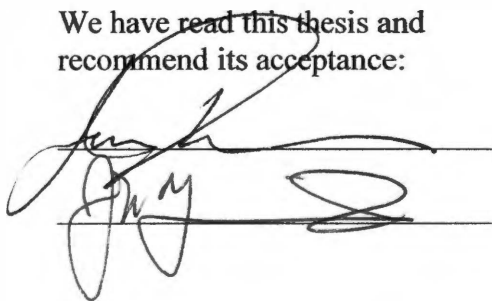


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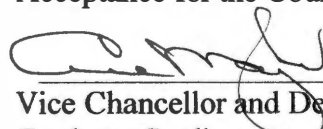
I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Edgar Cuthbert Gentle entitled "The Politics of Abstraction: Race, Gender, and Slavery in the Poetry of William Blake." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.


Nancy Goslee, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and
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Acceptance for the Council:


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THE POLITICS OF ABSTRACTION:
RACE, GENDER, AND SLAVERY IN THE POETRY OF WILLIAM BLAKE

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

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Edgar Cuthbert Gentle

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between the poetry of William Blake and the abolitionist movement gaining force in England from 1789-1793. The poems *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) and “The Little Black Boy” (1789) express sympathy with this movement, depicting racial prejudice and oppression in unsparing ways. However, other aspects of the poems threaten to undercut this message, such as the equation of corruption with black imagery and purity with white imagery. This is a sign of Blake’s limited scientific and theological understanding of race, which leads to an inadequate portrayal of enslaved Africans. Because his interests lie primarily in universal and Christian definitions of freedom, the poet fails fully to engage the problem of slavery.

This paper will describe these limitations in Blake’s poetry and in the critical response by Blake scholars, which often fails specifically to mention issues of enslavement. Chapter One will outline these problems and describe the poet’s connection to the abolitionist project. Chapter Two will explain the relationship between *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and the writings of John Gabriel Stedman, analyzing studies by Anne Rubenstein, Camilla Townsend, Eugenie R. Freed, and David V. Erdman. In Chapter Three, the utopian readings of *Visions* offered by Erdman and Steven Vine will be countered using the arguments of Anne Mellor and Nancy Goslee. Finally, Chapter Four will attempt to explain Blake’s specific stance with regard to racial difference and integration, primarily citing David Bindman, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, and the text of “The Little Black Boy.” These readings will reveal the perspective of a gifted artist who was nevertheless limited by the biases of his own culture and time period.

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Chapter One

William Blake and the Limits of Racial Knowledge

As demonstrated in his “The Little Black Boy”¹ (1789) and *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion*² (1793), themes related to slavery and race are an important characteristic in the poetry of William Blake. In both pieces, the author expresses his sympathies with the abolitionist cause gaining force in England from 1789-1793. Written at the opening and the temporary conclusion of the debates, respectively, these poems depict steadily growing conflicts that could no longer be suppressed by white authority. There are also, however, aspects of these poems that threaten to undercut Blake’s message of liberation, such as the expression of corruption through black imagery and purity with white imagery. This is a sign of the author’s limited understanding of race, which leads to an inadequate portrayal of enslaved Africans. In *Visions*, the consideration of female sexual freedom in the West takes precedence over a more specific discussion of race and slavery. For Oothoon, Theotormon, and Bromion, human captivity is primarily a state of hellish abstraction, “eternal fire” (*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, plate 7, line 23) and “eternal chains” (*Visions*, plate 7, line 23) representing the inescapable fate of the unredeemed. In “The Little Black Boy,” the narrator’s dream of a racially equitable heaven places him in a position of subservience, “shad[ing] [the English child] from the heat” (*Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, plate 10, line 25) in order to win his affection. Both poems display the biases of the

¹ Readings of “The Little Black Boy” will refer to copy Z of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

² Readings of *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* will refer to copy J.

poet's culture and time period, revealing insular assumptions about the origins of racial suffering and the predetermined nature of enslavement. The author defines restriction and liberty for his characters through Christian notions of human fallibility and salvation, which come before a direct indictment of the slave trade. Each narrative attempts to criticize literal and metaphoric forms of slavery, but these critiques place universal concepts of freedom above specific solutions.

This paper will attempt to address these inadequacies as they exist in the very form of the poetry and in the critical response by Blake scholars, which often fails to mention these issues. Chapter One will briefly outline these limitations and describe Blake's impression of and involvement with the abolitionist project. Chapter Two will explain the complex relationship between *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and the writings of John Gabriel Stedman, analyzing studies by Anne Rubenstein, Camilla Townsend, Eugenie R. Freed, and David V. Erdman. In Chapter Three, the utopian readings of *Visions* offered by Erdman and Steven Vine will be countered using the arguments of Anne Mellor and Nancy Goslee. Finally, Chapter Four will attempt to explain Blake's specific stance with regard to racial difference and integration, primarily citing David Bindman, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, and the text of "The Little Black Boy." This poem precedes *Visions* chronologically but also offers the clearest insights into the issues raised by Mellor and Goslee, describing racial conflict in a more concise, lyric form. In these ways, the paper will present the views and artistry of a gifted individual and the political forces that inspired and shaped his work.

William Blake's personal concern with the British slave trade can be traced back to his involvement in the New Jerusalem Church, a Swedenborgian sect of heretical

Protestants. In 1789, he and his wife officially embraced the teachings of this sect, which advocated establishing colonies in Africa for the conversion of newly freed slaves (Rubenstein and Townsend 279-280). Though Blake's affiliation with this sect soon dissolved after a more conservative leader came into power (Rubenstein and Townsend 279-280), the abolitionist ideas of the New Church would continue to inform his thinking. In 1791, free-thinking book publisher Joseph Johnson presented Blake with John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative, of a Five Years' Expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the Wild Coast of South America; from the year 1772, to 1777* (1790) and asked him to create accompanying engravings (Rubenstein and Townsend 284). As Anne Rubenstein and Camilla Townsend note, the engravings produced for this book were not typical of Blake's commercial work, which often suppressed his own style and voice. Here, Blake refused "to make slavery seem like a natural part of the world" (Rubenstein and Townsend 294) and invested each slave rendered with a unique "dignity and [. . .] centrality" (Rubenstein and Townsend 293). Each image nakedly reflects the emotionally charged content of Stedman's *Narrative*, and Blake would return to these "horrible and moving" (Rubenstein and Townsend 288) visuals frequently in his concurrent and later books of poetry:

Scholars have found evidence of the deep effect [the stories and pictures] made on his own books, both those made as he engraved Stedman's sixteen plates and those from years later. *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) is saturated with images of bondage and slavery. There, white figures assume the same poses as those taken by tortured slaves in the Stedman illustrations. (Rubenstein and Townsend 288-289)

The concern with racial discrimination evident in 1789's "The Little Black Boy" develops more fully into a depiction of the evils of slavery in 1793's *Visions*. However, while the illustrations in Stedman's book are noteworthy for their austere lack of detail, *Visions* places similar images into a more layered and obscure mythology. By adding subtle variations to the *Narrative*'s original pictures, Blake sought to make his reaction to their subject matter obvious and inescapable. With *Visions*, he elaborates on this commentary in complex and referential language that demands close attention and careful deciphering.

The two principle influences on *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* are Stedman's *Narrative* and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). A number of critics such as Steven Vine and Eugenie R. Freed have interpreted Oothoon's concluding pleas for free love as Blake's rebuttal to the Enlightenment philosophy espoused by Wollstonecraft. As Freed notes, Blake "believed that Reason should be the *servant*, not the lord, of the human intelligence" (Freed 70) and that "the liberation of Oothoon and the Daughters of Albion from their enslavement must be, before all else, a sexual liberation that begins by freeing them from the inhibitions inculcated by conventional morality" (Freed 71). Though Blake sympathized with Wollstonecraft's message of female solidarity, he believed that irrationality and sexual freedom were greater liberatory forces than rationality and sexual modesty.

This aspect of the poem has been thoroughly considered by Blake scholars, but significantly less has been said about the influence of Stedman's text on the piece. In the words of David V. Erdman, "love and slavery prove to be the two poles of the poem's axis. [. . .] The other pole [slavery], equally important in the dynamics of the work, has

scarcely been discovered” (“Blake’s Vision” 242). Even fifty-four years after his original statement in 1952, it still holds largely true. Erdman’s own reading of *Visions* interprets Theotormon and Oothoon as representations of John Stedman and his wife, Joanna, respectively (“Blake’s Vision” 245). Indeed, Blake’s method of so altering these historical personages may reveal one reason that slavery has been seldom discussed in this context by Blake scholars. This lack may partially reflect the biases of the critics themselves, who are more comfortable discussing the plight of English women than the less familiar and accessible struggles in the West Indies. However, this is also the result of Blake’s unusual poetic technique, which couches the figures of Stedman’s *Narrative* in metaphors and ultimately places more emphasis on feminism than slavery. Oothoon’s concluding lament goes out to the Daughters of Albion, who “hear her woes, & echo back her sighs” (*Visions*, plate 11, line 13). “[T]he oppression she attacks [at the end of the poem] binds the daughters of Albion, not the daughters of Africa or Antigua,” Nancy Goslee writes. “Has she forgotten the horrors of black slavery in challenging the economics of the European marriage-market?” (Goslee 101). In light of this shift in the poem’s focus, the inability of most scholars to answer this question, or even to ask it, should perhaps not be a surprise. By relating images of slavery to the feminist rhetoric of Wollstonecraft, Blake is trying to provide analogous examples of a broader notion of personal freedom. But as Goslee notes, “[a]t each level of inclusiveness [. . .] the primary evils become less vivid” (Goslee 124). Bromion’s fierce evocation of imperialism and chattel slavery is only one component of a larger discourse on the nature of liberty. A more defined statement condemning the practice of slavery itself never follows his words.

This project, in part, will be an attempt to address inadequacies in both the body of criticism and in the very form of *Visions*. Considerations of Oothoon's awakening to sexual experience and subsequent loss of freedom are indispensable, but they have also overshadowed other pressing concerns that exist at the poem's margins. More than just a symbol of sexual liberation, Oothoon embodies many different nationalities and forms of enslavement. "As Africa she is urging the London citizen to ignore color differences," Erdman writes. "As America she is urging British law-makers to rescue her from the muddy feet of the slaver. As a woman enslaved by Marriage Act morality, she is imploring her lover to rise above accusations of adultery" ("Blake's Vision" 249).

Yet in trying to flee from these restrictions, "the muddy feet of the slaver," Oothoon is continually moving away from dark imagery and toward white imagery. Despite these varied states of enslavement, she possesses a white complexion when the poem opens, "writhing her soft snowy limbs" (*Visions*, plate 5, line 12) after the rape. After this violation, however, she sees herself as tainted and seeks to cleanse away the stigma of non-marital intercourse. Visuals of a black stain being removed in order to achieve spiritual whiteness recur throughout the poem, threatening to undercut Blake's critique of racial oppression. At one point, Oothoon describes this process of suffering and rebirth as strengthening the sufferer (*Visions*, plate 6, lines 17-20), but as Nancy Goslee observes, "[i]t is difficult to believe [. . .] that even under the most negative and oppressive circumstances—that is, rape—sexual experience is so essentially good that it leads to a liberating imaginative experience. Such a consolation appears more a dangerous after-the-fact rationalization" (Goslee 114). Beyond this sexual anguish, Oothoon's inevitable ritual of suffering also evokes the concepts of racial superiority

described by Bromion. She believes that enduring pain will allow her to transcend an equivocal position, but soon “beauty fades from off [her] shoulders, darken’d and cast out” (*Visions*, plate 10, line 14) like “the swarthy children of the sun” (*Visions*, plate 4, line 21).

Connections between physical whiteness and ideas of Christian purity are also evident in Blake’s “The Little Black Boy,” which details the titular narrator’s hope of an afterlife where the color of his skin will be as temporary as “a cloud, and like a shady grove” (*Songs*, plate 9, line 16). Very few critics have written about this poem, which once again demonstrates the reluctance of scholars to discuss the difficult issue of racial struggle. Those who have discussed the poem construe it in many different and sometimes contradictory ways. Some critics, such as A. E. Dyson, view the poem as a simple promise of racial tolerance in the afterlife, void of any irony (Dyson 45). Others, however, draw attention to the poem’s final engraving, which depicts the black child’s exclusion from Christ’s inner circle. Alan Richardson views this image as a self-conscious and ironic indictment of Christian abolitionists and their condescension toward those whom they try to save (Richardson 239). David Bindman conversely argues that Blake is at least partly guilty of this condescension, unconsciously displaying aspects of the prejudices he seeks to condemn. Bindman attributes this inadvertent racism to the time period’s limited scientific and theological understanding of race (Bindman 382). Ngugi Wa Thiong’o accuses Blake more directly of discrimination, remarking that the poem voices “the white liberal’s dream of a day when black and white can love one another without going through the agony of violent reckoning” (Ngugi 20). He equates the Christian liberalism of the narrative with “the sugary ideology of imperialism: it

fosters the illusion in the exploited of the possibilities of peaceful settlement and painless escape from imperialist violence which anyway is not called violence but law and order” (Ngugi 20). Such a highly politicized “dream,” according to this perspective, must inevitably contain and perpetuate the inequalities that it in some measure conceals.

