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### Article

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## **Robert Burns: recovering Scotland's memory of the black Atlantic**

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It is now more widely-known that Scotland's 'national bard' was preparing to travel to Jamaica in 1786 to work as what he calls a 'negro driver' on a slave plantation. He hoped to escape the hardships of the life of a tenant farmer, as well as the remonstrance of the irate father of one pregnant Jean Armour. The couple had been secretly betrothed, though her father did not approve. The publication of Burns' first collection *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786), known as the 'Kilmarnock edition' from its place of publication, was intended to raise funds for the voyage; he reports that his very first purchase was the nine guinea fare across the Atlantic. However, Burns' voyage was continuously postponed, and in the interim the success of 'Kilmarnock' continued to grow. Soon, the 'plough driver' was able to avoid the post of 'negro driver' by pursuing instead literary fame as a 'quill driver' in Enlightenment Edinburgh. As a result of this episode, the figure of Robert Burns has provided a focal point for modern attempts to recover the long-obscured memory of Scottish connections with black Atlantic issues. In recent years, historical scholarship, exhibitions, television programmes and walking tours have sought to interrogate Scotland's collective memory and sense of identity along the lines of slavery and empire.<sup>1</sup> The artist Graham

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<sup>1</sup> Historical studies include Alan Karras, *Sojourners in the Sun: Scottish Migrants in Jamaica and the Chesapeake, 1740-1800* (London: Cornell University Press, 1992); T.M Devine, *Scotland's Empire 1600-1815* (London: Allen Lane, 2003); Douglas Hamilton, *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World 1750-1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005). See also *Scotland and the British Empire*, (eds.) John M. MacKenzie and T.M. Devine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Meanwhile in 2008, The People's Palace in Glasgow staged an exhibition on The Glassford Family portrait that is believed to show the outline of a young slave in the background. The popular BBC TV series *The History of Scotland* (2008) devoted an entire episode to Caribbean links in the eighteenth century. Finally, Stephen Mullen continues to lead a 'Slavery

Fagen has tapped the Burns story for ways to explore connections between Scotland and Jamaica. These include cutting a new reggae version of 'The Slaves Lament' (the original song will be examined below) for the *Clean Hands Pure Heart* exhibition at Glasgow's Tramway theatre in 2005.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, Andrew O. Lindsay's counter-factual novel *Illustrious Exile* (2006) is written in the form of Burns' journal had he undertaken the voyage to the West Indies.<sup>3</sup> Such projects note the 'paradox' of Burns' abandoned emigration to Jamaica, coupled with the relative lack of comment on slavery from the author of 'A Man's a Man for a' that'.

Clark McGinn spells out the somewhat anxious question that hangs over all such endeavours:

How could *our* Burns, the people's poet, look to become an instrument in what many now call "The Black Holocaust"?<sup>4</sup>

This echoes the anxiety around recovering the memory of Scotland and slavery more broadly, with the fear that to sully the bard is to sully the nation.<sup>5</sup> The purpose here, however, is neither to heap blame on the shoulders of one man, nor to discredit a people. Rather, I propose that Burns represents a *lieu de mémoire* (Pierre Nora) that serves as a portal onto a wider discussion that places Scotland into the context of the black Atlantic. This article considers Burns' biographical and textual (dis)entanglement with the Caribbean through a discussion of slavery and indenture as it relates to late-eighteenth century Ayrshire. I suggest that foregrounding the issue of 'free labour ideology' sheds light on the apparent 'paradox' of the Burns story. This 'paradox' represents a profound example

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Walking Tour' for Glasgow's Black History Month that highlights the Merchant City's connections with slavery.

<sup>2</sup> The producer Adrian Sherwood provided the musician, On-U Sound regular Skip McDonald and the singer, once of *Asian Dub Foundation*, Ghetto Priest. The video is available here: <http://www.myspace.com/adrianmaxwellsherwood>.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew O. Lindsay, *Illustrious Exile: Journal of my Sojourn in the West Indies* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Clark McGinn, 'Burns and Slavery' <<http://www.friendsofscotland.gov.uk/scotlandnow/issue-06/history/burns-and-slavery.html>> [accessed 12/10/2011]. Geoff Palmer also evokes the Burns story in *The Enlightenment Abolished: Citizens of Britishness* (Penicuik: Henry Publishing, 2007). See also Pat Kane on the Jamaican Burns Night with Sly and Robbie for the Celtic Connections music festival 2009: 'Murky Roots of Rabbie Reggae', *The Times* 14 December 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Gerard Carruthers' magazine article, 'Burns and Slavery', *The Drouth*, 25 (2007) received a flurry of hostile media attention and drew much ire for broaching the subject.

of the complex relationship between slavery, freedom and abolition that played out across Scotland, the United Kingdom and the Atlantic world as the Enlightenment progressed. From early in his career Burns could become an emblem of 'mutual sympathy' for contemporary abolitionist poets, while the tensions between 'free labour ideology' and abolitionism in his own verse remained problematic. Mapping Burns into the black Atlantic in this way permits a more conflicted account of the bard's own significance, and by extension a more conflicted account of Scotland's history of empire. This discussion feeds into an exploration of one black Atlantic manifestation of Burns' nineteenth century 'afterlives'. The African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) was engaged in a posthumous competition over Burns' memory with the Southern plantocracy. The article closes by raising the suggestion that focussing on issues such as Burns' presence in the contemporary Caribbean not only contributes to a modern re-assessment of the bard's role, but establishes Burns as a compelling *lieu de mémoire* in the much-needed recovery of Scotland's memory of the black Atlantic.

Indeed, Carla Sassi's pioneering work on national amnesia suggests that the Caribbean represents a profoundly destabilising *lieu de mémoire* for Scottish narratives of identity, with Burns himself a 'pivotal symbol figure'.<sup>6</sup> Pierre Nora's work on the *Lieux de Mémoire* of France, such as the Court of Versailles, the Eiffel Tower and Joan of Arc is designed to study 'national feeling' through 'the principal lieux...in which collective memory was rooted, in order to create a vast topology of French symbolism.'<sup>7</sup> Nora argues that modernity was obliged to found museums, anniversaries and commemorations because 'spontaneous collective memory' had been lost. 'History' (written academic history from archives) had replaced the '*milieu* of

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<sup>6</sup> Carla Sassi, 'Acts of (Un)willed Amnesia: Dis/appearing Figurations of the Caribbean in Post-Union Scottish Literature', in Giovanna Covi, Joan Anim-Addo, Velma Pollard and Carla Sassi (eds), *Caribbean-Scottish Relations: Colonial and Contemporary Inscriptions in History, Language and Literature* (London: Mango Publishing, 2007), p.135, p. 172.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Nora, Preface to the English Edition, 'From *Lieux de Mémoire* to *Realms of Memory*', in *Realms of Memory*, Vol 1, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 2. The original seven volumes in French were published from 1984 to 1992. A selection has been published in three English volumes titled *Realms of Memory*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer.

