

9 The matter of spirituality and the commons

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A poem by Gloria Anzaldúa¹
A Sea of Cabbages
(for those who have worked in the fields)

On his knees, hands swollen
sweat flowering on his face
his gaze on the high paths
the words in his head twinning cords
tossing them up to catch that bird of the heights.
Century after century swimming

with arthritic arms, back and forth
circling, going around and around
a worm in the green sea
life shaken by the wind
swinging in a mucilage of hope
caught in the net along with la paloma.

At noon on the edge
of the hives of cabbage
in the fields of a ranchito in Tejas
he takes out his chile wrapped in tortillas
drinks water made hot soup by the sun.
Sometimes he curses

his luck, the land, the sun.
His eyes: unquiet birds
flying over the high paths
searching for that white dove
and her nest.

Man in a green sea.
His inheritance: thick stained hand
rooting in the earth.

His hands tore cabbages from their nests,
ripping the ribbed leaves covering tenderer leaves
encasing leaves yet more pale.
Though bent over, he lived face up,

the veins in his eyes
catching the white plumes in the sky.

Century after century flailing,
unleafing himself in a sea of cabbages.

Dizzied
body sustained by the lash of the sun.
In his hands the cabbages contort like fish.
Thickened tongue swallowing

the stench.

The sun, a heavy rock on his back,
cracks,
the earth shudders, slams his face
spume froths from his mouth spilling over
eyes opened, face up, searching searching.

The whites of his eyes congeal.
He hears the wind sweeping the broken shards
then the sound of feathers surging up his throat.
He cannot escape his own snare –
faith: dove made flesh.

Introduction: the matter of spirituality

Spirituality is the movement of a soul beyond the boundaries of its own identity, the movement of perception beyond the perceptive capacities – the worlded realities – of the perceiver. It is the recognition of the existence of somethings radically other, the sure knowledge of unknowability. Spirituality decentres the self; it is calling to think, feel and act interestedness in others. As active principle it intervenes, distributes, partitions; it sets individuated things – vegetable, animal, mineral, technical – *in relation*. If we have a relationship with land we have a spirituality, or we have at least a ‘foyer’ – a framework, hearth and home – for spiritual experience. Bent over the earth we live face up, catching glimpses of the spirit’s creative movement. Concentrating on a natural form – cabbage, rock, soil – we cannot but confront complexity, mystery, an infinity of layers. As our back is scorched or our fingers are frozen, and our bones ache with the weight of moving or traversing the ground, we know, really *know*, that we are not all there is, that we are limited creatures, that we exist in and by the grace of a cosmos: the dove is made flesh.

Commons are profoundly spiritual. They are sites saturated with significance. Partaking in a commons means moving in currents of transcendence, seeing in relation, acting outside of the self. The spiritual nature of commons is most obviously manifest in the common farming of common land – where holy ghosts and other feathered creatures spring so readily from the soil. But all organisations of objects in common harbour a spiritual capacity. And spirituality helps to harbour the capacity of becoming or persisting as commons. The spirituality of the commons energises commons movements, resonating with religiosity. It binds bodies to a form of life and infuses everyday political practices of commoning with meaning. Spirituality is a snare, a lure to investment,

affective grip – twinning rough fibres of feeling into cords that secure frameworks or heave virtual futures into life.

This spirituality is a crucial aspect of the appeal of the commons in our alienated age. Commons promise escape from the disenchanted iron traps of instrumentalised, privatised lives – a route to self-transcendence that is also the transcendence of nihilism, existential angst and hopelessness. Alienation and disenchantment are not, as is often thought, the symptom of an overly institutionalised or fixed formation of life. Rather, they express the absence of a shared reality, of knowing together in a common world. They are the condition of ‘worldlessness’ (Arendt 1958), the absence of objectivity (Read 2011, Blencowe, Brigstocke and Noorani 2015). The commons offers precisely a world in common, a public thing (Honig 2012), an outside of subjectivity through which perception, action and attention come to matter. The tragedy of enclosure is the poverty of the soul.

The matting of commons has an enhanced appeal for our supposedly ‘post-secular’ moment, in which thirst for politicised religiosity is recognised but widely associated with aggressive identity politics and the ‘passionate intensity’ of ‘the worst’.² The investment of lives with matter (significance) through matter (objects, spaces, technologies) held in common promises formations of spirituality that are consistent with liberal commitments to openness, inclusion and equality. Instead of transcending the self by becoming a part of the mega-self of a particular identity group or community, the commons offer material practical sites through which we get outside of ourselves by entering, and sharing, a world. To have some-*thing* in common supplants the need to *be* common.

But spirituality *is a snare*. We can choke on our faith. The spirituality of the commons might tempt a naïve imagining that commoning is somehow immune from corruption, exploitation or entrapment. Whether it is communitarian or communist, totalising or spacing, spirituality generates energy that can be captured and utilised – and so captured, territorialised, spirituality becomes a means of capture.³

The spirituality of the commons

Commoning has always had a spiritual significance expressed as sharing a meal or a drink, in archaic uses derived from monastic practices, in recognition of the sacred habitus. Theophany, or the appearance of the divine principle, is apprehended in the physical world and its creatures. In North America (‘Turtle Island’) this principle is maintained by indigenous people.

Peter Linebaugh (2014: 13–14)

The commons and commoning practice are sources of spirituality. This spirituality is not simply a projection of human imagining – it is an expression and effervescence of the material and relational constitution of bodies and their forces, in which people are drawn outside of themselves and held in active relations. It is the experience of material interdependence, in which people might be dependent on objects, creatures, land or ecologies as much as on other people. In turn, the spirituality of the commons is crucial in producing and maintaining commons. The spirituality of the commons inspires people to act and it helps to sustain the great energy that

is always required in the ongoing production of common space and resource. Faith enables people to perform miracles, to raise new worlds from scorched stretches of earth, to build love and community from hatred or indifference (Katongole 2011). We might think of commoning as so many multiple miracles.

The spirituality of the commons, and the role of spirituality in maintaining a common, is most obviously evident where it intersects with explicitly religious discourse – as in the examples alluded to by Peter Linebaugh above. In this volume Naomi Millner (Chapter 2) explores the aesthetic and, we might say, spiritual attitudes that shaped and fuelled the Open Spaces Movement of the nineteenth century – which she controversially claims for a diverse and disputed history of commons movements. Alongside the mythic Romanticism associated with John Ruskin, the non-conformist Christian sensibilities and theological perception of activists like Octavia Hill were crucial to the inspiration and energy of the movement – a movement with profound legacies of parkland and the UK National Trust.

In the spring of 2012 I attended a symposium (somewhat ironically hosted by the Warwick Business School) which was a platform and discussion space for the London Occupy Movement Outreach Team, which had just been initiated. In discussion with the team members, all of whom had been key figures in establishing and maintaining the occupation of St Paul's Cathedral and other common spaces in London, I was struck by the passionate friendships and mystical intensity binding the diverse group. Love was central to their account both of their experience and their ambition, a discourse powerfully resonant with descriptions of mystic communion. Sharing food and living space was, they maintained, crucial to this new form of being together that they had come to engender. The team talked freely about the spirituality of their experiences in the movement, citing this as a core aspect of their strength and distinction. As they saw it, this open spirituality enabled them to cross the atheist/religious divide, bringing together deeply religious activists and organisations with Marxists and anarchists – groups that have conventionally seen themselves as deeply opposed.

But the spirituality of the commons is not only expressed through explicitly religious discourse. Patrick Bresnihan and Michael Byrne (2015) describe the practices involved in the creation and continuation of independent spaces – urban commons – in contemporary Dublin. Independent spaces require, they maintain, an alternative subjective relationship to space that operates outside of norms of private property. The independent spaces are not constituted once and for all at their inception, and nor are they constituted solely through arrangements of co-ownership. Rather, they require perpetual work of commoning – acts of non-monetary exchange, gifting and sharing. Vast amounts of voluntary labour go into sustaining any urban commons (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015:10). In this volume Bresnihan (Chapter 4) elaborates further on the nature of commoning practices and the relationships they engender, drawing here on his ethnographic researches amongst fishermen. He argues that these fishermen, in their vulnerability and interdependence, constitute commons both at sea and on shore – a commons that is constituted through commoning. The lives of the fishermen were characterised by perpetual 'small acts of generosity':

While they were often incidental and taken for granted, they constituted an invisible network of favours and gifts that operated like a reserve to be drawn on at any moment of need or crisis. Nor were these gifts, of time, labour, resources, calculated in the terms of straightforward utilitarianism; they were not the actions of individuals working out exactly what was in his or her own self-interest. They were the actions of people who knew intimately and immediately that they were part of a wider collective on which they relied.

(Bresnihan, Chapter 4, this volume).

Whilst he does not use the term, the ‘spirituality’ of the commons is captured well in this sense of being part of the meaning of the relationship. To use more theological language, we could describe these scenes as suffused with grace, charisma and love.

However, religion does figure explicitly in the examples that form the centre of this chapter – the early commons movements of the Diggers, Levellers and Pirates as described in Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker’s famous book *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000).

The monster and mystic communalism

That we may work in righteousness, and lay the foundation of making the earth a common treasure for all, both rich and poor. That every one that is born in the land may be fed by the earth, his mother that brought him forth, according to the reason that rules in the creation, not enclosing any part into any particular land, but all as one man working together, and feeding together as sons of one father, members of one family; not one lording over another, but all looking upon each other as equals in creation. So that our Maker may be glorified in the work of his own hands, and that every one may see he is no respecter of persons, but equally loves his whole creation, and hates nothing but the serpent. Which is covetousness.

