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Revolutionary Bodies: William Blake and the Struggle for Transcendence

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William Blake's work should be considered as an artist's attempt at constant revision; the work is never really complete, and different iterations will be crafted due to the available means of production. Different plates will yield different reactions, and new terrifying aspects will be rendered. Consider *The Tyger*; differing plates created over the course of Blake's display of this particular work are evocative of different feelings. The titular tiger is sometimes viewed as non-threatening, and other times there is a palpable fear. And yet, the skeletal structure of the plate is arguably the same. One could argue that only cosmetic changes are used, but these changes have far reaching implications. In short, subtle alterations give way to differing responses to a particular plate.

Delving further into Blake's plates, it becomes obvious that the artist is fascinated by bodies, both animal—as evidenced above—and human. Blake's bodily engagements show rippling masses of flesh with bulging limbs, bodies that are at the limit of any semblance of reality. The intentionality of this exaggeration is revealed when one considers Blake's consistent relationship with these bodies over the time of their creation and mass production; the exaggerated forms cannot be altered through the reproduction of his plates. The muscles and the skin can be somewhat concealed in the differing versions, but the forms are still etched in place. Since Blake was undoubtedly familiar with platemaking, this suggests that the form of the bodies, which are unalterable, comprise the constant message he is attempting to portray. Therefore, these bulbous bodies take on a greater significance for both the artist and the observer. Once one reckons with the rigidity of the bodies' forms, it becomes important to consider what the bodies are engaging in within the plate; the senses of motion, labor, and play reveal themselves through their emblematic bodies. While first realizations of this conjure

Platonic sentiments regarding ideality, when one further examines the plates it is revealed that while Blake may be appealing to the notion of an ideal form, there is ample evidence to suggest that he is aware that this form does not exist; or rather, it may exist outside of the realm of physical depiction. Instead, through the use of a centralized, “first” plate containing an exaggerated body or bodies (depending on the work), Blake provides himself an opportunity to engage in a base form to depict a transcendence of bodily restrictions. This allows him to show exaggerated bodies gesturing towards an ideal form, bodies that are almost bursting from their physical confines.

All this is to say, Blake has an intense passion and interest in the body. Moreover, due to the nature of his work there is an awareness that the images will be copied, edited and displayed in a mass-produced sense. Since the interest lies chiefly in bodies, one must consider Blake’s relationship with bodies outside of his work to provide context. Moreover, one should examine the ways in which the act of labor and production are both depicted and realized by Blake’s creation of the plates. In doing so, one is able to perceive that Blake’s work not only depicts bodies struggling to transcend themselves (perhaps towards an ideal), but that the plates also show a relationship between actual physical bodies/objects and the labor that impacts them. Moreover, throughout his plates Blake’s interests include sexual and racialized bodies. Finally, the plates make one consider how bodies are written and what constitutes a normative body in art. Through examinations of each of these concerns, one will arrive at the inevitable conclusion that regardless of the particular revolutions evidenced in Blake’s plates, the call for a revolution is paramount and it is a revolution that will be accomplished by and through the body.

I. Physical Bodies

Blake had an intimate knowledge of the human form and benefited from a general interest in anatomy during his lifetime. Regarding this interest, Stefani Engelstein writes of “the late eighteenth century medical focus on the reproduction of the human form” pioneered by William Hunter; Blake was one of Hunter’s “early students.”¹ Furthermore, in his biography of Blake, G.E. Bentley expands on Blake’s experience with anatomy: “Hunter may occasionally have persuaded his brother John the surgeon...to demonstrate the layers and lay-out of muscles...When Blake later wrote that ‘a modern Man, stripped from his load of clothing...is like a dead corpse’, he was almost certainly speaking from experience.”² Even before Hunter, images of skinless human bodies were circulated. Susan Stranding, in a history of topographical anatomy, provides an example of such bodies when discussing Andreas Vesalius’ *De humani corporis fabrica*; Vesalius’ 1543 work shows three skinless human bodies, walking in the sun with their muscles on display.³ Regardless of whether or not Blake was able to view these images, *De humani* suggests a growing interest in musculature as anatomy developed as a discipline. Furthermore, Jean-Antoine Houdon’s *Flayed Man* merits consideration when regarding Blake’s knowledge of musculature and anatomy. This piece was created in 1767 and is one of Houdon’s “most famous works, and has been reproduced thousands of times, serving as a popular anatomical model for artists...copies were soon found in art academies all over Europe.”⁴

¹ Stefani Engelstein, “The Regenerative Geography of the Text in William Blake,” *Modern Language Studies* 30, no. 2 (2000): 61-2.

² G.E. Bentley Jr., *The Stranger From Paradise: A Biography of William Blake* (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2001), 50.

³ Susan Stranding, “A Brief History of Topographical Anatomy,” *Journal of Anatomy* 229, no. 1 (2016): 41-2, <https://doi:10.1111/joa.12473>.

⁴ Deborah Aaronson, Diane Fortenberry, and Rebecca Morrill, eds., *Body Art* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2015), 292.

Considering the prevalence of this work throughout the entirety of Europe, one can assume that Blake would have encountered Houdon's work during his time at the Royal Academy or elsewhere.

Despite this exposure to and interest in the real, physical human body, Engelstein proceeds to write of Blake's advocating for the "birth of a radically different human body," one not bound up by earthly confines.⁵ In short, Blake was both familiar with and seemingly detested the limitations of the body; he was also familiar with musculature, the exaggeration of which will be shown below to articulate his revolutionary mission. The aforementioned detest and familiarity is further evidenced when one observes the Blake's construction of a body. Consider the following description of *Elohim Creating Adam* by Tristanne Connolly: "The Elohim's body has no middle: his shoulders are almost directly connected to his hips, with nothing in between but the locks of his long beard and the impractical tendons which attach the shoulders to the wings."⁶ Additionally, Connolly notes that even though there are flaws how Adam's body is shown, "The muscles and bones are indicated with loving delicacy...suggesting a passion for the human form, while its creation is depicted as a cosmic tragedy."⁷ Here, Connolly simultaneously highlights Blake's appreciation and knowledge of the human form, his deliberate dismantling of that form, and the relationship that the transformed body has with the universe. This "loving delicacy" is also shown in the figure of Adam in *God Judging Adam*; in the image, Adam is depicted almost as one long muscle, half of his body hidden from view. It's interesting to note that the figure's body appears to contain more texture than Blake's version of God in the same

⁵ Strandring, "Topographical Anatomy," 62.

⁶ Tristanne J. Connolly, *William Blake and the Body* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 25. Here, Connolly is paraphrasing the critic Christopher Heppner's description of Blake's work as found in Heppner's *Reading Blake's Designs*.

⁷ Ibid.

image; this supports the notion that the struggle Blake is concerned with depicting is human. However, Blake will often reflect this struggle through his depiction of otherworldly beings. This shows that Blake's aim is not to simply depict bodies, but focus the revolutionary act the bodies are engaged in.

Referring back to *The Tyger* and its various forms, William Davis posits that with this work "Blake moves entirely into the visionary world...he takes his readers with him to question the source of good and evil, and of their possible reconciliation. The enigmatic picture of the tiger below the poem is ferocious in some copies, tame in others, realistic in none."⁸ Davis also offers biographical examples regarding Blake's opportunities to view an actual tiger if the latter wished.⁹ By avoiding this opportunities and instead choosing to create the tiger from his mind, Blake shows an interest in skewing traditional bodily depictions in favor of something more fantastic. As a result, his revolutionary message becomes all the more clear in its refusal to be grounded in any familiar, earthly reality. Connolly also supports this favoritism of the unreal when she discusses Michelangelo's influence on Blake and the latter's use of *contrapposto*, a technique involving the contortion of limbs Michelangelo favored; despite employing a different artistic medium, Connolly writes that Blake used this technique, but did so in a way that rendered the bodies twisted so they displayed a "physical impossibility" for actual human bodily contortion.¹⁰

In regards to the exaggerated depiction of bodies present in Blake's work, Erin Goss states that, "Blake suggests that the represented body can only mark the failure of discourse to describe bodily experience. Blake thus uses the figure of the body to foreground the distance

⁸ William Davis, *William Blake: A New Kind of Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 57.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Connolly, *William Blake and the Body*, 60-1.

between the body as it is named and the body as it is lived.”¹¹ This reveals that Blake is not trying to portray bodies in the physical world; rather, the bodies in his work show bodies striving for transcendence. This recalls the Aristotelian notion that “there is also a difficulty as to why the senses do not produce sensation without external bodies, there being in them fire, earth and other elements, which are objects of sensation either in themselves or by their accidents.”¹² Plato has been mentioned above, but it is important to recognize that Aristotle also had influence on Blake’s work; in *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye writes “There is a sneer at Aristotle’s *Analytics* in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, presumably because of its title: all wisdom comes in unified synthesis of experience, and nothing else is vision.”¹³ Even though Blake was providing a “sneer,” his relationship with, and knowledge of, Aristotle is still evident. Goss is also in agreement with Thomas Hayes’ description of the body as immaterial.¹⁴ The relationship the body has with its immateriality “allows for the illusion of knowledge and understanding.”¹⁵ This illusion is explained further by Goss when she writes, “The body emerges as a prescriptive limitation, grounding existence and experience by delimiting what is available for apprehension. It also emerges as compensation for an initial lack of understanding.”¹⁶ Thus, the body is used to protect oneself from the horrors of not being able to comprehend. At face value, it appears that one’s body assists oneself; regardless, even if the functions in this way in order to help people comprehend, it is still an illusory force arguably preventing one from transcendence. In short, the

¹¹ Erin M. Goss, “What Is Called Corporeal: William Blake and the Question of the Body,” *The Eighteenth Century*, 51, no. 4 (2010): 414.

¹² Aristotle, *De Anima: On the Soul*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1986), 169.

¹³ Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 87.

¹⁴ Thomas Hayes, “William Blake’s Androgynous Ego-Ideal,” *ELH* 71, no. 1 (2004): 149.