In trying to explain the stance of both “The Little Black Boy” and *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* with regard to race, this study will utilize the perspectives of Bindman and Ngugi to varying degrees. The connection that Ngugi draws between Blake and British imperialism will be explored with regard to the poet’s Swedenborgian influences. Knowledge of these influences suggests that “The Little Black Boy”’s final engraving may be less ironic than critics have suggested. Bindman’s consideration of physiognomical theory (Bindman 379) and the Biblical curse of Ham (Bindman 376) will also be discussed. Together, these ideas will present a portrait of a brilliant and well-intentioned artist who was nevertheless restricted by the limitations and biases of his era. In Bindman’s words, “[w]hether one is a poet and artist like Blake or a mere academic historian, such contradictions are unavoidable, especially over matters of race” (Bindman 382).

This thesis will endeavor to develop new ways of reading, appreciating, questioning, and even revising the ideas communicated in William Blake’s poetry. The political inconsistencies and inadequacies of the texts under discussion will be highlighted, but not at the expense of their relative strengths and achievements. As Nancy Goslee observes, “[i]t might seem ungenerous [. . .] to suggest that [Blake’s] passionate assertions for the liberation of women, far in advance of his own time and more advanced than anywhere else in his own poetry might endanger other forms of

liberty” (Goslee 102). The problems presented in these and other texts will be discussed in an effort to discover new ideas that may help our society to address similar problems. However, such efforts must necessarily reflect the ideological limitations of individuals, societies, and eras. In the late eighteenth-century or in the present day, one’s efforts to reconcile problems of race and gender must necessarily exist within a speculative framework. To fail to confront these limitations in any given text would be to mistake the activist’s endeavor for the cure.

Chapter Two

The Influence of John Gabriel Stedman

The thematic ambiguity of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is partially a reflection of one of the poem's key influences, John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative* (1790). As Anne Rubenstein and Camilla Townsend argue in "Revolted Negroes and the Devilish Principle: William Blake and Conflicting Visions of Boni's Wars in Surinam, 1772-1796" (1998), this text is often referenced for abolitionist purposes that go against the intention of the author. Instead, Stedman's *Narrative* represents an intersection of viewpoints that is shaped by the rebels and slaves being described, its liberal London publishers, and its radical Christian illustrator, William Blake (Rubenstein and Townsend 273). These contradictions are particularly noticeable when the book seeks to deal with "the question of who the 'Revolted Negroes' were and what the white colonists should do about them" (Rubenstein and Townsend 274). The force of these intratextual tensions results in a work that is multifaceted and detailed if not always coherent. The text represents a cross section of arguments with regard to slavery yet is never able to fully reconcile these arguments. The presence of these gaps in the *Narrative* raises questions about the specific circumstances of its composition, illustration, and publication. For Blake scholars, these inconsistencies also raise questions about the poet's role in the process and how it may have influenced his later work. In Rubenstein and Townsend's words, "[t]he points where the book contradicts itself are those most central to its impact" (Rubenstein and Townsend 274).

Stedman was brought to Surinam in the 1770s to deal with the increasing problem

of runaway and renegade slaves. This rebellious behavior was a perhaps inevitable reaction to the brutal working conditions endured by slaves in the sugar mills. The manufacture of sugar on these plantations was an endless cycle of labor without compensation, often ending in death. For this reason, the rebels “committed Continual Outrages and deprivations upon the coffee and sugar Plantations—both from a Spirit of revenge for the barbarous and inhuman treatment which formerly they had received of their masters & from a view of carrying away plunder [. . .]” (Stedman 66). Because “[a] mere 5,000 whites ruled over at least 50,000 African slaves” (Rubenstein and Townsend 274), the planters often used violent means to enforce their authority. In spite of this threat, however, a number of slaves abandoned their lives on the colonies to regroup in the wilderness as “the *Serameca Rebels*” (Stedman 67). The existence of these rebel communities put the planters’ careful balance of power at risk, especially after they organized and converged under group leaders. When these leaders began systematically to loot white settlements, the government brought in the Scots Brigade in the hope of preventing “a general Massacre” (Stedman 81). By the time the Brigade arrived in Surinam, however, white power had been reasserted by “a regiment of *Manumitted-Slaves* [formed] to fight against their Countrymen [. . .]” (Stedman 81). This strategy of positioning slaves against each other was commonly employed in the colonies and, as Stedman observed, led to intense confrontations and questions of loyalty (Stedman 86).

Joining the Scots Brigade and leaving for Surinam at age twenty-eight, Stedman also faced uncertainties and compromises as he entered this conflict. His main motivations for doing so were financial, his father’s death in 1771 leaving him in debt after an idle youth (Rubenstein and Townsend 276). Until this turn of events, Stedman

had enjoyed a life of wealth, leisure, and sexual conquest modeled after the exploits of his heroes, Tom Jones and Roderick Random (Rubenstein and Townsend 276). From the outset, he was known as a pursuer and manipulator of women, habits that he would continue to indulge on the colony. Educated with his parents in Holland and his uncle in Scotland, “he played many pranks, called maids into his bedroom, and visited bawdy houses” (Rubenstein and Townsend 276). His heedless youth then came to an abrupt end when he left his home to pursue the life of a sailor, without any money or experience to rely on (Rubenstein and Townsend 276). Though Stedman would come to develop very definite beliefs about the “revolted Negroe Slaves” (Stedman 66) in Surinam, he was at this point an outsider thrust into an unstable and bewildering situation. He was unaccustomed to the cruelty surrounding him and had only a tentative grasp of his own role in it.

Stedman’s 1790 manuscript of the *Narrative* reveals much of his own uncertainty toward the rebelling Africans. While he expresses a dedication to the Brigade’s mission, he also feels unexpected regard for the abilities of their enemy. Witnessing many brutal acts of violence and warfare, he laments his inability to prevent or even escape from them. In his descriptions of bloodshed, one can detect regret for the loss of life on both sides. His account of a battle in a rice field, for example, contains a great respect for the enemy and the techniques that they use. In a passage that appears to presage the invention of modern warfare, Stedman writes of “The Stratagem of the Enemy in Surrounding and interspearcing the field by the Large Trunks, and the Roots of Fallen Trees we met with made our Advancing verry Different and Dangerous & at the Back of Which Fortifications they lay Lurking” (Stedman 405). The white soldiers are unfamiliar

with these strategies and lack the courage to directly engage their attackers, leaving most of this fighting to the black rangers. Stedman writes that these rangers “Acted with Wonderful Skill, And Gallantry, While the White Soldiers were too much Animated, the one firing over the other at Random” (Stedman 404). Even in the midst of this ambush, Stedman is able to appreciate the “excellent Generalship” (Stedman 405) and bravery of his opponents and begins to waver in his resolve to confront them. Unlike his skilled attackers, Stedman feels overwhelmed by the intensity of this battle and begins to shut his eyes before firing his rifle. “Even at this Moment my Sensibility Got so much the Better of my Duty,” he writes, “And my Pity for these poor miserable, illtreated People Was such, that I Was rather induced to fire with Eyes Shut [. . .] than to take a Proper Aim, of Which I had Frequent Opportunities” (Stedman 405). This combination of pity and personal fear compromises Stedman’s role as a soldier and, in spite of his intentions, indicates a hesitance to disrupt the native African populace.

When the captain of the rebels, frustrated by his inevitable defeat, lights a nearby town on fire, the author expresses a combination of awe and horror at the ensuing spectacle. He ultimately comes to regret the death and destruction around him, looking down with sadness on a fallen insurgent “After the Heat of the Action” (Stedman 406). For Stedman, this event is “a Scene of Beautiful Horror” (Stedman 406), capturing the sorrow of the encounter in a way that is memorable and almost aesthetic. He would later describe the visual grandeur of the burning forest as being “not unworthy of the Pencil of Hogarth” (Stedman 406), a statement which reveals his sensitivity and attention to detail. The soldier who speaks in the *Narrative* has the mind of a poet and the eye of an artist, capable of acutely and empathetically portraying the human suffering that he perceives.

His composite mindset is aware of the minutiae and multiple viewpoints within a given situation, a trait which has come to define modern thinking. The thoughts documented in the *Narrative* develop beyond the constraints and accepted purviews of English society, and as they broaden, feelings of commonality with the Africans grow more profound and inescapable.

This appreciation for the Africans' way of life continues as he provides a lengthy list of their naturally crafted foods and innovations. He notes that the rebels who have been shot are all "Plump and Fat" (Stedman 409), the result of healthy living in the depths of the forest. There, they enjoy "a State of *Tranquility*" (Stedman 409), catching and barbecuing wild game and fish and cultivating rice, cassava, yams, and plantains in the fields. They are also able to prepare salt, butter, palm tree wine, honey, soap, pots, cups, hammocks, brooms, ropes, tinder, corks, candles, wax, and even their houses from various natural sources (Stedman 409-410). Contradicting many pro-slavery arguments, these rebels have demonstrated their ability to exist without the aid of their overseers, fashioning a contented lifestyle from the raw materials of the forest. Stedman becomes increasingly impressed by their original thinking, and when a group of Africans escapes from the white soldiers by shouting, singing, and firing guns as distractions (Stedman 411), he remarks that this "was Such a piece of Generalship in a Savage People Whom we Affect to Despise as must have Done Honour to an European Prince & Even *Frederick the Great* himself Needed not to have been Ashamed of" (Stedman 411).

As his esteem for the rebels and slaves of Surinam grows, Stedman is increasingly disturbed by the harshness and injustice of their plight. During his stay in Paramaribo, the country's capital, he is unable to escape from the sounds and images of these

atrocities, which make him sad and pensive. “If /as I have Just mention’d/ Cruelties Were become less Common in the Rivers by the Rebels,” he writes, “Barbarities Still Continued in a Shocking degree in the Metropolis, Where my Ears were deaf’d With the Clang of the Whip, & the Shreeks of the Negroes” (Stedman 544). The author witnesses a woman flogged across her breasts until they are torn to shreds, an African girl falling from a window onto broken bottles, and a slave beheaded for shooting an intruder on his mistress’ estate (Stedman 545-546). However, the most memorable act of cruelty is inflicted not on a slave but on a black carpenter for killing the overseer of the Estate Altona. As punishment for this, he is “Sentenced to be brook *Alive* upon the Rack” (Stedman 546), a protracted and excruciating ordeal that Stedman relates in gruesome detail. After the man is placed on a cross, his left hand is chopped off and his bones shattered with an iron bar by an executioner. All of this he is forced to endure “without the benefit of the *Coup de Grace*, or mercy Stroke” (Stedman 546). Stedman is greatly repulsed by this malicious procedure, and when a group of bystanders begin to kick and spit on the man, he “With some Americans [thinks] Proper to Prevent it” (Stedman 547).

The author is even more shocked, however, by the defiance of the victim even after his penalty has been carried out. When his body is untied from the cross, he boldly rests “his Head on Part of the timber and [asks] the by Standers for a Pipe of Tobacco” (Stedman 546). Later, when he notices a soldier in the crowd eating a piece of dry bread, he asks “how it Came that he a *White Man* Should have no meat to eat along with it” (Stedman 547). He then instructs the soldier to “pick my Hand that was Chopt of[f] Clean to the Bones Sir—Next begin to myself till you be Glutted & you’ll have both Bread and Meat which best becomes you” (Stedman 547). Even after he dies and his

body is eaten by vultures (Stedman 550), the man appears to rebel, his head nodding belligerently at Stedman from atop a stake “as if he had been Really Alive” (Stedman 549). In the face of torture and death, this man remains a symbol to Stedman of bravery and an unshakeable resolve. He also serves as one further example of a Surinam inhabitant who refuses to recognize or shrink from white authority. Indeed, his defiant words and eventual ruin by vultures closely resemble aspects of Blake’s Oothoon and suggest a possible influence on *Visions*. Such stories of tyranny often have a potent impact on those who witness or even read of them. In this case, Stedman’s experiences leave him shaken and gradually more troubled by disconsolate thoughts. Instances where he “[muses] on all the different Dangers and Chastisements that the Lower Class of People are Subjected to” (Stedman 546) become more and more frequent, foretelling the considerable effect of such haunting accounts on the readership in England.

