

Who K(new): The Nation-ist Contour of Racial Identity in the Thought of Martin R. Delany and John E. Bruce

by

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Abstract

The dominance of anti-essentialist thinking has rendered contemporary discussions of Black Nationalism politically impotent. Current theorizations of Black solidarity and racial identity rely on the promises of liberalism and the hope of racial equality to justify ethical appeals to humanism and cosmopolitan care ethics without encountering the possibility that racial equality may never be attainable. With this possibility looming in the background, this article asks how Black scholars can begin to think about political theories under this pessimistic reality. Using Derrick Bell's Racial Realism as a philosophical foundation, I attempt to read Delany's infamous statement that Blacks are "a nation within a nation" as the philosophical origins of nation-ism, and contend that John E. Bruce's development of Delany's notion of race can provide an important contribution to racial identity theory in the age of social construction.

Introduction

Despite the irrefutable failure of integration¹ and multiculturalism, race theory in philosophy continues to endorse the dilapidated ideas of color-blindness (Bonilla-Silva 2003, 2001),² and liberal democracy, which ignore the historic and systemic racism of American society.³ Currently, theories about race focus on the socially constructed nature of the term—its contingency, rather than the effects it has had on African descended people's political orientation in America and the cultural heritage various African thinkers have infused the term with over the centuries. The dominance of anti-essentialist rhetoric and cosmopolitan care ethics in philosophy has forced scholars to write a historical and textually skewed apologetics of historic Black figures as the condition for their acceptance into the canon.

By ignoring key texts, inventing illusory continuities with established white philosophical traditions, limiting Africana philosophy to applied social/political thought,⁴ and eliminating meaningful discussions of culture with charges of essentialism, philosophy has effectively enforced an anti-Black moratorium on any attempt to address the drastic cultural, social, and political conditions of African people in America.

This essay is divided in three parts. In part I, I review and critique part of the extant literature on race, nationalism, and Delany. In part II, I argue that Delany's thesis that Blacks are a "nation within a nation" provides a fertile ground for theorizations about Black solidarity under the permanent conditions of oppression in America. In part III, I explore John E. Bruce's reformulation of Delany's concept of nation as a development of race. The theories of Delany and Bruce on race help articulate the theoretical contributions of a Nation-ist perspective to contemporary racial problems in the United States.

I. Literature Review

The analysis of racism that contextualizes the Black situation in the United States as a product of domestic colonialism is largely ignored in philosophical conversations about race. As illustrated by Hurricane Katrina, the colonial condition in America perpetuates Black vulnerabilities, poverty, and death. The conception of American racism as colonialism may appear as a pessimistic reality; but this reality needs to be confronted in contemporary philosophical works on Black solidarity and reflected in current "critical" understandings of the socially constructed nature of race in America. To date, the only literature that suggests a conceptual apparatus to explain the reality of African descended people's (hereafter ADP) subordinate status in the American context is Critical Race Theory (hereafter CRT), or more specifically Derrick Bell's racial realist account in CRT. According to Bell,

Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those Herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary "peaks of progress," short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it and move on to adopt policies based on what I call: "Racial Realism." This mind-set or philosophy requires us to acknowledge the permanence of our subordinate status. That acknowledgement enables us to avoid despair, and frees us to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph. (Bell 1992b: 373-374)

Despite the philosophical insights and explanative power of Bell's theory, Black philosophers primarily rely on the promises of American liberalism and the hopes of democracy in the post-Civil rights era to fundamentally change the racial context of the United States and remedy individual attachments to racial loyalties. Under the integrationist teleology, the jettisoning of race is consistent with a normative universalism that equates truth and progress with the elimination of racial distinctions. Gary Peller writes:

Today the story of the Civil Rights struggle is commonly told in a linear fashion, as if progress in race relations followed a teleological evolution—from an ignorant time when racial status was taken to signify real and meaningful differences between people to the present enlightened time, when race is properly understood in mainstream culture not to make a difference except as vestiges of unfortunate historical oppression or in terms of vague and largely privatized 'ethnic heritage.' (Peller 1995: 128)

In practice, this rigid universalism makes historic Black thinkers the test subjects of experimental philosophical projects that seek to enlighten the colored reason of "raced" philosophers through the transcendence of racial consciousness. Despite the dogmatic assertions that racial and cultural identities centered on "Blackness" are passé constructs of biological determinism (Appiah 2000, 1992; Stout 2002), there is no unquestionable justification to prefer the abstractions of humanism over the historical realities of racial oppression and the coherence of African ancestry.⁵ Because of its excessive individualism, liberalism fails to understand race and "the profound importance of culture, of membership in cultural groups, and of the influence these factors have within the institutions, practices and meanings of American society" (Cochran 1999: 5). This blind-spot in liberalism's conceptualization of the individual, which is largely a result of the Enlightenment's marriage of reason to anthropology, makes liberal theory an awkward and largely unhelpful intellectual tradition on questions concerning racial loyalties and the cultural membership surrounding "Blackness." This is where Black nationalism, as an ideology and philosophy, can provide some valuable insights.

