The Many-Headed Hydra

Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic

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CONCLUSION

Tyger! Tyger!

Adam Smith (1723–1790), the first comprehensive theorist of capitalism, and Karl Marx (1818–1883), its profoundest critic, agreed in their approach to globalization. Both understood its maritime origins, arguing that the discovery of the sea routes to the Americas and the East Indies marked a new stage in human history. And both understood its social consequences, the fact that the expansion of commodity production (Smith called it the extent of the market, Marx the social division of labor) resettled the globe and transformed the experience of work. Smith noted that the accumulation of wealth depended on an increasing division of labor, which in turn caused workers to become “as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.” Marx, for his part, argued that the colonial system and the extension of the world market converted “the worker into a crippled monstrosity.” He considered the imposition of factory discipline to be a “Herculean enterprise.”1 In other words, the despotism of the workplace and the anarchy of the global market developed together, intensifying work and redistributing workers in what Marx called a “motley pattern.” This book has shown that the monster had a head—indeed, many heads—of its own, and that those heads were truly motley.

In the preceding pages, we have examined the Herculean process of globalization and the challenges posed to it by the many-headed hydra. We can periodize the almost two and a half centuries covered here by naming the successive and characteristic sites of struggle: the commons, the plantation, the ship, and the factory. In the years 1600–1640, when capitalism began in England and spread through trade and colonization around the Atlantic, systems of terror and sailing ships helped to expropriate the commoners of Africa, Ireland, England, Barbados, and Virginia and set them to work as hewers of wood and drawers of water. Dur-
ing the second phase, in 1640–1680, the hydra reared its heads against English capitalism, first by revolution in the metropolis, then by servile war in the colonies. Antinomians organized themselves to raise up a New Jerusalem against the wicked Babylon in order to put into practice the biblical precept that God is no respecter of persons. Their defeat deepened the subjection of women and opened the way to transoceanic slaving in Ireland, Jamaica, and West Africa. Dispersed to American plantations, the radicals were defeated a second time in Barbados and Virginia, enabling the ruling class to secure the plantation as a foundation of the new economic order.

A third phase, in 1680–1760, witnessed the consolidation and stabilization of Atlantic capitalism through the maritime state, a financial and nautical system designed to acquire and operate Atlantic markets. The sailing ship—the characteristic machine of this period of globalization—combined features of the factory and the prison. In opposition, pirates built an autonomous, democratic, multiracial social order at sea, but this alternative way of life endangered the slave trade and was exterminated. A wave of rebellion then ripped through the slave societies of the Americas in the 1730s, culminating in a multiethnic insurrectionary plot by workers in New York in 1741.

In 1760–1835, the motley crew launched the age of revolution in the Atlantic, beginning with Tacky’s Revolt in Jamaica and continuing in a series of uprisings throughout the hemisphere. The new revolts created breakthroughs in human praxis—the Rights of Mankind, the strike, the higher-law doctrine—that would eventually help to abolish impressment and plantation slavery. They helped more immediately to produce the American Revolution, which ended in reaction as the Founding Fathers used race, nation, and citizenship to discipline, divide, and exclude the very sailors and slaves who had initiated and propelled the revolutionary movement. The liberty tree, however, sprouted branches elsewhere in the 1790s—in Haiti, France, Ireland, and England.

The proletariat has appeared throughout our book in a double aspect. First, when docile and slavish, it was described as the hewers of wood and drawers of water. The Irish revolutionary Wolfe Tone feared in 1790 that Ireland would forever be a “subordinate nation of hewers of wood and drawers of water.”2 Similarly, Morgan John Rhys, a remembrancer of the
revolutionary 1640s and an abolitionist, asked in the first political periodical published in the Welsh language, *Cylchgrawn Gymraeg* (November 1793), whether the Welsh were condemned always to be hewers of wood and drawers of water.³ John Thelwall, a poet and leading speaker for the London Corresponding Society (L.C.S., England’s first independent political working-class organization), worried in the face of government repression in England in 1795 that “nine out of ten of the human race (it will, anon, be nineteen out of twenty) are born to be beasts of burthen to the remaining tythe: to be hewers of wood and drawers of water.”⁴ The African abolitionist Ottobah Cugoano knew that the Canaanites had been enslaved—that is, made hewers of wood and drawers of water—but he showed that slavery in the West Indies was even worse.⁵ Irish, Welsh, English, and Africans alike struggled to liberate the hewers and drawers.

Conversely, when the proletariat was rebellious and self-active, it was described as a monster, a many-headed hydra. Its heads included food rioters (according to Shakespeare); heretics (Thomas Edwards); army agitators (Thomas Fairfax); antinomians and independent women (Cotton Mather); maroons (Governor Mauricius); motley urban mobs (Peter Oliver); general strikers (J. Cunningham); rural barbarians of the commons (Thomas Malthus); aquatic laborers (Patrick Colquhoun); free thinkers (William Reid); and striking textile workers (Andrew Ure). Nameless commentators added peasant rebels, Levellers, pirates, and slave insurrectionists to the long list. Fearful of the energy, mobility, and growth of social forces beyond their control, the writers, heresy hunters, generals, ministers, officials, population theorists, policemen, merchants, manufacturers, and planters offered up their curses, which called down Herceulan destruction upon the hydra’s heads: the debellation of the Irish, the extermination of the pirates, the annihilation of the outcasts of the nations of the Earth.

Hercules had been known since the time of Diodorus as an executioner.Hangings, burnings, mutilations, starvings, and decapitations have filled our every chapter in this black book of capitalism. What was to become of Despard’s head, for example? It was reported that “the Cabinet was called at the request of the Lord Chancellor to consider what advice should be given to His Majesty respecting the disposal of the Heads
of the Prisoners.” Dessalines, the ferocious, uncompromising leader of the Haitian revolt, tried to widen the ownership of land in Haiti, an aspiration that led to his death by mutilation in 1806. He embodied a revolutionary lwa or lao, spoke Congo, and called his people the Incas of the Sun. Défilé carried away the remains of his body, seeking to piece them together for the cemetery. Masaniello, leader of the galley slaves, fishwives, prostitutes, weavers, students, and lazzaroni of Naples during their ten days of proletarian revolt, was killed and chopped up on July 16, 1647. The following day his supporters gathered up the pieces, reattached the skull to the corpse, and gave his body a funeral befitting a martial commander. Walt Whitman would write a story about Richard Parker’s widow and her search for his body after he was hanged for leading the mutiny at the Nore in 1797. Thus our first step has been to remember the proletarian body. We have had to translate it out of the idiom of monstrosity.

