

# CAPITAL'S COLONY

## Antislavery, Racial Labor, and the Origins of Liberal Empire

Lucas Pinheiro, PhD Candidate  
Department of Political Science, University of Chicago

[lucaspinheiro@uchicago.edu](mailto:lucaspinheiro@uchicago.edu)

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines how emerging theories of race, colonialism, and capitalism across Britain and the Atlantic world set in motion an ambitious project to end slavery by colonizing part of Africa. From 1787 to 1807, the Sierra Leone Colony became a laboratory for key ideas in Western political thought, including the contractarian conceit of a free civil society put up from bare nature. Here, a cohort of abolitionist thinkers and activists tried their hand at ending the slave trade by establishing a commercial colony of former slaves brought in from all corners of the Atlantic. Yet, rather than an experiment in freedom and civil society, Sierra Leone became a test case for a new regime of racialized wage-labor and nineteenth-century liberal imperialism. I contend that the colony's regime of racial labor rested on the political ideas of two colonial thinkers who, despite being mostly forgotten today, exerted considerable influence on British economic and abolitionist discourse in the late eighteenth century: Malachy Postlethwayt and Maurice Morgann. These thinkers, as I go on to show, laid the foundation for Sierra Leone in two ways: first, by pushing Britain to establish African colonies devoted to the civilization of natives, the cultivation of cash-crops, and exclusive trade with Britain; second, in constructing black Africans as naturally ordained to labor in tropical climates, these theories handed the black Atlantic their fate after slavery: agrarian wage-labor in the tropics. In implementing these ideas in Africa, the Sierra Leone project lays bare the intellectual and material origins of the nineteenth-century formation political theorists have termed "liberal empire."

## INTRODUCTION: “AN ENDLESS FIELD OF COMMERCE”

On March 13, 1788, a year before his autobiography was published in London, Olaudah Equiano wrote to Baron Hawkesbury, President of the Board of Trade.<sup>1</sup> Equiano’s unique life story, from freedom in Africa to slavery in America to liberty and literary acclaim in Britain, commanded great respect and attention from an elite European public composed of nobles, royals, and industrialists.<sup>2</sup> As the antislavery movement gained ground, Equiano conveyed to Hawkesbury the significant profits Britain stood to make in replacing the African slave trade with a legitimate exchange in consumer goods. “If a system of commerce were established in Africa,” he informed the President, “the demand for manufactures would most rapidly augment, as the native inhabitants would insensibly adopt the British fashions, manners, [and] customs,” thus opening “an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interests of Great Britain.”<sup>3</sup> In addition to gaining from trade, Equiano continued, British commerce would be considerably favored by the cultivation of Africa’s vast yet untapped natural resources, which “abound in valuable and useful returns.” If Britain’s modern approaches to capitalist husbandry and mining were employed in Africa, the continent’s “hidden treasures”—its land, crops, animals, spices, minerals—would be brought “to light and into circulation.”<sup>4</sup> Africa, he concluded, would as a result lay open “*an endless field of commerce* to the British manufacturers and merchant adventurers.”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 304n.

<sup>2</sup> From 1789 to his death in 1797, Equiano’s autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavo Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, went through nine editions in Britain, the United States, France, Germany, Russia, and Holland. Among the subscribers to his work were members of the royal family, the aristocracy, prominent figures in the arts, philanthropy, and business, including the painter Richard Cosway, the ceramics magnate Josiah Wedgwood, and Elizabeth Montague. See: Equiano, xvii.

<sup>3</sup> Equiano, 233–34.

<sup>4</sup> Equiano, 234.

<sup>5</sup> Equiano, 34; emphasis mine.

Equiano's "endless field of commerce" conjures up a familiar eighteenth-century image of free trade as boundless and mutually beneficial.<sup>6</sup> A snapshot of global capital in motion, it figures commercial exchange as the revolving wheel of capitalist modernity, enriching, developing, and civilizing whatever crosses its path. On another level, however, Equiano's turn of phrase might also be read as a literal reference to the looming colonial relationship between African nature and British industry, between African plantations and British factories. Here, Equiano's construction speaks more broadly to the popular colonial registers in which late eighteenth-century abolitionists, political economists, and industrialists reimagined African nature as, quite literally, the *field* of European commerce. Indeed, starting in the 1770s, a vocal cohort of antislavery advocates placed their hopes of ending the slave trade on Africa's undeveloped natural wealth as a bountiful source of raw materials to fuel Britain's expanding consumer industries. Additionally, as a system of free labor and exchange gradually replaced the slave trade, abolitionists believed that a greater number of native Africans could be effectively employed in the cultivation of tropical cash crops, which workers in British factories would in turn transform into finished commodities. Conquered by the capitalist imperatives of wage labor, agricultural science, private property, free trade, and civil society, Africa's vast and uncultivated land, as well as its people, would transition from a "hidden treasure" to an endless field of British commerce.

This paper examines how modern theories of race, colonialism, and political economy across Britain and the Atlantic world set in motion an ambitious project to end slavery by colonizing Africa. I explore how the parallel rise of British industrial capitalism and shifting attitudes toward slavery—as much by canonical political thinkers the likes of Edmund Burke as by lesser-known political actors, activists, and pamphleteers—culminated in an ambitious experiment to establish a

---

<sup>6</sup> For one of the most characteristic statements to this effect in Enlightenment political thought, see: David Hume, "Of Commerce (1752)," in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, Revised Edition (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 261–64.

commercial colony of free black settlers around Sierra Leone.<sup>7</sup> From 1787 to 1807, the Sierra Leone Colony and Company became a laboratory for key ideas in Western political thought, including—most notably—the contractarian conceit of a free civil society put up from bare nature. Here, a cohort of abolitionist thinkers and activists tried their hand at ending the slave trade by establishing an independent settlement of former slaves brought in from all corners of the Atlantic. As a social experiment intended to reorganize the relationship between the black Atlantic, wage-labor, and global capitalism, Sierra Leone lays bare the conceptual entanglements of race, political economy, and colonialism that played out at a turning point in the transnational histories of capitalism and slavery. From its inception in the 1780s, the abolitionist founders of the Sierra Leone settlement—Henry Smeathman and Granville Sharp—challenged the moral economy of slavery by offering a commodity trade between Britain and Africa as a profitable and humane alternative to colonial slavery. Yet it was only in 1791, four years after its original implementation, that Sierra Leone became financially viable in the form of a joint-stock trading company funded largely by the private capital of industrialists, merchants, financiers, and philanthropists. Until 1807 the colony grew from an imagined paragon of Britain’s enterprising and humanitarian spirit, to an agrarian settlement, to a commercial network composed of plantations, schools, workshops, warehouses, and merchant ships. Thousands of newly conscripted black colonists were brought in from across the Atlantic to work the land as an absentee board of British traders and bankers managed the company from London. Despite its importance to the history of British colonialism in Africa, Sierra Leone’s contribution to recent studies on the relationship between political theory, colonial capitalism, and

---

<sup>7</sup> Throughout the 1780s and 90s, following Britain’s loss of American colonies in 1776, Burke’s “Sketch of a Negro Code” (1780) became a central text in proposals for reforming the British plantation complex in the West Indies by gradually transforming slaves into a waged workforce. See: Edmund Burke, “Sketch of a Negro Code (1780),” in *Edmund Burke: The Works*, vol. 6, 12 vols. (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1975), 255–89.

liberal empire remains unheeded.<sup>8</sup> How might the new bond between black identity, free trade, and wage-labor forged by the colony enrich ongoing debates over the winding historical trajectories of political theory, colonial capitalism, liberal empire, and modern racism?

