that detail cruelty toward slaves. These realist conventions work in coordination with the variations in dialect that Delany employs throughout both these stops in the slave states and the rest of the novel.<sup>2</sup> Upon his first visit to Louisiana, Henry meets Nathan and Dolly, slaves who inform him that even mulattos and black people run plantations and treat their slaves “’bout da same” as white slave owners (74). In Arkansas, Henry learns of Native American slave owners who treat their slaves somewhat as equals and who eventually become partners in Henry’s growing insurrectionist network (88). However, greater Arkansas, beyond the Native territories, proves to be a dangerous place for traveling black people. Through his enslaved allies, Uncle Jerry and Aunt Rachel, Henry learns that white patrols and surveillance are far more restrictive than in Louisiana, but he also finds that the slaves in Arkansas are “pretty well organized already” (90). Delany describes the way slaves in Arkansas pass information swiftly throughout their connected network, allowing Jerry and Rachel to know of Henry’s approach days in advance. Back in Louisiana, Henry spends some time in New Orleans which, at first, seems a sort of multi-racial haven, even leading him to a safe house inhabited by Jason and Phebe Seth whose owner lives out of town and largely leaves them to their own devices (108). In South Carolina we learn of a harsh colorist hierarchy that engages mulattoes in the subjugation and exclusion of “pure blooded negroes” through the “Brown Society,” an organization created by white people to elevate people of mixed race into positions that further exclude black people (110). In North

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on Delany’s use of varied dialects, see the introduction to *Blake; Or, the Huts of America* (pp. xix-xx)

Carolina, Henry visits the Dismal Swamp, a haven for “the old confederates of Nat Turner” which Delany describes as “a different atmosphere” where Henry finds “ample scope for undisturbed action throughout the entire region of the Swamp” (113). In each of these examples, Delany uses narrative to construct the social realities of the regions Henry travels through, deploying realist tactics that any nineteenth century reader could assume as truth. As Jennifer Brittan argues, “One of the jobs of the realist novel is to make existing social worlds legible, and with *Blake*...Delany shows a documentary concern for recording his own unfolding moment” (80). I argue that Delany’s practice here is somewhat of a precursor to the hybrid qualities of *The Green Book* which “implicitly denote [locations] as African-American friendly includ[ing] African-American-owned businesses, cultural heritage attractions, and places with sizeable populations of African-American residents, local histories of interracial social life, and few racial tensions” (Hall 312). Through their realist and travelogue forms, *Blake* and *The Green Book* work to curate national—and transnational—landscapes, inhabited by a pan-African community that resists white hegemony.

In both *Blake* and *The Green Book*—particularly the earlier publications under the title of *The Negro Motorist Green Book*—uses of mobility as a form of racial resistance coincide with emergent travel technologies. Whereas *The Green Book* is born out of the popularization of leisure travel through increased access to the automobile and the rise of many African American families into the middle class, *Blake* emerges from the increased use of the steamship for continental travel thanks to its ability to travel both with and against currents. While neither text obviously coincides with the invention of its respective technological advancements in travel, they do each signal key shifts in African Americans’ relationships to mobility through such advancements. As Michael Pesses argues, *The Green Book* “represent[s] an entry for black

motorists into the modern American automobility discourse” (678). *The Green Book* is both a product of and cause for increased African American mobility, serving to encourage African Americans to travel to identified friendly destinations, to increase business for black-owned and allied business, and perhaps to drive an increase in the creation of such black-owned and allied businesses. *Blake*, on the other hand, is a symptom of rapidly increasing social and political tensions over the future of American slavery and the implications of mobility for black people therein. Published shortly before the outbreak of the American Civil War, the uncertain fate of the slave industry looms over the narrative with striking presence, and the mobility of black people, specifically Henry Blake, is at the heart of this tension. Henry is constantly subject to curfews and interrogation by white people or slave overseers throughout his travels, highlighting the anxieties of the slave owning class toward mobility among black people. This anxiety is never more evident than when Henry finds employment on a slaving ship from Cuba to Africa in Part Two. Henry is hired on the ship as a commander for the black crew, and the entire population of the ship becomes enamored with his self-assuredness and leadership (204). The few white crew members become increasingly terrified of Henry potentially leading a mutiny among the largely enslaved black crew members that far outnumber them. Throughout the expedition, the narration continually returns to these anxieties.