¹⁵ Goss, “What is Called Corporeal,” 427.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 415.

body provides one a space to graft expectation of knowledge and understanding onto; as previously mentioned, the body is ideally “composed” of imagination. This point is also advocated by Northrop Frye when he writes that Blake “teaches us to see, in the small part of mystery which he has made coherent, the image, that is, the form or reality, of a universal coherence; he suggests, in other words, that if his natural body is a mental form, then the entire body of nature, from atoms to stars, may also be the form of a human mind, if the imagination could only get ahold of it.”¹⁷ Eventually, these requirements regarding rendering bodies results in unusually bulbous bodies that are trying to burst through their physical confines. Judith Butler reflects on the distinctions made between boundaries of the body:

the boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness...What constitutes through division the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds of the subject is a border tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control.¹⁸

Butler’s attention to the control placed on the body and its relationship to the physical boundaries of that same body are in line with Blake’s depictions; moreover, they are further enhanced by the added control depicted in the various bodies that are literally manacled in Blake’s work.¹⁹ In *The Book of Urizen*, Blake writes of the restricting nature of earthly existence and likens them to chains: “4: And Los formed nets & gins / And threw the nets round about / 5: He watch’d in shuddring[sic] fear / The dark changes & bound every change / With rivets of iron & brass.”²⁰

With this abstract declaration, Blake is revealing that being bound is not a purely physical

¹⁷ Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 229.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990), 133.

¹⁹ Examples of these bodies are found in, but not limited to, *There is No Natural Religion*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *America a Prophecy*, and *Jerusalem*.

²⁰ William Blake and Harold Bloom, “The [First] Book of Urizen,” in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Press, 1982), 74.

phenomenon; concepts and emotions can be bound by earthly confines. This shows that Blake displays a proto-Butlerian conception of the confines regulated to both the “inner” and “outer” body.

Extending beyond pure anatomical structure, Blake displays an interest in the physical realm and the otherworldly. For example, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the artist provides a direct link between the physical body and the immaterial soul; in fact, Blake offers a rubric of sorts for his revolutionary project:

1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.
2. Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
3. Energy is Eternal Delight.²¹

In short, the body and the soul are intrinsically linked; moreover, both are necessary to reach “Eternal Delight.” While remembering that the body is composed of imagination, one should consider the following written by Aristotle: “we must nonetheless suppose that in the soul too there is something beside reason, resisting and opposing it.”²² Since Blake was familiar with Aristotle, and the latter also states the soul and the body are indistinguishable from one another and “imagination is a different thing from both perceiving and thinking,”²³ one can see even more proof that Blake would have evidence for his claim that imagination, which composes the body, is also linked to the soul, which has no distinction from the body. David Erdman writes of this link being depicted in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* by two figures: “[Blake’s text is bordered by] soul and body figures flying respectively left and right, flanked by serpentine

²¹ William Blake and Harold Bloom, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Press, 1982), 34.

²² Aristotle, W.D. Ross, and Lesley Brown, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 21.

²³ Aristotle, *De Anima*, 198.

scrolls” and also states that the different strokes in the plate are given a “human extension.”²⁴ As will be shown further on, the delight Blake writes of within *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* can also be referred to as universal unity.

Foucault writes of the changes in bodies that occurred during Blake’s life, showing that not only were bodies perceived differently, but *carried* differently as well. He accomplishes this by reflecting on the perceptions of soldiers:

By the late eighteenth century, the soldier has become something that can be made; out of formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required to be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated restraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automation of habit...²⁵

Thus, society not only controls how one is able to view a physical body, society enacts methods to control how one *uses* their own body. Moreover, this body eventually becomes permanently prepared to serve as a function for the state in such a way that the agency of the body is removed from the individual and transferred to the state. Whether or not Blake made this connection consciously is irrelevant because he would have nonetheless been exposed to bodies reorienting themselves in this way. This exposure in conjunction with the aforementioned anatomical knowledge of physical bodies provides Blake with ground to form his own renderings of bodies struggling to transcend their limitations, be they societal or physical.

In fact, one can find bodies that match Foucault’s description in Blake’s *Jerusalem*, specifically in plate fifty-one.²⁶ Here, one is able to perceive three bodies in different states of distress. However, the right-facing body displays a figure that is chained, slumped, and without

²⁴ William Blake and David V. Erdman, *The Illuminated Blake: William Blake’s Complete Illuminated Works with a Plate-By-Plate Commentary* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), 109.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 135.

²⁶ Blake, *The Illuminated Blake*, 330.

agency; this body is “something that can be made” by those that have imprisoned it. Blake’s *The Book of Thel* also displays bodies likened to the above “formless clay.”²⁷ Blake’s depiction of bodies trying to transcend is noted extensively in *The Marriage of Heaven*, as shown above. However, there are other instances of the poem where Blake is concerned with the body; for example, he writes “For the cherub with his flaming sword is hereby commanded to leave his guard at tree of life; and when he does, the whole creation will be consumed and appear *infinite* and holy, whereas is not appears *finite & corrupt*. / *This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment.*”²⁸ Here, Blake is stating that the revolution will be sensual, ergo, it will be one of bodies. Further on in the same plate, Blake states “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. / For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.”²⁹ Since the senses are that by which human beings are able to perceive, the senses must be cleansed to reach the infinite. Furthermore, when coupled with the above observation regarding the revolution of sensual enjoyment, one is left with the notion that sensual perception must be augmented to make way for the revolution. This is why the bodies are depicted in a perpetual struggle; they have not yet been able to cleanse their senses, and they are still bound by earthly bodies that are “finite and corrupt.” The struggle is an attempt to reach the revolution, thereby reaching the infinite.

Part of this finite nature is due to the body’s actual, physical limits; however, these limits elicit other ramifications. Consider the following statement from *Body of Art*: “On a prosaic level, the outer limit of the body is skin. The body’s largest organ, skin creates a container and a

²⁷ *Urizen* also contains the line “Urizen is a clod of clay” showing Blake’s consistent regard for the metaphor across his work. As will be shown later, Blake does not want his symbols and metaphors to be static; however, clay is literally malleable, and can be treated as such.

²⁸ Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” 39. Emphasis mine.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

protective boundary between the world around and all that the body comprises to enable it to function as a living being.”³⁰ In short, the limitation is what allows the body to live and endure; one cannot live as Vesalius’ *De humani corporis fabrica*. However, by showing the skin stretched to the limits in his work, Blake shows the muscles fighting against the boundary, even though without the boundary the body would die. This again suggests that Blake is gesturing towards a new existence without these limitations. Further on in *Body of Art*, one is able to articulate concepts outside of the physical aspects of the body while still discussing skin: “On a more philosophical level, the principal limit of the body is its mortality - the fact that its capacity to endure is *finite*.”³¹ Thus, skin, and its tensile limits, are that which Blake is challenging due to its relationship with mortality and the finite. His familiarity with anatomy and muscle structure combined with the inclusion of the skin further support the claim above that the human form is only one aspect Blake is focused on; rather, it’s the struggle of the body towards transcendence that he is interested in depicting.

II. Linguistic Bodies

There are certain aspects of contemporary body theory that can be applied to Blake’s work based around linguistics. For example, Tobin Siebers writes of the construction of the body being immaterial before representation: “The human subject has no body, nor does the subject exist, prior to its subjection as representation. Bodies are linguistic effects driven, first, by the order of representation itself and, second, by the entire array of social ideologies dependent on this order.”³² If Siebers observation is correct, then Blake gives the figures in the plates their

³⁰ Aaronson, *Body Art*, 266.

³¹ *Ibid*, emphasis mine.

³² Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 35.

bodies. Julia Kristeva takes this a bit further and writes, “every language theory is predicated upon a conception of the subject that it explicitly posits, implies, or tries to deny.”³³ This observation working in concert with Siebers shows that there is a somewhat cyclical relationship between the bodies being written, and the concept the bodies have *prior* to being written. She also reveals how this linguistic relationship extends itself towards “The association of the body with human mortality and fragility” and states that this “forces a general distrust of the knowledge embodied in [the body].”³⁴ As such, language and linguistic systems as they exist may not be able to properly convey the knowledge of the body. Roland Barthes also is interested in textual bodies: “Does the text have human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but of our erotic body. The pleasure of the text is irreducible to physiological need.”³⁵ Here, Barthes links the body of the text in a particular work to the reader’s erotic body. Furthermore, Barthes is stating that the text is a body within itself. In this context, Blake is not only attempting to accomplish his revolution through the physical bodies shown in his plates, but the textual body works in concert with the physical to fulfill this transcendence. This eroticism will also be important to consider during the discussion of sexualized bodies below. It is also important to keep in mind how linguistics is used to shape discussions of sex and gender with varying degrees of success. For example, writing of Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler states that grammar cannot accurately articulate a discussion of gender because “the substantive grammar of gender, which assumes men and women as well as their attributes of masculine and feminine, is an example of

³³ Julia Kristeva, “From One Identity to an Other,” in *The Portable Kristeva*, upd. ed., ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 93.

³⁴ Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 26.

³⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Noonday Press, 1998), 17.

binary that effectively masks the univocal and hegemonic discourse of the masculine, phallogocentrism, silencing the feminine as a site of subversive multiplicity.”³⁶

It is also worth noting that the characters in Blake’s plates are often interacting with the text itself; this can be shown in *The Chimney Sweeper*, *A Cradle Song*, and *A Dream* as figures literally rest on the letters engraved into the plate. In each of the three, bodies are present using the titles of each plate to rest and play. While these figures can be easily looked over, their inclusion inherently suggests importance due to the painstaking effort Blake would have undertaken in order to include these bodies. The inclusion is due to Blake deciding to show depicted physical bodies interacting with text, which, due to the presence of and relationship with those same bodies, is thus rendered something physical as well.

Writing of *The Book of Urizen*, Erin Goss reflects on the use of language to establish bodies: “the nominally corporeal and the ontologically corporeal are indistinguishable. What is called corporeal becomes all that can be understood to be corporeal, and the possibility of differentiating between a material and a linguistic body becomes null.”³⁷ Further, Goss gestures towards Judith Butler’s writing of the body and suggests that Blake provides a proto-Butlerian perspective in that “Blake depicts the body as the ground for the known world.”³⁸ Thus, the linguistic bodies present not only show bodies that are striving to engage in a transcendent revolution, but they compose the world within Blake’s work. This harkens back to the above environmental aspects regarding *The Tyger*: in Copy F, Blake shows the environment affecting the body present in the plate. Thus, the environment is affecting the *world* that is present; this echoes the cyclical nature Kristeva articulates when writing about bodies and concepts of bodies.

³⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 19.

³⁷ Goss, “What Is Called Corporeal,” 413.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 414.