In an attempt to answer this question, I argue that, throughout the last two decades of the eighteenth century, the Sierra Leone project introduced a new regime of racialized free labor that rested on earlier political theories that touched on the central issues at stake in this paper: colonization, civilization, empire, slavery, and free trade all at once. As I suggest below, these theories proposed that black workers were naturally disposed to agrarian labor in tropical environments. According to this logic, an allegedly innate disposition to live in hot climates rendered black Africans the optimum and ideal workforce for cultivating cash crops in Britain's tropical colonies. And although earlier proponents of British colonialism in the tropics relied on eighteenth-century racist thought to justify the use of black wage-labor in their projects, Sierra Leone's founders never acknowledged a connection between race and labor. In the rare moments when Sierra Leone officials publically recognized racial difference, it was always in order to refute arguments leveled by their critics—planters and slave merchants—positing the innate intellectual and spiritual inferiority of black Africans in comparison to white Europeans. So, rather than focus on racial difference, exponents of the project made their case through a Christian language of racial equality. Indeed, much of the abolitionist defense of racial equality at the time was couched in a scriptural grammar of natural rights in which humanity was understood as a natural, God-given, and

---

<sup>8</sup> For recent and forthcoming monographs that take up these issues across a wide range of themes, periods, and geographies, see: Barbara Arneil, *Domestic Colonialism: The Turn Inward to Colonies* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2017); Onur Ulas Ince, *Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2018); Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University, Forthcoming). For classic studies on political thought, colonialism, and empire, see: Barbara Arneil, *John Locke and America: The Defence of English Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1996); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2003); David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2006); Sankar Muthu, ed., *Empire and Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2012).

universal attribute of *all* human beings that no social institution, law, or state could overrule. Despite its administrators' efforts to dismiss racial politics, both the Sierra Leone Colony and Company depended on a complex racialized regime of production that combined elements from colonial slavery, feudal indenture, and capitalist wage-labor.

As I argue throughout this paper, Sierra Leone contributes to our understanding of modern political thought and colonial capitalism in two central ways. Conceptually, the colony was a laboratory for political theory, from Lockean ideas of civil society and the social contract to new conceptions of freedom and natural rights articulated as a moral critique of slavery. Historically, Sierra Leone laid the groundwork for nineteenth-century ideas, discourses, and institutions that connected liberal thought to colonialism and the expansion of the British Empire after 1807. Moreover, the approach to colonization implemented at Sierra Leone combined, for the first time in British history, leading arguments of abolitionist discourse—which was then just emerging—with established precepts of modern racism, empire, and political economy. In light of the project's overlooked significance to Western political thinking, the central goal of this paper is to account for its intellectual foundations and historical legacies. In order to unravel the conceptual premise of colonialism at Sierra Leone, I turn to the political ideas put forth by two earlier proponents of colonialism: Malachy Postlethwayt and Maurice Morgann. Both thinkers advanced complementary possibilities for invigorating and expanding the British Empire through commercial colonies in the tropics, from West Africa to West Florida. Together, these proposals amount to an original colonial model organized around four principles: civilization, settlement, trade, and wage-labor. Drawing on classical political economy and modern racist thought, Postlethwayt and Morgann shed important light on how and why ideas concerning abolition, colonialism, and capitalism converged in the eighteenth century and became increasingly interdependent as the nineteenth century ran its course.

Moreover, in accounting for the importance of Sierra Leone in the history of modern political thought, I foreground the experiment's unique position in the history of eighteenth-century colonialism and nineteenth-century visions of empire. While Britain had, since the seventeenth century, sustained a constant commercial presence in the West African coast devoted largely to trading slaves, gold, and ivory, it had not pursued a colonial project to "develop" the continent's natural resources and "civilize" its native population as it had done in America and the West Indies. By conscripting black populations into a colonial regime of free labor, the architects of the Sierra Leone experiment set out to accomplish something that, until then, Britain had not attempted in Africa. In a way, the racialized regime of slave labor in Britain's American and Caribbean colonies provided Sierra Leone officials with the means to justify their project as a profitable and commercially viable form of liberal humanitarian intervention. In short, abolitionists figured the inhumane and despotic regime of racial slavery as the 'Other' against which Sierra Leone's new system of wage-labor was constructed as both "humane," "free," and—in the nineteenth century—"liberal." And yet, as I argue below, not only was the Sierra Leone experiment organized around earlier colonial theories based on civilization, settlement, fee trade, and wage-labor, but additionally, as it applied these concepts, the project introduced an idea of Africa as the blank slate of empire. Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century, territories on the Western coast of Africa became a testing ground for new imperial ideas and practices.<sup>9</sup>

Despite its significance to intellectual and social formations at the heart of recent scholarship on modern political thought and empire, Sierra Leone continues to go unheeded by political theorists working at the intersection of colonialism, liberalism, empire, and capitalism. For the most part, this oversight is a product of the reigning orientation among historians of political thought to

---

<sup>9</sup> For a recent transnational take on this history, see: Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University, 2010).

organize their studies of social formations such as colonialism, empire, and capitalism around canonical thinkers, ideas, and texts. But, as my paper makes plain, the development of these processes far exceeds the canon. By reading across traditions, archives, periods, and geographies, this paper brings together forgotten and unpublished texts—collected from the National Archives in the UK—to chart a new historical narrative of how modern political thought became embroiled in the development of colonial capitalism at the turn of the nineteenth century and beyond.

#### I. THE SIERRA LEONE EXPERIMENT: FROM COLONY TO COMPANY, 1787-1807

The first plan to form a colony of free Africans in Sierra Leone was drafted by Henry Smeathman, an English inventor, botanist, and abolitionist. Smeathman first devised his plan in 1783, after a ten-year period in Sierra Leone investigating the region's species of termites and collecting native plants for Sir Joseph Banks—England's most prominent naturalist. From his time in the African coast, Smeathman gathered a considerable body of knowledge on the prospect of creating a profitable plantation complex powered by waged African workers around Sierra Leone. By his estimations, most tropical cash crops—cotton, sugar, and coffee among them—cultivated in America and the Caribbean by slaves could be more profitably and efficiently produced in Africa through free black labor. “I conceive this project in Africa,” he declared, “where an industrious cultivation of the soil, with various excursions, made me well acquainted with the genius, customs, agriculture, trade and arts of the natives.”<sup>10</sup> By 1786, Britain's defeat in the American Revolutionary War created a set of social circumstances that suddenly rendered Smeathman's plan at once practical and desirable. At this point, thousands of black loyalists—former slaves who had retained their freedom in America by joining the British army—lived precariously as refugees in Nova Scotia and England. In London, the plight of black loyalists had reached a state of national crisis. Since their

---

<sup>10</sup> Henry Smeathman, “Two Letters Addressed to Dr. Knowles, of London, on the Productions and Colonization of Africa (1783),” in *An Essay on Colonization*, by Carl Bernhard Wadström, vol. 2 (London: Darton and Harvey, 1795), 198.

material needs could not be accommodated by the parish-based of welfare system managed by the English Poor Laws, scores of black refugees had no other choice than to dwell in the streets of London, begging the public for charity.<sup>11</sup> In January 1786, private philanthropists formed the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor to abate the situation. Among its subscribers were two leading activist of the rising abolitionist movement: Granville Sharp and William Wilberforce. Sharp, who was already familiar with Smeathman's plan, decided to bring the idea of settling the black poor in Sierra Leone before the Committee. The proposal consisted of two founding texts, Smeathman's "Plan of a Settlement to be made near Sierra Leone" and Sharp's detailed statute for the colony entitled "A Short Sketch of Temporary Regulations."<sup>12</sup> By May of 1786, the Sierra Leone project had secured approval from the Committee, state sanction from the Commissioner of the Navy, and public funding from the Treasury.<sup>13</sup> In May 1787, 462 colonists arrived in Sierra Leone to found the "Province of Freedom."

