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Comparative Analysis of William Blake's Engravings in *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*

Throughout 18th century Britain, the slave trade was a debated topic of discussion. The abolition campaign, made of up people like Olaudah Equiano, Grandville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, and other citizens saw the slave trade as cruel and unjust due to the horrific conditions slaves were subject to. On the other hand, slave owners and those in Parliament saw it as a way to keep social order in Britain, supporting the practice itself (Bindman 11). Writers and engravers like William Blake grew up witnessing the slave trade, evident in his allusions to it in his own works. Additionally, he did engravings for others that witnessed the slave trade first-hand like John Stedman, a soldier who spent five years writing about the atrocities that slaves experienced in Surinam. While Blake's depiction of slaves in his engravings for Stedman in *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* align with what Mbemé classifies as the living dead in his essay "Necropolitics," his engravings of Oothoon in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* challenges this notion as she becomes a figure of resistance and agency.

J.-A. Mbemé coins the term necropolitics as an extension of Michel Foucault's biopolitics, which he summarizes as "the domain of life over which power has taken control" (12). He begins by defining the role of the sovereign as "not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies

and populations” (14). In other words, the sovereign holds power over life and death, which differs from other politically traditional notions of sovereignty that essentially exclude how the fear of death impacts its subjects. Mbemé exemplifies this through slavery, and how the colonies are a place where the right to kill is not subject to any rules (25). Slaves are seen as hauntological phantoms due to their loss of home, self, and political status, which gives rise to a state of injury: “An act of caprice and pure destruction aimed at instilling terror” (21). In other words, because slaves are not seen as ‘human’ in the eyes of the sovereign, every aspect of their lives is controlled and destroyed by their master, resulting in the fact that they become a shadow known as the living dead. Present, but not entirely. While Mbemé wrote this essay centuries later than Blake, we can still see his idea of the living dead play out during the 18th century in John Gabriel Stedman’s *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes in Suriname*.

Stedman’s narrative is one of the first abolitionist texts that exploits the harsh, cruel, inhumane conditions that slaves are put through on a daily basis. According to Bindman, he “picture[s] in harrowing detail the horrendous punishments inflicted on African slaves for transgressions and resistance in Surinam” through both his vivid, detailed writing and his engravings that were made by Blake (12). Despite the fact that Stedman was not entirely opposed to the capitalistic nature of slavery, but rather the conditions and physical treatment that slaves were forced to endure, his work still exemplifies what Mbemé defines as the ‘living dead’ during the 18th century in a concrete, real life event rather than a theoretical representation. For the purpose of exemplifying the living dead, I would like to focus on specific cruelties that Blake engraves, such as a lynching of a slave that Stedman was witness to called “A Negro hung alive by the Ribs to a Gallows.” The lynching was described as follows:

Not long ago I saw a black man hang'd alive by the ribs, between which with a knife was first made an incision, and then clinch'd an Iron book with a Chain---in this manner he kept living three days hanging with his dead and feet downwards and catching with his tongue the drops of water...that were flowing down his bloated breast while the vultures were picking in the putred wound, notwithstanding all this he never complained.

(Stedman 103)

This event itself reflects Mbemé's depiction of the living dead in the way that the slave is nearly seen as an animal, dehumanized beyond belief, not only through the destruction of the body itself but the way it is done. As Blake shows in figure one, the slave is publicly hung for days for soldiers, citizens, other slaves to see, a reminder of the power that the sovereign has over them to either destroy or kill them. According to Stedman, some soldiers even laugh, describing the event as a form of "entertainment" full of "jokes" (103). While the slave is still alive, he does not complain, obedient to the torture, lacking any agency to resist, which embodies the living dead. He becomes this figure of the oppressed, living, but under the conditions of how he is meant to be seen: as dead.

Not only this, but Blake engraves the remains of former slaves into a pile of bones, one even resembling an animal claw. While this addition symbolizes the animalistic, 'othered' identity that slaves were portrayed as, the remains also become a reminder of death. Again, it becomes a reiteration of sovereign's power over slaves, and how their living being becomes controlled and delimited constantly until all that remains is the living dead. There is no agency, no independence as their every move results in either physical death by lynching, or, a living death, one where they lack any sense of self and are constantly faced with the threat of death.



