Raphael Hoermann

‘Fermentation will be universal’: Intersections of Race and Class in Wedderburn’s Black Atlantic Discourse of Transatlantic Revolution

Born in Jamaica likely in 1762, as the mixed-race son of the Scottish-Jamaican slaveholder James Wedderburn and an enslaved black woman named Rosanna, Robert Wedderburn’s life and anti-slavery and anti-capitalist activism were inextricably linked to the transatlantic slave economy. As he insists in the opening sentence of a narrative of his early life in Jamaica: ‘To my unfortunate origin I must attribute all my misery and misfortunes.’[1] This verdict seems justified, since Wedderburn, throughout his life, not only struggled with often extreme poverty, but was also hounded by the authorities for his radical politics. This was compounded by racism, as most virulently expressed in contemporary caricatures of him. His origins as a mixed-race free black, son of slaveholder and a slave, place him at the heart of the transatlantic slave economy. Wedderburn claims to have never enslaved, since his pregnant mother had reached a bargain with his father ‘that the child which she then bore should be FREE from the moment of its birth’ as he explains, although records seem to show that in fact he was freed by his father at the age of two.[2] Yet, as his writings and speeches attest, despite his free status, he was both conditioned by and acutely attuned to the terrors of the totalitarian regime of plantation slavery.

Moreover, his transatlantic migration to London and his later radicalisation by followers of the British agrarian socialist Thomas Spence (1750-1814), turned him into a seminal figure of the transatlantic network of diasporan African figures, which Paul Gilroy has pithily termed ‘the black Atlantic’:

> The history of the black Atlantic […], continually crisscrossed by the movements of black people—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship—provides a means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory. […] These traditions have supported countercultures of modernity that touched the workers' movement but are not reducible to it. They supplied important foundations on which it could build.[3]

As I will demonstrate, Robert Wedderburn is intrinsically linked with transatlantic emancipation struggles, slave and working-class, while he can neither be reduced to a mere abolitionist nor a working-class agitator. Paradigmatically, Wedderburn illustrates Gilroy's contention that black Atlantic 'countercultures of modernities' show affinities to working-class movements in their opposition to global capitalism but, in their engagement with race, also transcend it. Wedderburn was intimately linked to the British working-class movement, yet with his black Atlantic perspective he never lost track of the centrality of slavery to transatlantic capitalist economy, linking class closely to race. In a pamphlet, a journal and speeches, he forged a novel black Atlantic discourse of slave-revolution that interlaced agitation for with one for working-class revolution in a creolized language, which 'attempts to bend the King's English to his oral mode and distinctive vernacular dialect'.[4]

Despite forging such an avant-garde revolutionary discourse that interlinks the struggles against class and race exploitation, he continues to feature as an obscure figure on the fringes of both the abolition and working-class movement in Britain. To some extent, he remains one of Michel Foucault's 'infamous men' whose obscure lives have been illuminated solely by 'an encounter with power' and the ensuing official records:[5] in Wedderburn's case Home Office spy reports and court documents. Hegemonic scholarship on both abolition and working-class radicalism has largely ignored him. Even in a recent history of transatlantic

abolition that purposely sets out to highlight black agency in the overthrow of slavery, he is assigned a mere half-page cameo in a hefty 768-page book.[6] This chapter intends to account for Wedderburn's marginalization by highlighting the explosive, avant-garde and provocative nature of his black Atlantic radical rhetoric. As I will suggest, the constant deliberate slippage between race and class and his call for violent transatlantic revolution might have contributed to his silencing.

'If you wrong [the slaves], will they not revenge?' Wedderburn's radical abolitionism

The emphasis on revolutionary self-emancipation is the hallmark of Wedderburn's radical abolitionism, which marries a call for a revolutionary overthrow of slavery with a proto-communist insistence on communal land ownership. As he urges the slaves in his journal *The Axe Laid to the Root* (1817): 'Above all, mind and keep possession of the land you now possess as slaves; for without that, freedom is not worth possessing' His firebrand tirades against slavery received some notoriety, even with the highest echelons of British abolitionism, during his lifetime. When he was imprisoned in Dorchester Gaol (1820-2), convicted of blasphemy, he seems to have received a surprising visitor: none other than the 'saint' of British abolitionism and evangelical Christian Tory MP William Wilberforce took the trouble to visit the inveterate disrespectable black radical in prison. However, Wilberforce's attempt at converting Wedderburn to evangelical Christianity and moderate abolitionism seems to have failed. Although Wedderburn dedicates his autobiographical, abolitionist pamphlet *The Horrors of Slavery* (1824) to 'W. Wilberforce, MP,' he immediately undercuts his praise of Wilberforce as one of 'the glorious benefactors of the human race.'[7] For the black working-class ex-convict not merely ironically thanks Wilberforce for the two expensive religious 'books beautifully bound in calf' (44) that Wilberforce bestowed on to, but employing imagery of money-lending that emphasises their

