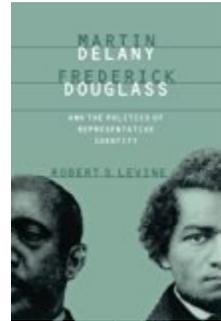


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert S. Levine. *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass and the Politics of Representative Identity.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. x + 314 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2323-1; \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4633-9.

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The American Civil War is arguably the most important episode in American history. It not only changed the lives of all who lived through it, but it had the most profound effects on the country itself, from the Constitution to the grammar of the English language.

Two Americans who were not only affected by the war but who had important impacts on the coming and course of the war were Martin Robison Delany and Frederick Douglass.

Ironically the more widely accomplished of them, Delany, is probably the most neglected, and undeservedly so. His insistence on the African nature of ancient Egypt and the importance of Pan-Africanism prefigure many of today's Afrocentric ideas. Although never enshrined as a national hero the way the other has been, his thought has influenced a significant part of the African American community, and his life should be better known by those who seek to understand how American thought and society have developed.

Martin R. Delany was not only a major in the Union Army, its highest ranking African American during the war, but he was also a medical doctor, journalist, inventor, novelist, African explorer, political organizer, diplomat, Freemason, judge, lecturer, member of the International Statistical Congress . . . the list seems endless. Most of all he was loudly and proudly "black" without a trace of white ancestry. Despite their many differences of policy and personality Frederick Douglass never hesitated to point out Delany's accomplishments to those who suggested that Douglass's own talents were inherited from his white ancestors. No one could ever credit Delany's accomplishments to any white forbears. He had none.

Delany was unusual in other ways. He had never been a slave, and thus it was not only his immense intellectual achievements that alienated him from the experiences, folkways and culture of the masses of African Americans in his day. Those same intellectual achievements, and the excruciatingly Western nature of his cultural background, also left him ill-equipped to understand the peoples of West Africa, despite his experiences there.

Such a unique human being as Delany is still difficult to understand today. His advocacy of such popular reform causes of his day as temperance, women's rights and abolitionism are easy enough to understand, but his insistence on emigration, the voluntary removal of African Americans overseas, especially during the 1850s as sectional conflict over slavery heated up, is still difficult to fathom.

Stranger still are Delany's alliances with whites who, at first glance, should have been anathema to him. After long trying to distinguish his "emigrationism" (the voluntary removal of free blacks outside of the United States) from "colonization" (the forced repatriation of free blacks outside of the United States) he finally wound up taking support from white colonizationists, if only because his emigration scheme could not attract sufficient support otherwise. By the end of Reconstruction he campaigned for the Democratic Party in South Carolina, and was shot at by other blacks for his troubles. He went back to his "back to Africa" schemes, foreshadowing Marcus Garvey's alliance with the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. His life thus demonstrates an essential dilemma for black nationalists in the U.S. The only whites interested in helping them foster black separation are those whites who have

the least interest in the welfare of African Americans. No wonder other African Americans throughout history have seen separatism, and especially emigrationism, as a threat to their interests.

Frederick Douglass was never a supporter of the Democratic Party, and never an emigrationist. His was an American dream, one in which people of all races would find a secure place and the right to pursue happiness in freedom and equality. Half-white and half black in ancestry, he spent his life in struggle, first for the abolition of slavery and later for the uplift and betterment of African Americans. As such his integrationism foreshadows the Civil Rights movement and its leaders. Shorn of anger and militance, he is often transformed into a safe icon of African American achievement and assimilation, and a staple of African-American History Month celebrations every February.

Yet Douglass shorn of anger and militance is not Douglass, for he was angry and he was militant, if a very American militant. Douglass had been a slave, and the wide range of his experiences as a slave gave him a deep understanding of the range of African American experiences and feelings of his time. He could connect to the black masses in ways that Delany could not, and the whites he attracted as supporters shared his interest in an integrated America and black uplift. Although both Delany and Douglass were accomplished writers the powerful sound of Douglass's angry, oft-quoted words, was hammered out on the unyielding anvil of slavery and rings down to this day as an indictment of the slave system and of racism. Perhaps no ex-slave since Terence has made such an impact on literature, or has been so often quoted.

Robert S. Levine has given us an excellent, parallel biography of Delany and Douglass, especially as regards

their writings and their interactions with another famous author of their day, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Levine is a professor of English at the University of Maryland, but historians should not worry. This book is not an example of the fashionable literary criticism that is fictionalizing history, it is an example of the historicization of literature. Levine's portraits of his two protagonists are more complex than mine here, not least because he has more space at his disposal. Instead of treating these authors' ideas as unchanging ideal types he shows how their ideas and their writings evolved in interaction with each other and with the events of their times. This makes this book especially useful for American Studies classes, in which history and literature often interact. It can easily be recommended as a textbook not only for such courses but for history, literature, and other courses as well.

If I have a criticism of Levine's book it is in his lack of understanding of the sexual politics of slavery. Levine argues that Douglass's characteristic use of the term "manly" only signifies an insistence on the humanity of blacks, and that linking it to patriarchal ideology is "anachronistic." (page 130) To me this suggests insensitivity to the problem of the family under slavery, and lack of recognition of the fact that so much of the miscegenation that took place under slavery was a result of rape. Slave men knew that their mothers, sisters and daughters could be and were being legally raped, and that they could do nothing about it. If Levine had understood the implications of this fact better, he might have been able to explain why Delany's emigrationism was far more successful in attracting women (page 92 and page 262 note 68) despite Douglass's equal espousal of women's rights.

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