Introduction

Abolitionism and Political Thought in Britain and East Africa

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In 1931, Zakaliya Lugangwa and sixty-three compatriots wrote to the governor of the British protectorate of Uganda, the Anglican bishop, and the secretary of state for the colonies to complain about the government of Mubende District. Mubende, historically part of the Bunyoro state, had with the backing of British administrators been folded into the kingdom of Buganda in the late nineteenth century. British administrators regarded Buganda’s hegemony over the disputed territory as an administrative convenience. Lugangwa and his compatriots, by contrast, argued that Ganda rulers were making them slaves. They catalogued the tyrannies of Ganda government—schools conducted exclusively in the Ganda language, discriminatory rules about land tenure—and cast themselves in a familiar moral drama: “the thing that hurts us most is Slavery which has been practiced over us. . . . We wish of the British Government that every country subject to the English Flag should enjoy freedom and that slavery should be done away with. . . . Free us from Bondage in which we are, let us go back to our mother land Bunyoro.”

Abolitionism had many advocates in colonial Africa. Activists like Lugangwa used abolitionist language to dramatize the starkly unequal power relations of colonial government and to transform their partisan political interests into a moral problem that demanded attention. In the British mandated territory in Tanganyika, activists of the Tanganyika African National Union drew from rural people’s own vocabulary to
characterize the cadre of government-appointed chiefs as utawala wa kitunywa, a “slave regime.” TANU activists argued that national independence would bring aburu, “freedom,” conceived both as political sovereignty and as liberation from slavery. Just to the north, in the colony of Kenya, Kikuyu detainees held in government-run camps during the Mau Mau war were similarly representing their situation in an abolitionist framework. In a 1957 petition to the commissioner of prisons, detainees at the Sanjusi Island camp complained over their paltry rations, the hard work they were forced to perform, and their inadequate clothing. “Now we have learned that instead of being detained, the government has turned us to be slaves,” they wrote, “for we are employed in the same work as African slaves were employed in America.” In 1954, detainees at the Manyani camp wrote to the secretary of state for the colonies, to Jawaharlal Nehru, and to parliamentarian Fenner Brockway to complain that “the Kenya Government wants to make us its slaves. Would you please inquire this of the British Government of our Queen Elizabeth II to help all people . . . not to be made Kenya slaves.”

In Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and other locales, subject peoples were exerting political leverage over local colonial authorities by representing themselves as slaves. There were other roles in which they could cast themselves. In the kingdom of Buganda, for example, the founder of the separatist African Orthodox Church replied to the Anglican bishop’s condescension by comparing himself with “Martin Luther, Calvin, Erasmus, [the] Huguenots, Henry VIII, Parker, Wycliffe, Cranmer, King Edward VI . . . Queen Elizabeth, Wolsey, the Protestant Episcopal Church, Booth, the Scotch church, the old Catholic church of Holland,” and other advocates for Christian orthodoxy. His contemporaries in the populist Bataka Party sometimes compared themselves with Oliver Cromwell, highlighting their opposition to the powers that Buganda’s king enjoyed. African activists drew on a wide range of historical precedents in order to validate their contemporary political projects. But for people confronting the starkly unequal power relationships that British colonialism cultivated, for prisoners, ethnic minorities, forced laborers, and nationalist politicians, being a slave was good politics. Abolitionist rhetoric was, among other things, a means of making political inequalities look unjust. What abolitionist rhetoric did particularly effectively was dramatize petitioners’ plight as exploited subjects, suffering under local authorities’ tyranny. By positioning themselves in this way, African entrepreneurs obliged British administrators in faraway London to act
in order to uphold British honor. In speaking as abolitionists, Africans on the colonial periphery brought the imperium close to hand.

Historians working within their separate subdisciplines have sectioned off the whole field of moral and political discourse that abolitionist thought supported. There is a vast literature about the politics of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. There is a separate, equally vast scholarship about slavery and emancipation in the Atlantic world. And there is a growing historiography about colonial Africa's intellectual and political life. What these chronological and geographic partitions obscure are the ongoing uses to which abolitionist symbolism, rhetoric, and ideology could be put. The East African activists who filled British officials' mailboxes with petitions about slavery were not contemporaries of Wilberforce or Clarkson. Neither were they actually engaged in the liberation of slaves. But thinkers in anglophone Africa could nonetheless appropriate the discourse of abolitionism in order to lend moral authority to projects that were secular in character. Anglophone Africa's activists knew William Wilberforce, David Livingstone, and other advocates of British abolitionism through the dozens of vernacular-language biographies that missionaries published. Mau Mau detainees ransacked the slim collection of books available from their camps' libraries and found therein accounts of the slave trade and the struggle against it. African politicians in 1950s Zanzibar composed dozens of essays hymning Livingstone, John Kirk, and other abolitionists, using their rhetoric to dramatize the brutalities of "Arab" slaveholders. Abolitionist discourse helped Zanzibar's African activists configure their political situation in racial terms and gave them a grammar with which to reply to Arab elites' cultural condescension (Glassman, this volume). For these entrepreneurs, British history was close at hand. Their chronological remoteness from the eighteenth century did not make it impossible for these thinkers to position themselves as subjects of abolitionist discourse.

The present volume arises out of a lecture series organized at the University of Cambridge to mark the bicentenary of the Act for the Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade. New Labour was in 2007 fighting a deeply controversial war in Iraq, and the Blair government seized on the bicentenary of abolition as an opportunity to stiffen the backs of the British public. The Heritage Lottery Fund disbursed some twenty million pounds to fund public events celebrating abolition. The Royal Mail issued a commemorative coin and a series of stamps. Inspirational biographies describing William Wilberforce's life were published, and a hagiographic film,
Amazing Grace, was released in March of that year (Hilton, this volume). In his November 2006 pronouncement on the bicentenary, Tony Blair publicly expressed his "deep sorrow" at Britain's involvement with the Atlantic slave trade. But against the backdrop of the Iraq war, he also called the bicentenary an opportunity to "increase our determination to shape the world with the values we share." For Blair, the bicentenary was a pedagogic event, an occasion to remind an increasingly skeptical public about imperial Britain's historical role as an agent of civility and human rights.  

Abolitionism and Imperialism was conceived as a contrarian effort to challenge the self-congratulatory frame in which the bicentenary of the Abolition Act was being cast. The authors argue that abolition was never a singular achievement for British idealism. They show, rather, that abolitionism was a joint production, authored not by a few British activists but by a cosmopolitan set of actors, working on a disparate set of projects from a variety of positions. The cast of characters was broad. British businessmen were interested in the agronomic potential of West Africa. They promoted free-labor colonies and experimented with crops that might fuel the British economy (Brown and Drescher, this volume). West African rulers, working to keep hold over their politics' demographic and political future, opposed the slave trade where it upset social order (Thornton, this volume). Caribbean planters were in the early nineteenth century experimenting with some of the principles of free labor. The evidence they generated helped abolitionists argue that slave emancipation would advantage the plantation economy (Morgan, this volume). Miners, colliers, and other middling artisans endangered by the inhumane conditions of Britain's new factories put their names to antislavery petitions as an act of protest against industrial capitalism. Working-class radicals identified themselves as "white slaves," and claimed the moral authority of abolitionism for themselves. And parliamentarians worried about the wrath that God was storing up against the British state supported abolition as an act of national absolution (Hilton). For these actors, the moral authority that antislavery conferred assisted projects that were themselves pragmatic. Economic and political entrepreneurs in West Africa, the Caribbean, and in Britain itself hooked into the discourse of abolitionism, using its symbols and its vocabulary to advance their disparate goals. Abolition was formed out of a contrapuntal discourse that crisscrossed the Atlantic.

Seeing abolitionism as a contrapuntal discourse makes it possible to think of the British Empire itself in a new frame: not as a vehicle by which
already-established British values were extended to the unenlightened corners of the world, nor still as a hegemonic imposition on subject peoples' cultural and political autonomy, but as an arena of moral discourse. A new cadre of imperial historians has shed light on what Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler have termed the "tensions of empire," highlighting how, in the transcontinental space opened up by Europe's empires, normative conceptions of religion, cuisine, motherhood, and matrimony were defined and debated. Britain's empire was never simply "out there": it never existed, that is, as a separate political field from Britain itself. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, actors in the West Indies and in Africa carried on a long conversation with British activists about labor, rights, and freedom. West Indian planters' racism drove patriots like Granville Sharp to clarify British virtues. Free blacks' commitment to Sierra Leone gave abolitionists evidence to prove the viability of emancipation. William Wilberforce's antislavery rhetoric helped inspire a slave rebellion in Barbados. The empire was the crucible wherein British values were worked out.