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, some workers wanted to turn the tables on their class enemies, representing themselves as having the strength to win and the authority to impose a new order. They assumed the mantle of Hercules and commenced to battle a different many-headed monster. Coleridge in the 1790s referred to the counterrevolutionary forces as a hydra. The L.C.S. predicted to a similar society in Newcastle-upon-Tyne that “the Hydra of Tyranny and of Imposition will soon fall under the Guillotine of truth and reason.” In November 1793, the French revolutionary artist David proposed that the convention erect a colossal statue of Hercules to represent the French people, replacing Marianne, the feminine personification of liberty. By 1795 the coins of the French Republic were divided between silver pieces bearing the figure of Hercules and bronze ones bearing that of Liberty. In November, during the Festival of Reason, held in Notre Dame Cathedral, the radical deputies again introduced Hercules: “The Terror was the people on the march, the exterminating Hercules.” Charles Lamb wrote in the early nineteenth century that gorgons and hydras and chimeras were “transcripts, types,—the archetypes are in us, and eternal. These terrors—date beyond body—or, without the body, they would have been the same.”

In England, tribunes of the radical working class were likewise fasci-
nated by Hercules and the hydra. “All things are sold,” began Shelley in *Queen Mab*, a catalogue of human corruption through the commodity form. Light, liberty, love—each had a price,

... whilst the pestilence that springs  
From unenjoying sensualism, has filled  
All human life with hydra-headed woes.

Richard Carlisle called his penny weekly newspaper the *Gorgon*, arguing in its first issue (1818) that “although the hydra of corruption still rears its accursed head amongst us, we are persuaded, that it must ultimately fall beneath general indignation and contempt.” Henry Hunt issued a weekly entitled the *Medusa; Or, Penny Politician*; the first number, which appeared on February 20, 1819, under the motto “Let’s Die like Men, and not be Sold like Slaves,” was addressed “To the Public, alias, the ignorantly-impatient Multitude.” In an attempt to provide national leadership by skilled male trade unionists over the burgeoning female and Irish textile proletariat of the northern factories, John Gast, a London shipwright, formed the Philanthropic Hercules in December 1818, just before the massacre at Peterloo in England (1819). Before the Haymarket Massacre (1886) in America, the “Revenge” circular called on the working class to rise like Hercules. Defining moments in the labor histories of England and America thus hinged on working-class references to this mythical hero.

The embrace of Hercules reflected a deepening fissure between skilled artisans—who, upon close inspection, often proved to be foremen or small managers—and the mass of migrants to the city, including young orphaned workers, female proletarians, discharged soldiers, and casualties of factory, workshop, and ship. The technological changes wrought by the steam-driven screw propeller and the substitution of iron and steel for wood in ship construction undermined the material basis of the motley crew and intensified the fragmentation of Atlantic dockside and maritime labor. The artisan, by contrast, was often a property holder, a temperate, prudent, punctual, literate citizen. His patriotism easily became nationalism. He was frequently a disciplinarian, an advocate of police. The fissure had cultural and political significance. Asa Briggs noted that in the early nineteenth century, “the gulf between skilled and unskilled
workers was so great that one acute observer spoke of them as two separate races.”

Tom Paine, Karl Marx, and Edward Thompson (who held that “working people were thrust into a state of apartheid”) wondered if the poor were becoming a race unto themselves.

The emphasis in modern labor history on the white, male, skilled, waged, nationalist, propertied artisan/citizen or industrial worker has hidden the history of the Atlantic proletariat of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. That proletariat was not a monster, it was not a unified cultural class, and it was not a race. This class was anonymous, nameless. Robert Burton noted in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1624), “Of 15000 proletaries slaine in battle, scarce fifteene are recorded in history, or one alone, the General perhaps, and after a while his and their names are likewise blotted out, the whole battle it selfe is forgotten.” It was landless, expropriated. It lost the integument of the commons to cover and protect its needs. It was poor, lacking property, money, or material riches of any kind. It was often unwaged, forced to perform the unpaid labors of capitalism. It was often hungry, with uncertain means of survival. It was mobile, transatlantic. It powered industries of worldwide transportation. It left the land, migrating from country to town, from region to region, across the oceans, and from one island to another. It was terrorized, subject to coercion. Its hide was calloused by indentured labor, galley slavery, plantation slavery, convict transportation, the workhouse, the house of correction. Its origins were often traumatic: enclosure, capture, and imprisonment left lasting marks. It was female and male, of all ages. (Indeed, the very term proletarian originally referred to poor women who served the state by bearing children.) It included everyone from youth to old folks, from ship’s boys to old salts, from apprentices to savvy old masters, from young prostitutes to old “witches.” It was multitudinous, numerous, and growing. Whether in a square, at a market, on a common, in a regiment, or on a man-of-war with banners flying and drums beating, its gatherings were wondrous to contemporaries. It was numbered, weighed, and measured. Unknown as individuals or by name, it was objectified and counted for purposes of taxation, production, and reproduction. It was cooperative and laboring. The collective power of the many rather than the skilled labor of the one produced its most forceful energy. It moved burdens, shifted earth, and transformed the landscape. It was motley, both dressed in rags and multi-
ethnic in appearance. Like Caliban, it originated in Europe, Africa, and America. It included clowns, or cloons (i.e., country people). It was without genealogical unity. It was vulgar. It spoke its own speech, with a distinctive pronunciation, lexicon, and grammar made up of slang, cant, jargon, and pidgin—talk from work, the street, the prison, the gang, and the dock. It was planetary, in its origins, its motions, and its consciousness. Finally, the proletariat was self-active, creative; it was—and is—alive; it is on the move.11

What does the experience of this proletariat have to offer us today? To answer this question, we turn to a story about three neglected friends of the human race: Thomas Hardy, founder of the L.C.S.; his wife, Lydia Hardy; and Olaudah Equiano, whom we have met in previous chapters. We conclude with reflections on the lives and works of the revolutionary savant C. F. Volney and the poetic visionary William Blake. All three—the forgotten, the utopian, and the visionary—illustrated the transatlantic circulation of experience and the effect of struggles in Africa/America upon social and political developments in Europe, and all expressed an egalitarian, multiethnic conception of humanity, which, we wish to argue, represented the grandest possibility of both their age and ours. The defeat of their common idea in the pivotal years of the early 1790s gave rise to two narratives of class, race, and nation that have served to hide the history we have attempted to recover in this book.