Blake's work begs the question as to how one is supposed to use language in order to describe bodies unlike those typically given names and descriptions; the task proves to be too much, and the body is left to write its own language and create different linguistic tricks to be used. Connolly raises this question herself: "If Blake imitates Michelangelo's expression of passion and wildness *through muscular contortion*, why does he not also strive to imitate that artist's impressive skill at depicting difficult postures correctly?"³⁹ Since Blake's familiarity with Michelangelo has already been established above, the answer is simple: Blake is not interested in what is correct. Rather, Blake seeks to create a new body, or at the very least show bodies trying to do away with their limitations. One can move through the various copies of *The First Book of Urizen*'s title page to for evidence of this. In copies B, D, and G, the lines delineating the muscles become harsher and more pronounced; the bodies are more bulbous. However, in copy F, the body shown makes a departure from the others. The figure is clad in white and takes on an almost ethereal air due to the clothes and appendages blending in with the bear. The curves of the body remain the same, but the harsh muscle lines are no longer present. Perhaps this is a body transcended, a body without limits able to present itself in an unnatural pose and defy ordinary description. Thus, the language becomes something the body writes itself. Kristeva gestures towards this new language as well: she writes of "static thoughts" being present when considering "a body in repose"; she writes of the relationship between these thoughts and the body and how they interact: "the kind of activity encouraged and privileged by (capitalist) society represses the *process* pervading the body and the subject, and that we must therefore break out of our interpersonal and intersocial experience if we are to gain access to what is

³⁹ Connolly, *William Blake and the Body*, 29. Emphasis mine.

repressed in the social mechanism: the generating of significance.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, when examining the aforementioned *Urizen* plates, one should not assign a specific chronology to Blake deciding to change his plates for one specific aim; rather, it is to suggest that throughout the course of his work, Blake was aware of the malleability of his plates and the language his bodies write. Moreover, Blake was aware that the meaning of his text would transform depending on worldly changes; in *William Blake and the Age of Revolution*, Jacob Bronowski writes, “Nothing has hindered the understanding of Blake’s prophetic books so much as the wish to fix symbols singly and steadily...they do shift, and they shift in order to remain apt to whatever actual Blake then had in mind.”⁴¹ While Bronowski may be hyperbolic in this instance, his statement regarding textual symbolism nonetheless functions in concert with Blake’s intense hatred of limitations and finity.

Referring to Barthes’ “From Work to Text,” one can conclude that text also reveals itself to be infinite:

The Text is plural. Which is not simply to say that it has several meanings, but that it accomplishes the very plural of meaning: an *irreducible* (and not merely an acceptable) plural. The Text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination.⁴²

This dissemination suggests that the text will spread across and through the previously perceived borders thought to be constructed by the text. This plurality thus defies any singular meaning the text could have, rendering it limitless. Moreover, considering what has been stated above regarding language and the body and the fact that text is inextricably linked to language, Barthes’

⁴⁰ Julia Kristeva, “From One Identity to an Other,” in *The Portable Kristeva*, upd. ed., ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 27.

⁴¹ Jacob Bronowski, *William Blake and the Age of Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 30.

⁴² Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism*, 2nd. ed., ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 1328.

observation assists in one's ability to perceive that text is limitless and linked to the body in Blake's work. By extension, this supports that the body at least has the potential for infinity; however, due to restrictions not placed on text but unique to the worldly body, the body cannot yet be infinite. Only through the body struggling towards transcendence, i.e., the infinite, can it accomplish what is fulfilled by text.

When writing on the nature of testimony in her essay *Work, Immigration, Gender*, cultural critic Lisa Lowe explores the relationship between literary works and society as a whole; since Blake was just as interested in the written word as the bodies etched along side them, one can read his work

not merely as aesthetic framing of a 'private' transcendence, but as a form that may narrate the dissolution or impossibility of the 'private' domain in the context of the material conditions of work, geography, gender, and race. In this sense, cultural forms of many kinds are important media in the formation of oppositional narratives and crucial to the imagination and rearticulation of new forms of political subjectivity, collectivity, and practice.⁴³

Blake's work is thus a part of much larger practice of both responding to and (re)articulating society. Lowe's mention of "political" should be read in the uppercase sense of the word due to Blake's concern regarding humanity and revolution in a broader sense than governing and legislative institutions. One should also consider Susan Buckingham-Hatfield's statement that "It is through our bodies that we most directly confront our environment" in addition to, and simultaneously with, the reverse confrontation occurring.⁴⁴ As will be mentioned further on below, the body is often a site where Blake is able to write and textualize environment. In strictly linguistic terms, consider the following from *Urizen*: "And their thirty cities divided / In form of

⁴³ Lisa Lowe, "Work, Immigration, Gender," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism*, 2nd. ed., ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 2522.

⁴⁴ Susan Buckingham-Hatfield, *Gender and Environment* (London: Routledge, 2000), 46.

a human heart / No more could they rise at will / In the infinite void, but bound down / To earth by their narrowing perceptions.”⁴⁵ Obviously, the cities become something akin to a human heart, but there is a doubling of this bodily symbolism that occurs with the mentioning of one being “bound” to the physical world. The concept of a city becomes something human, necessitating this grounding and binding. By taking on the aspects of the human body, the cities—and the people within—are not able to reach the infinite.

III. Gendered and Sexualized Bodies

One would be remiss to ignore the gendered and sexualized bodies present in Blake’s images. Much has been said above about the physical body, but most of the examples are pulled from images of (seemingly) male bodies. However, Tom Hayes writes of the presence of androgynous bodies in Blake’s work. Specifically, Hayes focuses on Blake’s drawing, “Visionary Head.” Hayes echoes other critiques of the head when he writes of the “figure’s highly arched eyebrows, heavily lidded eyes, tight-lipped smile, flowing hair, and smooth cheeks [that] give him a decidedly androgynous air.”⁴⁶ Hayes’ proposes that the drawing is representative of Blake’s ego-ideal; in attempting to prove this, the scholar relies on a self-portrait of Blake as well as a plaster cast to show similarities between Blake’s own physical features and those found in “Visionary Head.” This ego-ideal can be read as the ideal sum of one’s identity; for Hayes, this is represented through the bodily extension of the head in “Visionary Head.” However, taking into account what has previously been shown, this ego-ideal does not accomplish the entirety of Blake’s revolution. While it is useful to show that there is a unity within “Visionary Head,” the unity is still limited to the self; more specifically, it is limited

⁴⁵ Blake, “Urizen,” 83.

⁴⁶ Hayes, “William Blake’s Androgynous Ego-Ideal,” 143.

to Blake's self. Given the different revolutionary displays in other works of his, Blake does not want to limit the idea of unity to the self: the unity must be universal. However, Hayes' critique of "Visionary Head" does provide audiences with helpful language to navigate the gendered and sexualized implications of Blake's work. Moreover, as will be shown below, Blake's method of drawing extends to the creation of his plates; while these plates remain the focus of this essay, it is nevertheless helpful to engage Blake's other work in conjunction.

In addition to Hayes' language, one must also be familiar with the more general language used to define and examine concepts of gender and sexuality; in doing so, one will be able to readily examine that Blake's bodily revolution engages with and is assisted by gendered and sexualized bodies. This is accomplished through the "erotic body" body referenced by Barthes above. This gives a lens through which to view to actual text in Blake's works as erotic.

Additionally, Foucault examination of *ars erotica* can be applied to Blake: "In the erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as practice and accumulated as experience...it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul."⁴⁷ Thus, the eroticism that is found in Blake's work can be said to affect the body and soul, which—according to Blake—have no distinction from one another. Additionally, similar to the above discussion of physical bodies, one must be careful to include various sexualities. For example, Ofelia Schutte writes "The fact that patriarchal societies and religions have privileged heterosexuality as the norm for all sexual conduct, however, does not mean that all heterosexual activity necessarily fits into the traditional

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 57.

normative mold or domain.”⁴⁸ In short, different sexualities—and genders—should not be ascribed different privileges when critiquing Blake’s work. In fact, this would undermine Blake’s mission of a revolution towards the infinite due to any demarcations or limitations inherently functioning against that unity. Roy Porter articulates this when he writes, “Resurrection for Blake was the reunification of what had been one and whole in paradise but which had become divided, polarized into flesh and spirit, male and female and numerous other dichotomies.”⁴⁹ Further one, Porter makes a similar mention to Hayes’ in stating that Blake wanted a return to the “androgynous oneness of Adam in Eden.”⁵⁰ Thus, Blake finds himself in a position where, in order to show the faults of the demarcations of gender or sexuality, he would need to depict those same limitations to portray his revolutionary struggle. Additionally, as mentioned above, Blake was working during a time of questions regarding sexuality; 1792 saw the publishing of Mary Wollstencraft’s *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*. Blake, having been commissioned by Wollstencraft’s publishers to illustrate an earlier work, would have been aware of her work. Regardless of whether or not Blake would have subscribed to Wollstencraft’s views, there is no question that her work is a seminal text regarding supposed sexual differences in men and women. Moreover, the text augmented how people perceived these differences. For example, Porter writes “Her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) explained that the ‘person’ of a woman was ‘idolized’, that is, respected only for its ‘sexual character’. It was an admiration which paradoxically cheapened and weakened those upon whom it was bestowed.”⁵¹ Porter also traces the developments of conceptualizing sexuality prior to Wollstencraft; all this is to say that

⁴⁸ Ofelia Schutte, “A Critique of Normative Heterosexuality: Identity, Embodiment, and Sexual Difference in Beauvoir and Irigaray,” *Hypatia* 12, no. 1 (Winter, 1997): 41.

⁴⁹ Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 442.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 258.

there was a massive societal shift towards considering sexuality, specifically sexuality that differed from traditional male norms. This shift necessitated new ways of considering sexuality, and thus would lead to new ways to portray sexuality.

Londa Schiebinger writes of this shift from an anatomical perspective; this is important to account for considering the evidence above indicating Blake's interest in and knowledge of anatomy: "anatomists' interest in the female body was shaped, in part, by changes in the broader culture. Mercantile interests in population growth played a role in the ride of the eighteenth-century ideal of motherhood. The ideal of motherhood, in turn, profoundly changed medical views of the uterus."⁵² Schiebinger further states that the concern with the uterus necessitated a razing of previous conceptions of sexual differences; additionally, she is careful to mention that these "representations of the human body in eighteenth-century anatomical illustrations were, in fact, laden with cultural values."⁵³ Patriarchal systems were responsible for dictating how these sexual bodies were represented to the public; moreover, it is important to note that these are supposed to be scientifically based, reasoned accounts of the human body. Unlike Blake's work, they are not supposed to express exaggeration or imagination; there is no place for Blake's exaggerated bodies in these anatomical illustrations. And yet, there is still a cultural bias that indicates society will affect how bodies are defined in terms of sex. By attempting to skirt these biases, as will be shown below, Blake rebukes the normative classification of sexed bodies.