memory' (lived, everyday, social experience with customs and rituals). A *lieu* is thus a vestige, it is all that remains once living tradition has departed; or more poetically, they are 'shells' left 'on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.'<sup>8</sup> However, Nora's elegiac conceptualisation has been challenged in an edited collection entitled *Memory, History and Colonialism: Engaging with Pierre Nora in Colonial and Postcolonial Contexts* (2009). It seeks to, 'recover the concept of "lieux de mémoire" from the blind alley it reached as a result of the narrow Franco-French national frame of reference to which Pierre Nora restricted it.'<sup>9</sup> Indra Sengupta argues that Nora does not seem to account for 'the complexity of the past, the conflicting nature of collective memory, and the problematic questions of collective identity that are characteristic of colonial and postcolonial contexts.'<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Jay Winter suggests that rather than shells, a *lieu de mémoire* might better be understood as a palimpsest, i.e. a parchment on which the original writing has been partially erased and written over. A palimpsest allows those *lieux* to be read as a 'site of memory' that is 'reused or altered but still bears visible traces of its earlier form' in a fashion which 'layers meaning on top of meaning'.<sup>11</sup>

As such, our model of the *lieu de mémoire* is both transnational and, to borrow Sarah Dillon's term—'palimpsestuous'.<sup>12</sup> To consider Burns as a *lieu de mémoire* for Scottish connections with Atlantic slavery might at first seem curious given the scanty evidence of his personal involvement with the abolitionist movement that peaked around him. In another sense, of course, the failure to recognise the wider significance of Burns' planned emigration to Jamaica renders him an entirely appropriate *lieu* for 'Scotland and Slavery' studies, mirroring the marginalisation of the Caribbean plantations in Scottish national historiography. The 'Kilmarnock edition' has long been seen as a crowning achievement in Scottish letters: re-invigorating the

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<sup>8</sup> Pierre Nora, 'Entre Mémoire et Histoire', *Lieux de Mémoire*, pxxiv. Monica Juneja's translation, 'Architectural memory', (2009), p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Brigitte Reinwald, 'Recycling the Empire's Unknown Soldier', in *Memory, History, and Colonialism: Engaging with Pierre Nora in Colonial and Postcolonial Contexts*, ed. by Indra Sengupta, German Historical Institute Bulletin Supplement, No. 1 (2009).

<sup>10</sup> Indra Sengupta, *Memory, History and Colonialism*, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Jay M. Winter, 'In Conclusion: Palimpsests', in *Memory, History, and Colonialism*, p. 167.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (New York/ London: Continuum, 2007), p. 4.

Scottish vernacular and elevating its poetical possibilities. Since this first publication Burns has been received as a poet of natural humanity and sympathetic feeling. Here it will be argued that the Caribbean is infused throughout this key document of Scottish culture, the prospect of Jamaican emigration resurfaces as a constant threatening underpresence throughout the collection. Furthermore, I argue that the collection is animated by the tensions between 'free labour ideology' and abolitionist reform at the close of the eighteenth century.

The movement for abolition of the slave trade was the first modern, mass campaign to encompass the United Kingdom. However, in recent years a 'devolved' historiography has begun to emerge which usefully considers the particular case of Scotland in slavery and abolition, as Jerry Hunter has done for Wales.<sup>13</sup> In a pioneering study, Iain Whyte traces the development of abolition in Scotland which brought together the Moderate and Popular wings of the Church of Scotland.<sup>14</sup> Considering abolition through the *lieu* of Burns invites a focus on the 'free labour ideology' that historians have increasingly pinpointed as playing a crucial role in the politics of abolition. Employers had their own motivations for promoting a form of 'free labour ideology'—labourers worked better, longer and harder without the whip hand over them. However for workers it also conveyed a sense of 'self-worth created by dutiful work' that improved the character of the free labourer, and led to national prosperity.<sup>15</sup> In 1767 the Jacobite political economist James Steuart had drawn a distinction between industry and labour, analogous to the distinction between the head and the hands. *Industry* was 'the application to ingenious labour in a free man' which 'must be voluntary'; while mere *labour* 'may be performed by slaves.'<sup>16</sup> For Steuart the

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<sup>13</sup> Jerry Hunter, 'America Gaeth a'r Cymru/ The Welsh and American Slavery', 3 part TV documentary, screened on Welsh Language Channel S4C, (2006). <http://www.bangor.ac.uk/news/full-ori.php.en?ld=56>.

<sup>14</sup> Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756-1838* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 248.

<sup>16</sup> James Steuart, *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Oeconomy, Being an Essay on the Science of Domestic Policy in Free Nations, in which are particularly considered Population, Agriculture, Trade, Industry, Money, Coin, Interest, Circulation, Banks, Exchange, Public Credit, and Taxes* (London: 1767), II, I, p. 166.

figure of the slave suffered ‘the highest degree of dependence’;<sup>17</sup> in contrast, Burns would later celebrate the free labourer as, ‘the man o’ independent mind’. Rather than rank and title, ‘dignity’ could be gained from honest toil, and was measured in terms of personal character. Thus, to be enslaved or enthralled to another suddenly seemed anomalous to a much wider layer of society, in the way that it had not registered over the previous two centuries. ‘Free labour ideology’ united employers and workers in a common cause, although it would be understood in conflicting ways by each.

### **Slavery, Indenture and Ayrshire**

The transformations and traumas of agrarian revolution and the development of early capitalism which had crept over England over the previous centuries, were truncated in Scotland into the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; an era which spans, almost exactly, the life of Burns. Rather than the settled peasant existence Burns (1759-1796) is often portrayed as enjoying, it is the combination of traditional folk culture and modern wars, politics and turbulence which defines his biography. The presence of Atlantic slavery was never far away on the west coast of Scotland. According to Whyte, ‘Between 1719 and 1776, there were thirty-six newspaper advertisements for runaways who were brought from the Caribbean, the American colonies or the Indies, with nine notices of slaves for sale, four of these being in 1766.’<sup>18</sup> A series of legal cases of slaves claiming their freedom punctuate the eighteenth century, including the Scottish cases of *Montgomery v Sheddan* (1756), *Spens v Dalrymple* (1769) and *Knight v Wedderburn* (1778), as well as the *Somerset* decision in England in 1772. The first case took place in Burns’ Ayrshire, though three years before his birth.<sup>19</sup> Eric Graham in *Burns and the Sugar Plantocracy of Ayrshire* (2009)

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Steuart does not advocate free labour in the ‘sugar colonies’ however. In his opinion free labour could not compete with slave labour there as the products come cheaper.

<sup>17</sup> Steuart, p. 239.

<sup>18</sup> Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition*, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> National Archives of Scotland (NAS), CS234/S/3/12, p. 3-13. Montgomery escaped though he was incarcerated at the Edinburgh tollbooth where he died before his case came to court. In the second case, it was the master Dr Dalrymple who died before the case came to court against David Spens of Methil, Fife.

demonstrates the long-term investment of Ayrshire notables such as the Hamiltons, Fergussons, and Hunter Blairs in the slave societies of the Caribbean.<sup>20</sup> In Ayrshire and Scotland, the Atlantic networks were firmly in place, then, for a young literate man to seek employment at the imperial frontiers. Burns himself complained of losing so many of his school friends who lent him books to the empire: 'Parting with these, my young friends and benefactors, as they dropped off for the east or west Indies, was often to me a sore affliction.'<sup>21</sup> In 1786, Burns entered into negotiations with Patrick Douglas who was looking for a book-keeper for his sugar plantation at Ayr Mount, Port Antonio in the North East of Jamaica.