The first is the story of the Working Class. London artisans, faced in the 1790s with the economic pressures of rising prices, outsourcing, and mechanization, were inspired by the French Revolution and their own Dissenting and craft traditions to enter into correspondence with the emerging factory proletariat in the north of England, where the first steam-driven cotton factory opened in Manchester in 1789. They proposed the common purpose of Parliamentary reform. Despite domestic repression and the prohibition of trade-union organizing, the English working class emerged after the Napoleonic Wars (1815) with a vibrant intellectual, political, and moral culture (radicalism) and became a distinct and enduring class formation, able to force its industrial and constitutional opponents first to admit trade unions and then to expand the franchise. A defining document of this story was the “Address of a Journeyman Cotton Spinner,” published in the Black Dwarf in 1819, which described class relations in the cotton factories in terms of the length of
the working day, the child labor, the gruel, the steam engine, and the blacklist. The “Address” contrasted the factory worker with the plantation slave: “The Negro slave in the West Indies, if he works under a scorching sun, has probably a little breeze of air sometimes to fan him: he has a space of ground and time allowed to cultivate it. The English spinner slave has no enjoyment of the open atmosphere and breezes of heaven.” This view—opposite to the pledge of solidarity expressed by the Sheffield journeymen cutlers thirty years earlier—shows working-class insularity and its vulnerability to racist appeal.

The second is the narrative of Black Power. The people of the African diaspora fought against American slavery and the deliberate degradation, dehumanization, and destruction of name, lineage, culture, and country. Organized in mass in the mine or on the plantation (the cotton gin was invented in 1793), black or pan-African consciousness arose from resistance of blood and spirit, which achieved historic successes in the 1790s. The resistance of the spirit encompassed obeah, voodoo, and the black church (including the African Baptist Church of Savannah, Georgia, founded in 1788; the Free African Society of Philadelphia, 1787; and the Abyssinia Baptist Church of New York, 1800). The resistance of blood comprised revolts in Dominica, St. Vincent, Jamaica, and Virginia, and most significantly, the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804. Haiti was the original Black Power. If the distinctive accomplishment of the English working class was its labor press, the singular achievement of the black freedom struggle was its music. Ideological resistance would lead to David Walker and William Lloyd Garrison, and armed resistance to Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. An ideology of providence, called Ethiopianism because it located redemption in Africa, was nurtured in opposition to the racist myths of the ruling class and the racial exclusions of the working class. Even if we wished to bring these two narratives together, it would be impossible because they are true stories of their time and since. But we can remember a time before they separated.

Three Friends of the Whole Human Race

Olaudah Equiano, Lydia Hardy (née Priest), and Thomas Hardy lived together at Taylors Building, Chandos Street, Covent Garden, London, from August 1790 to February 1792. Every morning in season fruits and
vegetables—parsnips, carrots, peas, apples, and strawberries—arrived from the nurseries and gardens up the river Thames, and every evening piles of rubbish were collected. The three friends shared an experience of separation from the earthly commons, so they either had to buy commodities in the market or scavenge food. None was paid much, and prices were rising. Even if they shifted for goods (people then depended upon the customary wastes of urban manufactures), they lived an insecure life, if not one of constant destitution. The three friends belonged to the “swinish multitude,” as Edmund Burke had recently called the people in his diatribe against the French Revolution. They were pigs in the eyes of the upper class, and motley ones at that, for Olaudah was an African, Lydia was English, and Thomas was a Scot.

Olaudah had been both a plantation slave and a sailor. Lydia’s social role was parturition, hence she was a proletarian, a mother and a child-riser. Thomas was an artisan, a shoemaker. The slave/sailor, proletarian, and artisan—to identify them crudely by their economic types—were friends and would seek freedom together in 1792. Olaudah had been kidnapped at the age of ten with his sister and sold into slavery, torn from a “nation of dancers, musicians, and poets.” He described the West African commons: “Our tillage is exercised in a large plain or common... and all the neighbours resort thither in a body.” He noted that “every one contributes something to the common stock.” In Lydia’s native Buckinghamshire, acts of Parliament had enclosed the common lands. An anonymous ditty summed up the loss and the crime:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The law locks up the man or woman} \\
\text{Who steals the goose from off the common} \\
\text{But lets the greater villain loose} \\
\text{Who steals the common from the goose.}
\end{align*}
\]

Resistance to expropriation was strong in her home region, dating back to Captain Pouch and the Midlands Revolt of 1607 and to the Digger colonies of the English Revolution. Thomas, for his part, had been forced to leave his ancestral tenancy as capitalist farmers enclosed fields, consolidated runrig strips, and took in the commons, leaving the “gudeman” and cottar to join the landless. “Ah, man was made to mourn!” sighed the Scottish poet Robert Burns.

Having lost the commons, all three then saw their labors undergo de-
valuation. Olaudah experienced the terrors of merchant capitalism aboard the slave ship that transported him (among some 1.4 million other Igbo) across the Atlantic. He labored at sea, amid the cane fields, and in the tobacco rows. He observed but could not stop the terror against his fellow creatures, off whose labors the Bank of England, the Houses of Parliament, and much of the nation thrived. Lydia, meanwhile, became pregnant six times in London, where 74 percent of all children died before the age of five.17 She attempted to nurture five infants to childhood, but amid circumstances of penury, dearth, insecurity, and infestation, they all died young. Thomas found work as a brickie at the Carron armaments works not far from his birthplace. The “carronades” that gave the men-of-war of merchant capitalism their destructive firepower were produced amid volcanic conditions of darting flames, glowing coals, and molten iron. Severely injured when some scaffolding collapsed beneath him, Thomas recovered and sailed to London in 1774 with eighteen pence in his pocket.

