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A R T I C L E

“The Daughters Weave their Work in loud cries”: Blake, Slavery, and Cotton

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1 AT the height of abolitionist outrage, William Blake used the signifier slavery to denote more than a catastrophe of African slave torture: a hemispheric system of plantation and textile workers. His comparison of “black” chimney sweeps to African slaves will be more familiar to readers, and anticipates his strategies to reframe slavery to include child labor in mills. In “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Innocence* (1789), the boy speaker says, “my father sold me” (line 2). This is no twist on the imagery of African slavery; orphans and pauper children were sometimes sold by guardians into dire apprenticeships of perennial terms. The speaker tells of a fellow sweep, Tom, who has an anxious dream of deliverance from the misery:

All quotations from Blake are from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. Erdman.

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And the Angel told Tom if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke and we rose in the dark
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.
Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm,
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.
 (“The Chimney Sweeper” 19-24)

Salvational teaching enforces cheap labor in London (as on benevolent plantations abroad): Tom has absorbed homilies about duty, work, and obedience, of which the last line is an example. The phrase “we rose in the dark” is a bitter echo of the resurrection that the angel promises (and delivers for the dead sweeps in Tom’s dream), that otherworldly reunion of boy with Father.

2 In Blake’s expression, the young worker’s nightmare disturbs the great organizing principle of Christian abolitionism: slave martyrdom. “That thousands of sweepers Dick, Joe, Ned & Jack / Were all of them lock’d up in coffins of black” (lines 11-12) imagines small bodies—really a sub-population—consumed by hard and poisonous work. These de facto slaves do not allegorically rise from the horrors of a slave ship, which this crowded image refracts, nor from the persecution of chains, whips, and hangings, to judge and damn their abusers. Their African counterparts in scenes of popular abolitionism suggest martyrs—such as the kneeling supplicant in Wedgwood’s famous medallion—imitating Christ in their torture, but soot-blackened sweeps are victims of work.¹ Hence, their fantastical resurrection frees them from a life doomed to labor.

1. For a study that shows the prevalence and power of Christian martyr imagery and its obscuring of labor in the discourse of popular abolitionism, see Moyer.

- 3 In subsequent works, Blake develops a post-abolitionist critique of intertwined economies of forced labor, of New and Old World sites; he frames such works to link conditions of colonial and metropolitan slaves. That such slaves are part of a system is Blake's point. To say that "slave" covers a type of British worker is not, for Blake, simply to compare white misery with black. Such comparisons were not unheard of coming from labor advocates, who resented sympathy for distant "Negroes," and from pro-slavery lobbyists, who cynically cited England's squalor to say that Negroes had it pretty good.² Blake critically saw African slaves and some British workers as enmeshed in the Atlantic economy's division of labor.
- 4 By contrast, British anti-slavery had the paradoxical tendency of supporting the social order, as David Brion Davis explains: "Abolitionists could contemplate a revolutionary change in status precisely because they were not considering the upward mobility of workers, but rather the rise of distant Negroes to the level of humanity" (467). To advocate the "upward mobility of workers" in the 1790s, while France experimented with upending its social order, was to risk the mark of Jacobinism and repressive crackdowns by the monarchy. Pre-revolutionary abolitionism in Britain was already inclined to focus on the seemingly unique horrors of African slavery and to separate them from a larger problem of labor exploitation. Thomas Clarkson titled his 1786 treatise *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African*; note the modifying "Particularly the African," which admits of multiracial slavery even while underscoring especially sinful treatment of one kind of slave. Eric Williams sums up the reality that Blake contemplates and begins in a repressive time to articulate: "Unfree labor in the New World was brown, white, black, and yellow; Catholic, Protestant and pagan" (7). Blake's frequent "weaving" image of entrapment is elaborated out of his sense of conditions across, especially, the hemispheric textile industry, which requires plantation and mill.³ He insists, though often obscurely, upon a solidarity between African and English slaves that would further radicalize anti-slavery.
- 5 Commentators have noted Blake's focus on spinning and weaving as images of labor in a new industrial situation, yet the persistence with which he compares female and child workers with African slaves—his critique of systemic slavery in cotton—also deserves careful treatment. For instance, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) is the first of Blake's attempts at an analysis, one sensitive to female vulnerability to labor exploitation.⁴ This considerably predates the works (for example, *The Four Zoas*, *Jerusalem*) in which critics see his deepest commentaries on industrialization, if not on a system with colonial slavery. Reading *Visions* in the context of the cotton industry helps reveal Blake's critique of multi-site slavery and of conventional abolitionism, as does reading afresh the later works.
- 6 Note first that both *Visions* and *America a Prophecy* (also 1793) seem demonstrations of the same comparative mapping or "spanning" device. *Visions* and *America* are bridge-like. In both poems, England ("Albion") and America stand facing each other; the Atlantic Ocean represents a transformative medium between these sites of slavery. The Atlantic's symbolic power to unify arises from its literal status as a hemispheric trade route. Moreover, the protagonists and "prophetic" action of both poems traverse the ocean to introduce or connect mirroring slaves. (Blake's seers generally, not just Oothoon and Orc, are frequent flyers who relate human conditions from above.) The recurring figure of *Visions*, like an ostinato in music, is one of desperate communion across the expanse: "The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, & eccho back her sighs" (2.20, 5.2, 8.13). Both poems feature a multi-dimensional hero who suggests an African-American and an English slave, fusing or refracting them in a composite persona. Near the peak of publicity of the slave trade and efforts to end it, Blake twice refuses to treat slavery in terms of African servitude only; he uses the moment to reframe the term around labor in an industrial empire.
- 7 In *Visions* and *America* this mapping of multi-site slavery remains somewhat opaque, but in *The Four Zoas* (c. 1796-1807) Blake expresses it clearly:

2. For an overview of efforts to juxtapose slavery with harsh conditions of labor (which intensified during the British debates on the slave trade), see, for example, Tise (95-96).

