

## Symposium on Martin R. Delany's *Blake*

### Introduction

Samuel W. Black

Heinz History Center

My affinity to Martin R. Delany's legacy came about over a course of decades during my career as a museum curator and scholar. Like many people, I was introduced to Delany as a college undergraduate at the University of Cincinnati. To me, he was a footnote in Black history who seemed so remote I did not have an interest in learning more than the baseline premise of his biography. After all, I was a Frederick Douglass man—having attended Frederick Douglass Elementary School from kindergarten to the third grade. I grew up just blocks away from the Harriet Beecher Stowe historic site in Cincinnati's Walnut Hills community. I knew about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, two seminal volumes of abolitionist history.

What I did not know, but learned about and read as a graduate student, was the work of Martin R. Delany. During my ten years as the curator of the African American archives at the Western Reserve Historical Society, I was reintroduced to Delany through an original printing of the *Proceeding of the National Emigration Convention of Colored People*, a convention held in Cleveland, Ohio in August 1854 to discuss emigration from the United States. Delany was selected to chair the convention and set the tone for serious discussion and organizing around Black freedom somewhere, anywhere, but the United States. This public document not only opened my mind to an extended quest for Delany but also broadened my understanding of the struggle for Black freedom during the antebellum period.

When I moved to Pittsburgh in 2002, I took Delany with me. Shortly after I arrived, I searched the archives of the Heinz History Center for its Delany collection and other than a few of the seminal publications—Cyril Griffith's *The African Dream: Martin Delany and the Emergence of Pan African Thought*; Victor Ullman's *Martin R. Delany and the Beginnings of Black Nationalism*; and Frank (Francis) A. Rollin's *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany*—the archives lacked any primary sources related to Delany. I immediately ordered a microfilm copy of *the Proceedings of the National Emigration Convention* from the Western Reserve Historical Society and made it a priority to search and acquire Delany archival material.

By 2002, I had served as a member of the Association for the Study of African American Life & History and readily attended the national conference and even chaired panels or presented papers at several meetings. It was at these conferences, between 2002 and 2017, that I would annually meet and re-meet colleagues who I called Delanyites. During its 2017 conference in Cincinnati, I met Kweku Larry Crowe, and he introduced me to his gathering at Delany's gravesite in Wilberforce, Ohio, each May around the birth of Delany. I then told him I was interested in establishing a seminar, symposium, or conference that would document and encourage further discourse about Delany. I felt Pittsburgh was the best place to do it, as the historical incubator of Delany's activism and education.

The Senator John Heinz History Center opened an exhibit named "From Slavery to Freedom" in 2012. That exhibition mounted a life figure of Martin Delany circa 1850 to join a

previous life figure of Major Delany mounting in a Civil War exhibit. Both life figures continue to be displayed and have become a major part of school group education. In 2019, I decided to move forward with the Martin R. Delany Symposium to serve as the primary convening of scholars, students, academics, and Delanyites to present work on Delany and to encourage a continued discourse. As a result, the first Martin R. Delany Symposium was convened in August 2022 with papers presented by keynoters Richard Blackett and Tundi Adeleke accompanied by a cadre of panelists who presented on Delany's novel, *Blake*.

The second Delany Symposium in 2023, likewise, had several presentations on various perspectives of *Blake*. Keynotes by Tera Hunter and Robert S. Levine framed discussion of Delany and his era along with his counterpart Frederick Douglass in the Black freedom struggle. This issue of the *New North Star* captures several of those papers from the 2022 and 2023 Symposia that focused on *Blake*. This collaboration between the Martin R. Delany Symposium and the *New North Star* journal promises to be a continued vehicle that will broaden the scope of Delany, Douglass, and their era.