Three years after its implementation, the experiment proved to be a catastrophic failure. As of 1789, the vast majority of settlers had either died or returned to England while some of the black colonists had been sold into slavery. Most of the forty-six surviving settlers were so sick and malnourished that prospects of continuing the project were dismal. In short, the hopes of profit and freedom set out by Smeathman and Sharp had been met with unforeseeable disaster. Meanwhile, a few miles from the colony's barren fields, private merchants made unprecedented profits as the Atlantic slave trade soared. In 1791, a new plan to revive the colony as a joint-stock company

---

<sup>11</sup> Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon, 2006), 75–87.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Smeathman, "A Plan of a Settlement to Be Made near Sierra Leone (1786)," in *An Essay on Colonization*, by Carl Bernhard Wadström, vol. 2, 2 vols. (London: Darton and Harvey, 1795), 207–9; Granville Sharp, *A Short Sketch of Temporary Regulations (Until Better Shall Be Proposed) for the Intended Settlement on the Grain Coast of Africa, Near Sierra Leona* (London: H. Baldwin, 1786).

<sup>13</sup> David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London: Macmillan, 2016), 164–69.

breathed new life into the project.<sup>14</sup> Less than a year after Parliament incorporated the Sierra Leone Company with a Royal charter, its Board of Directors managed to raise £200,000 in shares, mostly from private capital. This time, the Company's general goal was "the Introduction of Civilization into Africa" through "the Establishment of a secure Factory at Sierra Leone, with the View to a new Trade in Produce, chiefly with the Interior."<sup>15</sup> In order to avoid the mistakes made by original settlers, the Company set commercial viability as its main and immediate priority.<sup>16</sup> Lured by false promises of free land grants, 1,190 black loyalists were brought in from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to populate the settlement as colonists and agrarian workers employed by the Company.<sup>17</sup> In 1800, the Company received 550 Maroons who, after rebelling against slavery in Jamaica, were recaptured and deported to Nova Scotia. By the time the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was adopted by Parliament in March of 1807, the Sierra Leone Company was completely bankrupt—since 1792 it had cost the state close to £1,000,000 in subsidies. At this point, the British government took control of the Company's assets and management, turning it into a Crown Colony in 1808.<sup>18</sup>

Despite its initial and ultimate failure, Sierra Leone's legacy point to two ways in which race, colonialism, and capitalism intersected at the turn of the nineteenth century. First, the project's vision of Africa as a source of raw materials for Britain's consumer industries was strictly contingent on a racialized division of labor informed as much by the Atlantic slave trade and slavery as by

---

<sup>14</sup> Stephen J. Braidwood, *Black Poor and White Philanthropists: London's Blacks and the Foundation of the Sierra Leone Settlement, 1786-1791* (Liverpool: Liverpool University, 1994), 225–49.

<sup>15</sup> "Report from the Committee on the Petition of the Court of Directors of the Sierra Leone Company," May 26, 1802, MS WO 1/352, p. 79, Africa and the Atlantic Islands, Sierra Leone, Sierra Leone Company, The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.

<sup>16</sup> Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor Versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 93.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London: Oxford University, 1962), 34.

<sup>18</sup> MS CO 267/9, CO 270/1, CO 270/4, The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.

abolitionism and colonial capitalism.<sup>19</sup> In this global configuration, black labor—whether waged, indentured, or enslaved—was defined as agrarian *par excellence*. In the same way Africa’s contributions to trade were, on the whole, limited to its natural resources, black labor was, for the most part, confined to the cultivation of raw materials that British workers manufactured into finished commodities. This system speaks to a colonial and racial division of labor that the Sierra Leone project did not so much reaffirm as it introduced by transforming elements of racialized slave labor and rendering them applicable to a system of free wage labor. Second, from its inception as a colony to its demise as a Company, Sierra Leone sustained a particular racial division of labor that, despite being founded on modern theories of racial difference, was justified as an inevitable product of the project’s Christian-humanitarian intent to abolish the slave trade. In other words, while the founders of the colony and the directors of the company deployed their antislavery mandate to justify the settlement’s reliance on a black workforce, this explanation—or rather, this alibi—only obscured the extent to which the project’s employment of black workers as menial farmers was grounded on earlier theories concerning the natural proclivity of black populations to perform agrarian work in tropical climates.

One of the central tenets of modern imperial ideologies is their “civilizing” mandate. While political theorists usually associate this aspect of colonial and imperial thinking with nineteenth-century liberals such as John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville, civilization was already a key concept in abolitionist projects to colonize Africa in the 1780s and, as I argue further on, in the colonial theories of Malachy Postlethwayt and Maurice Morgann in the 1750s and 1770s.<sup>20</sup> So,

---

<sup>19</sup> For a definition of colonial capitalism as it applies to British political thought, see: Ince, *Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism*.

<sup>20</sup> On liberal colonialism, see: Barbara Arneil, “Liberal Colonialism, Domestic Colonies and Citizenship,” *History of Political Thought* 33, no. 3 (2012): 491–523. On liberal imperialism and political theories of empire, see: Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*; Jennifer Pitts, “Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism: An Appendix,” in *Empire and Modern Political Thought*, ed. Sankar Muthu (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University, 2012), 351–88. On ideologies of empire see “Chapter 4:

beyond a commercial project, Smeathman's original plan for Sierra Leone sought to civilize Africa and abolish the slave trade. "My plan," he wrote in 1783, "would tend to emancipate and to civilize every year, some thousands of slaves, to dry up one great source of that diabolical commerce."<sup>21</sup> In light of its tropical climate, fertile soil, and abundant supply of native African labor, Smeathman defined Sierra Leone as "the finest field for exerting that species of industry, which is the surest foundation of national prosperity," namely agriculture.<sup>22</sup> Smeathman envisioned three key sources of agrarian labor for his plan: free natives in the vicinity of Sierra Leone, free blacks from across the Atlantic, and redeemed slaves purchased in the West coast of Africa. While Smeathman defined the first group—native Africans—as indolent and ignorant, he argued this was strictly a consequence of their habits, not their nature. "A very singular jurisprudence and customs [...] enchains the inhabitants of this part of the globe, and, till the charm is broken, must keep them in indigence, indolence and contempt."<sup>23</sup> In order to mend their ways, he suggested inducting natives into a system of free labor, free trade, and private property organized around the tenets of British common law and the precepts of Christianity. The second category of agrarian workers would come from "the vast numbers of people of colour in the West Indies, who though *called free*, labour under such intolerable oppression, that they would almost to a man unite themselves to such a community."<sup>24</sup> For the final third of his colony's workforce, he proposed redeeming captured slaves from neighboring slave factories and turning them into indentured laborers. This plan would entail purchasing slaves from outposts in Senegal, Gorée, and Gambia to work in the colony for free until

---

Ideologies of Empire" in Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University, 2016), 91–118.

<sup>21</sup> Smeathman, "Two Letters (1783)," 198.