During this dramatic year he bade farewell to friends, family and Scotland in a number of letters, poems and songs, some of which featured in the 'Kilmarnock edition'.<sup>22</sup> Nigel Leask has recently shown this phenomenally successful collection to be skillfully engaged in the politics of the Scots Pastoral, with Burns adopting the voice of a Meliboean exile facing dangers of dispossession, ruin and exile. Leask notes of the opening poem 'Twa Dogs' that, 'Kilmarnock's pastoral politics are stated at the outset in an eclogue between two dogs (*not* two shepherds) favourably comparing the hard lives of the poor to the *otium* of the rich'.<sup>23</sup> The dialogue between the master's Newfoundland Ceasar, and the ploughman's collie Luath, underlines the precariousness of 'free labour ideology'. Luath who generally extolls the virtues, dignity and contentedness of labourers, at one point admits the prospect of rural clearances:

There's monie a creditable *stock*

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<sup>20</sup> Eric Graham, *Burns and the Sugar Plantocracy of Ayrshire* (Ayr: Ayrshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Letter to John Moore, Mauchline, (2 August 1787), (CL, p. 250). McGinn also uncovers a reference to 'buckskin kye' (cattle) in 'Epistle to John Rankine' (1784). Burns had to pay a fine for fornication yet he vows to continue the practice though it may result in exile or emigration: 'Tho' I should herd the buckskin kye/ For't in Virginia.' Clark McGinn 'Burns and Slavery', *Robert Burns Lives!* [http://www.electricscotland.com/familytree/frank/burns\\_lives92.htm#sdendnote43anc](http://www.electricscotland.com/familytree/frank/burns_lives92.htm#sdendnote43anc) [accessed 28/4/2013].

<sup>22</sup> These include 'The Farewell Song to the Banks of Ayr', proclaiming 'For her I'll trace a distant shore,/ That Indian wealth may luster throw/ Around my Highland lassie, O!'. Yet, 'Farewell to Eliza' suggests he had more than Mary on his mind. Moreover, he pinpoints the origin of his woes in 'Lines Written on a Bank Note' where he curses, 'For lack o' thee, I leave this much-loved shore' (l. 11). See also the later song 'Will Ye Go to the Indies, My Mary?'

<sup>23</sup> Nigel Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 79.

O' decent, honest, fawsont folk, (respectable)  
 Are riven out baith root an' branch,  
 Some rascal's pridefu' greed to quench,  
 Wha thinks to knit himself the faster  
 In favour wi' some *gentle Master*,  
 Wha aiblins thrang a *parliamentin*, (perhaps, crowd)  
 For *Britain's guid* his saul indentin— (l.141-148)

The poor farmer's family are threatened with dispossession should they fail to pay the increasing rents demanded by 'improving' factors for their absentee landlords. Burns reports that he based his picture of the haughty, grasping factor in this poem on the 'scoundrel tyrant' who hounded his own family into penury when he was young.<sup>24</sup> The facetious claims of such masters to be pledging their 'souls' to serve the nation is designed to disguise self-serving self-interest. Burns' deliberate choice of the Scots 'indentin' meaning 'pledge' or 'warrant' (Scottish National Dictionary), also raises the very current sense of 'indenting' that weighed heavily on Burns' mind at the time— 'to engage a person as a servant' (OED).<sup>25</sup> The British empire in the Caribbean relied on an enslaved labour force transported from Africa, supervised by a layer of poor, white indentured servants, of whom Burns was nearly one. 'Twa Dogs' was written between 1785 and February 1786,<sup>26</sup> Burns notes that at that time he had been 'thinking of indenting myself for want of money to procure my passage.'<sup>27</sup> Here, it is the 'soul' of the evicted farmer that is in danger of being 'indented' in the Caribbean, for the sake of Britain's financial good.

The Virgilian dialectic introduced in 'Twa Dogs' informs the tension between the 'free labour ideology' and the threat of dispossession and exile that animates the collection. Jeff Skoblow notes the sequencing of the

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<sup>24</sup> See Letter to Dr. Moore explaining that after his father's 'generous Master' died... 'we fell into the hands of a Factor who sat for the picture I have drawn of one in my Tale of two dogs...(whose) insolent, threatening epistles...used to set us all in tears.'

<sup>25</sup> Kinsley notes the allusion to Robert Fergusson's satire on politicking deacons in *The Election* (1773): 'For towmonths twa their saul is lent,/ For the town's gude indentin' (l.120-1).

<sup>26</sup> Kinsley, iii, p1104-1105.

<sup>27</sup> Letter to Dr Moore.



his 'rhyme-composing billie' wishing that he may 'flourish like a lily' (l.57). Is it an overly modern reading to shudder at the image of the white flower flourishing on Jamaica? Burns' imagery here is at best ill-judged.

There is a historical controversy over whether Burns ever seriously intended to travel. Certainly, not one of his 'farewell pieces' suggest he had given any great thought to his proposed destination. This lack of consideration lends weight to the argument that Carruthers subscribes to—that Burns' planned emigration was a fantasy produced by his humiliation at the rejection of the Armours. Yet, it begs the question that if he never intended to emigrate, what exactly were his intentions when he took the concrete step of signing his farm over entirely to his brother in July 1786, a month before the proposed voyage. Maurice Lindsay reasons that 'from the very beginning the Jamaican plan was utterly repugnant to him', therefore:

As the pressure of home events upon him unexpectedly slackened; his resolution not unnaturally wavered...It had been an emergency measure, and the emergency was over: which is not to say that neither emergency nor the measures to cope with it had never existed.<sup>33</sup>

To argue that his planned emigration was merely chimerical might suggest an attempt to deflect blame from the national bard, to shield him from the smear of slavery. Yet Carruthers continues, 'this is not to have Burns off the hook...On the contrary, in this episode of his life, Burns, I would argue, is guilty of a failure of sympathy, a failure in imagination.'<sup>34</sup> Indeed, if imagination might be defined as the ability to form mental images or concepts of what is not actually present to the senses, the absence of any consideration of black slavery in poems concerning the West Indies represents a major failure of imaginative sympathy.

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<sup>33</sup> Maurice Lindsay, *Robert Burns* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1954), p. 76. David Daiches maintains that Burns never intended to travel, though Kinghorn and Kinsley concur with Lindsay, (K, iii, p1176).

<sup>34</sup> Carruthers, 'Burns and Slavery', p. 166.

## Abolitionism and Mutual Sympathy

Such a failure in these pieces is perhaps more understandable given that the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was not founded in London until the following May 1787. Later that year, Thomas Clarkson published the gruesome evidence in support of abolition—sailors' testimonies, iron-handcuffs, leg-shackles, and thumb screws—in *A Summary View of the Slave Trade and of the Probable Consequences of its Abolition* (1787). This opened the door for a flood of pamphlet wars and polemical poetry. The publication of Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789) with the accompanying national tour through England, Scotland and Ireland was an influential contribution, purporting to be the first hand account of an African with direct experience of the slave trade and the condition of slaves.<sup>35</sup> These works provided a firm basis for the first abolitionist speech of William Wilberforce in the House of Commons on 12 May 1789, only two months before the storming of the Bastille in Paris (a contemporaneity of movements which would prove fateful).

