The Violence of Enlightenment in William Blake’s 
Visions of the Daughters of Albion

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Among William Blake’s (1757–1827) most important contributions to modern poetry are his representations of violence and, in particular, the violence inflicted on individuals through systems. While depictions of violence proliferate in much of Blake’s work, Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793) offers one of the earliest dynamic representations of violence in his poetry. Scholars have done much to illuminate the different literary representations of violence in Blake’s work (particularly in Visions), stressing how integral violence is to depictions of sex and gender, revolution, imperialism, and the slave trade. Criticism that addresses violence in Blake’s work tends, however, to focus on overtly or explicitly violent acts, overlooking the extreme violence that occurs in even moments that at first appear to be serene. Steven Bidlake suggests that scholars must confront Blake’s violence “to the full extent that its affective intensity and deeper implications warrant.” In this spirit, I contend that investigating the violence of ideology and ideological systems can help us to understand more fully both the intensity and the origins of violence in Blake’s work. In this essay, I take Blake’s rhetoric of violence in Visions as a central focus and examine how
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The violence of Enlightenment was remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. According to Spivak, “this project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subject-ivity.” In other words, the Other’s subjectivity and sense of self are obliterated within what is established as the normative “explanation and narrative of reality.” Epistemic violence, then, violates or destroys the person as both a social person (in an extreme case, in all forms of slavery, whether it be gender, chattel, or political/colonial slavery) and as an individual person (in ideological abstractions that obliterate individual experience). Although Spivak is specifically concerned with the effects of Western imperialism and colonialism, her definition is useful in examining various manifestations of epistemic violence. In discussing epistemic violence in Visions, I refer specifically to a violence exerted by the very concept of knowledge within Enlightenment culture. Violence was, in other words, endemic to Enlightenment culture, since it delimited the methods, vocabularies, and modes through which individuals were able to claim knowledge.

Before stating the main arguments of this essay, I think it important to establish a working definition of violence as it is expressed in Blake’s poem. To do so, I turn to several contemporary theorists whose work helps us to more clearly apprehend how Blake treats violence in Visions. I specifically address three forms of violence: objective violence, subjective violence, and epistemic violence. In Blake’s poem, subjective violence is characterized by the destruction of subjectivity. In such cases, violence takes place overtly – in the words of Slavoj Žižek, “subjectively” – as a physical violation or destruction of the human body. Subjective violence occurs when a “clearly identifiable agent” commits a violent act upon another person. When I discuss subjective violence in Blake’s poem, then, I refer specifically to a physical violation, such as Oothoon’s rape.

By contrast, objective violence entails the destruction of subjectivity or human personhood itself, conceived as a self-contained social and individual entity (i.e., “person”). This “invisible,” systemic violence, intrinsic to the “normal” peaceful state of things, works to destroy the individual’s subjectivity. This type of violence, as Žižek explains, occurs in the forms of oppression, subjugation, exploitation, assimilation, and coercion that are inscribed in social and symbolic structures. When I discuss objective violence in Blake’s poem, I am referring to the systemic violence that takes place within Enlightenment culture as it oppresses, subjugates, and assimilates the characters of the poem.

Finally, for Gayatri Spivak, “epistemic violence” constitutes a form of objective violence inflicted on marginalized peoples by a dominant system of understanding. Spivak’s definition of epistemic violence is based on “episteme,” Michel Foucault’s term for the body of ideas that shape the perception of knowledge at a particular moment in time. Spivak uses the term as an example of the...
violence embedded in Enlightenment structures and institutions. Blake critically examines many social and political structures in *Visions*, but I focus here on empiricism, patriarchy, and imperialism, three interconnected structures prominent in the poem that adopt and participate in aspects of Enlightenment culture. I begin with an exploration of the more subtle form of epistemic violence exerted through empiricism, which the poem presents as limiting and intensely violent in its homogenizing universality. Blake’s treatment of empiricism serves as a crucial platform for then reevaluating what other readers have taken to be merely subjective acts of patriarchal and imperial violence, framing such instances instead as further demonstrations of the widespread violence Enlightenment exerts upon modern subjects. Although I begin the second section of the article with an exploration of Blake’s text as a “sideways glance” at the act of violent rape in the poem — a tactic that, as Žižek notes, makes it possible to examine the underlying social and political structures that create subjective violence without reproducing its trauma — this section addresses the poem’s critique of Enlightenment forms of patriarchy, which at once advocates gender equality and enacts objective violence on women through a patriarchal system that denies them individual autonomy. My essay ends with an examination of how the poem presents attempts to rationalize dominance and oppression in late eighteenth-century imperialism, which draws upon Enlightenment ideology to justify and promote the exploitation of foreign labor and natural resources in the name of scientific progress. In the end, I suggest that the power of Blake’s poem resides in its ability to make the most subtle forms of violence more explicitly felt through a rhetoric that reveals the intensity of objective and epistemic forms of violence.

Blake’s critique of Enlightenment ideology and institutions has long been a subject of scholarly criticism of his work. Northrop Frye, for example, addresses Blake’s criticism of Enlightenment thinkers, such as Francis Bacon (1561–1626), Isaac Newton (1642–1727), and John Locke (1632–1704), focusing specifically on Blake’s antagonism toward Locke’s empirical theories of sensation and perception.  

A foundational text in Blake scholarship, Frye’s book helped pave the way for later readings of Blake’s work and his response to Enlightenment thought. Scholars have since explored various threads of Enlightenment thought in Blake’s work, including representations of rational morality, sexuality, gender, and the influence of millenarian traditions on his work. Although much has been done to trace Blake’s response to Enlightenment philosophy and to specific Enlightenment thinkers, such as Locke and Bacon, scholars have paid less attention to representations of violence in relation to the Enlightenment in Blake’s poetry. This essay proposes a reading of *Visions* that accounts for the various ways violence transpires in Enlightenment culture.