3. Paley ("The Figure of the Garment") and Hilton have studied Blake's weaving imagery. Paley nicely observes a distinction between Blake's symbols of weaving—the web and the net—and the garment. The former convey "only negative implications ... of entrapment," while the latter is "ambiguous"—a symbol of mediation between redemption and imprisonment (126-27). Hilton sees Blake's invocations of "fibre" as suggestive of a diseased organism, symbolic perhaps of imperialistic economic relations (96). He comments sharply on the association of women and spinning, and "their depersonalization into engines" (277).

4. Erdman briefly suggests an interpretation of the daughters' slave identity, and hence the poem's indictment of English factory labor ("Blake's Vision of Slavery" 243). Makdisi also follows this line of thought: "What is happening here, then, is not that the harlots or the spinning daughters—the spinsters—of England are being compared with slaves in America ... but rather the reverse" (93). Discussing later works, Paley suggests why, in *Jerusalem*, Blake links Manchester and Liverpool—"the former because of its new urban squalor and human dislocation, the latter because of its role as the principal port of the slave-trade" (*The Continuing City* 198).

First Trades & Commerce ships & armed vessels he build-
 ed laborious
 To swim the deep & on the Land children are sold to
 trades
 Of dire necessity still laboring day & night till all
 Their life extinct they took the spectre form in dark de-
 spair
 And slaves in myriads in ship loads burden the hoarse
 sounding deep
 Rattling with clanking chains the Universal Empire
 groans. (*The Four Zoas* [95].25-30)

The breathless speed of this report reflects the bird's-eye view: two types of slaves are oblivious to the commercial system that herds and works them. Blake's punning repetitions join sites of the hemisphere's most constrained workers. "Trades" and "trades" link Britain's global interests (including the slave trade) with local (for example, textile) trades into which children "are sold." The echoing pairs "ships" and "deep" and "ship loads" and "deep" also associate Britain's commerce with the gruesome trade in human cargo. This concatenation of words and sounds performs textually what it exposes ideologically: the "clanking chains" of two kinds of slaves upon which the empire depends. Blake's phrasing in the last two lines exploits the ambiguity of enjambment to make it sound as if "slaves in myriads in ship loads" are the ones "Rattling" their chains, whereas the "Universal Empire" itself turns out (also) to be rattling and groaning. The result suspends grammar, compressing "slaves" and "Empire" into a distressed entity. "Universal Empire" (mock inflated, in Blake's capitals) represents the mass of people at labor. "Empire groans" performs no simple personification; it is a metonym that demystifies, by the sounds of people at toil or in chains, the imperial veneer.

- 8 The passage is noteworthy for plotting a new kind of imperial dominance: 1) securing materials and markets abroad; 2) industrializing the metropole; 3) accelerating the slave trade to meet industrial demand. The commercial and enforcement ships are "builded laborious," a reminder of anonymous labor; their builder, "he," "Urizen," personifies technocratic ownership. In a Blakean inversion of figures, ships "swim the deep" while humans become lifeless; the ocean and its "deep" in Blake allude at times to the slave trade. On "free" English soil, laborers must, because of hunger and inadequate wages ("dire necessity"), work non-stop in mills that induce, then supply, new markets. Characteristically, Blake suggests that mill workers are susceptible to jejune religious instruction; he figures the child workers in the form of specters, not only because they are thin, but also because their grim lives seek consolation ("they *took* the spectre form in ... despair" [italics mine]). In Blake's witness, an accelerating trade in slaves is now the consequence of factory demand for raw materials ("*And* slaves in myriads in ship loads" [italics mine]). Breathless

"stories" such as this set Blakean voices against imperial myth: the speaker perceives, and deconstructs, a terrible complex.⁵

- 9 Blake's personification of a groaning empire animates a similarly clear-eyed (and open-eared) figure later in the same poem, again to bridge African and English laborers. An angry "Demon of the Waters," a personification of English history, recounts his wounds, factory and plantation slavery chief among them:

And what I loved best was divided among my Enemies
 My little daughters were made captives & I saw them
 beaten
 With whips along the sultry sands. I heard those whom I
 lovd
 Crying in secret tents at night & in the morn compelld
 To labour & behold my heart sunk down beneath
 In sighs & sobbings all dividing till I was divided
 In twain (*The Four Zoas* 89 [97].5-11)

Here Blake employs a different figure to effect his mapping of slavery: a diseased and divided English heart recalls that the empire's scattered slaves once belonged to the same family. The demon's beloved "daughters" (in *The Four Zoas* the term often suggests young women of the textile trades) now stand for captives in cotton mills ("secret tents") and slaves in the tropics ("sultry sands"). Their recent slave histories bear the traces of a shared filial origin, really a common imperial source of cruelty and exploitation. As with "groans" (*The Four Zoas* [95].30), the figure of hearing people's pain at labor is Blake's signature way of marking such toil and its social invisibility. Note that the children cry not at laboring, but in the nightly interstice—a picture of their oblivion and their awareness of it. The end-line markers "beaten" and "compelld" subtly distinguish two kinds of slaves in cotton—those facing the brutal enforcements of the plantation, and those the coercions of the mill system. The demon can see ("I saw") the scandalous violence ("whips") of African slavery, while, paradoxically, those closer to home must be heard because they lack attention from abolitionist campaigns. But "little daughters" functions as an equating and humanizing signifier, naming African slaves and English paupers and orphans.

5. For a different analysis of Blake's storytelling as deconstructive—as undoing or "consuming" its own narrativity through temporal instability—see Cooper.