Black Nationalism was the earliest and most dominate branch of African thought in America prior to integration.⁶ At its inception, Black nationalism was "a consciousness of a shared experience of oppression at the hands of white people, an awareness and approval of the persistence of group traits and preferences in spite of a violently anti-African larger society, a recognition of bonds and obligations between Africans everywhere, [and] an irreducible conviction that Africans in America must take responsibility for liberating themselves" (Stuckey 1972: 6).

In this consciousness, Pan-Africanism is implicit;⁷ under Black nationalism the recognition of African heritage is the belief that “people of African descent throughout the world have common cultural characteristics and share common problems as a result of their African origins, the similarity of their political oppression and economic exploitation by Western civilization, and the persistence and virulence of racist theories, attitudes, and behavior characterizing Western contact with people of African descent” (Bracey et. al 1970: xxix).

Despite its reliance on the dubious category of race, and its privileging of ADP’s African identity over their American identity, Black Nationalism has a strength which resides in its ability to accurately explain the persistence of the racial reality of ADP in America while highlighting the culturally creative consciousness of ADP’s thinking about their oppression under race. Unfortunately, the current reflections on Black Nationalism by authors such as Anthony Appiah (2005), Eddie Glaude Jr. (2007), and Tommie Shelby (2005) have uncritically taken up the American liberal tradition as a part of the “African American” entitlement to American citizenship. This anti-race and anti-African stance of the aforementioned camarilla valorizes the imagined continuities that people of African descent shared with America while championing the inevitable excoriation of Africanity and Pan-African consciousness as intellectual and ethical maturity.

This thinking ignores the terms through which Black people have come to understand their historical and cultural fusion with the idea of race, and perpetuates apologetic readings of Black nationalists like Martin R. Delany and the outright dismissal of militant Black thinkers like John E. Bruce. In 1970, Theodore Draper’s book the *Rediscovery of Black Nationalism* became a much debated topic in Black history. This is largely due to the controversy his now infamous essay, “The Father of Black Nationalism,” caused when it appeared in the *New York Review of Books*. The essay, which was a shortened version of chapter two, “Emigration,” of his book released earlier that year, sparked an enormous debate as to the status of Delany in Black history and the historiography of Black Nationalism. According to Draper, Delany was an integrationist whose “‘black nationalism’ was based on unrequited love, on rejection by whites, rather than on a deeply rooted, traditional attachment to another soil and another nation” (Draper 1970a: 24). In an effort to prevent “new political communities” from being “infected with the nationalist fantasy and encourage a destructive and self-destructive—separatism from other communities” (Draper 1970a: 181), Draper wanted to show that Delany was an integrationist who gave up his “nationalist” program which, even in his own time, “relatively few Negroes took ...very seriously” (Draper 1970a: 47).

Draper's work, which was challenged back in the 1970s by leading scholars on Delany (Titcomb et. al 1970; Foner 1970; Sterling 1970), has tainted contemporary perspectives on Delany. Today, scholars like Tunde Adeleke (2003) and Tommie Shelby (2005) want to propose "deconstructive readings" of Delany's thought that make his thinking compatible with integration. With our historical lens geared towards the emergence of Black Nationalism in the 1960s, and our philosophical eyes viewing these figures from this vantage point, our thinking has been constrained by an integrationist belief in equality. According to J. Saunders Redding, "Black nationalism in all its varieties is a response to white racism. It is a response instinctively generated by group pride, by an awareness of the disparity between profession and performance and of the social disparity between whites and blacks, and by a love of equality, which, de Tocqueville reminded us more than 150 years ago is stronger than the love of liberty." (Redding 1970: 6). Unfortunately, our current theorizations of Black Nationalism have not moved beyond this fascination with equality.