As mentioned above, this shift is especially important because it placed focus on women specifically; up until the shift, discussions of sexuality were typically limited to men. Thus, new

⁵² Londa Schiebinger, "Skeletons in the Closet: The First Illustrations of the Female Skeleton in Eighteenth-Century Anatomy," in *Feminism & the Body*, ed. Londa Schiebinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 37.

modes of expression were required to articulate “woman.” Judith Butler writes of the link between gender, sexuality, and politics with attention paid to the form of “women”:

constructs of identity serve as the points of epistemic departure from which theory emerges and politics itself is shaped. . . . The sex/gender distinction and the category of sex itself appear to presuppose a generalization of ‘the body’ that preexists the acquisition of its sexed significance. This ‘body’ often appears to be a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as ‘external’ to that body.⁵⁴

Again, a cyclical relationship is visible in terms of the body and societal factors. The body is formed, or “figured,” by the culture that surrounds it, and the culture allows the body to exist within that same culture. As has been shown above, Butler echoes Blake in terms of bodies struggling to break boundaries in their display of musculature that is usually exaggerated to the point that they seem bulbous and tumescent.⁵⁵ These societal boundaries are defined on bodies by the very notion of gender; Buckingham-Hatfield writes, “Because gender is a society’s interpretation of maleness and femaleness, that society will determine what should be male and female characteristics and roles.”⁵⁶ Thus, Blake’s bodies are necessarily gendered, if only as a reflection of the genders he perceived in society.

Regarding sexuality, Seymour Howard writes of the influence classical nudes have on Blake’s work; moreover, he provides biographical context. Howard writes, “Blake’s seeming inconsistency, attributable to social scruple and to the varying appropriateness of nudity for different subjects, can also be linked with his efforts to deal with sexual and other polarities in an ideal universe of his own making.”⁵⁷ In short, Blake viewed sexuality, and even gender, as

⁵⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 129.

⁵⁵ When considering the sexualized nature of some of the images found in the plates, this swelling can be considered as a sensual biological response in addition to the transcendent revolutionary interpretation.

⁵⁶ Buckingham-Hatfield, *Gender and Environment*, 3-4.

⁵⁷ Seymour Howard, “William Blake: The Antique, Nudity, and Nakedness: A Study in Idealism and Regression,” *Artibus Et Historiae* 3, no. 6 (1982): 117.

limiting. In order to skirt the seeming necessity of sexing his bodies, as he may have been inspired to do by artists such as Michelangelo, Blake typically avoided depicting genitalia.⁵⁸ This is not to say that he avoided displaying nude bodies in his work; rather, he would include some sexual signifiers and omit others. However, this is not the only way Blake contended with genitalia and the sexual connotations of those organs. Howard writes that within the multiplicity of genital display or omission in Blake's work, the artist is able to "reflect his classic and academic accomplishments as a maturing professional artist, scholar, and gentleman [and] also reflect a complementary Romantic and iconoclastic way of cultivating the mystique of the primitive and child-like imagination."⁵⁹ Alicia Ostriker writes of Blake's *exclusion* of sexuality in his work: "Blake...does not stress the distinction between male and female, or assign conspicuously different roles to the two sexes. Youth and virgin suffer alike under chastity, man and women have identical desires."⁶⁰ However, one could argue that Blake does code certain meanings into his description of men and women. For example, in *Urizen* Blake writes of the creation of "the first female form now separate / They call'd her Pity."⁶¹ This description does not elicit any sense of power or agency within the female form. One will associate the female form as something to be pitied.

Despite the literally pitiful nature of the previous example, women are still included in and integral to Blake's bodily revolution. In fact, Blake specifically refers to the body when writing of Oothoon's expression of the pain brought forth due to Bromion's assault: "Oothoon weeps not. she cannot weep! her tears are locked up ; / But she can howl incessant writhing her

⁵⁸ Ibid, 126-27.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 123.

⁶⁰ Alicia Ostriker, "Desire Gratified and Ungratified: William Blake and Sexuality," in *Critical Essays on William Blake*, ed. Hazard Adams (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1991), 93.

⁶¹ Blake, "Urizen," 78.

soft snowy limbs.”⁶² Instead of having Oothoon speak her pain, Blake has her howl and express this pain through her body. In this instance, spoken language is cast aside in favor of this almost entirely bodily expression. When she is given the chance to speak her pain, Oothoon reacts by “calling Theotormons[sic] Eagles to prey upon her flesh.”⁶³ Oothoon wants to rid herself of the body; she states, “Rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect. / The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast.”⁶⁴ Further, once the “defiled bosom” is destroyed, “Theotormon severely smiles. her soul reflects the smile” showing that the physical body has changed in an effort to remove the pain; once this restriction is removed, the soul “reflects.”⁶⁵ However, as has been mentioned above, there is a unity in the body and soul within Blake’s work, but this instance in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* doesn’t render the destruction of the defiled body and retainment of the soul counter to Blake’s other work. Rather, one is able to apply this instance to the rest of the prophetic book because Oothoon’s pain is not removed despite the body being altered. Moreover, the soul enduring is a sign that the body is not lost or truly changed because of the unity of soul and body. This bodily change cannot be what will lead her to transcendence; rather, she must continue to struggle against bodily limitations using her body. This is not to say that there is any ableism or type of body being left out of Blake’s revolution; one need not have an “intact” or normative body to participate, in fact Blake’s bodies are usually anything but. Rather, this is to suggest that divine altering of the body as it is done to Oothoon will not be that which leaves her to infinity. In short, altering the body will not aid in the striving and revolution of that body.

⁶² William Blake and Harold Bloom, “Visions of the Daughters of Albion,” in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Press, 1982), 46.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Obviously, there is a rather sexist connotation that Oothoon will not be able to recover from her assault; moreover, she is the recipient of further pain due to Theotormon's refusal of her after the assault. This casts a misogynist aspect over *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, but the revolutionary spirit of the work is still apparent in Oothoon's attempt at doing away with her body to bring her peace. One can read this as synonymous with the struggles Blake's more bulbous bodies evince throughout his work. Moreover, there are frequent hints of a receptive and supportive community of women within the work; this is evidenced by the following repeating phrase: "The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, & echo back her sighs."⁶⁶ Rather than refuse her like Theotormon and Bromion after the assault, the titular daughters empathize with Oothoon in their echoes. Moreover, the mention of echoes can be related to the above mentions of Oothoon's wordless expressions of pain. This communication has a negative facet. As critic Michelle Leigh Gompf notes "while Oothoon speaks strongly for women's rights, the free love she speaks of includes trapping other girls, and seems to be for Theotormon's pleasure only."⁶⁷ However, Gompf also mentioned that the violence committed against Oothoon does bring forth more understanding regarding constraints writ large: "After the rending by the eagles she can now see all constraints at work in society. It is expanded senses in general, here created through violence, and therefore expansion of thought, that social rejuvenation is dependent upon."⁶⁸ While this certainly doesn't excuse the assault, the resulting relationship between Oothoon and the daughters will undertake a fundamental change. These women are able to communicate on a level that does not necessitate the spoken word; moreover, they are not required to operate within

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Michelle Gompf, "Ripped from Complacency: Violence and Feminist Moments in Blake," in *Sexy Blake*, eds. Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne J. Connolly (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 65.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 66.

the limitations of the spoken word, resulting in a non finite form of language. This language can refer to the above notion put forth by Kristeva with regards to the body writing it's own language. Even with this explanation, and Glomph articulates this throughout her essay, there is nevertheless something disturbing with regards to Blake's depiction of this "social rejuvenation" by way of assault functioning as a case of the ends justifying the means. However, for the purpose of this essay and to assist in somewhat bracketing the horrors above, one should consider that Blake is commenting on finite bodies. In this sense, the bodies and the pain they receive are the results of a corrupt and finite world; one should be focused on the infinite that is reachable through bodily revolution.

IV. Racialized Bodies

As has been discussed above, Blake is writing the bodies of his plates. As has been mentioned above, when referring to the "social ideologies" Siebers gestures towards both the idea of sexualization and racialization with regard to bodies. With sexualization having been discussed above, a discussion of racialization through a lens of marginalization and revolution should occur.⁶⁹ To begin, one should consider how the male body is portrayed throughout his work, and in order to provide further historical and societal context it is important to note how male bodies were depicted shortly after Blake's death. For example, Gail Bederman's provides an examination of how male bodies were depicted and provides a racial element while discussing boxing:

Late Victorian culture had identified the powerful, large male body of the heavyweight prizefighter... as the epitome of manhood. The heavyweight's male body was so equated with male identity and power that American whites rigidly prevented all men they

⁶⁹ This is not meant to be a section used for mere tokenism; rather, I hope to approach both sexualized and images of racial conflict within Blake's work to show the palpability of revolutionary thinking. Moreover, in terms of critiquing race, this discussion will focus on the Black bodies depicted in Blake's work.

deemed unable to wield political or social power from asserting any claim to the heavyweight championship.⁷⁰

Obviously, this example is from a period after Blake's death. However, the base description Bederman grants her readers shows that there is a direct relationship between social power and muscle; moreover, not any muscles will enact this relationship.⁷¹ They must be large, akin the those depicted in the male bodies of Blake's work. Once again, examples of this abound in Blake's work, but one can take into account Elohim as referenced above. The racial component of Bederman's observation is worth noting as well; in fact, she expands on this further on when she writes of Black heavyweight Jack Johnson:

for twenty-seven years African American men, whom whites saw as less manly than themselves, were forbidden to assert any claim to this pugilistic manhood, When Johnson actually won the heavyweight title, white men clamored for [former white heavyweight champion Jim] Jeffries to ameliorate the situation and restore manhood to what they believed was its proper functioning.⁷²