Thus grounded in common experiences of expropriation and exploitation, the three friends shared rooms and ideas. Olaudah reached back to the antinomian abolitionism of the English Revolution to express through Milton’s Paradise Lost (2:332–40) his own experience of American slavery:

\[
\ldots \text{for what peace will be giv'n}
\]
\[
\text{To us enslaved, but custody severe,}
\]
\[
\text{And stripes, and arbitrary punishment}
\]
\[
\text{Inflicted? and what peace can we return,}
\]
\[
\text{But to our power hostility and hate;}
\]
\[
\text{Untamed reluctance, and revenge though slow,}
\]
\[
\text{Yet ever plotting how the Conqueror least}
\]
\[
\text{May reap his conquest, and may least rejoice}
\]
\[
\text{In doing what we most in suffering feel?}
\]

Wherever Olaudah carried this “untamed reluctance,” miracles of social alliance followed, for he played a catalytic role in the making of the United Irishmen, the English working class, and the Scottish convention movement. His life story, The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African, was “the most important single literary
contribution to the campaign for abolition.” While living with Lydia and Thomas, he prepared the fourth edition of the book, which he took with him on a journey to Ireland in May 1791. The sixty Irish subscribers to the *Interesting Narrative* included a large number of radicals who would become United Irishmen later in that year. Wolfe Tone came to Belfast about the same time as Olaudah and wrote his *Argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, which shared common ideas with Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*.

Lydia Hardy was, like other women, active in the abolitionist movement, not in lobbying members of Parliament or participating in the deliberations of the national committee of the abolitionists, but at the parish pump or kitchen hearth. On April 2, 1792, she would write to Thomas and report on the progress of abolitionism in her hometown of Chesham: “Pray let me no how you go on in your society and likewise we [illegible word] as been donn in the parlement house concurring the slave trade for the people here are as much against it as enny ware and there is more people I think hear that drinks tea without sugar than there drinks with. . . .” The inclusive “we” here refers to the sugar boycott, one of the movement’s most effective campaigns, which had been launched the previous autumn. In the same letter, Lydia would ask Thomas to give Olaudah her best wishes for “a good jorney to Scotland” (he had been working in their common quarters on the fifth edition of his book, which he would carry with him). Her acquaintances in Chesham, she bid Thomas to pass on, were “very fond of Vassa book.”

Thomas Hardy had arrived in London when the unfolding American Revolution was the subject of every political discussion. Influenced by the organizational and intellectual innovations of the motley crew (the committees of correspondence and abolitionist literature), Thomas explained that “his heart always glowed with the love of freedom, and was feelingly alive to the sufferings of his fellow creatures.” He developed a concern for the “future happiness of the whole human race.” By 1790 he kept a shoemaker’s shop located just a few yards from their rooms in Covent Garden, in Piccadilly, the embarkation point for coaches going to the west—to Bath or Bristol—and from there for ships headed for the West Indies. Here he formed the London Corresponding Society, which was egalitarian by income (membership cost one penny) and by status (titles
were forbidden), though it excluded people “incapacitated by crimes.” After the first meeting, in January 1792, Hardy and the other founders repaired to a tavern, the Bell in the Strand, for supper, and listened to a parable by William Frend about “certain brethren dwelling together in one house and having all things in common.” Thus, at the very beginning of its deliberations, the L.C.S. considered the commons and slavery, the ideal of the one and the evil of the other. It began to seek out similar societies elsewhere for correspondence. But where? Olaudah suggested Sheffield—“a damn bad place,” according to George III.21

Thomas pursued the suggestion. On March 8, 1792, he wrote to the Reverend Thomas Bryant of Sheffield, “Hearing from Gustavus Vassa that you are a zealous friend for the Abolition of that accursed traffick denominated the Slave Trade I inferred from that that you was a friend to freedom on the broad basis of the Rights of Man for I am pretty persuaded that no Man who is an advocate from principle for liberty for a Black Man but will strenuously promote and support the rights of a White Man & vice versa.” Equiano opened for Hardy the doors to the steel and cutlery workers of Sheffield. The Reverend Bryant led a congregation that would soon be labeled the “Tom Paine Methodists,” and many of its members were up in arms. In June 1791, six thousand acres of land in Sheffield and its vicinity had been enclosed by an act of Parliament. The commoners, the colliers, and the cutlers reacted in fury, releasing prisoners and burning a magistrate’s barn.22 A witness at Hardy’s 1794 trial for treason laid the ax to the root: “The original cause of discontent was the inclosing a Common, which was opposed by the populace.”23 The struggle for customary rights was common to both field and manufacture; a song of 1787 illustrated the interrelationship between expropriation and criminalization. Jonathan Watkinson and the masters of the Cutlers Company calculated their compensation and decreed that thirteen knives thenceforth be counted to the dozen, since among the twelve “there might be a waster,” a customary taking for the workers. The people sang in protest,24

That offspring of tyranny, baseness and pride,
Our rights hath invaded and almost destroyed,
May that man be banished who villainy screens:
Or sides with big W——n and his thirteens.
The reference was, of course, to common rights. The ballad thumped along, comparing Watkinson to Pharaoh:

But justice repulsed him and set us all free,
Like bond-slaves of old in the year jubilee.
May those be transported or sent for marines
That works for the big W—at his thirteens.

Jubilee thus meant the restoration of manufacturing rights.

When Hardy wrote to Bryant, he mentioned the “broad basis of the Rights of Man,” referring to Tom Paine’s book, whose second part had just been published. *The Rights of Man* demonstrated the economic feasibility of public education for all children, social security for those over fifty, and health care for everyone. The rights encompassed by the phrase “rights of man” were growing; they would soon include the rights of women and the rights of infants. Dr. William Buchan, a physician in Sheffield, considered air, water, and sunshine to be “among the most essential articles of the knowledge and rights of man.” Hardy’s own “vice versa” suggested that any advocate of workers’ rights to bread, commons, fresh air, clean water, and representation in Parliament must stand against slavery and advocate the same for the black person.