The ‘Digger Manifesto’ *The True Leveller’s Standard Advanced*
(1649) (cited in Linebaugh and Rediker 2000: 85)

The Many Headed Hydra sets out a new account of the revolutionary forces of seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Britain and the Americas. In contrast to histories that emphasise the agency of the bourgeoisie in the generation of the ideas and energies that fuelled the ‘Age of Revolutions’ and the foundation of modern political structures, Linebaugh and Rediker set out a classic ‘people’s history’ argument, emphasising bottom-up transformation and the agency of the proletariat in the making of modernity. However, contra those ‘people’s histories’ that identify ‘the proletariat’ with the white working class, or assume that folk history must pertain to the folk of a particular territory, Linebaugh and Rediker emphasise the transatlantic, transnational, character of the proletariat. They map out concrete links and the movement of ideas between workers’ revolts and uprisings across

all edges of the Atlantic, citing sailors as ‘a vector of revolution’ carrying ideas, resources and agency (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000: 241). Through their narrative Linebaugh and Rediker seek to reverse the divide-and-rule tactics through which the interests of the (supposedly white) proletariat in history have been pitted against those of slaves and black people – reverberating the insistence of the seventeenth-century Diggers in England and the nineteenth-century revolutionary writings and preachings of Jamaican Robert Wedderburn that the only real political choice is that between the commons and slavery.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the image of the many-headed Hydra was often used in the writings of the powerful to characterise the emergent proletariat. The Hydra is a mythical monster that Hercules had to fight as one of his great tasks. When the head of the Hydra is chopped off it grows two new heads in its place. Workers’ revolts were depicted as the heads of the Hydra that keep popping up, however often they are put down. By using this imagery the bourgeoisie was defining itself as ‘the hero’, engaged in a Herculean battle to subdue the monster and establish a new world order. In 1795 Thomas Malthus described the displaced people (lost commoners) of England as akin to the barbarians, the ‘hydra-headed monster’ that had invaded and destroyed Rome (Malthus 1795: 276). We can see here the image of a ‘many headed’ body of the monster feeding into the modern concept of the population ‘the body with so many heads they cannot be counted’ (Foucault 2007).

Linebaugh and Rediker (2000) aim to reclaim this image of the many-headed Hydra from its monstrosity, setting out an affirmative vision of a many-headed transnational and irrepressible revolutionary proletariat. This proletariat emerged with the displacements and dispossessions of peoples through enclosures, clearances and the transatlantic slave trade, and pulled itself together in the ships of the merchants and the British navy which piloted the new factory model of disciplined labour. This proletariat was a ‘motley crew’, a multi-racial mixture of displaced people, both men and women, circulating around the Atlantic. It was revolutionary, resisting the enclosure of common lands in the practices of the Diggers; fuelling regicidal revolution in England and demanding the radically democratic levelling of all people and the abolition of slavery in the Putney Debates; resisting forced labour and other impositions in countless urban insurrections; fleeing the floating factories to form the maritime commons of pirate ships; rising up against slavery across the Americas; overthrowing slavery in the first-ever successful workers’ revolution, that of the slaves in Haiti; and fomenting the American Revolution. And this insurrectionary ‘motley crew’ was, radically, *religious*.

The Diggers and the Levellers of seventeenth-century England were closely associated with radical religious movements of the day, including Anabaptists, Quakers and ‘Ranters’. As can be seen in the extract from the manifesto quoted above, the Diggers drew inspiration from scripture and theological insight as well as their own experience. Bibles in the vernacular were still a relatively recent innovation and persisted as a source of radicalism, despite conservative forces of the Counter-Reformation which defined Anabaptists as heretics fit for deportation or destruction. The biblical theme of God’s abundance provided a powerful

critique of the ideology of scarcity that was being used to justify enclosures and suffused the understanding of the common with that of divine glory. The idea of ‘levelling’ – making all equal – was crucially informed by the biblical theme of equality, especially the phrase that God ‘is no respecter of persons’ (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000: 88). Many Anabaptists professed *antinomianism*, which takes up Corinthians 6:12 ‘All things are lawful unto me’, interpreting this as the statement that faith, which is the manifestation of God in individuals’ consciousness, is beyond the law. They believed that ‘the ‘moral law [was] of no use at all to believers’, that the Old Testament was not binding on God’s chosen, and that faith and conscience took priority over good works and lawfully constituted authority’ (*ibid*: 66). This belief in the primacy of conscience over established law was a powerful resource in imagining revolutionary radicalism and fostering resistance to hierarchy. ‘Skepticism toward rules, ordinances, and rituals abounded, as did revelations and visions. Some religious radicals asserted that the “body of the common people is the Earthly Sovereign”’ (*ibid*). In the transatlantic ‘motley crew’ this radical Christian religiosity met with African spirit theologies, generating a powerful catalyst for change that resonates today in contemporary black liberation theology and Rastafarian spirituality (Taylor 2004).

Theologian Mark Lewis Taylor associates the religiosity of the Diggers, Levellers and Pirates, as described by Linebaugh and Rediker (2000), with a concept of ‘mystic communalism’ rooted in Christian understandings of the Holy Spirit – which, he maintains, are compatible with African notions of spirit. Taylor argues that a thorough survey of the biblical and theological writings on the nature of the Holy Spirit leads to an understanding that living in community has a mystical meaning and power. It is when living and acting in community that the creative force of God within the world – the Spirit – is manifest. He argues that the term “‘Holy Spirit” refers primarily to the mystery of God as intrinsic to, immanent in, communal life and development’ (Taylor 2004: 379), and that in biblical examples the Holy Spirit is integrally bound up with the creation and nurture of communities of agapic love. The mystical meaning of spirit is ‘located in the experience of love in a communal ethos . . . It is a mystical practice where transcending experiences of the sacred, paradoxically, spring up most dynamically in ways immanent to concrete human experiences of agapic community’ (*ibid*: 380).

Taylor claims that the essential connection between the Holy Spirit and community is expressed in numerous definitions or attempts to name the ‘person’ of the Holy Spirit. In trying to explain the concept of the Trinity (the threefold nature of God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), St Augustine experimented with an imaginary in which the Father is ‘the Lover’, the Son is ‘the Beloved’ and the third person is ‘the Love’ that is between them. In contemporary theology Paul Tillich frequently discussed the Holy Spirit as “‘Spiritual Community,” an ideal community realised in history as one of faith and love, under the “biblical picture of Jesus as the Christ””; whilst Sallie McFague emphasises ‘the spirit of God as “basically and radically immanent’ and *in relations* of “love and empowerment, of life and liberty, for people and for the natural world”’ (Taylor 2004: 382).

In Taylor's description, the mysticism of the Holy Spirit in Christian communities appears as an expression of something very much like the spirituality that is intrinsic to the commons and commoning. A crucial point to draw from his theological exploration is that the mystical experience, the manifestation of divine creativity and the miraculous capacity that constitute the Spirit derive from – or at least become possible within – the concrete experiences of living in common. This suggests that it was not only a case of radical religiosity fuelling the revolutionary fires of the motley monster of the seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic, but that it was also a case of the concrete experience of people thrown together, living in common as a practical and political necessity, generating the mystical experiences of Spirit that underpinned religious radicalism.

The holy spirit or the commons out of place

Now the Spirit spreading itself from East to West, from North to South in sons and daughters is everlasting, and never dies; but is still everlasting, and rising higher and higher in manifesting himself in and to mankind.

I have writ, I have acted, I have peace: and now I must wait to see the spirit do his own work in the hearts of others, and whether England shall be the first land, or some other, wherein truth shall sit down in triumph.

Gerrard Winstanley 'the most articulate voice of revolution during the late 1640s' (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000: 140–142)

Christian theologies vary very considerably in all manner of ways. One of the key divisions concerns the different emphases that are placed on the nature of God. As Dieter Werner explains, there are three different emphases in the understanding of God that characterise the three main prototypes of church traditions in World Christianity:

The three emphases are: the emphasis on God as proclaimed Word of Jesus Christ (Protestant tradition), the emphasis on God as charismatic power and source of energy through the Spirit (charismatic and Pentecostal tradition) and the emphasis on God as Eucharistic mystery or transformed substance as celebrated in the sacrament(s) (Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions)

(Werner 2013: 98).

Taylor points to the specifically *Spirit-centred* nature of the theology of the Diggers, Levellers and Pirates. He thus draws attention to resemblance between these theologies and contemporary Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions. Indeed, one of his key points in discussing the religiosity of the movements described by Linebaugh and Rediker is to reclaim the politics of Pentecostal Christianity from being automatically associated with the political Right. He wants to affirm a long tradition of leftist Pentecostalism, of which black liberation theologian Robert Beckford (1998) is exemplary in the present (Taylor 2000: 190).

Spirit-centred theology emphasises the immanent creative force of God within the world, as well as the capacity of people – or those people who are reborn in Christ – to participate in that creative agency (or charisma). Whilst this certainly can and does have individualistic and identitarian manifestations (as figured in the Prosperity Gospel and the Culture Wars), there is also a radical and democratic impulse to Spirit-centred theology. The idea that human creativity is a manifestation of Spirit informs traditions of radical pedagogy and participatory democracy, as represented in the figure of Paulo Freire (1970) – the idea that people do not have to be told what to do, because if they are truly free to engage their creativity, humanity or ‘dignity’ they will be enacting the divine agency of Spirit. If people are considered as participants in the creative force of God in the world (the Spirit), then the actions of people have that divine self-justifying, sovereign nature. As radical transformation is a sign of Spirit – a manifestation of its divine creativity – Spirit-centred theology can nurture radicalism. In so far as other people’s creative agency can be considered participation in the work of Spirit, that agency can be trusted. We can see ourselves as part of a common project – the work of the Spirit – even though we are acting individually and without instruction.