**Epistemic Violence and Enlightenment Empiricism**

Perhaps the most subtle, yet affectively intense, of the violences presented in Blake’s *Visions* is the epistemic violence of empiricism enacted on the modern subject. Enlightenment ideology, conceived broadly, encompasses the notion that philosophical and scientific knowledge will improve human life and promote human progress. The rise of empiricism, the theory that knowledge is derived from sensory experience and observation, came to be aligned with scientific discovery and was thus particularly instrumental to the development of Enlightenment thought. While Blake addresses empiricism in more sweeping terms as well, scholars have long recognized Oothoon’s monologue on the senses as a pointed response to Locke’s empiricism in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), in which he claims knowledge originates only from information imprinted on the mind through the senses or through reflection, an “internal sense” (2.1.3–4). Locke views the human mind as empty, as a *tabula rasa*, “white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas,” until it is filled through
The passage uses more actively violent words, such as "obliterated," to describe the destructive effects of empiricism on Ooothoon's individual subjectivity. According to Ooothoon, empiricists "sunk" her heart into an abyss, a lacuna of emptiness and meaninglessness. As Fred Hoerner suggests, the obliteration and erasure of Ooothoon seems a "suspiciously volitional" act for Locke's philosophy of *tabula rasa*, "but not once we recall that 'rasa' means razed." As a blank slate to be "written" on by sense impressions, Locke's theory of the *tabula rasa* arguably carries a threat of violence. For Ooothoon, the mind's passive reception of the outside world on the senses limits (or evenobliterates) the possibility of a unique, individual experience. Ooothoon is denied agency and the complexity of selfhood.

In Blake's poem, this seemingly subtle form of coercion is not only a problematic process but also an especially violent one, because Ooothoon's subjectivity is completely obliterated or destroyed through Enlightenment empiricism.

Considering the violent potential Blake sees in Lockean empiricism, it is no coincidence that the poet associates Bromion with Lockean epistemology. Bromion's reference to "trees beasts and birds unknown: / Unknown, not unperceivd, spread in the infinite microscope" aligns him with Locke's theories of sense and perception (4.15–16). The passage alludes, in part, to Locke's references to the microscope in relation to augmented perception (2.23.11) and the possibilities (as well as the limitations of) exploring the mysteries of nature: "And if by the help of such Microscopical Eyes a Man could penetrate farther than ordinary into the secret Composition, and radical Texture of Bodies" (2.23.12). Bromion's description of the "infinite" powers of the microscope mirrors Locke's wonder and amazement at the advanced discoveries of the instruments of empirical science.

As Green suggests, Bromion's description of the "infinite" powers of the microscope represents "Locke's awe and admiration at the discoveries of the microscope," yet his "distinction between the 'unknown' and the 'unperceivd' speaks to Locke's contradictory representations of the primary qualities in objects, as those whose pat-
terns are replicated faithfully in our ideas, but whose operations on our senses are unknown.”22 As this passage from *Visions* reveals, knowledge and perception are distinct concepts for the empiricist—the trees, beasts, and birds cannot be known until they are perceived by the senses.

“Bromion’s caves” likewise align him with Locke, emphasizing the “narrow circle” of Lockean epistemology that “inclos[es]” Oothoon (2.5; 232). Signifying limited perception, Bromion’s caves represent his reductive view of sensation—that there are no “other sorrows, beside the sorrows of poverty,” and no “other joys, beside the joys of riches and ease” (4.20–21). Locke himself likens his theory of the division between the mind and the outside world to the metaphor of a dark closet: “For methinks the *Understanding* is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible Resemblances, or *Ideas*, of things without” (2.11.17). As Peter Otto contends, Blake’s “cavern’d man” in *Visions* represents Locke’s “closeted man.”23 Like the “little openings” of Locke’s closet metaphor that let in ideas, Bromion’s caves include an opening for entry and exit, through which sensations and ideas may be admitted. However, as the poem demonstrates in both the text and frontispiece, the occupants of the cave are confined within this restrictive experience. The poem’s cave imagery represents empiricism as objectively violent because it promotes the passive reception of sensory impressions and, in turn, restricts the mind’s agency. Blake presents this restrictive form of experience as violent through the image and rhetoric of chains and binding, which suggest intellectual and emotional restraint. Both Bromion and Oothoon are bound together “back to back” by thick chains in “Bromion’s caves” (2.5). This image replicates Oothoon’s description of the mind as “inclosing” (fig. 1). Bromion’s caves imprison Oothoon and deny her the possibility of liberation, just as Locke’s model of the impressionable mind encloses and binds her. The image of Bromion in chains in his own cave exposes his own imprisonment within the empiricist epistemology he espouses. The image thus reveals how even the male oppressor who lays claim to knowledge and power is victimized by the epistemic violence of Enlightenment ideology.

In addition to taking issue with the passive and restrictive conception of mind promoted by Locke and other empiricists, Blake also critiques their insistence on a uniform and universal model of sensation and perception. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno view the universalization of human experience propagated under empiricist psychology as an important aspect of Enlightenment ideology, noting especially the violence of Enlightenment equivalence, which they claim “makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract qualities.”24 According to Horkheimer and Adorno, within empiricist Enlightenment ideology “anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion.”25 This notion that “whatever might be different is made the same” is what “critically sets the boundaries to possible experience.” As Horkheimer and Adorno point out, “by relating every existing thing to every other, these systems of equivalence end up reproducing systems of oppression that were originally developed in the Enlightenment to liberate individuals from institutions of oppression, such as the Church and feudalism.”26 They effectively replace one system for another. Blake’s *Visions* exercised a similar critique well before Horkheimer and Adorno by illuminating the violence of Enlightenment systems of thought and governance. As addressed earlier, Bromion’s subscription to empiricist thought prevents him from being able to conceive of “sorrows, beside the sorrows of poverty,” of “joys, beside the joys of riches and ease,” and of law that does not equally apply to “both the lion and the ox” (4.20–22). For Bromion, all beings experience sensation equally and uniformly, since knowledge is impressed on the passive mind by the senses. However, Oothoon rejects the limitation empiricism places on the senses along with the notion that all creatures experience the same sensations. She asks:
In this passage, "sense" evokes both physical sensation and thought, implying that the diverse creatures of the earth experience sensations and think differently. Hence, Oothoon stresses the diversity of senses among all creatures, as they

With what sense is it that the chicken shuns the ravenous hawk?
With what sense does the tame pigeon measure out the expanse?
With what sense does the bee form cells? have not the mouse & frog Eyes and ears and sense of touch? yet are their habitations And their pursuits, as different as their forms and as their joys.