In April, Hardy wrote, “There is an absolute necessity for us to unite together and communicate with each other that our sentiments and determinations may center in one point, viz., to have the Rights of Man re-established especially in this nation but our views of the Rights of Man are not confined solely to this small island but are extended to the whole human race, black or white, high or low, rich or poor.” Like J. Philmore before him and the Despards after, he sought the liberation of the whole human race. The idea arose from his roommates, from his reading, from London Dissent, and from his knowledge of the gathering slave revolts in the Caribbean.

April 2, 1792, was a historic day. It was announced that “the LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY with modesty intrudes itself and opinions on the attention of the public.” The delicately worded proclamation, however, said nothing about slavery, the slave trade, or the commons. On the same day, Lydia, visiting family, wrote Thomas her letter from Chesham, politely inquiring about his society but emphasizing abolition and her news for Olaudah. Early the next morning, Parliament agreed to
what, in the history of English abolitionism, is called the April Compro-
mise. Wilberforce had asked Parliament on April 2 to resolve that the
slave trade “ought to be abolished”; after midnight, the home secretary
moved to amend the resolution by adding the word *gradually*. In the wee
hours, the prime minister waxed eloquent. Then, after debating all
night, not least about levelling principles, the members of Parliament
went to breakfast, one or two of them perhaps blithely humming the hit
tune of the year, “Oh, Dear! What Can the Matter Be?”27 The way was
now clear for an *expansion* of the slave trade.28

The coincidence of these events suggested a betrayal, which became
more obvious with the passage of time. In May, Olaudah, who had
joined the L.C.S., wrote to Thomas and expressed “my best Respect to
my fellow members of your society.” The confusion of pronouns indi-
cated a deepening problem. By summer Hardy had begun to worry that
the abolitionist movement might sidetrack the society from its main ob-
jective, parliamentary reform. Looking back on the history of the organi-
ization from the vantage point of 1799, Hardy omitted any mention of the
equality of race in observing of the society’s charter, “There was a uni-
form rule by which all Members were admitted high and low, rich and
poor.” The three friends soon separated. Olaudah married and dropped
out of the movement; Lydia died in childbirth after being harassed by a
church-and-king mob; Thomas was attacked by the government, went
to prison, was acquitted, and survived to publish, in 1832, his memoirs,
which minimized Olaudah’s role as midwife to the birth of the L.C.S.

As we have seen when considering Despard’s situation, the ramifica-
tions of the Haitian revolt undermined the revolutionary possibilities
epitomized by the three friends, because it divided the abolitionist move-
ment. In November 1791, a debate took place at Coachmakers’ Hall on
the Haitian slave insurrection. “People here are all panic-struck with the
transactions in St. Domingo,” wrote Wilberforce, but to him “people”
meant the middle class.29 The idiom of monstrosity sanctioned violent,
steady repression. In debate in the House of Lords, Abingdon argued
that “the order and subordination, the happiness of the whole habitable
globe is threatened” by abolition: “All being equal, blacks and whites,
French and English, wolves and lambs, shall all, ‘merry companions
every one,’ promiscuously pig together; engendering . . . a new species of
man as the product of this new philosophy.”

Abolish the slave trade, he warned, and other abolitions will pop out of Pandora’s box: the transporting of felons to Botany Bay, the flogging of soldiers, the pressing of seamen, the exploiting of factory workers. London bankers and merchant houses embraced the Baconian argument of monstrosity, urging the government fully to prosecute the attempt to repress the Haitian Revolution and eagerly supporting the exiled French planters in their city. Seventeen banking firms soon petitioned the Duke of Portland to annihilate and exterminate the insurgent slaves. Meanwhile, the poor mechanics of Leeds acknowledged the effects of propaganda in 1792: “We are beheld more like Monsters than Friends of the People,” they wrote to the L.C.S. in 1792.

Henry Redhead Yorke, who had been born in the West Indies, spoke against slavery at a mass meeting in Sheffield in the spring of 1794. The speech got him arrested, imprisoned, and tried. At his trial he brilliantly defended himself by turning the rhetoric of monstrosity back against the authorities, promising, “The more sacrifices, the more martyrs you make, the more numerous the sons of liberty will become. They will multiply like the hydra, and hurl vengeance upon your heads.”

Volney’s Motley Crowd

In 1791 the revolutionary savant Constantin François Volney published his *Ruins; Or, Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires*, a learned, sensible, and rhapsodic work of religious anthropology and world history. Its most famous passage is a dialogue between the “People” and the “Privileged Class”:

**People:** And what labor do you perform in our society?

**Privileged Class:** None; we are not made to work.

**People:** How, then, have you acquired these riches?

**Privileged Class:** By taking the pains to govern you.

**People:** What is this what you call governing? We toil and you enjoy! we produce and you dissipate! Wealth proceeds from us, and you absorb it. Privileged men! class who are not the people; form a nation apart, and govern yourselves.
The Privileged Class sends its lawyer, its soldier, and its priest to plead their characteristic arguments with the People, but none prevails. Then it plays the race card: “Are we not men of another race—the noble and pure descendants of this empire?” But the People, who have studied the historical genealogy of the Privileged, burst out in gales of laughter. Finally, the Privileged Class concedes, “It is all over for us: the swinish multitude are enlightened.”

Written in an accessible, liberating style, Volney’s *Ruins* was as important to the age of revolution as Paine’s *Rights of Man*. First published in Paris, it was translated into German and English in 1792, with American editions appearing shortly after, and numerous fly-sheets, pamphlets, and abridged editions distributed elsewhere. It was printed in Sheffield, and in Welsh translation. Its fifteenth chapter, a vision of a “New Age,” was reprinted often. On the very day in May 1794 when habeas corpus was suspended and Tommy Spence was dragged off to Newgate, he included “The New Age” in the second volume of his *Pig’s Meat; Or, Lessons for the Swinish Multitude*. The L.C.S. reprinted chapter 15 under the title *The Torch*, a circumstance “made use of to countenance the report of an intention to set London on fire.” In Bahia, Brazil, a copy was found in the hands of a mulatto in the midst of the 1797 conspiracy of whites, browns, and blacks. The United Irishmen reworked it as a chapbook and distributed it to Belfast mill workers. A second or third English translation, prepared by Joel Barlow with anonymous assistance from Thomas Jefferson, came out in 1802, when Volney may have been visiting England.