In contrast to the current, more mainstream, theorizations of racial identity that look to the 1960s brand of Black nationalism as a way to fulfill the promises of American citizenship (Glaude 2001; Glaude 2007), this work draws from an under-theorized aspect of ante-bellum Black nationalist thought, namely that African heritage is fundamentally incompatible with American identity and the illusory notion of equality. The constant reifications of American colonization demands a re-theorization of the political relationship African descended people have with the United States. As Critical Race Theorists have long maintained (Bell 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c; Nunn 1997), anti-Black racism is a permanent part of American society. In America, white supremacy is both historically maintained (Feagin 2001) and psychologically sustained (Kovel 1970) by white rationalizations of and complacency in Black subjugation (Hanson and Hanson 2006). If Bell's thesis is correct, and equality is an illusory goal in America for Blacks, what political theories do Black thinkers have that speak to the unchanging reality of racial inequality in the United States?

In an effort to move Black political theory forward, beyond the illusory hopes of racial equality, I propose a reading of Black Nationalist thought that is politically viable and conceptually compatible with racial realism. This discussion, in recognizing the futility of striving for political equality and social recognition, wants to conceive Black political theory from the underside of democratic thought. If equality is truly impossible in America for ADP, then what is it that we strive for? How do we conceptualize any genuine resistance against white supremacy and oppression? Is the only alternative simply blanket nihilism? I will argue that such resistance is indeed possible, and rests on an epistemic contour of Black social existence in America.

Instead of looking at Blacks as an oppressed group of individuals suffering from race, we should look at Blacks as a nation within a nation defined by race. From this perspective, resistance is the act of struggle against the white nation, its principals and its understanding of ADP. Since equality cannot be attained, disempowerment must be the goal.

Historical groups of people sustain their existence through a Nation-ist orientation. Nation-ism is the process through which historical people create social constructions that maintain and perpetuate their cultural epistemology in the world. A people create the world through a particular orientation that gives their interests, their ways of knowing, and their beliefs content. So, in one regard, race must be understood as a product of the self-sustaining interest whites had in preserving their superiority; but, on the other hand, it cannot be ignored that ADP have epistemically contoured race towards their own cultural ends. This cultural contextualization of race is a central feature of the understanding African people had of “Blackness,” and can potentially disclose how people of African descent have sculptured a Black world in the “making” of race that can resist and disempower white notions of superiority. This molding of social meanings is a cultural manifestation of both the historical persistence of a people and the ability of that people to transform itself in the struggle with the constructs of the world around it. In this way, people of African descent have, in choosing how they contour their relationships with the world, fundamentally effected their own constructions of the social, since it is the social that manifests the epistemological relations that a people undertake through their historical references.

Whereas Black nationalism has struggled for equality either in terms of separate physical spaces, equal resources, or equal citizenship, as in the sixties, nation-ism fights for the disempowerment of whites as the condition of the perpetual inequality ADP face in America. Nation-ism simply holds that the reality that whites impose on Blacks through the structural determination of anti-Black racism is fundamentally incompatible with the understanding that ADP has of their Blackness and the world they seek to create for their people.

II. Delany’s Nation-ist thought

It would be duplicity longer to disguise the fact that the great issue, sooner or later, upon which must be disputed the world’s destiny, will be a question of black and white, and every individual will be called upon for his identity with one or the other.

Martin R. Delany

Martin R. Delany (1812-1885) was a militant nationalist born in Charles Town, in what is now known as West Virginia, on May 6, 1812 (Painter 1991: 150). Delany was an author, journalist, explorer, soldier, politician and the unrivaled political and legal theorist of his time (Levine 2003: 1). He is an important figure for contemporary racial theory since he is widely regarded as the “father of Black nationalism (Falola 2004: 7; Levine 2003: 4-5). Delany’s theory reigned as the dominant ideology of Black nationalism for the last three centuries. His ideas have influenced historic Black leaders like Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X and driven the ideology of Black think tanks like the American Negro Academy.

Though Delany’s writings on race probably started in the early 1830s, and were widely available in *The Mystery* as early as 1843, it was not until 1852 that he wrote his first full length manuscript on the race problem in America entitled, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (hereafter *The Condition*). In *The Condition*, Delany developed what some scholars claim to be the “origin of Black nationalism in print” (Falola 2004:12). This title was largely due to Delany’s radical claim that the only way to solve the race problem in America lied in the establishment of a separate nation-state by Black Americans emigrating to Africa (Delany 2004/1852: 200-201, 217). While many scholars know Delany for his radical emigrationist stance during the 1850’s, there is a less recognized diagnosis that has rarely been mentioned in his work—namely that emigration was necessary in light of the unchanging and permanent practice of anti-Black racism in America.