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Moreover, Oothoon perceives that an empirical philosophy of the mind does not register the social inequities she recognizes in the world: “With what sense does the parson claim the labour of the farmer? / What are his nets & gins & traps?” (5.17–18). As Green argues, Oothoon “demonstrates an awareness of the interrelationship of social institutions” that empirical epistemology fails to explain. That is, the homogenizing effect of Enlightenment empiricism obfuscates the power relationships that govern perception. For this reason, Oothoon proposes that within modern society our pleasures and experiences are in many ways tied to our class position and to social constructions of gender, an understanding that is incompatible with the self-evident “truths” of Locke’s empirical philosophy. As D. Aers suggests, the “cold floods of abstraction” (5.19) that surround the farmer refer to the “individualistic doctrine” of Enlightenment, which “isolates man from man,” enabling the domination of one group over others. When Oothoon questions “With what sense” the “parson claim[s] the labour of the farmer” (5.17), she demonstrates how the meaning of the word sense can shift within Enlightenment ideology from the body – the “five senses” (2.31) – to the mind. Oothoon then demonstrates that “sense” becomes the “rationalization of oppression.” For Blake, both abstraction and self-evident truths serve domination, allowing for inequality and exploitation.

The notion of universal equivalence that Visions aligns with empirical epistemology and that holds the potential to “obliterate” the self and personhood also carries the threat of forcing human beings into conformity and a herd mentality. Like the techniques that establish Foucault’s “docile body,” conformity and the unity of the collective under Enlightenment culture resulted in greater obedience and allowed social and political structures more control over their subjects. According to Foucault, the notion of “the body as object and target of power,” exemplified through “docile bodies” and
throughout his literary career, it would be misguided to claim that Blake completely rejected empiricism or was wholly opposed to Locke’s ideas. The origin of the poem’s climactic scene of violence is, in fact, an idea — the idea that the human mind is passive. In *Visions*, perception can guide us to knowledge, as Green indicates, “but that knowledge can only attain its redemptive potential if the senses are informed by the affections.” For Blake, empirical epistemology does not leave enough room for the affections in sensory experience. This is why Oothoon’s heart is “sunk” into the “Abbyss” of meaninglessness (2.33) and why “her tears are locked up” (2.11). Oothoon’s recognition of the diverse “joys” of animals and humans (3.6), not to mention her appeals to “free born joy” (7.2) and “happy happy Love” (7.16), highlight the importance of the emotions and affections to human experience. Moreover, her emphasis on the senses throughout *Visions* endorses an active rather than passive perception of the world. Oothoon then increases rather than denies the importance of sensual existence and of perception. By exceeding the proscribed bounds of sensual experience, Oothoon may find a way out of this epistemic violence.

**Patriarchal Violence and Enlightenment Equivalence**

The poem’s representation of patriarchy has garnered much critical attention from scholars. As the quintessential act of gender violence, the rape of Oothoon is significant to the poem’s commentary on violent patriarchal systems and is the text’s prime example of overt, subjective violence. However, scholars such as Anne Mellor have pointed out that the rape is troublingly erased from Blake’s designs and hardly mentioned in the text, thus reducing the intensity of “male violence against the female body.” For example, Plate 1 does not illustrate Bromion’s rape of Oothoon but rather portrays their postcoital collapse (fig. 2). Although this image exhibits the result of physical trauma — Oothoon’s body appears contorted and splayed brutally on the rough terrain — it does not show the actual act of rape. According to Mellor, the erasure of the rape scene “transforms the literal atroci-
inflicted on the female subject. By not actually offering a visual representation of rape, *Visions* may indeed reflect the impossibility of expressing the pain and horror of “subjective” trauma.

Yet, there is another way of reading this oblique treatment of Oothoon’s rape – one that paradoxically recognizes the absence of violence while also amplifying its impact. The poem may well take a “sideways glance” at the act of violence, 

**FIGURE 2**
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as Žižek puts it, allowing one to think about the implications of the rape without reproducing it, reducing its impact, or participating in its horror. Žižek contends that “there is something inherently mystifying in a direct confrontation with [violence]: the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking.” Moreover, he recognizes that there is “a sense in which a cold,” dispassionate “analysis of violence somehow reproduces and participates in its horror.” For Žižek, the “only appropriate approach” to this subject is one that “permits variations on violence kept at a distance out of respect towards its victims.” Although the poem only briefly (and metaphorically) represents the rape — “Bromion rent her with his thunders” — the rest of the poem addresses the causes and implications of such a violent act for Oothoon and the text’s other characters. The absence of an image of rape in the poem thus effects a “sideways glance” in order to examine the underlying social and political structures that create subjective violence, while also calling attention to the objective violence underlying such acts.

An extensive system that stretches across the major social and political structures of late eighteenth-century Europe, patriarchy is a central concern of Blake’s Visions, and the rape of Oothoon perhaps most clearly signifies the violence intrinsic to that system. Many scholars have addressed the representation of patriarchy and the female in Visions, but they do not agree on Blake’s overall vision of women. While some scholars argue that Blake offers a surprisingly liberating view of women for a late eighteenth-century male writer, others insist Blake’s poem does not allow the possibility for women to break out of the era’s cycles of subjugation and oppression. Other scholars, such as Alicia Ostriker, emphasize that these polarizing views of Blake’s work elide more nuanced representations of gender and sexuality within Blake’s poetry. Indeed, even the single act of sexual violence against Oothoon cannot be read in a single way, as the text encourages a complex examination of women and sexuality.