socio-economic disparity, he further reasserts that he has not changed his radical political stance. Thanking Wilberforce for his 'advice for which he is still [Wedderburn's] debtor' (44), he neither distances himself from the blasphemies he was convicted of nor from his revolutionary agitation by invoking an absolute right to freedom of speech: 'imprisonment has but confirmed that I was right' in 'daring to express my sentiments as a free man', he declares in *The Horrors of Slavery.*[8]

Symptomatic of Wedderburn's refusal to be neatly pigeon-holed, this self-published abolitionist pamphlet breaks the mould of abolitionist literature from the onset. It was sold by the radical publishers/booksellers Thomas Davidson and Robert Carlile's bookshop who had been imprisoned in Dorchester Gaol at the same time as Wedderburn and contains a loose, autobiographical narrative, followed by (possibly fictitious) epistolary spat with Wedderburn's white half-brother. Crucially, it combines a withering attack on the inequities of the plantocracy and their place as respectable members of the British establishment with a call for a violent overthrow of slavery. This departure from hegemonic abolitionism is already signalled at its opening, as it recalls and at the same time subverts the conventions of the slave narrative. Recalling the title of the most successful British slave narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), Wedderburn frustrates his reader with a decisive anti-climax: 'The events of my life have been few and uninteresting'.[9]

Crucially, he viewed transatlantic slavery as part of a global capitalist system of exploitation, built on race, class and gender oppression. While the nexus of race and class oppression dominates his work, he occasionally also indicts gender oppression. In *The Horrors of Slavery* he details the sexual abuse of his mother at the hands of his father and the flogging of his grandmother by her owner whom she had raised. Moreover, in his trademark blasphemous satiric style, he draws on these examples to indict slavery as a system that turns black female bodies into commodities. As he implies, chattel slavery has institutionalised the

sexual abuse of the female slaves which in turn increases the 'personal property' of the slaveholder through fathering slave children: 'an acquisition, which might one day fetch something in the market, like a horse or a pig at Smithfield Market in London.'[10]

Wedderburn relentlessly attacks his abusive slaveholder father as a representative of his class. Constructing a blasphemous, anti-climactic, mock-heroic parallel between him and biblical kings, patriarchs and a cockerel on a dung-heap, Wedderburn describes him as a posturing sexual predator with the intellectual faculties of a chicken:

> My father's house was full of female slaves, all objects of his lusts; amongst whom he strutted like Solomon in his grand seraglio, or like a bantam cock upon his own dunghill. My good father's slaves did increase and multiply, like Jacob's kine; and he cultivated those talents well which God had granted so amply.[11]

Denouncing the patrilineal white Scottish slaveholder branch of his family, including fighting an epistolary feud with his likely white half-brother, A. Colville, in the pages of the very same pamphlet, Wedderburn identifies with the matrilineal African line. Brought up by his maternal grandmother 'Talkee Amy,' an enslaved market and medicine woman with strong links to syncretic African-Caribbean religions such as *obeah*, Wedderburn claims to have inherited his rebellious nature from his mother. He shares with her 'the same desire to see justice overtake the oppressors of my countrymen—and the same determination to lose no stone unturned, to accomplish so desirable an object.'[12]

Wedderburn's abolitionism is revolutionary as it based on retributive justice. At the same time it has a Black Atlantic trajectory beyond the Caribbean colonies. By 'his oppressed countrymen', Wedderburn seems to refer to enslaved Africans throughout the Atlantic world. At the same time, he is addressing the British working classes, toiling under emerging

industrial capitalism, exacerbated by a series of socially highly repressive Tory government. As Alan Rice elucidates, Wedderburn mounts a 'radical critique of capitalism throughout the British Empire' that interlinks the 'two horrors of wage and chattel slavery'.[13]

For Wedderburn, revenge forms a key revolutionary lever. In his pamphlet, he asserts the right of slaves to revenge by riffing on Shylock's famous speech in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1598), in which he not only counters the anti-Semitic demonization of Jews by asserting their humanity, but also asserts their right to execute 'revenge' on the Christians for the 'wrong' committed against them (III.1, ll. 65-6). Replacing 'Jew' with 'slave', Wedderburn asks: 'Hath not a slave feelings? If you starve them, will they not die? If you wrong them, will they not revenge?'.[14] Subversively, Wedderburn undermines the abolitionist rhetoric of sympathy, which turns the shackled passive slave into an object of white pity, perhaps most succinctly expressed in the iconic abolitionist emblem of the shackled slave pleading with the white viewer: 'Am I not a man and a brother?' As Marcus Wood asserts, this image erases black agency instead positing 'the black as a blank page for white guilt'.[15] With Wedderburn the slave's emotions, not the white observer's guilt-induced sympathy becomes the focus as he is assigned 'feelings'. Unlike the meek gratitude to the white liberator that mainstream abolitionism projected onto the slave, Wedderburn's slaves thirst for revenge on their white oppressors.

'The Fate of St. Domingo Awaits You": Wedderburn's Discursive Merger of Slave- And Working-Class Revolution

Wedderburn's exhortation to revenge is not limited to *The Horrors of Slavery.* Some of the most powerful passages that casts it as the driving force of a transatlantic revolution can be found in his short-lived journal with the formidable title *The Axe Laid to The Root or*

A Fatal Blow to Oppressors, Being an Address to the Planters and Negroes of Jamaica (1817).

As the plural 'oppressors' indicates, Wedderburn is not merely attacking the Jamaican slaveholders but also English capitalists and the repressive British government who support them. This becomes even more obvious in a later speech (9 August 1819) delivered in his hayloft 'chapel' in which he delivered political sermon as a licensed Unitarian minister, often it has been the same capitalists who are involved both in slavery and the exploitation of British proletarians, whom he terms 'slaves' here. Alluding to the practice of a candidate buying the small number of electors in a 'rotten borough' to bribe his way into Parliament, Wedderburn insists in front his presumably working-class audience that it is this double gain, through the slave economy and industrial capitalism, that forms the foundation of the repressive British state. Albeit transmitted in the garbled language of the Home Office spy Sidney Bryant, we find an anti-colonial critique of how the slave trade, with its deliberate provocation of military conflicts in Africa to increase the number of captives, has been the engine for Britain's industrial take-off:

> Wedderbourne [*sic*]—rose—Government was necessitated to send men in arms to West Indies or Africa which produced commotion. They would employ blacks to go and steal females—they would put them in sacks and would be murdered if they made an alarm Vessels would be in readiness and they would fly off with them This was done by Parliament men—who done it for gain—the same as they employed them in their Cotton factories to make Slaves of them to become possessed of money to bring them into Parliament.[16]

By spinning a fiction that the British government would capture Afro-Caribbean or African women to employ them in cotton mills, Wedderburn suggests that slavery forms the economic base for the British State and economy. Moreover, he merges slaves and workers. By placing them on the same spectrum of exploitation, he also subverts widespread attempts to play one group against the other. Perhaps most notoriously among contemporary English radicals, William Cobbett epitomises 'the Negrophobe orthodoxies of English Radicalism',[17] as he juxtaposes the exploited and down-trodden British labourer with the happy-go-lucky slave: the 'wretched White slave'[18] with the enslaved 'fat and lazy Negro that laughs from morning to night!'.[19]

In contrast, Wedderburn aims to engender transatlantic, trans-racial, revolutionary solidarity in his exhortations for revolution in his *Axe Laid to the Root*. Ostensibly directed to a Jamaican audience, but in fact speaking to metropolitan radicals, he employs the same double reference of slaves and British workers, throughout much of this short-lived journal. Daringly, he recalls the revolutionary violence the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) and its fundamental socio-revolutionary overthrow of plantation slavery to call for a general overthrow of slavery and the oppressive forces of capitalism throughout the Atlantic World:

> Prepare for flight, ye planters, for the fate of St. Domingo awaits you. Get ready your blood hounds, the allies which you employed against the Maroons. Recollect that fermentation will be universal. Their weapons are their bill-hooks […] They will be victorious in their fight, slaying all before them; they want no turnpike roads: they will not stand to engage organised troops, like the silly Irish rebels. […] They will slay man, woman, and child, and not spare the virgin, whose interest is connected with slavery, whether black, white or tawny. O ye planters, you know this has been done; the cause which produced former bloodshed still

> remains, – of necessity similar aspects must take place. The holy alliance of Europe, cannot prevent it, they have enough to do at home, being compelled to keep a standing army in the time of peace, to enforce the civil law. My heart glows with revenge, and cannot forgive.[20]

Recalling the spectre of St. Domingo and the Jamaican Maroons who, after two wars with the British colonial army, achieved autonomy and freedom, Wedderburn preaches a revolutionary abolitionism rooted in slave agency.