William Dickson's tour of Scotland in 1792 disseminated the powerful *Abstract of Evidence* and introduced Josiah Wedgewood's symbol of the kneeling slave in chains with the motto 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?' The Abolition movement gained support from wide sections of society: academics, churches, magistrates, councils, Synods, Presbyteries, trade guilds, etc. In the Scottish context, Whyte has traced petitions from a host of communities calling for abolition including Glasgow, Edinburgh, Paisley, Dundee, Aberdeen, and, indeed, Ayr. Of the 519 petitions Parliament received in 1792, 185 came from Scotland, representing 35% of the total.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Controversy over Equiano's origins stretch back to the eighteenth century when anti-abolitionists argued he was not born in Africa, as he claimed, but North America. Vincent Carretta in searching for proof of his African birthplace uncovered instead a baptismal certificate stating his birthplace as South Carolina. This would render the portrayal of the Essaka region of Igboland, and his capture in the early sections of the *Narrative* a fictional portrayal rather than eyewitness account. However the proof is inconclusive. Vincent Carretta, 'Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-century Question of Identity', *Slavery and Abolition*, 20, 3 (December 1999), pp. 96-105. For a useful summary of the continuing debate, see <http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/nativity.htm> [accessed 29/03/2012].

<sup>36</sup> Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition*, p. 85. As Whyte notes, this striking percentage deserves some caution as Clarkson urged one petition to come from each community on his tour of England. Dickson may have been

Therefore, the textual and biographical evidence of Burns' concern with colonial slavery is surprisingly scant in the context of this widespread and vocal abolition movement. The name of Robert Burns has not been found on any of the petitions and Burns did not meet Dickson during his spell in Dumfries. It is possible that he wanted to say more but that he felt confined in his position since mid-1788 in the Excise, as a government employee was forbidden to make political statements. Yet, the treasurer for the very active Edinburgh Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was Alexander Alison of the Excise Office, and his 'colleague in that department, Campbell Halliburton, undertook the major work of the committee throughout this whole period.'<sup>37</sup> Their positions may have been more senior and secure than Burns' own, though we might at least expect some obvious allusions in his poetry and songs considering the powerful political messages in his work of the period that he continued to circulate amidst the climate of fear during government oppression.

Around the late eighteenth-century Atlantic world, it seemed a 'many-headed hydra' threatened to overwhelm the world-system.<sup>38</sup> American farmers had rejected and finally defeated the British empire in 1785; Toussaint Louverture's revolution in Saint Domingue (1791-1804) would defeat three rival empires, and threatened to overthrow the entire slave system of the Caribbean; while in January 1793 the French people decapitated their own king. In Britain, over the course of 1792 the government began to view the increasing agitation for reform as 'Jacobinical' sedition worthy of imprisonment and transportation. It was in this atmosphere that the liberal reformers of the abolitionist leadership decided to suspend public agitation for 'liberty' in case it developed into an alternative form of liberty that spiraled beyond their intentions. In late 1792

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less forceful in this, resulting in a number of smaller petitions being sent from different groups in the same area. Closer examination of the number of signatories on each petition would better establish the proportions involved. Nonetheless, the popular commitment to abolition was clearly substantial North and South of the border.

<sup>37</sup> Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition*, p. 88.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London: Verso, 2000).

the Board of Excise initiated an investigation into Burns' affairs, provoking him to confide in Mrs Dunlop: 'I have set, henceforth, a seal on my lips, as to these unlucky politics; but to you I must breathe my sentiments.'<sup>39</sup> Yet Burns continued to take risks; in the same month of Thomas Muir's trial for sedition, he published 'Scots Wha Hae' (1793). He explained to Thomson that this song related to struggles 'not quite so ancient'. Thus, Burns invokes Scottish heroes of yore, Wallace and Bruce, interpreting their battles as ones of freedom and liberty in order to nourish and fortify contemporary struggles for democratic freedom. Burns puts into Bruce's mouth a speech before Bannockburn which echoes the language of the French revolution, 'Tyrants fall in every foe!/ Liberty's in every blow'. Notably, Bruce warns his troops that the prospect of defeat by King Edward would result in 'chains and slaverie' (l.8). The figure of the coward slave— 'Wha can fill a coward's grave/ Wha sae base as be a Slave?' (l.10-11)— is contrasted to the man who is brave enough to do battle, 'free man stand/ or free man fa' (l.15). Burns' construction of the brave 'free labourer' would consistently collocate 'cowardice' with enslavement, even in the midst of the abolitionist campaign, the implications of which are discussed below.

Burns' relative silence in the thick of the abolition movement is curious given the convergence of two main areas. Firstly the widespread popularity of that movement, outlined above, also drew support from Moderate churchmen whom Burns admired. He was baptised by William Dalrymple of Ayr (Moderate) who became 'Dalrymple mild' in 'The Kirk's Alarms'. John Russel of Irvine (Popular party) also became 'black Russel' in 'Twa Herds'. Both figures met William Dickson on his 1792 tour. Secondly the movement for abolition was driven and inspired by outspoken and perceptive poets with an interest in political reform. These include, Thomas Day ('The Dying Negro', 1773), William Cowper (*The Task*, 1775), Hannah More (*Slavery: A Poem*, 1788), and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (*Ode Against the Slave Trade*, 1792—in Greek). Corey Andrews traces a long history of anti-

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<sup>39</sup> Letter to Mrs Dunlop, Dumfries, 2 January 1793. Those sentiments have been prudently snipped from the original letter.

slavery feeling in Scottish letters from Robert Blair (1743), John MacLaurin (1760), James Beattie (1760), through to Rev John Jamieson (1789).<sup>40</sup> Burns' fellow labouring class poet, the 'Bristol milkmaid' Ann Yearsley ferociously attacked her fellow Bristolians in *Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade* (1788).

In addition, Burns was heavily invested in the language of sentiment, mutual sympathy and pastoral which also shaped abolitionist verse. Wylie Sypher long ago noted that these combined forms risked creating 'pseudo-Africans' in 'a pseudo-Africa'.<sup>41</sup> The song 'The Slaves Lament' published as part of James Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum* in 1792, and often ascribed to Burns, might be considered a prime example of this.<sup>42</sup> It must be stressed that the pastoral mode provided a poetic vision that could not express the political complexities of the inter-imperial slave trade. Where pro-slavery pastoral presented a movement from the savage chaos of Africa to the ordered idyll of the West Indies; anti-slavery verse simply reversed the categories, presenting a descent from a pastoral African arcadia to the infernal depravity of the West Indies. The simplicity of the depiction was vulnerable to abolitionist attacks on slave punishments, toil and sexual abuse on the one hand; while pro-slavery writers could easily puncture naïve depictions with reference to African warfare and slave dealing on the other. The refrain of 'The Slaves Lament', 'Alas, I am weary, weary, o', establishes the speaker as a sentimental hero in the ballad tradition, mourning his own trafficking across the Atlantic.<sup>43</sup> A contrast is established between a pastoral Senegal where 'streams for ever flow, and flowers for ever blow' and the 'bitter snow and frost' of, not Jamaica, but Virginia. However,

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<sup>40</sup> Corey Andrews, "'Ev'ry Heart Can Feel": Scottish Poetic Responses to Slavery in the West Indies from Blair to Burns', *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 4, Spring/ Summer 2008, <<http://www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk/issue4/andrews.htm>> [accessed 14/10/2012].