Stedman settled in Tiverton, England in 1784 to write the book, which sold well in spite of its expensive cost and even “inspired bowdlerized versions, romances, plagiarisms, and translations into German, Swedish, Dutch and French; after only eleven years, plans for a second edition were underway” (Rubenstein and Townsend 284). This level of success reflects the intensity of the debates over slavery during this period (Rubenstein and Townsend 284). If the reception of the *Narrative* was influenced by these debates, however, the composition and publication of the book was all but shaped by them. The individuals involved in the creation of this text, including Stedman himself, were caught in the midst of a passionate discussion and strove to adjust their claims accordingly. Despite his sometimes empathetic stance toward his subject matter, Stedman advocated slavery as a form of benevolent paternalism in the first, 1790

manuscript version of the *Narrative*. This version, previously referenced here, was the edition sent to Blake for illustration by Joseph Johnson:

The first contradictions in the text came from Stedman's awareness that he was writing in changed circumstances, that by the 1780s there was more in the air on the subject of slavery than there had been when he kept his journal in tropical Surinam. [. . .] He frequently used images of slaves as victims and liked to emphasize how the sight of others in torment made him suffer [. . .] However, he wrote, the way to ease the slaves' suffering was not to end slavery but to enforce the kind of benevolent paternalism that should have existed all along. (Rubenstein and Townsend 285)

This mentality is evident in Stedman's comment that "best of all was never to have drove these poor Creatures to such extremities by constant ill treatment [. . .] while at the same time it is certainly true that to Govern the Coast-of-Guinea Negroes well, nay even for their own benefit—the strictest discipline is absolutely necessary" (Stedman 68).

Ironically, Rubenstein and Townsend posit that the compassionate tone of the *Narrative* is Stedman's effort to reinforce the status quo of the colonial labor system. His descriptions of anguish, in this context, become a way of more effectively communicating a point of view that is still pro-slavery.

Publisher Joseph Johnson later revised the book's endorsement of "a strict but kind paternalism" (Rubenstein and Townsend 286) in the printed, 1796 version of the *Narrative*, the most commonly read edition of the text. In 1791, Johnson and his free-thinking circle of editors received the 1790 manuscript, sent copies to various artists, and then "[m]uch to [Stedman's] annoyance, they altered it significantly" (Rubenstein and

Townsend 286). Their reasons for making these revisions were most likely influenced by the recent rebellions occurring in the colonies during this time. After events such as the violent Haitian Revolution, Johnson's circle had reason to believe that Stedman's solution was impractical and poorly considered:

Stedman finished his manuscript in the year [the Haitian Revolution] began on the French slave colony of Saint-Domingue. By the time the book was in press, Britain had 60,000 troops committed to the war against the ex-slaves and mulattoes. Everyone in Johnson's circle would have been discussing events avidly; to them, Stedman's faith in the possibility of slavery being made workable with kinder and firmer treatment for the slaves must have appeared naïve. (Rubenstein and Townsend 286)

To lessen the force of this message, the editors removed several lines that criticized Cambridge intellectual and leading abolitionist Thomas Clarkson. They also made Stedman's relationship with his slave companion, Joanna, appear more sympathetic. Though his interaction with Joanna was more clearly based on dominance in the 1790 manuscript, "[b]y the time the *Narrative* was published, the relationship appeared as a more distant, romantic attachment originating on Joanna's side as much as on Stedman's" (Rubenstein and Townsend 287). As we will see, similar discrepancies concerning Joanna exist between Stedman's original journals and his 1790 manuscript. When preparing their 1796 edition, Johnson and his editors simply carried these changes a few steps further in order to make the author seem more humane. Stedman made his changes to strengthen the book's pro-slavery message, but ironically, the similar changes made by Johnson's liberal collaborators partly explain why the text is so often interpreted in

differing ways today.

William Blake's illustrations of the *Narrative*, however, more than any other factor, have led to its eventual interpretation as an abolitionist piece. "From its first publication to the present," Rubenstein and Townsend write, "its illustrations by Blake have been used as if they were photographs of the horrors of slavery in works ranging from student textbooks to ACT UP billboards" (Rubenstein and Townsend 273). Producing these images had a profound impact on Blake, informing much of his own work in *Visions* and later poems. This high level of reproduction also suggests their unforgettable impact on the reader, possibly more than any other element of Stedman's *Narrative*. Each engraving "speak[s] in the familiar voice of Blake's poetry" (Rubenstein and Townsend 289) and leaves in the viewer's mind an indelible portrait of a difficult and sometimes hellish world. Blake's commercial work was usually less distinctive than his more personal efforts, and even in this case he was basically reproducing Stedman's original drawings (Rubenstein and Townsend 289). His approach to engraving these drawings, however, involves a disorienting and almost surreal lack of perspective and conventional detail that enhances each likeness' immediacy. While more distinguished artists like Francesco Bartolozzi employ standard techniques of perspective and fill each scene with detail, Blake deemphasizes any element that would distract from the plight of the slaves. "Bartolozzi, unlike Blake, used perfect Italianate three-point perspective to provide the illusion of depth," Rubenstein and Townsend observe. The individuals in Blake's work, by contrast, appear "as dark figures framed against a blank sky" and "look more like characters on an empty stage" (Rubenstein and Townsend 293). Blake's depictions remove any possible barriers between the viewer and the subject, drawing both

into an intimate and almost claustrophobic relationship (Rubenstein and Townsend 294). These scenes confront audiences in a way that is singular, unnatural, and inexorable, their harsh truths refusing to fade into the background. In a similar way, Stedman's *Narrative* would refuse to fade away for Blake, influencing a considerable amount of his subsequent work and playing a pivotal role in the composition of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.

The incident in Stedman's ambiguous story that is most relevant to the development of *Visions* is the author's relationship with a fifteen-year-old slave, Joanna. Stedman was well known for his sexual exploits in Holland and Scotland, and this behavior continued after he relocated to Surinam. He recorded his experiences in a personal diary referenced by Rubenstein and Townsend, which offers many new insights about the writer. According to the diary, Stedman "spent his time in Surinam chasing the last of the fugitives farther into the bush, dining with Dutch planters who regaled him with bloody stories of the Saramakas, wincing at the worst punishments meted out to the slaves, and 'wenching' among black women wherever he found them" (Rubenstein and Townsend 276). His relationship with Joanna, then, was one of many such relationships that were often characterized by dominance and immediate sexual gratification. Yet the 1790 manuscript tells a different story, making Joanna the central focus of an affair that was more monogamous and romantic. In another example of this text's editorial transformation of certain events, she becomes "his one and only beloved, whom he had finally intended to marry and bring to Europe except that she expressed some reluctance to go, and he lacked the funds. (Inexplicably, he did have the funds to bring to Europe a young male slave he had purchased.)" (Rubenstein and Townsend 278). Stedman's love

for Joanna and financial inability to free her from slavery is an oft cited element of his story, noted by David Erdman, Nancy Goslee, Anne Mellor, and Steven Vine. The account typifies the author's youthful ineptness and inner conflict. The fact that he altered this story to make himself more sympathetic to British readers (Rubenstein and Townsend 278) is one further example of this inner conflict. The young soldier who served in Surinam had no compunctions about using African women for his own pleasure, yet later in life he felt the need to hide these actions from his audience. Even as a work of fiction, this account of Joanna reveals much about its author and informs one of *Visions*' key thematic interests.

Visions tells the story of a young woman, Oothoon, and her awakening to sexual experience as she plucks "Leutha's flower" (*Visions*, plate 3, line 5), the "Golden nymph" (*Visions* 72) of "Leutha's vale" (*Visions*, plate 3, line 4). As Eugenie R. Freed notes, she also symbolically represents "the soft soul of America" (*Visions*, plate 4, line 3), "the brave New World untouched and as yet unpolluted by European influence and values" (Freed 71). Oothoon's anticipation of sexuality brings her extreme joy and prompts her to journey "[o]ver the waves" (*Visions*, plate 4, line 14) to experience more of adult life. She is betrothed to marry her lover, Theotormon, and as she embarks on this voyage overseas, she moves swiftly over "Theotormon's reign" (*Visions*, plate 4, line 15), the Atlantic Ocean (Johnson and Grant 72). Before she can complete this rite of passage, however, she is tragically raped by Bromion, who symbolizes imperialism, slavery, and a shattering loss of innocence. "The tyrant Bromion is the imperialist power proclaiming 'Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north and south' (1:20, E46)," writes Freed. "[H]e is the slave-owner who boasts 'Stamp't with my signet are the swarthy

children of the sun' (1:21, E46); he is the rapist who reviles Oothoon as his 'harlot' and taunts her devastated lover Theotormon [. . .]" (Freed 71-72). In playing each of these parts, Bromion enacts a vicious exchange with Oothoon that is characterized by commerce as well as sex. David V. Erdman observes that Bromion impregnates Oothoon in order to increase her market value as a slave ("Blake's Vision" 242). Consequently, her once pleasurable bodily interaction with the world becomes a source of guilt, anguish, domination, and eventual rejection. Viewing her as a tainted object after the rape, Theotormon refuses all contact with his fiancée and jealously broods over her perceived infidelity. "Theotormon," Freed comments, and as other critics have noted, "tormented (as his name suggests) by the strictures of religious hypocrisy, ignores Oothoon's plight altogether, and wallows in self-pity and self-involvement" (Freed 72).

In reaction to this, Oothoon passes through a series of psychological stages, trying in succession to regain Theotormon's attention, cleanse away her sense of shame, and argue against her supposedly tainted condition. In Freed's words, she "alternately laments her lover's rejection of her, offering to martyr herself to prove her own love, and expresses her real longings—for recognition, for love, for an imaginative life—all evidently doomed to eternal frustration" (Freed 72). The poem's final lines state that the Daughters of Albion "hear her woes, & eccho back her sighs" (*Visions*, plate 11, line 13), which suggests the futility of her defiant words in securing liberty for women. As the poem ends, Oothoon is left a divided character, suspended in midair in a final engraving and unsure whether she accepts or denies the love and approval of Theotormon. This at least partially undercuts the rebellious tone of her concluding speech and, as with Stedman's *Narrative*, documents the emergence of an indecisive, constantly changing,

and distinctly modern sensibility.

In “Blake’s Vision of Slavery” (1952), David V. Erdman draws a more direct connection between *Visions* and the *Narrative*, positing that the poem is a retelling of and commentary on Stedman’s chronicles. This view is reiterated with only minor variations in Erdman’s *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (1969) and greatly informs Rubenstein and Townsend’s work in 1998. Failure to recognize Blake’s relationship to slavery in general and Stedman in particular, Erdman writes, has severely limited critical responses to the work. Sexuality and slavery are the main concerns of *Visions*, yet discussion of the former has always prevailed in the literary community over the latter. “As a ‘lament over the possessiveness of love and the impossible demand for purity,’” Erdman writes, quoting Bernard Blackstone, “the poem has been widely explored in the light of Blake’s note-book poems on this theme and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*” (“Blake’s Vision” 242). In focusing so exclusively on this one facet of the poem, however, many critics have overlooked the piece’s thematic intricacy and social relevance. For this reason, the strong influence of “the parliamentary and editorial debates of 1789-93 on the bill to abolish the British slave trade” (“Blake’s Vision” 243) on *Visions* has largely been ignored. Erdman’s article follows the relationship of Blake’s work to these debates and to the tumultuous first years of the French Revolution. Though the abolition bill failed in 1793 as a result of Anti-Jacobin attacks, the fervor generated by the movement was massive, irrepressible, and noticed by many intellectuals. Blake’s “The Little Black Boy” and *Visions* were written at the beginning and end of these debates, respectively, and both voice criticisms that were growing stronger and more widespread within English society. Bromion, in fact, is partially a caricature of Edmund

Burke, Lord Abingdon, and the slave-agents who opposed the bill in Parliament.

Theotormon, in turn, signifies the “wavering abolitionist who cannot bring himself openly to condemn slavery though he deplores the *trade*” (“Blake’s Vision” 243).

Blake followed these debates and the subject of the slave trade with a keen interest, and his involvement in producing the *Narrative* only added to that interest. “Blake’s knowledge of the cruelties of slavery came to him doubtless through many sources,” Erdman states, “but one source was particularly impressive and, literally, graphic” (“Blake’s Vision” 243). Blake completed his sixteen plates for the *Narrative* in December 1792 and December 1793, at the same time that he was composing *Visions*. He was also the only engraver who subscribed for the text after publication, “if we can assume that he is the subscriber designated ‘Blake (Mr. Wm.) London’” (“Blake’s Vision” 244). After taking “more than his usual care” (“Blake’s Vision” 244) to complete each plate, Blake felt a personal connection to the finished work that went beyond the concerns of most commercial artists. Beyond providing illustrations, Blake was moved by Stedman’s *words* and sought to respond to those words in a project of his own making.