This book aims to expand the geographic terrain in which the study of abolitionism is normally conducted. At the same time it illuminates the broader temporal field in which abolitionist thought took place. For abolition was never only an event in nineteenth-century legal history. In Britain's twentieth-century empire, Africans took hold over the discourse of abolitionism in order to bridge the metropole with the colony. Imperial government confronted people in Africa and elsewhere with the challenge of exercising influence over a ruling class that was distant from them. But African activists knew the mailing addresses of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society, of Fenner Brockway, Clement Attlee, and other liberals. They identified allies that could be mobilized to act on their behalf and filled their mailboxes with petitions and correspondence. Their political strategies produced lines of political connection that were more varied and complex than the hierarchy of superior and subaltern. Activists in Uganda, Kenya, and elsewhere adopted the posture of slavery by highlighting the inhumanity of local conditions. They thereby configured their political situation as a moral problem and compelled British liberals to pay heed.

Abolitionism and the Making of British Identity
The history of abolitionism has very often been composed as advocacy. The earliest work was authored by Thomas Clarkson, whose two-volume
history appeared in 1808, the year after Parliament passed the Abolition Act. Clarkson pictured the progress of antislavery as a river. It was fed at its headwaters by the influence of John Wesley and Granville Sharp, and it deepened after 1787, when the Quakers, the Evangelicals, and other groups swelled the movement. In Clarkson’s imagery the river reached flood stage in 1807, when with popular support abolitionism overflowed its banks and spilled onto the alluvial plain of Britain’s political life. Clarkson’s hydrological imagery made a tendentious history look inevitable. It put the opponents of abolition outside the main currents of British history. Writing over one hundred years later, the Cambridge historian G. M. Trevelyan followed Clarkson in representing abolition as the outworking of British ideals. On the centenary of Wilberforce’s death, Trevelyan claimed that abolition was accomplished because of “the will and conscience of the people of England,” not through the “ordinary machinery of party politics.” For Trevelyan the legislative triumphs of 1807 and 1833 had established Britain’s moral role as a force for good in the world. “Before [Africa’s] exploitation by Europe had well begun,” hymned Trevelyan, “the most powerful of the nations . . . had decided that slavery should not be the relationship of the black man to the white.” He thus argued that mankind had been “successfully lifted on to a higher place by the energy of good men.” Trevelyan’s contemporary Reginald Coupland spent his long career composing biographies of David Livingstone, William Wilberforce, John Kirk, and other heroes of British abolitionism. “The lives and works of Wilberforce and the ‘Saints’ are certain proof,” Coupland argued, “that not merely individuals but the common will, the State itself, can rise on occasion to the height of pure unselfishness.”

At the high tide of Britain’s African empire, the historians Trevelyan and Coupland found in the history of abolitionism evidence with which to fortify the civilizing mission. For the architects of empire in the late nineteenth and in the twentieth centuries, it was the abolitionist project that made Britain uniquely qualified to govern its African subjects. Missionaries and other advocates of empire published dozens of works documenting the accomplishments of the heroes of abolitionism. Today, Cambridge University Library holds 133 titles classified under “Livingstone, David, 1813–1873.” Titles such as David Livingstone: The Great African Pioneer and David Livingstone: Light-Bearer to Africa make Livingstone into a standard-bearer of civility. Other books put Livingstone alongside the makers of British history: one is entitled Heroes
of the Nineteenth Century: Nelson, Napier, Roberts, Livingstone, and another Three Martyrs of the Nineteenth Century: Studies from the Lives of Livingstone, Gordon, and Patterson. 17 But it was not only English readers who were learning about British values through the biographical genre. Africans were invited to apprehend British liberal values in the dozens of vernacular-language biographies published by missionary presses. In western Kenya’s Luo language, for example, readers of the 1951 collection Jochir sigendini magadiera (People who have lived great lives) could learn about David Livingstone alongside Kitty Wilkinson, Mary Scharlieb, Ann Judson, and other Victorian-era philanthropists. 18 As Boyd Hilton notes in this volume, the inspirational tradition of biographical writing persisted to the present. The bicentenary of the Abolition Act, in 2007, saw the publication of no less than eight biographies of William Wilberforce, with titles like Statesman and Saint, The Man Who Freed the Slaves, and The Millionaire Child Who Worked So Hard to Win the Freedom of African Slaves. The historiography of British liberalism was in its own time composed as biography. Cast as the victory of principle over self-interest, abolitionism was the framework by which Africans and other colonial subjects were taught about their rulers’ benevolence. It was Eric Williams’s 1944 book Capitalism and Slavery that first punctured the moralistic historiography of abolitionism. Where Coupland and Trevelyan had represented abolition as a victory for idealism over self-interest, Williams attributed the rise of abolitionism to what he called “developing economic forces.” Williams argued that the Atlantic slave trade had played midwife at the birth of capitalism, and that capitalism had in turn played pallbearer at slavery’s demise. 19 Profits from the slave trade and its allied industries had provided much of the capital that financed industrialization. But by the 1780s, Williams argued, the economy of the British West Indies was in terminal decline, in part because of the loss of the food-provisioning colonies of America. And in England there was a shift in political power, as ascendant industrial capitalists displaced merchant capitalists. The calculus of low profitability and self-interest made it possible for Britain to end the slave trade based on economic, not moral or ideological reasons. “The humanitarians,” argued Williams, “could never have succeeded a hundred years before when every important capitalist interest was on the side of the colonial system.” 20

Scholars have filled a library with replies to the Williams thesis in the sixty years since the publication of Capitalism and Slavery. 21 Some
intellectual historians, like Roger Anstey, sought to rehabilitate the reputation of British liberalism. Anstey calculated that the small profits earned from slave voyages were not enough to suggest "any positive connection between structural change in the imperial economy and abolition." In contrast to Williams's materialist thesis, Anstey argued that antislavery was primarily the fruit of Christian cosmology, of the "powerful idea of benevolence." "It was mainly religious conviction, insight and zeal which made it possible for anti-slavery feeling to be subsumed into a crusade against the slave trade and slavery," Anstey wrote. In his 1975 book Anstey devoted six full chapters, nearly four hundred pages, to the Evangelicals and the Quakers, illuminating the moral, philosophical, and political dynamics of the abolitionist lobby. Other historians, more focused on economics than Anstey, challenged Williams's argument about the slave trade's role in Britain's industrial growth. Stanley Engerman calculated the contributions that the slave trade made to British capital formation and concluded that the trade could have made but little difference in the financing of industrialization. Historian Joseph Inikori worked through the same statistics as Engerman and published a series of books and articles illuminating the slave economy's crucial role in fueling industrialization. Inikori's 2002 book was a catalogue of statistics and graphs demonstrating that Africans, as slaves and as workers, played a central part in England's economy. Like Williams and Inikori, historian Seymour Drescher argued that the slave trade played a significant role in the eighteenth-century British economy. But where Williams argued that the profits from the trade were in decline by the 1780s, Drescher contended there was no decline in the value of the British slave system until well after the abolition of the slave trade. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, during the height of the abolitionist campaign, regions under British control produced 60 percent of the world's sugar exports and 50 percent of its coffee. It is with this evidence in view that Drescher has termed the abolition of the slave trade "econocide," for by it Britain willfully terminated the most dynamic sector of its economy (Drescher, this volume).

The debate over Eric Williams's thesis made economic history into a politically consequential vocation. In tables detailing the revenues that slave plantations earned, in censuses detailing the earnings of slaving voyages, historians looked for evidence by which either to indict abolitionists as self-interested profit seekers or to exonerate them as self-sacrificing idealists. It was David Brion Davis who first charted a path out of this
impasse by inviting intellectual history and economic history to join hands. Like Williams, Davis linked the rise of antislavery to the rise of capitalism. But where Williams argued that abolitionism reflected the particular financial interests of industrial capitalists, Davis positioned antislavery within the broader intellectual and moral world that capitalism created. In his 1966 book *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, Davis focused particularly on the Quakers, who played a key role in legitimating bourgeois social relations. With their evangelical allies, they stigmatized the old, external mechanisms of physical constraint and valorized the internal restraint and self-discipline necessary for wage work. Abolitionists sought to free individuals to make rational choices, about God and about their financial interests. Their agenda reached from the slave plantations of the West Indies to the urban slums of London. The antislavery parliamentarian William Wilberforce was also the founder of the Society for the Suppression of Vice. His contemporary Thomas Chalmers, a clergyman, abolitionist, and devotee of Malthus, argued that statutory poor relief should be abolished so that the poor could be made responsible for themselves. Even as they sought to free West Indian slaves from their physical bondage, middle-class reformers also sought to liberate working-class people from moral bondage and financial dependency. In their philanthropic work as in their antislavery advocacy, they argued that social discipline should arise from an internalized moral order.