<sup>41</sup> Sypher, *Guinea's Captive Kings*, p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> Although many modern versions include an apostrophe 'The Slave's Lament'—that would correspond to the individual speaker of the song— it is in fact plural.

<sup>43</sup> Compare 'The Highland Widow's Lament' (1794) recalling the pastoral Highlands—'Oh I am come to this Low Country/... Without a penny in my purse/...It wis na sae in the Highland hills/...For then I had a score o' kye...' For a discussion of the 'sentimental hero' in abolitionist verse, see Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

Burns' authorship remains 'uncertain'.<sup>44</sup> While there is no conclusive proof, the balance of evidence suggests this was an older song circulating in 1792, at the height of the early abolitionist drive that Burns collected, rather than an original composition.<sup>45</sup> The principle reason to suppose it was written by Burns is to fill an otherwise curious gap in his 'politically radical or progressive C.V'.<sup>46</sup> The significance of the song was later inflated with apocryphal tales: that Burns wrote it following the sighting of a slave ship in Dundee, or that the tune is based on an African source, neither of which is confirmed in Burns' journals or letters. Although Johnson informs us that those songs marked 'R', 'B' or 'X' were either written or substantially rewritten by Burns, that code is inconsistent and unreliable. In Robert Riddell's copy of *Scots Musical Museum* Vol. 4 which is interleaved with Burns' notes on the provenance of some songs, 'The Slaves Lament' is marked 'R'. However he made no notes on this song that would represent his sole vocalisation of an African slave, nor referred to its gestation in any extant letters.<sup>47</sup> Secondly Eric Graham notes that transportation from Senegal to Virginia was an older slave-trading route that had not been open to British traders since the American War of Independence 1775-1783.<sup>48</sup> As this would suggest it to be an older song, it would explain the distance between the devastating rhetorical power Burns could summon against the injustices of social hierarchy, and this single 'abolitionist' piece that seems a rather insipid response to the tyranny of chattel slavery.

If Burns remained almost entirely removed from the abolitionist movement, other poets heard in Burns' poems a strident voice for human dignity that spoke to the wider meanings of freedom in the late eighteenth century. Nigel Leask skilfully reads Helen Maria Williams' *Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave Trade* (1788) as 'both a context and a

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<sup>44</sup> Kinsley, p. 1405.

<sup>45</sup> The song appears to be based on 'The Trepann'd maid' from the seventeenth century.

<sup>46</sup> Gerard Carruthers, 'Robert Burns and Slavery', *Fickle Man*, p. 172.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Burns Birthplace Museum Archive, 3.3009. d. Burns' notes finish at no. 364 'Nithsdall's Welcome Home', twenty songs before 'The Slaves Lament'.

<sup>48</sup> Eric Graham, *Sugar Plantocracy of Ayrshire*, p. 96.

source for the [Burns] song “Honest Poverty” (1795).<sup>49</sup> Williams (1761?-1827) who was brought up in Berwick was a great admirer of Burns.<sup>50</sup> Williams remained a supporter of the French Revolution when most British poets abandoned it, and would move to France where she later died. Burns had been in correspondence with the abolitionist poet through their mutual friend Dr John Moore.<sup>51</sup> As Moore had failing eyesight, Williams read Burns’ letters to Moore, including the long biographical letter in which Burns sheepishly explains his hardships that led him to apply for a post as a ‘poor Negro-driver’ in Jamaica.<sup>52</sup> In a previous letter, Burns praised Williams’ own collection of *Poems* (1786).<sup>53</sup> Deborah Kennedy explains that:

Burns’ very status as a poet was caught up in the eighteenth century debate on unlettered poets, a debate on nature versus art, that took up the phenomenon of women writers too. While Burns himself was being heralded as a ‘native genius’, he used the same terminology to praise what he called Helen Maria Williams’s ‘unfetter’d wild flight of native genius.’<sup>54</sup>

Williams was clearly moved by the prospect of Burns’ emigration and wrote a ‘Sonnet on reading the poem upon the Mountain-Daisy by Mr Burns’.<sup>55</sup> She recognises ‘genius in her native vigour’ and pleads ‘Scotia! From rude affliction shield thy bard/ His heav’n-taught numbers Fame herself will guard’ (l.13-14). Burns’ poem ‘On Turning up a Mountain Daisy’, a companion poem to ‘To a Mouse’, is placed only three poems before ‘On a Scotch Bard Gone to the West Indies’. The ‘cauld’ ‘bitter-biting *North*’ wind blows through the poem that returns to the precariousness of the poet-farmer, who, like the flower, is in danger of being uprooted. The Atlantic

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<sup>49</sup> Nigel Leask, ‘Burns and the Poetics of Abolition’, *Edinburgh Companion to Robert Burns*, ed. Gerard Carruthers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 55.

<sup>50</sup> Williams was the daughter of a Welsh army officer and Scotswoman Helen Hay, they moved to Berwick in 1769 following her father’s death.

<sup>51</sup> Moore was a relative of Mrs Dunlop, and Burns greatly admired his novel *Zeluco* (1789).

<sup>52</sup> Letter IV (125), Burns to Moore, Mauchline, 2 August, 1787 (CL, p. 248 & p. 255).

<sup>53</sup> Letter II (85), Burns to Moore, Edinburgh, 15 Feb 1787 (CL, p. 247).

<sup>54</sup> Kennedy quotes from J. De Lancey Ferguson, *The Letters of Robert Burns*, (1931), Vol 1, p. 71. There is a curious incongruity as in the second edition edited by G. Ross Roy (1985) the quote runs, ‘the wild, unfetter’d flight of native Poesy, and the querulous, somber tenderness of “time-fettled Sorrow”.’ (p. 247) Compare ‘time-settled sorrow’ in Ferguson, which appears to be a quote from John Home’s *Douglas: A Tragedy* (1756), I,i,31. Whether native ‘genius’ or ‘Poesy’, Kennedy’s point still stands.

<sup>55</sup> Second edition of her *Poems* (1791), pp. 55-56.

crossing looms large: ‘Such is the fate of simple Bard, on Life’s rough ocean luckless starr’d!...Till billows rage, and gales blow hard, And whelm him o’er!’ (1.37-42). Williams is attuned to the pressures that would force a tenant farmer to become a book-keeper. In Williams’ abolitionist poem ‘On the Bill Lately Passed’, Leask perceives an allusion to Burns as she identifies the ‘paradox’ of the ‘native genius’ considering a role amidst the slave economy. She employs the figure of the ‘generous sailor’—the jolly British tar navigating a slave ship—whom she exonerates from blame.

Each cultured grace, each finer art,  
E’en thine, most lovely of the train!  
Sweet Poetry! Thy heaven-taught strain—  
His breast, where nobler passions *burn*,  
In honest poverty would spurn,  
The wealth Oppression can bestow,  
And scorn to wound a fettered foe.<sup>56</sup>

Leask hypothesises that Burns perceived the allusion to himself (in Mackenzie’s famous ‘heaven-taught ploughman’<sup>57</sup> and pun on the italicized ‘burns’), but was embarrassed by the suggestion that he, like the sailor, spurned employment in the slave trade to embrace ‘honest poverty’ due to moral misgivings. Burns’ reply to Williams demonstrates his understanding of the ‘unfeeling selfishness of the Oppressor’ and ‘the wrongs of the poor African’, but picks up on the compromised figure of the sailor. Burns writes,

I am not sure how far introducing the Sailor was right; for though the common characteristic is generosity, yet in this case his is certainly not only an unconcerned witness but in some degree an efficient agent in the business.<sup>58</sup>

Leask argues that Burns’ discomfort over the exoneration of the ‘efficient agent in the business’, might ‘betray an awkward sense of his own complicity in planning to serve as a “Negro-driver”’.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Helen Maria Williams, ‘A Poem on the Bill Lately Passed’, (1.240-247).