This could not be further removed from Wilberforce's conservative Evangelical approach, which championed abolition through acts of parliament. In 1824 in a debate in the House of Commons, Wilberforce conjured up the spectre of the Haitian Revolution: a 'first explosion' followed by 'dire disasters,' as he denounces revolutionary self-emancipation as 'the desperate course of taking [the slaves'] cause into their own hands'.[21] I have shown elsewhere how Wedderburn appropriates the Gothic demonization of the Haitian Revolution, of the which the 'massacre of the innocent' of 'woman, child' or 'virgin' forms an essential trope, and instead taps into a Black Atlantic counter-discourse that turns the Gothic against the colonial masters.[22] Wedderburn further insists that the slave economy is not always based upon clear-cut racial divides but in essence a class-based, socio-economic system: even the 'black' and 'tawny' that play their part in propping the transatlantic system of slavery, as their 'interest is connected with slavery' have to be killed. 'Interest' with its manifold meanings relating to property, business interest, financial gain, stakes, property, etc., subtly suggests that transatlantic slavery is the primary economic engine for transatlantic capitalism with race and racism functioning as its essential ideological levers.

In his agitation for transatlantic revolution, Wedderburn grasps the close nexus of race and class within transatlantic slavery, capitalism and colonialism. As Trinidad-born Black

Atlantic Marxist, C.L.R. James later would argue in his 1938 history of the Haitian Revolution *The Black Jacobins*: 'The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental.'[23]

Wedderburn places this nexus of race and class within the perspective of transatlantic imperialism. As he recalls in the passage above, the 'Holy Alliance', the counter-revolutionary alliance of European monarchs, and Britain's standing army in peacetime suggests that the European repressive forces will face similar annihilation at the hands of the working classes, as that which Saint-Domingue slaveholders experience at the hands of their slaves. That is if the rebellious workers adopt the guerrilla tactics of maroons and slave rebels and refrain from engaging the British Army in open battle as the 'silly Irish rebels' of 1798 and 1803 did in the fight against their British colonial masters, then transatlantic 'fermentation' will indeed be 'universal'. However, although Wedderburn rhetorically and ideologically deploys Haitian Revolution as a catalyst for a British workers' revolution, he does not reduce this slave revolution to the 'first successful workers' *revolt* in modern history', as Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker suggest.[24]

'To Murder Their Masters as Soon as They Please': Transatlantic Revolutionary Solidarity

Even more explicitly still, in a handbill advertising the debate of 9 August 1819 in his Soho 'chapel', Wedderburn endorses revolutionary violence as the engine of transatlantic emancipation:

> **The Following Question will be**
>
> **DEBATED**

Has a Slave an inherent right to slay his Master

who refuses him

HIS LIBERTY?

The Offspring of an African Slave will

open the Question.[25]

As the bill suggests, again this call for slave revolution is interwoven with a call for revolution in the heady days leading up to the Peterloo Massacre of unarmed working-class mass protesters in Manchester. In what is evidently a rhetorical question, not even worthy of debate, the bill's heading seems to justify radical-revolutionary change in Britain's government: Can it be Murder to / KILL A / T Y R A N T ? .[26] As Iain MacCalman points out, even the Prince Regent was so concerned by Wedderburn's constant agitation for revolution and regicide that in August 1819 he sought assurances from the Home Secretary Lord Sidmouth, who promised the ruler that this '"notorious firebrand, Wedderburne" would be silenced by prosecution'.[27]

Ironically, it is thanks to this intense Home Office surveillance of Wedderburn with spies that a sketch of this debate has been preserved in the ministry's archival records for posterity. With the assembly unanimously affirming the right of the slave to kill his master: 'Mr W. then exclaimed, well Gentlemen, I can now *write home and tell the Slaves to murder their Masters as soon as they please.* Sd. J. Bryant'.[28]

Speaking both as the son of a slave and a slaveholder and as the ultra-radical preacher and impoverished London tailor, Wedderburn refers with the 'Slaves' who have right to slay the 'Masters' with both chattel and wage slaves: the Caribbean slaves *and* the oppressed and exploited proletarians in Britain. Similarly their 'Masters' are both the slaveholders and the capitalists and the repressive British Government, while 'Home' seems an even more

ambiguous and contested notion for Wedderburn the Black Atlantic radical. Is 'home' Jamaica as he seems to infer, even after having spent his entire adult life in London? Or is it London, which would turn this exhortation into a thinly veiled call for a violent overthrow of Britain's social and political *status quo*?