We see something of this democratic impetus in the above quotes from the seventeenth-century English revolutionary and Digger Gerrard Winstanley. Winstanley is attempting to revolutionise the world, and yet he ‘has peace’, having made his own contribution; he trusts that ‘the spirit [will] do his own work in the hearts of others’ (cited in Linebaugh and Rediker 2000: 141). The trust that Winstanley is willing to place in the hearts of others is crucial to the radically democratic levelling spirit that he articulates politically. It relies upon the sense that his agency and ambition are bound up with that of others, that he and others are co-participants in a common creative force – the trans-personal and indeed transnational – life of the Spirit which ‘is spreading itself East and West from North to South in sons and daughters is everlasting and never dies’ (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000: 142).

Taylor claims that there is a correlation between people who are oppressed and seeking liberation and Spirit-centred theologies or the Holy Spirit more specifically. The Spirit ‘thrives among peoples in resistance [and] is associated with their roles as shifting, often forcibly displaced, moving from place to place, mixing cultural ways from continent to continent’ (Taylor 2004: 389). For Taylor, then, the Diggers, Levellers and proto-Pentecostal Pirates are examples of the general phenomena of the Spirit becoming manifest amongst displaced and resisting people. There is strong resonance between this identification of the prevalence of Spirit-centred theology amidst displaced, nomadic and mobile people and the identification of such peoples with creative ‘lines of flight’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1988) and the autonomous generation of immaterial commons *as* collective life force of the multitude (Hardt and Negri 2000).

For Taylor, the reason for this correlation between displaced resisting people and the Spirit is to be found in the nature of the Spirit itself. Drawing on Tillich (1967), he claims that the Spirit is intrinsically liberating or freeing – that it is

divine life [which is] in itself (and not just for the world), distinguished by that freedom. Hence the divine life that is believed to act in history, etched deeply into the dynamism and structure of all creation, is a veritable pulsing of freedom, a resource for catalysing change in the present (to varying degrees) or change in an eschatological or apocalyptic future.

(Taylor 2004: 384)

Taylor's explanation for the correlation between displaced peoples and Spirit is difficult to accept for a number of reasons. Even if we can accept such essentialist metaphysical reasoning about the nature of Spirit, the assumption that the Spirit is the same as the force of liberation (whilst commonplace and resonant with many vitalist philosophies, such as that of Hardt and Negri) is clearly false. This is because of the evident and powerful role of Spirit in so many religious-political movements that patently *oppress* people and lands. In the Lord's Resistance Army we can see the Spirit rising up amidst displaced and alienated people of Northern Uganda who are resisting their circumstance and pulling together, but could we really describe that Spirit as 'a veritable pulsing of freedom'? The same question could be asked of the Prosperity Gospel or the 'God Hates Gays' brigade.

In a more materialist or sociological reading we can flip the explanation around and suggest that the association between the Spirit and displaced people is not about the Spirit bringing, or even constituting, the movement of liberation – but, rather, is something that comes about due to the absence of concrete resources and places in which to manifest the spirituality of the commons. We might think of the Spirit as the manifestation of the spirituality of the commons *in the absence of a physical common* – constituting a plane of immanence, a site of participation, for people who are not in the position to be participating in the concrete active life of land or independent spaces. Spirit, then, is an effect, not cause, of mobility, transience and alienation – movements that *may* be, but are certainly not necessarily or ordinarily, movements of liberation. The Spirit might be thought as an immaterial materialisation of the common life of persons who do not have the common object of land or place through which to get outside the self. Ripped from their actual common land, we might speculate, the Diggers and Levellers encountered and made manifest the spirituality of that common in the shared, impersonal/trans-personal life of the Holy Spirit, relating to the world and to each other through the impersonal vital mediator of determination that is Spirit. Rather than 'the veritable pulsing of freedom', then, we might rethink the Holy Spirit as the spirituality of the common *out of place*. In this reading the Spirit becomes an answer to the question of how to constitute a common in the absence of concrete common land or resource. The association between the Spirit and mobility is, then, not due to the emancipatory nature of Spirit but, rather, due to the way that Spirit movements arise from the experience of *dispossession*.

The return of the monster

If you should destroy these vessels, yet our principles you can never extinguish, but they will live for ever and enter into other bodies to live and act and speak.