- 10 Unheard voices of toil link slaves and child workers in this analogous, earlier passage from *Visions*:

At entrance Theotormon sits wearing the threshold hard
With secret tears; beneath him sound like waves on a de-
sart shore
The voice of slaves beneath the sun, and children bought
with money.
That shiver in religious caves beneath the burning fires
Of lust (*Visions* 2.6-10)

This prototypical example places African slaves and child workers in conceptual proximity. But as befits the bleak and desperate *Visions*, no moment of liberating recognition overcomes a spiritually enlightened wanderer, as happens at a similar moment in *Jerusalem* (20.12-18). Blake's repressed, sanctimonious, and craven Theotormon is a satiric stand-in for some Britons, complicit in domestic textile enslavement, reluctant to take a stand on the African slave trade and plantation slavery.⁶ (His tears of self-pity and guilt abrade a stone threshold, an image of paralyzed inaction.) As in Blake's work generally, the voices of slaves and children have no social status: they sound like "waves on a desert shore," incessant, loud, and desolate. As in *The Four Zoas*, African slaves and English children are of one voice—there groaning, here waves breaking. In *The Four Zoas*, shiploads of slaves "burden the hoarse sounding deep," as if even the ocean could never absorb the crime's enormity; similarly, in *Visions*, the Atlantic's roar transmits the immeasurable pain of slaves and children across the same sea. For Blake, the Atlantic's waves cannot break on any shore without calling to mind both plantation slaves and their counterparts, caught in the same commercial nexus.

The Daughters of Albion in the Cotton Nexus

- 11 The opening line of *Visions* proclaims in magnified letters that the "Daughters of Albion" are "Enslav'd." "The Eye sees more than the Heart knows," the poem's headline and epigraph, is an elliptical way of saying the same thing: we Britons can see what is happening to women and girls, for instance in the textile trades, but we lack the heart to call it what it is. *Visions* has been read with interest since the

6. In "Blake's Vision of Slavery," Erdman relates Theotormon to Wilberforce and to the Abolition Society as a whole: the latter, inoculating itself from the taint of radicalism, stated in February 1792 that it did not seek "the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British Colonies" but only an end to "the trade for Slaves" (246) (quotations and italics are from Erdman). Erdman does not say that the incremental approach was a necessity, and a radical step. Blake is on the alert for backsliding, for the rationalizing to which such incremental politics are susceptible.

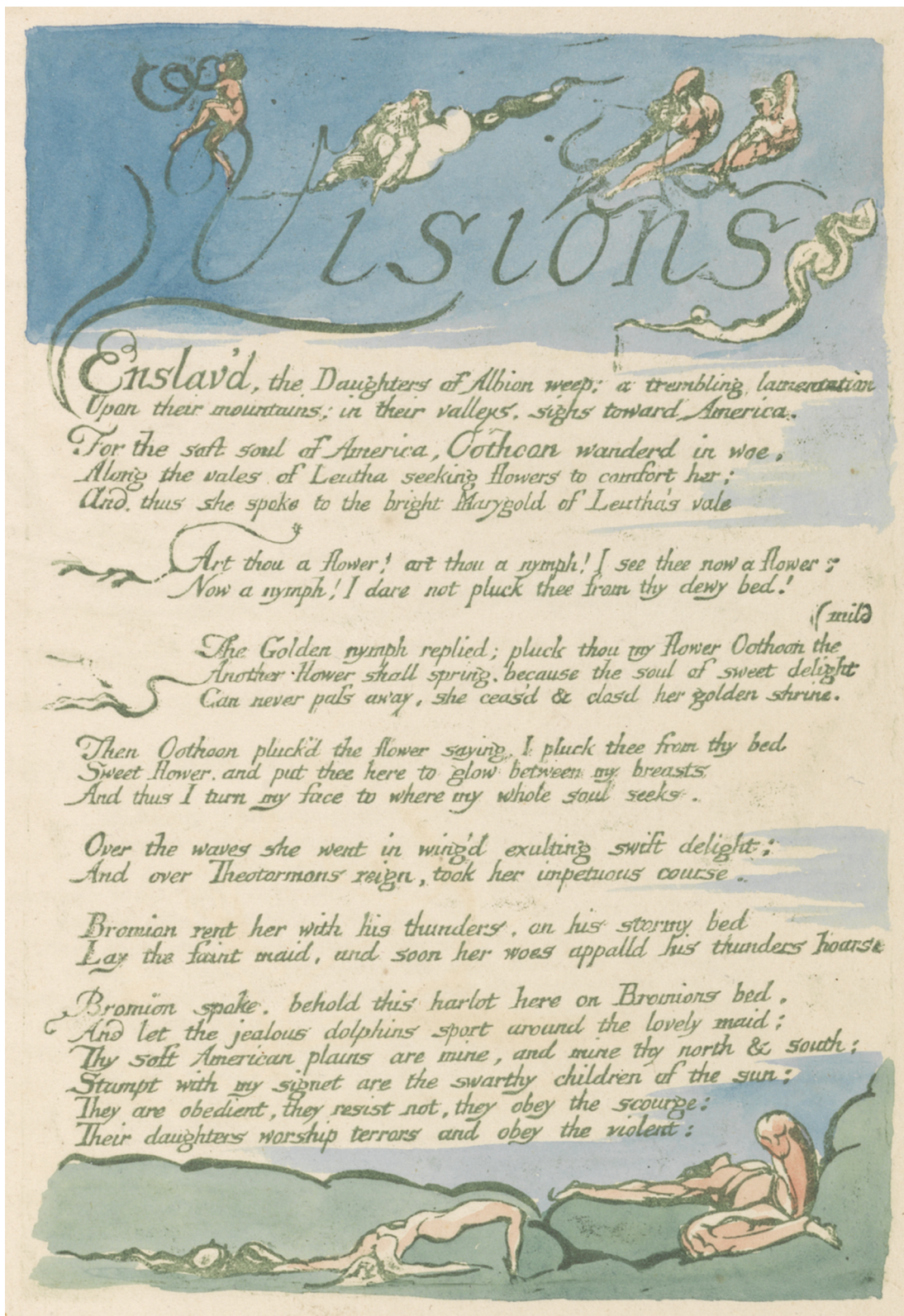
1980s for its provocative handling of gender and sexual politics alongside a dark fable of African-American slavery. Critical discussions of Blake's views on women and gender attend closely to this poem.⁷ Discussions of Blake's views on African slavery, though scantier, similarly begin with the poem or arrive at it.⁸ Some critics read the poem as drawing an analogy between English gender oppression and American chattel slavery, bringing into the open the legal oblivion and violence that eighteenth-century women endured by comparing them with slaves. Others see it as going still further in its gender politics by exposing the way phallic power—male sexual desire and rivalry—plays a role in all kinds of abuse, even white efforts to dominate blacks. The poem allies both readings. It also allies two sites of slavery, America and England: they are slave colony and industrial metropole, a linkage that commiserating workers in cotton can appreciate. The daughters of Albion want to communicate with Oothoon, the African-American slave who stands as their counterpart across the Atlantic, because they share with her a condition of economic, as well as gender, enslavement. This economic critique is one that wartime British interests, using cotton to expand economically (and politically and militarily) cannot well abide—one a wary radical poet will insinuate through symbol and subtext.