<sup>57</sup> This was Henry MacKenzie’s description in the *Lounger* review of 1786 that quickly became famous. Burns himself cultivated the image of the untutored pastoral genius, the epitaph to *Kilmarnock* reads—‘Gie me a spark o’ nature’s fire, That’s a’ the learning I desire.’

<sup>58</sup> Letter 353B, Late July or early August 1789, Burns to Helen Maria Williams CL, p. 534.

<sup>59</sup> Leask, ‘Burns and the Poetics of Abolition’, p. 55.

I would like to build on this analysis and introduce the terms of ‘free labour ideology’ into the discussion of Burns’ tense relationship with abolitionism. Leask’s reading of Williams is strengthened upon examination of Hannah More’s treatment of the sailor in the highly successful *Slavery: A Poem* (1788) and an updated version that contains significant insertions, *The Black Slave Trade: A Poem* (1790).<sup>60</sup> The title of the second version suggests More’s adherence to the priority of orthodox abolitionist policy—focussing on the trade more specifically than slavery as a mode of production. More engaged in a variety of reforming projects including abolition and female education, though unlike Williams she abhorred the French Revolution.<sup>61</sup> In both versions *Slavery* and *The Slave Trade*, More makes an appeal to the sailor to desist on the grounds of mutual sympathy, centring on love of ‘freedom’ and ‘native soil’. The original is shown here in regular type, with the insertion in bold font:

Hold, murderers, hold! Nor aggravate distress;  
Respect the passions you yourselves possess;  
Ev’n you of ruffian heart, of ruthless hand,  
Love your own offspring, love your native land.  
**Ev’n you, with fond impatient feelings burn,  
Though free as air, though certain of return.  
Then, if to you, who voluntary roam,  
O dear the memory of your distant home,  
O think how absence the lov’d scene endears  
To him whose food is groans; whose drink is tears;  
Think on the wretch whose aggravated pains  
To exile misery adds, to misery’s chains.  
If warm *your* heart, to British feelings true,  
As dear his land to him is yours to you;  
And Liberty, in you a hallow’d flame,**

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<sup>60</sup> Bristol poet Robert Southey would also focus on the figure of the sailor in ‘The Sailor Who Had Served in the Slave Trade’ (1798), a re-working of Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798).

<sup>61</sup> Anne Stott, *Hannah More: the first Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

**Burns, unextinguish'd, in his breast the same.**

**Then leave him holy Freedom's cheering smile,<sup>62</sup>**

The heav'n taught fondness for the parent soil;

Revere affections mingled with our frame,

In every nature, every clime the same;

In all, these feelings equal sway maintain;

In all, the love of HOME and FREEDOM reign. (l. 127-148)

If we read, as in Williams, the original's 'heav'n-taught fondness for the parent soil' that is found in both the sailor and the African as an allusion to Burns, this seems expanded in the second version. The choice to place 'Burns' at the start of the poetic line results in the capital 'B' that more strongly indicates the bard's name, in whose breast 'the spark o' nature's fire' burns with love of 'home' and 'freedom'. Here Burns seems to become associated with the enslaved African. Yet if we read the first line of the insertion, 'Ev'n you with fond impatient feelings burn' (l. 131) equally as a pun on his name, it suggests the 'you' refers both to Burns and the sailor—or Burns in the figure of the sailor (compare 'E'en thine' in Williams). Like in Williams, the passage reads more like an address to a poet who is 'free as air', and explains the double referent in the italicized 'your': 'If warm *your* heart, to British feelings true' (l.139). It appears that through a cryptic play of allusion there is a triangulation between Burns, the sailor and the African. More identifies the 'paradox', first aired by Williams, of the 'native genius' who almost became an 'efficient agent in the business'. It is unclear whether More is picking up on the Burns story, or the similar allusion to Burns in Williams' treatment of the sailor, or both. Perhaps noting Burns' lack of consideration of the enslaved, as he focused more on his own Meliboean exile, she urges him to 'think'. 'Think how absence the lov'd scene endears', 'Think on the wretch' for whom 'exile misery adds, to misery chains', (i.e. the slave is not only exiled like Burns, but also enchained). Finally she emphasises the comparison, invoking the moral sentiment of mutual sympathy: 'As dear his land to him as yours to you;/ And Liberty in

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<sup>62</sup> In the original this line runs 'Ah! leave them holy Freedom's cheering smile' (*Slavery*, l. 115). The later version was published in Hannah More *Collected Works* (1801).

you a hallow'd flame,/ Burns, unextinguish'd, in his breast the same' (l. 140-143). This is the paradox that makes Burns such a potent *lieu de mémoire* for slavery studies for the present day and his contemporaries alike.

The democratic, republican tone of the song 'Is there for honest Poverty' (1795) has long been recognized.<sup>63</sup> Marilyn Butler calls it 'probably the closest rendering in English of the letter and spirit of the notorious Jacobin "Ca ira"'.<sup>64</sup> However, Leask identifies a depth of allusion to the 'poetics of abolition', particularly to the Williams correspondence, that elevates the song to a more profound and complex level. In the first line, Williams' phrase 'honest poverty' resurfaces in a song that stages the tensions between abolitionism and 'free labour ideology' in the mid-1790s. Leask suggests that 'Burns perhaps needed to disavow and acknowledge Williams' abolitionist polemic, reflecting both his own compromised involvement in slavery, and the hi-jacking of abolition by Tory politicians.'<sup>65</sup> The song opens,

Is there for honest Poverty  
That hings his head and a' that;  
The coward-slave we pass him by,  
We dare be poor for a' that! (l.1-4)

The song abounds with the terms of 'free labour ideology' that Burns had long valued. Disdaining inherited privilege, he stresses, 'the honest man, tho' ere sae poor,/ Is king o' men for a' that' (l.15-16); and upholds that 'the pith o' sense and pride o' worth,/ are higher rank than a' that' (l.31-32). Seymour Drescher points out that Adam Smith's version of 'free labour ideology' spoke only of freemen and slaves, ignoring indentured servants, apprentices, miners, convicts, etc. This simplification became standard: 'in the age of abolition European freemen and Caribbean slaves would be

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<sup>63</sup> In 1894, John MacCunn drew attention to the parallels between 'Is there for honest Poverty' and Tom Paine's work. Although MacCunn is surprisingly hostile to Paine's rhetoric of 'natural rights', he appreciates Burns' lyrical rendering. He wonders, 'Can we help wishing that all political philosophers could find their poets?' John MacCunn, *Ethics of Citizenship*, (Glasgow: James MacLehose & Son, 1894), p. 68.