While much of Henry’s travel between destinations within the boundaries of the United States is invisible to the narration, his most visible travel scenes occur on steamships, or “steamers.” The steamship in fact makes a narrative like Henry’s possible by allowing for such rapid transit along rivers in a rather meandering path. In one of the most memorable of these steamship scenes, Henry is recognized by an enslaved passenger, Lewis Grimes, who he later learns was a freeman but “stolen and now being taken to Texas, where [he is] to be enslaved for



life!’” (83). Through his characteristic questioning, Henry learns that Lewis is kept under constant surveillance and bondage, but he eventually convinces Lewis to take the next opportunity available to kill his captor, regardless of the outcome (83). This episode, alongside Delany’s many other less overt portrayals of southern anxieties toward black mobility, seems a direct response to the 1850 passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, requiring that all escaped slaves—including and especially those finding sanctuary in the north—be captured and returned to their slavers. Lewis’s story is one highlighting the inhumanity of such a law while providing an opportunity for Delany to imagine a form of collective resistance in both Henry’s interference on the steamship and his later reflection upon the encounter, determining that “nothing short of interference by Divine Providence should stop his plans and progress” (84). Here, Lewis’s strife and Henry’s ability to aid him serve to propel Henry along his messianic insurrectionist path. Certainly, the concurrent popularizations of contemporaneous travel technologies help situate *Blake* and *The Green Book* within broader discourses of black mobility and resistance, yet they also make way for these texts as powerful forces of utopic, futurist production.

Utopia in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is defined as “an ideal commonwealth whose inhabitants exist under seemingly perfect conditions...used to denote visionary reform that tends to be impossibly idealistic.” While Delany never presents us with a fully liberated, pan-African utopia, *Blake* certainly creates an idealized narrative in which such a liberated future is not only possible but likely. Zamalin argues that “Delany fictionalized a global slave insurrection and Pan-African community. His work imagined what history couldn’t: black liberation on black terms” (21). While slave insurrection was nothing new in the mid-nineteenth century, Delany’s dramatization of national coordination—not to mention the transnational turn of Part Two—among enslaved peoples is profoundly idealistic. Although such a developed insurrectionist

network at the time is a near impossibility, Delany's realism and emphasis on travel and communication technologies showcases how such an insurrection *could* happen. Henry's time in Cuba in Part Two highlights stark differences between the position of enslaved peoples in Cuba and the US, a condition that becomes necessary for the continued growth of the movement. Cuba represents a class system less attached to race than wealth. This circumstance is made explicit when Henry finally finds his wife, Maggie, and helps her buy her own freedom—a legal right that slaves in Cuba hold regardless of the slaveowner's willingness to grant freedom (187-9). Because of the more mobile economic positions of black Cubans, Henry and his wealthy poet cousin, Placido, are able to quickly gather a rather elite Grand Council, naming Henry “Commander-in-Chief of the Army of Emancipation” (258). This congregation proves to be a lively crowd of intellectuals and leaders that immediately evoke ideal narratives of the birth of the American revolution. The Grand Council represents the possibility of a black utopic society beyond emancipation. Similarly, *The Green Book* asserts its own kind of black utopia. Hall writes that “*The Green Book* served as a tool with which African-Americans resisted and surmounted postcolonial and postbellum legacies of white racial violence and hegemony” (308), but I argue that *The Green Book* itself accomplishes these means aesthetically even before it necessarily becomes a tool for travelers to do so. By not only featuring but also narrativizing communities and businesses that welcomed black travelers during the Jim Crow era, *The Green Book* asserts its own imagined utopic present in which black people may move freely while affecting a real future that will become increasingly more maneuverable by black travelers. In this way, both *Blake* and *The Green Book* imagine liberatory realities in which black mobility resists overt, institutionalized forms of racial oppression.

But all utopias are *seemingly* perfect. Both *Blake* and *The Green Book* contain ideological contradictions that can become discomfiting. Both texts, perhaps subconsciously, oscillate between their explicit ideologies of liberation and more covert tendencies of the oppressive systems they attempt to resist. For *Blake*, this contradiction is most evident in the differences between Henry's actions in Parts One and Two. Part One largely takes place within the US southern slave states, so Henry is in constant motion. As mentioned above, these chapters are the most like the travelogue and are the most invested in the people Henry encounters along the way. Throughout Part One, Henry does not hesitate to aid those he encounters, regardless of their social or economic status—often indicated by the dialect Delany ascribes to them. This characteristic, however, shifts when Henry makes his way to Cuba in Part Two. As his company becomes more economically and intellectually elite, he takes on a more dignified position, separate from the actively enslaved. Henry becomes a spectator rather than an actor. In the beginning of Part Two, Henry watches Madam Garcia whip a young slave boy in front of his mother. Delany reports that “To all this, Henry was a serious spectator, having twice detected himself in an involuntary determination to rush forward and snatch the infernal thing of torture, from the hand of the heart-crushed mother. He retired that night with a mind nearer distraction than sanity” (172). Based on the characterization of Henry in Part One, we expect him to take action here, but he merely watches. There are hints of Henry's Part One persona here, in his “serious” spectatorship, his “involuntary determination to rush forward,” and his “distraction” afterward. However, he doesn't act, and his inaction continues to lose even these glimpses of his former character. Later, on his slave expedition from Cuba, the return trip sees the ship full of recently enslaved Africans who are mistreated, neglected, and murdered. “To all this, Blake was witness, with a watchful eye and determination more than ever to carry out his objects” (225).

