Dualistic Imagination of Africa in the Black Atlantic Narratives of Wheatley, Equiano, and Delany

Babacar Mbaye

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In his 1925 poem “Heritage,” Countee Cullen asked “What is Africa to me?” and expressed a desire to return to the idyllic land that gave birth to the ancestors “from whose loins I sprang.” Cullen represented Africa as a haven of “spicy grove” and “cinnamon tree” where his forebears lived centuries ago before they were kidnapped from the continent and brought to the New World. Remembering this brutal experience, Cullen resolved to take off “this new [western] exuberance” and “dance the [traditional African] Lover’s Dance.” (178). Yet, although he was determined to return to his African roots, Cullen was disenchanted when he found out that his Christian heritage prevented him from identifying with a culture that he perceived as pagan. Cullen wrote:

My conversion came high-priced;
I belong to Jesus Christ,
Preacher of humility;
Heathen gods are naught to me. (178)

This passage reflects Cullen’s reluctance to preserve his African religious heritage alongside his Christian tradition. The statement reflects the paradox that Lloyd W. Brown described in his essay “The Expatriate Consciousness in Black American Literature” (1972), as the tension between “Christian loyalties” and “pagan non-Christian longings” in Cullen’s work. The conflict that Brown identified in Cullen’s poetry reflects the dualism that Black intellectuals in the West experience when they attempt to create a balance between their African and European identities. In their representation of Africa, Black intellectuals in the West depict the continent and its cultures in complex terms that simultaneously reflect attraction, doubt, rejection, and romance. Known as the Black Atlantic discourse, the ambivalent imagining of Africa by Black intellectuals of the West is, according to Paul Gilroy, a set of ideas in which Africa is theorized in terms that are antithetical to the “rhizomorphic” and “fractal” nature of Black cultures.

The ambivalence of Black-Atlantic intellectuals concerning Africa is noticeable in the works of Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, and Martin R. Delany, where the authors define their relationships with Africa in terms that reveal a blend of attraction and repulsion. On the one hand, Wheatley, Equiano, and Delany imagined Africa as a source of ethnic pride, freedom, and identity.
that they wanted to reclaim in order to affirm their Black consciousness, power, and humanity. On the other hand, these writers represented Africa as a location of unchristian and uncivilized ways that they did not want to associate with. By representing Africans as unchristian and uncivilized, Wheatley, Equiano, and Delany perpetuated the European myth that Africa was a “Dark Continent” and weakened the notions of Black consciousness and transnational African identity that they promoted in their works.

This paper explores the ambivalence that Wheatley, Equiano, and Delany expressed toward Africa. First, I will review the scholarship, written since the late 1950s, that discusses the ambivalent attitudes of African-Americans toward Africa. Second, this paper will explore how this ambivalence is noticeable in Wheatley’s poems, Equiano’s Interesting Narrative (1791), and in Delany’s Blake or the Huts of America (1860) and Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party (1860).4

Wheatley, Equiano, and Delany were part of a small elite group of Western educated Black intellectuals whose views on Africa did not represent those of other Black populations in the United States. These writers had an education, freedom, experiences and opportunities that were not available to most Blacks in the West. The elite status of these artists is also visible in the fact that Wheatley and Delany are often viewed as intellectuals who did not represent the masses of African-Americans.5

One early study of the relationships between African-Americans and Africa is Rayford W. Logan’s “The American Negro’s View of Africa” (1958). In his essay, Logan pointed out two factors that one must consider before studying the relationships between African-Americans and Africa. The first factor, Logan argued, was that so many African-Americans have views about Africa that it is impossible to describe accurately the “African-American view.”6 The second factor, Logan continued, was that all Americans have opinions about Africa that “consist largely of stereotypes and sentiment” that it is impossible to know the particular cultures and groups from where the misconception about the continent come (217).