A handbill in the Home Office's files on radicals goes some way to answering these questions by proving Wedderburn's version of this debate. Headed with another revolutionary threat, 'Vengence [*sic*] Awaits the Guilty', it announces the subsequent debate on the increasing political tensions in the run-up to the Peterloo Massacre (which occurred on the date set for debate on 16 August 1819). At the bottom, the bill summarises the previous debate:

> The last Debate respecting a Slave having a Right to slay his Master who refuses him his Freedom, was decided in Favor of the Slave without a discerning Voice, by a numerous and enlightened Assembly, who exultingly expressed their Desire of hearing of another sable Nation freeing itself by the Dagger from the base Tyranny of their Christian Masters.
>
> *Several Gentlemen declared their readiness to assist them.*
>
> *The Offspring of an African who opened the debate, was highly gratified.*[29]

This is a masterpiece of satirical radicalism. Writing of himself in the third person as the 'Offspring of an African', he expresses profound satisfaction with members of the audience volunteering to assist in revolutionary slave emancipation. While this scene might be Wedderburn's fiction, the Haitian Revolution is again clearly cast as the blueprint for abolition, with the goal of creating another black nation in the Americas through the means of anti-colonial violence. With the spectre of the Haitian Revolution still fresh in the mind of the

British public, endorsing the prospect of a British Caribbean colony turning, through slave revolution, into an independent black state in the mould of Haiti is a radical position unmatched in contemporary British discourse. A mere four years later, the radical William Cobbett in his popular *Political Register* would conjure up such a scenario of Jamaica turning into a second Haiti as a vision of horror. As Cobbett suggests, this Jamaican slave revolution will continue to write the unfinished horror tale of Caribbean slave revolutions, as it 'will be a second chapter of the desolation and bloodshed of St. Domingo'.[30]

Moreover, as the handbill emphasises, Wedderburn neither casts the French Revolution, nor a mythical Albion of free-born Englishmen, as inspiration for the English workers, but revolutionary slave resistance. Iain McCalman overlooks this ideological innovation, when he, rather dismissively, claims that Wedderburn's main goals in his speeches was 'to debunk authority and impel political action through shock, pathos or humour': 'Wedderburn's fiery extempore speeches contain little in the way of original political theory'.[31] For such a pronounced expert on Wedderburn, McCalman's statement can only be explained by a Eurocentric attitude that dismisses any non-European ideology as banal and inferior, the very same attitude Wedderburn set out to challenge. As Wedderburn asserts, the revolutionary fervour of the Caribbean slaves has been far superior to that of the British working class that, in the contemporary racist ideology, is deemed superior to that of the black slaves:

> One of those men who appeared to be the principal in their concern is a Mulatto and announced himself as the Descendant of an African Slave—After noticing the Insurrections of the Slaves in some of the West India Islands he said they fought in some instances for twenty years for 'Liberty'—and he then appealed to Britons

> who boasted such superior feeling and principles, whether they were ready to fight now but for a short time for their Liberties.[32]

Even filtered through the writings of the outraged Home Office spy, Reverend Chetwode Eustache who complains that 'Doctrines were certainly of the most dreadful nature', we hear Wedderburn's Black Atlantic voice.[33] He throws down the gauntlet to the European racist mindset that cast people of African descent as inferior, when he ironically lauds the 'superior feelings and principles' of white Britons. In particular, he attacks the claim that Britons would know more about liberty than the chattel slaves of the Caribbean who have resisted and fought for the liberty ever since they were first captured and enslaved. While Wedderburn also aims to provoke his audience into action by holding up the model of the courageous Caribbean slave rebels, this transcends mere satiric agitation, to which McCalman wants to reduce Wedderburn's speeches. On the contrary, Wedderburn's position marks a theoretical advance as he points towards a Black Atlantic relocation of the axis of transatlantic liberation. For he locates the source in the struggle for emancipation, 'Liberty', not with the white Jacobins in France and radicals in Europe, nor with the slaveholding white North American revolutionaries. Instead, with him transatlantic emancipation begins with the Caribbean slave revolutionaries. In essence, he thus dismisses the American and French Revolutions with their compromised stance towards slavery as revolutionary models for working-class emancipation and replaces it with the Haitian Revolution. As I have argued elsewhere, it even challenges later Black Atlantic accounts of the Haitian Revolution, as in C.L.R. James *Black Jacobins,* in which the slaves take their main revolutionary inspiration and cues from the French revolutionaries.[34]

