

The Unfinished Business of American Insurrection

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How can literary scholars productively engage with the contradictions of revolutionary violence, both as a historical phenomenon and as a legacy that continues to script contemporary politics? In particular, how might we situate major upheavals like the American Revolution, Haitian Revolution, and US Civil War—when violent insurrection proved central to dismantling *and* defending figurative and literal forms of slavery—alongside latter-day instances of antidemocratic, white-supremacist violence that reveal the as-yet-incomplete nature of those very events? This essay takes up these questions by considering three recent publications. Shelby Johnson’s 2020 article, “‘The Fate of St. Domingo Awaits You’: Robert Wedderburn’s Unfinished Revolution,” and Betsy Erkkilä’s 2021 article, “Phillis Wheatley on the Streets of Revolutionary Boston and in the Atlantic World,” each consider an early Black Atlantic theorization of insurrection forged at the crossroads of antislavery activism, evangelical Protestantism, and revolutionary ideology. Reading these works in dialogue with Chris Hayes’s January 7, 2021, interview with Ta-Nehisi Coates about the January 6 US Capitol insurrection clarifies racism’s paradoxical role as democracy’s limit case and its most inexorable summons to fulfillment.

Johnson’s eloquent and provocative article offers a reading of *The Axe Laid to the Root*, an 1817 periodical produced by the mixed-race, Jamaican-born abolitionist and radical activist Robert Wedderburn (1762–1835?). Taking as her point of departure the text’s prophetic warning of an “imminent Jamaican insurrection” modeled on the Haitian Revolution, Johnson analyzes *The Axe*’s formal quirks to excavate Wedderburn’s “radical historical sensibility.”¹ Informed by early nineteenth-century millenarianism and ideas circulating in London’s radical underground, the text elaborates a complex political temporality that “layer[s] past and future history” to imagine “a revolution that . . . has both already happened and is yet to come.”² In so doing, Wedderburn simultaneously evinces a “commitment to revolutionary inevitability and a recognition of its profound contingencies.”³ For Johnson, Wedderburn’s literary ventriloquy—his evocation of multiple voices, including those of the enslaved and the deceased—diffuses revolutionary agency in ways that at once defer and guarantee liberation’s eventual arrival. Transforming the liability of individual human “finitude” into an asset through acts of imagined collectivity, *The Axe* “conjures out of revolution’s unfinishedness a wholly new future.”⁴

ENGLISH LANGUAGE NOTES

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While the enslaved poet Phillis Wheatley (ca. 1753–84) may lack Wedderburn's radical bona fides, Betsy Erkkilä's searching treatment of her life and writing suggests that she too theorized revolution. Challenging scholarly assumptions about how Wheatley's gender, faith, race, and enslaved status constrained the politics of her 1773 *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, Erkkilä's article uses inventive analyses of Wheatley's understudied and even nonextant poetry to argue that she likely participated in the major crowd actions that took place near her Boston home during the lead-up to the American Revolution: the 1765 Stamp Act riots; the unrest caused by the 1768 arrival of British troops at Long Wharf; and in 1770 the murder of Christopher Snider, the Boston Massacre, and the scenes of public mourning that followed. For Erkkilä, participating in these overwhelmingly "inter-racial [and] working-class" protests led Wheatley to conceive of the revolution as "inseparable from the struggle against African slavery."⁵ Among other yields, this revisionist approach bears fruit in a thoughtful reframing of Wheatley's 1774 letter to the Mohegan minister Samson Occom. Well known as her most outspoken condemnation of slavery, the letter also suggests that Wheatley articulated a "more insurrectionary vision of the American freedom struggle" that included women, African Americans, Native Americans, laborers, and the enslaved alongside the elite founders.⁶

Wheatley's concept of revolution resembles Wedderburn's not only because of its core commitment to antislavery but also because of its creative experimentation with collectivity and temporality. Erkkilä's account of Wheatley "rais[ing] the dead" in her revolutionary elegies echoes Johnson's remarks about Wedderburn's prosopoeia, while Wheatley's correspondence with Occom anticipates the long-distance literary coalition building of Wedderburn's periodical.⁷ Likewise, *The Axe's* warning of impending slave insurrection finds a counterpart in Wheatley's "Old Testament prophecy" of divine punishment for tyrants and enslavers and of divine liberation for the tyrannized and enslaved.⁸ While the logic of delayed imminence encoded in Wheatley's prayer—"God grant Deliverance in his own way and Time"—might seem to bespeak a boundless political patience purportedly typical of evangelicals, it gains new potency when set alongside Wedderburn's equally theological theory of unfinished revolution.⁹ For both writers, racism constricts democracy but also motors further attempts to realize it. And this paradox resonates with and enriches a range of scholarly formulations, from Cedric Robinson's "dialectic of imperialism and liberation" to Jason Frank's account of the "persistent latency" that haunts any attempt to define that quintessential democratic-revolutionary ideologeme: The People.¹⁰ In this way, Johnson's and Erkkilä's work exemplifies the field's ongoing effort to complicate notions of revolution as a clean break with the past (e.g., David Scott) or an activity monopolized by a single demographic (e.g., Jared Hickman).¹¹