Figure 1 William Blake, *A Negro hung alive by the Ribs to a Gallows*. Copy 1, 1796. Photo courtesy of The William Blake Archive

While there is significant emphasis on the lynching and the bones that surround it, his facial expression should be noted too. Physiognomy was popular during this time, the psychological correspondence to facial expressions. Blake was clearly aware of this considering his usage of it in his engravings like this one. After exploring various facial expressions in *The Juvenile Lavater*, it seems like this slave has an expression of sadness (Brewer 124). While it would seem like he would be in pain, terrified even, his facial expression does not match that of ‘acute pain.’ His eyes are positioned upward, lacking any sign of life, yet so reflective of the sadness that the slave condition brings along with it. Additionally, his mouth is closed in a neutral position, no sign of pain or torment, just emotionless. Brewer does not have a classification for humiliation, but it seems that sadness is only a fraction of how he is feeling. His arms have been removed, literally ridding of any physical agency he might have had, and he is hanging there for others to see as a warning for the power of sovereignty. In this sense, the lack of emotion in his facial expression could also be a reflection of humiliation, embarrassed by his dehumanization and demasculinization. Regardless, the sadness and the humiliation that is shown in this engraving speaks to his status as the living dead: physically alive but for the purpose of intimidation as the face of death for other slaves. While this engraving depicts just one of many lynchings that occurred during this time period, I would like to turn to another engraving that also reiterates the concept of the living dead through the hanging of a female slave.

While visiting an estate, Stedman comes across what he deems “the first Object of [his] compassion,” a young female slave who has been flogged by her master (Stedman 264). He describes the interaction as follows: “It was after receiving 200 lashes that I perceived her with her head hanging downwards, a most miserable Spectacle” (264). In figure two, we can visually see this moment as a portrayal of the living dead.



Figure 2 William Blake, *Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave*. Copy 1, 1796. Photo courtesy of The William Blake Archive

The first thing stands out is the specific word ‘flagellation’ in Blake’s title, which refers to the sexual pleasure that the master experiences while torturing this slave. Interestingly enough, Stedman does not write about this, only accounting for the flogging that she receives, however, Blake chooses to depict this through the sexual objectification of her body. Her breasts are centered toward the middle of the engraving, one of the first things that is seen. All that is covered is her sex with a seemingly destroyed piece of fabric, torn and loosely falling off of her body. She even tries to cover it up with her thigh, unable to fully as she is hung from a tree. Additionally, while the plantation owners are presumably working behind her, they are positioned in a way that makes it seem as if they are pointing to her body, highlighting her presence in the frame. The one to the right seems like he is pointing to her body while conversing with the other presumably male slaves, sexually objectifying her even further. The emphasis on her body can be seen as her lacking subject hood, deemed as an object to be conquered as a female and as a slave. In that sense, she is figure of the living dead, objectified to the point of not being seen at all.

While there is significant emphasis on her body, her facial expression should be noted too. In contrast to the male slave who was lynched, the female slave seems to express ‘simple bodily pain’ (Brewer 120). While it is unclear what Brewer classified as ‘simple,’ she does seem to reflect the pain she received from the flogging. Her eyes are looking upward while her eyebrows are creased, mouth slightly open which aligns with Brewer’s classification. At the same time, she expresses no emotion. There are no slaves around her, no plantation owners, and while she definitely seems to be in pain, there is an expression that notes her position: oppressed. She has no agency, no ability to resist, so instead, she is stuck as a figure of the living dead: alive, but under the face of death. While I have explored both a male and female slave as

exemplifying the living dead through the brutal, inhumane conditions that slavery encompasses, I will now turn to an engraving of a group of slaves who exemplify the same.