<sup>22</sup> Smeathman, 205.

<sup>23</sup> Smeathman, 202.

<sup>24</sup> Smeathman, 204.

the cost of their redemption was paid in full.<sup>25</sup> Unlike free native Africans, Smeathman described redeemed slaves as naturally docile workers who would readily adopt the terms of civil society without resistance. “These people,” he discerned, “could not have the same customs and language, which they would give up for liberty, and readily agree to be governed by what they term *White-man’s fashion*.”<sup>26</sup> On the whole, Smeathman’s plan was strictly dependent on the condition that all black workers—natives, immigrants, and slaves—disavow their culture, national identity, customs, and language in exchange for membership in his free community as an agrarian workforce ruled by the government and regulations of a Christian commercial society.

In addition to black agrarian workers, Smeathman also envisions accommodating a non-agrarian class of white settlers composed of artisans, mechanics, administrators, teachers, botanists, and clergymen invested in advancing the commercial and civilizing missions of the colony. Reaffirming the racial division of labor in Smeathman’s plan, Granville Sharp’s regulations for the colony, based on a medieval law known as “Frankpledge,” made labor time the only accepted medium of exchange in the settlement. So, instead of buying commodities from white artisans with money, black farmers would pay “by giving the *merchant, or tradesman*, in return for [articles of trade] an indenture for as many *days labour* as the purchase is worth.”<sup>27</sup> In a setting where black farmers outnumbered white workmen by several orders of magnitude, black laborers were far more likely to be indentured to white artisans, especially if the latter were unable to supply these commodities at the rate which they were desired by black farmers. Like Smeathman, Sharp saw a valuable source of agrarian labor in employing freed slaves as an indentured workforce set to work for their freedom—without remuneration—for five to ten years. But Sharp added a further condition on the freedom of

---

<sup>25</sup> Smeathman, 205–6.

<sup>26</sup> Smeathman, 205.

<sup>27</sup> Sharp, *A Short Sketch of Temporary Regulations (Until Better Shall Be Proposed) for the Intended Settlement on the Grain Coast of Africa, Near Sierra Leona*, 74–75.

indentured workers. Beyond paying the colony for the cost of their redemption through unpaid labor, indentured servants were to continue working *pro bono* until their labor yielded a profit to the colony: 10% of the price originally paid for each worker.<sup>28</sup> As the colony evolved into a chartered company, the conditions for inequality between white and black settlers became more salient. When the Company's first Governor, Henry Thornton, found out that over one thousand black loyalists would immigrate from Nova Scotia in 1792, "he decided to send from England only qualified craftsmen or traders," which in the end was a total of less than fifty white workers, a mere fraction of the black agrarian labor force.<sup>29</sup>

On the political ideas about race animating abolitionist projects to colonize Africa, I contend that the Sierra Leone project was undergirded by the unchallenged scientific consensus among eighteenth-century thinkers that black Africans were, unlike white Europeans, naturally conditioned to live and work in the tropics. This theory was confirmed by empirical observations of European explorers and adventurers for whom, as Seymour Drescher put it, "Africans seemed, for whatever reason, favored by their rates of survival under the severe disease and labor conditions for competitive production of the principle staples of the American tropics and subtropics."<sup>30</sup> Smeathman assented to this belief in his 1786 "Plan of a Settlement to be Made Near Sierra Leone," arguing that his colony would offer people of color an opportunity to "enjoy perfect freedom" by being "settled in a country *congenial to their constitutions*."<sup>31</sup> In other words, black Africans were preordained by the nature of their racial identity to work in tropical plantations; that is, they were the optimal supply of labor for the Sierra Leone experiment not only because they were inexpensive and abundant but also because working in tropical fields was, in so many words, the natural calling of

---

<sup>28</sup> Sharp, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor Versus Slavery in British Emancipation*, 74–75.

<sup>31</sup> Smeathman, "Plan of a Settlement to Be Made near Sierra Leone (1786)," 209; emphasis mine.

their race.<sup>32</sup> A similar alibi was used by authorities in charge of settling Maroons in Nova Scotia who, in order to expedite and justify sending them to Sierra Leone in 1800, blamed the destitution of black refugees on the frigid North Atlantic climate rather than on the racially motivated by the neglectful conduct of Commonwealth officials towards the Maroons. As Ellen Gibson Wilson writes, “Whites on both sides of the Atlantic in succeeding generations have liked to think that the loyal blacks [...] were driven out of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in 1792 by dreams of the steamy sunshine of Africa.”<sup>33</sup> Yet, she continues, “The blacks themselves seldom mentioned the cold. It was well down on their list of grievances, which always led off with the failure to get land as freemen.” Philip Curtin adds that, despite their purportedly egalitarian views on human nature, abolitionist followed earlier patterns of tropical colonization, assuming “a racial division of labor even when it was not explicitly stated: the blacks would do the work and the whites would supervise.”<sup>34</sup> In the end, black workers embodied what Smeathman called the “tropical exuberance” of African nature—their dark skin was a mark of their tropical origins. According to abolitionists, then, the Sierra Leone Colony offered black Africans more than freedom, happiness, and prosperity; it was meant to be something of a “homecoming” for the black Atlantic diaspora created by the slave trade. In the next two sections I show how these registers of race, colonialism, and capitalism at Sierra Leone stemmed from earlier eighteenth-century colonial theories that articulated a new path for black labor within global capitalism after slavery.

## II. GLOBAL CAPITALISM AND COLONIAL VISIONS OF AFRICA: MALACHY POSTLETHWAYT

---

<sup>32</sup> In his scientific work on West African termites, Smeathman made a similar argument about how certain forms of social organization are determined by nature and climate. See: Henry Smeathman, *Some accounts of the termites, which are found in Africa and other hot climates* (London: J. Nichols, 1781).

<sup>33</sup> Ellen Gibson Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1976), 113–112. As Gibson notes, the central problems that led loyal blacks to Sierra Leone was their inability to acquire land, famine, and poverty, see: Gobson, 91-2.

<sup>34</sup> Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1964), 116.

Commenting on the late eighteenth-century colonization of West Africa by European abolitionists, Philip Curtin concluded that, “If any field of thought was neglected in planning for human happiness in Africa, it was certainly not political theory.”<sup>35</sup> While Curtin’s association between abolitionist colonialism and “human happiness in Africa” is at best questionable, he is certainly correct to emphasize the fundamental role political theory played in the conception and implementation of commercial colonies in West Africa by eighteenth-century British thinkers. Indeed, the social contractarian imaginary—running from Hobbes to Locke and Rousseau—was a salient motif in the history of African colonization.<sup>36</sup> In the same way Locke relied on images of a wild, unbound America as the natural and primitive grounds for a civilized and industrious political society, abolitionists painted a plenteous portrait of the African hinterland in defense of their own projects for a free society in the continent. From the 1750s to the turn of the nineteenth century, modern ideas about capitalism, civilization, and racial difference became the key ingredients of European inscriptions on Africa’s *tabula rasa*. “In tracing mankind as near as we can to their origin,” Malachy Postlethwayt wrote in 1758, “we find them in the general to have been no better civilized, than the Africans.”<sup>37</sup> As I argue in this section, the project to colonize Africa through the precepts of civilization, settlement, free trade, and wage-labor, so pointedly articulated by Equiano, Smeathman, and Sharp in the 1780s, had been popularized by Postlethwayt nearly thirty years earlier. While Postlethwayt is largely neglected by political theorists today, his influence on eighteenth-century economic and abolitionist discourse was unparalleled in Britain. His *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* went through four editions from 1752 to 1774 and was widely read across

---

<sup>35</sup> Curtin, 119.