Yet, as Logan argued, in the United States, the misrepresentation of Africa was the product of a European education that taught students that the continent was a wild and dark jungle full of pagans, savages, and elephants (217). This European distortion of the image of Africa was brought down in African-American culture in which limited knowledge about the continent and its cultures perpetuated the stereotyping.7

Taking on Logan’s view, Marion Berghahn and Tunde Adeleke argued that European stereotyping of Africa led a number of nineteenth-century African-American preachers to believe that Africans needed to be converted to Christianity.8 Yet the idea of converting Africans was generally unpopular
among African-Americans who continued to look up to Africa as a source of national pride, liberation, and cultural awareness. As historians such as John W. Blassingame, Sterling Stuckey, Michael A. Gomez, and Phillipe Wamba have argued, African-Americans have always identified Africa as the place where their identity, freedom, culture, and self-consciousness are securely-defined.9

Blassingame, Stuckey, Gomez, and Wamba seem to perceive African-American culture as a civilization that developed outside the influence of Western tradition. Opposing the notion of the autonomy of African-American culture, scholars such as Lawrence Levine and Paul Gilroy argued that such tradition is hybrid since it is influenced by a diversity of peoples, worldviews, and experiences.10 In Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line (2000), Gilroy suggested the diversity in African-American culture by representing writers such as Phyllis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano as major participants in a dynamic of “cultural syncretism, adaptation, and internixture.”11

Bearing in mind Gilroy’s idea that Wheatley and Equiano were part of a complex and hybrid culture, this paper will explore how the writers related to Africa in complex and ambivalent ways. Wheatley, Equiano, and Martin R. Delany did not sever from Africa. Yet they did not connect with the continent to the point when their relationships with African cultures were undisturbed by their allegiance to the United States and its traditions.

I. Phyllis Wheatley: the Indeterminacy of Deference

Phyllis Wheatley was born in Senegal, West Africa, in about 1753. In 1761, she was kidnapped from Africa and was brought to Boston. John Wheatley, a prominent merchant in Boston, and his wife purchased Wheatley and took her to their home. Wheatley grew up with Mary and Nathaniel, the children of her owners. Through the help of Mary, Wheatley learned to speak English, Latin, and Greek. Sixteen months after her arrival in America, Wheatley could read passages from the Bible, the Western Classics, and was able to write letters and poems to her friends.12 When she was 18, Wheatley wrote Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (1773), a work that later brought her fame, recognition, freedom, and the title of first African-American poet.13 For all her life, Wheatley had a frail health that was aggravated by the harsh climate of New England, leading to her premature death in Boston on December 5, 1784.14

Phyllis Wheatley’s relations with Africa were ambiguous. This complexity is visible in how she expressed both a desire to reconnect and sever with Africa. On the one hand, Wheatley wanted to return to Africa where she hoped to live with people whom she viewed as having rich and admirable cultures. On the other hand, Wheatley was reluctant to go to Africa because she
regarded African societies and cultures as strange and unfamiliar. In a letter to Reverend Samuel Hopkins of New England, dated May 6, 1774, Wheatley declined an invitation to serve as a missionary in the village of the Anamoboe ethnic group of Ghana. In the letter, Wheatley said that she was anxious to go to Africa and work as a “servant of Christ.” Yet in the letter, Wheatley raised a slight concern that belied her willingness to go to Africa. Wheatley wrote:

But why do you hon’d sir, wish those poor men so much trouble as to carry me so long a voyage? Upon my arrival, how like a Barbarian shou’d I look to the Natives; I can promise that my tongue shall be quiet for a strong reason indeed—it being an utter stranger to the language of Anamoboe.

(184)

On the one hand, Wheatley’s statement suggests her respect for the culture of the Anamoboe. Wheatley’s fear of being unable to speak the language of the Anamoboe reflects her deference for the civilization of the natives. Yet Wheatley’s respect for the Anamoboe belies her condescension for their culture. Wheatley’s concern about the long time and the far distance that it would take her to travel to the village of the Anamoboe indicates her reluctance to go to Africa. Wheatley’s fear of being looked on as “Barbarian” and illiterate suggests her unwillingness to go to a place where she feared of being in contact with peoples and cultures that she imagined as different. All the poems in which Wheatley mentions Africa reflect this distortion of African peoples and cultures. One example is the poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773) in which Wheatley represents Africans as “Pagans.” Wheatley wrote:

Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

Some view our sable race with scornful eye, “Their color is diabolic die.” Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin’d, and join th' angelic train.

In this passage, Wheatley identifies herself as an African. Yet she does it in a primitivistic manner by representing herself as a person from the “Pagan land.” Wheatley’s description of herself as a descendant of a “sable race” suggests that she regarded Africa as her place of origin. However, Wheatley’s recognition of her background cannot compensate for the distortion that she makes by perceiving Africans as inferior people who “May be refin’d” by Christianity. The way in which Wheatley described herself as a descendant from “a sable race” while, at the same, she accepted the idea of African inferiority shows that she was experiencing a double consciousness in which she was attempting to create a balancing act between the two warring sides of her

For Wheatley, reconciling her historical ties to Africa with her adoptive American culture became an effort to *transcend* her African identity; she acknowledged the inferiority of her background, but reminded her readers that it was a circumstantial, not innate, condition and had not prevented her from finding religious salvation and rising in civilized American society, and would not prevent others like her from doing the same. (84)

In giving more value to her Christian heritage and her American identity than to her African background, Wheatley showed that she was negatively impacted by the Western misrepresentation of Africa as backward.\(^\text{17}\)

Yet despite her allegiance to European culture, Wheatley continued to identify herself as an African. In poems such as "Maecenas," "Afric," and "Ethiop," Wheatley referred to herself as an African. In "Maecenas" Wheatley wrote:

> The happier Terence all the choir inspir'd,  
> His soul replenish'd, and his bosom fir'd;  
> But say, ye Muses, why this partial grace,  
> To one alone of Afric's sable race;  
> From age to age transmitting this his name  
> With the first glory in the rolls of fame?\(^\text{18}\)

The passage above reflects Wheatley's admiration and pride at how Terence, a Roman poet of African descent, was able to use his oratory skills in order to inspire the world and achieve freedom. Wheatley's description of Terence as a product of "Afric's sable race" attributes Terence's choiring abilities and "grace" to his African origins, thus letting it be known that she was proud of her African heritage. Wheatley's attempt to know why the "Muses" have favored Terence alone by giving him the glory that many poets of African descent deserve shows that she perceived herself as one of the talented African orators of the world. Betsy Erkkila describes: "Self-consciously placing herself and her poems within a specifically African tradition, Wheatley registers her own ambitious desire to share—or perhaps transcend—the 'first glory' of her African forbear in a poetics of ascent."\(^\text{19}\)

In other poems, Wheatley appropriates the African identity that she prided in Terence in order to promote her own poetic self. In "Hymn," which is a eulogy about one of her departed friends, Wheatley calls herself an "Afric muse:"

19
Can Afric’s muse forgetful prove?  
Or can such friendship fail to move  
A tender human heart?  

Wheatley’s act of calling herself an “Afric’s muse” suggests her desire to identify herself as an African. In The Heath Anthology of American Literature (1990), Paul Lauter described Wheatley’s representation of herself as an “Afric’s muse” as an expression of her “racial self-consciousness.” Yet, given the elusive nature of Wheatley’s rhetoric, one wonders if her imagery of “Afric’s muse” derived from a genuine sense of African consciousness or from deceptive strategy. As Houston Baker wrote in The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism (1980): “One pauses to ask if her reference to nationality was calculated merely to win added admiration from or to shock a white public that sometimes argued that the human heartbeat is not a property of the black world, or whether it is actually an indication of an extended African consciousness.”

However, there are instances in which Wheatley’s identification with Africa seems to be sincere. One example is the poem “To the University” in which she expresses a strong desire to be seen as a woman of Ethiop [Africa]. Wheatley wrote:

Ye blooming plants of human race divine,  
An Ethiop tells you ’tis your greatest foe;  
Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,  
And in immense perdition sinks the soul.