While Stedman was on his way to receive medical attention for ringworm, he stopped by the waterside and noticed a group of slaves who were imported from Africa, about to be auctioned off for plantation work. Stedman described them as “walking Skeletons covered over with a piece of tanned leather” (168). This description in itself is necropolitical, the slaves referred to hauntologically, however, this is furthered through their treatment. Stedman notes that the sailors used a bamboo rattan and a dog as means of abuse, either whipping them or ordering the dog to bite them if they lagged behind (168). In figure three, Blake engraves this maltreatment in an interesting way, initially highlighting their status as the living dead. The first thing that stands out is the soldier’s position on the plate. He is this tall, authoritative presence who stands out because of his bamboo rattan, dictating where they need go. He shows little to no emotion, his expression masked by the power he holds. Additionally his bamboo rattan is drawn horizontally, one of the first things that catches the eye, leading you to his figure on the plate.

With that said, this notion is complicated by Blake’s depiction of the slaves themselves. The slaves’ bodies are unrealistically morphed, positioned in a way that people do not normally walk. Whether it was meant to be a racist depiction or a representation of the primitive ‘other,’ it seems hypersexualized, almost depicted as having agency to show off their bodies. There is no evidence of the brutality that Stedman describes on their bodies, no physical abuse or torment, but rather, a conscious decision to show off their bodies. Interestingly enough, their faces do the same, expressing astonishment, even remnants of joy (Brewer 42, 94).



Figure 3 William Blake, *Group of Negroes as imported to be sold for Slaves*. Copy 1, 1796.
Photo courtesy of The William Blake Archive

While they all seem to be enjoying their experience, the most overt example is the male toward the front of the group, on the left-hand side of the plate. He is bending his knee, showing off his leg and muscular body. Additionally, he seems to be laughing, enjoying the march towards the auction (Brewer 103). Initially, this seemed to be odd, out of place considering the grotesque horrors that Stedman writes about, however, it can be seen as the beginning of Blake's implementation of resistance in his works. While the slaves in Stedman's account are depicted as the living dead by being described as 'skeletons' who are brutally tormented by the soldiers who literally control their every move with the bamboe rattan and the dogs, Blake does the opposite. He gives them life, agency, control over their bodies and facial expressions. It is one of the first and only engravings that he does for Stedman that showcases resistance, a theme that becomes clearer in his own works, more specifically *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.

While Blake's engravings for Stedman mainly depicted slaves as figures for the living dead, his engravings for *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* painted a whole different picture, one that embodied resistance. While this specific work can be read in a variety of different ways, I will read it as an allusion to slavery, Oothoon representative of a slave and Bromion her master, "the cruelest and most dissipated of the plantation owners described by Stedman" (Bindman 15). Toward the beginning of the poem, Oothoon is raped by Bromion on the way to visiting her lover Theotormon when he "rent[s] her with his thunders" (Blake 58). This results in Bromion and Oothoon being chained together while Theotormon hides his head in his hands. While this sounds necropolitical in theory, a slave master suppressing his slave by physically degrading her through rape, Blake's plates tell otherwise. To begin, I would like to turn to plate 7, also known as figure four. The first thing that speaks resistance is the way that Oothoon is hovering over Theotormon.



Figure 4 William Blake, Plate 7. Copy A, 1793. Photo courtesy of The William Blake Archive

Even though she suffered a traumatic rape by her master and her boyfriend will not acknowledge her, she refuses to let that get to her. Instead, she is defined as “an etched space within the dark, relief surface of an enormous, flame-like ‘wave’...her world combines both water and fire, both changefulness and anger” (Blake 239). In other words, even though she is still chained down by slavery, and the oppressive conditions that come along with it, she still becomes this wave of resistance through her ability to express emotion.