Despite the complexity of Blake’s depiction of gender relations in his works, it is clear in the poem that he does not easily condone the subjugation of one sex by another. The beginning of Visions alone offers disturbing images (both visually and textually) of gender violence and the systemic oppression of women. Bromion’s brutal speech after he rapes Oothoon chillingly points to the atrocities of gender inequality. Branding her a “harlot” (1.18), Bromion claims Oothoon as his property; she is “stampt with [his] signet” as his slave (1.21). Although Oothoon “cannot weep,” her “incessant” howls reveal the intensity of her physical, emotional, and psychological oppression by Bromion (2.11–12). However, it is not only Oothoon who is subjugated by men, but also the daughters of Albion who are “Enslav’d” (1.1). All they can do is “weep” and offer a “trembling lamentation” (1.1). The repeated line “The Daughters of Albion hear her woes and echo back her sighs” (2.20, 5.2, 8.13) indicates that the oppression of women is systemic — they understand her plight and experience the same condition. Yet, the daughters’ inability to do anything about Oothoon’s rape reflects how pervasive and entrenched female oppression truly is. According to Bromion, like the slaves, “They are obedient, they resist not, they obey the scourge: / Their daughters worship terrors and obey the violent” (1.22–23). Obedience here does not imply complacency; rather, the daughters’ fear and the threat of subjective violence (such as rape) within patriarchal society coerce them into obedience.

Moreover, Blake specifically takes issue with the hypocrisy of Enlightenment culture, which stressed equality while, in practice, aggressively suppressing gender equality and codifying male dominance. To this end, Visions suggests that the modesty and repression expected of women even within Enlightenment culture also constitutes a form of violence. Visions traces patriarchy to the heart of many of the major social institutions of late eighteenth-century Britain, including capitalism, imperialism, and religion.
Although the notion of Enlightenment claims to dispel the inequalities of previous institutions, such as the Church and the feudal system, it perpetuates inequality through an emphasis on man’s dominance over nature. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Bacon’s vision of the “happy match” between human nature and the nature of living things is a “patriarchal one: the mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanted nature.” Through scientific experiment, the mind (often associated with the masculine in Enlightenment thought) would “establish man as the master of nature” (which was often figured as the feminine). They furthermore contend that what “human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings.”

Horkheimer and Adorno begin their critique of Enlightenment with this point to emphasize that violence is inherent to Enlightenment culture. Yet, the point that Blake makes in *Visions* is that it is a particularly patriarchal form of violence. In the advancement of knowledge, scientific experimentation, and rationalism, Enlightenment is constituted on patriarchal domination. Oothoon laments the fate of women who are forced to confine desire to the social restriction of marriage within a patriarchal society:

Till she who burns with youth and knows no fixed lot is bound
In spells of law to one she loaths: and must she drag the chain
Of life, in weary lust? must chilling murderous thoughts obscure
The clear heaven of her eternal spring? to bear the wintry rage
Of a harsh terror driv’n to madness! bound to hold a rod
Over her shrinking shoulders all the day! & all the night
To turn the wheel of false desire!

(5.21–27)

Subjectively violent imagery pervades this passage as Oothoon describes the systemic sexual oppression of women in modern society. Through the use of the words “burns,” “bound,” “chain,” “murderous,” “rage,” “terror,” and “shrinking,” Blake employs the language of subjective violence in order to call attention to the more sublimated acts of objective violence directed against women. The repetition of the word “bound” in this passage emphasizes the constricting conditions of marriage for women and invokes the image of physical imprisonment. Oothoon’s lament that woman must “drag the chain / Of life, in weary lust” reiterates this physical image of the burden of ungratified sexual desires. Here, heterosexual desire is contained within the institution of marriage, where the phallus persists as an instrument of control, the “rod” woman is “bound” to hold “over her shrinking shoulders.”

Woman’s plight “To turn the wheel of false desire” at night likens sexual activity in marriage to compulsory labor. To this extent, this passage reveals the emotional intensity of objective violence in patriarchy, where female sexual pleasure is denied and women are expected to serve the desires of men. Wishing to break free of her enslavement, the wife experiences the guilt of “murderous thoughts” and is driven to terror and madness. The oppression of women – what Žižek would define as objective violence – thus leads to thoughts of murder and a threat of subjective violence. The violent imagery of this passage emphasizes the physical, emotional, and sexual oppression inflicted on women within a culture that denies female autonomy.

Although late eighteenth-century Europe continued as a patriarchal society, Enlightenment ideology nonetheless introduced the possibility of questioning the inequality of the sexes. For example, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) critiques the systemic subjugation of women by appealing to reason. Situated within the mainstream of Enlightenment thought, *Vindication* challenged male Enlightenment thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), who used appeals to nature to rationalize the inferiority of women. In *Emile* (1762), Rousseau alleges to be arguing from nature when he professes that “woman is specifically made for man’s delight.” For Rousseau, the subjective position of women to men is thus part of the natural order. Critiquing Rousseau’s claims, Wollstonecraft minimizes nature and emphasizes “reason.
virm, and knowledge” in order to argue that women are equal to men but are taught to believe themselves inferior.54 Wollstonecraft contends that women are “kept in ignorance under the specious name of innocen,” as men “try to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to keep them always in a state of childhood.”55 For Wollstonecraft, Rousseau’s assertion of female subordination as natural works to construct women as “gentle, domestic brutes.”56 Although sympathetic to Wollstonecraft’s admonition of women’s oppression and her critique of the reductive argument for women’s subjugation to men, Blake was skeptical of some of the principles that structured her argument, specifically “her faith in reason and her distrust of sexuality.”57 As Wes Chapman suggests, by defining her argument “against male sexuality, Wollstonecraft repudiates female sexuality as well” and “denies sexual difference.”58 Visions, as several scholars have argued, responds in part to Wollstonecraft’s glorification of reason and virtue and her denial of sexual difference in Vindication.59 For Blake, these aspects of her work led Wollstonecraft to preserve conventional morality and to affirm male norms that maintain patriarchal systems and male dominance within Enlightenment culture. Blake also presents this gender equivalence as violent, denying diversity of experience and subjectivity. While this might seem revolutionary, Visions also presents gender equality as problematic, since it reinscribes the value of traditionally male attributes. The recurring image of reflection in Visions, specifically Oothoon’s wish to reflect Theotormon’s image, depicts even ostensibly progressive Enlightenment notions of gender equivalence (like those of Wollstonecraft) as homogenizing and subjectively violent. Oothoon calls to Theotormon’s eagles to 

Rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect.

The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast.