The Quaker Edward Burrough to Charles II in 1660
(cited in Linebaugh and Rediker 2000: 135)

Linebaugh and Rediker claim that ‘the truth’ and ‘everlasting gospel’ preached by Winstanley and the Diggers persisted across centuries in the transatlantic imaginary, returning to England in the nineteenth century in the words of Ottobah Cugoana and William Blake. In the meantime:

It sat in swampy tri-isolate communities; it swayed on the decks of deep-sea ships; it rubbed shoulders with the poor in the taverns of the divaricated port cities; it strained for a hearing on the benches of the Great Awakening, or on stools on the dirt floors of slave cabins at night.

(Linebaugh and Rediker 2000: 143–144)

The Great Awakening was a charismatic movement of Protestant revival that took place in America in the early eighteenth century (and then again on a more dramatic scale at the post-Independence end of the century in the ‘Second Awakening’), which renewed the Protestant affirmation of the primacy of the individual relationship with God over the mediation of institutions or dogma (MacCulloch, Bancroft, and Salt 2010). The Awakenings gave rise to the plethora of American Evangelical churches and paved the way for contemporary Pentecostalism and Charismatic revival. In contrast to the Reformation of Luther and Calvin two centuries earlier, the Great Awakening emphasised an *emotional* relationship with God – communing with the movement of the Holy Spirit in the intensity of transformative and spiritual experience. Charismatic preachers excited radical emotional responses. Church services were dramatically taken over as congregants became infused with Spirit and expressed their joy at this through singing, fainting, running around. On the other side of the Atlantic, the Great Awakening had its counterpart in the Methodist Church, founded by John Wesley in Bristol, England, in 1739. Wesley was a profoundly charismatic preacher and brought profound innovation to British Christianity, taking the church to the new rural proletariat, preaching in the open air, reducing hardened miners to tears.

There is surely something egalitarian, levelling, in these emotionally charged, anti-institutional, eighteenth-century movements of the Spirit. The message that ‘God is no respecter of persons’ certainly found a voice in its benches and fields. The movement spoke to the experiences and needs of the most downtrodden and dispossessed – becoming the churches of miners in Britain, and of slaves in America (MacCulloch, Bancroft, and Salt 2010). Awakening Christianity was associated with stoking slave rebellions in Boston and New York, and some in

the American colonial establishment ‘feared that the Levellers, Ranters, and Fifth Monarchy men of the seventeenth-century English Revolution had reappeared’ in the form of these new evangelicals (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000: 190–191). In 1774 Wesley published his *Thoughts on Slavery*, which concluded that ‘liberty is the right of every human creature as soon as he breathes the vital air. And no human law can deprive him of that sight which he derived from a law of nature (cited in Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000: 296). It makes sense, then, to think of the Awakenings and the Methodists as in some sense a return, renewal or resting place of the Spirit or ‘everlasting gospel’ of Winstanley, the Diggers, Levellers and Pirates – the spirituality of the monster.

But the relationship between the monster (the population) and the bourgeoisie was itself undergoing reformation at this time. And the egalitarian, let alone commoning, impetus of the spirituality of the monster was not to be relied upon. As Linebaugh and Rediker show, prominent Baptists of Bristol (presumably a part of John Wesley’s milieu) had become firmly entrenched in the colonial slaving economy by the end of the seventeenth century. The egalitarian impulse of their religiosity was made to reconcile with the source of their prosperity through the invention and adoption of modern racism (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000: 97–99). For all the egalitarian and social impulses of the Great Awakening and Methodism, it is clear that the newly minted scientific and state racism also found a place on their pews, as did the promotion of commerce, the money economy and colonial expansion. In the 1780s Methodists played a key role in the prevention of slave revolts in the West Indies, and in the 1790s in Virginia many Methodists had backed away from anti-slavery and sought a ‘gospel made safe for the plantation’ (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000: 240).

The Methodists were the church of the miners, but they were also the church of mine-owners (Thompson 1963). Methodists were foremost amongst the missionaries of the British Empire at the end of the eighteenth century. In southern Africa they acted as advocates for local black populations against the ravages of colonial commercial exploitation, they provided education and made their mission stations spaces of security for people dislocated by war. But they were also proponents of ‘civilisation’ with all its cultural-racist implications, and of commerce, celebrating the money economy and not only the ‘work ethic’ but specifically work for a wage, going so far as to welcome dispossession because it forced people into supposedly salvific wage labour (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991).⁴ The seemingly contradictory impulses of the politics of Awakening Christianity are in line with the dualistic, incorporating and fragmenting political technologies that were in emergence at the time and would come to define modern power relations.

If the seventeenth-century transatlantic bourgeoisie saw its task as the suppression of the rebellious heads of the population (come ‘Hydra’); by the nineteenth century the task had become the cultivation, maximisation and exploitation of the vitality of the population (come ‘Society’). The life of the monstrous population and its common-ist spirituality were becoming incorporated into an emergent biopolitical imaginary – in which the collective body (race, class, nation) and evolutionary conceptions of nature, life, culture and economy became ‘the common’ and the centre of spirituality.