The events of January 6, 2021, made it all too clear that Wheatley's and Wedderburn's revolutions have remained incomplete. As Coates and Hayes attempt to make sense of the US Capitol insurrection one day later on Hayes's *Why Is This Happening?* podcast, they emphasize "the newness of American democracy," its "recentness" and "fragility."¹² Coates rehearses a snapshot history of a United States dominated for much of its existence by an "antidemocratic spirit" that disenfranchised huge swaths of the population.¹³ Pro-democracy forces occasionally

gain ascendancy—during Radical Reconstruction and the Civil Rights era, for instance—but then lose ground. What results, for Coates, are significant periods “during which you can say you have democracy but even then it’s challenged. It’s a fight. It’s not a fact. It’s not a state. It’s a fight that’s being had. It’s a process.”¹⁴ The continuities between Coates’s thinking here and Wheatley’s and Wedderburn’s ideas reflect not just an investment in a similar project but also a confrontation with a similar obstacle. Coates suggests that only an ignorance of US history could lead one to be surprised by the Capitol insurrection or to forget that “this isn’t the first attempted coup in America.”¹⁵ The presence of Confederate flags at the riot tell the tale: a rising tide of antidemocratic white supremacy has once again gainsaid the exceptionalist belief that the American Revolution was completed—in 1776, 1783, 1865, 1964, or since.¹⁶

Yet even as antidemocratic violence can start to seem inevitable, Coates takes solace in the fact that the “fundamentally . . . minoritarian ideology” of white supremacy has routinely activated and energized efforts to liberate and democratize.¹⁷ While Hayes evokes Frederick Douglass’s and W. E. B. Du Bois’s perspectives on this dialectic, Johnson and Erkkilä help us trace its history back to Wedderburn and Wheatley, who theorized anti-racist revolution as constitutively, productively unfinished. Like those writers, Coates’s proposed solutions privilege creativity, pondering new ways to pluralize voices (voters’ rights protections, DC statehood) and layering past and future to avoid naive optimism and dour defeatism alike.

Still, the interview sometimes loses sight of a crucial, albeit uncomfortable, insight—one that could not have been overlooked in the age of revolutions: while democracy may function as an alternative to violence in the context of transfers of power, its initial institution has often seemed to *require* violence. From the earliest slave revolts to Haiti, John Brown, and ultimately the Union Army, radical antislavery—like the American revolutionaries—has resorted to force in situations where liberty and equality were more “fight” than “fact.” The brief genealogy of revolutionary inevitability traced in this essay suggests that this ethos of anti-racist insurrection remains perennially available, if only as an imaginative reserve kept alive by Black Atlantic literary production. As Coates’s thematization of the power of memory in his own debut novel demonstrates, such literary works enjoy a capacity for historical recovery that exceeds slavery’s forbidding archival silences and the strident tones of nationalist historiographies that would insist that the Americas’ various revolutions were ever complete.¹⁸ Rather than waiting on the ever-deferred realization of those revolutions’ ideals, these works reimagine political change itself.

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Notes

- 1 Johnson, "Fate of St. Domingo," 376.
 2 Johnson, "Fate of St. Domingo," 373.
 3 Johnson, "Fate of St. Domingo," 384.
 4 Johnson, "Fate of St. Domingo," 384, 385.
 5 Erkkila, "Phillis Wheatley on the Streets," 354.
 6 Erkkila, "Phillis Wheatley on the Streets," 354.
 7 Erkkila, "Phillis Wheatley on the Streets," 366.
 8 Erkkila, "Phillis Wheatley on the Streets," 364.
 9 Wheatley to Ocom, quoted in Erkkila, "Phillis Wheatley on the Streets," 364. Erkkila's speculation about the diminution of Wheatley's religiosity following her manumission (366–67) thus seems unnecessary.
 10 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 166; Frank, *Constituent Moments*, 5. Robinson defines "the dialectic of imperialism and liberation" as "the contradiction that compelled the appearance of resistance and revolution out of the condition of oppression" (166). For Frank, The People "are forever a people that is not . . . yet" (5; ellipses in original).
 11 In a passage quoted by Johnson, Scott troubles the Romantic revolutionary notion that "our pasts can be left behind and new futures leaped into" (*Conscripts of Modernity*, 135; see Johnson, "Fate of St. Domingo," 384). Hickman's *Black Prometheus* uses eighteenth- and nineteenth-century retellings of the Prometheus myth to explore the racialization of revolutionary activity within pro- and antislavery political theologies. Other relevant meditations on the temporal and demographic complexities of political agency in the Atlantic world include Kazanjian, *Brink of Freedom*; and DeLombard, *In the Shadow of the Gallows*.
 12 Hayes, "Attack on the Capitol," 14:03 (Coates), 14:05 (Coates), 2:55 (Hayes).
 13 Hayes, "Attack on the Capitol," 16:04 (Coates).
 14 Hayes, "Attack on the Capitol," 16:26 (Coates).
 15 Hayes, "Attack on the Capitol," 16:48 (Coates).
 16 Of course, the presence of Gadsden flags, as well as Confederate ones, indicates that the Capitol rioters claimed continuity with traditions of rebellion associated not only with Southern secession but also with the American Revolution. Meanwhile, the label *insurrection*

that is often applied to the events of January 6 has traditionally, though not exclusively, been reserved for Black political activities, as Hawa Allan has shown (*Insurrection*).

- 17 Hayes, "Attack on the Capitol," 21:12 (Coates).
 18 See Coates, *Water Dancer*.

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