While Wedderburn recasts revolutionary 'Liberty' as a *Caribbean* concept and refigures Caribbean slaves as the Atlantic's revolutionary avant-garde, he also aims to instil

transatlantic and transracial class solidarity. This is staged in the bill when reports how allegedly 'Several Gentlemen declared their readiness to assist' the slaves in slaying their masters. This moment of trans-racial solidarity suggests that Wedderburn's 'numerous and enlightened' working-class audience are more advanced into the attitude towards race than many of the European Enlightenment figures who were profoundly racist and/or supported slavery.[35] Irrespective if this is fact or fiction, I would argue that for Wedderburn these moments of lower-class revolutionary identification and solidarity do form the nucleus for the future transatlantic revolution and thus a transformation of Europe's unequal rotten society.

Dis-remembering Robert Wedderburn? Wedderburn on Display in the 'Sugar and Slavery Gallery' in the Museum of London, Docklands

While Wedderburn now is an obscure historical figure, at least between the mid 1810s and the early 1820s, Wedderburn enjoyed, if not fame, at least a certain notoriety. Not only, as pointed out, did Wilberforce visit him in Dorchester Gaol, but also one of London's leading caricaturists, George Cruikshank, portrayed him at least twice as a central figure of a cartoon. In the first 'A Peep into a London Tavern' (1817) we see a racially angrily caricatured Wedderburn denouncing the non-revolutionary socialists view of Robert Owen 'as just another system of slavery'. The second, 'The New Union Club' (1819), full of racist bile, constitutes a phantasmagoric orgy of cross-racial debauchery and anarchy with a voiceless Wedderburn at its centre. These political cartoons provide further proof that for some years Wedderburn was a public figure, known beyond the small circle of metropolitan ultra-radicals, and their nemesis, the Home Office.

This contrasts with the lack of his memorialisation at present. There no memorials to him and he is omitted from the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool. To my

knowledge there is only one museum that features Wedderburn, the Museum of London Dockland as part of its 'London, Sugar and Slavery Gallery'. It is housed in the former West India Dock, which opened in 1802 mainly to unload and store slave-produced commodities from the triangular trade. Despite the proximity of its opening to the abolition of the British transatlantic slave trade it was deeply implicated in it, for between 1802 and 1807 'twenty-two ships sailed from the dock to West Africa where they purchased more than 7,000 enslaved Africans who were transported to the Americas'.[36]

It seems fitting that such a scathing and trenchant critic of the capitalist slave economy as Robert Wedderburn should be featured in the gallery. Moreover, his agitation for revolutionary self-emancipation chimes in with the key objective of the gallery to tell 'the story of self-determination by enslaved Africans to win their freedom through rebellion', as David Spence explains.[37] Particularly given his absence in museums the fact that Robert Wedderburn even features three times in the gallery is remarkable. As its co-curator Dr. Tom Wareham acknowledges, 'we have a soft spot for Robert here, he was a great character'.[38] So is here 'for the first time since his death' Britain 'finally giving full credit to his work'?[39] The first exhibit features the only known portrait of him, the frontispiece of the 1824 pamphlet *The Horrors of Slavery* (IMAGE I), placed next to the panel on Olaudah Equiano. This arrangement might suggest an equivalence in importance with the writer of one of Britain's most successful Black writers. However, at the same time, their stark differences in social status seem erased: Equiano, the respectable radical, who, at his death, was the richest black person in Britain, while the unrespectable proletarian radical Wedderburn (whose date of death remains unknown) was probably buried in an unmarked pauper's grave in an unknown graveyard. The label underneath Wedderburn's image avoids any mention of his precarious socio-economic status and only the concluding sentence seems to imply that he was a working-class radical: 'Licensed as a Methodist preacher, Wedderburn used the pulpit to

connect working-class ideas with the anti-slavery Movement.' Even though this description captures key aspects of his Black Atlantic political agitation, his revolutionary voice remains silenced. While all the other black abolitionists are featured with text excerpts, any quotation from Wedderburn's writings is lacking.