Delany’s Racial Realism

In *The Condition*, Delany conveyed his infamous message to the world—that Blacks were a “nation within a nation” (Delany 2004/1852: 41-42, 221). He depicts Blacks as these “classes of people who have been deprived of equal privileges, political, religious and social... and who have been looked upon as inferior by their oppressors” (Delany 2004/1852: 41). Later, he writes: “There have in all ages, in almost every nation, existed a nation within a nation—a people who although forming part and parcel of the population, yet were from force of circumstances known by the peculiar position they occupied, forming in fact, by the deprivation of political equality with others” (Delany 2004/1852: 42).

Delany’s understanding of the conditions of Blacks in these terms was largely predicated on the previous knowledge of Black intellectuals during the Convention movement,⁸ which found that white claims of Black inferiority was a matter of policy not nature” (Delany 2004/1852: 42).

What is most interesting about Delany's spin on this knowledge, which was passed on to him from his predecessors, was that he understood that there was simply no "hope of redemption among those who oppress [Blacks]" (Delany 2004/1852: 43). While this was certainly a major impetus in Delany's justifications for pursuing emigration (Delany 2004/1852: 216-220; Delany 1972/1854:199), Delany's works reveals an independent analysis of an unchanging reality that contemporary theorists have yet to confront—namely the fact that equality is impossible to achieve in the United States.

According to Delany, moral suasion is useless on whites, and is absolutely impotent as a political strategy for equality (2004/1852: 67). Only in the most philosophically abstract moments can one maintain that all things, or in Delany's case, all people were created equal; but in society, "there is such a thing as the inferiority of things" (Delany 2004/1852: 67) insofar as the society has made it so. This understanding, which posits racial inferiority as an invention of whites that sustains their interests, can only adequately be termed racial realism.

Delany's conviction in this position is incontrovertible during his authorship of *The Condition* and would influence his writings for years to come. In a letter to William Lloyd Garrison written May 14th of 1852, Delany says, " I have no hopes in this country—no confidence in the American people—with few excellent exceptions—therefore I have written as I have done. Heathenism and Liberty, before Christianity and Slavery" (Levine 2003: 220). "Thus between 1850 and 1852 Delany finally reached the conclusion that equality for black people in America was unattainable" (Griffith 1975: 16).

This line of thinking propelled Delany's reflections in "The Political Destiny of the Colored Race" in 1854, where he developed Black degradation from a policy distinction into an ontological distinction. In the United States, skin color marked a social category that conditioned the possibilities of one being fit for citizenship; but what Delany also realized, which holds true as much then as now, is that once Black degradation was legally determined beyond the opinions and beliefs of the public, it was inscribed by blood—in the presumption of difference by birth. Delany realized that the identities constructed by societies were more than thoughts or ignorant beliefs; they were social ontologies in which the corruption of blood is equated to the process by which a Black person is degraded and deprived of rights common to the enfranchised citizen (Delany 2004/1852: 170). If it is assumed that Blacks were inferior from birth, then it is understood that to be Black *is* to be inferior. Delany knew that these designations of inferiority in societies endure despite their socially constructed origins. So even in light of the fact that Black inferiority arises from a conflation between the social, legal and political creations of white interests that mistake the socially constructed reality for a natural reality. The assumed inferiority of Blackness persists because it is in the interests of those who created the myth of Black inferiority in order to benefit from its meaning and existence.

Delany writes:

In the United States, among the whites, their color is made, by law and custom the mark of distinction and superiority, while the color of the blacks is a badge of degradation, acknowledged by statute, organic law, and the common consent of the people. With this view of the case—which we hold to be correct—to elevate to equality the degraded subject of law and custom, ...can only be done...by an entire destruction of the identity of the former applicant. Even were this desirable, which we by no means admit, (emphasis added) with the deep-seated prejudices engendered by oppression, with which we have to contend, ages incalculable might reasonably be expected to roll around before this could honorably be accomplished (Delany 1975/1854: 199) .

Delany's formulation of Black oppression in the United States has a special relevance for contemporary theories of race that rest on the difference between white myths of racial inferiority and Black utilizations of race. Race, when created by whites, is based on the corruption of blood, which assumes that Blacks are inferior to whites by birth.

This reality that whites have made for themselves is not the only attitude that should or can inform ADP's thinking on Blackness. Just as whites have created meanings to maintain and sustain their legacies of peoplehood, so too have Blacks in the contouring of racial identity. However, our understanding of this creative process rests in our ability to reconcile our emotive disdain for race and our unfounded assertions of a shared humanity. Racial identity, in being a socially constructed category, has a particular historical and cultural content, because race has been inextricably tied to a particular historical and cultural context which gives it meanings. Despite its socially constructed nature, race points to and permanently distinguishes specific groups of people.