While Delany notes Henry's confirmed determination to carry out his insurrection, the people right in front of him suffer for the prioritization of his plans. Rather than a liberator, Henry becomes an observer, even a recruiter, as he focuses on the captives described as "noble-looking" and "civilized" (226). He abides his time on the slave ship to ensure the captives deemed as elite make it to Cuba and eventually join his Grand Council. Delany's text eventually prioritizes the elite mindset to strengthen the revolution, disregarding the most violently oppressed as pawns.

*The Green Book* straddles a similar line between its liberatory pursuits and its sometimes-contradictory methods. As Cotton Seiler puts it, *The Green Book* "mediated between Jim Crow and civil rights sensibilities, and between a traditionally white mode of individualism and the appeal to collective action that would power the civil rights movement" (15). This mediation occurs because, in crafting a travel guide that responsibly identifies both hospitable and dangerous destinations for African American travelers, *The Green Book* implicitly adopts the formal restrictions of Jim Crow segregation. Hall writes that the result of this is "that whiteness in the travel guide signifies a desirable, yet seemingly unattainable freedom while blackness inversely signals restriction, confinement, and all the attendant hardships that come along with paradigmatic limitations on mobility" (313). Here, one might argue that *The Green Book*, in contrast to the civil disobedience practices of the Civil Rights Movement, not only reinforces Jim Crow segregation as a system travelers *should* abide by but also profits from that system. It seems to me that this would be a harsh criticism, considering that the publication of such a travel guide without explicit consideration of segregation would simply produce falsehoods and do nothing to prevent African American travelers from encountering danger. This criticism is additionally troubled by the fact that *The Green Book* became more than a Jim Crow production

as its coverage expanded beyond the continental United States into Canada, Latin America, Africa, and Europe.

Both *Blake* and *The Green Book* speak to their contemporary contexts in terms of the realities they reflect and those they attempt to create. Their endings, though, are especially interesting to consider because both texts conclude under strange circumstances. *Blake* is obviously often deemed “unfinished,” with “lost” chapters while *The Green Book* was forced to adapt a bit in its final publication of 1966-7, after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed Jim Crow segregation. Some, like Sean Gerrity, argue that “*Blake*, by being unfinished, the insurrection never yet begun, allows us a window into freedom in (perpetual) process, into an assemblage of self- and community-affirming resistant practices that can be valuably considered” (2). In a similar way, the 1966 edition of *The Green Book* continues to serve the specific needs of African American travelers but with a new title: *The Traveler’s Green Book: International Edition* (Hall 316). *The Green Book* broadened its named focus to *all* travelers in and international context, although its content remained largely the same. To me, these endings imply a lack of change even within the context of their respective, shifting racist systems. Delany’s ending implies that emancipation does not equal salvation, that emancipation is not the end of the story of racial uplift. *The Green Book*’s final edition implies that the Civil Rights Act does not equate to the end of danger for African American travelers, simply a change in language, a change in visibility.

As Michelle Alexander and others have argued, Jim Crow never went away. Jim Crow evolved into a War on Drugs and a system of mass incarceration that imprisons and profits disproportionately off the backs of black men. So, if we subscribe to this idea that the present-day criminal justice system is merely a contemporary evolution of Jim Crow, which itself was a

contemporary evolution of slavery, how might we begin to locate literary and cultural production in relation to mass incarceration doing similar work as Delany and *The Green Book*? In a racist system more invested than ever in restricting movement, how might we center cultural production within this system that does represent mobility, coalition building, and imagining a utopic present-future? I am primarily reminded of the 2020 videos leaked from inmates with contraband cell phones in Mississippi State Penitentiary, or Parchman (CBS Mornings). In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Parchman inmates released video footage of dilapidated facilities, roach and rat infestations, and untamed fires that caused a massive public outcry against the Mississippi Department of Corrections' oversight. As we develop political platforms aimed at reforming or eliminating these systems, perhaps deeper examination of such relevant cultural productions could offer insights into how we might do this work with enhanced attention to the ways oppressive systems evolve.

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