- 12 By force of the tacit equation of the plantation with cotton—the new king displacing sugar since the revolution in textile manufacture—Oothoon is a cotton slave. Her English counterparts, the "Enslav'd" daughters of Albion who "eccho back her sighs," include female spinners and weavers exhausting their eligibility, if not their lives, in England's mills. In *Visions*, even the overt themes of male sexual insecurity and violence and of female sexual liberation are not far afield from the subtext of oppressed labor. Since the spinners' work consumes their eligible years and sexual lives—and middle-class culture wants them chaste and industrious—their vision of sexual freedom is the more urgent. Though plantation bound, Oothoon is mentally free enough in the spinners' projection of her to express ideals of love and sexual freedom. To reinforce the notion that these daughters are dreaming the poem, Blake reprints the lone word "*Visions*" above its opening.

- 13 While the poem addresses women's status generally, it contemplates women at the extreme socioeconomic margin. "Daughter" refers partly to a new type of textile worker: paupers as young as six were carted "in wagon-loads" from

7. For such readings and critiques, see Bruder, Sturrock, and Goslee.

8. For such discussions, see Erdman, "Blake's Vision of Slavery," as well as Mellor and Bindman. For a recent analysis of *Visions* that treats both its gender and racial signifiers and argues that they dramatize the ambiguous power of essentializing to denigrate or liberate, see Welch.



1. *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* copy I, pl. 1 (Erdman numbering). Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection. B1978.43.1582.

London workhouses to Lancashire mills by middlemen, or sold by their desperate parents into factories (Inglis 124). Mill owners made it a policy to hire children before adults, and females before males—a practice they colluded to defend in the face of parliamentary inquiries into child labor after 1800 (Inglis 121). In text and image Blake invokes young textile workers throughout his career—for the first time, here in *Visions*. Oothoon's summary speech sympathizes with weavers and spinners: "she who burns with youth. and knows no fixed lot" is nevertheless "bound to hold a rod / Over her shrinking shoulders all the day; & all the night / To turn the wheel of false desire ..." (5.21, 25-27). Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi (*The Early Illuminated Books*) note that the image of the rod condenses multiple enslavements: "A yoke for bearing burdens over her 'shoulders' ... but also the rod or whip of the slave owner or cruel husband" (277, note on 8.25). To these meanings of rod can be added more specifically the picking stick and perhaps beater of the loom apparatus, which a weaver must hold, and most of all the bar of the spinning jenny. This Oothoon appears at times more a phantasm, the daughters' alter ego as they dream her; she reverts to their problems, which include deforming labor in the spinning mills.

- 14 "Daughters" of the poem's title and epistrophes comes into sharper focus in light of its use in subsequent works. *The Four Zoas* describes "The Daughters of Albion girded around their garments of Needlework / Stripping Jerusalem curtains from mild demons of the hills" (25.25-26)—a startling image of textile mills denuding sheep and displacing local wool economies. This launches a passage suggestive of industrial slavery (25.34-39). Later still, there is this story of England's origins in divided labor (weaving daughters, hammering sons):

Enitharmon wove in tears Singing Songs of Lamentations
 And pitying comfort as she sighd forth on the wind the
 spectres
 And wove them bodies calling them her belovd sons &
 daughters
 Employing the daughters in her looms & Los employd the
 Sons
 In Golgonoozas Furnaces among the Anvils of time &
 space
 Thus forming a Vast family wondrous in beauty & love.
 (*The Four Zoas* 103.32-37)

The creator-employer's emoting seems self-indulgent and hypocritical. Her "calling" the workers "belovd" runs without pause into "Employing" them. The bodies are stuck "in," not merely "at," the looms. The climactic ending to the

first book of *Milton* has this nightmarish allusion to inventor John Kay's flying shuttle (1733), which revolutionized cotton weaving by exponentially speeding up the process:⁹

The stamping feet of Zelophehads Daughters are coverd
 with Human gore
 Upon the treddles of the Loom, they sing to the winged
 shuttle. (*Milton* 29.58-59)

Unable in the din (underscored by the consonance of t's and d's of "feet," "treddles," and "shuttle") to communicate with each other, they sing to their looms.

- 15 Similarly, in Blake's *Jerusalem* (1804-20), "daughters" habituated to industry tragically serve to spread a dehumanizing imperial economy:

The Daughters Weave their Work in loud cries over the
 Rock
 Of Horeb! still eyeing Albions Cliffs eagerly siezing &
 twisting
 The threads of Vala & Jerusalem running from mountain
 to mountain
 Over the whole Earth. (*Jerusalem* 67.26-29)

As with "sing to the winged shuttle" in *Milton*, the image derives its power from the compression of signifiers of a conflicted psychology, so that the "Daughters" are both eager and desperate, laboring while hopeful. Blake enlivens this proto-Marxian collapse of worker into her commodity, dramatizing the thin line between resistance and fetishization in the verbal contrast between work ("siezing & twisting") and the reach of the product ("threads ... running ... Over the whole Earth"). The organizing image—"The Daughters Weave their Work in loud cries"—cuts to workers' anguish of complicity in their own exploitation, as their going to work reinforces (weaves) such work, such conditions. Their "loud cries" leak their guilt, or compensate for it in ever shriller eagerness in allegiance to England ("Albions Cliffs").