<sup>36</sup> The eventual failure of these projects brought in radical revisions to these projects based on utopian ideas of a civil society by the likes of Thomas Spence and, later on, Robert Owen.

<sup>37</sup> Malachy Postlethwayt, *Britain’s Commercial Interest Explained and Improved; In a Series of Dissertations on Several Important Branches of Her Trade and Police*, vol. 2 (London: D. Browne, A. Millar, J. Whiston, B. White, and W. Sandby, 1757), 216.

Europe, including by Adam Smith, whose thinking about foreign trade was considerably influenced by Postlethwayt.<sup>38</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century, Postlethwayt's writings on Africa had made a significant impression on abolitionist thinkers and activists. This true in the work of C. B. Wadström, the tradition's most prolific thinker whose two-tome *An Essay on Colonization* (1794-1795) made him into one of the leading theorists of colonialism at the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>39</sup>

For most of the eighteenth century, British presence in Africa revolved around thirteen trading castles and forts—known as factories—along the continent's Gold Coast.<sup>40</sup> And although this meant that Britain's sovereignty over coastal territories was legally untenable, its commercial infrastructure was an influential institution in the transatlantic slave trade, exerting a considerable influence on the lives of native Africans.<sup>41</sup> In Upper Guinea, for instance, the Royal African Company commanded a massive and socially complex sphere of trade in the orbit of its factories that went as far back as the seventeenth century.<sup>42</sup> After 1750, however, control over Britain's trading network in the continent fell in the hands of the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa. At this point the Company was charged with administering all British castles, forts, outposts, and warehouses in the region, most of which had to be renovated and many others built from the

---

<sup>38</sup> Robert J. Bennett, "Malachy Postlethwayt, 1707-67: Genealogy and Influence of an Early Economist and 'Spin-Doctor,'" *Genealogists' Magazine* 18, no. 2 (2011): 1–8; Peter Groenewegen, *Eighteenth-Century Economics: Turgot, Beccaria and Smith and Their Contemporaries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 381.

<sup>39</sup> Carl Bernhard Wadström, *An Essay on Colonization, Particularly Applied to the West Coast of Africa*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (London: Darton and Harvey, 1794); Carl Bernhard Wadström, *An Essay on Colonization, Particularly Applied to the West Coast of Africa*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (London: Darton and Harvey, 1795); Jonas Ahlskog, "The Political Economy of Colonisation: Carl Bernhard Wadström's Case for Abolition and Civilisation," *Sjuttonbunderatal* 7, no. 0 (October 1, 2010): 146–67; Deirdre Coleman, *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> A. W. Lawrence, *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963).

<sup>41</sup> Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850*, 7; see also: Rebecca Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Rochester: University of Rochester, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> Colleen E. Kriger, *Making Money: Life, Death, and Early Modern Trade on Africa's Guinea Coast* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), 5.

ground up in the service of a booming slave trade.<sup>43</sup> And yet, despite its significant presence in the continent, Britain was not—by the middle of the century—invested in setting up a lasting colonial settlement in Africa the likes of which it had already established across the Atlantic. Up to this point, Britain’s mission in Africa was to sustain and expand its trade in slaves, not much else.

Paradoxically, Postlethwayt, one of the earliest proponents of establishing a commodity trade with Africa by harnessing its natural resources, was a leading advocate of the slave trade and had served in the Court of Assistants to the Royal African Company for over a decade before it was disbanded in 1750.<sup>44</sup> For most of his career as a Company official, Postlethwayt was a vocal and relentless advocate for the importance and necessity of maintaining the Royal African Company’s monopoly in the slave trade. But after the Company was replaced by a system of free trade under the newly-established Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, Postlethwayt’s position on slavery began to shift. In a text published in 1757 as *Britain’s Commercial Interest Explained*, he proposed that, rather than limiting its commercial activity to the coast, Britain should instead extend it “into the bowels of Africa, as might and would have unspeakably advantaged the trade, the wealth, and the power of the whole kingdom.”<sup>45</sup> To this end, Postlethwayt suggested refitting coastal factories into colonial settlements that would facilitate trade with natives residing deep in the backcountry, in lands that “abound with commodities of inestimable value,” including an “infinite variety of vegetable, mineral, and animal production[s], [...] which might afford an infinite variety of trafficable objects.”<sup>46</sup> Prefiguring both Equiano’s “endless field of commerce” and Smeathman’s plan to

---

<sup>43</sup> Ty M. Reese, “The Drudgery of the Slave Trade: Labor at Cape Coast Castle, 1750-1790,” in *The Atlantic Economy during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: Organization, Operation, Practice, and Personnel*, ed. Peter A. Coclanis (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2005), 277–96.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Leslie Brown, “Empire without America: British Plans for Africa in the Era of the American Revolution,” in *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic*, ed. Derek R. Peterson (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 88.

<sup>45</sup> Postlethwayt, *Britain’s Commercial Interest*, 1757, 2:201, 210.

<sup>46</sup> Postlethwayt, 2:215.

civilize Africa through commercial trade, Postlethwayt believed that Africa would “admit of a very extensive and lucrative commerce [...] if we can propagate the same into the very heart and center of these extensive territories.”<sup>47</sup> According to Postlethwayt, the African interior would not only provide Britain with an extended source of raw materials at a much shorter distance from English ports than its American and West Indian colonies; it would also compensate Britain if it were ever dispossessed of its New World territories. In addition to new valuable commodities such as diamonds, ivory, and camwood, the British could easily transplant to Africa the cash crops it cultivated across the Atlantic since, according to Postlethwayt, the tropical climate and soil are commensurate in both areas, which lie on the same latitude.<sup>48</sup>

Another advantageous externality of a commodity trade with the African interior is its potential to civilize the native population. “What has so much tended to civilize the human species as commerce?” Postlethwayt’s plan was to purvey a culture of European consumerism among the native populations of the African interior, cultivating among them a set of Western customs, habits, tastes, and sensibilities generative of sumptuous consumer desires that only British commodities can satiate.<sup>49</sup> “If we could so exert our commercial policy among these people,” he continues, “as to bring a few hundred thousand of them to cloath with our commodities, and to erect buildings to deck with our furniture, and to live something in the European way, would not such traffic prove far more lucrative than the slave-trade only, or the dealing with them only for those small quantities of gold, and other commodities which we do?”<sup>50</sup> If the British succeed at exciting the passions and reforming the manners of natives so they demand more and more British commodities, native populations would, in Postlethwayt’s words, and three decades later in those of Equiano and

---

<sup>47</sup> Postlethwayt, 2:215.

<sup>48</sup> Postlethwayt, 2:216.

<sup>49</sup> Postlethwayt, 2:217–19.

<sup>50</sup> Postlethwayt, 2:218.