The Eagles at her call descend & rend their bleeding prey;

Theotormon severely smiles; her soul reflects the smile. (2.15–18)

The word “reflects” here suggests the act of contemplation but it also signifies the physical act of mirroring, an act that in this instance requires that the female body be mutilated or torn apart (“rend”). When the act of reflection occurs, it does not produce a gender equivalence; rather, it reveals the persistent power of the male gaze. The visual representation of this scene is notably the only explicit image of subjective violence and penetration of the female body that appears in the poem. Plate 3 comprises the image of a bird – referred to in the text as an eagle (“The Eagles at her call descend” [2.17]) – piercing Oothoon’s abdomen (fig. 3).60 In the text, the eagles’ descent upon Oothoon is brutal and bloody. The poem describes her as the “bleeding prey” of the eagles as her flesh is rent (2.17). Although the plate does not portray the destruction to Oothoon’s body suggested in the text, it nonetheless displays the physical dominance of a bird over Oothoon’s recumbent form. The dark bird is positioned above Oothoon and is juxtaposed against her white skin and supine position. Oothoon’s volitional call to Theotormon’s eagles to “prey upon her flesh” (2.13) situates her as what Mellor calls “a rhetorical figure of heroic Promethean suffering.”61 Yet, in addition to subtly suggesting “that the female slave welcomes her painful sexual servicing of male desire,” as Mellor contends, the image also emphasizes the negative effects of masculine reflection.62 In wanting to reflect the image of man, Oothoon loses her individual self. This physically violent yet volitional sacrifice of woman to man’s image and sexuality palpably represents the objective violence within patriarchal Enlightenment equivalence.

This is, moreover, revealed in Theotormon’s response to Oothoon’s willing reflection of man’s image. As he watches Ooothoon’s sacrifice, Theotormon “severely smiles,” indicating that he takes pleasure in her mutilation and reflection of his image (2.18). The severity of his smile reveals his anger, jealousy, and refusal to forgive, destructive emotions that persist in representations of Theotormon’s char-
her to see the world differently from her male counterparts. She now reflects Theotormon's severe, masculine "smile." This mirroring shows that Theotormon still has the power in the relationship—her soul reflects his smile, not the reverse. By mirroring Theotormon's image, Oothoon has not eradicated her subjectivity. Theotormon's severe, masculine "smile" mirrors to the reader her subjugation throughout the poem. In mirroring Theotormon, Oothoon briefly loses her identity and compassion, which are important qualities that ultimately lead to her alienation.
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so he “sits / Upon the margind ocean
conversing with shadows dire” (8.11–12).

In Blake’s text, sexuality promises to become a revolutionary tool, offering women a way out of the persistent violence of patriarchy. By embracing “the moment of desire,” a woman may experience the “pleasures” of “free born joy” (7.3, 2). Only then may man and woman experience “happy happy Love” that is “free as the mountain wind” (7.16). At the end of the poem, Oothoon finds an opportunity to free herself from patriarchal control and equivalence when she imagines an erotic scene featuring captive girls for Theotormon’s delight. For many critics, the scene of captured girls demonstrates Oothoon’s final submission to patriarchal ideology. Nancy Moore Goslee argues that Oothoon “celebrates free love for Theotormon with a thwarting of desire for herself.” Moreover, the scene seemingly perpetuates violence—this time, with Oothoon as the aggressor. However, a closer examination of this passage reveals that Oothoon imagines a moment where they experience bliss together:

But silken nets and traps of adamant will Oothoon spread,
And catch for thee girls of mild silver, or of furious gold;
I’ll lie beside thee on a bank & view their wan-tion play
In lovely copulation bliss on bliss with Theotor-mon:
Red as the rosy morning, lustful as the first born beam,
Oothoon shall view his dear delight, nor e’er with jealous cloud
Come in the heaven of generous love; nor selfish blightings bring.

(7. 23–29)

As Daniela Garofalo contends, in this scene, Oothoon “attempts to articulate an alternative erotics that requires neither subordination, nor the deferral of enjoyment.” She sits “close” Theotormon and participates in a shared pleasure. Oothoon is not just a pawn in Theotormon’s sexual fantasy; she enacts her own fantasy in this moment. It is Oothoon, not Theotormon, who is “red as the rosy morning, lustful as the first born beam,”
In this passage, Oothoon imagines “the capacity to renew enjoyment not by deferral and self-denial, but by tasting one’s joy.”66 This is not Theotormon’s enjoyment alone; she experiences “lovely co-"lation bliss on bliss with Theotormon.” Moreover, Oothoon promises to view Theotormon’s enjoyment with “delight,” not modesty, jealousy, or selfishness – traits which Theotormon demonstrates throughout the poem, and which lead to their mutual agony.

The imagery of captivity in this scene has been especially troubling for many scholars. By “catch[ing]” these girls (7.24), Oothoon appears to use the same forms of violence that the oppressors of the poem use. However, Nicholas Williams suggests that the nets and traps Oothoon promises are, “paradoxically, the nets of generosity and openness, not of jealousy and secrecy.”67 Lisa Crafton similarly argues that Oothoon’s “use of ‘nets and traps’ to catch girls most obviously sounds like she is adopting the rhetoric of captivity”; however, “her progressive use of this metaphor throughout the text suggests a playful manipulation of the image.”68 Indeed, Oothoon uses the rhetoric of violence employed by the poem’s male figures to subvert mastery and liberate both herself and Theotormon.

Oothoon’s recognition of the discursive and objective violence of Enlightenment equivalence – implemented through both empirical and patriarchal thought – allows her to be (at least briefly) liberated from such conformity. Oothoon’s recognition of the overarching systems that codify human behavior seems to lead her a step closer to psychological liberation. She is able to recognize the destructive effects of subtle epistemic and objective violence on subjectivity, something that goes largely unrecognized by other characters in the poem.

**IMPERIAL VIOLENCE AND ENLIGHTENMENT RATIONALIZATION**

Although much of Blake’s poem focuses on the subjugation of women to men and on the epistemic violence of Enlightenment empiricism, the imagery of enslavement and imprisonment extends beyond the confines of Enlightenment patriarchal and empiricist ideology. The description of Bromion’s slaves, the “swarthy children of the sun” who are “stampt with [his] signet” (1.21), emphasizes possession, slavery, and, more specifically, imperial conquest. Multiple critics have pointed out that Blake’s *Visions* connects Bromion’s ruthless rape and appropriation of Oothoon’s body with a figurative, but nonetheless violent rape of land and the natural world.69 Identified as the “soft soul of America” (1.3), Oothoon represents both a person and a place in *Visions*. Accordingly, as Kevin Hutchings suggests, what happens to her human body also affects “the environmental aspect of her identity.”70 Bromion’s rape of Oothoon then signals not only the physical rape of woman – a form of subjective violence – but also the imperial rape of the New World – figured as both subjective and objective violence. Bromion’s declaration “Thy soft American plains are mine and mine thy north & south” indicates the successful imperial conquest of America (1.20). Bromion has now branded Oothoon as his property – an enslaved person and an enslaved land. This form of objective violence destroys Oothoon’s subjectivity (as a social person) and her resources (as a geographical space).71

Indeed, the rape of Oothoon, as several critics suggest, also recalls the subjective violence and objective oppression exercised on enslaved blacks, as well as Native Americans, through the processes of colonization and imperial expansion.72 Although Oothoon appears with white skin in the poem, she is compared to “the swarthy children of the sun” who, like Oothoon, are branded as Bromion’s slaves (1.21). Bromion’s claim that the rape has impregnated Oothoon – that she carries “the child / Of Bromion’s rage” (2.1–2) – aligns her further with the enslaved women of America, whose rape frequently resulted in pregnancy. Now that she is one of his slaves, pregnancy is part of her physical bondage and subjection to Bromion. This increases her market value, as she carries another potential slave in her womb. Oothoon’s pregnancy and the “children bought with money” (2.8) to whom she is...
compared, expose the commodification of marginalized individuals that occurs within mercantile-capitalist imperialism. The commodification of Oothoon and the slaves emphasizes the economic foundation of Bromion’s imperial conquest of America.

The poem, moreover, connects the subjective and objective violence of imperial conquest to Enlightenment ideology. In his speech on imperial expansion, Bromion uses Enlightenment ideology to justify and promote the exploitation of foreign land and labor:

But knowest thou that trees and fruits flourish upon the earth
To gratify senses unknown? trees beasts and birds unknown:

Unknown, not unperceivé, spread in the infinite microscope,
In places yet unvisited by the voyager and in worlds
Over another kind of seas, and in atmospheres unknown?

(4.14–18)

As this passage and others demonstrate, Blake portrays Bromion as a committed imperialist informed by Enlightenment ideology. The repetition of the word “unknown” emphasizes the potential for imperial conquest in the world through empirical exploration – that they are “unknown” implies that Bromion anticipates making them known to himself and to the Western world. Bromion’s presentation of fruits and trees as existing to gratify human sensation echoes Rousseau’s claim that “woman is specially made for man’s delight” and implies that it is man’s right to indulge the senses by exploring “unknown” worlds.

In addition to invoking Lockean empiricism, in this passage the imperialist Bromion appropriates Enlightenment ideology to rationalize the exploitation of land and people. The trees, beasts, and birds “unknown” will become objects of exploitation, used to satiate the senses and pleasures of white men as they embark on imperial conquest. Although they are currently “unknown,” they are “not unperceived” – Enlightenment science will be able to apprehend and classify them as Britain penetrates foreign lands. The allusion to the “infinite microscope” in this passage emphasizes Bromion’s faith in scientific technology, which through imperial conquest will be able to perceive all things. As Hutchings suggests, Bromion’s speech stresses his “confidence in Enlightenment progress, which by perfecting the instruments and methods of empirical inquiry, would give humanity unprecedented access to places and things only currently beyond apprehension.”

Bromion’s speech, as Hutchings points out, echoes Enlightenment rhetoric on scientific discovery, which used imperialist language to describe man’s superiority to nature. In Plus Ultra (1668), philosopher Joseph Glanvill (1638–80) commended science as increasing “the Empire of Man Over Inferior Creatures.” Bacon also employed imperialist language in describing man’s relation to nature. In Novum Organum (1620), scientific inquiry, described as a “penetration” of nature’s “womb,” is presented as helping to solidify man’s “empire” over nature. According to Hutchings, Bromion’s rape of Oothoon, in part represented as the symbolic rape of American lands, reflects the violent imperialist rhetoric of empiricism and Enlightenment. The connections between empiricism and imperialism in this passage thus position Bromion as a figure deeply entrenched in Enlightenment ideology. Moreover, Blake represents imperialism as appropriating Enlightenment empiricist ideology to rationalize the exploitation of land and people.

Furthermore, the poem presents Bromion as working within the Urizenic system of Enlightenment imperialism. Throughout Blake’s mythology, Urizen is constantly associated with the Enlightenment. The name Urizen phonetically resembles the word reason and stresses the figure’s association with Enlightenment values. As scholars have pointed out, Urizen signifies many different things in Blake’s works – reason, the “deep-seated nature of corruption,” empire, capitalism, and the “world-system” of modernization. Yet each of these aspects of Urizen unites in his connection with Enlightenment ideology. In Plate 5, Oothoon addresses him as the “Creator
of men” who wishes to “form men to [his] image” (5.3.4). For Oothoon, Urizen is a “mistaken Demon of heaven” who has made both Bromion and Theotormon in his image and who has created the systems of oppression under which all three of them suffer (5.3). All of the characters of the poem are presented as subjects of what Saree Makdisi terms Urizen’s “Universal Empire” – the “emerging space-time of modernization, of capital, of empire.”89 I would add that Visions stresses this “Universal Empire” as the all-encompassing system of Enlightenment that rules over modern social and political structures, including imperialism. Reason is presented through Urizen as a tool of oppression. Bromion, in seeking to emulate Urizen, rationalizes the oppression of others through the superiority of science and imperial expansion.

Moreover, Urizen’s association with the sun in Visions rhetorically and visually positions Enlightenment reason as a form of imperial coercion. The allusions to slaves in the poem align them with the sun – they are the “swarthy children of the sun” (1.21) and the “slaves beneath the sun” (2.8). Both lines evoke the image of enslaved people laboring in fields during the scorching heat of day. Yet, as Matthew J. A. Green indicates, Oothoon’s later description of the sun as “like an eye” (2.35) also connects “the sun with the aspect of constant and oppressive surveillance enacted by figures such as Urizen.”90 Urizen’s labor to “form men to [his] image” further evokes the objective violence of coercion (5.4). By attempting to make men in his own image, Urizen leverages Enlightenment ideology in order to create docile minds and bodies. The sun, or the eye, in Visions is therefore similar to the panopticon, which Foucault argues functions “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.”91 Bromion’s claim that his slaves “are obedient, they resist not, they obey the scourge: / Their daughters worship terrors and obey the violent” (1.22–23) suggests that their compliance stems from their fear of the all-seeing eye of the sun. Although Bromion takes their obedience as proof that they desire domination and violence, the threatening presence of the sun coerces them into submission. The omniscient eye of Urizen is depicted as watching over the three main characters of the poem as well in the frontispiece to Visions (fig. 1). In this image, the sun looks similar to an eye in the way the clouds surround the orb, as it watches the violent and oppressive actions of Bromion and Theotormon against Oothoon. This image also highlights the affective intensity of Urizen’s coercive empire over all three characters. Bromion and Oothoon are physically bound together while Theotormon weeps. Urizen reigns over the characters of the poem in his own dominant and coercive empire. He extends Enlightenment ideology over all he has conquered. The poem thus reveals the objective violence of imperialism through both references to the spread of the British empire in the New World and through the depiction of Enlightenment as spread through Urizen’s empire. In both manifestations, the concept and rhetoric of imperialism is depicted as intensely violent to the characters of the poem.

**Conclusion**

While this essay has focused on Blake’s critique of the violence of the Enlightenment, I do not mean to suggest that Blake completely rejected Enlightenment philosophy. Indeed, Blake’s response to Enlightenment culture and philosophy was rather complex, as much of Blake scholarship indicates. In We Have Never Been Modern, Bruno Latour describes the Enlightenment as accomplishing “the double task of domination and emancipation.”92 Blake was well aware of this mixed legacy and the problems it created, as we can see in Visions. Moreover, as Jean Hagstrum reminds us, Blake was “deeply involved” in the culture of Enlightenment that he admonished.93 As a working-class writer, Blake could not have instantiated such a critique without the societal implementation of Enlightenment values. Blake’s work thus exposes the paradoxical situation in which he found himself – criticizing the movement that gave him the initiative, as well as the social capability, to critique it. As
Hagstrum astutely points out, although Blake “mounted the fiercest, longest, and most effective attack on the . . . enlightened establishment ever made,” he continuously “revealed the marks of his origins” in the age of Enlightenment.⁵

Although Blake critiques many aspects of Enlightenment modernity, *Visions* advances a critique of the intense objective and epistemic violence imposed by the empirical philosophies of mind and the patriarchal and imperial influences at the center of Enlightenment discourse. Blake’s critiques are founded on a recognition of the potential damage of Enlightenment ideologies on an individual’s sense of self, her very subjectivity. Although the oppressive violence of Enlightenment culture on the individual – and specifically the female – was subtle, Blake’s poem makes these subtleties palpable and demonstrates the subjective emotional intensity of objective and epistemic violence. In his analysis of the violent social coercion that occurs within Enlightenment culture, Blake was certainly ahead of his time, anticipating the emergence of problems addressed by philosophers and writers well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By focusing his critique on the violence precipitated by the interrelated systems of empiricism, patriarchy, and imperialism, Blake demonstrates that Enlightenment thought limited the development of the imagination, which he viewed as the only way one could break out of the cycles of oppression and violence produced in modern society. Emphasizing subtle coercions as intensely violent acts, Blake perhaps instantiates his own “sideways glance” – one that allows us to look at acts of subjective violence without reproducing them or reducing their impact, while also promoting a deeper understanding of how objective and epistemic violence in some cases may be just as intense and significant as acts of subjective violence.

**NOTES**


5. Ibid., 1.

6. Ibid., 2.

7. Ibid., 1–2.


10. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 278.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.
13. Žižek, Violence, 2.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 9.
18. John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1995); quotations from An Essay Concerning Human Understanding will be given parenthetically in the text according to section.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 8.
27. Frye, Fearful Symmetry, 239.
28. Ibid.
29. Green, Visionary Materialism, 144.
32. Horkheimer and Adorno refer to the “herd” as a consequence of the universalizing tendency of the Enlightenment to make “everything in nature repeatable” (Dialectic of Enlightenment, 9). “Herd” mentality comes from both Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s (1770–1831) Phenomenology of Spirit (1807), in which he identifies the “herd” as the result of enlightenment (Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 9), and Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844–1900) “On Truth and Lie in an Extra Moral Sense” (1876), in which Nietzsche discusses “simulation” and man’s tendency to want to “live in a society or herd” as a motive for lying (p. 254); see Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra Moral Sense,” in Nietzsche: Writings from the Early Notebooks, ed. Raymond Geuss and Alexander Nehamas, trans. Ladislaus Löb (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 253–64. In a very Blakean sentence, Nietzsche addresses this “herd” mentality in relation to Enlightenment ideology: “Now he submits his actions as a rational being to the rule of abstractions: he is no longer prepared to be carried away by sudden impressions, or intuitions, but he generalises all these impressions to form less colourful, cooler concepts, to which to harness the vehicle of his life and actions” (p. 258).
33. As several scholars have suggested, there are parallels between Blake’s and Locke’s works that suggest they shared some opinions. Green proposes that although Blake attacks the “narrow bounds within which Locke confines the understanding,” his attacks on Locke’s epistemology are “motivated in part by a commitment, shared with Locke, to mental liberty, to the primacy of experience and even to free inquiry over institutional authority and public opinion” (Visionary Materialism, 18, 17). Steve Clark argues...
Blake's work is not antithetical to Locke's but rather shares a "common tradition of radical Protestantism" ("Labouring at the Resolute Anvil," 134); and S. H. Clark contends that Blake's Milton "may legitimately be described as an empiricist epic" because it embraces some of the qualities of Lockean psychology ("Blake's Milton as Empiricist Epic," 482). However, despite continuities in their work, Blake maintained an adamant criticism of the passive model of the mind that Locke espoused.

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and attacks repression”; the Blake who “depicts sexual life as a complex web of gender complementarities and interdependencies”; the Blake, "apparently incompatible with Blake number one, who sees sexuality as a tender trap rather than a force of liberation”; and the Blake "to whom it was necessary, as it was to his patriarchal predecessor Milton, to see the female principle as subordinate to the male” ("Desire Gratified and Ungratified: William Blake and Sexuality," Blake 16, no. 3 (1982–83): 156–65, 156). Scholars such as Ostrik er do not attempt to reduce or resolve these contradictions in Blake's works, but rather try to gain a precise understanding of Blake's various views and how he engages with the cultural issues of his time.

41. Ibid., 3–4.
42. Ibid.
43. Susan Fox argues that women are depicted in Blake's prophetic works as either "inferior or dependent" or as "unnaturally and disastrously dominant" ("The Female as Metaphor in William Blake's Poetry," Critical Inquiry 3, no. 3 [1977]: 507–20, 507). In her influential article, Mellor argues that Blake's Visions "must finally be seen as condoning the continuation of female slavery under a benevolent master" ("Sex, Violence, and Slavery," 369). Mark Anderson similarly contends that Oothoon is never truly liberated, because she "ends by seeing her freedom but failing to know it: she sees through Urizen's morality to the potential eternity in the moment of desire, but cannot realize it while she continues to depend on Theotormon rather than on herself for her liberation" ("Oothoon, Failed Prophet," Romanticism Past and Present 8, no. 2 [1984]: 1–22, 14). However, Harriet Kramer Linkin challenges negative readings of Oothoon, arguing that Oothoon's experiences throughout the poem are "ultimately progressive rather than degenerative" ("Revisioning Blake's Oothoon," Blake 22, no. 4 [1990]: 184–94, 185). David Aers views Oothoon as having so "full an understanding of the psychological effects and perverted indulgences of repressive sexuality" that she is "able to transcend the consciousness of her fellow women absolutely" (Romanticism and Ideology: Studies in English Writing 1765–1830 [London: Routledge, 1981], 31). Similarly, Gompf contends that Oothoon experiences an "awakening" and is able to "give expression to the changes [she] see[s], or hope[s] to see" ("Ripped from Complacency," 80).

44. Alicia Ostriker argues that Blake offers four different views on sexuality and gender: we see "the Blake who celebrates sexuality..."
Many scholars have examined Blake’s *Visions* as a response to Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Yet, as Chapman suggests, “understanding Blake’s attitude towards Wollstonecraft is troublesome,” because “Blake’s attitude towards women in general has seemed so contradictory” (*Blake: A Life*). Moreover, critics disagree about Blake’s response to Wollstonecraft. For example, Mark Schorer argues that “the poem is a perfectly direct allegory of her doctrines” (*William Blake: The Politics of Vision* [New York: Henry Holt, 1946], 290), while others, such as Fox and Mellor, view Blake’s response to Wollstonecraft as more critical and as demonstrative of his misogynistic views of women. Chapman contends that Blake does not criticize Wollstonecraft for her censure of women’s subjugation, but rather critiques the way her argument relies on Enlightenment ideology (p. 4). However, he further suggests that “in taking up Wollstonecraft’s cause, Blake changed its object; he tried to trace women’s oppression to the same masters he traced all other oppressions to, rationality and religion, abstraction, etc. – to Urizen, in a word, and in doing so, he lost sight of anything specific to the oppression of women” (p. 12). For more on Blake’s *Visions* in response to Wollstonecraft, see Nancy Moore Goslee, “Slavery and Sexual Character: Questioning the Master Tropes in Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*,” ELH 57, no. 1 (1990): 101–28.

Although the poem indicates that eagles rend Oothoon’s flesh, the image of the bird on plate 3 does not appear to be an eagle (fig. 3). The image instead seems to represent a cormorant, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “a large and voracious sea bird.” The term cormorant was often used in eighteenth-century English to refer to a greedy or insatiable person. In John Milton’s (1608–74) *Paradise Lost* (1667), Satan appears in the shape of a cormorant as he examines the Garden of Eden and resolves to “work” Adam and Eve’s fall (*The Argument* to Book IV, *Paradise Lost*, 2nd ed., ed. Scott Ellidge [New York: Norton, 1993], 84–85, 84). As Blake was greatly influenced by Milton, the image of the cormorant may have been incorporated to signify insatiability (associated with Bromion) and jealousy (associated with Theotormon).

62. Ibid.  
66. Ibid., 69.  
71. Imperialism in Blake’s poetry has been a recent interest in Romantic scholarship. Although there are many different ways of approaching imperialism in *Visions*, I am particularly interested in Blake’s depiction of imperialism as part of Enlightenment culture. For more on imperialism in Blake’s works, see David Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, 3rd ed. (New York: Dover, 1977); Goslee, “Slavery and Sexual Character”; Hutchings, “Gender, Environment, and Imperialism”; Makdisi, “Blake and the Ontology of Empire,” “Immortal Joy,” and *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).  


73. Rousseau, Émile, 322.

74. I want to stress here that I do not mean to conflate empiricism with rationalism. Indeed, empiricists, such as Locke, were known for rejecting aspects of rationalism (see Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 2.2, 4.17). Moreover, the history of both philosophical approaches is complex, continuing to be an issue of interest in twentieth-century theory and philosophy. Rather, I would like to suggest that Urizen, whom I will address later, serves as the Enlightenment force under which empiricism, rationalism, imperialism, and capitalism are connected in Blake’s literary works.

75. Hutchings, “Gender, Environment, and Imperialism,” 82.

76. Ibid.

77. Joseph Glanvill, Plus Ultra; or, the Progress and Advancement of Knowledge Since the Days of Aristotle (London: James Collins, 1668), 188.


81. Green, Visionary Materialism, 144.

82. Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 136.


85. Ibid.