<sup>64</sup> Marilyn Butler, 'Burns and Politics', in Crawford, p. 102

<sup>65</sup> Leask, *Poetics of Abolition*, p. 57.

juxtaposed in a stark dichotomy.<sup>66</sup> However, Burns here maintains the earlier rhetoric of free labour ‘liberty’ with a triple stratification between aristocrat, freeman, and slave (another signal of his distance from orthodox abolitionism). Unfortunately for those who would eulogise the ‘poet of humanity and all mankind’;<sup>67</sup> the bold independent free labourer snubs both the nobleman above him, and the figure of the coward-slave below him.

Burns uses the term ‘slave’ or ‘slavery’ thirteen times throughout his oeuvre and in six of these it is collocated with ‘coward’. At this point, it is important to recognise with Murray Pittock that ‘the language used to describe slavery as a condition remained slippery and problematic, because it was inherited from an earlier language unconcerned with black slavery, but seeing the condition as one brought about by tyranny and voluntary subjection to it.’ Slavery, in this sense associated with Catholicism, Orientalism, and Jacobitism, ‘had long implied that it was in part a wilful surrender of liberty, rather than its theft.’<sup>68</sup> Burns’ closest reference to the abolitionist sense of slavery is the ‘hapless wretches sold to toil’ amongst an Orientalist picture of ‘spicy forests’, ‘ruthless natives’, and ‘tyrants and slaves’ in ‘Castle Gordon’ (1787). The figurative meanings refer generally to a loss of sovereignty or control, such as that of a conquered people or a people subject to tyranny (such as the French *ancien regime*), or as a ‘slave to love’. As well as ‘Scots Wha Hae’ discussed above, other examples include: the ‘half-starved slaves in warmer skies’ in ‘The Author’s Earnest Cry and Prayer’ (1786). Intriguingly, ‘The Song of Death’ which features the command— ‘Thou grim King of Terrors! Thou life’s gloomy foe! Go, frighten the coward and slave!’— is found immediately following ‘The Slaves Lament’ in the *Scots Musical Museum* (1792). In ‘Poortith Cauld’ (1793) he scorns the fool obsessed with material wealth: ‘My curse on silly coward man,/ That he should be the slave o’t’. These meanings overlap in the lovely song ‘Their

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<sup>66</sup> Seymour Drescher, ‘Free Labour vs Slave Labor: The British and Caribbean Cases’, *Terms of Labour* (1999), p. 54.

<sup>67</sup> J.A Mackay, Preface to the *Complete Works of Robert Burns* (Ayr: Alloway Publishing, 1990), p. 7.

<sup>68</sup> Murray Pittock, ‘Slavery as a Political Metaphor in Scotland and Ireland in the Age of Burns’, in *Robert Burns and Transatlantic Culture*, (eds) Sharon Alker, Leith Davis, Holly Faith Nelson, (Surrey, England and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 19-31, p. 19.

Groves o' Sweet Myrtle' (1795) in which he refuses the temptations of foreign luxury in favour of the simple pleasures to be found on Scottish mountainsides—'The Slave's spicy forests, and gold-bubbling fountains,/ The brave Caledonian views wi' disdain;/ He wanders as free as the winds of his mountains,/ Save Love's willing fetters- the chains of his Jean'. These references generally adhere to that 'older rhetoric' even in the midst of the first phase of the abolitionist campaign that swelled from 1787 to the mid-1790s.

The 'coward slave' was, of course, a standard insult in the discourse of muscular British 'liberty' over the course of the eighteenth century. Indeed, the ubiquity of the collocation renders the reading of 'coward-slave', as 'cowed slave' a case of wishful thinking. There was moreover, in Burns' hyphenation of the 'coward-slave', a conflation of 'timidity' with 'slothfulness'.<sup>69</sup> The languor of the slave in comparison to the free labourer was well established; in 1771, Glasgow University Law Professor John Millar opined, 'A slave who receives no wages in return for his labour, can never be supposed to exert much vigour or activity in the exercise of any employment.'<sup>70</sup> In contrast to the 'independent mind' and moral soundness of the labouring poor, the psychological degradation of both 'cowardice' and 'torpor' was prevalent in the labour theory of the Scottish Enlightenment. Amongst his promotion of free trade and free labour, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) also expresses fears over the moral degradation of commercial modernity.<sup>71</sup> This 'cowardice', 'stupidity' and 'torpor' was especially prevalent amongst urban manual labourers following the modern division of labour. A process that Marx would later define as 'alienation' was understood at the time as 'torpor'—anathema to the free labour ideology of both Smith and Burns. Smith argued that the danger of 'cowardice' was less prevalent in agricultural labourers, especially ploughmen, who were exposed

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<sup>69</sup> The O.E.D reports an older connection through the Old English 'earg'— 'still current in Northern dialect'— meaning 'cowardly' and 'weak', but also 'slothful', 'lazy', 'inert'.

<sup>70</sup> John Millar, *Observations Concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society* (London: 1771), p. 199.

<sup>71</sup> Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Vol I, p. 373.

to a lower level of division of labour than workers in manufacturing.<sup>72</sup> However, according to Burns' free labour ideology, the *enslaved* agricultural labourer is not considered to accrue the moral benefits of honest toil. Rather, the slave, deprived of personal liberty and the opportunity to work *for himself* sinks into moral degradation. There is no evidence to suggest that Burns was thinking of African chattel slaves in the Caribbean in this song; that is, however, the puzzle. In a song that alludes cryptically to the poetics of the abolitionist campaign that had shifted the terms of 'freedom' and 'slavery', Burns rehabilitates an older rhetoric that does not denounce the institution of slavery, but continues to view the condition of enthrallment as 'a qualitative judgement on the enslaved'.<sup>73</sup>

### **Burns: Mobile Memory**

In his essay in Pierre Nora's collection on the *Lieux de Mémoire* of France, Michel Winock traces the varied incarnations of a French national icon noting that, 'the name Joan of Arc has lent itself to a variety of purposes since the nineteenth century.'<sup>74</sup> Robert Burns has had a similarly mobile memory. Given the lack of textual evidence, studies exploring slavery through the memory of Burns have tended to focus on the posthumous use of Burns by abolitionists. Thomas Keith traces how in North America, 'Man was made to Mourn' and 'Is there for honest Poverty' became a 'theme tune' for abolitionists.<sup>75</sup> Alasdair Pettinger explores how the prominent black abolitionist Frederick Douglass invoked the memory of Burns for his anti-slavery tour of the British Isles. His tour supported the 'Send the Money Back' campaign, urging the Free Church to forego the proceeds of North American slavery. Pettinger notes that Douglass 'sees a little of himself in Burns', styling him as a 'brute' who 'broke free from his moorings' through

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<sup>72</sup> Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Vol 1, p. 231.

<sup>73</sup> Mitchell Miller, 'How Robert Burns never met James Boswell (and neither met Toussaint Louverture)', *Fickle Man*, p. 198.