Smeathman, “lay in time all nature’s work at our feet; they would clear their lands; take to the cultivation of those things we have found valuable amongst them, breed those animals we esteemed, and search, at our instigation, to the very center of the earth for all her invaluable treasures.”<sup>51</sup>

Colonizing the interior parts of Africa is the chief method “whereby traffic of this part of the globe may be advanced, for the benefit of the subjects of *Great-Britain* in particular.”<sup>52</sup> By Postlethwayt’s estimations, Portugal had implemented the most beneficial commercial model in Africa, which he believed the British should emulate to their advantage. From its “extensive colonies in *Africa*,” the Portuguese enjoy a “very great sway, influence and dominions over many of the countries adjacent to their settlements.”<sup>53</sup> Unlike most European states, the Portuguese are “not on the coast merely as a *factory*,” Postlethwayt discerns, “but they possess the country as a *colony* of their own, and command all the slaves that are to be had, by keeping the negroe kings and chiefs under their dominion.”<sup>54</sup> The Portuguese had effectively colonized parts of the African hinterland such as São Salvador, which, despite being situated some two hundred miles from the coast, the Portuguese have “so christianized in their way, that the barbarous paganism is here pretty much eradicated.”<sup>55</sup> By combining the twin institutions of global capitalism and empire—the factory and the colony—Britain would be able to expand its trade with and dominion of Africa. In short, Postlethwayt, concludes, “no consideration drawn from the barbarous state of the Africans should discourage our efforts to cultivate and extend our commerce amongst them to the utmost.”<sup>56</sup> We thus find in Postlethwayt’s theory of colonial capitalism a conceptual grammar for combining civilization with free trade that colored both Equiano’s “endless field of commerce” and the central tenets of

---

<sup>51</sup> Postlethwayt, 2:219.

<sup>52</sup> Malachy Postlethwayt, *The Importance of the African Expedition Considered* (London: C. Say and M. Cooper, 1758), 77.

<sup>53</sup> Postlethwayt, 86.

<sup>54</sup> Postlethwayt, 74.

<sup>55</sup> Postlethwayt, 75–76.

<sup>56</sup> Postlethwayt, 99.

Smeathman's "Plan." But beyond these textual resonances, Postlethwayt's proposal to unite the factory and the colony in a single African settlement was enshrined, almost verbatim, in the 1791 mandate of the Sierra Leone Company, which called for "the Introduction of *Civilization* into Africa [through] the Establishment of a secure *Factory* at Sierra Leone, with the View to a *new Trade in Produce, chiefly with the Interior.*"<sup>57</sup>

Despite Postlethwayt's investment in slavery during his tenure at the Royal African Company, by the late 1750s his position on the matter had changed. "For my own part," he admitted, "I cannot help expressing my dislike to the slave-trade, and wish an end could be put to it; and I am inclined to believe that practicable without injury to our plantations."<sup>58</sup> However, since at this time he saw no viable alternative labor supply for Britain's sugar plantations as abundant and cheap as slaves, he added: "We cannot think of giving up the slave-trade, notwithstanding my good wishes that it could be done."<sup>59</sup> Postlethwayt believed that, without slave labor, Britain would run its colonies at a disadvantage to competitors who still employed slaves. It was in supporting this argument that Postlethwayt first elaborated the racial logic of his colonial theory, which hinged on a racial group's natural propensity to live and work in an environment congenial to their physical constitution. "While no other means can be found to supply our colonies with white people sufficient to perform the laborious business require[d] in our sugar-colonies; or, if experience should prove that whites like blacks cannot sustain the heat, and the fatigue necessary."<sup>60</sup> Postlethwayt's racial politics conform to a climatic theory of race that constructs black Africans as naturally suited to live and work in tropical climates. For Postlethwayt, nature is always "*suitable to its climate and*

---

<sup>57</sup> "Report from the Committee on the Petition of the Court of Directors of the Sierra Leone Company," May 26, 1802, MS WO 1/352, p. 79, Africa and the Atlantic Islands, Sierra Leone, Sierra Leone Company, The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom; emphasis mine.

<sup>58</sup> Postlethwayt, *Britain's Commercial Interest*, 1757, 2:217.

<sup>59</sup> Postlethwayt, 2:221.

<sup>60</sup> Postlethwayt, 2:221.

situation.”<sup>61</sup> And if “soils of all kinds, and in all climes are improvable,” he asks, “why not the human nature? Are not the rational faculties of the negroe people in the general equal to those of any other of the human species?” In other words, racial difference is not a mark of innate cultural inferiority; like their barren land, which can be transformed into productive plantations through capitalist cultivation, Africans are susceptible to being civilized through Western culture and free trade. What racial difference does signify, on the other hand, is an innate disposition to dwell in certain parts of the world and withstand laboring under its environmental conditions. Postlethwayt makes his most clear statement on race when discussing whiteness. “England,” he contends,

[I]s an island placed as a center to the circular globe, towards which, commerce may draw a line from the whole circumference; it is blessed with a moderation of every element; no scorching sun negroes, nor frigid zone benumbs its natives; a medium influence strengthens and beautifies its inhabitants, rendering them, neither of the unwieldy [sic] or pigmy race, but fit to endure the toils of labour.<sup>62</sup>

England’s temperate climate, that is, accounts as much for its fertile soil as for the natural dispositions of its people, who—being as mild as the climate in which they are nurtured—possess an imagination that is “neither too airy for deep contemplation, nor too dull for invention.”

Finally, according to Postlethwayt’s theory of colonial trade, Britain had a direct interest in precluding Africa from developing into an industrial economy. That is, Britain’s policy in Africa was simply to introduce capitalist agriculture and, from then on, to maintain the continent in an arrested state of economic progress. Like most political economists of his day, Postlethwayt understood that

---

<sup>61</sup> Postlethwayt, 2:217; emphasis mine.

<sup>62</sup> Malachy Postlethwayt, *Britain’s Commercial Interest Explained and Improved; In a Series of Dissertations on Several Important Branches of Her Trade and Police*, vol. 1 (London: D. Browne, A. Millar, J. Whiston, B. White, and W. Sandby, 1757), 182.

the most advantageous imports for an industrial society such as Britain were unfinished raw goods. In order to maximize its gains from trade, Britain's raw imports had to be as cheap and bare as possible, void of any added value from manufacturing. "The importation of foreign materials for manufacturing, unwrought instead of importing them ready manufactured," he concluded, "saves a great deal of money to the nation."<sup>63</sup> In other words, confining African economic development to agriculture is more advantageous to Britain's economic interest. As a British colony, Africa will function strictly as a source of inexpensive, abundant, and unprocessed goods, yielding a considerable surplus to Britain's industrialist class and more jobs to British factory workers. In the whole, Postlethwayt develops three central elements of the Sierra Leone project that its founders seldom elaborated on: first, the advantages of combining the trading factory and the colony in a plan intended to develop and civilize Africa through free commerce and settler colonialism; second, the reason why the agrarian workforce in this colony must be composed of black Africans; and third, the importance of maintaining Africa in an agrarian state of economic development.

### III. A RACIAL THEORY OF LABOR AND A LABOR THEORY OF RACE: MAURICE MORGANN

In addition to Postlethwayt, the Sierra Leone project can be traced back to the colonial ideas of Maurice Morgann, an "imperial insider," Shakespeare scholar, and advisor on colonial affairs to the President of the Board of Trade, Lord Shelburne.<sup>64</sup> In 1772, Morgann published a plan for the abolition of the slave trade as a colonial experiment in free labor for freed slaves, which he summarized as "a proposal for the extension of the future power and commerce of Great Britain."<sup>65</sup>

His proposals outlined measures for "the introduction of free Negroes into an assigned part of

---

<sup>63</sup> Postlethwayt, *Britain's Commercial Interest*, 1757, 2:370.

<sup>64</sup> Peter S. Onuf and Eliga H. Gould, *Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2005), 304–6; Trevor Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America, 1650–1820* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 2015), 216–17; Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006).

<sup>65</sup> Maurice Morgann, *A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery in the West Indies* (London: William Griffin, 1772), 1.