As can be easily ascertained, white society was uncomfortable with displays of Black power brought to the fore through these "manly" depictions and powerfully muscular Black bodies. Again, while Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries fight occurred long after Blake's death, the racial tension and unfounded anxiety exhibited by white people existed long before the boxing match. This leads one to note Blake's depiction of Black bodies and the call for revolution that exists in these depictions. More importantly, if one subscribes to the idea of powerful, muscular bodies equating societal power, Blake's plates displaying Black bodies gain yet another dimension. For example, consider *A Negro Hung by the Ribs to a Gallows*. While this is certainly a violent

⁷⁰ Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

image, the exaggerated muscles are still present in the Black man depicted. Thus, Blake is showing this man—who is having an incredibly abhorrent atrocity committed on his body—as a powerful body. In doing so, this man becomes one of the bodies that Blake depicts as bulbous and exaggerated to show a desire for transcendence; thus, Blake is including Black bodies in his revolutionary transcendence. In fact, Blake also provides examples of a Black soldier and a white one: *A Coromantyn Free Negro, or Ranger, armed* and *A private Marine of Col. Fourceoud's Corps*. When looked at together, there is a mirrored effect; both men stand in similar poses. However, the Black man's muscles are more defined (partially due to the fact of being shirtless), and this serves to evidence the previously mentioned power *and* links him to the transcendent revolution. While the white man has a similar frame, the muscles are concealed by a uniform. While Blake surely wanted to include all people in his revolution, his anti-slavery rhetoric and his writing of the “sorrows of slavery”⁷³ shows that he was passionate about advocating for the freedom of Black people, leading to the extra attention given to musculature in *A Coromantyn Free Negro, or Ranger, armed*. It is also worth noting that these images are less exaggerated in terms of muscle. David Erdman suggests that this could be Blake wanting to depict the true conditions of enslaved peoples; furthermore, Erdman describes *A Negro Hung by the Ribs to a Gallows* among other similar works as images that “emphasize the dignity of Negro men and women stoical under cruel torture.”⁷⁴

This brings to mind the expressions Black bodies display in Blake's work, specifically when buttressed against white bodies. For example, in *Group of Negros, as imported to be sold*

⁷³ William Blake and Harold Bloom, “Milton: Book the First,” in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Press, 1982), 121.

⁷⁴ David V. Erdman, “Blake's Vision of Slavery,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 15, no. 3/4 (1952): 244, doi:10.2307/750476.

for Slaves, the Black bodies have a wide range of emotion and expression. These expressions function in a similar way as the wailing of Oothoon; the expressions give the bodies a language to express the pain they are receiving due to their existing a corrupt world. Conversely, the lone white body in this image guiding the slaves to their doom has a markedly blank and emotionless expression. This contrasts the above stoicism because there is no reason for the white slave driver to be stoic; he is not included in the pain present in the Black bodies. And much like the white body displayed in *A private Marine of Col. Fourceoud's Corps*, the white body in this image does not contain any exaggerated features or musculature; in other words, there is no semblance of a bodily struggle that can be ascribed to this white body. This is not to say that the white body depicted in *Group of Negros, as imported to be sold for Slaves* would be exempt from Blake's revolution as this would imply limitation, but rather to again allow Blake an opportunity to comment on slavery using more worldly methods. Further attention can be given to anatomical literature from Blake's time. Biologist Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) was keen on delving into the differences in the skeletal structure of the bodies of different races. Anne Fausto-Sterling writes that, even though Cuvier amassed an immense collection of skeletons during his lifetime, Cuvier was frustrated that there had not been comparative work between Black and white skeletons.⁷⁵ While Blake may have shared Cuvier's interest in anatomical structure and a desire to focus on aspects of the body other than its outer limits, the similarities end there. Cuvier procured his skeletons using nefarious means and was engaged with essentially grave robbing the battle sites of African cultures.⁷⁶ Blake, hating the horrors of slavery and the

⁷⁵ Anne Fausto-Sterling, "Gender, Race, and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of 'Hottentot' Women in Europe, 1815-1817," in *Feminism & the Body*, ed. Londa Schiebinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 209.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

lack of freedom of all people, and while still maintaining his interest in anatomy, for the most part treats the Black bodies he depicts with reverence.

Blake's poem *America* offers more textual evidence in favor of the freedom of slaves directly from the artist: "Let the slave grinding at the mill, run out into the field: / Let him look up into the heavens & laugh in the bright air; / Let the chained[sic] soul shut up in darkness and in sighing, / Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary years; / Rise and look out, his chains are loose, his dungeon doors are open."⁷⁷ Furthermore, although not an explicitly racialized example, Blake begins *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* by admonishing slavery: "Enslav'd, the Daughters of Albion weep; a tembling lamentation / Upon their mountains; in their valleys, sighs toward America."⁷⁸ Referring to critical readings of Blake's relationship with abolition, Erdman provides further insight into Blake's views on slavery: "The Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was formed in 1787, and Blake's *Little Black Boy* coincided with the early phase of a campaign in which several artists and writers were enlisted."⁷⁹ Considering the actual production and reproduction of plates with a racial component, one should examine *The Little Black Boy*.

Consider the shift in skin tones from Copy I, B, L, and Z. As one can plainly see, the titular boy becomes increasingly dark-skinned. While it would be somewhat difficult to apply issues of colorism to Blake's work, these changing skin tones are evidence of different racialized versions of the same body; Blake was portraying different shades of skin tone in order to elicit different reactions. This becomes all the more readily apparent when one considers that

⁷⁷ William Blake and Harold Bloom, "America a Prophecy," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Press, 1982), 53.

⁷⁸ Blake, "Visions of the Daughters of Albion," 45.

⁷⁹ Erdman, "Blake's Vision of Slavery," 243.

throughout the above plates, the depictions of the white child and Christ do not alter as drastically; in fact, there seems to be only the most minute of changes. Since these plates were all produced during 1789, the differing of skin tones was more than likely not a product of Blake's growing relationship with race, but a reflection on the multifaceted and multi-hued nature of racialized bodies. Additionally, Erdman writes of Blake directly addressing the arbitrariness of skin tone in response to reactions to *Little Black Boy* and the white soul present in the poem:

To avoid a chauvinistic interpretation Blake explained that any skin colour is a cloud that cannot obscure the essential brotherhood of man in a fully enlightened society, such as Heaven. 'These black bodies and this sunburnt face,' said the little black boy, are 'but a cloud.'⁸⁰

Erdman goes on to say that the white child also has a cloud that would ostensibly be removed in the aforementioned "enlightened society." However, one must be careful to note that Erdman is incorrect in his equating this society with heaven; or, if such an equalizing can occur, it should be mentioned that the transcendent revolution has not yet been completed due to the restrictive nature of heaven that Blake consistently refutes. Rather, it seems that Blake is being careful to reference the earthly problems and atrocities related to slavery and racism while still leaving room for further revolution. While Blake's focus remains on the universal, he is aware that he must reckon with his earthbound society as well. However, Blake is not without his faults regarding his depiction of race; in *Fearful Symmetry*, Northrop Frye recalls that Blake is part of a tradition of poets that "associate Ethiopia with the unfallen world from which the fallen world, the 'spiritual Egypt' of the Book of Revelation, has descended."⁸¹ While this can be seen as Blake attempting to lift Ethiopia to a higher status, it is equally true that it appears to be an

⁸⁰ Ibid, 249.

⁸¹ Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 213.

idealization undertaken by a white man on a predominantly Black space. With this, Blake is ascribing certain mystical notions to Ethiopia that result in something akin to orientalism. However, his attention appears to be noble, albeit misguided. Elsewhere in his text, Frye writes of Blake depicting “Africa as a giant of the same kind as Albion” stating that African civilization is not fallen and should be considered in concert with the rest of humanity.⁸²

One should also consider how perceived racial difference is used to conceive language. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy provides this link while also connecting the state: “[Black and white] colours support a special rhetoric that has grown to be associated with a language of nationality and national belonging at well as the languages of ‘race’ and ethnic identity.”⁸³ As has been shown above, language and text are linked to the body, but Gilroy expands the relationship to the racialized body; this is akin to how language is explained examined above in terms of gender and sex. This mention of nationality provides a further connection to the (racialized) body’s place within a larger context: the state.⁸⁴ While Gilroy is specifically referring to racialized bodies, this is more evidence that there is a clear relationship between bodies and the societies they exist in. This suggests that not only is one able to observe Blake’s specific relationship with slavery and race, but another dimension regarding the state’s role in these practices is revealed.

Blake’s commentary regarding the role of the state reveals his revolutionary spirit through his work depicting Black bodies. Consider how the bodies function in the examples above with regard to society as a whole. The body in *A Negro Hung by the Ribs to a Gallows* is a clear victim of colonial enterprises, i.e., the European state engaging in the oppression of

⁸² Ibid, 212.

⁸³ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 2002), 1-2.

⁸⁴ This will be examined further in the following section.

another. As has been mentioned above, both *A Coromantyn Free Negro, or Ranger, armed* and *A private Marine of Col. Fourceoud's Corps*. can be seen as complementary pieces in terms of bodily position; moreover, both bodies wield rifles; this both denotes an imperialist, colonialist facet to each work, as well as the more general notion of a soldier's relationship with the state. As has been stated above, the body of the Black man depicted has less exaggerated musculature than other examples discussed in this essay, and this can be attributed to an attempt to show the real horrors of slavery. This also adds to the symbolic power of the rifle and the notion of the free body the title suggests. For example, the body is rendered in a realistic way in order to provide a more grounded representation; again, this should not detract from Blake's revolutionary aims because there is still additional attention paid to the muscles in *A Coromantyn Free Negro, or Ranger, armed* when compared to the body in *A private Marine of Col. Fourceoud's Corps*. The body is still the site of the revolution. Additionally, the mention that the Black body is free suggests that *some* revolution has taken place in order to procure that freedom; the rifle then furthers this idea as the Black body is now "free" to pick up arms and defend itself. However, the rifle is also representative of state control and suppression, and this renders the concept of a free Black body duplicitous; there is only the illusion of freedom because the body is still bound to the state, and thus still bound to the corrupt and finite world. As has been mentioned above by Bronowski, symbols shift and should not be bound to any particular meaning, but there is still value in attempting to examine the cultural and temporal import of these images when placed within their time. Hopefully, contemporary audiences will look at images of weapons and slavery and arrive at different conclusions than those in the eighteenth century, and it can be anachronistic to apply contemporary views to earlier atrocities.