<sup>74</sup> Michel Winock, 'Joan of Arc', *Realms of Memory*, (1996), p. 436.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas Keith, 'Burns in the Abolitionist's Arsenal', Robert Burns Conference, University of Glasgow (Jan, 2009).

the power of his own eloquence.<sup>76</sup> Alan Rice shrewdly suggests that Douglass inaugurates a 'strategic Celto-philia' for black American writers and radicals that stretches through Paul Robeson to Maya Angelou's eulogisation of Burns.<sup>77</sup> The construct of Southern racial slavery relied in part on its sense of a pure white Scottish heritage. There is a grain of truth to Mark Twain's playful observation that Walter Scott was to blame for the American civil war.<sup>78</sup> The Southern planter class conceived of themselves in terms of 'honour' and 'loyalty', with due deference to rank, borrowed from Scott's depiction of Highland society. Following the defeat of the Confederacy in 1865, in Pulaski, Tennessee, a group of six founded a secret society that would maintain the old ways. They adapted the Greek word for 'circle'- 'kuklos', and as all six were of Scottish descent they added 'clan', thereby founding the 'Ku Klux Klan'.<sup>79</sup> The Burns poem 'To a Louse' was used in Klan initiation ceremonies.<sup>80</sup> For Frederick Douglass to take his name from Walter Scott's 'the Black Douglas', recruits Scotland itself against the Southern construction of its white, honourable Scottish heritage.<sup>81</sup> Tavia Nyong'o closes his revisionist exploration of 'blackface minstrelsy' with this aspect of Douglass's political repertoire. If aspects of 'early minstrelsy' offered 'implicit possibilities of interracial affective transactions', Douglass's affinity with Burns and Scotland represented another such transaction. Douglass maintained an erudite, dignified, respectable persona that denied the exaggerated stereotypes of minstrel clowning. Nyong'o invokes José Muñoz's concept of 'disidentification' to conceive of Douglass's 'perverse and

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<sup>76</sup> Frederick Douglass, 'Letter from Scotland' (1846), in *Always Elsewhere: Travels of the Black Atlantic*, ed. by Alasdair Pettinger (London: Continuum, 1998).

<sup>77</sup> Alan Rice, *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 213.

<sup>78</sup> Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 390.

<sup>79</sup> This is the history of the Klan according to their websites, for example <[www.mwkkk.com/history.htm](http://www.mwkkk.com/history.htm)> [accessed 08/08/2012]. General George Gordon wrote the original 'Precept' on the Klan's organization, purpose and principles; and its first Grand Wizard was Confederate war hero General Nathan Bedford Forrest, both of Scottish descent. The tradition of cross burning was inspired by a scene in Walter Scott's 'Lady of the Lake', popular throughout the South, in which the Scottish clans are summoned by a 'fiery cross'.

<sup>80</sup> Martin Gitlin, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Guide to an American Sub-culture*, (California: ABC-CLIO, 2009), p. 52.

<sup>81</sup> It was suggested by a supporter who had recently been reading 'The Lady of the Lake'. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1995), p. 66.

unexpected affiliations' with Scotland.<sup>82</sup> Douglass's re-naming of himself and location of alternative anti-slavery sources represent 'signature acts of disidentification' that operate as 'tactical misrecognition' and work to 'demistify the dominant publicity'.

In [Burns'] romantic poetry, Douglass was able to find the full range of rhetorical expression, from abstraction to intimacy, from reason to emotion, without reinforcing race by using the folk idiom of African American slavery [i.e minstrelsy], which would have been seen as the natural source for him to have used. Douglass found in Burns's Scots English a substitute, within and against the dominant tongue, in but not of Anglo-American culture.<sup>83</sup>

Here the 'dominant publicity' subverted is both Southern slavery's affinity with Scotland, and the equation of the black subject on a stage with minstrel idioms (think Douglass' public speaking tours). At a time when the Southern plantocracy laid claim to an honourable Scottish heritage through Burns and Scott, Douglass depicted Scottish (as well as Irish and English) society as impeccably anti-racist. This downplayed the very real 'colour prejudice' that existed, in order to give him a weightier stick with which to beat the South.<sup>84</sup>

This example testifies to the contested nature of Burns' memory, though critics have tended to focus on his presence in humanitarian and progressive movements. As Carruthers notes, 'Work remains to be done on the conservative construction of Burns'.<sup>85</sup> Given the uneasy relationship Burns had with abolitionism, we might pay closer attention to his reception amongst slave societies such as the Caribbean in order to recognise the competing layers of meaning that constitute this *lieu de mémoire*. If the Caribbean was infused throughout Burns' work, the reverse is also true;

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<sup>82</sup> Tavia Nyong'o, *The Amalgamation Waltz, Race, Performance and the Ruses of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 125, p. 131. Citing José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 168.

<sup>83</sup> Nyong'o, p. 132.

<sup>84</sup> Racial prejudice was certainly a different tone in Europe than America. It would become common-place for black American sojourners to downplay its existence completely in order to better show up their home society.

<sup>85</sup> G Carruthers, *Edinburgh Companion to Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 2.

Burns' work remains infused throughout the Caribbean. Velma Pollard observes that in Jamaica:

The Scottish society of the seventeenth century later became the Caledonian Society and held a Caledonian Ball annually as part of the St. Andrew's Day celebrations. The ball no longer exists but the Society hosts every year at the end of January, a Burns Supper in honour of Robert Burns.<sup>86</sup>

Indeed the present Caledonia society meets in the up-market 'Liguanea Club' in Kingston. It holds records from 1927, although the *Jamaica Gleaner* archives mention the Society in the 1870s.<sup>87</sup> Douglas Hamilton also points to the presence of lodges of the Freemasons in the Caribbean which practiced the Scottish rites, as well as the lewd Beggar's Bannison in Grenada.<sup>88</sup> Items of Burns' work are well-known amongst older Jamaicans thanks to his presence amongst Wordsworth and Keats in the 'Royal Reader series' of English literature that was standard issue in the colonial education system. Burns therefore existed as one thread in the cultural fabric of British imperialism that had to be reconsidered and resolved post-independence. Leith Davis and Kristen Mahlis note that the poet Kamau Brathwaite, often a fierce cultural critic, referred to himself as the 'Jamaican Burns' given his combined use of vernacular and standard English in his poetry. They employ a rhizomatic map to consider Brathwaite's approach to oral literature in relation to Burns, and reconsider Burns in relation to Brathwaite's theory of 'interculturalism'.<sup>89</sup> To question Burns' writings in this way remains a controversial exercise in modern Scotland. Yet it is testament to his art that his work demands and sustains such an

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<sup>86</sup> Velma Pollard, 'Scots in Jamaica', in *Caribbean-Scottish Relations: Colonial and Contemporary Inscriptions in History, Language and Literature*, (eds.) Giovanna Covi, Joan Anim-Addo, Velma Pollard, and Carla Sassi (London: Mango Publishing, 2007), p. 125.

<sup>87</sup> With thanks to Ian Murphy and Arthur Bogues of the Caledonia Society and the Scottish Country Dance Society of Kingston for their hospitality and for providing this material. Velma Pollard herself gave the 'Toast to the Laddies' at the Burns Supper in Kingston in 2010. The Caledonian Society of Bermuda was founded in 1937.

<sup>88</sup> Hamilton, p. 49.

<sup>89</sup> Leith Davis and Kristen Mahlis, 'A "Conceptual Alliance": "Interculturalism" in Robert Burns and Kamau Brathwaite', *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives*, Michael Gardiner, Graeme MacDonald, Niall O'Gallagher, eds (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 15-29.

interrogation, and yields such complex results. Burns' version of 'free labour ideology' animates his most profound and enduring verses. Placing this ideology in a wider Atlantic context reveals both the promises and the limitations of Enlightenment humanism. Recovering this black Atlantic memory through the *lieu* of Burns permits a more conflicted account of freedom, slavery and abolition in late eighteenth-century Scotland.