Erdman interprets *Visions* as a retelling of the story of Stedman and Joanna, with Theotormon and Oothoon symbolizing the two lovers. He notes that Stedman’s inability to free Joanna even after their marriage is “a quandary suggestive of that of Blake’s Theotormon, who loves Oothoon but cannot free her” (“Blake’s Vision” 245). Stedman, according to the *Narrative*, could not bear to be parted from Joanna, yet his wife, “to prove the equality of her ‘soul’ to ‘that of an European,’ insisted on enduring the condition of slavery until she could purchase freedom with her own labor” (“Blake’s

Vision" 245). Like Oothoon, Joanna associates her feelings of love with a need for self-sacrifice, and Erdman observes that "Blake's Oothoon invites vultures to prey upon her naked flesh for the same reason" ("Blake's Vision" 245). In both narratives, Stedman and Theotormon are left incapacitated, or impotent, unable to prevent the acts of aggression that surround them. Erdman describes Stedman's "shamefaced" ("Blake's Vision" 245) reaction to seeing Joanna on an auction block and a slave woman being whipped ("Blake's Vision" 245). This is akin to the shame that Theotormon suffers as he sits in the cave beside Bromion and Oothoon, "the theology-tormented man, inhibited by a moral code that tells him his love is impure" ("Blake's Vision" 246). Images of physical bondage envelop these men, reminding them of their own inadequacies and the obstacles facing their lovers. As Erdman points out, numerous descriptions and engravings of Oothoon show her imprisoned and in a subservient position:

Oothoon advertised as pregnant by Bromion is the slave on the auction block whose pregnancy enhances her price; Oothoon chained by an ankle is the 'Female Negro Slave, with a Weight chained to her Ankle'—or the similarly chained victim of the infamous Captain Kimber, cited in Parliament in 1791. The cold green wave enveloping the chained Oothoon (Pl. 50b) is symbolic of the liberating fires of rebellion. ("Blake's Vision" 245-246)

The "liberating fires of rebellion" notwithstanding, the prevailing tone of these visuals is bleak and repressive, conveying sexual, economic, and racial forms of slavery. Chains and pregnancy place a literal burden on Oothoon that, to a lesser degree, is also felt by the other characters. Bromion later appears with chains around his own legs, and all

three characters converse in a Platonic cave deprived of sunlight and folded in Theotormon's "black jealous waters" (*Visions*, plate 5, line 4). Within such a setting, they all appear as prisoners, trapped in what Johnson and Grant call a "'No Exit' triangle" (Johnson and Grant 69). Like Stedman and Joanna's relationship, this union is characterized by discontent, the female unable to leave and the males struggling to fully possess her. "The persons and problems of Stedman's *Narrative* reappear, creatively modified, in the text and illustrations of Blake's *Visions*," Erdman writes, as "the rape and torture of the virgin slave, her pride in the purity and equality of her soul, and the frustrated desire of her lover and husband" ("Blake's Vision" 245).

Oothoon's ethereal nature allows her to embody many different forms of slavery and racial suffering, even resembling a combination of different peoples and nationalities physically. Erdman mentions that she is "[p]ictured in chains" ("Blake's Vision" 249) that recall the exhausted African worker in an earlier engraving ("Blake's Vision" 249). She also possesses physical features similar to those of an American Indian, with the same "loose black hair, sad mouth, and angular limbs" ("Blake's Vision" 249). In these ways, she becomes an amalgamation of lifestyles and standpoints that simultaneously connotes reconciliation and a constant state of discord. Oothoon is a paradox, offering a promise of unity that exists under conditions of extreme tension and inequality. "Stedman's emblematical picture treats Europe, Africa, and America as three separate women," Erdman points out, noting one of Blake's engravings in the *Narrative*. "Blake makes them into one" ("Blake's Vision" 248-249).

However, as with Stedman's emblematical picture, elements of Blake's singular portrait threaten to destabilize his notion of racial and ethnic integration. The concept of

purity in *Visions*, for example, often accompanies images of European whiteness, Oothoon's skin being a "snowy" (*Visions*, plate 5, line 12) color rather than the "copper colour of the engraved America" ("Blake's Vision" 249). Erdman sees this whiteness as being more metaphoric than literal, signifying freedom and tolerance rather than a specific race. He equates this figuration in *Visions* with comparable imagery in "The Little Black Boy," where "[i]f the Negro is to be free of his black cloud, the little English boy must be likewise free from his 'white cloud,' which is equally opaque" ("Blake's Vision" 249). According to this reading, each child's "cloud" denotes a prejudicial viewpoint that obscures an awareness of the inherent purity within all human beings. This purity is white or "snowy" only in an abstract sense and is not associated with a specific skin color. Oothoon allows vultures to tear away her skin in order to reveal her inner purity to Theotormon, yet this painful action, in Erdman's view, only serves to make her stronger. "Consider the dark skin of worm-ripened fruit, which is 'sweetest'; or the darkness of 'the soul prey'd on by woe' [. . .]," he writes. "It is the soul rather than the body of the slave that is 'inured,' in being richer in experience" ("Blake's Vision" 249-250). The very anguish of this self-sacrifice is equated with the dark colors of the "worm-ripened fruit" or the "new wash'd lamb ting'd with the village smoke" (*Visions*, plate 6, line 18), and these colors, in turn, are linked to a process of liberating purification. In his analysis, Erdman accepts this light and dark symbolism and the near martyrdom of Oothoon as positive, but as we will see in the next chapter, other critics have questioned the ethical implications of these themes.

Erdman nevertheless convincingly argues that *Visions* derives its basic story from the events of J. G. Stedman's *Narrative*. In its initial form, the *Narrative* is a pro-slavery

text, yet aspects of the book and accompanying illustrations prompt readers to question this avowed message. Stedman's own uncertainties and Blake's powerful engravings work against the intent of the author, as does *Visions* more directly in its critique. The aim of Blake's poem is to make the indeterminate subtext of the *Narrative* more apparent, but in doing so, *Visions* creates further problems of its own with regard to race and gender. Oothoon becomes a sacrificial figure to Theotormon's wounded jealousy, and promises of racial unity consist of strained and potentially damaging metaphors. Whiteness represents purity, while blackness evokes inevitable suffering and a tainted state. While Blake scholars may be more comfortable accepting these symbols as mere abstractions, the explicitly racial content of the poem suggests that this answer is incomplete. Erdman considers *Visions* to be entirely praiseworthy in its depiction of race, but other critics such as Steven Vine, Anne Mellor, and Nancy Goslee have not been so kind. As their analyses will make evident, *Visions* has noble intentions that are distorted by an overly abstract form and imperfect artistic decisions. Blake advocates liberation for slaves and for women, but the mitigating factors of his place, time period, and chosen artistic method weaken his intended commentary. How scholars should judge the resulting commentary, and what forms of expression should replace it, remain to be determined.

Chapter Three

The Visions of the Daughters of Albion and the Politics of Abstraction

William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is simultaneously an expression of defiance and despair, the characters of Oothoon and the Daughters of Albion sounding passionate cries that reflect and interrelate both emotions. This sense of thematic abstraction is evident in the poem's depiction of the human body, which as Steven Vine argues is the site of Oothoon's sexual violation and awakening (Vine 49). Her body offers a means of retaliation against her fiancé, Theotormon, her "defiled bosom" (*Visions*, plate 5, line 15) in fact resembling the incriminating marks of an abused lover. According to Vine, contradiction is the preferred way for this character to realize her "own utopian prospects" (Vine 59), but the critic fails to acknowledge the dangers of using physicality as a form of rebellion. Citing Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Anne Mellor notes that physical and sexual dependence often characterized female submission to men in eighteenth-century British life. Vine's espousal of physical revolution, and Blake's endorsement of free love in *Visions*, risk playing into a system of sexual indulgence that allows women to be easily manipulated (Mellor 364). Further problems neglected by Vine include the poem's emphasis on the inner perspectives of its characters, which comes at the expense of a more thorough commentary on the issues of slavery, race, and gender. Nancy Goslee makes this point, observing that the opening descriptions of rape and enslavement succumb to a vague conclusion based in "private myth" (Goslee 105). Before this concluding speech, Oothoon, Theotormon, and Bromion become fatalistically ensnared in their lives of

solitary trauma, self-imposed isolation, and imperial conquest, respectively. That such differing lifestyles could lead to the same grim fate, trapped within “houses [. . .] shut up from cold despair” (*Visions*, plate 7, lines 1-2), further undercuts the poem’s reputed message of a visionary utopia. Blake may criticize Bromion’s role in fostering the suffering of colonialism, but he does not provide his characters with a plausible way of breaking their shackles.

In “‘That Mild Beam’: Enlightenment and enslavement in William Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*,” Steven Vine states that contradiction is the principal characteristic of and driving impetus behind Blake’s poem. For Oothoon and the Daughters of Albion in particular, every action and word expressing freedom accompanies or simultaneously invokes a reminder of their political and bodily restriction. This is especially evident when Oothoon delivers her concluding plea for free love, which as previously discussed is both a defiant and intensely desperate speech. Compounding this sense of desperation is the echoing refrain of the Daughters of Albion that implies an endlessly cyclical and fruitless pattern of communication. As Vine notes, they issue their despondent sighs at the onset and conclusion of the poem in a closed system that, in his words, is “severed from collective utterance and political possibility” (Vine 40). Though her words have the force and audacity of a fiery separatist manifesto, her total isolation and inability to categorically rally support to her aid more closely resemble a stranded victim crying out in empty space. The unfortunate circumstances that motivate her final plea overpower its beauty and independence, leaving “some of the most powerful emancipatory lines in English poetry [. . .] a lament, a faint cry delivered on the margins of history” (Vine 40).

Confined to this inadequate position, Oothoon must waver between combative and submissive stances in order to survive, at times modifying the emphases of her final speech within a single passage. She discusses the liberating powers of free love, for example, but then imagines herself catching women of “mild silver, or of furious gold” (*Visions*, plate 10, line 24) for Theotormon in “silken nets and traps of adamant” (*Visions*, plate 10, line 23). In trying to satisfy this love, she succumbs to the “nets found under thy night pillow, to catch virgin joy” (*Visions*, plate 9, line 11) that she initially decries. The presence of “silver” and “gold” skin also suggests racial oppression and the commodification of the female body, as each of the “girls” (*Visions*, plate 10, line 24) becomes like currency. By participating in this act of enslavement, Oothoon passes from victim to victimizer in the space of a few lines, an additional yet shocking result of her contradictory status. She exists on a margin between these personas that is related to Blake’s concern with the universal but that nevertheless leaves her without a unique and concrete selfhood. As Vine says, “her speeches veer disconcertingly between subjection and fierce autonomy, and she seems unable to find a position from which to speak that is free from contradiction” (Vine 41). This “veer”ing from one extreme position to the other is not entirely the precarious balancing act that these words would imply, however. Indefiniteness in *Visions* is in equal part the basis for the poem’s revolutionary ethic, as Oothoon hovers beyond the grasp of her male tormentors in the poem’s final engraving. Her story in many ways is about trying to redefine traumatic experiences in a positive light, and “her capture in contradiction is far from a simple enslavement, for *Visions* strives to discover political possibility *within* contradiction” (Vine 41).

The treatment of the human body in *Visions* most clearly indicates this innovative

potential found in ontological contradiction. Oothoon's body is simultaneously the site of her sexual awakening and violation, and as Vine discusses, its eventual decimation by eagles "shows it to be the very image of oppression" (Vine 49). In the bloody aftermath of this feast, she "reflect[s]/The image of Theotormon on [her] pure transparent breast" (*Visions*, plate 5, lines 15-16), but this alleged purity comes at a grisly price, her "defiled bosom" (*Visions*, plate 5, line 15). By surrendering to the eagles, she is endeavoring to transcend the contamination of her body, yet the consequences of this action only worsen her already desecrated condition. "Oothoon's 'bosom' is not purified but bloodied," Vine writes, "not spiritualized but brutalized in a terribly material assault upon the flesh" (Vine 49). While Oothoon is unable to achieve this physical transcendence, her body remains an attuned and expressive site for resistance. According to Vine, "Oothoon's anguished cry, 'How can I be defild when I reflect thy image pure?' splits into two opposed readings: it subordinates her to the purity of Theotormon's image, but also subverts that image through a series of ironic metaphors" (Vine 58). Theotormon's appearance in the renewed "clear spring" (*Visions*, plate 5, line 19) of her breast, in this context, establishes a correlation between his violent passivity and her "defiled bosom." Oothoon's words indirectly identify Theotormon as an accomplice in her victimization by both the devouring eagles and Bromion.