If you zoom in on her facial expression, you will notice that she is not sad, nor oppressed by her condition. Rather, she has this expression that is content, controlled. While Brewer’s physiognomy book does not have an expression that completely summarizes the emotion in this plate, I think that it is the lack of emotion that shows her strength. Her lips are slightly parted, enough to replicate her plea “arise my Theotormon I am pure” (Blake 60). Additionally, her eyes are not looking at him, but rather past him, her eyebrows slightly creased, which signifies a little bit of anger, presumably because he refuses to acknowledge her presence after a traumatic rape. With that said, it also shows her ability to feel emotion, not entirely dictated by the slave owner as we saw in Stedman. Contrary to the engravings he did for Stedman, this plate shows Oothoon becoming a figure of resistance, a slave who had to endure the cruelty and injustice of the rape by her master, however, not allowing it to consume her. She depicts agency to feel emotion, independence even though she is chained to Bromion, something so different to the living dead that it becomes a piece of its own. In the next section, I would like to further this notion by looking at another plate that reflects her resistance and ability to defy slavery.

At the end of the poem, the daughters of Albion hear Oothoon’s woes and echo back her sighs as depicted in figure five.

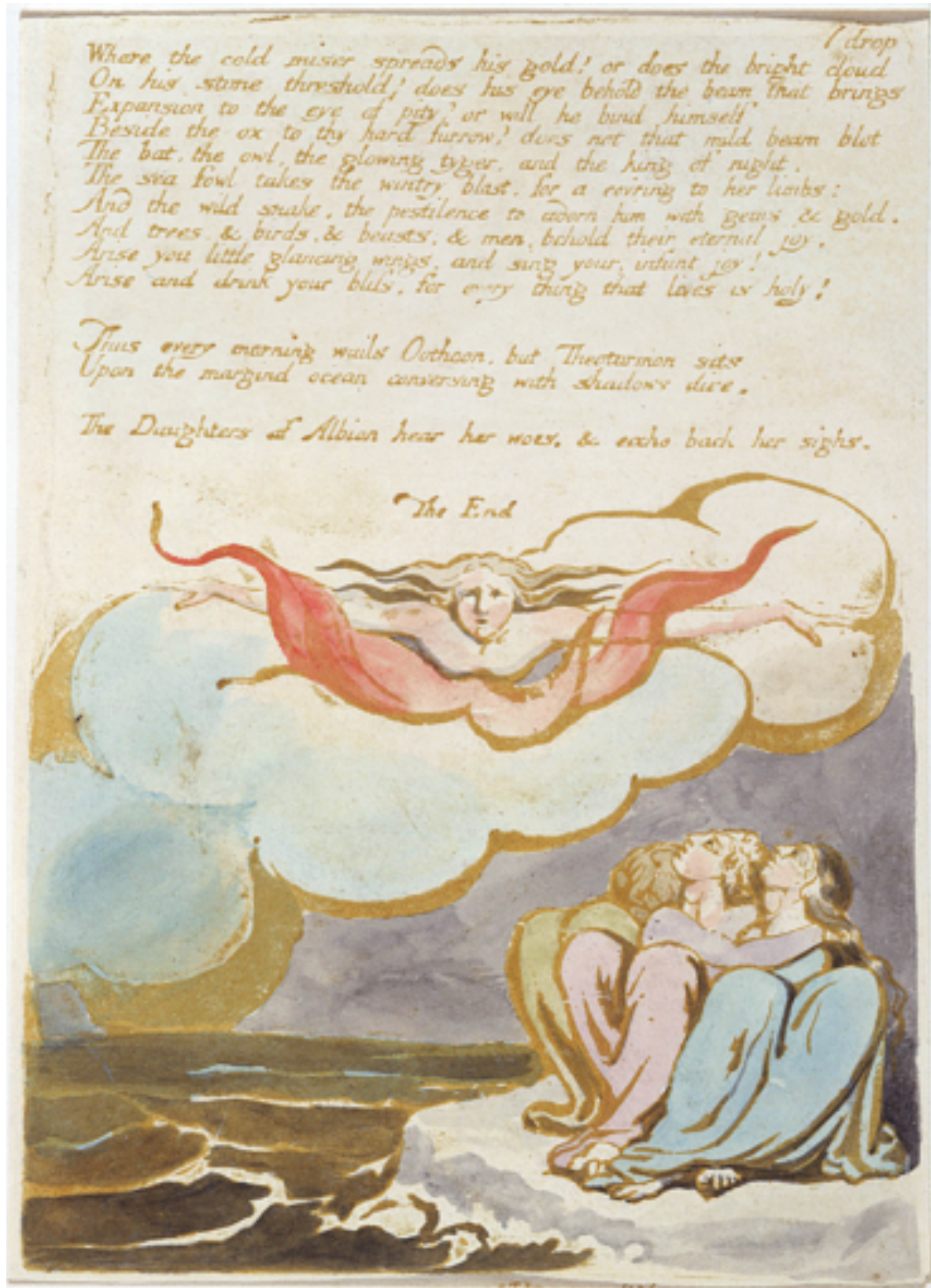


Figure 5 William Blake, Plate 11. Copy A, 1793. Photo courtesy of The William Blake Archive