Davis’s latitudinal study of abolitionists’ projects makes it possible to think of antislavery neither as an instrument of capitalists’ self-interest, nor still as a movement of self-denying idealism, but as part of a broader reorientation in British economic and social life. In their marriages, in business, in religion, and in philanthropy, British people were in the eighteenth century developing mechanisms to hold each other accountable. This societal emphasis of accountability arose, argues historian Thomas Haskell, out of the organizational demands of commerce. Where in an earlier time promises exchanged between individuals were beneath the notice of the courts, in the late eighteenth century contract law emerged as a discrete field of litigation. English courts compelled parties involved in contracts, whether financial or conjugal, to keep their promises. In their married lives, English people were in the eighteenth century eliminating religious sanctions punishing sexual deviance. Where sixteenth-century moralists had called adultery bestial, eighteenth-century novels and periodicals conceptualized sexual infidelity as a violation of
the marital contract. Seen in this light, adultery was not a sin against God; it was an offense against the promise that the adulterer had made with his or her spouse.31 In their sexual conduct, as in their business transactions, English people were keeping their promises and living up to the letter of the law.

The abolitionist project worked by extending the range of social problems for which British people felt themselves accountable. The abolitionists' challenge was to make skeptical people feel that their own reputation was endangered by commerce conducted thousands of miles away, on distant shores in West Africa and the Caribbean. In making British people feel accountable for slave traders' deeds abolitionists drew from the rich historical vocabulary of British citizenship. For the discourse of English citizenship was, in origin and form, abolitionist. Parliamentarians had from the 1620s argued that the English people possessed freedom not as a gift from the king but as a legal right. They complained bitterly when Charles I imprisoned subjects without trial, or imposed taxes without consent. It is "unnatural," wrote one pamphleteer in 1642, "for any Nation to give away its owne propriety..." and thereby "contribute to its owne inherent puissance, meerely to abet Tyranny, and support slavery."32 Parliamentarians cast the king as a tyrannical slaveholder and represented themselves as chattel, unjustly enslaved. When in 1649 Charles I was beheaded, John Milton, Parliament's secretary for foreign tongues, warned Englishmen never again to consent to the yoke of kingship. "Any form of slavery is shameful to a freeborn man," he wrote, "but for you, after recovering your freedom... to wish to return again to slavery, contrary to your destiny... will also be both impious and wicked."33 When on 17 March 1649 the Rump Parliament abolished the office of kingship, they argued that "use hath been made of the regal power to oppress and impoverish and enslave and subject." Two months later, the parliament proclaimed that "the people of England" constituted a "Commonwealth and Free State" governed by the people's elected representatives.34

In its conception, the English citizenry was defined in opposition to the figure of the voiceless, maltreated slave. The vocabulary of the English revolution established the terms in which, a century later, abolitionists framed their argument. Abolitionism worked by contrasting hard-won British liberties with the tyranny that the slave trade promoted. The decision in Somerset v. Stewart (1772) helped abolitionists make their case. The litigation concerned a young black man, Jonathon
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Somerset, the slave of a Boston customs official. While in England he escaped from his owner's custody, then was recaptured and confined on a ship bound for Jamaica. Somerset's godparents, backed by the abolitionist Granville Sharp, brought a suit on his behalf. They argued that Somerset's reenslavement had made England, as Sharp put it, "as base, wicked and Tyrannical as our colonies." To allow slavery in England was to allow the "horrid cruelties...perpetuated in America" to "be introduced here." Sharp and his colleagues were dramatizing Somerset's reenslavement as an assault on metropolitan freedoms. They distinguished freeborn Britons from a colonial world dominated by arbitrary power and abject servility. By this contrast they made slavery in Britain look like an abomination. Their argument carried the day; while Lord Mansfield's verdict was ambiguous, it established Somerset's right to go free. The Somerset verdict was expanded into a generalized principle when, in 1778, another judge concluded that a slave brought to England became "as free as any one of us."

Being free was thereby given a particular geography, as a defining quality of the British commonwealth. Abolitionist rhetoric worked by extending the reach of Britain's geographic and moral boundaries. Aphra Behn's novel Oroonoko, for example, was published as a play in 1760. It told the story of an African prince, snatched by slave merchants, who contemplates death rather than submission to slavery. One of the play's African characters pricks the slave traders' conscience by asking,

The Isle which gave thee birth,
Is mark'd for hospitable Deeds, humane
Benevolence, extended Charities—
With ev'ry social Virtue—Is't possible?
A Nation thus distinguished, by the Ties,
Of soft Humanity, should give its Sanction,
To its dependent states, to exercise,
This more than savage Right, of thus disposing,
Like th' marketable Brute,
Their Fellow-Creatures Blood: 38

The play brought British theatergoers face to face with the inhumanity of the slave trade. Oroonoko was pushing out the boundaries of British people's accountability even to "dependent states," to the slave dealers that operated in West Africa and the Caribbean. By this geographical
extension creative writers made British people feel responsible for slave traders' deeds. In *A Father's Instructions to His Children*, published in 1776, the narrator is “shocked” to tell his readers that “this infernal commerce” was “carried on by the humane, the polished, the Christian inhabitants of Europe, whose ancestors have bled for the cause of liberty, and whose breasts still glow with the same generous flame.”

That same year, Granville Sharp’s tract *Law of Liberty* trumpeted the fact that “the African slave trade, which includes the most contumacious Violations of Brotherly Love and Charity, that men can be guilty of, is openly encouraged and promoted by the British Parliament.” But the fault lay not only with a few politicians. “The horrible guilt... which is incurred by Slave-dealing and Slave-holding is no longer confined to a few hardened individuals... but alas! The whole British Empire is involved!”

Men like Sharp were indicting British people as a collectivity, not as selected individuals, for their guilt. They summoned Britons as a polity to stand in judgment for their deeds. The slave trade, went one abolitionist petition in 1792, was a "national disgrace," for it violated Britain’s standing as a “free and enlightened nation.” As Boyd Hilton argues in this volume, politicians were in the late eighteenth century casting a wary eye on world politics, on the specter of Napoleon's military successes, and finding therein evidence of God’s growing wrath. “How shall we hope to obtain, if it be possible, forgiveness from Heaven for the enormous evils we have committed?” Prime Minister William Pitt asked Parliament. “It is as an atonement for our long and cruel injustice towards Africa, that the measure [for abolition] most forcibly recommends itself.” If Britons were collectively guilty, they stood also to share in the collective reward that abolition would bring to the nation.

The *Leeds Intelligencer* argued that abolition would “raise the true glory and honour of the British empire to an infinitely higher pitch than all the victories of a Marlborough, a Hawke, or an Alexander.” “Let no one be afraid of espousing the cause of the Negro,” wrote the *Newport Herald* in 1792. “'Tis the cause of mercy, 'tis the cause of our country—and sooner or later it shall succeed.”

Abolitionism worked horizontally, by holding people, by virtue of their membership within the British polity, responsible for slave traders' actions. It was the horizontality of their political imagination that made the abolitionists' project into a popular movement. Where earlier forms of political activism had been small-scale affairs, led by the gentry,
abolitionism drew support from thousands of commoners. As many as four hundred thousand people, some 13 percent of the total adult male population of England, Scotland, and Wales, put their name to petitions against the slave trade in 1792.44 City councils vied with each other in the issuing of proclamations condemning the trade. The city of Leeds, for example, published its 1788 resolution in newspapers in Leeds and York, in St. James’s Chronicle, and in the London Packet. “Let us not, my friends, be backward in so laudable a business,” went an editorial in the Leeds Intelligencer, “let it not on this occasion be said, that we want either religion or humanity.”45 A boycott of West Indian sugar, organized as a protest at the inhumanity of the sugar plantations, drew the support of as many as three hundred thousand families.46 And thousands of people purchased Josiah Wedgwood’s medallion of a supplicant slave, holding his chained hands aloft, with the inscription Am I Not a Man and a Brother? The medallion, first produced in 1788, was fitted in ladies’ hairpieces, printed on coins, and displayed on snuffboxes. In petitions, in proclamations, and in the accoutrements of domestic life, British people were enlisting themselves as patriots, redeeming Britain’s reputation on the world stage. By their lifestyles and their rhetoric they affirmed their aversion to tyranny.