As a distinct racial class, or as Delany phrases it, "a nation within a nation," our subordinate status is permanent. In Black thinkers' inability to stomach this pessimistic rendering of Blackness in the United States, some have argued that we should abandon race thinking (Appiah 2005, 1992, 1985) and common racial identity (Shelby 2005) altogether. This surrendering of Blackness, the dominant trend in race theory today, fails to attend to the construction of race that ADP have used to resist white racism. In an effort to mark distinction and separate themselves from the anthropological inclinations of European "humanity" and the domination that inevitably follows, Blacks have embraced their difference over their similarity with whites. This maintained difference of the Black "nation" within the United States is a crucial aspect of Delany's thinking. Delany strongly maintains that Blacks should keep their racial identity and develop their race's "native characteristics" for the betterment of their people. He says,

Our friends in this and other countries, anxious for our elevation, have for years been erroneously urging us to lose our identity as a distinct race, declaring we were the same as other people; while at the very same time their own representative was traversing the world, and propagating the doctrine in favor of a universal Anglo-Saxon predominance...The truth is, we are not identical with the Anglo-Saxon or any other race of the Caucasian or pure white type of the human family, and the sooner we know and acknowledge this truth the better for ourselves and posterity. (Delany 1972/1854: 202)

Our distinction as a people capable of developing itself and resisting the attempts to be “molded into various shapes of eccentricity, to suit the caprices and conveniences of every kind of people” (Delany 1972/1854: 202), is what I am calling Nation-ist thought. As a people we encounter the world with certain attributes, or “native characteristics” that must be cultivated and developed through our historical continuity as a “people” (Delany 1972/1854: 203). From this perspective, race and the context through which we experience the world is contoured through our encounters with and resistance to our social contexts. Delany’s Nation-ist thinking allows us to think of the ways Blacks have contoured meaning and their understandings of reality.

Ironically, this construction of knowledge is a crucial aspect of Delany’s thought that influenced John E. Bruce and an aspect of race thinking under social constructionism that has not been encountered. Delany maintained that “we must believe nothing” of what our oppressors tell us, since white “politicians, religionists, colonizationists, and abolitionists, have each and all, at different times, presumed to *think* for, dictate to, and know better what suited colored people, than they knew for themselves...” (Delany 2004/1852: 38). Given the weight of such a critique, scholars should consider the possibility that Delany’s philosophical nation-ism is more than a political treatise and an attempt to mark out racial particular forms of knowledge and its production. The most recent work on Delany goes the opposite direction, seeking to vindicate his attachment to race and racial thinking.

III. John E. Bruce’s Use of Race

John E. Bruce (1856-1924) was a militant separatist born a slave in Piscataway, Maryland on February 22, 1856. He was primarily known by his work as a journalist under his nom de plume “Bruce Grit,” which was coined by Timothy Thomas Fortune. But he was also an established fiction writer, a renowned historian and bibliophile, and a respected political analyst. Though his writing career began in 1871 as a correspondent for the *Progressive American*, by 1891 he was known as the “prince of Afro-American correspondents” (Gilbert 1971: 2). Bruce’s prolific textual productions consisted of pamphlets, poetry, plays, song-books, hundreds of opinion pieces and several books. (Seraile 2003: 11).

Much like Delany, who influenced a number of Bruce's contemporaries, Bruce believed that racism was a permanent part of the American context and "strongly condemned the nomenclature colored and Afro-American" (Seraile 2003: x). For Bruce, Negro was the proper racial term that connoted a rich history of a people that reached back to Africa; however, in his later years (1922-1924) he adopted the term African (Seraile 2003: 195) as the most salient cultural referent for Black people in the United States.

Intellectually, Delany was an ideological beacon for Bruce. In a recollection of meeting Delany, Bruce said he considered him to be "the Blackest, jolliest and most brilliant Negro I have ever seen or known" (Seraile 2003: 7). Following in Delany's footsteps, Bruce was an intellectual giant of Pan-African thinking and nationalist thought until his death in 1924. Bruce Grit had intimate friendships with Edward Blyden, Alexander Crummell, Timothy Thomas Fortune and the African Christian philosopher, Mojola Agbebi, and was a major contributor to the great Black organizations that line the narratives of history. In 1897, he was personally invited to join the American Negro Academy; in 1911, he co-founded the Negro Society for Historical Research with Arthur Schomburg; in 1915, he became a major supporter of Carter G. Woodson's *Journal of Negro History* and, in the 1920s, he was a writer for *The Negro World* and a major component of Marcus Garvey's UNIA.

Bruce's Understanding of White Racism

Cooperation is the magic word and active principle by which our Race is to be saved and developed into a potent force... We are compelled to admit the efficacy of cooperation as a force in Race building. It is about time for Negroes, everywhere, to cooperate; to begin to think Black, because white men always think White.