The later racial metaphors involving the lamb and the swan further contribute to the redefinition of Theotormon's notion of purity, as they are purified rather than sullied by the dark colors of the smoke and red earth. Juxtaposed with the image of her mutilated chest, these figurations suggest that "Oothoon is able to 'reflect' Theotormon's image *swarthily as well as clearly*" (Vine 58-59). In these ways, she distorts the Urizenic

reproduction of this image so that it more accurately reflects her inner reality, wounded and changed by a remembered trauma. The signs of this pain surface on her skin like bruises inflicted by an abusive lover, denoting agony but also loudly signaling the abuse itself to the world. Calling attention to these marks in her final oration transmits her feelings of guilt onto Theotormon in a cathartic accusation that is voiced in part by her broken body. For her, the lamb, the swan, and “the fruit that the worm feeds on” (*Visions*, plate 6, line 17), corporeal suffering precedes a sense of rebirth and retribution as racial classifications and the marks of sexual injury become strange badges of honor. The body conflates and emblemizes race and gender as bases for a uniform type of patriarchal mistreatment, a symbol that fuses Oothoon and the exhausted slave of the fifth plate. Vine notes that they lie in a similar, horizontal position and writes that “just as Oothoon’s bloody breast stains the clarity of Theotormon’s self-mirroring, so the slave’s black body—in a visionary retort to Theotormon’s obsession with whiteness—interrupts his pious self-contemplation with an image of colonial violence” (Vine 51-52). These figures fall under the gaze of Theotormon just as another slave fell under the pitying gaze of Stedman, the soldier’s “gun stand[ing] murderously over a dead slave” (Vine 52). Presenting their bodies in this position, Vine argues, creates an additional link between this poem and Stedman that highlights the latent hostility of Theotormon’s submissiveness. “[L]ike the wavering Stedman, he weeps for those laid low by slavery, but reproduces nevertheless the thing he abhors” (Vine 53). He longs to escape from Oothoon’s persistent entreats and incriminating wounds, which remind him of his failure to protect her and consummate their relationship. Her ordeal saddens and repels him but in the end does not earn his sympathy. Retreating into the blinding shadows of a cave’s

entrance, however, does not prevent a momentary glimpse of the two prostrate bodies.

Vine acknowledges the complications that result from Oothoon's use of "Theotormon's discourse of punishment and enslavement" (Vine 58), noting that taking part in such a discourse, even in a subversive fashion, results in an interminable cycle of consensual torture, where Oothoon is "fed on by the worm, preyed on by woe, washed by waters and cleansed by the immortal river" (Vine 58). To valorize pain as a mark of honor, he implies, is to give a degree of legitimacy to the causal act of abuse. He concludes, however, that Blake's careful use of thematic contradictions ultimately exposes and overturns this cycle, returning the tone of an indictment to Oothoon's words. The phases of experience that shape her language and prophetic mentality are interminable yet undefined, leaving a gap for creative vision and political revision. "Paradoxically," he writes, "[. . .] it is the *contradictory* nature of Oothoon's visions that most powerfully dramatizes their political significance, for her speeches meditate the limits as well as the possibilities of their own utopian prospects" (Vine 59). Vine discovers intricate and confounding levels of incongruity within *Visions*, but like Erdman, he ends by praising Blake's ability to construct a dexterous social commentary.

In "Sex, Violence, and Slavery: Blake and Wollstonecraft," Anne Mellor criticizes Blake from a different and more overtly feminist perspective, analyzing the character of Oothoon with reference to female intellectuals of the period and particularly Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Her research seeks to define more explicitly what Blake means by "slavery" in *Visions* and to compare his designation to that of Wollstonecraft's (Mellor 345). Unlike Erdman, who views sexuality and slavery as "two poles of the poem's axis," Mellor sees the subjects as

closely related. To explain this connection, she gives an account of the case of black slave James Somerset, during which the presiding William Murray, Lord Mansfield, “[i]n his famous judgment [. . .] maintained that England was by nature ‘a soil whose air is deemed too pure for slaves to breathe in’” (Mellor 345). This ruling, at least in a legal sense, allowed England to become “a mecca in the eyes of slaves from the British West Indies” (Mellor 345-346). In an unsettling aside, however, Mr. Dunning, the defense lawyer for Somerset’s owner, remarked during his argument “that slavery, *like marriage*, was a ‘municipal’ rather than a ‘natural’ relationship, and Lord Mansfield did not object to this equation” (Mellor 346). This statement essentially upheld the opinion that relationships such as these were instituted by a legal precedent that offset any outside ethical standards. Even more significant was the “implied parallel between wives and slaves [. . .] [which] did not escape the attention of the women writers of the period” (Mellor 346). Provoked by these arguments, female intellectuals and public figures began to occupy major positions in the Anti-Slavery Societies that formed in England from 1780 to 1830, rising to become “the leading figures in the social protests against the slave trade” (Mellor 349). These women petitioned, organized boycotts of sugar, and produced voluminous poems, novels, and tracts denouncing the trade (Mellor 349), which was finally abolished legally in 1807 while continuing “illegally for several more years” (Mellor 350).

Of these female political agitators, Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the most influential and innovative, persuasively discussing the issues of women’s rights, slavery, and public education in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Drawing from the arguments of Lord Mansfield’s antislavery judgment, Wollstonecraft’s book notes ways

in which the situation for women in England is comparable to that of a slave.

Establishing “legal and psychological grounds” (Mellor 363) for these claims, she notes that a woman “is not a ‘person’ in law; she cannot own property, have custody of children, bring legal suits—although she can be held solely responsible for any crime she commits” (Mellor 363). In these ways, women and men legally comprise “one character” (Wollstonecraft 154), yet Wollstonecraft warns that “[women] may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent” (Wollstonecraft 88). Women are submissive to men as a result of their cultural dependence on sexual gratification, which stunts their mental development and leaves them vulnerable to manipulation. Because of the strict and inescapable nature of marriage during this time period, women are unable to seek out any source of comfort or security beyond the legal husband in their lives. Financially, legally, and emotionally, they are trapped within a form of forced servitude similar to that of “the poor African slaves [. . .] subject to prejudices that brutalize them” (Wollstonecraft 257). While Blake can easily espouse free love as a solution to this form of bondage, for women sexuality outside of marriage poses an even greater risk, allowing men to “[abandon] them, dishonored and pregnant, to a life of social ostracism and prostitution” (Mellor 364). For Wollstonecraft, scenarios involving unbridled sexual behavior, whether inside or outside of marriage, invariably lead to the exploitation of women by men. Distancing herself from the bodily methods of resistance previously seen in *Visions*, she instead focuses on educating and liberating the female mind. Rationality and socially responsible judgment, in her view, can only be cultivated after “curbing female sexual desire” (Mellor 363) and redirecting it into a marriage based on “the calm tenderness of friendship, the confidence

of respect” (Wollstonecraft 114). By enjoying such a rapport with their spouses, women will be able to forget idle flirtations and concentrate more intently on living an independent adult life. The naïve obedience of a wife to her husband, the basis for Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s “submissive, coquettish child-brides” (Mellor 363), succumbs to an equal relationship between educated and sensible peers. This relationship enables the female to escape from the expectations of codified, heterosexual behavior instilled during childhood and young adulthood. Wollstonecraft compares these expectations to a slave-like sense of obedience, but she is also “careful to qualify such rhetorical usages” (Mellor 364). “I do not [...] dream of insinuating that boys and girls are always slaves,” she explains. “I only insist that when they are obliged to submit to authority blindly their faculties are weakened, and their tempers rendered imperious or abject” (Wollstonecraft 270). Like Blake in *Visions*, Wollstonecraft draws points of connection between feminist rhetoric and the antislavery movement, yet she also does a clearer job of identifying disparities between the two topics. She makes these comparisons as a broader challenge to the authority of white, European males, illustrating how such authority derives personal pleasure from differing systems of categorization, bondage, and forced servitude.

In her analysis of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* as a response to Wollstonecraft, Mellor notes that Blake’s emphasis is more on sexual manifestations of slavery and less on societal and doctrinal slavery. The poem discusses the enslavement of women and the slave trade of expansionist England only as they are linked to the greater theme of sexual modesty, a concept that Blake sees as the most significant threat to personal freedom. “Blake’s primary concern in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is

not to end the slave trade [. . .],” Mellor writes. “His primary concern is to liberate the ‘daughters of Albion,’ *British* women, from the greater slavery they experience at home [. . .] that very rational modesty advocated by Wollstonecraft—from which Blake hoped to free both British women *and* British men” (Mellor 365-366). For this reason, specific visualizations of racial oppression in the poem are few and subtle, constituting in Mellor’s view an “erasure of visual violence” (Mellor 365). Citing the aforementioned engraving of the black man lying prostrate, she notes that “no overt physical abuse appears; his pick axe lies, unused, nearby” (Mellor 365). Indeed, from the beginning to the end of the work, engravings of black individuals are largely absent, as “neither Oothoon herself nor her lover Theotormon is depicted as black, not even copper-toned” (Mellor 365).

Blake condemns slavery in the piece but also limits his portrait of freedom to the experiences of white, European males, a perspective that influences the depiction of Oothoon as a submissive martyr. Operating in direct opposition to *Visions*’ message of freedom is a sense that human suffering is inevitable and that rising to embrace that suffering is somehow heroic. “Blake thus transforms the literal atrocities of slavery in the West Indies (recall Stedman’s description of the male slave hanging from a hook, his putrifying breast eaten by vultures) into a visual *metaphor*, into a rhetorical figure of heroic Promethean suffering” (Mellor 369). This suffering occurs in a work that nevertheless still fails to acknowledge how victims like Oothoon are controlled by and forced into accordance with masculine authority. Her compromised state is relevant to Blake only to the extent that she is able to fulfill male desire, her words and deeds existing only to gratify the sexual fantasies of her author. The so-called liberation of

English women to appease male desire, however, comes at the expense of cultures outside of England still held in thrall by lustful greed. “Insofar as the black body can be assimilated into the white body, the black man can enjoy the same ‘rights’ as the white man,” Mellor writes. “Insofar as the female body gratifies the sexual and psychological desires of the male body, she achieves her freedom” (Mellor 368).

Blake views all forms of sexual experience as intrinsically pure and enlightening, even finding positive qualities to Oothoon’s rape by Bromion. As the metaphor of the fruit being eaten by the worm tells us, this poem regards the rape as a painful but finally enriching experience, one that leaves “her body [. . .] more delicious” (Mellor 366). Free love remains Oothoon’s salvation, and if Blake chooses to render this love with shades of ambiguity, he also never replaces it with a greater theme. Mellor notes the abstract qualities of the poem previously discussed by Vine, mentioning that “[s]ome readers have suggested that Blake wanted us to see Oothoon’s doctrine of free love, her ‘silken nets and traps of adamant’ [. . .] as Urizenic forms of psychological enslavement” (Mellor 368). However, she is also correct in noting that the “utopian prospects” suggested by critics like Vine never produce a more concrete answer than that of “Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as the mountain wind!” (*Visions*, plate 10, line 16). The force of these declarations makes them difficult to dismiss as ironic, and if they are given negative connotations, these remain subtle and largely in the background. Mellor observes that the Motto “the eye sees more than the heart knows” (*Visions*, plate 2) suggests an answer to these questions that exists apart from romantic feelings of “the heart.” But the key difficulty of *Visions* is that it never denotes “what that alternative could be” (Mellor 368) beyond physical interaction, erotic delight, and the proof of heroic merit through torture.

As the poem ends, Oothoon, Theotormon, and Bromion remain trapped in the depths of a Platonic cave, once again bound by inescapable, Blakean anguish. Mellor takes issue with Blake's inability to provide a *true* promise of freedom from this anguish, as he instead leaves his characters forever separated from the light of "the sun looking in from behind Blake's design" (Mellor 368). How these characters might escape from the cave and enter the sunlight remains a mystery, one that Blake consistently refuses to solve for us. In Mellor's words, "[a]s the creator of this poem and its designs, Blake must take responsibility for what the work does not say as well as for what it does say" (Mellor 368). By cruelly leaving his characters stranded in such a desolate state, the author risks counteracting or at least severely weakening Vine's hope for a prophetic utopia.

Nancy Goslee further criticizes the overtly sexual and psychological domain of the poem in "Slavery and Sexual Character: Questioning the Master Trope in Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*." In her analysis of *Visions*, she asks how the inner mental states of the characters influence the poem's outward concern with slavery, race, and women's rights. She notes that the piece follows "a kind of ABA' sonata form" (Goslee 104), moving from descriptions of gender and race based oppression to a more cerebral "exploration of private vision [. . .] in which neither gender nor race is explicit" (Goslee 104). In the third section of the poem, Blake returns to the theme of women's rights in Oothoon's final speech, which is given from a decidedly European perspective (Goslee 104). As *Visions* moves through these stages, it curiously seems to displace the themes of slavery featured in Bromion's dialogue. This specific instance of oppression recedes as the psychological anxieties of Blake's characters grow more prominent, signifying "a romantic descent into the self in order to find a revolutionary or at least

reforming vision for society” (Goslee 104). Their inward search for this reforming vision is an attempt to reconcile the racial conflict glimpsed in the first section, yet by descending into this state of abstraction, each character risks “compromis[ing] the specific, revolutionary claims of race and gender” (Goslee 104). Interpreting *Visions*, then, requires an approach that diverges from the methods of many Freudian and post-Freudian critics, who see these issues only in terms of archetypes and cognitive symptoms. Translating “the public drama of those sections into private myth [. . .] to make internal the objective, external politics of race, class, and gender” (Goslee 105) is an approach that Goslee expressly seeks to avoid.