Wheatley’s reference to herself as “An Ethiop” conveys her desire to be regarded as an African. However, Wheatley’s strong identification with “Ethiop” is unclear since it might have been driven by her attempt to differentiate herself from Europeans by making it seem that she, the African, could write good theological poetry. In this sense, strategic quest for literary notoriety and fame might have led Wheatley to represent herself as a person from “Ethiop” or “Afric.” One example of Wheatley’s use of “Afric” for self-promotion is the poem “To His Honour” in which she mourns the loss of a departed friend’s wife. In the poem, Wheatley calls herself “the Afric muse” who brings “heavenly tidings” to a grieving husband. In order to bring solace to the bereaved husband, Wheatley assures him that his wife is waiting for him in paradise. Wheatley writes:

There sits, illustrious Sir, thy beauteous spouse;  
A gem-blaz’d circle beaming on her brows,  
Hail’d with acclaim among the heav’ny Choirs,  
Her foul new-kindling with seraphic fires,  
To notes divine she tunes the vocal strings,  
While heav’n’s high concave with the music rings.

20
Virtue’s rewards can mortal pencil paint?
No—all descriptive arts, and eloquence are faint;
Nor canst thou, Oliver, assent refuse
To heav’nly tidings from the Afric muse.24

Wheatley’s representation of herself as the “Afric muse” suggests her desire to identify with Africa geographically and culturally. The way in which Wheatley describes Oliver’s deceased wife as a spirit who is being welcome in heaven with music and praise shows that she mastered the traditional African poet’s art of actualizing the past in mythical, vivid, theatrical, and life-like images. However, despite her use of griot strategy and her reference to herself as the “Afric muse,” Wheatley’s identification with Africa is indefinite since it might have derived from a heartfelt bond with Africa or a superficial attachment to the continent. This pervasive uncertainty in Wheatley’s poems shows that she had ambiguous relationships with Africa.

II. Olaudah Equiano: A Vision of Africa from the two Sides of the Atlantic Ocean

Like Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano developed ambivalent relationships with Africa. Equiano was born in 1745 in Essaka, an Igbo agricultural province located in present-day Northeast Nigeria.25 One day in 1756, when his parents had gone to the farms, two local slave traders came in their home and kidnapped Equiano and his sister. Six months later, Equiano was taken to Barbados and was sold to many traders who made him work as a seaman in England, in the British Caribbean, and in the United States.26 In 1757, Equiano was in Virginia when Michael Henry Pascal, a British navy lieutenant, purchased him and took him to the West Indies and to England. Pascal later named Equiano Gustavus Vassa, after a sixteenth-century Swedish patriot. With Pascal, Equiano traveled throughout the Americas, Turkey, and the Mediterranean and participated in the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763). When he was not at sea, Equiano spent most of his time reading, writing, and learning arithmetic. By 1766, Equiano, who had become a skilled sailor, soldier, and trader, bought his freedom and began to work for the abolition of the slave trade.27

Equiano’s The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself (1789) is the most celebrated autobiography written by an African slave in the Western world. In The Classic Slave Narratives (1987), Henry Louis Gates, Jr., described Equiano’s book as “the prototype of nineteenth-century slave narrative” (xiv).28 In the book, Equiano is inclined to stress his strong connections with Africa. He represents his native village of Essaka as a place where artistic talent and creativity flourished. Equiano states:

We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets. Thus every great event, such as a triumphant return from a battle or
other cause of public rejoicing, is celebrated in public dances, which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion.29

This quotation suggests Equiano’s pride in an African tradition that he could remember so vividly in the West. His depiction of Africans as happy and sophisticated people registers his African consciousness, making a great departure from Whealley’s misrepresentation of the natives as “Pagans.” In this sense, one may agree with Femi Ojo Ade’s argument that the experience of being in the West did not lead Equiano to neglect his African heritage.30