John E. Bruce

The aforementioned quote was the foundation of Bruce's philosophical project. Whereas Delany pointed out the inevitability of white racism in America and suggested leaving the United States, Bruce confronted white racism through racial organization. For Bruce, equality was an idle promise—an illusion, and the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution "was the blackest lies ever evolved from the Sainted Fathers" (Bruce 1971/1883: 25). American citizenship only existed in the abstract for Blacks, since whites would never surrender their power in the United States to accommodate Blacks. Even concrete legislation was met with a caustic skepticism. As he remarks, "the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution are well written and are doubtless full of good intentions, but there is not to be found in them a ghost of a guarantee to the Negro, [since] Congress might not see fit to legislate fairly" (Bruce 1971/1883: 25).

Bruce understood that legislation was meaningless, since “the heart of the white race in America has not yet been touched with sympathy for the Negro and its mind is not concerned with any movement looking toward putting the Negro on an equal plane...” (Bruce 1971/1919: 152). Ultimately for Bruce, whites were “conscious of [their] power and dominance not only in America but also throughout the world wherever it has been permitted to obtain a foothold, and it is too farsighted and too fond of power and too jealous of its prestige willingly to share them with a race whose skin is not colored like its own” (Bruce 1971/1919: 152). This criticism of whiteness was made a year before W.E.B. Du Bois’ critique of “The Souls of White Folks” in his 1920 publication of *Darkwater*.

Bruce understood that white racial identity marked a historically triumphant legacy and gave those who possess it power. He believed that “white men have and always will be jealous of their power” (Bruce 1971/1919:161). This power that whiteness afforded its owners manifested itself in a selfish interest and a formative stock in possessing the meanings used to create reality. Whiteness gave whites the ability to define, control and create the values of justice, the privileges of citizenship, and the infamy of the white race in America and abroad. This power that Bruce speaks of was specifically utilized against the darker people of the world under the banner of civilization and the ideas of democracy; but these ideas, Bruce claimed, simply meant that democracy was a euphemism for colonization (Bruce 1971/1919: 157-158). White privilege was understood as a colonial affair, and could not be extricated from the motivations of conquering darker peoples across the globe.

From this perspective, Bruce reasoned that Blacks, as a conquered nation, were not full citizens and would never be in any true sense of the word. In fact, “we only deceive ourselves in thinking that it is possible for the impossible to happen. It won’t in this century nor the next. For no race is better organized for the preservation of its power and influence ...than the Anglo-Saxon” (Bruce 1971/1920: 162).

Bruce’s “The Making of a Race”

Bruce sought to combat the permanent inequality of Blacks in the United States through the development of a new racial identity immersed in the success and knowledge of African civilizations. In his last major work, “The Making of a Race,” written towards the end of his life in 1922, Bruce articulated what he took to be a formative project of “race building.” Unlike the various criticisms of essentialist thinking that his work could be charged with, Bruce presents a very interesting philosophical account of race that centers on the development of race temporally. According to Bruce, “the making of a race is the work of centuries of patient plodding and suffering: of oppression and repression of individual ambitions and aspirations” (Bruce 1971/1922: 176).

Making a race, or what Bruce refers to as “race-building” is a philosophical engagement with history and a proleptic foreshadowing the future. Race-building depends on history not only as a recollection of the past or the accomplishments of the race, but also as a corrective to the constructed accounts of African achievement, and more concretely as proof that African descended people can create civilizations. “The more extensive their knowledge of race achievement, past and present, the greater their respect for their Race, this knowledge should be gathered and imparted to the young of the Race because it will help to form the character and give them a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of the Negro Race, for Race is the key to History” (Bruce 1971/1919:177).

Race-building requires Blacks to acquire knowledge to rebel against the “estimate others have placed on our race” (Bruce 1971/1919:177). Because the white race has invented the historical accounts of Black civilization and created the barbarism of Africa, “we have come to depreciate our own worth; to minimize our influence; and to think meanly of ourselves, because other Races, which have come into power by the law of might, think meanly of us...” (Bruce 1971/1919:176). Knowledge or what Bruce called “thinking Black” is required to correct these accounts that have solidified in the minds of Blacks, and free Blacks to imagine a world in which their people are free to create reality. Thus, acquiring knowledge about the past, and the acknowledgement of the importance of race in building nations unearths the laws that “make a Race a strong and potent force for good” and know “how to unify the units and weld them into one harmonious and invincible whole” (Bruce 1971/1919:179).