As mentioned above, Millner (2015) discusses the bourgeois commons movement of nineteenth-century England – the Open Spaces Movement – to which Octavia Hill was central. Hill is a crucial figure in the history of the modern British state. Not only did she work for the preservation of parkland and co-found the National Trust, as discussed by Millner, she also established novel forms of social housing, was a key architect of the emergent arts of governance of public health and is recorded in the histories of social policy as a pioneer of the British welfare state (Fraser 1973). Against a dichotomous reading of history that will associate commoning only with working class heroes, Millner maintains that bourgeois philanthropists including Hill were genuinely inspired by and working for the commons. From this she argues that the history of the idea of the commons is more complex and contested than people’s histories often allow, and that realities of commoning are constituted through aesthetic frames that are always in tension. However, the convergence of bourgeois welfare-state building and the spirit of the commons to which Millner draws our attention might point to more than the complexity and plurality of political history.

Following Michel Foucault, we have come to think of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western European bourgeoisie as having ‘invented for itself a class body’ (Foucault 1978), defining itself as a class in terms of physical health, vigour and creative capacity to transform the future – a vitality that is understood as being constituted collectively as a class, and being subject to the threat of degeneration through abnormal behaviour and contact with infection. Bourgeois projects of health campaigns, regulation of sexuality, urban reconstructions, public schools – all can be seen as originating in the efforts of the bourgeoisie to manage and care for its own corporate body. This collective body became a common object of passionate spiritual and political devotion and a frame of reality, a ‘quasi-transcendental’ (Foucault 2002, 2007, Deleuze 1988). The ‘discovery or invention’ of the collective embodiment of people – the modern biological concept of ‘population’ – was such a big event in the organisation of perception and care (according to Foucault at least) that it formed the basis of a whole new rationality and organisation of power – proliferating political economy, linguistics and evolutionary biology, future-orientated values and intensive practices of collectively caring for, maximising and exploiting life (Foucault 2007, Blencowe 2012). Foucault contends that the outsiders of this class body demanded and fought for inclusion through countless specific struggles – Chartism and the Labour movement being obvious examples – and that it was through such struggle that the net of collective body production and regularisation was extended to incorporate the proletariat (Foucault 2002). The imaginary of the population then extended from the boundaries of class to become the modern idea of the nation (Blencowe 2012). The collective embodiment of class, nation and race is the site of commonality – the domain of common thing – that sustain the spirituality of modern political ideologies including liberalism, socialism, nationalism, totalitarianism and imperialism.

Reading this moment back through the lens of the spirituality of the commons and Linebaugh and Rediker's hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic, we might posit a different agency in its creation. When the bourgeoisie 'invented for itself a class body', we might suppose that the new bourgeois sciences (hewn in the corpses of colonies and slums) were not the only source of its learning. Perhaps the bourgeoisie was also learning from the commoning practices and spirituality of the 'monster' that it had spent the past two centuries fighting – appropriating the impersonal common life force that Winstanley and Wedderburn named 'the Holy Spirit', and reproducing this as the impersonal common life force of the bourgeois class body, race, society and nation.

The monstrous corporate body 'with so many heads that it cannot be counted' – the Hydra – reappears in the nineteenth-century bourgeois imagination as the biological population which it will aim to profitably manage (Hinterberger 2012). The common land become-Holy-Spirit of proto-Pentecostal Pirates has undergone a new transubstantiation to incarnate as the intergenerational, intimately and dynamically related, collective, incorporated vitality of the biological population – articulated in the ideas of class, race, society and nation. If this is right, then nineteenth-century bourgeois commons movements were not 'just another version' of the politics of the commons popping up at a different moment in history, but were something more like the incorporation – in-corporeal-isation – of the commoning spirit of the transatlantic proletariat. The egalitarian impulse of that spirit re-emerged in the political demands of socialism. But the idea and experience of the collective biological bodies also fostered the most rank exclusions, enclosures and exploitation.

Conclusion: the 'spirit of 45'

It's the evening of 27th July 2012 and I sit amongst friends watching the television screen. I don't know how this has happened – I swore to myself (and anyone who cared to listen) that I wouldn't be watching this: the London Olympic Games Opening Ceremony.

I am the rebellious daughter of a sports fanatic mother – I can't stand spectator sports. I am a feminist, socialist, internationalist and when I see symbols of nations – especially this British nation – I see naught but oppression and violence. And when I see a spectacular media show carved in the carcass of East London I feel fury at all those brilliant unfunded projects and neighbourhoods trashed. And I never watch television anyway. How can I be here watching this?!

Ah the friends cooked me dinner, I'm at their house, they want to watch it, and my lift is yet to arrive . . . the car driver is blatantly watching.

So I watch.

And I am knotted inside myself. Cringing in advance at the clichés and jingoistic triumphalism that I know to expect. Rock-hard fast in my cynicism and indifference to the joys of this turbo engine of affection.