Abolitionism was an effort to extend the range of British virtues to places far distant from the islands’ shores. Abolitionism cultivated, that is, a symbiotic relationship with empire, as empire was the sphere within which a benevolent government could most readily act.47 “The principles of justice,” argued William Wilberforce in 1807, “are immutable in their nature, and universal in their application; the duty at once, and the interest, of nations, no less than of individuals.”48 By extending Britain’s political boundaries, abolitionists sought also to create a one world of labor relations. The late eighteenth century witnessed a variety of experiments, as abolitionists worked out models by which Britain’s government could be extended to distant shores. One of the earliest schemes came from Maurice Morgann, who in 1772 published his Plan for the Abolition of Slavery in the West Indies.49 Morgann proposed that the British government should each year purchase several dozen boys and girls from West Africa’s slaving forts, send them to England for schooling, and settle them at the age of sixteen in the Pensacola district of the new British province of West Florida. The resulting colony of free Africans would be bound to the British polity not as slaves but as citizens. For Morgann, the abolition of slavery would not compromise
empire. Abolition would place the British Empire on the “sure foundations of equality and justice.” In time, the former slaves would “talk the same language, read the same books, profess the same religion, and be fashioned by the same laws” as their fellow subjects in Britain. Morgann was viewing Africans as potential allies, as subjects of the Crown rather than as property. He envisioned an empire defined by its subjects’ shared allegiance to and veneration for the Crown.

Morgann’s project never came to fruition. But his vision of empire—as a community of subjects, bound together by shared allegiance—shaped a variety of schemes in West Africa and the Caribbean. The most successful of them was Henry Smeatham’s scheme to establish a settlement for the castaways of the Atlantic economy—black loyalists, redeemed slaves, and white craftsmen—in Sierra Leone. Smeatham devised an elaborate plan, modeled after the termite colony, in which each individual’s work would be directed in a rational fashion (Morgan, this volume). He hoped that the colony would “civilize the country, and gradually absorb all the petty tyrannies, and change them into subordinate free states.” As the Sierra Leone colony took shape after 1787, the limits of Smeatham’s ambitions became clear: labor was chronically unavailable, and the investors’ capital was quickly expended (Drescher, this volume).

But, as Christopher Brown argues in the present volume, projects like Smeatham’s and Morgann’s were important in helping abolitionists model a world without slavery. By holding out alternatives to slave labor, entrepreneurs could argue that the abolition of the slave trade would not compromise Britain’s economic position.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, abolitionists were working to extend the boundaries of the British polity, to compass ex-slaves and black loyalists as subjects of the Crown. But abolitionists were not the only ones pushing out Britain’s borders. Enslaved people in the United States and in the West Indies enlisted themselves alongside abolitionists as advocates for British values and as subjects of the king. In 1788, at the height of the popular anti-slavery campaigns that Thomas Clarkson and others organized, one planter heard Grenadian slaves proclaim, “Mr Wilberforce for negro! Mr Fox for negro! Parliament for negro! God Almighty for negro!” (Morgan, this volume). In Barbados, literate slaves read British and local newspapers aloud to their fellows, keeping a careful watch on parliamentary debates over slave emancipation. When in 1816 Barbados’s slaves rose in revolt, planters argued that the rebellion originated “solely and entirely in consequence of the...
intelligence imparted to the slaves (which intelligence was obtained from the English News papers) that their freedom had been granted them in England." One freedman is reported to have told a group of slaves that "Mr Wilberforce had sent out to have them all freed," but that planters had refused to abide by the new law. West Indian slaves were keeping a careful watch on the news. They made themselves allies of the Crown and got rhetorical leverage with which to hasten the day of their emancipation.

Slaves in the United States were likewise inserting themselves into the transoceanic discourse that abolitionism opened up. In 1830 David Walker, a used-clothing dealer in Boston, published his *Appeal To the Coloured Citizens of the World*, identifying Englishmen as "the best friends the coloured people have upon earth." Walker and his compatriots had good reason to ally themselves with the British Crown. Canada, a British possession, was a refuge for as many as sixty thousand runaway slaves, defended by the Crown courts against extradition. Black subjects in Canada were therefore Tories, anxious to identify themselves with British values. "Her Majesty's coloured subjects," one advocate proclaimed in 1837, must "resist to the last, every innovation upon Conservative principles of British liberty. . . . Coloured men should become as thoroughly British as they can." Free blacks in the United States likewise lauded Britain's commitment to slaves' liberation. In 1841, Rev. Amos Beman, addressing the Vigilance Committee in New York, described how runaway slaves had escaped the "American eagle—proud and cruel bird" to "stand on free soil, and breathe free air by side of the British lion." African Americans were anglophiles. By standing alongside the British lion, they put distance between themselves and America's cruel slaveholders. In the United States, as in the West Indies, slaves hooked into antislavery discourse and drew Wilberforce and Clarkson into a distant political project. These slaves were pirates. They commandeered British abolitionism and brought its moral authority to bear on their own situation.

Slaves were not the only ones pirating abolitionism into distant seas. Closer to home, antislavery rhetoric and symbolism escaped from the grip of abolitionists and animated contemporary British working-class activism. Reformers seeking to limit working hours, improve factory conditions, and magnify workers' political voice found in the figure of the slave a useful means of illuminating the inhumanity that industrial capitalism was cultivating in Britain. This political strategy was widely
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adopted in the early 1830s, when campaigners working for the Ten Hours Bill borrowed freely from abolitionist discourse. Petitioners from Manchester, for example, argued that their lack of voting rights was as much a mark of degradation as “the visible brand on the person of a bought and sold negro,” while spinners in Stockport claimed to be enduring “all the horrors of a sullen and hapless slavery.”55 A banner commonly carried in working-class rallies depicted a deformed white man with the inscription Am I Not a Man and a Brother?56 Josiah Wedgwood’s famous icon of the supplicant slave gave working-class men and women a means of highlighting the inhumanity of factory labor. “Tell me, not of the free labour of a poor famishing artisan, covered in rags and broken in spirit, standing in the presence of an unfeeling, unprincipled Task Master,” wrote Richard Oastler in 1833. “This is the freedom that the unprotected British labourer enjoys in his boasted land of liberty.”57 Activists were making the working class look like slaves, and in so doing they made Britain’s factories look immoral.

The cross-fertilization of antislavery and factory agitation was more than a rhetorical convenience. For many activists, the reform of factory labor and antislavery were conjoined projects. Richard Oastler, the Clarkson of factory agitation, began his career as an antislavery activist. His friend Henry Whiteley published his best-selling Three Months in Jamaica in 1833. It focused both on the “slavery of the poor factory children at home” and on the abusive exploitation of slaves in the West Indies.58 Rallies organized by the Factory Movement in the early 1830s made no distinction between working-class advocacy and abolitionism: at an 1832 rally in Manchester, for example, the first banner bore the slogan No Infant Slavery. Some working-class radicals argued that antislavery was diverting attention from the more pressing abuses, closer to home. But even antibolition radicals found antislavery symbolism useful in illuminating the inhumanity of factory discipline. “White men can be sold, and white men are sold, by the week and month all over England,” the radical activist William Cobbett told a crowd of workers in 1832.59 The anonymous pamphlet The Condition of the West India Slave Con- trasted with That of the Infant Slave in Our English Factories made the comparison most clearly. Published in 1833 and illustrated by the radical thinker Robert Cruikshank, it depicted black slaves as “totally free from the cares, the troubles, the poverty and even the labour and anxieties of the British poor.”60 In his woodcuts, Cruikshank contrasted slaves’ favored position with the situation of English workers, depicting the
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Straw-roofed hovels in which factory workers were compelled to live. One particularly awful plate showed two “factory overlcers” beating children, one holding a long pole, the other a cat-o’-nine-tails.61

The imagery of slavery was useful for activists like Oastler because it helped transform their controversial political project into a moral problem demanding the public’s attention. Stripped of its antislavery cladding, reformers’ aims were essentially secular. They objected to the economic and political strictures that limited workers’ freedom of choice, and they argued that workers should have a voice in electoral politics. By positioning themselves as abolitionists, activists made the abuses of wage work look like a moral problem requiring a solution. By calling wage workers slaves, working-class thinkers contrasted the liberal values of freedom and self-determination with the injustices of the factory system, and showed that the tyranny of the West Indies was growing on British soil. Their rhetorical strategy made reform seem urgent.

Abolitionism was always more than a parliamentary lobby. Its advocates were working on a variety of projects, from a variety of positions. West Indian slaves sought to hasten the day of their emancipation. Working-class activists sought to alleviate the abuses of the factory system. British Quakers worked to free men to make their own choices about God and about their material welfare. Maurice Morgann and other visionaries cast about for economic alternatives to slave agriculture.
Abolitionism drew these disparate entrepreneurs together. As abolitionists, moral reformers in Britain could help make poor people and slaves alike responsible for their own actions, by removing the external structures that limited their freedom of choice. As abolitionists, working-class activists could illuminate the inhumanity of the factory system and make its reform seem necessary. As abolitionists, slaves and free blacks could assert their claims to the liberties that British subjects of the Crown enjoyed. As abolitionists, empire builders like Morgann could formulate novel models of community in which people were bound together, not as slaves and owners, but as subjects of the British Crown. All these interests found in the discourse of abolitionism a means to give their controversial, debatable projects moral authority.  

Abolitionism opened up a transoceanic sphere of discourse about British values. Its advocates were neither saints nor self-interested profiteers. Working from distant positions, they found useful rhetorical and political resources in the discourse of antislavery. In the West Indies, in the southern United States, and in the factories of Lancashire and Manchester subaltern activists took hold over abolitionist discourse in order to bring an idealized Britain close to hand. They sought, that is, to bridge geographic and social space, to elide racial and class differences, and to align disparate people as subjects of the Crown. The power of abolitionist rhetoric was to make people that were subject to political or economic hierarchies—slaves, free blacks, working-class people—look like Britain’s responsibility. In their strategic engagements with abolitionist rhetoric and thought, subaltern activists generated moral capital and held the British public accountable.

Abolitionism and Political Advocacy in Colonial Uganda

Once its vocabulary had been established, abolitionist rhetoric and imagery could be pirated abroad to serve projects that were only tangentially concerned with the alleviation of chattel slavery. I here want to explore one distant shore on which abolitionist discourse found a home. East Africa had once been the scene of the thriving slave trade: in the nineteenth century caravans worked by Arab and Swahili merchants had stretched from the Indian Ocean ports at Bagamoyo and Mombasa to the distant hinterlands of the Congo. But by the 1950s the East African slave trade was a memory for partisans to argue over (Glassman, this volume). Their temporal remoteness from the British antislavery movement did not make it impossible for East Africa’s political activists to hook into
abolitionist discourse. Minorities in Uganda, suffering under the tyranny of latter-day despots, found in William Wilberforce's rhetoric a useful means of characterizing their own situation. Uganda's minorities were not actually slaves. They were enclosed in neotraditional kingdoms in which legal practice, language, and political authority were defined by the majority. British administration was deliberately ignorant of the multilingualistic diversity of Uganda's people. Guided by the philosophy of "indirect rule," officials reinforced the supposedly traditional prerogatives of the kings of Buganda, Bunyoro, Toro, Ankole, and Bugisu; they standardized languages and legal practices, and obliged minorities to abide by the majority's customs. Minority groups enclosed within Uganda's kingdoms experienced this form of governmentality as totalitarianism. They were subject to unfamiliar systems of law, they very often lacked a voice in local government, and they sometimes were unable to purchase land. They got leverage over the local legateses of colonial administration by representing themselves as slaves. Minority activists did historical and political work to identify themselves as a distinct people, as inheritors of a culture that was distinct from their rulers'. With the evidence of their distinctiveness in view, minorities could cast light on the cultural and political violence they suffered, frame the homogenizing tactics of indirect rule as tyranny, and position themselves as slaves. In twentieth-century Uganda, the rhetoric of abolitionism was for minority groups a powerful strategy of imperial advocacy; it led them to identify their particular cultural patrimony and gave them a language with which to make allies in the British metropole.

The Nyoro people living in the borderland between the kingdoms of Bunyoro and Buganda were particularly skilled at using the grammar of abolitionism. The Bunyoro kingdom had in the nineteenth century become one of the most innovative and commercially oriented polities in East Africa. Under Mukama (King) Kabalega, Bunyoro's professionalized armies had successfully pushed the kingdom's boundaries to the east at the expense of the Buganda kingdom. But in the late nineteenth century British explorers and conquistadors had forged a close alliance with Kabalega's enemies in the kingdom of Buganda, and in 1890 fourteen thousand Ganda troops backed by British soldiers invaded Bunyoro. During the eight-year war of attrition that followed, Bunyoro's population was decimated, its economy was destroyed, and its people were scattered. So devastating was the assault that Bunyoro's population did not recover until the mid-twentieth century. When Kabalega was finally defeated,
in 1899, British officials rewarded their allies by allocating a large portion of Bunyoro’s southern territory to Buganda’s government.

The British strategy for dealing with what Bunyoro’s leaders called the “lost counties” was to treat them as an integral part of Buganda. A British officer set the agenda in 1896. As “these provinces became part of the Kingdom of Buganda,” he wrote, “so would their native inhabitants become Waganda [people].”66 Ganda agents were appointed to govern the territories wrested from Bunyoro, while the Ganda language became the official standard for government and the courts. By 1955 the British governor could tell Bunyoro’s politicians that “the clock of history . . . could not be turned back.” Buganda’s government over the lost counties was a fait accompli. The governor would not “accept that there was a great difference between the Bunyoro and the Baganda,” and recommended that the Nyoro and Ganda peoples set themselves to “learning to live together.”67 British officers and Ganda elites were smoothing over the differences that set Nyoro and Ganda people at odds.

But Nyoro people in the lost counties would not agree to be assimilated into the Buganda Kingdom. In reply to the British demand that they conform to their rulers’ culture, the Nyoro minority practiced nativism. They worked, that is, to identify themselves as a distinct people, unjustly governed by a foreign power. The 1930s and 1940s witnessed a wave of historical writings, as political entrepreneurs mined the distant past in order to find evidence of the Nyoro state’s distinct character. Bunyoro’s king, Tito Winyi, published three historical articles in the Uganda Journal. He emphasized the longevity of Bunyoro’s ruling lineage and gilded its kingship by describing the royal regalia in great detail.68 Other historical writers elaborated on Bunyoro’s long and glorious history. John Nyakatura, a long-serving government chief, published Abakama ba Bunyoro-Kitara (The kings of Bunyoro-Kitara) in 1947.69 Nyakatura began his book by assuring readers that “Kitara was a very extensive, prestigious and famous kingdom at the height of its power” and argued that the ancient kingdom was in fact the ancestor of Buganda itself. Bunyoro and Buganda were therefore siblings, equals in politics. Nyakatura made a point of listing the kings of Buganda and of Bunyoro side by side, in columns. Through his historical writing he sought to align Bunyoro’s political status with Buganda’s.

This glorious but distant history was not enough for the Nyoro people living in the lost counties. They needed hard evidence by which to establish themselves as indigenes, with a prior claim to the disputed
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territory. Cartography was one vehicle by which they made their case. John Nyakatura’s 1947 book began with an excursus into geography: the boundaries of Bunyoro, he argued, had once stretched all the way to Kavirondo, in western Kenya, compassing the whole of Buganda. A map produced by the “Bunyoro Public” association made the point in graphic terms. It represented Buganda’s “expansion at the expense of neighbouring areas,” highlighting with vivid red ink the vast territory that Buganda had, with British support, wrested from Bunyoro.70 In 1960 one petitioner told a visiting British commission that, in the lost counties, “the stones, hills, mountains, valleys, hillocks, rivers, streams, trees, grass, the soil itself and even the winds of the air blow hard their horns that they belong to Bunyoro Kitara. . . . Insects, birds, and animals have locally been and are crying to be returned to their Motherland.”71 For this petitioner, as for other partisan cartographers, the evidence of Bunyoro’s rightful government over the lost counties was written on landscape. This cultural essentialism proved both enduring and useful. By late 1963 Bunyoro’s government could argue that “the link between us and the Lost Counties is natural; is not man made but God made. . . . It is he who made the Banyoro as one tribe and gave us a particular land to live in.”72 In their cartographic work, Nyoro entrepreneurs were drawing the lost counties into a foreordained orbit. Their geographic essentialism allowed them to treat the disputed territory as an organic extension of Bunyoro itself.

More than land was at stake in this debate over the government of the disputed territory. Bunyoro’s mapmakers were also demographers, enlisting the region’s human inhabitants as carriers of an essential Nyoro culture and as subjects of the Nyoro king. Language work proved particularly helpful in establishing the demographic evidence for a Nyoro presence in the lost counties. The British policy was to use Luganda as the language of government: the governor thought that in any case “Luganda and Lunyoro are both Bantu languages with great similarities.”73 But Nyoro population builders could not agree to speak the Luganda lingua franca. John Nyakatura’s history book served as the standard for Nyoro orthography and grammar during the 1950s.74 Nyakatura himself had made several trips to London to press Bunyoro’s case over the lost counties, and there he learned his language politics. “Despite their different languages and various dialects,” wrote Nyakatura, “the British have one common language—English—to unite them.” Like the Welsh, the Irish, and other far-flung residents of Great Britain, Bunyoro’s people could constitute an enlarged political sphere by speaking with one voice.
Using the vernacular was therefore a patriotic undertaking. Nyakatura enjoined his readers, “Let us not emigrate from our country,” and in the next sentence he encouraged them to “cherish our language and speak it everywhere we go.” Greater Bunyoro’s political entrepreneurs were putting words in the mouths of the members of their imagined community and anchoring them in position as subjects of the Kingdom of Bunyoro.

By using the vernacular, Nyoro residents of the lost counties generated textual and auditory evidence to establish their unique identity. By speaking like natives, they put distance between themselves and their Ganda rulers and made themselves look like an oppressed people. Nyoro petitioners filled British officials’ mailboxes with evidence about Buganda’s cultural imperialism. In 1938 the Mubende Banyoro Committee wrote to Uganda’s governor to complain that “in every meeting, we are compelled to talk a foreign language such as in courts, in churches etc. In every school, our children are forced to be taught in Luganda. . . . In both birth and baptism registers our children’s names are generally reduced to Luganda ones which is a very bad and wonderful habit indeed.” Nyoro petitioners represented Buganda’s efforts at cultural assimilation in the lost counties as totalitarianism. In a 1955 meeting with the British governor, the chief judge of Bunyoro cited census data as evidence of Bunyoro’s claim over the counties. Seventy percent of the people in one of the lost counties were Nyoro, he argued, while only 21 percent were Ganda. These statistics allowed Nyoro petitioners to represent the counties’ population in monochromatic terms. In a letter in the Uganda Argus, four editorialists argued that “most of us in this district are Banyoro one hundred percent and have been so for centuries, and naturally our outlook is Kinyoro.” In 1955 the Bunyoro government asked politicians in Uganda’s legislative council to adopt a motion protesting that the “natural culture of the people in [the lost counties] is in fact being destroyed.” And by 1961 a tract could describe Buganda’s government over the lost counties as “foreign rule.” “God created us and put us in those counties which are our heritage,” went the tract. “It is a shame to the British and the Baganda who should very well know their responsibility with regard to human rights.” With their unique language on their tongues, the entrepreneurs of the lost counties could position themselves both as indigenes and as an oppressed people. Their cultural, linguistic, and historical work generated evidence by which Nyoro politicians represented Buganda’s government over the lost counties as a denial of human liberty.
Abolitionist discourse gave Nyoro petitioners the grammar with which to draw British officials onto their side in this dispute over governance. The rhetoric of abolitionism helped Nyoro politicians transform a political dispute into a moral problem that demanded action. In his 1931 petition (above), Zakaliya Lugangwa and his sixty-three colleagues named themselves “the natives of the Mubende counties” and addressed the governor as “the Peace and Civilizer in the Uganda Protectorate, a country over which the Union Jack waves.” With the governor’s role in view, Lugangwa and his colleagues could meaningfully announce that “Slavery has been practiced over us since [the lost counties] were cut off from Bunyoro Kingdom and added to Buganda.” Lugangwa proved his case by contrasting an old order of cultural self-possession with the new, debased world in which he and his colleagues lived. Before “being cut off,” he wrote, “we had inheritable lands; we had our own language, Runyoro; we had power in our country; we had honour and we could get everything that comes out of our country at ease.” But under Ganda overlordship Luganda, not Lunyoro, was used in schools and in courts, and “so we are slowly turned into Baganda, this shows the presence of slavery.” Moreover Nyoro were obliged to “buy their land from Baganda overlords.” “This shows we are slaves,” wrote Lugangwa, “for we are badly treated on our own native soil.” Lugangwa and his compatriots were calling themselves oppressed victims of Ganda tyranny. The petitioners concluded by asking “the British Government that every country subject to the English Flag should enjoy freedom and that slavery should be done away with.”

Nyoro petitioners used abolitionist rhetoric to remind British officials of their moral duties and to oblige disinterested administrators to take an active role in upholding British honor. Nyoro petitioners were burdening British officials with evidence of their oppression and obliging them to act. In 1938 sixty-six signatories from the Mubende Bunyoro Committee petitioned the governor to complain that “1. we lost the rights in our mother country 2. we lost the power in our mother country 3. we lost the dialect language 4. we are slaves.” Like Zakaliya Lugangwa and his colleagues, the 1938 petitioners represented the imposition of Ganda language in the lost counties as a mark of Buganda’s cultural imperialism. “We are afraid [that] this slavery [will] touch to our poor children as well as our grand children,” they lamented. With the issues so clearly drawn, British government should feel itself compelled to act in the favor of an oppressed people. The 1938 petitioners asked for “the just
kindness of the British government to order . . . that we may be set free from slavery."81 Other petitioners similarly invited British officials to follow William Pitt’s lead. “We are under the same flag and serve the same government of His Majesty the Great King of England, George,” wrote an anonymous petitioner in a 1932 letter to the secretary of state for the colonies.82 “We are to be treated in the same way as other races that are near us, to make us equal to the other parts of the Protectorate.”

Nyoro petitioners were ventriloquizing abolitionists’ voices. They were addressing the British governor with words and phrases that Wilberforce, Clarkson, and their colleagues had first worked out. Nearly two hundred years after Maurice Morgann and other British abolitionists had first conceptualized the British Empire as an assembly of subjects, united in their shared loyalty to the king, abolitionists in western Uganda were illuminating the unequal politics that indirect rule promoted. Nyoro petitioners framed the political situation in the lost counties in such a way as to make the region’s residents look like slaves. And by drawing officials’ eyes to the Union Jack fluttering over the Uganda Protectorate, entrepreneurs contrasted British ideals with the evidence of local inequalities. Like Wilberforce and the abolitionists of the eighteenth century, Bunyoro’s petitioners were extending the range of issues for which British people felt themselves accountable. In reminding Uganda’s administrators of their membership within Britain’s empire, they laid out a path of action for colonial officials to follow.83

Nyoro activists’ rhetoric of abolitionism was conceived as a strategy of imperial advocacy. It depended for its salience on the presumption that government officials could be made to intervene, as Britons, to suppress slavery. But by the late 1950s the efficacy of abolitionist rhetoric was increasingly open to question. Where in the 1920s and 1930s British officials had promoted a “civilizing mission” in Africa, in the 1950s British officials were positioning themselves as advocates of development.84 Uganda’s administration set out to remake the authoritarian institutions that had in an earlier era upheld the politics of indirect rule. They reined in the power of chiefs and kings, and organized local government councils to which Africans could elect representatives. In Bunyoro a parliament was created in 1953, with half the representatives elected by popular vote.85 The district commissioner welcomed the newly elected members by telling them that “you are here today as representatives of the people of Bunyoro . . . you are acting on behalf of your fellow citizens.”86 In 1958, Ugandans for the first time elected representatives to
sit on the colonywide legislative council. And in 1962 the new nation of Uganda declared its independence. Its national anthem, carefully edited by President Milton Obote, had as its first verses “Oh Uganda! May God uphold thee, / We lay our future in thy hand. / United, free, / For liberty / Together we’ll always stand.” 87

But how could Milton Obote and other leaders of Uganda be moved to act for the principles of liberty, freedom, and unity? What did minorities in the lost counties and in other parts of Uganda’s national territory lose in their country’s independence? A few days after the swearing in of Bunyoro’s first elected parliament, in 1956, editorialist W. Kaikuru wrote to the Uganda Argus to compare the residents of the lost counties with slaves. “Individual slavery ceased to be legal and we are all happy about it,” he wrote. 88 But where in the 1930s and 1940s Nyoro petitioners could frame their situation as an offense against British honor, in the 1950s they had to appeal to more abstract, blandly universal notions of fraternity and equality. “Uganda can only be united if the principles of justice, equality and liberty are respected,” wrote Kaikuru. “The citizens of Uganda who are interested in Uganda as a whole are eager to see this thorny problem put right.” There were, even in the 1950s, appeals to the duties that Britain owed its subjects. 89 But as the Ugandan nation took the place of the British imperium, so too did subject minorities find their vocabulary of claim-making to be radically delimited. For Uganda’s new African government was not obliged to uphold Britain’s promises. Uganda’s politics were majoritarian, and Milton Obote was not honor bound to liberate subject minorities. Bunyoro’s activists were therefore obliged to take matters into their own hands. In the 1930s Nyoro petitioners had illuminated their unique cultural heritage in order to oblige British officers to defend their interests. In the 1960s Bunyoro’s cultural politicians lost their British audience. What had been conceived as a strategy of imperial advocacy became, in the 1960s, a form of racism. The Mubende Banyoro Committee’s 1961 flyer highlights the absolutist character of their discourse: “Objective: Lost counties to be returned to their master. . . GOD KNOWS THAT WE ARE BANYORO. The Baganda, you yourselves prove us that we are Banyoro from in and out, and perpetually shall be Banyoro.” 90 A 1963 statement from the chairman of the “Bunyoro-Kitara public” was equally strident: “the people of the lost counties,” he said, “are pure Banyoro, and there is no doubt that they themselves know that they are Banyoro. Therefore imposing Buganda rule on them . . . means that Uganda’s independence to Bunyoro does not mean anything.” 91
There is a discursive line linking the 1930s cultural politics of abolitionism with the aggressive, racist politics of the 1960s. In the 1930s Bunyoro’s activists standardized languages, did historical research, and made themselves look like a unique people. Their cultural work identified them as slaves, kept down by the tyranny of Buganda, and made them allies in the British metropole. In the 1960s these stereotypes were used to enlist Bunyoro’s people as militant defenders of their homeland. In 1961 Nyoro residents of the lost counties began a campaign of disobedience against their Ganda rulers. Letters distributed by Nyoro activists urged that “all Bunyoro . . . must fight the Buganda until they leave their counties.” Residents were told not to pay taxes to Buganda, and coffee plantations owned by Ganda farmers were cut down in nighttime raids. The palace that the king of Buganda had built in one of the lost counties was burned down in July. In the latter part of 1961 arsonists targeted homes owned by Ganda farmers living in the disputed region. Late that year the Bunyoro parliament declared the lost counties to have “reverted to Bunyoro and [are] thus known as Bunyoro territory.” By 1963 a low-level guerrilla war had broken out in two of the lost counties. Nyoro observers reported that Buganda’s government had moved hundreds of Ganda ex-servicemen into the disputed territories. They encamped around the tomb of one of Bunyoro’s kings, saying that the Nyoro had no rights to bury their dead on Ganda land. Several people were killed, whether by Ganda soldiers or Nyoro guerrillas. In 1964 the issue was put to a referendum, and two counties, Buyaga and Bugangaizi, were handed over to Bunyoro. At the ceremony marking the handover in Bugangaizi, the seven thousand attendees listened to a long history lesson given by the grandson of the Nyoro chief who had once ruled the county.

Uganda’s national independence closed off a line of discourse by which minorities could get leverage over their rulers. As subjects of the British Empire, Nyoro entrepreneurs had open to them a powerful vehicle of claim making. British officials were obliged to act to suppress slavery. Their theory of imperial government, structured by late-eighteenth-century debates over citizenship, burdened British officials to act as agents of emancipation. Subject groups in western Uganda, as elsewhere in anglophone Africa, could therefore position themselves as objects of mercy and invite British rulers to act as abolitionists. This was a strategy of representation, a theatrical event that required Nyoro people to play out a role. Entrepreneurs had to configure their language, their cultural life, and their history to differentiate themselves from their Ganda
overlords. They had, that is, to represent themselves in racial terms, as a distinct, identifiable people. The power of abolitionist discourse was to cast the complicated, interwoven relationship between Nyoro and Ganda people in moral terms, to make rulers look like tyrants and subjects like slaves. By this representational work subaltern abolitionists made Ganda government over the lost counties look unjust, and invited British officials to act in their favor.

But subaltern activists could not, as citizens of independent Uganda, oblige their rulers to pay heed. Citizenship was a passport to political rights, not a vehicle for claiming social and economic justice. As anthropologist Harri Englund has observed about contemporary human rights discourse in Malawi, "new freedoms entail new prisoners." Uganda's government was legitimated by electoral ritual, not by its humanitarian role. Its agents were representatives of the majority. To exercise influence, Uganda's peoples needed to group themselves into constituencies, establish a majority in particular tracts of territory, and gain electoral representation on the national stage. Where in the 1930s Nyoro petitioners could move British officials by the evidence of their oppression in the hands of Ganda overlords, in the 1960s they needed to compete with Buganda for political leverage over Milton Obote's government. It was this competitive politics that drove the violence that gripped Uganda in the mid-1960s. In the 1930s Nyoro people did historical research, spoke the vernacular, and established their distinct identity in British officers' eyes. In the 1960s their strategy of imperial advocacy was translated into a vehicle of political violence.

This book is an effort to expand the temporal and geographic frame in which the history of abolitionism is conceived. The authors argue that abolitionism was more than an outworking of British liberal's idealism. Abolitionism was a theater in which a variety of actors—slaves, African rulers, Caribbean planters, working-class radicals, African political entrepreneurs, Christian evangelicals—played a part. This varied cast of characters was not working from a script authored in London. The Atlantic was an echo chamber in which abolitionist symbols, ideas, and evidence were generated from a variety of vantage points (Morgan, this volume). This book highlights the range of political and moral projects in which the advocates of abolitionism were engaged, and in so doing it joins together geographies that are normally studied in isolation.
The book begins with John Thornton's chapter, which illuminates the ethical grounds on which the leaders of three states in western Africa—Kongo, Ndongo (in modern-day Angola), and Dahomey—found it possible to participate in the Atlantic slave trade. Seen from the position of the ruling caste, the trade in slaves was a means to extend authority over refractory peoples and defend themselves against external enemies. Western Africa's political leaders objected to the commerce in slaves when it outran their control and undermined social order. For western Africa's rulers, argues Thornton, the trade in slaves was not a moral problem that demanded a resolution. It was a pragmatic vehicle of polity building. Britain's eighteenth-century rulers were no less pragmatic about the slave trade. But where western Africa's leaders saw the slave trade as a routine means of political consolidation, British parliamentarians had by the early nineteenth century come to see the trade as morally compromising. In his chapter, Boyd Hilton builds on his earlier work concerning Britain's eighteenth-century intellectual culture to show how abolitionism grew out of British people's religious sense that God was standing in judgment on their nation. The evidence was before them, in the loss of the American colonies, in Napoleon's rise, and in other contemporary events. Parliamentarians therefore abolished the slave trade as an act of atonement, an effort to reconcile their collective guilt with divine standards.

But while Christian eschatology lent abolitionism urgency and conviction, antislavery activists could not be religious ideologues. Neither was their movement purely a British affair. The chapters by Christopher Brown and Philip Morgan show how much the abolitionist project owed to actors in western Africa and the Caribbean, who provided material evidence and rhetorical fuel for British activists to draw upon. Brown's essay focuses on western Africa, where in the eighteenth century abolitionists experimented with a number of "free-labor" schemes meant to expand British enterprise. At Cape Coast Castle in the early eighteenth century, in Senegambia in the 1760s, and in the colony of Sierra Leone, entrepreneurs of the Royal Africa Company tried out new crops and novel forms of labor organization. The evidence they generated, argues Brown, allowed activists to model alternatives to slave agriculture and gave them means to show that abolition would not undermine the British economy. Hardheaded abolitionists were gathering evidence from a variety of sources. Philip Morgan's essay casts light on the diverse set of actors whose ideas about labor organization and
human liberty resonated around the Atlantic world. In the West Indies, planters were in the late eighteenth century encouraging slaves to work for their own gain. Planters were disposed against abolition. But by encouraging slaves to marry and bear children, by giving them provision grounds, and by offering them incentives for piecework, planters generated hard evidence that abolitionists could use to illuminate the economic and social benefits of free labor. Free blacks were likewise generating evidence by printing testimonials and other propaganda documenting the inhumanity of the slave trade. Rebellious slaves in St. Domingue weakened France’s Caribbean economy, making abolition seem commercially feasible to British entrepreneurs. And the leaders of independent Haiti corresponded with British abolitionists, sending them information about the island’s demography and economy. The evidence for abolitionism was generated from a range of sources, from West Indian planters, slaves, visionaries, and other entrepreneurs working on disparate projects.

Even as activists in Britain, western Africa, and the Caribbean worked to end the slave trade, they also extended Britain’s imperial reach. But as Seymour Drescher’s chapter shows, abolitionism was never simply an instrument advancing Britain’s political self-interest. Drescher focuses on Sierra Leone, established in the late eighteenth century as a utopian experiment in free labor. By the 1830s the colony’s declining fortunes had convinced British businessman that further imperial ventures in western Africa were doomed to fail. For the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, therefore, British interests in Africa were markedly circumscribed: a spectacular military intervention in Algiers (1816) was of a purely humanitarian character, while the antislavery patrol off western Africa’s shores did nothing to extend Britain’s territorial domain. Drescher concludes that imperialism was the “last thing on the minds of British policy makers” during the period of the suppression of the slave trade. But British authorities’ aversion to empire building in West Africa did not spring from a fervent regard for African states’ sovereignty. As Robin Law shows in his chapter, British jurisprudence had in the early nineteenth century recognized African states as sovereign under international law, and British policymakers had constructed elaborate treaties with African rulers in order to suppress the slave trade. But by the 1840s policymakers had come to regard African states as unworthy of the protection of international law because they lacked the civilized credentials of other modern states. Military men were therefore
free to meddle in African states’ private affairs, intruding, for example, to engineer a succession dispute in Lagos in 1851–52. Britain’s role as an agent for the suppression of the slave trade, Law argues, lent moral authority to its self-interested interventions in other polities’ affairs. The abolitionist project thereby cleared the legal and political barriers to the partition of Africa.

The concluding chapter, by Jonathon Glassman, expands the book’s geographic and temporal reach. Twentieth-century Zanzibar was a world away from the eighteenth-century Atlantic. But the discourse that British abolitionists, West Indian slaves, and other entrepreneurs authored resonated in Zanzibar and shaped its politics. Colonial Zanzibar’s Arab elite learned about the history of slavery from missionary schoolteachers, whose lessons contrasted the chattel slavery of the Atlantic with the comparatively more humane forms of enslavement practiced in the Arab world. From their missionary school teachers, and from contemporary pan-Arabist newspapers, the Arab intelligentsia learned to apprehend their political world in racial terms, to contrast their cultural sophistication with the barbarism of “African” mainlanders. In the 1950s the “African” partisans of the Afro-Shirazi Party replied to Arab elites’ scorn by emphasizing the British roots of Zanzibar’s civilization. They represented themselves as chattel abused at Arab slave dealers’ hands and published dozens of essays recounting how David Livingstone and other abolitionists had freed them from bondage. In Zanzibar, as in the lost counties of Bunyoro, abolitionist discourse invited subaltern activists to represent their political situation in racial terms. When violence broke out in 1967, Glassman argues, its “African” protagonists acted to repay the historical indignities they thought they had experienced in Arab slave dealers’ hands. Abolitionist rhetoric helped subaltern nationalists consolidate their racial identities and led them to right the wrongs of an imagined past.

In twentieth-century eastern Africa and in eighteenth-century Britain, abolitionist discourse was useful because it cast hierarchical political and economic relationships as moral abominations. Until the late eighteenth century, British citizens had accepted the slave trade as a commonplace of their nation’s economy. But from 1772 onward Granville Sharp and other abolitionists argued that Britain’s hard-won liberties were endangered by the practice of colonial slavery. In sermons, pamphlets, Wedgwood medallions, and other media, they brought Britons face to face with the inhumanity of the slave trade and made slavery look like a stain on
Britain's reputation. In their own time, abolitionists' tactics were pirated into a novel sphere by working-class radicals, who used antislavery imagery to cast factory discipline in moral terms. They compared factory managers with plantation overseers and cast workers as maltreated slaves. Radicals thereby made workers' economic situation look morally compromising, a blight on British liberty. Subaltern nationalists in twentieth-century Zanzibar and Uganda confronted social and political hierarchies that denied them a voice in government. They valorized their own history, cast themselves as maltreated slaves, and worked up the political and moral wherewithal to take up arms as righteous militants. British reformers, working-class radicals, East African nationalists, and other entrepreneurs used the figure of the slave to cast their partisan activism in moral terms, as a struggle for human liberty.

The British abolitionist movement opened up a sphere of discourse about the rights that different categories of subjects enjoyed and the responsibilities that rulers owed them. Abolitionism made the British Empire into a sphere of moral argument, where British, African, and other identities were defined and debated. Saying that the British Empire was a sphere of moral argument does not mean that Africans were not also involved in other discourses. Africans conducted vernacular-language debates over civic virtue and political authority more vigorously than the extramural class of English-language advocacy. Neither does seeing empire as a moral unit mean that there was a steady push to bring subject peoples within a universalistic, egalitarian conception of polity. As Robin Law's chapter reminds us, the abolitionist project could reinforce Britons' chauvinistic sense of superiority. What the study of abolitionism allows historians to do is to conceive of empire as its Caribbean, African, and British protagonists saw it: as a theater where lines of discourse tied disparate groups together, and in which activists could take up a character and oblige others to act.

Notes

1. Hoima District Archives (hereafter cited as HDA), file with no cover, Zakaliya Lugangwa et al. to Governor, 1 December 1931.
2. Steven Feierman, Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), chaps. 8, 9.
5. Church of Uganda Provincial Archives (hereafter cited as CUDA), file 02, Bp 8/1, Reuben Sparta to J. Willis, 21 April 1935.


8. "PM's article for the New Nation newspaper (27 Nov. 06)," at http://www.kenyaportal.gov.uk/output/Page10487.asp.

9. Not everyone followed Tony Blair's lead. Alongside New Labour's celebration of British virtues there were a series of exhibitions—at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, and at the Museum of London—that focused on the inhumanity of the slave trade and highlighted the profits that the slave economy generated for British capitalists. For an analysis highlighting the place of abolitionism in Britain's national memory, see J. R. Oldfield, *Chords of Freedom: Commemoration, Ritual and British Transatlantic Slavery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).


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Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1906). For an analysis of this literature, see Timothy Holmes, Journey to Livingston: Exploration of an Imperial Myth (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1993).


44. Ibid., 114; Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilisation in Comparative Perspective* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986).
45. Quoted in Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, 104.
46. Ibid., 57.
48. Quoted in Drescher, “Free Labor.”
50. Quoted in ibid., 315.
58. Described in Drescher, “Cart Whip.”
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60. Quoted in Hollis, “Anti-slavery.”
62. This argument is derived from Brown, *Moral Capital*, epilogue.
70. HDA, “Local Government Policy, Lost Counties” file, “Kingdom of Buganda, showing its expansion at expense of neighboring areas,” [1967].
71. CUPA, file 02, Bp 211/26, P.T. Erbanyakya to the Relationships Commission, 6 October 1960.
73. Public Records Office, CO 822/1738, Crawford to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 2 July 1957.
75. Catholic Church of Uganda Archives, Kampala D.39 f.5, Mudende Banyoro Committee to Governor, 27 April 1938.
76. HDA, “District Council” file, minutes of meeting in the secretariat, Entebbe, 5 October 1955.
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78. HDA, "District Council" file, O. Magezi to chair, Representative Members Organization, Kampala, 14 October 1955.
79. HDA, "Local Government Policy, Lost Counties" file, Byarugaba Masoobi to All People in the Lost Counties, 20 November 1961.
80. HDA, file with no cover, Zakaliwa Lugangwa to Governor, 1 December 1951.
81. Catholic Church of Uganda Archives, D. 31 f.5, Mubende Banyoro Committee to Governor, 17 April 1938.
82. HDA, file with no cover, anonymous petitioner, Hoima, to Secretary of State, 1933.
83. Their rhetorical tactics had real effects. In 1962 a visiting delegation from the Privy Council heard Nyoro advocates lay out the standard argument about British rulers' obligations to their subjects. The presenters documented how Nyoro subjects in the disputed territory had been forced to adopt the identity of their "hereditary rivals and enemies" and argued that it was the "duty of the British government to cure a continuing wrong" before the end of colonial rule in Uganda. The visiting councillors accepted their line of argument and recommended that two counties, Bugagadzi and Bugangaizi, should be returned to Banyoro. *Report of a Commission of Privy Councilors on a Dispute between Buganda and Banyoro* (London: HMSO, 1952).
86. HDA, "District Council" file, DC's speech to Rukurato, 24 February 1956.
87. CUPA, 1 Abp. 157/1, Milton Obote to Archbishop of Uganda, 13 September 1962.
89. See, for example, Joseph Bitaroho, Lababo Isoke, Denis Kasinyo, and Yowana Katuntu, in *Uganda Argus*, 23 January 1956.
95. HDA, "Tombs of the Bakama" file, DC, Banyoro, to Administrator, Bugagadzi, 7 August 1963.
96. HDA, "Local Government Policy, Lost Counties" file, no title, [January 1965].
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100. As argued in Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, chap. 6.