Volney voted in the French revolutionary assembly to abolish slavery. He foresaw a new age, and like Tom Paine and the United Irishmen, he saw it dawning in the west: “Turning towards the west... a cry of liberty, proceeding from far distant shores, resounds on the ancient continent.” He assailed the ruling logic of nationalism, having his Privileged Class say, “We must divide the people by national jealousies, and occupy them with commotions, wars, and conquests.” He critiqued the patriarchal family: “The King sleeps or smokes his pipe while his wife and daughters perform all the drudgery of the house.” He stood against the cupidity that “fomented in the bosom of every state an intestine war, in which the citizens, divided into contending corps of orders, classes, families, unremittingly struggled to appropriate to themselves, under the name of su-
preme power, the ability to plunder every thing.” From this “arose a dis-
tinction of castes and races, which reduced to a regular system the
maintenance of disorder” and perfected the science of oppression.39

Volney explained that civilization had begun in Africa: “It was there
that a people, since forgotten, discovered the elements of science and art,
at a time when all other men were barbarous, and that a race, now re-
garded as the refuse of society, because their hair is woolly and their skin
is dark, explored among the phenomena of nature, those civil and reli-
gious systems which have since held mankind in awe.”40 Volney was a
planetary wanderer who observed the variations inherent in hu-
mankind: “I contemplated with astonishment this gradation in color,
from a bright carnation to a brown scarcely less bright, a dark brown, a
muddy brown, bronze, olive, leaden, copper, as far as to the black of eb-
ony and jet.” He wondered “who causeth his sun to shine alike on all the
races of men, on the white as on the black, on the Jew, on the Mussulman,
the Christian, and the Idolater”? He believed in a grand family of the hu-
man race. He wrote,

A scene of a new and astonishing nature then presented itself to my
view. All the people and nations of the globe, every race of men
from every different climate, advancing on all sides, seemed to as-
semble in one inclosure, and form in distinct groups an immense
congress. The motley appearance of this innumerable crowd, occa-
sioned by their diversity of dress, of features and of complexion, ex-
hibited a most extraordinary and most attractive spectacle.

Volney raised the motley crowd to a universal ideal.

Although he escaped the guillotine under Robespierre, Volney, like
Tom Paine, landed in prison. He was released, along with Paine, on 9
Thermidor 1794. He soon sailed to America, taking his first English les-
sions from a Venetian sailor. In the winter of 1795–96, he lived in Philadel-
phia, across the street from the African Church, which was crowded with
refugees from revolutionary St. Domingue. Volney admired the inscrip-
tion over its portal, “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great
light” (Isaiah 42). He made contacts in “enlightened” circles, but his be-
behavior apparently transgressed the norms of white supremacy. He visited
Thomas Jefferson at Monticello in the summer of 1796 and later wrote
about a personal encounter he had there with slavery:
After dinner the master [Jefferson] and I went to see the slaves plant peas. Their bodies dirty brown rather than black, their dirty rags, their miserable hideous half-nakedness, these haggard figures, this secretive anxious air, the hateful timorous looks, altogether seized me with an initial sentiment of terror and sadness that I ought to hide my face from. Their indolence in turning up the ground with the hoe was extreme. The master took a whip to frighten them, and soon ensued a comic scene. Placed in the middle of the gang, he agitated, he grumbled, he menaced, and turned far and wide (on all sides) turning around. Now, as he turned his face, one by one, the blacks changed attitude: those whom he looked at directly worked the best, those whom he half saw worked least, and those he didn’t see at all, ceased working altogether; and if he made an about-face, the hoe was raised to view, but otherwise slept behind his back.  

William Cobbett denounced Volney as an infidel and a cannibal, while Joseph Priestley accused him of Hottentotism. John Adams probably had him in mind when he complained that the United States was becoming a “receptacle of malevolence and turbulence, for the outcasts of the universe.” Jefferson himself believed that Volney was the principal object of the Act Concerning Aliens of 1798, which was designed to promote “purity of national character” and forced the Frenchman to sail back to Europe.

**Blake’s African Orc**

William Blake wrote his prophecy *America* in 1793. Its preludium was illuminated, like the initial letter of a medieval manuscript, by the image of an outstretched figure—Orc, the symbol of revolution—pinioned spread-eagled to the ground, straining to be free. Blake derived the image from Captain John Gabriel Stedman, a mercenary soldier who had fought four years in Surinam against the maroons—escaped slaves who shared the tropical rain forest with Indians and other state-of-the-art forest dwellers—and lived to tell the tale. Stedman wrote a “narrative” and painted a hundred watercolors that he submitted in 1790 to Joseph Johnson, a publisher, who in turn hired Blake to help engrave the plates.
From 1791 to 1794 Blake bore down, elbow grease mixing with the burin and copperplate, on these images of an American slave revolt. His poetry of this period—*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Songs of Experience*, *America a Prophecy*, *The Four
Zoas—and his politics (he paraded in a red liberty cap, the symbol of the emancipated slave) were deeply colored by Stedman’s text, pictures, and friendship. One of the plates, entitled *The Execution of Breaking on the Rack*, provided the basis of his depiction of red Orc.
In the summer of 1776, Stedman had followed a crowd to the savannah to watch the execution of three African Americans. One of them, Neptune, had killed an overseer. He was pinioned to a rack on the ground. The executioner, a fellow African, chopped off his left hand, then used an iron rod to break and shatter his bones. Neptune lived. He fell from the rack “and Damn'd them all for a Pack of Barbarous Rascals, at the Same time Removing his right hand by the help of his Teeth, he Rested his Head on Part of the timber and ask'd the by Standers for a Pipe of Tobacco Which was infamously Answered by kicking & Spitting on him”—a final insult that Stedman and some American sailors intervened out of sympathy to stop. Neptune begged for the coup de grace, but it was denied him. He sang a song to take leave of his friends, and a second to tell his deceased relations that he would soon join them. He asked the sentinel on guard “how it came that he a White Man should have no meat.” The soldier answered, “Because I am not so rich.” Neptune responded, “Then I will make you a Present first pick my Hand that was Chopt off Clean to the Bones Sir—Next begin to [eat] myself till you be Glutted & you’ll have both Bread and Meat which best becomes you.” He laughed. When Stedman returned to the site of execution later in the day, he observed Neptune’s skull on the end of a stick, nodding at him. Frightened out of his wits, Stedman recovered only when he saw that a pecking vulture had set the skull in motion.