However, these images still have their anti-slavery and anti-imperialist aspects due to—borrowing Barthes’ language—their plurality.

Another element that demands attention is the racialized woman’s body present in Blake’s work.⁸⁵ To begin, one can discuss how, like the body in *A Coromantyn Free Negro, or Ranger, armed*, the body of a Black woman is also linked explicitly to the state. To examine this, consider *Europe Supported by Africa & America*. This work was created during the same year as *A Coromantyn Free Negro, or Ranger, armed*, but instead of offering an image rife with both warlike and free imagery, *Europe Supported by Africa & America* appears more idyllic, at least at first glance. There are three bodies in this image, one Black, one white, and the last seemingly Indigenous. All of the bodies portray women, with the white body (representing Europe) in the center. The genitalia of them women are covered, but their bodies are nude. Here, Blake is showing that Europe, associated with whiteness, must rely on Black and Indigineous people to function. While the image seems to display harmony amongst the three bodies, and thus the three geographic areas associated with these bodies, when considering that this image was created as part of a larger work depicting the atrocities of slavery one cannot help but perceive that Blake is deliberately commenting on the horribly exploitative nature of slavery.

V. **Revolutionary (Re)Productive Bodies**

⁸⁵ In order for this essay’s progression to organically follow, intersectionality between gender, sexuality, and race will be discussed in this section. While the above section on gender and sexuality attempted to articulate womanhood writ large, it is important to try to conceptualize the intersection of race and gender as it occurs in Blake’s work because of the amount of Black women present. Moreover, the discussion necessarily helps one better understand how the members of this intersection function separately and together.

One can now turn to the actual construction of Blake's plates in order to understand the artist's relationship with the material in terms of labor. In his text *Blake and the Idea of the Book*, Joseph Viscomi offers a variety of details regarding Blake's process, as well as providing biographical details related to the work. Viscomi writes that Blake's choice in the size of his plates was dependent on "a rough idea of his projected book's size, an idea affected by such *economic and aesthetic* concerns as the cost, number, and size of plates that could be cut out of a standard-size sheet of copper, and the costm number, and size of leaves that could be cut out..."

⁸⁶ This not only shows the relationship between "economic and aesthetic concerns," but shows that they are intrinsic to one another with regards to Blake's artistic process. One could substitute a variety of other terms addressing the economic concerns, but for the purposes of this section, one should consider the link between the labor enacted and the resulting economic "gain." In other words, Blake's labor directly impacted his work to continue the cycle of his own labor through any capital gained after the initial labor. Again, here is a cyclical relationship in Blake's life that will be reflected throughout his work. Furthermore, his relationship with labor and the worker is articulated by Northrop Frye in such a way that can be readily applied to the bodies in Blake's art: "The worker, then, does not call the world of experience real because he perceives it out of habit acquired from his ancestors: it is real to him only as the material cause of his work. And the world of dreams is not unreal, but the formal cause: it dictates the desirable human shape which the work assumes."⁸⁷ Here, Frye is stating that the labor one undertakes is arbitrary, but it is important to recognize the *formal cause* of that labor; this labor then becomes an

⁸⁶ Joseph Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 48. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁷ Northrop Frye, "Blake's Treatment of the Archetype," in *Critical Essays on William Blake*, ed. Hazard Adams (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1991), 40.

expression of someone reacting to the world of dreams, which can be referred to as the infinite or unity mentioned elsewhere in this essay.

However, one must contend with what Frye is stating with regards to how labor had shifted during Blake's time to a more capitalist enterprise fueled by machinery. In "Signs of the Times," Thomas Carlyle expresses the anxiety brought forth by this change:

Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also. Here too nothing follows its spontaneous course, nothing is left to be accomplished by old natural methods. Everything has its cunningly devised implements, its preëstablished apparatus; it is not done by hand, but by machinery.⁸⁸

Blake, like most of his fellow artists, likely would have felt this pull away from the internal and spiritual due to mass production. Moreover, Carlyle echoes Blake's relationship to the internal and spiritual with one's body by mentioning the work "done by hand." Thus, Carlyle provides a helpful link between external labor performed by the artist and the artist's internal and spiritual self.

Attention should be paid to the amount of labor Blake engaged in to learn his trade. In G. E. Bentley's text *William Blake in the Desolate Market*. Bentley writes, "Blake's training as an engraver from 1772 to 1779 was rigorous, comprehensive, and old-fashioned."⁸⁹ Bentley details that Blake did not have an issue finding work once his apprenticeship under renowned line engraver James Basire was completed in 1779.⁹⁰ Yet, despite periods of prosperity, there was an inherent precarity to Blake's craft due to the financial burden it necessitated: "Blake

⁸⁸ Thomas Carlyle and Giuseppe Mazzini. *The Socialism and Unsocialism of Thomas Carlyle: A Collection of Carlyle's Social Writings, Together with Joseph Mazzini's Famous Essay Protesting Against Carlyle's Views*, ed. Rev. W.D.P. Bliss (New York: Humboldt Pub, 1891), 170.

⁸⁹ G.E. Bentley Jr., *William Blake in the Desolate Market* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 8.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 10.

characteristically made his pictures *then* waited for a buyer” and “he was not a good businessman.”⁹¹ The fact that Blake was concerned with the work he was doing outside of gaining any financial freedom allows his audience to reflect on the limits that a capitalist society imposes on those within it; despite Blake not subscribing to traditional business models he would have viewed as limiting, he nevertheless had to exist within a capitalist society. This is indicative of a situation artists still find themselves in today; moreover, artists and craftsmen in Blake’s time would have had to contend with the societal systems that pervaded their lives regardless of any struggling against those systems. Blake’s necessary cooperation with this harmful system in order to furnish his art will become clearer further down when one is able to perceive the monetary costs of the creation of some of his plates.

Viscomi elaborates on this laborious process and the tools required when he writes of the editions of the books Blake would create using the plates: “Blake printed his books in small editions, often producing ten or more copies of a book in a printing session. To ready the studio for this kind of printing required making ink, preparing paper, and adjusting the printing press.”⁹² Blake was never able to escape the dependence on financial gain for the production of his work due to the amount of money necessary to fulfill his practice; this is despite the fact that between 1782-83 “he engraved thirty-one book illustrations.”⁹³ William Vaughan argues that in the late eighteenth century, a decline in Blake’s income resulted in Blake turning away from the creation of his prophetic books and a revitalization in “his engraving career as well as his practice of making illustrations after other people’s work.”⁹⁴ David Erdman echoes this based on Blake’s

⁹¹ Ibid, 7.

⁹² Viscomi, *Idea of the Book*, 92.

⁹³ Bentley Jr., *Desolate Market*, 13.

⁹⁴ William Vaughan, *William Blake* (London: Tate Gallery, 1999), 45.

letters from the early nineteenth century: “Having accepted the idea that steady employment at engraving, which he alternately blessed and cursed, must be the foundations of his economy, Blake circulated brightly among authors, artists, and publishers.”⁹⁵ This included a period in 1800 to 1803 when he was under the patronage of William Hayley.⁹⁶ To better understand how much money Blake was earning during this time, Ruthven Todd provides insight to how much Blake was spending on materials while he was creating *Chaucer’s Canterbury Pilgrims* during the early 1800s:

Although I doubt whether Blake produced a printing of the first state of "The Canterbury Pilgrims" of as many copies as 25, I have made an estimate based upon that number:

Cost of copperplate £1.10s.
 Cost of paper(1 sheet, 2 prints) . . . £0.12s.6d.
 Cost of printing 25 copies £2.00s.

total £4.02s.6d.⁹⁷

Todd is the first to admit that this is simply an estimate; in fact, he writes “Copper has always fluctuated in value, so it is difficult to decide what the plate would have cost.”⁹⁸ However, this estimate compared to Bentley’s own calculations regarding Blake’s income provide further insight into the aforementioned precarity. Bentley writes that between 1800 and 1809, Blake earned £1,280; however, Blake’s income during this period was based on several occupations: engraver, teacher, printer, painter.⁹⁹ In terms of engraving, Blake earned £640; subsequently,

⁹⁵ David V. Erdman, *Blake, Prophet Against Empire: A Poet’s Interpretation of the History of His Own Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954) 403.

⁹⁶ Bentley Jr., *Desolate Market*, 10.

⁹⁷ Ruthven Todd, “A Tentative Note on the Economics of The Canterbury Pilgrims,” *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (Summer 1977): 31.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 30.

⁹⁹ Bentley Jr., *Desolate Market*, 105.

using Todd's estimate, *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims* resulted in Blake having to pay .6% of his income earned from engraving during that almost decade-long period. While this may not seem like a tremendous amount, Bentley states that during the first decade of the 1800s, Blake's yearly income was dismal and he earned "only £68 per annum."¹⁰⁰ With some simple calculating, one can see Blake could be said to have spent roughly 5.9% of his yearly income to create *one* work. Obviously, Blake busied himself with prints that may not have been as large-scale as *Pilgrims*, but since he was often working on multiple projects at once, it can be surmised that Blake was spending a great deal of money to complete his work without that same work generating a sustainable income. It's plain to see why he would have to take on other occupations and work for others to supplement his living. Furthermore, Blake continued to earn less and less in the subsequent decades.¹⁰¹ This antagonistic relationship with money can be contributed to Blake's hatred of the rich, and his desire for something other than the physical realm. A letter John Linnell writes to Bernard Barton detailing Blake's life dated April 3, 1830 elaborates: "[Blake] feared nothing so much as being rich, lest he should lose his spiritual riches."¹⁰² This relationship between Blake and other craftsmen with industrial developments is succinctly summarized by J. Bronowski in order to further evidence how the above precarity influenced and somewhat dictated their work: "The village workmen could remain masters only so long as they could buy their raw stuffs. They could buy their raw stuffs only so long as they

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 103.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 105. Bentley also provides a detailed account of the money Blake received for various projects during his life.