Bruce’s understanding of the process of how one “makes a race” is an interesting analysis to introduce in the age of social construction debates. In the sense that race and reality are socially constructed, Bruce asks by whom are these constructs created and what are their aims. According to Bruce, “a race is a family. Its hopes and aims are one” (Bruce 1971/1919:178), but this aim is not given by God, or anointed in the essential being of “Blackness;” instead, this aim must be developed, and can only be secured through “the spirit of cooperation, Unity and Brotherhood” (Bruce 1971/1919:179). This spirit sustains and develops a race towards a whole; it is a unifying concept. Bruce realized that “as long as the Negro Race is divided on sectional, social, religious, color or educational lines, its weakness will be apparent and it will never be able to exert any influence or command the respect from other Races, which an united front would command” (Bruce 1971/1919:179). In this sense, Bruce envisioned a plurality of differences in class, gender, religion, and education addressed through a racial perspective that enhances Black people as a group, rather than as factions of varying identity politics. Race designates a historical determinant that makes Blacks participants in the historical journey of their people. A race is a “gigantic cooperative society,” and can address the various identities that make up its racial legacy. In creating whiteness and enforcing colonialism, whites have eliminated their differences against Blacks.

“[Whites] are a unit, and as against a Negro, they are neither Catholics, Protestants, German, Irishmen, Englishmen nor Frenchmen, but White Men” (Bruce 1971/1919:182). Bruce understands that whiteness and, by effect, Blackness are created; but the construction of and surrender to these terms are largely a matter of racial cooperation, and the interests served by those in power. Given the colonial reality of race and the racism geared against Blacks, Bruce urges African descended people in America and African people in Africa and the Diaspora to join together under the banner of race to resist the imperial myth of the white race. Whereas Delany saw nation as a family fixed on one goal, Bruce perceived race as that family attuned by one aim.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Despite the persistence of anti-Black racism in the United States, “African American” scholars continue to imagine the possibility of equality under American liberalism and the philosophical banner of pragmatism. In this regard, we have reached a point in Africana thinking where the preoccupations with creating moral ways of speaking about Black reality have fallen short of speaking to Black realities. The inability of “African American” theorists to cope with the political reality unveiled by racial realism leaves contemporary theories concerning Black solidarity devoid of any experiential substance and conditions such theories on the temperament of white racists. Africana thought is not white therapy, and as such, it should not focus on rehabilitating the white psyche or couching Africana scholarship under the rubric of intellectual engagement with various white traditions to demonstrate its importance.

Given the historical problems of liberalism and the Enlightenment thinking that produced liberal political thought, one is hard pressed to justify current political theories in Africana thought beyond the moralization of integrationist politics and the infiltration of integrationist ethics in the intellectual productions of post-civil rights Blacks.

In an attempt to break with current trends, I have urged that we read Martin R. Delany as a Nationist, and take seriously the conviction and intellectual commitments that Delany invested in his thoroughly developed understandings of race. The justification for this new Nationist interpretation of Delany is perhaps best articulated in the actual writings of Delany himself. Delany’s work in both *The Condition* and “The Political Destiny of the Colored Race” maintains that racial equality in the United States is not possible and as such Blacks must learn to theorize about the world anew. In current Africana scholarship, the “idea of equality” has become the determining mode of political theory, even when the realization of equality itself has yet to materialize for people of African descent.

By demonstrating the effects of Delany's thought on John E. Bruce and the centrality of race to both thinkers, I contend that what I am calling Nationist thought had a very developed intellectual genealogy and a huge intellectual following throughout the 1900's. In light of the continuing suffering and oppression of Blacks to this day, the importance of the thought in both Delany and Bruce should be no less in current political theorizations about the conditions of African descended people than they were during their time.

Nation-ism, as an attempt to bring about African descended people's cultural vision of the world, is mutually exclusive to the contemporary understandings of liberty, and equality. Black political unity and the identity that precedes the demand for organization are cultural artifacts that declare an agency and self-determining resistance to the terms whites have used to constrain and label African descended people. Our theories must start matching our realities in order to effectively speak about change. Nation-ism seeks to move in that direction.

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¹ The failure of integration has been well documented. In law, Critical Race Theorists like Derrick Bell have convincingly argued that integration is built on a false sense of hope that racism will gradually end and has failed to improve the condition of Blacks' economic, social and political situation. "In spite of dramatic civil rights movements and periodic victories in legislatures, black Americans are by no means equal to whites. Racial equality is, in fact, not a realistic goal" (Derrick Bell, "Racial Realism." *Connecticut Law Review* 24.2 (1992): 363-379, 363).