- 16 *Jerusalem* deepens the theme of a spreading industrialism:

the Daughters of Albion Weave the Web
 Of Ages & Generations, folding & unfolding it, like a Veil
 of Cherubim
 And sometimes it touches the Earths summits, & some-
 times spreads
 Abroad into the Indefinite Spectre, who is the Rational
 Power.
 (*Jerusalem* 64.2-5)

9. For a discussion of Kay's flying shuttle (which increased demand for yarn and stimulated the search for faster spinning), see de L. Mann. See also Mantoux 206-09.

Along with “Rational Power,” of which the technocratic way of organizing human labor is a version, Blake wants to expose the role of religious morality in controlling labor. (The deft “like a Veil of Cherubim” conjures the charm of any soft-twilled product that people like and worship, and that makes it so easy not to see [“Veil”] the labor behind it.) Hence, he creates this image of textile workers subject to shame-inducing ideas for chaste industry: “The Daughters of Albion clothed in garments of needle work / Strip them off from their shoulders and bosoms, they lay aside / Their garments; they sit naked upon the Stone of trial” (*Jerusalem* 66.17-19). Early in *Jerusalem*, Blake frames the new conditions of industrial labor in terms of a British “family”: “Scotland pours out his Sons to labour at the Furnaces / Wales gives his Daughters to the Looms” (16.22-23).

17 The prevalence of girls and women in the mechanized textile factories was impressive, as records in the industrial phase demonstrate (though records before 1800 are spotty). Among a major group of Lancashire cotton mills around 1830, girls and women made up over half of the work force of 7600. “Young women” and girls (those twenty-one and under) composed one third of the total. Women and children of both sexes made up 79 percent of the work force; adult males composed less than a quarter (Inglis 303). Parliamentary returns of 1816 indicate that 17.7 percent of the work force in the cotton industry were adult males (Pollard, “Factory Discipline” 103). In 1789 at Richard Arkwright’s mammoth Cromford mills, there were only 150 men out of 1150 workers—13 percent of the total (May 72-73). (The starting ages for children in the cotton industry were low enough, at nine or ten years; in the silk industry, which employed them almost exclusively, children started at six or seven years [Pollard, “Factory Discipline” 103].) As one historian glosses females’ predicament of low wages and dismal working conditions: “It could in fact be argued that in the process of proletarianisation, women were often proletarianised first, increasing their vulnerability and their dependence on men” (Hudson 23).¹⁰

18 Blake’s attention to young female textile workers and to their conditions both materially and sexually makes sense then as part of an alarmed response to a changing England. Blake spent his childhood in his family’s hosiery shop at 28 Broad Street; he knew the traditional textile business.¹¹ He was alert to the industry’s transformation, which happened

10. For more on women’s importance to the textile industry, see Bythell. For a literary-critical perspective on women’s association with textile production, especially in the proto-industrial context, see Callaghan.

11. Bentley notes that Blake’s father and brother ran the shop from 1752 to 1812 (12-15, pl. 7). In his pioneering chapter on Blake and weaving, Hilton also mentions Blake’s family background (107).

in the two decades between his youth and adulthood. “Transformation” does not convey the impact of the revolution in textile manufacture, which was primarily a British phenomenon, penetrating and altering most aspects of British life and culture, and a key reason for Britain’s long dominance in both textiles and industry generally. So swift was the transition to mass production, so large were the profits accumulated by owners of textile mills, and so purely exploitative were the terms of employment that economic historians debate the usefulness of cotton as a representative case for generalizing about the early phases of Britain’s industrial revolution.¹² Blake’s commercial work brought him (probably inevitably, given the reach and size of the cotton industry) into the domain of a textile producer, Moore & Co., which hired him c. 1797 to engrave its advertisement (see illus. 2). Taking or needing this work was probably humiliating to Blake; it may account for some of the bitterness he hurls at the textile industry. The image deserves closer reading; to interpret it helps us situate Blake within imperial capitalist discourse, and helps us see the extent of his critique of industrial practices.

19 The advertisement depicts a tripartite temple of British textile greatness. Following the compositional rule of thirds, the image is vertically ordered from a pedestal of “revealed” and “realistic” factory production to an intermediate proscenium of eager child labor to a symbolic pediment of British imperial strength. Between two great columns Moore & Co. makes an elaborately etched sales pitch touting its carpets and hosiery. The scene is one of happy industry. Two adult male workers—one a handloom weaver, the other at a knitting machine—flank the image at the bottom, as if anchoring imperial pillars. Of the nine workers, at least four are children; three others—the male apprentice to the weaver’s right, and the two nearly synchronized women weaving a carpet—appear to be in their teens. Above ground, as it were, as if to represent and normalize the industry below, three well-fed, handsomely dressed children go to their tasks. Two small boys attend to huge carpets; a girl sits at a training-sized spinning wheel. Sumptuous carpets cloak the twin columns, rising with them to support an imperial nimbus, where carpets, steam clouds, royal devices, and rays of the sun combine in a herald of industrial and geopolitical might. The insignia of the Prince of Wales (with his Orwellian motto, the ancestral German “Ich Dien”—“I Serve”) hover left and right, and the royal arms topmost. The carpets wrap the structure, subsuming the busy labor under glory.

12. For a discussion of this debate, see McCloskey 243-48.



2. An advertisement (c. 1797) by William Blake for Moore & Co. manufactory. Belying the grim conditions of women and children in textile mills—against which Blake the poet rails—the engraving is a sumptuous idealization, replete with symbols of national greatness and vignettes of happy industry. The Latin epigraph speaks of “the British quill succeeding now the needle of Babylon.” © Trustees of the British Museum. 1868,0711.439.

20 Appeals to class-conscious consumption pervade the copy:

Private Families may be supplied with Silk, Cotton,
Worsted, and Thread STOCKINGS of all kinds & qualities,
on the most reasonable terms.

Colours & patterns of Carpeting may be changed to suit the taste of
the Purchaser, & patterns of Hosiery made to any size.