¹⁰² William Blake and Archibald G. B. Russell, *The Letters of William Blake. Together with a Life by Frederick Tatham. Edited from the Original Manuscripts with an Introduction and Notes by Archibald G.b. Russell. with Twelve Illustrations [including Portraits]* (London: Methuen, 1906), 229.

could sell their manufactures. When the price of manufactures slumped, the small masters had to borrow.”¹⁰³

Despite the tense relationship he had with engraving, and the financial precarity that ensued due to the practice, Blake was dedicated to trying to reach audiences with his revolutionary message; in fact, he was particularly interested in children. As Michael Davis writes, during this late eighteenth century period, Blake’s “readers would be children... whose hearts are innocent.”¹⁰⁴ This special attention to children can be found in plates referenced both above and below, and the reason for the attention is further explicated by Davis when he discusses Blake’s *Tiriel*: “This narrative poem is an attack on aged, hypocritical tyranny. For the lamentable state of man... he blames the restrictive upbringing of children.”¹⁰⁵ In short, Blake’s attention to depicting children as both laboring and at play is evidence to their role in his bodily revolution. Blake wants children to view the bodies he creates so that they can engage in the ultimate universal unity he—and the depicted bodies—are striving towards.

In order to better explicate how Blake’s method of artistic expression functions as a reflection of a laboring body, one should consider Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” Benjamin writes, “In principle, the work of art has always been reproducible. Objects made by humans could always be copied by humans. Replicas were made by pupils in practicing for their craft... But the technological reproduction of artworks is something new.”¹⁰⁶ Further, Benjamin charts the growth of this technical, or mechanical, reproduction, and although he extends his examination beyond Blake, “engraving and etching”

¹⁰³ Bronowski, *Age of Revolution*, 90.

¹⁰⁴ Davis, *A New Kind of Man*, 43.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 42.

¹⁰⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism*, 2nd. ed., ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 1052.

are still included in the chronology.¹⁰⁷ This means that Blake is engaging in a mechanical (re)production of art. Moreover, this production can be said to be both technically and manually reproduced: Blake is augmenting his own art through the use of different paints and materials while still relying on the technical methodology used to produce the “original” plate. Benjamin’s appeal to forgery, unless Blake is forging himself, is thus dispelled. Furthermore, this technical reproduction Blake engages in allows him to “place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain.”¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, as Susan Bordo writes of “the seventeenth-century philosophic conception of body *as machine, mirroring an increasingly more automated productive machinery of labor.*”¹⁰⁹ One could dismiss this way of thinking as dissipated by Blake’s time, but he no doubt depicts bodies in similar types of labor. In fact, the labor depicted bears a strong link to the repetitive practice of etching; consider the following from *Urizen*: “and the hammer / Incessant beat; forging chains new & new / Numb’ring with links. hours, days & years / 3. The eternal mind bounded began to roll / Eddis of wrath ceaseless round & round.”¹¹⁰ Here we see that the very labor being performed leads to the “eternal mind,” i.e., infinite mind, being bound and limited. And yet, the labor undertaken during the etching process when matched to the bodies shown in the plates reveals the struggle necessary for revolution.

By performing this action in his plates, Blake is showing bodies that are transformed into somewhat mechanical figures while still portraying them in such a way as to suggest transcendence through the body. The images become juxtapositions of the lived struggle of

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 1054.

¹⁰⁹ Susan Bordo, “Unbearable Weight,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism*, 2nd. ed., ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 2252-53. Emphasis mine.

¹¹⁰ Blake, “Urizen,” 75.

humanity in a (pre/post) capitalistic setting. The body is rendered an inhuman and human device of labor struggling to break the bonds that are enacted by societal strictures on the body, strictures that are only possible due to the engagement in harmful societal systems by those same (in)humans. Again, one must reckon with the cyclical critiques that are inherent in Blake's work and refer to the body and environment depicted in the plate. Viscomi writes of Blake's methodology in his platemaking and how the artistic method reflects a repudiation of restrictions. Richey accomplishes this by focusing on how Blake's process differed from his contemporaries: "[Blake's technique] did not copy actual drawings but instead incorporated the conventions, tools, methods, and aesthetics of drawing."¹¹¹ By using those aspects of drawing throughout his platemaking process, Blake "knew that ideas evolve, that drawing is a mode of thinking that can—and should whenever possible—occur on the same support, or surface, as the finished work."¹¹² This mention to evolution echoes the concept that Blake's appeal to something boundless and free from limitations. By working in this way, Blake allowed his ideas to transform over time; thus, the bodies that are present in the plates necessarily must undergo augmentation as well. They will not be contained in a static representation. This is further evidenced by Tristanne Connolly: "Engraving relies on pattern more than drawing or painting, so to give priority to pattern reflects the priorities of his own medium"¹¹³. This pattern-distinction is important to keep in mind when one considers the mass production of Blake's plates: patterns beget patterns. Furthermore, the materials used to create the plates necessitate unique method of providing the pattern: "is drawn on a bare copper plate with pens and brushes in a liquid

¹¹¹ Viscomi, *Idea of the Book*, 44.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Connolly, *William Blake and the Body*, 29.

medium, a medium that, because it is *liquid* and because of the way it is applied, gives illuminated prints their characteristic free-flowing, bold appearance.”¹¹⁴

Blake’s interest in labor is reflected throughout his work. Los is typically characterized with language that likens him to a blacksmith or craftsman; as mentioned above, he is able to bring forth “rivets of iron & brass.” In terms of more earthly labors, in *The Chimney Sweeper* found in *Songs of Innocence*, Blake titles the piece after an occupation; moreover, the titular laborer is a child. This is an obvious reflection of the child labor practices occurring during Blake’s life. Referring further to the exploitation of children, Blake begins the poem showing that shortly after birth the child was the object of a transaction that resulted in his forced labor: “When my mother died I was very young, / And my father sold me while yet my tongue / Could scarcely cry 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!”¹¹⁵ This not only transforms the child’s body into something transactional to provide labor, but also shows a lack of agency in the child in terms of his body. The result of the child’s labor (and other children names in the poem) is death; there is no benefit for the child from the earlier transaction. This is directly analogous to the inherent problems in capitalistic labor; the exploited are not represented and must bear the brunt of the turmoil within this particular system. Martin Nurmi provides historical context for this exploitation of children: not only was the child literally sold, but Nurmi writes

Ostensibly the child was apprenticed for seven years, after which he was usually too large to go up small chimneys; but after his apprenticeship he was by no means assured the living as a journeyman, since there was not enough work to go around. Often he was left to the parish to support, not only because work was scarce but because he was physically unable to work.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Viscomi, *Idea of the Book*, 53.

¹¹⁵ William Blake and Harold Bloom, “The Chimney Sweeper,” in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Press, 1982), 10.

¹¹⁶ Martin Nurmi, “Fact and Symbol in ‘The Chimney Sweeper’,” in *Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Northrop Frye (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 16.

This means that the child is unable to perform labor *because* of the earlier labor performed. This is due to both the physical restrictions and limitations furnished by the occupation, but also by the society that cannot sustain the worker. The child is thus halted in terms of development and will die due to labor; this can be likened to the boundaries placed on one by the finite world which prevent transcendence. It's no wonder Blake decided to portray the chimney sweeper in multiple poems.

Blake's poem of the same name found in *Songs of Experience*, Blake provides a further condemnation on traditional religious views of labor: "And because I am happy and dance and sing, / They think they have done me no injury, / And are gone to praise God and his priest and king, / Who make up a heaven of our misery."¹¹⁷ In this instance, the child's woes are concealed by his parent's (and society's) ignorance to the exploitative labor. Moreover, these are the same individuals who are praising God; this provides a direct conflict between those who labor and those who subscribe to religion, specifically Christian ideals. This coupled with what Nurmi has stated earlier shows that the indictment placed on organized religion is even more sinister; the child can only turn to the parish once their body is broken and unfit for work, but the parish willfully engages in ignorance to the plight of the children due to this exploitative labor. The children are also almost permanently marked by their labor in such a way that it becomes a part of their identity: "When Blake's sweep says 'in soot I sleep,' he is not talking metaphorically. Soot is his element day and night. Nor was there much relief from it, even temporarily, for sweeps often went without washing for six months."¹¹⁸ There is an explicit connection between

¹¹⁷"The Chimney Sweeper," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Press, 1982), 23.

¹¹⁸ Nurmi. "Fact and Symbol," 17.

soot and the labor of the chimney sweeper. During Blake's time, the physical maladies that would befall chimney sweepers could not be used as complete signifiers of their labor; injuries can occur for a variety of reasons, and while some were more than likely unique to the occupation, soot is an intensely explicit sign of the labor being performed by the body. Moreover, the soot is a literal example of how the labor a body engages in marks that body; the soot, and thus the labor, soon become a part of the body's language and identity.

With this in mind, one can turn their attention towards *The Chimney Sweeper* in *Songs of Experience*. In this poem, Blake actually shows a figure covered in soot, both marking the body and rendering a body that is virtually indistinguishable; moreover, when one examines the various copies of this particular plate, the body remains the same shadowy figure trudging through the landscape. This further reinforces the notion that a soot covered body is indicative of a chimney sweeper. Despite a lack of definition, the effect of the titular figure doesn't function the same as God or even Urizen in *The Book of Urizen* (Copy F). The body in *The Chimney Sweeper* appears to be severely impacted by its surroundings; more importantly, the body is impacted by its occupation and the labor therein. Where the other characters have been able to change from copy to copy, the figure in *The Chimney Sweeper* remains the same due to the labor being undertaken. Furthermore, the text of Blake's poem removes any semblance of agency that could be suggested upon first glance of the figure: the body is "A little black thing among the snow..." (Blake, Copy E). Observers of this plate are at once encountered with a body that almost appears formless, and a body that is constricted by the labor it must perform. This juxtaposition creates a dissonance between the image of the body and any appearance of

transcendence. In short, unlike God in *God Judging Adam*, the titular body in *The Chimney Sweeper* is very much grounded.

Aside from the realm of religion, there is also the implied continuation that childhood evinces; children are meant to grow up and undergo the transformation into adults. The titular child and other children contained in both versions of *The Chimney Sweep* are denied any opportunity for this transformation; even in the angelic depictions, the children remain children in the afterlife. This means that because of the restrictive and exploitative labor practices enacted on children, transformations of the identity and body are constricted until they are destroyed. In short, worldly physical restrictions kill the body, which can be linked to the self, and halt any chance for a revolutionary progression or transcendence. Moreover, it is important to consider that the child looks markedly similar in the afterlife when compared to their earthly form, at least in terms of their physicality. The children are lithe and waifish, and while they are allowed freedom from labor in the form of play within the afterlife, this is not by any means the culmination of any kind of fulfilment. This is evidenced by Blake's own critique of Christianity; moreover, by echoing earthly elements in the depiction of something other worldly, i.e., heavenly, Blake is able to show his audience that the Christian conception of the afterlife is still bound to physical restrictions. By providing a decidedly grounded version of the afterlife, Blake is again showing the need for a transcendent bodily revolution in order to give way to a universal unity. The body remains in the afterlife depicted, so the struggles and limitations on that body are present. Moreover, the attempt at extending beyond the confines of the body remains intact.