Florida; that lands be granted them, and their propagation encouraged in that country.”<sup>66</sup> While Morgann’s plan differed from Postlethwayt’s in its explicit goal to abolish the slave trade by introducing black slaves into a regime of free labor, both projects converged in two significant regards: first, they appealed to the global ambitions and commercial interests of empire, rather than those of private capital; second, they advanced an environmental theory of race in which racial difference and human equality were complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

As much for Morgann as for Postlethwayt, racial difference indexed a population’s natural propensity to flourish in their native environment. While both authors conceded that black Africans and white Europeans were racially, ethnically, and culturally distinct, they maintained that these differences were in no way invidious. On their accounts, members of one race cannot be inherently superior or inferior to those of another because human beings are naturally equal in what concerns their intellectual abilities and propensity to be “civilized” and “educated.” Instead, racial difference according to Postlethwayt and Morgann was a product of environmental factors such as climate. In other words, the particular physical traits of each race correspond to the natural conditions of the environment in which that racial group originated. This view of race was set decidedly against popular currents of eighteenth-century English racist thought in which caricature writers, for instance, commonly figured blackness as a sign of innate indolence, pathological virility, and intellectual deformity.<sup>67</sup> Still, the climatic theories of racial difference advanced by Postlethwayt and Morgann were well known in eighteenth-century Europe. From the 1740s to the 1770s, prominent naturalists such as Comte de Buffon in France and Johan Blumenbach in Germany had popularized the theory of racial monogenism with recourse to conjectural arguments about the climate’s effect

---

<sup>66</sup> Morgann, 2.

<sup>67</sup> James Walvin, *Black and White: The Negro and English Society, 1555-1945* (London: Penguin Press, 1973), 160.

on skin pigmentation.<sup>68</sup> The distinctive and original aspect of the abolitionist understanding of racial difference inheres in the subtle ways they connected race to labor. In other words, abolitionists used racial difference as evidence that distinct races were naturally disposed to live and work in specific environments. Moreover, unlike academic naturalists and mainstream caricaturists, abolitionists mobilized these ideas in the service of political, social, and economic ends.

For Morgann, “Nature has fitted all her creatures for the climate they are destined to inhabit. This provision is very apparent in the wise distribution of the various genius of the vegetative and brute creation, all adapted to climate.”<sup>69</sup> In accordance with the wisdom and prudence of nature, Morgann proposes to “furnish our most southern colony on the Continent of America with a race of people, whose constitutions are best adapted by nature to labour in that country, and to sustain the heats of the climate.”<sup>70</sup> Like “a breed of cattle” that may only “thrive kindly or increase” in an environment congenial to its nature, members of different races are naturally fit—and therefore destined—to work in climates appropriate to their natural constitutions. With a single stroke, Morgann’s theory naturalizes both race and labor, enmeshing the one in the other. In the same way different species of termites, plants, and animals are naturally engineered to survive and reproduce in different environments, the distinct racial characteristics of humans reveal their “natural” proclivities to labor in their “native” terrains and climates. On Morgann’s telling, black Africans, native to the tropics, were naturally endowed with the “most apt constitution” for performing hard agrarian labor in hot climates. “It were well if our statesmen, less engaged in the pursuits of temporary policy, had given some attention to the wisdom of nature.”<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor Versus Slavery in British Emancipation*, 73–87.

<sup>69</sup> Morgann, *A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery in the West Indies*, 4–5.

<sup>70</sup> Morgann, 4.

<sup>71</sup> Morgann, 11.

The “original and essential difference in the corporal constitution of the whites and blacks,” Morgann discerns, “becomes apparent to us chiefly by colour, and by that woolly hair bestowed on the natives of Africa, as a defence against a sun, whose beams beat directly on their heads.” As Morgann reiterates throughout his text, racial difference is solely physical: “both experience, and the nature of man, considered as a presiding rational animal, forbid us to suppose that there is any original or essential difference in the mental part, however our bodies may be varied by colour, or any other corporeal distinction.”<sup>72</sup> From this, he argues that, “The natives of Africa are better able to bear extreme heat, and to labour in the Torrid Zones, than the whites of Europe; and that the former [natives of Africa] may, under the influence of a right policy, be induced to emulate, in one climate, the industry of the latter, in another.”<sup>73</sup> Or, in blunt terms: “blacks are better suited by their constitutions to labour in the hot climates than whites.”<sup>74</sup>

But physical difference attains a particularly significant meaning in a plan devoted to *manual* wage-labor. In this case, what Morgann calls “corporeal distinction” marks what kind of body is best suited to perform a given form of labor under certain environmental conditions. Morgann thus racializes labor by rendering black bodies as *naturally* fit to withstand the heat of tropical climates and, therefore, as better suited than whites to the agrarian labor necessary to cultivate cash crops in the tropics. Like Postlethway, Morgann argues that exposing native Africans to commercial society is conducive to civilizing them. And although Postlethway limits this project to free trade, Morgann extends it to free labor: “The love of independence, of gain of fame; the gratifications of pride, vanity, ambition, avarice, and every human passion, would certainly raise among them a Spirit of industry and atchievement [sic], which at present, the lash alone compels them.”<sup>75</sup> The freedom of

---

<sup>72</sup> Morgann, 5.

<sup>73</sup> Morgann, 6.

<sup>74</sup> Morgann, 8.

<sup>75</sup> Morgann, 7.

wage-labor is more effective as an impetus for hard work than brute force under slavery. As English industrialists were beginning to realize around this time, workers are most productive when their employer recognizes and rewards them for their effort. Beyond being punished and disciplined, workers must be motivated. It was in large part based on this hypothesis that the pottery manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood trained his workers through free apprenticeships, the capitalist reformer David Dale shortened the workday in his industrial community at New Lanark, and the entrepreneur Matthew Boulton founded sick clubs, schools, and dispensaries for workers at his Soho factory.<sup>76</sup>

Moreover, Morgann's account of English artisans being propelled to work by rewards and benefits rather than tyrannical punishments brings to mind an idyllic image of industrial society as humane, just, and orderly: "Who that has seen the Spirit of industry toiling in the streets of London, who that has heard of our draymen, our watermen, or our miners, can doubt, if freedom does not furnish inducements and supports of labour beyond all the terrors and the inflicted punishments of tyranny?"<sup>77</sup> These examples are also telling of the racial division of labor animating Morgann's plan: blacks, naturally "capable of the most extreme toil in those [hot] climates," will be farm peons, while white workers will transform these raw materials into commodities in the temperate, industrializing parts of the empire, such as England and the northeast provinces of America.<sup>78</sup> The plan, then, is to "stock, in the farming dialect, the new acquisition of Florida with such a breed of men, from whose industry we may most reasonably expect the largest return of such commodities as are the production of, or may be produced in, that country."<sup>79</sup> Because he sees white Europeans as naturally unfit for agrarian labor in tropical climates, Morgann deems "an effectual settlement of Florida by

---

<sup>76</sup> Paul Mantoux, *The Industrial Revolution in the Eighteenth Century: An Outline of the Beginnings of the Modern Factory System in England (1928)* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 399–440, 465.

<sup>77</sup> Morgann, *A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery in the West Indies*, 7.

<sup>78</sup> Morgann, 6.