In the foreground are the proprietor and a lady client taking in the industry. (They are the only figures communicating with each other, a mini-drama that also serves to fix the eye, while their pointing initiates a succession of focuses counterclockwise through scenes of work, then upward to empire.) The image encourages the viewer to identify with the purchaser. Words and image both are pitched to women of means; “stockings” stokes a desire for visible luxury. Meanwhile, the two female bodies send a comforting message about their work and about disciplined conduct for women of a certain class. (Twinned women reinforce the class/group subtext in a way a single figure would not.)

- 21 This advertisement is a revealing matrix. First, child and female labor in the mills was a common practice, and common knowledge; the advertisement trumpets what nationalistic discourse always claimed—that children and women were properly and happily enrolled in the industry. The engraving produces a rather strained argument for their labor in a percolating debate over the same, in which Blake’s dissenting commentaries are the angriest (if also obscure). The two *almost* mechanically synchronized women (the heart of the picture), ironically focused by the pointing owner and leisurely client, counter anxiety regarding female labor in the textile mills (not quite synchronized says “still free”). Anxiety on the religious right is concerned with women’s conduct in the mills, their sexual vulnerability and comportment; anxiety on the left is concerned with their working conditions. This parlor or drawing room is designed to ease both. The two rugged young males assisting the handloom weaver—himself a symbolic denial of dislocations in formerly male-dominated, craft-conscious weaving—represent legitimate apprenticeship. Parliament would soon address, if ceremoniously, a crisis in textile apprenticing, which saw boys (and perhaps some girls) bonded into sham agreements, with no real hope of learning a profession that they could ply independently.¹³

- 22 Later, in *Jerusalem*, Blake writes the dark parody of this iconography in its demystified reverse image:

13. On such apprentices, see Inglis 104: “In the factories they were employed in their own right, as machine-minders, learning no trade—being effectively prevented from learning one” On the debate surrounding the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act of 1802, see Inglis 78-80, 121.

And one Daughter of Los sat at the fiery Reel & another
Sat at the shining Loom with her Sisters attending round
Terrible their distress & their sorrow cannot be utterd
And another Daughter of Los sat at the Spinning Wheel
Endless their labour, with bitter food. void of sleep,
Tho hungry they labour: they rouze themselves anxious
Hour after hour labouring at the whirling Wheel
Many Wheels & as many lovely Daughters sit weeping.

(*Jerusalem* 59.26-33)

What stands out here is the concern for a vulnerable group of English females whose situation, for almost a half century starting in the 1780s, is so marginal that it “cannot be utterd.” The Moore advertisement’s imperial display, typical of the discourse of national interest during the 1790s, suggests the bravery required to “utter” on behalf of these women; Blake’s complicit engraving is a most personal instance of non-utterance. Of Blake’s concern for female textile workers, which is detailed through his non-commercial work, there is no parallel in literature of the period. “And one Daughter ... & another ... And another Daughter ... & as many lovely Daughters sit weeping” typifies Blake’s anaphoric insistence on activating hearing, on making the socially invisible audible through alliterative names and signifiers (“Wheels ... weeping”). Moreover, the passage is accurate. “Endless their labour, with bitter food. void of sleep, / Tho hungry they labour” reads like a prescient transcription of real children’s oral testimony on the long shifts and difficulty in taking meals while at the machines. To cite three examples:

I have worked till twelve at night last summer. We began at six in the morning [an eighteen-hour shift]. I told the book keeper I did not like to work so late, and he said I must. We only get a penny an hour for overtime.

The engine never stopping excepting about ten minutes to be oiled

Never stop to take our meals except at dinner; has gone on so this six years and more¹⁴

“They rouze themselves anxious / Hour after hour labouring” reveals a child psychology of profound intimidation, the human animal in its residual recoil from miserable conditions. The machines are grimly mesmerizing: “fiery Reel,” “shining Loom,” “Spinning Wheel,” “whirling Wheel.” Monstrous toys, they dwarf young minds and proliferate to defeat them one by one: “Hour after hour labouring at the whirling Wheel / Many Wheels & as many lovely Daughters sit weeping.”

14. These quotations are from the minutes of MP Michael Sadler’s 1832 commission on child labor, quoted by Inglis 306-07.

23 Blake targets this strange way of arranging human beings: industrialization, the operation of machines in round-the-clock mills.¹⁵ Parliament's Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800 established that there would be no state interference in the labor market, only official acquiescence to the trends Blake observes (Inglis 82). Blake's critique targets not just machine technology, but also the coercive techniques that enable its deployment: a combination of machines, labor management techniques, and ideology called the factory. The advertisement that Blake engraves for Moore is an almost parodically optimistic display of this system, while his critique of it in *Jerusalem* aims to expose it piece by piece—and perhaps to resist his own capture by the cotton nexus. If the advertisement reinforces class and gender roles in the textile industry, and in Britain at large, *Jerusalem* forms the critique:

Other Daughters Weave on the Cushion & Pillow, Net-
work fine
That Rahab & Tirzah may exist & live & breathe & love
Ah, that it could be as the Daughters of Beulah wish!
(*Jerusalem* 59.42-44)

The labor of some English daughters (here, those who do “fine” work—that is, finishers) supports the leisure and luxury of other women, a fact Moore's advertisement does not so much deny as try to naturalize through images of contented labor and national greatness.

24 The passage shows different classes of spinners laboring to satisfy other English classes, a satire of national harmony. Blake's ambiguous and suggestive “Weave on the Cushion” brings out the theme of sexual depletion: the textile workers neither sleep nor love, but weave “on” the amorous cushions and pillows they produce, which other women have for their bedchambers. A diction of casual excess—“may exist & live & breathe & love”—conveys leisure's dependence on the labor of others, and so freedom from necessity. “Breathe” and “love” connote physical passion while expanding the general sense, in contrast to the alienated daughters, of life at its freest. The lines convey women's alienation from the fruits of their labor and from their bodies, given over and sublimated to the pleasure of others. More darkly, this sublimation turns out to be the daughters' reason for existing; others' leisure and love is the daughters' compensatory devotion, and their pleasure is

15. The literature on the transformation of labor—from independent to wage labor—during the industrial revolution is considerable. See, for example, Hill 214-15 and Hobsbawm 48-51. For an overview of the modern factory system as distinct from older systems of manufacture, see Mantoux 25-44. See also Pollard, “Factory Discipline,” on the rise of disciplinary techniques to enforce the new form of labor, and May (64) on the distinction between “standard of living” and “way of life,” and the profound changes to the latter.

believing that they bring it about: “Ah, that it could be as the Daughters of Beulah wish!” The sarcastic shift from Albion to Beulah (the idyllic land at life's end in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*) layers the psychology of fruitless labor with nationalist and Christian myths of purpose.