In The Interesting Narrative, Equiano’s respect for African culture is also visible in his description of how in his native village space was allocated according to gender and marital status. Equiano tells us that in Essaka, men and women sleep separately unless they are married. The male-head of the family “has a large square piece of ground, surrounded with a moat offence” (37). In the middle of the house stands a ‘principal building’ [Obi] that is “appropriated to the sole use of the master consisting of two apartments” (37). Equiano also tells us that in Essaka, the head of the family has “a distinct apartment in which he sleeps, together with his male children” (37). This housing-system reflects the gendered-structure of traditional African families. Opposing common stereotype, Equiano does not critique the housing-system in his village as discriminatory since he acknowledges the relative power and privilege that women have in the African family. As Equiano points out, on either side of the husband’s principal building, “are the apartments of his wives, who have also their separate day and night houses” (37). Such a detailed description of his traditional home and of the privilege that women have in the Essaka family suggests Equiano’s respect for his African village and tradition.

Equiano’s deference for African culture is also visible in how he remembers the rituals such as totemism, animal sacrifices, and ancestor worships that were practiced in Essaka. Equiano writes: “the day on which the sun crosses the line [the equator]” is the time when “the greatest offerings are made” in Essaka (41). The day when the sun crosses the equator is also the time when “any young animals are killed” as sacrifices for the spiritual health of the community (41). Equiano’s memory of traditional rituals such as animal sacrifices suggests the strong impact that African tradition had on him.

The positive impact of African culture on Equiano is also noticeable in the positions that he takes in his Narratives in order to create respect for Africa and Africans in the West. In an attempt to transcend racial and cultural stereotypes and dichotomies, Equiano argues that the cultures of the Ibos and those of the Jews are similar. He explains that rituals such as circumcising children or naming them from some event or circumstance are practiced in the cultures of both the Ibos and the Jews (42).
Later, Equiano argues that the Ibos and the Jews share the use of ablution for physical and spiritual cleanliness (42). Equiano’s intercultural theories allow him to suggest that the Ibos and the Jews have a common origin. Equiano tells us that according to an eighteenth-century European physician known as Dr. Gill, “The Africans [come] from Afer and Afra, [and are] the descendents of Abraham by Keturah his wife and concubine” (44). Gill’s theory, Equiano continues, “alone would induce me to think that the one people had sprung from the other” (44).

Equiano’s analogy between the Ibos and the Jews reveals his attempt to create admissibility and respect for Africans in the New World. In suggesting the similarity between the Ibos and the Jews, Equiano seeks to subvert the racist views that tended to perceive Africans as inferior to Europeans. As Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr argued in Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century (1995), Equiano’s theory of race and culture “runs contrary to the common (though fantastic) taunt that blacks are the cursed descendants of Ham who are ordained to serve God’s chosen people—here, white Europeans—as slaves.”

Equiano’s representation of himself as the product of an African culture that was influenced by Jewish tradition suggests a radical change in how he perceives his African identity in the West. In representing his racial and cultural background as a blend of African and Jewish elements, Equiano undermines the notion of pure African identity. Equiano’s perception of his racial identity as hybrid is visible in how he later prefers to be seen as White and Christian rather than as Black and Jewish. In the fourth chapter of the Narrative, Equiano describes the moment when he wanted to be White. Referring to Mary, who was the daughter of an Englishman in Guernsey, South Great Britain, Equiano states:

I had often observed that when her mother washed her face it looked very rosy, but when she washed mine it did not look so. I therefore tried oftentimes myself if I could not by washing make my face of the same color as my little playmate, Mary, but it was all in vain; and I now began to be mortified at the difference in our complexions. (64)

Equiano’s belief that he could wash off the color of his face suggests a desire to be assimilated in a European culture in which one’s ability to pass as White was a key to social admissibility and political and economic success. Ironically, Equiano’s use of passing is not harmless since it leads him to question his relationships with Africa. He writes:

I could now speak English tolerably well... I not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and manners. I no longer looked upon them as

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spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the
stronger desire to resemble them, to imbibe their spirit, and
imitate their manners. (72)

In the statement above, Equiano perceives Europeans as more civilized than
Africans. As Jesus Benito and Ana Manzanas argued in a 1999 study of
Equiano's shifting identities, in the Western world, "Equiano seems to forget
that whiteness for the African equates 'otherness.'"32

Another transformation in Equiano's consciousness is visible in the
way in which he criticizes the Africans' participation in slavery. Referring to
Richard Baker, who was one of his English friends and shipmates, Equiano
states: "From what I could understand by him of this God, and seeing these
white people did not sell one another as we did, I was pleased; and in this I
thought they were much happier than we Africans" (63). This quotation suggests
that Equiano's critique on African culture was influenced by how he felt
disillusioned by the native Africans' participation in his captivity. The quotation
also shows that Equiano was, like Wheatley, uncertain and ambivalent toward
Africans.

III. Martin Robinson Delany: the Birth of Pan-Africanism

Unlike Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano, Martin Delany had
never been to Africa. Delany [also spelled as Delaney] was born free in
Charlestown, Virginia, on May 6, 1812. He grew up in Pittsburgh where his
parents had moved in 1812 to live among the free Blacks who had settled in the
area.33 He attended Reverend Lewis Woodson's school for Black Youngsters in
Pittsburgh and was later accepted at Harvard Medical School. Delany's
extensive education allowed him to meet and associate with prominent African-
American leaders such as Frederick Douglass—whom he helped found and edit
the North Star newspaper.34 Delany was the first African-American to receive
the rank of major in a regular U.S. Army commission. After he served as
medical officer in the Union Army during the Civil War, Delany was appointed
as a commissioned justice of the peace in Charleston, South Carolina.35 Delany
was one of the first African-American political leaders to propose the creation of
a nation in Africa that all Black people could call home.36

In 1859, Delany was sponsored by the Black emigration convention
known as the Niger Valley Exploring Party37 to do a Geological study of West
Africa. Delany's mission was to inquire into the state and condition of the
people of the Niger valley and of other parts of West Africa. In the Official
Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party (1860) that he wrote about his
African expedition, Delany described the colony of Liberia that he visited in
1959:

On the African coast already exists a thriving and prosperous
Republic. It is the native home of the African race; and there he can enjoy the dignity of manhood, the rights of citizenship, and all the advantages of civilization and freedom. Every colored man in this country will be welcome there as a free citizen: and there he can not only prosper, and secure his own comfort and happiness, but become a teacher and benefactor of his kindred races: and become an agent in carrying civilization and Christianity to a benighted continent. (35)

As this statement suggests, Delany supported the idea of a nation in Africa that all Black people could call "home." Delany envisioned this nation as a country where Africans in Africa and abroad could have the autonomy and independence that were necessary for their social and economic development. During his visit of Monrovia in July 1859, Delany met and congratulated President Stephen Allen Benson and his Black patriots for being "a noble band of brothers" engaged "in the great stride for black nationality" (60).

After he visited Monrovia, Delany reminded another group of Black politicians of Liberia to "Always bear in mind that the fundamental principle of every nation is self-reliance, with the ability to create their own ways and means: without this, there is no capacity for self-government" (60). This statement shows that Delany knew that development in Africa and in the Diaspora required a political and economic freedom from Western hegemony. Delany's emphasis on the need to create self-reliance and self-government in Africa grew out of his awareness of the shared history of oppression that Africans on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean endured from European imperialism. As Victor Ullman argued, Delany believed that "In 'civilized' Africa, the position of the blacks was no different from that in 'civilized' America where the free blacks were allowed to educate themselves, only to arrive at the same stone wall."39

Delany's emphasis on the importance of Black freedom, independence, and autonomy is also visible in his novel Blake Or The Huts of America (1861). In Blake, the central character who is also called Henry Holland, journeys in the American South, Canada, Cuba, and Africa to inquire about the difficult conditions that people of African descent faced during the nineteenth century. In the beginning of the novel, Blake, who was a slave in Natchez, Mississippi, returned from a business trip for his master Colonel Stephen Franks only to learn that his wife Maggie had been sold to a White woman who took her to Cuba. When one of the slaves of Colonel Franks told Blake about what had happened, he shouted: "What! —Do you tell me, mammy, she had better disgraced herself than been sold! By the——!" (15). In a state of panic, the Black woman attempted to calm Blake by telling him "hope yeh ain't gwine lose yeh 'ligion? Do'n do so; put yeh trus' in de Laud, he is suffishen fah all!"(15). Yet Blake was too angry to listen to the woman. Blake said:
Don't tell me about religion! What's religion to me? My wife is sold away from me by a man who is one of the leading members of the very church to which both she and I belong! Put my trust in the Lord! I have done do all my life nearly, and of what use is it to me? ... I'm tired looking the other side... I won't do such a thing... I have waited long enough on heavenly promises; I will wait no longer.

My mind is made up, my course is laid out. I'll go out to the place today and let them know that I have returned. (16)

Blake's disillusionment in Christianity and non-violence came from his conviction that such pacifist attitudes did not protect him from the tyranny of slaveowners whom he viewed as being less religious than he was. The paradox that Blake noted in how Colonel Franks sold the Africans who attended his congregation led him to question the efficiency of passive resistance. Alternatively, Blake escaped the plantation of Colonel Franks in order to fight for the freedom of Black people all over the world. At first, he became a revolutionary in the South where he urged slaves to rebel against their masters:

From plantation to plantation did he go, sowing the seeds of future devastation and ruin to the master and redemption to the slave. Henry [Blake] went forth a welcoming messenger, casting bread upon the turbid waters of oppression, in hopes of finding it after many days. (83)

Later, Blake fled to Canada where he raised consciousness for slave rebellion and Black progress. In Canada, Blake also served as a community leader who urged his fellow runaways such as Eli and Ambrose to contribute money for the purchase of fifty acres of land for a children-school. After a few years in Canada, Blake returned to Cuba to buy his wife Maggie from her owner. In Cuba, Blake found Maggie in Havana and gave her four hundred dollars to pay for her manumission (185-186).

After he paid for Maggie's freedom, Blake left Cuba and went to Africa where he became a sailor on the West coast, hoping to outdo European traders in the arts of steamship and ship ferrying. Blake told Maggie: "Whatever liberty is worth to the 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" (192). This statement suggests that Blake possessed the same ideology of Black progress through resistance to Western domination that Delany had. Armed with such a subversive ideology, Blake sailed for Dahomi [Dahomey], singing "Goin' to Afraka / Where de white man dare not stay" (210-211). Blake traveled to the Gulf of Guinea where, like Delany, he developed affection for the Africans whom he saw as victims of European slavery and imperialism. When his ship reached the shores of the Gulf of Guinea, Blake saw "The miserable victims who filled these coffle-shambles of suffering humanity, having been so
taught to do by their relentless and insatiable oppressors” (212).

In Africa, Blake, like Delany, is conscious of the history of oppression that he shared with Africans. Sailing through the West Coast of Africa, Blake was shocked to see how European slave-traders ill-treated the Africans. One day when Blake was standing on the deck admiring the sea, one of his White shipmates told him: “Step light and bestir yourself my larky; you’re not now in Africa to give nigger impudence to white men! Get about there, get about! or the knot-end of a tar rope may teach you how they make smart blacks in America” (221). Blake, who was so shocked and perplexed, stood firm, “giving him a look—and such a look!” (221). Blake’s hard look on the fellow shipmate reflects his shock at knowing that in the eyes of European traders, Blackness qualified him for being oppressed in Africa just as it would in the New World. Blake’s experience with racism on the ship showed him that oppression of people of African descent was transnational.

Yet in Africa, Blake’s racial consciousness changed unpredictably as he began to weaken the idea of transnational Black unity that he preached earlier. In Africa, Blake shifted his priority by perceiving the native Africans as mere individuals, commercial partners, and potential slaves. Blake’s perception of the natives as individuals and commodities is visible in how he acts as a slave trader who is carrying Africans in the belly of his ship at the same time when he stands on deck and feels pity for the natives. This contradiction between Blake’s nationalist rhetoric and his participation in slavery undercuts the “pan”-Africanist ideology that he developed earlier. As Paul Gilroy wrote in The Black Atlantic (1993): “The version of black solidarity [that] Blake advances [in Africa] is explicitly anti-ethnic and opposes African-American exceptionalism in the name of a truly pan-African, diaspora sensibility. This makes blackness a matter of politics rather than a common cultural condition” (27).

Indeed, the consciousness that Blake develops in Africa opposes the idea of pan-African ethnic and cultural unity. When the vessel in which Blake was employed was on the point of sailing for Cuba, Paul, who was the White captain, told his shipmate Royer, “This morning he [Blake] was as sulky as a black ram, because I told him about the nigger wenches on the coast. I suppose he thinks himself one crust above the wenches” to which Royer replied, “You better treat him well; he’s no common Negro, I assure you” (222). What seemed to be a prejudicial comment on how Blake perceived Africans as different later turned out to be somewhat true. Shortly before the ship left Africa, the narrator described:

Leaving this scene of distress, passing to another tier in which were confined principally females, the attention of Blake was attracted by a sprightly, handsome little bright-eyed boy, playing about with as much delight and unconcern as if gambling with the freedom of a kid over some grassy
common in his own loved nativity. He readily recognized in
the child the likeness of the noble-looking captive confined in
another place, so ruthlessly abused by the heartless American
mate, Royer. (224)

Blake’s attraction to the intelligence, freedom, and nobility of the child is
inconsistent with the primitivistic way in which he represents the younger as a
person who is playing “over some grassy common in his loved nativity.”
Blake’s emphasis on the “likeness” between the child [who was playing on the
grass] and “the noble-looking captive” [who was] confined in another place
reflects his attempt to perceive Africans as a homogeneous group in which
individuals share more ties with each other than with himself. By creating an
analogy between the two children in a way that makes him stand as a spectator,
not a participant, Blake disrupts the idea of transnational African unity that he
promoted earlier.

The sadness that Blake feels as the ship stirs away from the Atlantic
shores recalls the melancholy that overwhelmed Delany during the last days of
(1860), Delany described the time in Africa when he was in “this incipient stage:
a feeling of regret that you left your native country for a strange one; an almost
frantic desire to see friends and nativity; a despondency and loss of the hope of
ever seeing those you love at home again” (64). This statement shows how
Delany really missed America when he was in Africa. The statement also shows
how, in Africa, Delany, like Blake, felt alienated in a world in which he viewed
himself as a stranger.40

Wheatley, Equiano, and Delany represented Africa in both romantic
and primitivistic terms. On the one hand, these writers perceived Africa as a
source of ethnic pride, liberation, power, humanity, and unity. On the other
hand, these writers viewed Africa as a site for unchristian and uncivilized ways.
The European perspectives through which these writers imagined Africa
prevented them from representing African peoples and cultures in respectful
terms or from identifying with them without condescension. Wheatley, Equiano,
and Delany reclaimed African culture and personality in order to subvert
European stereotyping and create a sense of transnational African
consciousness. Yet the notions of transnational African unity that they
developed and the cultural and historical continuities between Africans and
African-Americans that they emphasized in their works are contradicted by the
primitivism through which they perceived Africa. By affirming the superiority
of their Western heritage and history over their African traditions, the three
writers opposed the idea of a monolithic and transnational African identity that
they promoted in their works. Such contradictions suggest that Wheatley,
Equiano, and Delany were ambivalent toward Africa since they could not
represent the continent and its cultures without reflecting the European myth of
African inferiority that they sought to dismantle. This study recognizes that
Wheatley, Equiano, and Delany were participants in a complex and exclusive “Black-Atlantic” intellectual tradition that needs to be explored further.

NOTES

7. Ibid., p. 218.


11. Ibid., p. 117.


16. Ibid., p.

20. Ibid., p. 97.
24. Ibid., 117.


40. Beverly Lindsay, Rev, of Black Zion: The Return of Afro-Americans and West Indians to Africa, by David Jenkins, 1995, The Journal of Black Studies (8; 2), pp. 251-252. In the article, Lindsay interpreted Delany's last days in Africa as a period when the expatriate realized that "home turns out to be a totally alien environment" (pp. 251-252).