While some critics see this plate as pointing out differences between the oppressor and oppressed, others see Oothoon as a figure of resistance, a “liberating vision riding apocalyptic clouds” (Blake 241-242). To unpack the claim of resistance, I would like to begin with Oothoon herself in this engraving. First off, her position on the plate embodies a sense of freedom and independence. While she is physically chained to Bromion, this engraving says otherwise. Her arms are spread out horizontally, nearly taking up the entirety of the plate width.

There is no visible sight of Bromion nor the chain that links them together, but instead, a ‘freed’ Oothoon. Additionally, her facial expression is powerful, one that is on the verge of anger (Brewer 165). Her eyes are distinctly open while her eyebrows are drawn downward, nearly crossing her eyes, which can be interpreted as expressing anger, but in a hopeful way. She proclaims her freedom, “I cry, Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as the mountain wind” (Blake 64). She reclaims her body, something strikingly different from the engravings he did for Stedman, and her facial expression mirrors that: strength.

Additionally, if we turn to the daughters of Albion, we can see their hope. While they look terrified, comforted by female solidarity, they look up to Oothoon. She becomes a God-like figure, described as “the woman’s outstretched arms replacing the man’s self-enclosing embrace and wings” (Blake 241). In other words, she becomes interchangeable with the male on the title page, figure six, which is presumably Bromion as he is chasing after her while she is on the way to visit Theotormon. This signifies her strength, her power to overcome the way she is meant to be seen as slave and as a woman. She is “an image of the very forces she was trying to overcome” (Blake 242). In this sense, she has the agency, power to resist the boundaries for how she is meant to be seen, ultimately becoming a figure for change which is why the daughters of Albion look up to her.