By writing about events such as the rape of Oothoon in a subjective fashion, Goslee notes, Blake risks surrendering to this same reductive philosophy. This act of violence explodes into “terrible thunders” (*Visions*, plate 3, line 7) that tear her “virgin mantle in twain” (*Visions*, plate 3, line 8), but the cumulative effect of this violence is not only pain but also severe confusion. In an almost expressionist turn, the very language of the passage reflects this confusion, as Oothoon’s violation is conflated with a positive awakening into sexuality. Goslee notes that “the immediate effect of the argument is to suggest that her expected sexual experience proves devastating, not that she has been attacked by a second person” (Goslee 106), and it remains unclear if this confusion is solely Oothoon’s or also Blake’s. Is this link between the rape and a positive sexual initiation related to the author’s later message of free love, as Mellor suggests? Does Blake’s esteem for sexual experience of any sort lead him to view acts of rape and consensual sex as interchangeable, or does this association merely reflect the uncertainty of adolescence? Even in its detailed commentary on free love, *Visions* never fully

answers these questions but leaves Bromion's crime shrouded in a multitude of different meanings and consequences. As Goslee observes, the narrative never explains if Oothoon's concluding sense of prophetic vision results from sexuality, suffering brought about by the rape, or "some combination of the two, some recognition that the distortion of a great good leads to a greater suffering and thus to better prophecy" (Goslee 114). What the reader does know is that Oothoon's later claims of liberation stem in part from "the manacles of sexual and racial oppression" (Goslee 114), which put the speaker at risk even as they inspire her. Blake's depiction of violence in the poem conveys Oothoon's emotional reaction but still fails to take an ethical position, making any declarations of freedom or equality difficult to believe. "By naturalizing male sexual violence," Goslee writes, "Blake almost allows us to ignore the unequal effect of male and female sexual freedom" (Goslee 106).

Goslee confirms Vine's later claim that Oothoon's attitude is difficult to pinpoint, noting its considerable shift between the poem's first and third sections (Goslee 112). The character's thoughts on human suffering, in particular, receive an acute emphasis in the opening of the poem that all but vanishes from her final lines. When she describes the renewal of the lamb, the swan, and the fruit eaten by the worm, it remains unclear how these entities will be improved by their trials. Even if the village smoke, red earth, and worm are accepted as life-affirming forces, they still act on the behalf of outside parties. "[T]he fruit is sweet not to itself but to the worm's rival in consuming it," Goslee writes, "and the lamb and swan gain value for the perceiver" (Goslee 113). Indeed, the flesh of the lamb and swan may literally be "prey'd on" (*Visions*, plate 6, line 17) by these perceivers, the village smoke representing a flavoring process. The implication of

these images, intentional or not, is that a state of purity exists for the benefit of the victimizer rather than the victim. This definition of purity makes it a dubious goal and explains Oothoon's apparent need to escape from the tinge of the smoke and river by achieving "renewed spiritual whiteness" (Goslee 113). Redemption as outlined by these metaphors does in fact "risk needing martyrdom" (Goslee 115), but for Oothoon, the desire to achieve cleansing whiteness outweighs any need to be a martyr. She describes the tinge of human suffering in beneficial terms, but she also feels a need to wash away the physical markings of this suffering. Darkened skin, in this context, is both a positive and a negative trait, which raises significant questions about the racial overtones of this passage. With regard to this notion of whiteness and Oothoon's later revelations, Goslee asks if and how ritual suffering leads to a "prophetic vision" (Goslee 119) of equality. If this is the case, she inquires, then why is the topic of slavery neglected so completely in the poem's final section? "[H]ow do [the speech's] claims for women's liberation support and conflict with the pleas for black liberation from slavery in part 1?" (Goslee 119). If Blake hopes to establish a universal criterion for freedom, why is his lead character unable to discuss these two ideas in tandem?

When discussing the first section of the poem, Goslee raises a point also mentioned by Mellor, that "none of the three figures in the frontispiece appears as black, nor do they in later illuminations" (Goslee 107). Bromion does make a direct reference to slavery, however, when he attempts to terrify Oothoon into submission. He proclaims that his female victims "worship terrors and obey the violent" (*Visions*, plate 4, line 23) and that he expects her to do the same. His dominance relies more on psychosomatic threats, fear, and acquiescence than on literal sexual violence. By eliciting these

reactions, he “[l]ike the white slave-ship captains and slave owners [. . .] exploits his economic, legal, and physical power through a sexual oppression which is also psychological” (Goslee 108). The horrors of colonialism hold these women in place through an enslavement of the mind, but as Goslee points out, a more literal form of slavery may prevent Theotormon from fighting against these horrors. Theotormon as read by Erdman is a stand-in for John Gabriel Stedman, but in a stunning reversal, Goslee writes that “we might assume that he is black and doubly powerless” (Goslee 108). As evidence for this, she notes “[t]he voice of slaves [. . .] and children bought with money” (*Visions*, plate 5, line 8) beneath him and the fact that his “jealous waters” (*Visions*, plate 5, line 4) are black (Goslee 108). In yet another example of the poem’s incongruous nature, *Visions* offers evidence to support the divergent readings of both Erdman and Goslee. Just as the victimized Oothoon becomes the victimizer after capturing the silver and gold women, Theotormon shifts from being the enslaved to the enslaver. This repositioning of character roles at unpredictable stages of the narrative demonstrates what makes *Visions* so confounding yet so realistic in its depiction of psychological improbability. Embracing either of these interpretations, however, does not change the ironic fact that Theotormon views slavery as a gender rather than race-based phenomenon. “The literal oppression of black slavery becomes a figurative way of talking about the violation of his property that Theotormon feels,” Goslee writes, “and Oothoon’s three pleas to him, one in each section of the poem, address not her plight as slave but her damage as his property or as his narcissistic reflection” (Goslee 111). Blake’s deft evocation of slavery in the opening portrayals of Bromion and Theotormon later dwindles in favor of more broadly proprietary and sexual themes. Theotormon loses

the specifically racial nature of his enslavement, all signs of blackness vanishing from the engravings.

A similar dissipation of racial brutality occurs in Oothoon's final speech, which concentrates more on "the falsification of female and then male desires in marriage" (Goslee 121) than on slavery. The reference made to the rod held "[o]ver her shrinking shoulders all the day" (*Visions*, plate 8, line 26), as Goslee notes, "may include slavery" (Goslee 121), but the speech generally focuses on the conflict between sexual modesty and free born joy. The worm constructing its "palace of eternity in the jaws of the hungry grave" (*Visions*, plate 9, line 1) symbolizes this joy, simultaneously representing "generation—phallic or embryonic life—or death" (Goslee 121). The recurring metaphor of the worm undergoes a subtle change as it appears in this passage, this time evoking the bodily joys of infancy that initiate all human experience. Epitomizing life and death in combination, the worm foreshadows Oothoon's reemergence in the third section after her destruction by the eagles. By embodying an expressly sexual form of life and joy, the worm also serves as a contrast to the religious hypocrisy of the modest virgin, "a mark against which to measure" (Goslee 121) the "nets found under thy night pillow, to catch virgin joy,/And brand it with the name of whore; & sell it in the night" (*Visions*, plate 9, lines 11-12). During her oration, Oothoon discusses using these very nets to capture women for Theotormon's pleasure, an act that attempts to achieve non-jealous love but that also impedes the development of a more innocent sexuality. She "celebrates free love for Theotormon with a thwarting of desire for herself" (Goslee 122), moving the intrusive gaze once reflected in her breast toward other women. The nets turn the values of freedom and visionary insight against each other, reducing her discourse on unfettered

love to a tragic paradox as “[l]iberty of individual vision [. . .] [leads] to masochistic voyeurism” (Goslee 122). Yet as Goslee reminds us, nets similar to these have already appeared in the poem twice and in very pejorative ways. The parson’s “nets & gins & traps” (*Visions*, plate 8, line 18) confine the farmer within “cold floods of abstraction” (*Visions*, plate 8, line 19), while the aforementioned nets hidden under the pillow ensnare the sincere forms of virginity brought about by infant joy. The third use of the nets by Oothoon is tragic, but these previous references to entrapment suggest that Blake is subtly criticizing her behavior. Goslee concludes that “Blake points to her confusion in having her propose to use [the nets] herself and thus to extend the possessiveness of slavery and hypocritical jealousy” (Goslee 122). But are these images of ambush enough to comprise a full critique of slavery, or is Blake simply raising a sense of doubt for reasons that are unclear? If he is implying that Oothoon’s nets are harmful, what methods of affection would he propose to replace them with? When trying to answer these questions, one is reminded of Mellor’s observation that *Visions* hints at a message greater than free love without providing any clarification.

Despite the uncertainties of the net symbolism, the worm’s infant joy primarily functions as a broad indictment of all forms of human possession, including the yoke of chattel slavery. In Goslee’s view, this inherent joy is the rationale for “a social criticism of all sorts of property or ownership, whether slavery, marriage, or a proprietary sexual jealousy” (Goslee 122-123). Though gender-based restriction is the central focus of the poem, Oothoon’s final oratory examines how this problem affects both “women and men” (Goslee 123), the “virgin/That pines for man” (*Visions*, plate 10, lines 3-4) and the youth who “forget[s] to generate” (*Visions*, plate 10, line 6). Given the universal nature

of this plea, Blake's inability to discuss slavery directly and in more detail is surprising and inexplicable. Does Oothoon transcend her feelings of racial inferiority through a period of meditation and personal struggle, emerging at the end as a formless but defiant individual? If so, says Goslee, "this explanation [. . .] operates at too high a level of generality to allow the poem full force as a polemic against chattel slavery" (Goslee 123).

The development of Oothoon into an amorphous, racially ambiguous representative of humanity poses severe thematic risks, as it imperfectly blends her mythical conflict with the very real conflict of racial discrimination. At various stages in the plot, she is and is not a slave, a vagueness that in no way characterizes the plight of slaves in South America. A fictional character who denotes but does not fully embody different types of inequity can only partially voice the abolitionist argument, if at all. Goslee notes that "the gender-defining rhetoric of the woman as rape victim intensifies the victimization of all slaves at the risk of feminizing black men" (Goslee 124), which is only one of many complications that such an approach entails. Oothoon and Theotormon, first and foremost, are characters within a drama who appropriate certain dilemmas in contemporary life without giving them adequate weight or consideration. Blake never regards these real world details as insignificant, but they do move in and out of focus at the convenience of telling a highly abstract story. His reasons for ending this story in such an unusual fashion, however, remain as indistinct as the poem itself. "We *might* argue that Blake was avoiding these conflicts between race and gender by a brilliant evasiveness," Goslee writes, "though I think it more likely that he had not thought through the implications of his synthesis" (Goslee 124). Admiration for his originality and craftsmanship may lead one to believe that Blake deliberately avoids these

conflicts for the sake of subtlety, but the value of this subtlety becomes tentative when faced with issues of such dire consequence. *Visions* is an epic plea for collective freedom that encompasses numerous points of view, all of which overlap and intersect in unforeseen ways. The narrative gaps and unexplained points of contention broached by Goslee are a result of the project's heedless breadth and ambition. Blake poses more questions and pursues more topics here than he can address comprehensively and sufficiently.

To conclude, following the readings of Vine, Mellor, and Goslee demonstrates how the optimism of the former critic is difficult to sustain in light of the more doubting views of the latter critics. Vine refers to specific problems mentioned by Goslee, but in endorsing *Visions* as a proposal for utopia, he also neglects the greater, thematic inconsistencies raised by both critics. When discussing these more contentious readings of the text, the depiction of Oothoon and Theotormon's inability to communicate with each other becomes strangely revealing. The expressive gap between the two lovers, in some respects, resembles a similar gap that exists between Blake and the reader. Theotormon's "secret tears" (*Visions*, plate 5, line 7) and Oothoon's "locked up" (*Visions*, plate 5, line 11) tears signal a hidden anguish that suffocates the couple and prevents them from crying out in pain. This results in a deafening silence that Theotormon breaks only to describe elusive thoughts, joys, and sorrows that he cannot express (*Visions*, plate 6, line 21). As these remote thoughts become dim memories, Theotormon forgets the happy relationship with Oothoon that he once had. "Tell me," he asks her, "where dwell the thoughts forgotten till thou call them forth?" (*Visions*, plate 7, line 3). Crushed by this humiliating denial, Oothoon retreats into an inactive and mute

stupor for “all the day and all the night” (*Visions*, plate 7, line 25) before starting her last speech. After the rape, both characters experience paralyzing states of shock that leave them confused, inarticulate, and nearly comatose. Indeed, the anxieties they feel while separated from each other are not dissimilar from those of the youth shut away in his room who “create[s] an amorous image/In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of his silent pillow” (*Visions*, plate 10, lines 6-7). He and the virgin who “awaken[s] her womb to enormous joys/In the secret shadows of her chamber” (*Visions*, plate 10, lines 4-5) live through intense feelings of loneliness and sexual longing that cannot be fulfilled. Like Theotormon and Oothoon, they submit to the silence and “horrible darkness” (*Visions*, plate 10, line 11) of complete isolation, experiencing strong pangs of desire and heartbreak anonymously and in ascetic privacy. Both parties want only to be together, but the insecurities and rigid morals of their theocratic society make this impossible. The repressive nature of this society keeps their longings and unease hidden behind closed lips and latched doors.