This calls to attention the ways otherworldly practices are explicitly related to bodily functions; not only does this further evidence that conceptions of unearthly realities are still

grounded in worldly terms. As such, they are bound in the same way physical, corporeal bodies are, and they are also in need of transcendence. Consider how Blake describes the realm of Bowlahoola in *Milton*; moreover, one should focus on how the labor evidenced by Los' smithlike station is written: "Accordant with the horrid labours make sweet melody / The Bellows are the Animal Lungs: the Hammers the Animal Heart / The Furnaces the Stomach for digestion. terrible their fury / Thousands & thousands labour."¹¹⁹

William Richey writes of Blake's relationship with political revolution and that "Blake undoubtedly thought the French Revolution an event of potentially cosmic significance" in that the significance could give way to a universal liberation.¹²⁰ Regardless of semantics, Richey would more than likely agree that Blake's work is interested in articulating a transcendence outside of the physical world. Richey further supports the notion that Blake's work is interested in articulating a transcendence outside of the physical world when he discusses Blake's writing in the latter's poem *The French Revolution*. Richey writes, "Blake casts his revolutionary narrative as an epic, the oldest of all poetic genres and a form that predates the rise of... 'ancient' chivalric and aristocratic traditions."¹²¹ Here, Richey is writing of Blake's relationship with Edmund Burke and trying to show that Blake was combating the traditions Burke held in esteem in order to attempt to take art further towards transcendence. However, much like the epic predates the "chivalric and aristocratic" traditions, those latter traditions predate Edmund Burke. Obviously, Richey is not incorrect in stating that the two men had a relationship revolving around artistic constructions of revolution. However, one must also consider Blake's use of epic

¹¹⁹ Blake, "*Milton*," 120-21.

¹²⁰ William Richey, "The French Revolution: Blake's Epic Dialogue with Edmund Burke," *ELH* 59, no. 4 (Winter, 1992): 817.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 818.

traditions in order to reflect the world around him. By harkening back to the “oldest of all poetic genres,” Blake is able to render certain fantastical representations of bodies and have them correspond with contemporaneous events in his life. Furthermore, Blake’s presumed knowledge in french society could have been reflected in the bodies shown in his work. By simply being alive during the time of the French Revolution, Blake would have had to encounter what Foucault referred to as a time when “The body as the major target of penal repression disappeared.”¹²²

In addition to reflection events occurring in his lifetime, Blake was also following a tradition of revolutionary craftsmen reacting to the inherent problems of labor already present in England. In his text *The Republic of Labor*, Ronald Schultz writes of artisans in the late seventeenth century:

What artisans of London wanted was more than a new set of more liberal and tolerant rulers; they wanted true revolution... What these London craftsmen were beginning to articulate was a formal criticism of the values and actions of the capitalist manufacturers and merchant magnates who were denying the true value and independence of labor by subordinating artisans to them.¹²³

While Blake seemed to eventually enjoy a great deal of support from his patrons, the revolutionary spirit of these earlier artisans is explicitly present in his work. His status as a “radical” was also widely known throughout the country: “it is commonly thought that his move to Lambeth was made partly to avoid too close a surveillance from those government agents increasingly bent on winking out dangerous subversives in the volatile urban world.”¹²⁴

Furthermore, Blake “knew the world of protest well” and although he was more interested in the

¹²² Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 8.

¹²³ Ronald Schultz, *The Republic of Labor: Philadelphia Artisans and the Politics of Class, 1720-1830* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 10-11.

¹²⁴ Vaughan, *William Blake*, 34.

cosmic and universal conceptions of transcendent revolution, he still had to contend with the society he lived in.¹²⁵

As has been established above, Blake despised structure and order; oddly enough, they were necessary for his work to be created. Despite this necessity, Blake's hatred of order and reason was not relegated to the abstract notions of those terms; his vitriol extended into the real world. As J.J. Kripal notes, Blake was against all of normative society: "Blake raged against not only social injustice but social justice as well. In ways that imply the transcendence of law, convention, and even culture, he raged against the mediocrities that stable cultures naturally generate."¹²⁶ This echoes what is known about Blake's relationship with slavery and his above response to the French Revolution. Mark Crosby also writes of Blake's activism in London, specifically linking Blake's protests to his profession in that Blake was involved in "a concerted attempt by prominent London engravers to obviate a repressive and, for many, bloodthirsty legal system."¹²⁷ However, Crosby takes his observation a step further than Kripal in that the former notes Blake's participation in the system. Crosby writes of Blake "attesting to the efficacy" of printing banknotes in a way that indicates Blake was willing to bend his anti-establishment position depending on the context of the protest.¹²⁸ It is also possible that Blake's want for a revolution is not tied specifically to society. For example, David M. Baulch writes, "What sets the stage for revolution here is not primarily a question of political oppression; rather, the

¹²⁵ Ibid, 25.

¹²⁶ J. J. Kripal, "Reality Against Society: William Blake, Antinomianism, and the American Counterculture," *Common Knowledge* 13, no. 1 (2007): 99, Project MUSE.

¹²⁷ Mark Crosby, "Blake and the Banknote Crises of 1797, 1800, and 1818," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 816.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 814.

decisive factors are connected to the histories of science and philosophy, both of which are tethered to the spiritual for Blake.”¹²⁹

Obviously, Blake’s relationship with labor is integral to further exploring his advocating for a revolution through the body. Referring to the aforementioned “reunion with the ineffable One,” everything becomes connected during this reunion, therefore everything becomes infinite. This does not negate Blake’s apparent advocating for a revolution due to one’s required labors; rather, the desire for spiritual revolution is expressed through these bodies at work. Furthermore, this “earthly” revolution centered on labor would perhaps be more digestible to the general public, giving Blake a wider audience that could benefit from such a revolutionary spirit. It is also worth noting that the want for an earthly revolution is present in certain works depicting play. Consider *The Ecchoing Green*; the children portrayed in each plate are playing under the careful watch of various adults, be they the mothers under the tree or the figure of Old John. The children’s play is entirely curated and dictated by the adult bodies present in the plates. The only children not under the adults’ watchful gaze are those located in the bottom half of the first plate. These children appear to be floating through an ethereal realm, free from adult supervision, free to play as they desire. Their bodies remain, but the clothes covering them appear to be more loose and formless than the clothes worn by the children in the other plates.

In Blake’s plates, the depicted bodily form will inform future concepts and depictions of bodies, which will result in a mostly homogenous conception in the (re)produced plates. However, through the exaggerated nature of Blake’s depictions *and* the augmentation he actively engages in when (re)producing his plates, this conception actively changes from plate to plate.

¹²⁹ David M. Baulch, “‘Like a pillar of fire above the Alps’: William Blake and the Prospect of Revolution,” *European Romantic Review* 24, no. 3 (May 2013): 280.

Consider *The Tyger* once more, specifically the shifting nature of the animal's body.¹³⁰ *The Tyger* shifts from a surrealist conception (Copy F, 1789 and 1794) to almost photorealistic image (Copy Z, 1826); these plates are separated by a number of years, and while this could be used to explain the differences, there are other examples of Blake creating different plates within the span of a year.¹³¹ Moreover, the central *form* of the body remains across the plates. It's also important to examine the changing environments depicted in the above plates: Copy Z depicts the titular animal standing near a tree, and the color of the tiger is clearly rendered; however, Copy F depicts half of the tiger shrouded in the trees shadow. These differing depictions show that the bodies are also impacted by the environmental qualities, akin to the social ideologies mentioned above by Siebers. The view of the body is augmented by that which is around it, even if the form of the body doesn't change. This again calls to mind the Platonic notion of a true fixed form; however, as John E. Brown suggests, Blake was more interested in the "reunion with the ineffable One."¹³² This shows that Blake was moving beyond the idea of a universal body and towards a striving for an entire unity with the enigmatic One; whether or not there is indeed a Universal body isn't an issue because the ultimate goal is complete unity. Because of this, Blake moves beyond traditional Platonic concepts.

Referring to the above children at play, the bodies, once free from the restrictions of labor, are often no longer depicted as about to burst. However, their need for transcendence is still present due to Blake's rejection of *all* earthly confines; moreover, as mentioned previously, traditional, i.e., Christian, conceptions of the afterlife are still rife with restrictions. This is further

¹³⁰ This is readily apparent at looking at a variety of plates; here, *The Tyger* is chosen mostly for its familiarity.

¹³¹ One example of this is *The Little Black Boy*, which will be discussed further.

¹³² John E Brown, "Neo-Platonism in the Poetry of William Blake," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 10, no. 1 (1951): 52.

evidenced by Blake's mythological figures oftentimes being depicted as chained or bound in some regard; all representable versions of bodies are susceptible to restriction because the revolutionary transcendent body Blake wishes to depict is not possible with the methods and means available to him. As Frye writes regarding Blake's *Jerusalem*, "Revolution is always an attempt to smash the structure of tyranny and create a better world, *even when revolutionaries do not understand what creation implies or what a better world is.*"¹³³ Thus, even without available means or method, one can still engage in revolution. Moreover, the struggle that results from being deprived of the appropriate tools is itself a revolutionary act.

VI. Conclusion

As has become evident throughout the course of this essay, Blake is simultaneously depicting a revolution that is accomplished through bodies, and engaging in this same revolution through his work. He is able to furnish this revolution by way of linguistic bodies created in his plates, the attention to exaggerated musculature in the bodies, and the focus on labor in his work. Moreover, the societal implications of the labor Blake himself engages in throughout the creation of his plates reveals both material and technological (re)production, which is in itself revolutionary in terms of art. Blake's attention to differing societal issues contemporaneous to him also shows a contrarian spirit; the artist is against normative depictions of bodies, but more than that Blake is reflecting on the fact that bodies are capable of transcendence through a revolution that must be enacted upon the body through the body. Since the body comprises the

¹³³ Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 67.

entirety of the world for Blake, and due to his striving towards an ultimate unity, this bodily revolution will necessarily be universal.

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