Reflecting fourteen years later on the experience, Stedman quoted the prophet Daniel in passages that referred to the island slave trade and prophesied deliverance by a prince. Blake conjoined the redeeming warrior of Daniel with the rebellious African American Neptune to create a revolutionary symbol of energy, desire, and freedom: Orc. In contrast to Neptune’s fate, in Blake’s America, a dark virgin brings food and drink to Orc and inspires him to break free. They make love. She exclaims,

I know thee, I have found thee, & I will not let thee go;  
Thou art the image of God who dwells in darkness of Africa.

And with that ecstatic shout, Blake began his praise-song of the American Revolution, in which the meaning of “America” was no more restricted to the thirteen states of the U.S.A. than the meaning of “revolution” was restricted to the mutilating Constitution, which treated each African American as three fifths of a human being. Blake’s America was
Aftermath of the Demarara slave revolt, 1823. Joshua Bryant, Account of an Insurrection of the Negro Slaves in the Colony of Demarara (1824).

an African America, and his revolution included the emancipation of the whole person:

Let the slave grinding at the mill, run out into the field:
Let him look up into the heavens & laugh in the bright air;
Let the inchained soul shut up in darkness & in sighing,
Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary years;
Rise & look out, his chains are loose, his dungeon doors are open,
And let his wife and children return from the oppressors scourge.

Blake’s vision was further compressed into a single, powerful symbol: the tiger. Stedman had written about the tigers and other wild cats of Suriname, where he and his fellow soldiers had once captured a jaguar in a chicken coop and drowned it. He described the cougar and the “Tiger-Cat Which is Extremely Beautiful . . . a Very Lively Animal With its Eyes emitting flashes of Lightning;—But ferocious, Mischievious, and not Tameable like the rest.” Of the “Red Tiger” he wrote, “the head is small the Body thin the Limbs Long with tremendous whitish Claws The Teeth are Also Very Large, the Eyes prominent, and Sparkling like Stars.” These observations inspired Blake’s “The Tyger,” part of Songs of Experience, published in 1793. ⁴⁴
Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

It lived in the forest, ferocious and untamable, a creature of the commons. In the poem’s trochaic rhythm we hear hammer blows or the march of soldiers, or perhaps the blows upon Neptune’s body:

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand: & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

Stedman respected the creature, but only with the hunter’s wish to kill it. Blake also wondered about the relation between hunter and hunted, but he widened it to include the larger social forces of oppressor and oppressed.

Stedman’s Narrative concluded with Europe supported by Africa & America, a plate depicting three idealized nude women—white, black, and brown—standing arm in arm upon a green, with mountains in the distance. Stedman called it an emblematical picture “accompanied by an ardent wish that in the friendly manner as they are represented they may henceforth & to all eternity be the prop of each other; and I might have included Asia but this I omitted as having no Connection with the Present Narrative—we all only differ in the Colour but we are Certainly Created by the same hand & after the Same Mould”—lines that echoed Blake’s own belief about the “everlasting gospel” and that helped him to compose his first draft of “The Tyger,” which asked,

In what clay & in what mould
Were thy eyes of fury roll’d?

Stedman himself had fought against freedom, but he nonetheless brought the revolution of the Americas to Blake in a way that was consis-
Europe supported by Africa & America, by William Blake.

Stedman, Narrative of a Five Years Expedition.
tent with what Blake would have learned during the same period from Ottobah Cugoano and other abolitionists. Blake discovered in the revolts of the slaves of the Americas a revolutionary energy, politics, and vision.

After 1795, Blake would continue to write poetry that drew on American struggles, but he would not publish another line for ten years. In 1797 he wrote *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, describing child labor at grinding wheels and workers in brick kilns:

*Then All the Slaves from every Earth in the wide Universe
Sing a New Song drowning confusion in its happy notes.*

The New Song would be sung by an African, wrote Blake. The phrase referred either to Revelation 4, in which the scroll is opened by the harp players and the Lion of Judah, or to Isaiah 42, where justice will shine on every race, “a beacon for the nations, to open eyes that are blind, to bring captives out of prison.” Blake continued, “The good of all the Land is before you, for Mystery is no more.” He meant that ideological manacles were to be cast away.45 Isaiah 42 was the most well-thumbed part of the Hebrew Bible for the Atlantic proletariat; these passages would have been instantly recognizable to the Afro-Baptists of Savannah, the Iroquois followers of Joseph Brant, the worshipers of the Free African Society in Philadelphia, George Liele’s congregation in Kingston, or the “Tom Paine Methodists” of Sheffield. They would have known about jubilee, universalism, and Isaiah’s appeal to “you that sail the sea, and all the sea-creatures, and you that inhabit the coasts and islands.” These people had affected Blake himself, who in 1793 had expressed his hopes of freedom through an African torture victim in a South American colony. Yet ten years later he could ask in the song “Jerusalem,” an unofficial anthem in the English-speaking world,

*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England’s mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England’s pleasant pastures seen?*

The world had been different ten years earlier, when freedom was not merely *English*. 
“Seize the Fire”

The years 1790–1792 were a revolutionary moment. Egalitarian, multi-ethnic conceptions of humanity had not evolved in isolation, but rather through solidarity and connection, within and among social movements and individuals. Blake had certainly crossed paths with Equiano (perhaps their mutual acquaintance Cugoano introduced them). The L.C.S. published a cheap edition of the *Ruins*, which Hardy carried in his pocket. Blake studied Volney. The friendship of Olaudah Equiano and Thomas and Lydia Hardy proved that Atlantic combinations—African and Scot, Englishwoman and African American—were powerful and of historic significance. Volney demonstrated the power of laughter and the centrality of Africa, to civilization in general and to the struggle between Privileged Class and People in particular. Blake embodied the anamnesis of seventeenth-century radicalism and insisted that the liberation of the imprisoned and the enslaved was necessary to all freedom struggles. All showed that the early 1790s were an expansive time for redefining what it meant to be a human being. But that time would not last.