25 While the daughters of *Jerusalem* “sit weeping” at the machines, Blake cares to explain how self-regulated their mental framework is:

Yet the intoxicating delight that they take in their work
Obliterates every other evil; none pities their tears
Yet they regard not pity & they expect no one to pity
For they labour for life & love, regardless of any one
But the poor Spectres that they work for, always incessantly . . . (*Jerusalem* 59.34-38)

The daughters work for “Spectres”—that is, big, hollow ideas (like “Ich Dien”), phantasms that bear little relation to their well-being. Similarly, the “Spectres” are “poor,” not only empty in meaning but also materially impoverishing, no matter how hard the daughters work “for” them. The word “intoxicating” stresses what is unnatural and wildly overcompensating about the daughters' self-sacrifice and desire for such labor.

26 The choice of “intoxicating” in *Jerusalem* echoes “to turn the wheel of false desire” in *Visions*. Both point to the theme of fruitless desire and sexual depletion; Blake sees harnessing women's libidos as the main psychological method of subjugating female labor in factories. Reforming female desire for purposes of work is a policy Blake critiques time and again, starting with *Visions* at the height of the abolition debates. One way people can be made to work as hard and fast as the girls do at wheels and looms, suggests Blake, is for their libidinous energy to go into work—for them to sacrifice their shameful sexuality for productivity. Blake dwells on the “daughters” with regard to this theme of sexual sacrifice and sublimated desire because he sees girls and women as particularly susceptible to a moral lesson of chaste industry. Similarly, the plight of factory women, whatever their attitudes at work, becomes easier to rationalize within a culture-wide discourse that construes their labor as good for them morally.

27 A story of sexual freedom and constraint fills up the daughters' visions, not because *Visions* is about only sexual politics (and not labor), but because “the pleasures of this free born joy” (*Visions* 7.2), denied to England's spinning women, are at stake. Blake the sexual liberationist provokes divergent responses: some critics praise his willingness to affirm women's sexuality in shame-free terms; others warn that he inscribes a fantasy of free love geared to men's pleasure and insensitive to the risks to women (such as preg-

nancy); others read his figures as self-reflexively, if ambiguously, testing notions of sexual agency.¹⁶ Alongside these responses, all legitimate, there is another point: Blake stresses that England's poor females are subject not to ideology about sex all by itself, but also to ideology about work; the two are inextricable and mutually reinforcing.¹⁷ In most references to spinners and weavers, Blake interrelates work and sexual imagery. Readers sometimes misconstrue the references to labor as idiosyncratic metaphors for women's psychosexual repression. But Blake mixes material and sexual imagery to argue that a disciplined workplace and disciplined desire go hand in hand to keep female workers at task. David Punter makes the same point, in more general terms:

Readings of the Prophetic Books which ... see labor as a metaphor for psychological and cosmic conflict have tended to compound the rationalist world-view against which Blake so bitterly protests; and ... such readings cannot take account of the principle of the paramouncy of energy, of that energy which pertains not to the mind but to the body. (553-54)

The constraining discourse of work parallels that of benevolent Christian slavery, which claims that Negroes similarly attain civilization through the regimens of plantation life. *Visions* recognizes the parallel with a suggestion of Oothoon's rape by Bromion, a corrective to the myth of benevolent masters and an image of male domination of (free-spirited) female sexuality in a context of forced labor.

- 28 To clinch the point that Blake sees sexual constraint as a deprivation of factory toil and as a woman's way of sublimating such toil, consider this memorable instance of mixing material and sexual imagery in *The Four Zoas*:

The Daughters of Enitharmon weave the ovarium & the
integument
In soft silk drawn from their own bowels in lascivious de-
light
With songs of sweetest cadence to the turning spindle &
reel
Lulling the weeping spectres of the dead.
(*The Four Zoas* 113.9-12)

Nelson Hilton glosses this caricature as "perpetrating the whole system of generation" (113), akin to the "vegetative"

16. Wolfson succinctly summarizes these critical responses, contextualizing them historically and giving each its due (especially the last), in her reading.

17. McClenahan observes this linkage (145). She also observes, interestingly, "a contrast" in Blake between some of his images of women's work and "real-world occupations"—a contrast Blake uses "to honour the labour of women by suggesting its difficulty while representing it as sublimely significant" (137).

in Blake's metaphysics—that is, prolific but spiritually dead. This graphic metaphor is also a figure of sexual constraint because of endless work. The ovarium is the uterus, the integument the hymen; by spending year after year "turning spindle & reel," young women "weave" their sex organs shut, in Blake's remarkable image of lost sexual lives. "Bowels" and "lascivious delight" mean that the daughters'—that is, spinsters'—devotion to their labor must finally be libidinous. Keeping them devoted to work must mean turning their libidos against themselves, must require a sustaining desire equal to, indeed converted from, sexual need.

- 29 Blake's critique is keyed to the anxiety of the consumer public, especially conservative Christians, about the factory as a new and morally treacherous space for women.¹⁸ He targets the "conduct" discourse that calls for chaste industry on the part of poor women.¹⁹ "Prior to the 1770s," writes Helen Bruder, "most advice literature was directed towards providing guidance and information for young men, but in the later decades of the eighteenth century the behaviour of young women became a subject of more pressing concern, and brought into print a large band of markedly directive and moralistic writers" (40). Bruder does not speculate on what caused this "flood of didactic books for ladies." One cause was the upsurge in women wage-workers, leaving the domestic space behind for the crowded, rootless one of the mill, factory, and weaving village. Women going out into spaces in which their discipline, obedience, and industry were a capitalist imperative and national interest is one concern of the conduct writing.