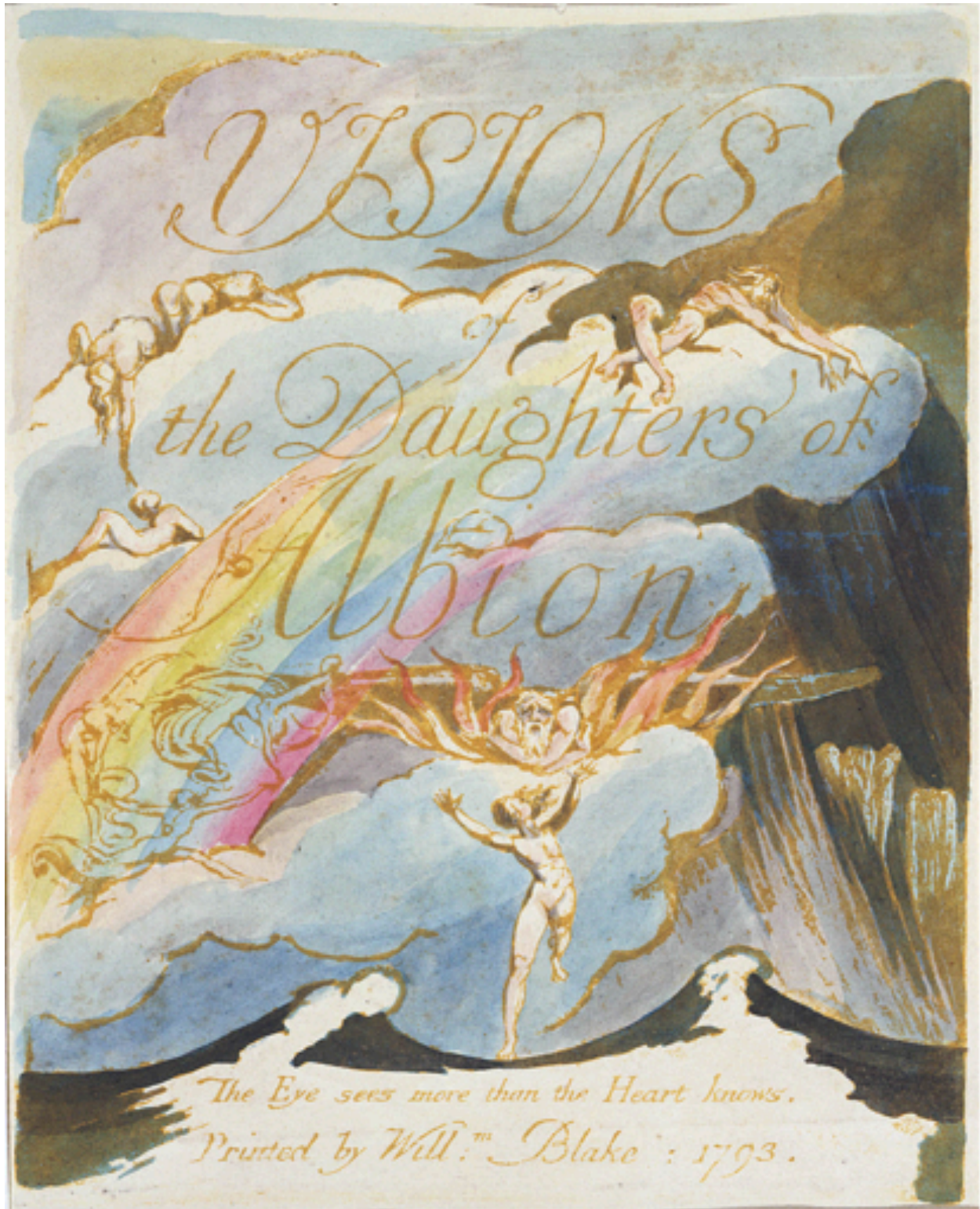


Figure 6 William Blake, Plate 1. Copy A, 1793. Photo courtesy of The William Blake Archive

Contrary to his engravings for Stedman, Blake's engraving of Oothoon represents resistance and agency, the ability to transcend and overcome the slave condition, making her a forerunner of modern feminism (233).

Throughout this essay, I have explored Blake's engravings in two works that pertain to the topic of slavery in strikingly different ways. His engravings for Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* are necropolitical, his portrayal of slaves embodying Mbemé's definition of the living dead. They lack any agency to defy the slave condition, and are constantly faced with physical death or the threat of it by the sovereign, also known as the slave master to the point of living how they are meant to be seen: as dead. On the other hand, his engravings of Oothoon in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* challenges this notion as she becomes a figure of resistance and agency in the engravings we looked at. She overcomes the boundaries for how she is meant to be seen and treated as a slave, one that becomes a figure of hope and liberation for the daughters of Albion. So you might be asking: What does this mean? Why is this important? How does this apply to contemporary society? Well, there is a common misconception when it comes to slavery. While the slave trade was abolished in 1807 and plantation slavery was abolished in 1838 in Britain, remnants of it still linger today (Bindman 11). Whether it is the prison system, the unbelievably dangerous working conditions in third world factories, even horrifyingly low paying jobs in the United States, slavery is still existent today in many contemporary forms all over the world. Blake's engravings function as an artistic form of awareness that show how slavery was prominent then, and is very much still prominent today. It is not our job to stop it entirely as that is simply unfeasible, however, Blake has taught me that we should spread awareness, educate ourselves in hopes that one day there will be a change.

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