When casualties began to mount after the British expeditions against Haiti in 1795–96, panic—and racism—spread through society. This was, as we have seen, the very moment when the biological category of race was being formed and disseminated in Britain and America, and no less the moment of the formation of the political and economic category of class. Organizations such as the L.C.S. would eventually make their peace with the nation, as the working class became national, *English*. With the rise of pan-Africanism, the people in diaspora became a noble *race* in exile. The three friends became unthinkable within ethnic and nationalist historiography. Volney disappeared from radical scholarship, except among the pan-Africanists and “Ethiopianists” who kept him in print.46 What began as repression thus evolved into mutually exclusive narratives that have hidden our history.

English sailors and commoners wanted to stay in Bermuda rather than sail on to Virginia, and some, after they got there, deserted to Algonquian villages. Diggers built communes upon the “earthly treasury” on George’s Hill as the light shone in Buckinghamshire. Resistance to slavery extended from Putney Common to the estuarial waters of the river
Gambia. Renegades who fought with Bacon against slavery in Virginia escaped to the swampy commons of Roanoke. Pirate rovers of the deep hindered the advance of West African slaving and offered occasional refuge. The outcasts gathered at John Hughson’s tavern in New York for laughter and hospitality. Black preachers searched the Atlantic for a place to build a new Jerusalem. Sheffield cutlers pocketed the “wasters.” Colonel Edward Marcus Despard redistributed land in Belize. Elizabeth Campbell staged a little jubilee in Jamaica. The mutineers escaped the regimen of the *Bounty* for the beautiful ecology and people of Tahiti. One of them, Peter Heywood, his legs covered with tattoos, composed a poem, “Dream,” in praise of the “beauteous morals,” simplicity, and generosity of the friendships he formed in Tahiti, contrasting them with the expropriation, exploitation, and possessive individualism of his own civilization. He would have gazed at the sky to see the southern constellation of stars known as the Hydra, the ancient sign of navigators, preceding even the agrarian signals of the Nile for the wanderers of the planet. To do this he would have sat not quite on the ground, but upon the root of the breadfruit tree, the nourishing commons of the Pacific. He would have meditated, in that hopeful moment of 1791, like Thomas and Lydia Hardy, Toussaint L’Ouverture, Wolfe Tone, Constantin François Volney, Edward and Catherine Despard, and William Blake—but only Heywood sat in the Pacific. Captain William Bligh used Pacific breadfruit to support Atlantic slavery, and he had Heywood captured and tried for his life. The globalizing powers have a long reach and endless patience. Yet the planetary wanderers do not forget, and they are ever ready from Africa to the Caribbean to Seattle to resist slavery and restore the commons.

*Tyger Tyger, burning bright,*  
*In the forests of the night,*  
*What immortal hand or eye,*  
*Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

*In what distant deeps or skies*  
*Burnt the fire of thine eyes!*  
*On what wings dare he aspire?*  
*What the hand, dare seize the fire?*
Detail from “A New Map of the World According to Mercators projection, Shewing the Course of Capt Cowleys Voyage Round it.” Captain William Hacke, ed., A Collection of Original Voyages (1699). Named after the Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator, who designed it in 1569, the projection is formed as if a cylinder of paper were slid over the globe, touching it only at the equator, with area and direction projected accordingly upon the paper. The projection enlarges the sizes of European countries relative to those closer to the equator, such as African or Caribbean nations. This distortion flattered the imperialist imagination of European globalizers while it permitted navigators to plot their bearings with straight lines. The many-headed hydra thrived against such a mapping.


Conclusion


5. Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery (1787, 1791), 36–37. In 1934 Samuel Beckett translated an article during the anglophone moment of négritude: “If the race of Negroes should happen to disappear tomorrow, no doubt, their absence would be deprecated by the white man; as transatlantic stokers, as hewers and carriers of water it would be a matter of some difficulty to replace them.” See Nancy Cunard, The Negro Anthology (London: Nancy Cunard at Wishart, 1934), 580.
8. Francis Midon, The History of the Rise and Fall of Masaniello, the Fisherman of Naples (1729), 204–5.
21. Thomas Hardy, Memoir of Thomas Hardy (London, 1832), 8–9.


40. This is from the 1795 translation, page 29, rather than the 1802 translation.
44. Stedman, 359.
Our collaboration originated at a conference on “The World Turned Upside Down,” held in 1981 with the assistance of the University of Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies in honor of Christopher and Bridget Hill. We furthered the collaboration at subsequent conferences, in Miami, Baltimore, Claremont, Milan, Atlanta, New Orleans, Halifax (Nova Scotia), Boston, Moscow, Chicago, Amsterdam, London, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Toledo, Durham, and Los Angeles. We thank those who organized the meetings and those who commented on our work. We also thank Bryan Palmer and Gregory Kealey, who gave us an opportunity to publish some of our early findings, and the Midnight Notes Collective, which helped us to think. We thank those whose kindred projects have been so important to us: Julius Scott, Robin D. G. Kelley, Robin Blackburn, Michael West, Paul Gilroy, Susan Pennybacker, James Holstun, Dave Roediger. Thanks to Staughton and Alice Lynd and the Youngstown Workers’ Solidarity Club. We thank the comrade remembrancers who passed on before we finished: John Merrington, George Rawick, Raphael Samuel, Edward Thompson, Jim Thorpe, Gwyn Williams. We thank especially our colleagues at Beacon Press: Edna Chiang, always helpful; Dorothy Straight, for gracious and meticulous copyediting; and our editor, Deb Chasman, who first contacted us about this project seven years ago, and since then has given it her catalytic intelligence, energy, humor, and wisdom. We are deeply grateful.

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