The second exhibit consists of a composite photograph by the white British-born artist Paul Howard, entitled 'Lloyd Gordon as Robert Wedderburn' (2011). Commissioned especially for the Gallery, the 'actor Lloyd Gordon' models 'Wedderburn', [40] as the photograph re-stages the adjacent oil painting of 'Portrait of George Hibbert' (1812) by Sir Thomas Lawrence. In the re-staging, Howard replaces Hibbert, one of the most notorious profiteers of the enslavement of Africans, slave-trader and holder, philanthropist, West India merchant and eight-times chairman of the West India Dock Company with the Black Atlantic proletarian radical Wedderburn, Admittedly, this juxtaposition of the respectable epitome of British slavery with the unrespectable agitator for slave and working-class revolution could harbour some radical potential. Yet, in my opinion, this is largely wasted here. For Wedderburn, imitating Hibbert's imperious pose, seems prouder to finally have usurped Hibbert's position as Chairman of the West India Dock Company than to have overthrown transatlantic capitalism.

Crucially, Wedderburn's radical writings are again erased in the photograph. Bizarrely, it replaces his journal *The Axe Laid to the Root* with *The Poor Man's Guardian* (1831-5), a radical newspaper only founded after Wedderburn had disappeared from the political stage. This journal's deployment here seems so haphazard that Katie Donnington in her PhD thesis 'The benevolent merchant? George Hibbert (1757-1837) and the Representation of West Indian Mercantile Identity'[41] in a description of this image even inadvertedly corrects it: 'Hibbert's silverware and dock designs were replaced with Wedderburn's magazine [*sic*] *Axe Laid to the Root*'.[42]

However, on close inspection the photograph reveals an allusion to the journal's title: an axe lying on the floor. As Paul Howard explains in a blog (which also features the opening page of the first issue of *The Axe to the Root*), this '"re-constructed portrait"' of Wedderburn 'includes contemporary analogies and references to Wedderburn's achievements including an axe laid on the floor of No 1 Warehouse in Docklands, the only surviving building ion London of the transatlantic slave trade'.[43] Yet, an axe laid on the floor is not the same as the axe laid to the root of exploitation and oppression, of the transatlantic slave economy. Similarly the cane knife dangling from his hip seems more a fashionable accoutrement like a dagger than the work tool and primary weapon of the slaves.

What then of the 'contemporary analogies' Howard mentions? Michael Morris has argued that the window view with the tower of Canary Wharf looming behind the West India Dock in the background updates Wedderburn's radical critique of capitalism for the millennium: it 'suggests the connection historical slavery and contemporary global capitalism and, perhaps, the spirit of resistance that is still necessary today'.[44] While the image might indeed aim to draw these links, I would argue that its effectiveness is seriously hampered by downplaying Wedderburn's revolutionary radicalness.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the final exhibit, a display for children, is the most effective as it captures Wedderburn's complexities. In a rectangular panel bordered by a blue pattern reminiscent of West African textile, there are three flaps and an instruction: 'Look at Robert Wedderburn the man in this [Howard's] painting [sic]. / Do you think he was / The son of a rich man who owned slave / A preacher in a church? / A dangerous revolutionary'. Of course, all three of these characterizations are accurate as it is revealed when the flaps are lifted up. Ironically, in its simplicity this display captures the richness and the multiple identities of the figure of Robert Wedderburn much more sharply than the other, more ambitious representations.

As I have attempted to demonstrate it is exactly Wedderburn's refusal to be pigeonholed into one category that vexes the academic drive for categorisation. At the same time, the challenge posed by this subversive anarchic black Atlantic revolutionary, who mounted one of the first powerful, intersectional critiques of capitalism that yokes class and race together, call for further exploration by scholars, museums and activists alike.

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[1] Robert Wedderburn, *The Horrors of Slavery and other Writings* in Iain McCalman, ed. (Princeton/ Kingston, Jamaica: Marcus Wiener/ Ian Randle, 1991), p. 44.
[2] Wedderburn, p. 48. See Ryan Hanley, *Beyond Slavery and Abolition: Black British Writing, c.1770-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 204.
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