

On Insurrections

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On January 6, 2021, many learned the meaning of the word *insurrection* for the first time. When a violent mob stormed the US Capitol, captured on live television, words did not come easy. *Insurrection* sounds so antiquated, so out of the realm of possibility! Yet in front of our eyes, individuals wielding weapons and dressed in tactical gear, homemade costumes, and “Make America Great Again” T-shirts overwhelmed police barriers and threatened lawmakers who were voting to certify Joe Biden’s victory as the forty-sixth president. Americans still do not agree on what they saw that day or what it means.

Two articles exploring literature of liberation point toward the long history of insurrection as a pathway to freedom, albeit pursued by those in different positions from the January 6 rioters. These two articles, “The Fate of St. Domingo Awaits You’: Robert Wedderburn’s Unfinished Revolution,” by Shelby Johnson, and “Phillis Wheatley on the Streets of Revolutionary Boston and in the Atlantic World,” by Betsy Erkkila, bring to light similar ways that Wedderburn and Wheatley unsettle tyrannical racial hierarchies in their writing, portending through imaginative and literal political resistance an assured liberation.¹ Bringing these articles into conversation with an episode of the *Why Is This Happening?* podcast featuring Ta-Nehisi Coates and Chris Hayes, recorded a day after the January 6 attack, can help disentangle differing notions of freedom that drive these case studies of insurrection and make us more aware of the practice of liberation as ongoing.² On January 6 the “freedom” that insurrectionists championed was not articulated clearly, but the attackers were motivated by a general unwillingness to accept a futuristic America: a pluralistic, progressive democracy with the broad participation of diverse peoples (peoples who are often the targets of Donald Trump’s ire). While the attack was certainly planned, it was not well organized; many who gathered were without a clear purpose aside from disrupting the peaceful transfer of power from Trump to Biden. Wedderburn’s and Wheatley’s embrace of insurrection, on the other hand, is driven by commitment to freedom unbound by systems (economic, political, national) that hinge on racial hierarchies (slavery most egregiously). For Wedderburn and Wheatley, liberation is not about who leads in a particular historical moment but about who is empowered in a transformative future.

In their conversation, Coates and Hayes are earnest in their assertion that what happened on January 6 is not as unprecedented as it may seem; America is a

country with a violent origin story, after all. Hayes explains, “It was founded on violent insurrection. We don’t study this part of the founding, but it was unruly mob violence a lot of the times. It was like British customs officials being dragged through the streets and tarred and feathered and beaten to death as crowds cheered on. It was real gnarly.” Coates responds by saying, “It is not simply that ordinary American citizens haven’t reckoned with the history. It’s that you’re in the hands of leadership who haven’t quite reckoned with the history.” As a scholar of Native American and Indigenous studies, I would agree that violence is inherent in America’s origin, but not only for the reasons Coates and Hayes give. The founding of the United States—and its continuance as a nation-state—depends on Indigenous dispossession, enacted in many campaigns of violence against North America’s first peoples. Coates and Hayes are right: America has not reckoned with its history. Doing so requires not only acknowledgment of this violent origin but also an openness to imagining—and acting—according to a future otherwise, which for many non-Natives feels like an impossibility. What if “land back” were not a slogan but a promise?

The radical assuredness of the activism of Wedderburn and Wheatley reminds me of literal—not symbolic—Indigenous land back movements, which intersect in important ways with global civil rights and antislavery movements. Wedderburn warns of insurrection in an impending Jamaican uprising ignited by the Haitian Revolution. Wedderburn, in Johnson’s analysis, is compelled both by present struggles against poverty and the prophetic conviction that liberation is assured, if in the future, beyond his own participation and with transnational reach. Likewise, Erkkila makes the case that Wheatley, alongside her activism expressed through anti-slavery poems, was also engaged in the street activism that defied British colonial rule in early America. Her alliance with interracial working-class revolutionaries, her correspondence with Mohegan minister and Native independence leader Samson Occom, and her more cosmopolitan sensibility post-emancipation are evidence, Erkkila explains, of Wheatley’s vision of insurrection, of the fulfillment of a global promise of liberation. In Erkkila’s reading, several of Wheatley’s poems reflect the revolutionaries’ broad rejection of British minoritarian rule, with slavery at the heart of its failure.

Hayes and Coates also discuss minoritarian rule as a factor in this moment when, in the wake of the January 6 insurrection, democracy feels so fragile. Hayes names the Supreme Court and the Senate as examples of the way Republicans are presiding with minoritarian rule, since a Republican president who lost the popular vote named several court appointees while outdated filibuster rules all but require supermajorities for legislation to be passed. The two journalists equate minoritarian rule with white supremacy and tie the January 6 attack to this preoccupation with who will rule rather than a concern for freedom, which is a distinction that is evident in its contrast with the insurrections advocated by Wedderburn and Wheatley.

While Hayes and Coates note the galvanizing impact of Black Lives Matter on those who chose to attack the Capitol as one example of this dogged commitment to white supremacy, I also identify another clear “own” in the number of

participants who “played Indian” via their costumes. The most prominent of these was Jacob Anthony Chansley (Jake Angeli, “QAnon Shaman”), who, shirtless, wore a helmet/headdress with attached horns and face paint. Chansley’s tattoos, visible on his bare chest, are Odinist symbols, some of which are now co-opted by white supremacist organizations. Coupled with his appearance, Chansley’s fashioning himself as a “shaman” with the alternate name “Yellowstone Wolf” channels a twisted and vague understanding of Indigenous identity. The Cherokee scholar Joseph M. Pierce interprets Chansley’s appearance as follows:

Storming the Capitol was an expression of the inability to imagine a world in which white people do not automatically and inevitably wield the power over life and death in this country built on genocide and slavery. But this imaginary is unthinkable without first positioning Native Americans as inherently closer to “nature,” only to erase us from that natural landscape, and then, finally, replace us with white men posing as Indians. This is the history of settler colonialism in the United States. Angeli is symptomatic of this history, not an outlier.³

Believing not only that Trump is the only legitimate president but also that only their votes—and their identities—are legitimately American, the 2021 insurrectionists seemed to be motivated more by a concern about legitimacy than freedom. This preoccupation with determining and enforcing the limits of freedom is a key distinction from antislavery insurrection, which transcends race or nationality and has unity as a central aim.

As depressing as it is to recognize the power and influence of those who strive to rule rather than govern, Johnson, Erkkila, and Hayes and Coates all provide insight into the ongoing work in practice and in imagination that liberation requires and the optimism that is unmistakable in its leaders. Hayes and Coates point toward the surprising political successes of Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff, who, buoyed by the strategies that Stacey Abrams brought to the get-out-the-vote effort in Georgia, are examples of what is possible when commitment to the cause (and to sharing the struggle) is stalwart, even when the odds are tall. As *insurrection* has reentered the discourse concerning whether America may fulfill its promise, these three readings remind us that liberation is assured, though unfinished.

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Notes

- 1 Johnson, “‘Fate of St. Domingo’”; Erkkila, “Phillis Wheatley on the Streets.”
- 2 Hayes, “Attack on the Capitol.”
- 3 Pierce, “Capitol Rioter.”

Works Cited

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