² Empirically, a color-blind perspective maintains a modern racism based on white privilege. See Germaine Awad et al., "Attitudes Toward Affirmative Action: A Comparison of Color-blind Versus Modern Racist Attitudes." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 35.7 (2005): 1384-1399.

³ White on black oppression is systemic and has persisted over several centuries without the broad and foundational racial transformations that many social analysts suggest should have happened. While some significant changes have certainly taken place, systemic racism today retains the numerous basic features that perpetuate the racial views, proclivities, actions and intentions of many earlier white generations, including white founders like Thomas Jefferson. Because of its power and centrality in this still racially hierarchical society, white-on-black oppression has shaped considerably all other types of racial oppression that whites later developed within this still white controlled society...In addition, white-on-black oppression is an independent social reality that cannot be reduced to other social realities such as class stratification, though all major forms of oppression do interact and intersect with it historically (Joe R. Feagin, *Systemic Racism*. New York: Routledge, 2006:7). For an historical explanation of racial development in the United States, see Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

⁴ “African American philosophy is still largely marginalized. Many philosophers regard it as not real philosophy at all. And when it is considered philosophical, it is given the label *applied philosophy*, a term often used derisively to denote work that is considered ‘soft’ or only marginally philosophical” (Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005. 13).

⁵ African descended people stand at a unique historical juncture. The accumulation of ancestry informative traits and DNA databases make it possible to find out the place of origin and specific African ethnicity for people of African descent in America. This can provide a new context for theorizing about African identity and Pan-African identities beyond the imagined connections of “one Africa.” For a discussion of a geographical understanding of race and ancestry by geneticists, see Mark Shriver and Rick Kittles, “Genetic Ancestry and the Search for Personalized Genetic Histories.” *Nature Review* 5 (2004):611-618; Rick Kittles and Kenneth Weiss, “Race, Ancestry and Genes: Implications for Defining Disease Risk.” *Annual Review of Genomics and Human Genetics* 4 (2003): 33-67. It is important to note that Rick Kittles’ work does not claim that racial identity, geography or genes determine culture, however, his work does point to a nuanced understanding of the socially constructed nature of race in relation to the geographical entity we know as Africa.

⁶ The precise details of certain experiences that bear directly on Black nationalism will remain forever enshrouded in obscurity—the degree to which Africans during the seventh and eighteenth centuries continued to think positively of their ancestral home; the extent to which they preferred living apart from white people; the length of time the majority of them remained essentially African in America; and the exact nature of Pan-African acculturation, the process by which differences between Africans from various parts of Africa, the West Indies, and North America were virtually destroyed on the anvil of American slavery. But we do know something of the broad contours of these developments, and that is more than sufficient to suggest that many of the ingredients of black nationalism, together with the conditions necessary for their perpetuation, were very much in evidence by the time the forces of slavery were becoming...more entrenched than ever (Sterling Stuckey, *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1972. 1). Stuckey’s account is confirmed by Wilson J. Moses work, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism: 1850-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). According to Moses, “The handful of black people who were literate in English at the end of the eighteenth century were painfully and furiously aware of the debasement of Africa in the eyes of the civilized world. Everywhere they witnessed symbols of Anglo-Saxon dominance and power” (15).

The discontent with the literate African people in the early 18th century demonstrates a connection to Africa and the aversion to European colonization. For a contrast of these accounts, cf. Wilson J. Moses, *Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey*. (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

⁷ Nationalism during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries can be attributed to two broad set of aspiration. Often it resulted from the desire of a subject people to break away from foreign rule; in other cases it represented the desire to unite traditionally disunited peoples. Black Nationalism has historically conformed to both of these patterns. The ideological basis of nationalism is the idea that the people concerned are tied to a geographical region which they have either traditionally possessed or which they feel entitled to possess. The national group is seen as organically united by language. Black Nationalism differs from most other nationalism in that its adherent are untied neither by a common geography nor by a common language, but by the nebulous concept of racial unity. It seeks to override the numerous differences among the dark brown-skinned peoples whose ancestors lived in sub-Saharan Africa before the age of European expansionism. [...] Black Nationalism has sometimes, but not always, been concerned with the quest for a nation in the geographical sense. But often it has been “nationalism” only in the sense that it seeks to unite the entire black racial family, assuming that the entire race has a collective destiny and message for humanity comparable to that of a nation. For this reason it is impossible to speak of Black Nationalism without simultaneously speaking of Pan-Africanism. (Wilson 1978:17).

⁸ For a discussion of the Convention movements relationship to Delany’s thought, see section II in *The Condition*, pages 40-57.