In the second section of *Visions*, the only character still capable of any kind of outward activity is Bromion, who aspires to discover, explore, and occupy foreign lands. His proud and aggressive personality makes him the antithesis of the virgin and the youth, allowing him to venture out to seize whatever he desires. As he declares his plan to colonize and enslave various nations, his language strongly recalls the Motto of the poem, “The Eye sees more than the Heart knows.” According to Bromion, a lack of familiarity with these lands diminishes neither his ability to perceive them nor his wish to possess them. These lands are “[u]nknown, not unperceived, spread in the infinite microscope,/In places yet unvisited by the voyager and in worlds/Over another kind of

seas, and in atmospheres unknown" (*Visions*, plate 7, lines 16-18). Bromion believes that the universe, mental perception, and mortal life are infinite, but to him this infinity equals only an unlimited capacity for power and the subjection of his enemies. He sees an immense number of peoples, cultures, and nations, but his heart feels no sympathy or remorse for them. His notion of infinity is a hellish one, and as he concludes his monologue, he threatens Oothoon with the damnation of "eternal fire" (*Visions*, plate 7, line 8) and the unending servitude of "eternal chains" (*Visions*, plate 7, line 8). In a disheartening thematic shift, the life of adventure and exploration espoused by Bromion ultimately results in greater stasis, isolation, and torment for the subjugated "phantoms of existence" (*Visions*, plate 7, line 24). When read together, the implicit message of Bromion's monologue and the story of the virgin and youth is that segregation is predestined. Two characters yield to this fate through a self-imposed exile, while another ventures forth to discover new means of living, but the end result of these tactics is inexorably the same. *Visions* describes the horrors of sealed chambers, undying fires, and unbreakable chains but does not use its words as a means for salvation. There is no key to open these locks.

Because of the immediate and arresting style of these stories, one cannot accuse Blake of assuming an apathetic stance toward his material. Unlike Urizen, the god of reason, whose "narrow eyelids mock/At the labor that is above payment" (*Visions*, plate 8, lines 7-8), Blake does not hover aloofly above his creations. The emancipation of slave labor is a principle concern of *Visions*, but as the Motto reminds us, inner feelings of the heart do not always coincide with the outside world. When Oothoon grieves for being "bound/In spells of law to one she loaths" (*Visions*, plate 8, lines 21-22), the reader

is left to wonder how she will counter this specifically legal form of abuse. As consoling as internal sentiments of good will may be, they do not comprise a definitive strategy for swaying parliament and establishing a new legal precedent for marriage and labor. A divide exists between the fantastic myth of *Visions* and the more practical concerns of resolute political action, one that places the overall message of the poem perilously close to irrelevance. The discourse of free love means nothing to those who do not speak and cannot hear the cries of their victims, lost “in seeming sleep” (*Visions*, plate 9, line 13) within their cold and circular routines. Blake’s pleas are well-intentioned, but they also seem destined to fall on deaf ears because of their sentimental, fanciful, and overly introspective nature. The poet dreams of a day when reality might reflect the compassion of an open heart, but as an activist, he must also engage with the material world and tactics of his adversaries.

Because he partly fails to do this, Oothoon is left “the crafty slave of selfish holiness” (*Visions*, plate 9, line 20). In a line that evokes the Middle Passage, she travels “[o]ver the waves” (*Visions*, plate 4, line 14) and toward her encounter with Bromion. Theotormon makes a similar journey, experiencing “a night of pain” (*Visions*, plate 7, line 7) as he “traverse[s] times & spaces far remote” (*Visions*, plate 7, line 6) and is brought to a “remote land” (*Visions*, plate 7, line 8). This trip takes him through gardens, across rivers, and over mountains populated with “shadows of discontent” (*Visions*, plate 7, line 1) before finally stopping at a house. “[I]n what houses dwell the wretched,” Theotormon asks, “Drunken with woe forgotten and shut up from cold despair?” (*Visions*, plate 7, lines 1-2). In this way, the triangular trade comes full circle, bringing Theotormon to a house that resembles the lonely and lifeless quarters of the virgin and

the youth. The expansionist doctrine of imperialism unexpectedly leads to a bleak and forbidding dead end, a dwelling without warmth or memory that suspends its inhabitants in perpetual limbo. Contrary to the wishes of the narrator in Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*³ (1790), the doors to these rooms cannot be "cleansed" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 14) and offer infinity only in Bromion's terms of endless domination.

Oothoon's attempts to overcome her situation, for this reason, cannot circumvent the inherently tragic nature of the poem. Steven Vine describes a story that tries to realize political possibility through contradiction, but while this may have been Blake's goal, the bleak, cumulative effect of *Visions* finally outweighs it. The reader is instead left with definitions of slavery that are overly ambiguous and dependant on notions of free love and physicality. These values fail to provide a workable political or legal strategy for the liberation of either women in England or slaves in South America. Blake's attempt to relate the struggles of these two groups is poorly defined and imperfectly balanced, resulting in concluding lines that favor a white and Western outlook. The characters of the poem, meanwhile, fade into the mire of their strained and circuitous relationships with each other, their emotive pleas vanishing along with the opening depictions of the black race. For a poem that relies so heavily on monologues and dialogue, *Visions* contains a surprising amount of silence and semi-coherent speech, which complicates its effectiveness as a direct political utterance. In the next chapter, Blake's use of black and white imagery will be further explored with regard to his poem "The Little Black Boy." Similar problems concerning the politics of abstraction and

³ Readings of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* will refer to copy I.

Blake's depiction of race will be explored within the confines of a simpler, lyric technique. In doing so, this paper will attempt to explain the impact of liberatory Christian faith on Blake's ideological beliefs, as well as his apparent need to assimilate black struggles with standards of white purity.

Chapter Four

Liberatory Christianity and the Perception of Race in “The Little Black Boy”

While William Blake’s “The Little Black Boy” initially appears to be a straightforward, lyric monologue, after closer inspection it reveals ambiguities similar to those found in *Visions*. The title character describes his mother’s promise of a spiritual afterlife where the color of his skin will be as insignificant as “a cloud, and like a shady grove” (*Songs*, plate 9, line 16). However, in describing this dream of racial equality, the speaker unconsciously reveals assumptions of racial inferiority that lie beneath it. Though his mother’s conception of heaven allows him to assume an angelic position beside the praying English child, it also returns him to the subservient role of “shad[ing] [the English child] from the heat till he can bear/To lean in joy upon [their] father’s knee” (*Songs*, plate 10, lines 25-26). This portrayal of the spiritual as ultimately damaging to the main character is foreshadowed through iambic pentameter in the poem’s opening six lines:

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
 And I am black, but O! my soul is white.
 White as an angel is the English child:
 But I am black as if bereav’d of light.

My mother taught me underneath a tree
 And sitting down before the heat of day [...] (*Songs*, plate 9, lines 1-6).

The stressed, single-syllable words of this passage immediately convey a link between the narrator's view of the afterlife and his sense of racial inferiority. Though words such as "white" and "light" suggest the possible rewards of paradise, this imagery is followed by his finding shelter under a tree in "the heat of day." Terms often used to describe Christian salvation are instead associated with hot, damaging sunlight. In another Blakean paradox, this light is the very element that marks his "sun-burnt face" (*Songs*, plate 9, line 15) and leaves him "bereav'd of light" (*Songs*, plate 9, line 4).

Stresses in the poem's third line suggest a more psychological source of this racial insecurity, revealing the speaker's mental connections with paradise and privileged, Anglo-Saxon society. The word "angel" and the first syllable of "Eng/lish" both receive stress, emphasizing the similarities of the two words.⁴ The English and angels are also described as physically similar, the stressed "child" (*Songs*, plate 9, line 3) and later "silver hair" (*Songs*, plate 10, line 27) suggesting a cherubic countenance for the young boy. The narrator even sees the child's complexion as being "white as an angel" (*Songs*, plate 9, line 3). This resemblance to Christian, angelic figures is what leads him to equate acceptance from the English boy with acceptance into heaven. From the first line of the poem, however, the likelihood of such approval is questioned, with stresses falling on "bore" and "wild" to underline the narrator's rugged upbringing. The verb "bore" or "bear" recurs three times in the poem, later describing the hellish "heat" that endures even in the confines of heaven. Here, the word traces this agony to the main character's very origins, describing the ordeal of his birth. The pain of childbearing knows no skin

⁴ See Alan Richardson's "Colonialism, Race, and Lyric Irony in Blake's 'The Little Black Boy'" (1990) for more about the connection between these two words, which he interprets as a Manichean ideology common in English children's literature. Such an ideology involves the contrast between "en(light)enment and darkness, and Christian and heathen" (239).

color, but the black child's delivery casts him as an outsider nonetheless. His birth beyond the margins of British society severs him from the consideration and tolerance of a white culture enamored with and deferential to its own features.

For this reason, even in his own heaven, the narrator's relationship to the English boy is one of inferiority. Though he privately longs for a world that is free of prejudice, where "I from black and he from white cloud free" (*Songs*, plate 10, line 23), he understands that approval is only possible when "Ill stand and stroke his silver hair/And be like him, and he will then love me" (*Songs*, plate 10, lines 27-28). Blake emphasizes this inequality in the second of two engravings accompanying the poem, which depicts the black child as standing outside of Christ's inner circle of prayer. According to footnotes to the piece in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, though "the heavenly scene [. . .] shows both boys sheltered by the tree and welcomed by Christ [. . .] [the narrator] is not part of this configuration of prayer, but rather a witness to it, stroking the hair of the English boy who has no regard for him" (Wolfson and Manning 113). Heightening this sense of disparity is the fact that in some copies Blake depicts the narrator with white skin, while in others he remains black. The etchings of the 1789 and 1794 editions⁵, where both boys are painted the same color, suggest that Blake approves of racial equality and wishes to convey the idea in his artwork (*Songs*, plates 23 and 6). However, the etchings of the 1795 and 1808 editions⁶, where they are more clearly differentiated, suggest that such ideals are rarely carried out in late eighteenth-century British society (*Songs*, plates 9 and 10). While Blake accepts Christianity's greater

⁵ These etchings are from copies C and F of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

⁶ These etchings are from copies L and R of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

themes of tolerance, he simultaneously laments that actual practitioners of the faith rarely do the same. For this reason, acceptance by white culture for the narrator comes at the price of social subservience and loss of identity.

This evidence indicates that the poem is an ironic critique of a Christian faith that claims to value tolerance while perpetuating notions of white superiority.⁷ Yet when observing the disquieting final engraving of either version of “The Little Black Boy,” one must wonder if this explanation is entirely adequate. To what extent might the deeply devout poet’s critique be a self-critique, and what does this statement tell us about Blake’s specific views with regard to race? These are the questions asked by David Bindman in “Blake’s Vision of Slavery Revisited” (1996), which attempts to extend Erdman’s study of the poet’s relationship to slavery. In the article, Bindman tries more concretely to define Blake’s perception of blackness and African culture in the time and place of late eighteenth-century England. Reading “The Little Black Boy,” he notes, raises many of the questions asked then by prominent scientists and theologians about the origins of racial difference. “[W]as the sun the physical cause of the African’s dark skin color; and what was God’s purpose in so differentiating Africans from their fellow beings?” (Bindman 374). These inquiries connect deeply with the poem’s themes and very imagery, making their answers crucial to a full interpretation of Blake’s message. In what ways does this narrative reflect a system of scientific or religious thought?

Recalling the image of the main character’s sunburned face, Bindman argues that “Blake

⁷In “‘The Little Black Boy’: Blake’s Song of Innocence” (1959), A.E. Dyson argues that the poem is a straightforward endorsement of a loving faith that exemplifies a timeless “wholeness, integrity, unity” (45). Such an interpretation, in my view, overlooks the poem’s painful world of burning sunlight and latent prejudice. Dyson does a commendable job, however, of articulating the good intentions that may have at least partially guided Blake’s work.

appears to follow an explanation [for racial difference] that had already been rejected by Malpighi and most scientists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (Bindman 376). Blake included this description in spite of the widely observed fact that “white people did not turn black in Africa nor blacks white in Europe” (Bindman 376). This portrayal of the narrator’s skin being literally burned black, in Bindman’s view, represents a prevailing theological rather than scientific definition of race. The excruciating nature of this process and the sense that the African is “bereav’d of light” more closely convey Biblical origins for this suffering. “The strong sense in Blake’s poem that blackness is a curse upon the African [. . .],” Bindman writes, “reminds us that the ‘natural’ subservience of blacks was often attributed by Christian commentators to the infamous curse of Ham” (Bindman 376). According to this story, slavery is the result of one of Noah’s sons viewing his father naked, which leads to the condemnation and enslavement of his lineage (Bindman 376).