<sup>79</sup> Morgann, 9.

whites altogether hopeless.”<sup>80</sup> The prospect of success would be even more abysmal if the colony were populated by Native Americans whose “savage liberty” Morgann deems irreconcilable with the principles of law, agriculture, and commerce.<sup>81</sup>

In the colony, freed black slaves would cultivate raw materials such as hemp, silk, indigo, and spices, which would be traded and imported to artisans in northern American provinces or Britain charged with finishing, marketing, and selling them as consumer goods. For Morgann, a capitalist economy organized by the racial division of black agrarian and white industrial labor would “furnish so increasing a people with all the necessaries, conveniencies, and luxuries of life.”<sup>82</sup> Not only that, this system would also forge an amicable bond between both races since, by abolishing slavery, it would consequently eradicate its hold on the social meaning of racial difference. In such a racially divided yet harmoniously connected society, Morgan had it, race could not be the grounds for enmity between whites and blacks because “it is not a nominal, but a real and a lasting distinction; a distinction founded in physical, not moral causes; and which Nature, not man, has established.”<sup>83</sup> Rather than a sign of economic wealth, social esteem, and political power, Morgann writes,

[T]he colours of men are distinctions of another nature; they are the distinctions of *climate* and *constitution*; and whilst; as such, they infer *distance*, they can never imply a real or supposed opposition of interest; but, on the contrary, a common and mutual exchange of benefits, by means of a friendly intercourse and commerce.<sup>84</sup>

For Morgann, racism is the product of an “unnatural mixture of climate and complexion on the same spot of existence.” Additionally, the hostility between blacks and whites stems from racial

---

<sup>80</sup> Morgann, 9.

<sup>81</sup> Morgann, 24.

<sup>82</sup> Morgann, 26.

<sup>83</sup> Morgann, 21.

<sup>84</sup> Morgann, 22.

slavery's reconfiguration of the world's population, forcibly placing people in environments and geographical regions incompatible with their natural dispositions. This unequal state of affairs, he concludes, will continue "till the violated order of Nature is restored, and the climates of that country are divided between their proper and destined inhabitants."<sup>85</sup> Differently put, racial difference is not naturally generative of moral ills; it is an unequal society that recasts race as a source of invidious distinctions among humans. If slavery were replaced by free trade and free labor, racial difference would retain its natural meaning and cease to be socially or economically significant. "Nature herself," Morgann discerns, "will *necessarily* link [whites and blacks] in intercourse and concord."<sup>86</sup> Capitalism is called upon to restore the violated order of nature and set both races on a path of harmony and mutual advantage.

In the end, the political goal of Morgann's plan was to strengthen and globalize the British empire: "Thus wisely availing herself both of moral and physical causes, no longer weakened and disgraced by slavery or refrained by climate, but rising upon the sure foundations of equality and justice, might Great Britain, aggrandized and invigorated at home, stretch forth, with irresistible power, her sable [black] arm through every region of the Torrid Zone."<sup>87</sup> Populating the "Torrid Zone" with Britain's "sable arm" marks the denouement of Morgann's plan: to colonize the tropics with black agrarian workers. "We might next turn our eyes to Africa," he concludes by echoing Postlethway's melding of factories and colonial settlements, "where, instead of seeing a few whites languishing and piddling for gum in Senegal, we might behold the whole coast colonised, and our commerce pushed through the very heart of that continent."<sup>88</sup> Finally, Morgann justifies the gradual liberation of black slaves on the grounds that they are not yet ready to be free since slavery has

---

<sup>85</sup> Morgann, 22–23.

<sup>86</sup> Morgann, 26.

<sup>87</sup> Morgann, 27.

<sup>88</sup> Morgann, 27.

precluded them from being civilized by capitalism. “It must be allowed to be wholly impracticable [...] to liberate the present race of slaves; nor indeed, if it were in other respects practicable, are they capable of receiving freedom; their ignorance and their bad habits effectually forbid it.”<sup>89</sup>

\* \* \*

The unifying idea behind abolitionist projects to colonize Sierra Leone was an implicit and unchallenged understanding of labor as a naturally ordained form of productive activity contingent on the “natural” disposition of different races to live and work in particular climates. Insofar as it constructed racial difference as the mark of a natural division of labor, such a concept of race was not simply a racial theory of labor, but also a labor theory race. If the division of labor at Sierra Leone had been based, as abolitionists claimed to believe, solely on the inalienable natural equality of all human beings, then the type of labor black workers were destined to perform once freed from slavery would not have been predetermined a priori by their race, much less would it remain the prerogative of white Europeans. By and large, the natural proclivities of black Africans to work in tropical plantations was a deciding factor in abolitionist plans to imagine a future for black labor after slavery. Moreover, the idea that capitalism was capable of civilizing native populations was a peculiar position for abolitionists to hold given their knowledge that free trade and Europe’s booming consumer demand for luxury commodities was what set the slave trade afoot in the first place. While abolitionists were careful to emphasize the ways in which the slave trade had precluded Africa from becoming a modern civilization, they downplayed the active role international commerce played in this process. Yet, Sierra Leone officials were that the demands of a rapidly industrializing society alone could have intensified the slave trade to the unprecedented levels it reached in the final decades of the eighteenth century. Abolitionists were equally cognizant that capitalism created the class of white planters and merchants responsible for preserving the Atlantic

---

<sup>89</sup> Morgann, 13.

slave economy. Additionally, abolitionists agreed that industrial capitalism was to blame for eroding rural traditions and transforming pious and industrious peasants into an “unruly” and “disorderly” working class.<sup>90</sup> In order to prevent black workers at Sierra Leone from the debauched manners of English workers, both the Colony and the Company combined a medieval agrarian regime of order, discipline, indenture, and Christian morality with a modern, industrial system of free labor and time notation that mirrored those implemented in English factories. “The daily commencement of publick labour and of hired labour,” Sharp announced in 1786, “should be limited to stated periods of time, rendered uniform and general, throughout the settlement, by the periodical summons of a publick bell, as in our *dock yards* and great manufactories.”<sup>91</sup>

Finally, the ideas of race, colonialism, and capitalism that emerged from the Sierra Leone experiment combined the capitalist rewards of free and waged labor with its punitive apparatus of impersonal domination and labor discipline. So, while black Africans were introduced to a system of free labor, they were decidedly not free to determine what type of work they could pursue, nor were they free to weigh in on the geographical location of their workplace. Instead, their work and workplace had been naturally delimited a priori by their racial disposition to withstand working the land under the scorching sun. On top of these direct limitations on their liberties as workers, black colonists at Sierra Leone were thrust upon a political regime of labor overdetermined by mechanisms of capitalist domination that imposed further social, external, and structural constraints on their freedoms.<sup>92</sup> It was by recourse to the workings of a global capitalist market that Sierra Leone officials justified rationing food, confiscating land, raising taxes, indenturing free workers, and other measures that directly oppressed the settlement’s black working class. Protesting the patterns

---

<sup>90</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1975).

<sup>91</sup> Morgann, *A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery in the West Indies*, 15.

<sup>92</sup> For a recent treatment of capital’s mechanisms of impersonal domination, see: William Clare Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2016).

of capitalist domination at Sierra Leone, three black settlers who had escaped slavery in Britain's West Indian sugar plantations—Ishmael York, Stephen Peters, and Isaac Anderson—wrote to the colony's Governor in 1798: "Having [found] ourselves *oppressed*, [we] would wish to [...] lay before your honour all our grievances and our Distresses which we are encountering with here."<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>93</sup> Sierra Leone Company Council Minutes, 1796-1799, January 15, 1798, MS CO 270/4, p. 186, The National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom.