

Article

Revolutionary Art and the Creation of the Future: The Afrofuturist Texts of José Antonio Aponte and Martin R. Delany

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Abstract: Afrofuturism (an artistic perspective in which Black voices tell alternative narratives of culture, technology, and the future) and the Dark Fantastic (interrupting negative depictions of Black people through emancipatory interpretations of art) are two interrelated concepts used by Black artists in the Atlantic World to counter negative images and emphasize a story from a Black perspective. Likewise, these concepts have been used to recreate and re-narrate history with an eye towards subverting white supremacist historical narratives. By using Afrofuturism and the Dark Fantastic as lenses through which texts by authors from the African Diaspora in the Atlantic World are examined, an alternative narrative of Black histories and futures concerned with revolution, liberation, and justice can be seen. The two texts that are the subject of this research include José Antonio Aponte's descriptions of his book of paintings under interrogation in 1812–1813, and Martin Delany's novel *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859–1862), providing images of enslavement that run counter to a white supremacist telling of history. They both imagine alternative pasts and futures for Africa and the Afro-Diaspora involving revolution and magic. These works, though produced at different times and locations in the nineteenth century, offer new ways in which to discuss liberation and freedom in the context of the artistic production of the Atlantic World.

Keywords: Afrofuturism; Dark Fantastic; Atlantic World; José Antonio Aponte; Martin R. Delany; revolution; nineteenth century



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1. Introduction

In examples of popular and political culture in the Atlantic World, two interrelated concepts which developed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can be seen—the Dark Fantastic and Afrofuturism. Both theories deal specifically with speculative literature and art, particularly those created by Black individuals, which imagine or reimagine the past, present, and future. One such example from the nineteenth century which exemplifies this is Martin Delany's *Blake; or the Huts of America*, published serially between 1859 and 1862. In contrast to many narratives of enslaved people in the United States, Delany's novel portrays a widespread plot in the U.S. and Cuba for an uprising of enslaved people, aided by magic and a pan-African collection of revolutionaries. Likewise, descriptions of revolutionary paintings created by the Black Cuban revolutionary José Antonio Aponte under interrogation in 1812–1813 (Aponte et al. 2006) illuminates even earlier examples of these concepts. These two texts imagine alternative pasts and futures for Africa and the African Diaspora involving reimaged history, revolution, and magic.

1.1. The Texts

José Antonio Aponte was a free Black Cuban artist who, in 1812, was accused of planning a rebellion among both free and enslaved Black Cubans (Childs 2006, pp. 3–4). The planned revolution was betrayed, and its leaders were arrested. When the Spanish arrived to arrest Aponte, a book of his paintings was seized by Spanish authorities alongside

his personal library. The paintings therein were considered subversive to the colonial government and contained various images that suggested historical Black revolutions, a proto-pan-Africanism, and what was, in essence, Aponte's history of the world (Palmié 2002, p. 22). The scholar Jorge Pavez Ojeda (2012, p. 280) described this book as not only one of paintings, but also "a book of history" of the "social classes of races and nations". As Agnes Lugo-Ortiz stated, "Aponte's *Libro* was intensely baroque, thickly allegorical, and loaded with cryptic references" (2021, p. 309). Under Spanish interrogation, prior to his execution, Aponte described these paintings and the reasons for which he created them; his descriptions in these interviews are all that remains of his book of paintings, as they had been lost during the last two centuries, exemplifying the erasure of the colonial archive.

The record of Aponte's three-week-long interrogation is important to the understanding of how Black Cubans understood their immediate and broader world in the early nineteenth century. As Sibylle Fischer noted, this record is "arguably the most powerful document we have of the imaginary of radical antislavery in the Caribbean" (2004, p. 43). Fischer also noted that this document could not be taken at face value—it was, after all, the record of a colonial subject's interrogation by authorities (pp. 43–44). Likewise, as Lugo-Ortiz noted, these images were largely "illegible to the untrained eyes of colonial officers" (2021, p. 309). However, this does not mean that Aponte's descriptions of his book can be dismissed, especially in light of the diversity and depth of images that his book of paintings contained; the historian Ada Ferrer, for instance, wrote that Aponte "drew on New World, European, and African intellectual and political currents to craft a revolutionary movement that would make real the era's promise of meaningful transformation" (2014, p. 275). By reading Aponte's descriptions, in light of our understanding of the broader revolutionary Atlantic World in the nineteenth century, and through the lens of the Dark Fantastic and Afrofuturism, I argue that Aponte imagined alternative pasts and futures for Africa and the African Diaspora through a reimagining of historical and revolutionary figures and an interrogation—and rescripting—of religious imagery in the nineteenth-century Atlantic World.

Beginning in 1859, Martin R. Delany, the first Black man accepted into Harvard Medical School and later the first Black field officer in the United States Army, serially published his novel *Blake; or the Huts of America* (2017). This book follows the story of an enslaved man, Henry Holland (later Henry Blake), as he attempts to foment an uprising in the U.S. South and later in Cuba, set during the early 1850s. The novel remained unfinished, however, and only saw publication as a full book in 1970; there are roughly six chapters missing, as they were never published. The ending can be hypothesized, as Henry has multiple journeys of freedom and the pattern repeats throughout the novel; it can be surmised, therefore, that the final journey of freedom will come with the liberation of enslaved people in Cuba (McGann 2017, pp. xiv, xvii).

Delany's *Blake* is often cited as one of the first works of speculative or science fiction by a Black author in the United States (Brittan 2019). Likewise, other scholars such as Ytasha Womack (2013) and Valerie Babb (2020) have discussed Delany's work as an early example of Afrofuturism. The most recent edition of *Blake*, corrected and edited by Jerome McGann, notes that Delany created it not just to speculate or envision a potential future, but rather as an attempt "to bring about actual social change" (2017, p. xiii). Delany was "not a novelist—he was a polemicist, even a kind of prophet, who deployed various conventions of traditional fiction to make an argument about what black emancipation in America meant and how it was to be achieved" (pp. xiii–xiv). The realist, grounded aspects of *Blake* are important to understanding this, as Delany's use of historical and contemporary details, particularly in Part I, make the social and political landscape of the United States clear and presents a hypothetical way to escape the racist state of the day (p. xvi; see also Brittan 2019). Delany's writing as both a fantastic and futurist piece of speculative fiction and as a realist attempt to critique and subvert Euro-American racism mark it as an important work in the nineteenth-century Atlantic World. Through a reading of Delany's novel using the Dark Fantastic and Afrofuturism as critical theories, I argue that Delany envisioned a path

for the creation of a revolutionary, pan-African state, in some ways similar to the results of the Haitian Revolution, in the nineteenth-century Atlantic World.

1.2. *The Theories: The Dark Fantastic and Afrofuturism*

This paper uses the following two theories to analyze the texts: the Dark Fantastic and Afrofuturism. The Dark Fantastic, as conceptualized by Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019, p. 20), is a flipping of the script in relation to the concept of ‘darkness’ and ‘the Other’ in the literature—which Thomas argues is “personified, embodied, and most assuredly racialized”. Through a “Critical race counterstorytelling”, Thomas draws out, translates, and amplifies the “subsumed narratives” of the “Dark Other . . . the spectacle, the monstrous Thing that is the root cause of *hesitation, ambivalence, and the uncanny*. The Dark Other is the present-absence that lingers at the edges of every fairy tale” (p. 23). In the context of this paper, I use the concept of the Dark Fantastic to discuss the transformation of “objectified Dark Others into agentive Dark Ones” in the two texts, emphasizing the ways in which figures which have historically been portrayed as a negative or in the background have now been centered and heroized. Likewise, I discuss the texts in the context of the Dark Fantastic cycle in which the authors’ creations of an emancipatory future for Black folk in the Atlantic World is the final step (p. 28).

Afrofuturism, a term which originated in the 1990s but has been present in the literature of Africa and the African Diaspora for far longer, can broadly be defined as speculative fiction which centers on a “shared interest in projecting black futures derived from Afro-diasporic experiences” (Yaszek 2006, p. 42). Likewise, Ytasha Womack (2013) discusses Afrofuturism as “an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory . . . it’s a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about future rife with cultural critiques” (p. 9). While the term originates with a focus on African American artists and literature, this has become more globalized in recent years by authors from Africa and the wider Diaspora. This has been termed “Afrofuturism 2.0”, a Pan-African Afrofuturist movement “characterized by . . . metaphysics; aesthetics; theoretical and applied science; social sciences; and programmatic spaces” (Anderson and Jones 2016, p. x). In the same way that Afrofuturism 2.0 broadens the original Afrofuturist concept to include Africa and other areas of the African Diaspora, it also broadens the discussion of the temporal concept of futurism, which, while concerned with the future, can also be concerned with the past. As van Veen (2016, p. 77) had explained, “Afrofuturist transformations of the ‘subject’ are always temporal interventions: they necessarily break with, remodel, or revise the timeline to remake a recursive future, one that rewrites its own past, in the present. Unquestioned ‘tradition’ is oft challenged, rewrit, or discarded”. Afrofuturism, in the way that this paper engages with it, therefore refers not just to a projected Black future but also to reimagined Black pasts. I use Afrofuturism, as suggested by Womack (2013, p. 9) as “a framework for critical theory”, to analyze Aponte’s and Delany’s works as examples of both reimaginings of the past and creations of potential futures, in particular revolutionary futures.

2. José Antonio Aponte’s Book of Paintings

Based on Aponte’s descriptions of his book of paintings that came out through his interrogation, elements of Thomas’ concept of the Dark Fantastic and of Afrofuturism can be seen. For example, Thomas (2018, p. 1) states that the cycle of the Dark Fantastic, which is how the presence of Black characters in mainstream fiction in the United States “creates a dilemma”, is only interrupted “through emancipation—transforming objectified Dark Others into agentive Dark Ones”. Aponte does this in a variety of ways, but primarily through his use of historical and mythological signifiers—he centers Black figures in his art in such a way that was not particularly common for painting in the nineteenth century (Pavez Ojeda 2012, p. 294). Aponte does just this through his paintings, where he reimagines Black pasts, sometimes changing white signifiers to Black, and imagines new presents and possible futures through an Afrocentric education and revolution. Likewise, Aponte takes figures Europeans have considered ‘Dark Others’ in their paintings and histories

and transforms them into agentive Dark Ones in his book as a work of artistic history. This also blends well with an important aspect of Afrofuturism: the “revision of accepted long-standing views, theories, historical events, and movements” (Gaskins 2016, p. 30). As it operates and navigates the past, present, and future simultaneously, Afrofuturism can reconceptualize history even as it imagines a new present and possible future. The following three examples from Aponte’s book illustrate his reinterpretations of history and religion: láminas 44a, 44b, and 45 present depictions of strong African states, monarchs, and churches.

2.1. Aponte’s Painting and Reimaginings of the Past

Aponte’s paintings depicted a global Black history, particularly of revolutionary or military figures. He used these images to teach other Black individuals in Havana about people from Black history that he deemed important for them to know of (Pavez Ojeda 2012, pp. 278–79). After seeing the images in the book of paintings and hearing descriptions of how he used them, Spanish authorities reached the conclusion that he must be a revolutionary leader and that execution was the only way to silence him and his work (Childs 2006, p. 4). The portraits that Aponte painted were largely of “divergent modes for the visualization of Black [folks] . . . as historical and political subjects” (Lugo-Ortiz 2021, p. 310). Aponte’s paintings presented an Afrocentric history in which Black folks were presented as powerful, both militarily and religiously—an act the Spanish would see as subversion in a colony dependent on enslaved labor.

Aponte’s reimagining of religion and history can be read through the lens of the concept of ‘restorying’ in the Dark Fantastic, which Thomas describes (in the context of young creators recreating stories from popular culture) as “the complex ways that contemporary young people narrate the word and the world, analyze their lived experiences, and then synthesize and recontextualize . . . stories in forming new narratives” (2019, p. 159). This can be seen in how Aponte describes lámina 44a in the court records, which consists of several images including the Pharos Lighthouse at Alexandria, the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon’s temple, and depictions of Ethiopian Orthodox church officials (Aponte et al. 2006, pp. 735–36). These paintings created “a new universal history in which black men ruled” that directly countered Spanish portrayals of history and religion (Ferrer 2014, p. 303). In showing the Pharos Lighthouse, for example, Aponte provided an example from the history of a wealthy, dominant indigenous African kingdom building a ‘wonder of the world’. This is particularly significant given the history of Euro-American depictions of Egypt in antiquity as white and having adapted its culture from the Greeks (Kamugisha 2003). Aponte, in a way, preceded Cheikh Anta Diop’s work on ancient Egypt and its history as an indigenous African state (Diop 1954, 1974).

Similarly, the painting of the Queen of Sheba’s arrival at Solomon’s Temple has the following two results in Aponte’s book: the first being the depiction of an African woman as a queen who meets with the biblical figure of King Solomon, therefore inserting an African narrative into a religious text that had historically been used to justify enslavement in the Spanish Empire (Martínez 2008, p. 16). The second result, perhaps unintentional but interesting given its importance elsewhere in Aponte’s work, was the depiction of the meeting that would lead to the founding of the Solomonic Dynasty of the Ethiopian Empire. This dynasty traces its origins to the meeting between the Queen of Sheba and Solomon, as their union resulted in the dynasty’s first member, Yekunno Amlak (Kaplan 2017, pp. 111–12). In his depictions of the Pharos Lighthouse and the arrival of Queen Sheba with a bounty of goods at Solomon’s Temple, Aponte gives an example of a Black past that is radically different from the one the colonizers usually portrayed: one of power and prestige, rather than slavery and subjugation.

The frequency of Christian imagery in Aponte's work is notable. For instance, one painting depicts an Ethiopian cardinal, Jacobo, and a Benedictine monk meeting with Pope Clement XI in the Vatican (Pavez Ojeda 2012, p. 284; Ferrer 2014, p. 304). In lámina 44a, there are two such images: Saint Anthony the Abbott of the Desert Fathers is portrayed with other members of his monastic order, as is the previously mentioned Ethiopian Patriarch Jacobo with a Black Dominican friar in the city of Sheba (Aponte et al. 2006, p. 736). In this set of images, Aponte's tendency to change those signifiers who were often depicted as white to Black can be seen again, where he paints Saint Anthony as Black, differing from many paintings and icons of the time. In a similar way, the other monks around him are also portrayed as Black. While we do not know Aponte's exact reasons for this change, as Stephan Palmié (2002, p. 23) has pointed out, it is possible that this was to show the importance of African peoples, specifically Coptic and Ethiopian, in the history of early Christianity. Lugo-Ortiz argues, meanwhile, that these particular images construct "a Christian Afrocentric view of history" (2021, p. 316). By showing the Ethiopian Patriarch Jacobo and a Black Dominican friar near Saba, Aponte is once again showing the importance of Africans to early Christianity. He is also arguably linking them to the Queen of Sheba, both in the biblical and traditional stories. Aponte's work breaks the cycle of the Dark Fantastic by centering Black Africans as leaders in Christian history, making them agentive in his historical imagination, and moving away from the Eurocentric depictions common at the time.

2.2. Aponte's Painting of the Future through Revolutionary Figures

The next set of Aponte's láminas, 44b-45, continue Aponte's references to Ethiopia, presenting a counter-historical model which is explicitly revolutionary. However, these láminas interact with Ethiopia in a distinct way from the previous religious themes. As with the previous lámina, there are several images that Aponte painted on the sheet. The image which received the most attention in his court transcripts, however, depicted a Black king (whom Aponte identifies as "Tarraco") leading Black soldiers carrying yellow flags with black lions and a cross, such as the ones "used by those in Abyssinia", invading the Spanish city of Tarragona (Aponte et al. 2006, p. 736). These images are offered in parallel to the defeat of the Assyrian king Sennacherib by an angel, a separate event in the mix of histories (by Herodotus and Alonso de Sandoval, in particular), the Bible, and tradition that gave the Spanish their conceptions of ancient history. However, when asked why he mixed these historical events, Aponte responded that they were there "because of history as everything else [is] in the book" (p. 736). As to what exactly Aponte meant by this has been debated by many scholars. Palmié (2002, p. 120) argues that it could be "regarded as generative of powerful knowledge", whereas Ferrer (2014, p. 310) believes the events were mixed up but focused on Ethiopia and Africa in order to "imagine a victorious black revolution in Havana . . . to make the case his revolution had two powerful precedents: a remote, prophetic one in Ethiopia and a proximate one in Haiti".

Aponte's mixture of history makes sense as both a historical reimagining along the lines of Afrofuturism and to show precedents for his own potential revolution, especially considering the numerous pictures of Haitian revolutionary leaders that Aponte had in his possession (Pavez Ojeda 2012, pp. 296–97). For a figure who is planning a revolution, painting the image of a Black king conquering a Spanish city, whether historical or not, makes a clear statement. It should also be noted that Aponte's consistent use of two contemporary Black kingdoms—Ethiopia and Haiti—in his paintings cannot be overstated. Aponte had access to accounts that discussed Ethiopia, discovered in his library upon his arrest, as well as the historical mythologizing of Europeans, such as the existence of Prester John (Fischer 2004, pp. 49–50). As Nurhussein (2019, p. 5) noted, the use of 'Ethiopia' has given the African Diaspora a documented example of "originary blackness" that defied the racist accounts of civilization. Aponte could have used both the images of Haitian revolutionaries and of influential Ethiopian figures (both religious and secular) in order to

show how a potential revolution could not only succeed, but lead to an imagined, future Black state in the Atlantic.

2.3. Conclusions

Aponte's book of paintings is a unique blend of many processes in the history of the Atlantic world. His work clearly fits within the strains of Ethiopianism that [Nurhussein \(2019\)](#) has noted began in the late-eighteenth century in the Atlantic World, and which contributed to radical and pan-Africanist politics in the twentieth century (see also [James 1998](#)). Aponte, it could be argued, creates a proto-pan-Africanism with his work, bringing together images and histories of an African past, containing Egypt, Sheba, and Ethiopia, with a Black Atlantic present in the Kingdom of Haiti. Aponte clearly connects these disparate histories and cultures into one historical reimagining that contributes to a revolutionary Blackness in Aponte's Cuba. By reimagining the histories of Africans and Afro-Diasporans in a revolutionary manner, changing white signifiers to Black, and centering and making agentive 'Dark Others', Aponte demonstrates an eighteenth-century use of the Dark Fantastic and Afrofuturism.

3. Martin Delany's *Blake*

As with Aponte's paintings, Delany's *Blake* can be read through the lenses of the Dark Fantastic and Afrofuturism. The Dark Fantastic's cycle can be seen in the travels of the protagonist Henry, such as the hesitation (disruption) he invites as a Dark Other traveling through the American South, planning an uprising of enslaved people, the actual violent resistance that he engages in and plans throughout the novel, and the awaited upon emancipation that does fully take place due to the book's truncated ending ([Thomas 2019](#), pp. 26–29). In particular, the use of magic and spiritualism, specifically when Henry travels through the Great Dismal Swamp, invites us to consider the centering of Dark Others outside the protagonist as well as lending an element of the fantastic to Henry's planned revolutions (p. 11). Meanwhile, Afrofuturism can clearly be seen in the idea of a revolution taking place in the American South and in Cuba through Henry's machinations, and creating what Delany imagines as a free, Black, pan-African utopia.

3.1. *Marronage, Magic, and the Dark Other*

After escaping enslavement, Henry travels to the "mystical" Great Dismal Swamp, spread between Virginia and North Carolina ([Delany 2017](#), p. 113). He meets numerous maroons (people who had freed themselves from slavery, most often through fleeing) who live in the Swamp. These individuals were described as some who fought as "[Black] patriots in the American Revolution" in the 1770s–1780s, others who had been a part of the planned uprisings of Gabriel's Rebellion of 1800 and Denmark Vesey's of 1822, and "a number of the old confederates of the noted Nat Turner", who had fought beside him in his 1831 revolution, among others (pp. 113–14). This is the first example of the Dark Fantastic in *Blake*: the imagining of these people, stark examples of how those Black individuals who fought for freedom in the American Revolution, and at other times, were betrayed by the nation's centering of enslavement in its foundation. While it is probable that Turner's compatriots could have survived into the 1850s in the Swamp, it is more unlikely that someone who fought in the Revolutionary War would still be alive roughly 70 years later; this longevity is perhaps linked to the Dismal Swamp as a place of magic in American folklore ([Miller 1989](#), pp. 89–90). With specific reference to the long-lived men that Henry meets, it was also thought as a possible location of the mythological Fountain of Youth (pp. 27–28). Revolutionaries who had fought alongside Vesey, 'General Gabriel', and Turner would certainly be considered the Dark Other in the American imagination of the time; the U.S. government and a majority of the white people in the South saw Black revolutionaries—especially those who were fighting for their freedom from enslavement—as an existential enemy to the state and to their profit. Delany centers these men at this point in the story, giving them the long lives they were historically

denied as well as magical abilities, and makes it clear that they have continued to resist the settler-colonial project of the United States—thereby making them into emancipated, agentive Dark Ones.

The elders whom Henry meets living in the Swamp were discussed as “High Conjurors” and magicians who could “create new conjurers, lay charms, take off ‘spells’ that could not be reached by Low Conjurors, and renew the art of all conjurers” (Delany 2017, p. 115). These individuals maintained the freedom, by “keeping up an organized existence”, of the Swamp’s maroons by earning an income from these activities, allowing them financial freedom, as well as through bringing “sufficient charms” to those who would lead a future uprising (p. 115). These conjurers also anoint Henry into their order “to place greater reliance in the efforts of Henry for their deliverance”, imbuing him “with unlimited power—a power before given no one—to go forth and do wonders” (p. 116). Having been given powers even beyond those of the High Conjuror elders, Henry becomes a figure re-imbued with agency—enough to deliver the maroons in the Dismal Swamp and other enslaved people in the United States to freedom through his actions. Through these actions, Henry goes from a Dark Other—a formerly enslaved, runaway Black man in a nation dependent on enslaved Black labor—to an agentive Dark One—a magically powerful, Black revolutionary leader.

3.2. *Transnational Revolution and the Futurism of Pan-African State-Building*

Meanwhile, a significant element in Delany’s *Blake* is its pan-Africanism, which links with the concept of Afrofuturism 2.0 in that it expands the concept of Afrofuturism beyond North America (Anderson and Jones 2016, pp. ix–x; Samatar 2017; Doolen 2009, p. 155). Delany included both Africans and Afro-Diasporans in Henry’s planned uprising; the African characters were not of a single ethnic group either, with Delany writing that some came from Sudan, Congo, Dahomey, among other places. This can be seen in Henry’s plot to join the slaving ship, *Vulture*, venturing to the West Coast of Africa, with the goal of inciting those enslaved on the ship to revolt and take the ship for the “war upon the whites” (Delany 2017, pp. 200, 291). Although his planned uprising is thwarted by a violent storm, the ship arrives in Cuba (and is therefore still available later for his revolution) and some of those enslaved—including a “native chief” named Mendi, who becomes one of his officers—are recruited (pp. 238–40).

The leadership of the coming revolution in Cuba, therefore, is led by this pan-African group of Black North Americans, Cubans, and West Africans (pp. 257–64). As with other references in Delany’s novel, one can see a link between this and the historical record; for example, revolutions (such as the 1833 Salvador uprising) led by enslaved peoples in the Atlantic World often involved multi-ethnic groups who utilized tactics and weapons indigenous to West Africa (Barcia 2014, pp. 106–7, 123–25; see also Reis 1993). Likewise, Delany’s descriptions of Henry’s planned uprising can be read as the conception of a post-revolutionary state in Cuba that is pan-African, utopian, and transnational. The very concept of an independent Black state in the mid-nineteenth century was in itself a utopian idea, just as revolutions are often linked to ideas of utopia—they are, after all, generally concerned with the creation of a new future (Zamalin 2019, pp. 21–22; see also Lasky 2004). This depiction of a Black revolution in the mid-1850s in Cuba was a process of historical reconceptualization; as one scholar stated, Delany “imagined what history couldn’t: black liberation on black terms” (Zamalin 2019, p. 21). Delany’s envisioned Cuba differed greatly from the results of previous revolutions in the Atlantic. Rather than a nation led by a white, planter class (America) or republics that turned into monarchies (Haiti and France), Delany imagines a future state that would be led by a pan-African grand council (2017, pp. 257–64).

This new state would also be transnational, as can be seen in Henry’s movements throughout the Atlantic World and Delany’s own travels to Canada and West Africa (Doolen 2009, p. 163). This transnationality, particularly in the Caribbean, is also a form of utopianism, as Schabio (2009) has argued. By portraying Henry’s actions in Cuba and the Atlantic World in such a way, Delany reflected the transnationality of the Haitian Revolution,

where Haiti invaded the Spanish-controlled side of Hispaniola to spread the revolution. Likewise, as Julius Scott (2018, pp. 26–27, 79–80) has pointed out, the revolutionary message of Haiti spread throughout the Atlantic via Black sailors, particularly in Jamaica. In a similar way to the historical maroons in the Great Dismal Swamp—as well as those in Jamaica, Brazil, and elsewhere—Henry’s movements were not limited to a state or national border, but rather reflected his need to first find his wife (who had been taken to Cuba) and then to contribute to his planned revolution. His travels to Africa and eventual recruitment of Africans for the coming struggle reflects these realities of revolutions led by enslaved people in the Atlantic, in that there was not necessarily a concern for borders and that they were led by a diverse group of people from a multitude of polities. By moving away from a strictly national model, Delany’s idea of a Black Cuba is one that envisions a successful Black revolution that differs completely from those that have previously taken place.

3.3. Conclusions

Overall, *Blake* is a notable example of Afrofuturism and the Dark Fantastic in the nineteenth century. Particularly noteworthy of Delany’s novel is that it exemplifies key elements of Afrofuturism 2.0, in that it incorporates Africa in its imaginings of Black futures (Anderson and Jones 2016, p. x). Similarly, in its imagining of a Black revolution in the Atlantic, it follows Aponte’s uses of Afrofuturism in the envisioned creation of a revolutionary Black state. The Dark Fantastic comes out clearly in the scenes in which Henry travels through the Great Dismal Swamp, particularly in the transformation of revolutionary Dark Others into Dark Ones that have managed to survive and resist the settler-colonialist United States. Finally, the transnationality and pan-African vision of Delany’s Cuban revolution also draws upon “utopian visions of pan-African revolutions”, such as that which took place in Haiti (Janis 2013, p. 34).

4. Conclusions

José Antonio Aponte’s descriptions of his book of paintings and Martin Delany’s *Blake* invite us to consider how things may have been different through recreated pasts and imagined futures. The discussed texts are replete with examples of the Dark Fantastic, as both authors reimaged African and Diasporic pasts, often centering people who would have been considered the ‘Dark Others’ in the Atlantic World, such as enslaved revolutionaries and African leaders. They sought to use these pasts not just to inform their present, but also to help envision possible futures in which the ‘Dark Others’ have become Dark Ones with the agency to change their systems—Black kingdoms in Aponte and a pan-African revolution in Delany’s Cuba—resulting in the emancipatory end to their cycle. As the Digital Aponte site (New York University n.d.)—an exploration of Aponte, and an attempt to bring to life some of his works—explains, Aponte’s paintings “connected a diasporic and transatlantic past to the possibility of imagining a sovereign future for free and enslaved people of color in colonial Cuba”, as much as Delany’s novel did. Likewise, the two authors reflected the Haitian Revolution in their works, an event which itself brought about a new idea of what the future could look like in the Atlantic World (see Fischer 2004; Ferrer 2014; Casimir 2020; Daut 2023). Delany’s vision of how a revolution could be organized is of particular interest, in that it blended both his realist style of writing and Afrofuturistic concepts of how a pan-Africanist Black state in the Atlantic could be structured. The authors’ use of recreated pasts and constructed futures are key to understanding these early examples of Afrofuturist writing. Overall, the two texts have given us examples of these important concepts in the broader field of Afrofuturism and popular culture in their imaginings of alternative pasts and futures for Africa and the Black Atlantic World.

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