Blake invokes these explanations for race and slavery in another of his works, *The Song of Los*⁸ (1795), which describes how “Adam shuddered! Noah faded! black grew the sunny African” (*The Song of Los*, plate 3, line 10) after “They saw Urizen give his Laws to the Nations/By the hands of the children of Los” (*Los*, plate 3, lines 8-9). The precise meaning of this passage is unclear, as Blake’s mythological characters often appear and reappear in his works with new forms and in different roles. As Bindman notes, these lines represent “one of the most compressed passages in the Prophecies; but the blackness of the African might be interpreted as deriving from Noah’s seed as the fallen world is established by Urizen” (Bindman 377). Through these descriptions, *Los*

⁸ Readings of *The Song of Los* will refer to copy B.

offers an alternate perspective on the creation myth, linking humanity's fallen condition to the narrow rationality of Urizen and the forbidden knowledge of Noah's descendants. In both poems, the African's blackness signifies a divine penalty, one often used to *justify* rather than counter the practice of slavery during this time period. If Blake's art seeks to oppose the forces that "restrain the child from the womb" (*Los*, plate 6, line 24), why does it contain affirmations of such a prejudicial belief?

Further, how do these references reflect on the main character's role as a servant at the end of "The Little Black Boy"? Can this conclusion and the final engraving still be read as a critique, or does Blake to some degree surrender to a depiction of ethnic inferiority? As unsettling as these references to the curse of Ham are, Bindman continues to consider the possibility that the poem may be ironic. He does this primarily by studying the poem's relationship to a well-known emblem entitled "Am I not a Man and a Brother?" (Bindman 378). This emblem, produced in 1786 by Wedgwood, quickly became a popular fixture of abolitionist culture for its memorable depiction of "the gratitude expected of the liberated slave, who would embrace Christianity but would ever afterward be a loyal servant to the white masters and mistresses who had liberated him" (Bindman 377). Widely distributed, this image would have been instantly recognizable to many of Blake's contemporaries, which raises the possibility that "the Little Black Boy's servility to the white boy and the white boy's servility to Christ [. . .] [are] a sign that the poem is an ironical exposure of the limitations of the abolitionist position [. . .]" (Bindman 377). These attempts by Christians to end slavery, in other words, become meaningless when combined with the expectation that liberated slaves become dedicated servants in the aftermath. This interpretation could restore some of the validity to ironic

readings of the poem, but as even Bindman notes, this explanation is “unlikely to be more than a partial one” (Bindman 378).

Further complicating Blake’s stance with regard to race is a line in the “Song of Liberty” section of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that urges “O African! black African! (go, winged thought, widen his forehead.)” (*Marriage*, plate 26, line 12). This line, one of a list of stereotypical descriptions that also includes “the citizen of London” (*Marriage*, plate 26, line 12) and the “Jew” (*Marriage*, plate 26, line 12), appears to describe the African as mentally inferior and in need of guidance from the revolutionary “Shadows of Prophecy” (*Marriage*, plate 25, line 3). Once again, Blake undercuts the dreams of liberation and equality offered in other poems with a simplistic and derogatory claim about the nature of an entire culture. In this case, the line most likely communicates outmoded scientific rather than theological assumptions about race, the narrow forehead of the African recalling some of the descriptions in Caspar Lavater’s *Physiognomy* (1788). Bindman notes that “Blake could have read in Lavater that man combines animal, intellectual, and moral aspects in his being, and that all of these are expressed in differing proportions in the face, which is always dominated by one of the three aspects” (Bindman 379). Ideas similar to these had already been discussed by Dutch painter Pieter Camper, who theorized that human intelligence could be measured by drawing two lines “along the forehead and nose and the other through the chin and mouth” (Bindman 379). According to diagrams of this system, the Greek face represented the ideal individual, followed by the European and the African. Camper believed that the tendency for “the African’s forehead to narrow and recede” (Bindman 379) suggested a less fully evolved state, closer to the orangutan (Bindman 379). By

making similar judgments about the African character in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, then, Blake is most likely referencing these dated and insular scientific theories.

As disturbing as these findings are, Bindman argues that they do not “cast doubt on the sincerity of Blake’s opposition to slavery in the early 1790s or on his commitment to universal redemption” (Bindman 382). Instead, they are simply another example of how any writer is limited by his or her respective time period, just as Bindman’s own argument may be “affected by contemporary concerns and may reflect the intellectual contradictions of our age” (Bindman 382). Even if one makes such allowances for Blake, however, his traditional status as a revered literary icon and defender of liberty must still be called into question. When seen through the lens of his Biblical and scientific beliefs, the definitions and construal of slavery present in “The Little Black Boy,” *The Song of Los*, and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* show a marked difference from those that we would employ today. A thorough consideration and discussion of these differences is vital and should come before any attempt to present the author as a timeless representative of human parity and emancipation.

Admirers of Blake may take consolation in the fact that “The Little Black Boy,” at least, can be read as a trenchantly ironic salvo against the slave trade. Yet Blake clearly endorses the merits of liberatory Christian faith, even if these beliefs diverge from the sentiments expressed in “Am I not a Man and a Brother?”. In *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Christianity plays a role similar to its role in “The Little Black Boy,” once again symbolized by images of light and the sun. Here, Blake uses this imagery to signify his liberal and sexual understanding of the faith. As the poem draws to a close, the sun is linked to Oothoon as she discusses a pure and more virginal form of

sexuality in “happy copulation” (*Visions*, plate 10, line 1). In this context, Blake uses the sun as a positive symbol of personal freedom that guides his characters to an ending where all are connected by inherently “fearless, lustful, happy” (*Visions*, plate 9, line 4) natures. While Blakean concepts of freedom conflict with the religious strictures binding Theotormon, the sun comes to represent a new theology in which “every thing that lives is holy!” (*Visions*, plate 11, line 10). Both *Visions* and “The Little Black Boy” contain moments that call the sun’s life-giving powers into question, yet the underlying message of universal freedom remains prevalent. Blake’s work often criticizes the apathy generated by Christianity in Western culture, but he also couches this critique in imagery that is highly religious. Whether these symbols represent reality for the writer or simply the most effective weapon to use against his enemies is open to debate, but their centrality in both poems is clear.⁹

If religion serves as a means of freedom for Blake, the institution also plays a larger and more nefarious role in furthering the objectives of Western expansion. This purpose is manifest in the narrative of “The Little Black Boy,” despite the noble intentions of the author. In “Literature and Society”¹⁰ (1981), Ngugi Wa Thiong’o classifies the poem as a type of European literature that attempts to “sympathetically treat the African world either to appeal to the European liberal conscience or simply to

⁹ For more on the sun as a religious symbol in “The Little Black Boy,” see Lauren Henry’s “Sunshine and Shady Groves: What Blake’s ‘Little Black Boy’ Learned from African Writers” (1995). Henry discusses the possible influence of African sun worship on the poem by comparing it to Phillis Wheatley’s “An Hymn to the Morning” (1773).

¹⁰ Richardson references this essay by Ngugi in “Colonialism, Race, and Lyric Irony,” but he still persists in reading “The Little Black Boy” as a subversive redefinition of Christianity by the narrator and his mother. To justify this interpretation, he notes that “at a time when ‘untutored savage’ is stock poetic diction, Blake’s emphasis on the African mother’s teaching (which forms the subject of the design for the first plate) is extremely significant” (239). This explanation, however, fails to account for the unsettling tone of the second plate.

interpret Africa for the Africans” (Ngugi 19). The poem’s message of reconciliation between the white and black child, in his view, is merely an attempt to stifle the inevitable onset of violence imminent between Europe and exploited regions of Africa. White liberalism longs to erase the tension of class margins, yet these tensions are only the first symptom of a larger cycle of violence that cannot be prevented. In catering to this desire for equality without penalty, Ngugi writes, the literature of liberalism becomes a carrier for imperialist doctrines that leave one society at the mercy of another. “Liberalism blurs all antagonistic class contradictions,” he states, “all the contradictions between imperialist domination and the struggle for national liberation, seeing in the revolutionary violence [. . .] [in reaction to] the former, the degradation of humanity” (Ngugi 20).

The Christian morality of works such as “The Little Black Boy” transfers the culpability for racial struggle from the oppressor to the oppressed, allowing the narrator escape from “the burden of his skin color” (Ngugi 19) only after dying. This aspect of the poem reveals how burdensome faith in God and in a predestined afterlife can be for those facing tangible obstacles in the here and now. The mother tells her child that the source of his anguish lies in his very nature, and within his *spirit*, rather than in the influence of white authority. “The cloud will vanish,” she promises, only after their “souls have learn’d the heat to bear” (*Songs*, plate 10, lines 17-18). As comforting as this explanation is to the narrator, it fails accurately to tell him how and why he feels so excluded. Instead, his mother’s theology wholly inverts the cause and effect of colonial rule, shielding the institutions of white power from any sense of guilt or wrongdoing.

Christian humility, Ngugi argues, is only a pacifier for the suppressed rage of occupation, which explains the pervasiveness of the theme in British literature:

Why is it that the church is always preaching humility and forgiveness and non-violence to the oppressed? [. . .]

The aim is obvious: it is to weaken the resistance of the oppressed classes [. . .] making the oppressed believe that the root cause of their problem, and hence the solution, lies deep in their spiritual condition, in their sinful souls. (Ngugi 22)

Beyond this colonial application of Christianity, Ngugi posits that the very language of the faith is inherently racist, English being “the most racist of all human languages” (Ngugi 14). This is evident in words such as black market, black sheep, blackmail, and blacklist, which all have negative meanings, as well as “the character of black sambo” (Ngugi 14). Visual portrayals of heaven, conversely, present “God, Christ, angels, in terms of whiteness” (Ngugi 15). Seen from the point of view of ethnicity, such a belief system’s impact on the main character of “The Little Black Boy” becomes more understandable. Like Oothoon, he longs to become “white and pure” (*Visions*, plate 6, line 20), just as the African Christian sings “Wash me Redeemer and I shall be whiter than snow” (Ngugi 14). Indeed, Ngugi even describes similar efforts during his own time period to achieve whiteness, discussing the desire of the African populace to mask blackness by using “hot combs and lipsticks, snowfire and ambi” (Ngugi 15).

Spirituality, religious ceremony, and other attempts at cultural assimilation are, first and foremost, placebos for the outrage of suppressing African nationalism. History demonstrates that the symptoms of global violence only worsen with time, rendering

efforts to counter civil unrest with a message of peace and tolerance trite and ineffectual. Blake's endeavor to create a better world through versification is noble, but his art can only offer a band-aid solution to problems of such magnitude.

In a world of intense racial suffering, can any joy be found in the pursuit of art or in the trials of human experience? Ngugi finds value in the redefinition of Christianity by the revolutionary Mau Mau of Kenya, who "[t]ook Christian songs; they took even the Bible and gave these meanings and values in harmony with the aspirations of their struggle" (Ngugi 27). He sees this action as valuable because it defines "armed struggle as the highest form of political and economic struggle" (Ngugi 27), lending abstract theology an immediate and highly functional use. Reading this passage, one begins to wonder if any real difference exists between Blake's essential human suffering and Ngugi's determined violence. Accepting the message of either author, the reader might be tempted toward non-involvement, a decision that would negate Ngugi's push toward political awareness and responsibility. Beyond these pressing concerns, however, another question remains. Historically, why do works such as *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and "The Little Black Boy" remain popular after so many years, while other literature dealing with similar issues fades from memory? The answer, in this writer's opinion, lies in the ability of both poems to disrupt the unconscious, to connect with the reader's thoughts and memories in a way that cannot be fully understood or articulated. These hidden thoughts are often unpleasant, which makes the experience of stirring and unearthing them a difficult but also highly memorable one. The jolting discovery of these recollections may, in part, explain the negative reactions voiced by many of the critics referenced here, myself included. A true portrait of oppression is unsparing in its

refusal to comfortably reconcile painful dilemmas, leaving many readers shaken and deeply pensive. Viewing honest and realistic works of art is never easy, which is why the experience is so rare and so unforgettable. Even so, however, Ngugi raises a valid point when he states that literature must “be relevant to our situation” (Ngugi 30). Art’s ability to take hold of the reader’s mind is a timeless and essential one, but this ability grows stronger when the art is of the reader’s own time and culture. As history progresses, so hopefully does our ability to understand conflicts involving race, class, and gender. Moving into the twenty-first century, then, we may in fact require new forms of artwork and literature that engage such issues with greater intelligence and precision. In Blake’s words, “[t]he man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind” (*Marriage*, plate 19).

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Vita

Edgar Cuthbert Gentle IV was born in Birmingham, AL on March 15, 1981. He went to grade school and junior high school at Highlands School in Birmingham, where he graduated at the top of his class. In 2000, he graduated from Jefferson County International Baccalaureate High School. He received a B.A. in English with a concentration in Creative Writing from Rhodes College in 2004, and in 2006, he received a M.A. in English from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.