18. This is an issue requiring more study. For instance, how connected is on-site religious schooling in the factory villages to the more general discourse of "morality" for women? For a discussion of the disciplinary role of Sunday schools and "evening" schools in the factory village, see Pollard, "The Factory Village" 123: "Sunday schools had a far more important part to play [than day and evening schools], being largely designed to inculcate current middle-class morals and obedience" Note that Sunday was the one day off for workers; hence, their leisure time was appropriated and managed to the extent that the Sunday school movement succeeded.

19. Sturrock essentially supports this point, albeit in language that obscures the material facts motivating Blake's critique, such as textile factory work: "I argue that Blake's association of feminine power and chastity with oppression when placed in context should be understood as part of what Jackie Di Salvo calls his 'assertion of plebeian values against those of middle-class England'—his rejection not just of an ancient and repressive moral code but of a new and revitalized manifestation of this code, which threatens to perpetuate in a new form a divisive and oppressive social structure" (339).

- 30 A protective anxiety about the migration of women from the domestic to the worldly sphere inflects the widely read work of conduct writer Hannah More:

That bold, independent, enterprising spirit, which is so much admired in boys, should not, when it ... discover[s] itself in the other sex, be encouraged, but suppressed. Girls should be taught to give up opinions betimes, and not pertinaciously carry on a dispute, even if they should know themselves to be in the right It is of the greatest importance to their happiness, that they should acquire a submissive temper, and a forbearing spirit, for it is a lesson which the world will not fail to make them frequently practise, when they come abroad into it, and they will not practise it the worse for having learnt it sooner. (145-46)²⁰

To “come abroad into” the world means going off to marry or to work. Young women could do one or the other (or stay home); outwork in a mill meant little prospect for working as a wife. While sincere, More’s advice is at odds with Blake’s disparagement of restrictive codes of conduct in a context of factory labor. At every point—*Visions, The Four Zoas, Jerusalem*—when Blake invokes England’s “daughters” he joins grim manufacture to moral regulation in his view of the plight of women.

- 31 By the time of *Jerusalem*, Blake’s depiction of the world of textile labor and conduct conditioning has achieved the compression that comes with practiced bitterness: “That the deep wound of Sin might be clos’d up with the Needle, / And with the Loom: to cover Gwendolen & Ragan with costly Robes / Of Natural Virtue” (*Jerusalem* 21.13-15). The lines expose several social facts and an elaborate psychosocial process. They indicate that propertied classes use shame to enforce poor women’s “redeeming” work ethic; that women of conspicuous means reap the fruits of others’ anonymous labor; that beautifying such women is supposed to become for poor women a purpose for living; that “Robes” are “costly” because high both in price and human toll; and that “Natural Virtue,” as Blake sneeringly calls the chaste industry expected of poor women, is neither natural (because ideological) nor virtuous (because morally perverse). Blake sees, somewhat unfairly, the work of conservative moralists as enforcing slavery in England.²¹

20. Partially quoted by Bruder (42).

21. “Unfair” in that Wilberforce and other conservative evangelicals formed in 1796 the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor, which played a role in defending the apprentice reform bill from efforts of owners to block it. However, Wilberforce and other conservatives, including many leaders of Christian abolitionism, attacked trade-unionizing efforts as against the national interest and resisted other domestic reforms. In addition, they tried to inculcate obedience through religion. On this political activity, see Inglis 79-82.

- 32 *Visions* is really where Blake begins to work out this critique of conditioned female labor: a story of female sexuality provides an alternative to the spiritual politics of middle-class Christians and of Christian abolitionists (like More). *Visions* is a fairly direct critique of Christian abolitionism and its focus on African slaves alone, as those magnified letters suggest: “Enslav’d, the Daughters of Albion weep: a trembling lamentation / Upon their mountains; in their valleys, sighs toward America” (1.1-2). These lines waste no time linking England (“Albion”) with America, and linking the laboring women of each. Blake argues that England’s spinners should be heard in any conversation about slavery that abolitionists are rightly provoking. Moreover, the following line figures Oothoon as “the soft soul of America.” Hence, England’s spinning daughters have more in common with African-American slaves than soul-saving abolitionists do, which is why they echo back Oothoon’s lamentations with their sighs and which is why they should be informing British conversation about forced labor and sexual morality. (Blake’s framing terms—“Enslav’d” and “soul”—and their respective sites—Albion and America—invert the imperial view and Christian assumptions: England is home to slavery, while American slaves have “soft”—already good—souls.) Oothoon plucks flowers as she moves from field to field, shirking, we might suppose, plantation work, and doing so in a subversively suggestive form, flowers marking sexual freedom. This vivid blend of sexual autonomy and work avoidance puts her master, Bromion, into a rage. (In what may function as a reminder that this is the English daughters’ self-commiserating vision, Oothoon “turn[s] [her] face” after plucking, and in short-lived bliss mentally flies “over the waves” to where her “whole soul seeks.”)

- 33 Though gender politics and sexual mores saturate the poem, it shows the brutal facts of New World slavery, as in Bromion’s sexually sadistic reaction to Oothoon’s truancy. He rapes her “on his stormy bed,” then speaks in words parodic of an overlord, with allusions to plantation tortures (and enforcements) of rape, branding, and whipping:

behold this harlot here on Bromions bed,
And let the jealous dolphins sport around the lovely
maid;
Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north &
south:
Stamp’t with my signet are the swarthy children of the
sun:
They are obedient, they resist not, they obey the scourge:
Their daughters worship terrors and obey the violent.

(*Visions* 1.18-23)

This announcement of African-American slavery is rife with rhetorical figures of swaggering dominance (the chiasmus of geographic reach; the sibilant humiliation of

branding; the parataxis of others' submission). The passage grounds the attempt to see slavery systemically without diminishing the brutality faced by black slaves. Note that "daughters" refers here to black female slaves, chiming openly with the "daughters" of England. Blake's vision repeatedly connects modes of terror and violence, worship and obedience, that compel disparate people to labor in the same system.

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