Commentators let us know that most of the dancers are not professionals but are in fact everyday public sector workers who have been invited to volunteer. A green and pleasant pastoral immediately gives way to an industrial landscape showing workers fuelling revolutionary technical innovation . . . And I am fully fledged in my icy outlook - sneering at the romanticisation of hardship, the celebration of that artless Engineer Brunel, and the exclusion from the vision of the Empire that made Britain (supposedly so) Great . . .

The Queen jumps out of a helicopter with James Bond. All are revelling in the carnivalesque and surreal . . . Still I do not give an inch.

And then.

And then. Nurses flood the stadium. Real Nurses beautiful and dancing in a stadium watched by hundreds of millions. An almighty moment in the sun for denigrated workers . . . And eek I feel myself softening . . . just a little . . . as they make bedframes perform a comic turn . . .

And just when I'm thinking that I can pretty much hold out, that they definitely still haven't 'got' me . . . A giant shining NHS symbol appears in the middle of the stage. Like the whole of the stadium, and the whole of the watching world, is worshipping the National Health Service.

They got me.

Even me.

I melt.

Ken Loach's 2013 documentary *The Spirit of 45* is an attempt to capture the intense spirituality, love and passion that founded the NHS and other institutions of the welfare state in post-Second World War Britain. The spirit, or spirituality, is portrayed through celebratory archive footage and through intimate personal narratives of 'ordinary working people' as well as the new public sector workers. A doctor describes with pure joy the day when he was first able to say to the mother of a sick child who could not afford his treatment: 'don't worry about that – from now on the treatment is free'. A former miner describes the squalid living conditions of his childhood in a slum Victorian terrace and our lungs heave in empathetic frailty at the obvious physical costs that life would bear – we sigh out our relief as we learn of the really decent council housing that was to follow and recall the sure hand of that doctor who could now heal the wounds for free. We see love and wonder in the eyes of our elders and understand that the creation of the NHS was truly a spiritual, spirit-full, project. Indeed, we reflect, love for this institution must be the closest thing the British have to a national religion, even if we lack the fervour today to fight for our gods.

And of course the film itself is an attempt to somehow recall and revitalise that spirit. To pass on the word from a generation that is itself passing – to declare that

miracles do happen, that new worlds can be made to rise, and that the people of Britain have built and to some extent still possess the most miraculous commons, most purely symbolised in ‘our NHS’.

An aspect of the story that the film shows, but seemingly despite itself – that is downplayed in the narration – is the centrality of the experience of war to the generation of this nationalising spirit. The ‘spirit of 45’ emerged from a concrete experience of collective, national, embodiment. The people of Britain had lived through intense mortal threat that was specifically collective. Limitations and the state control of usually privately abundant resources had made the materiality and interdependence of lives in a territory far more readily perceptible. Enemy lines and coping strategies had proliferated ideologies of ‘them ’n us’ – from the violent, triumphalist racism engendered in Winston Churchill to the internationalist, socialist patriotism of George Orwell.

The passionate intensity and spirituality that created and maintained the miraculous commoning of the NHS sprang from the soil: the garden soil in which women had been ‘digging for victory’, and the blood-drenched soil of battlefields in which intense corporeal interdependence and affection bound bodies, technologies and future lives. The commoning spirit is nourished by intense experiences of material ecology.

It’s the next evening – 28th July 2012 – and I am sharing a different meal with different friends: British intellectuals and devotees of the Left. They are elated by the Opening Ceremony – by the inclusion of all these leftist themes in this national spectacle. Voldemort terrorising the children of Great Ormond Street Hospital was, they explained, health secretary Andrew Lansley terrorising the NHS. Mary Poppins defeating Voldemort was a hopeful premonition of leftist revival to come.

‘And wasn’t it beautiful to see the celebration of working people, rather than “National heroes” at the centre stage?’

Whilst I can’t exactly disagree my feelings are very different to their elation.

I feel dirty and manipulated – ‘they even got me!’ – exploiting the NHS and workers histories to draw the affections of the feminist, socialist, internationalist into the celebration of machismo, Nation, and spectacular consumption. I feel sullied. Perhaps I feel that something sacred has been ignominiously profaned. I definitely feel like a shmuck, like I’ve been hoodwinked into feelings against my better nature.

But much worse than this is the realisation that in this ideological manipulation I am in fact facing the truth: That of course all along the NHS, our passionate common, has been a snare; a hook, a trade-off, securing the attachment of folk like me to the racist, imperialist, capitalist state that I know to abhor; to the profit motives of Big Pharma and military hardware; to the vicissitudes of normalising life.

But in the sickening feeling is also wretchedness in the knowledge that whatever the cynical implications or motivations, I couldn't choose for us to be without the NHS, and that this common does not look set to survive the current wave of enclosure.

The sound of feathers surges in my throat.

I love this *Spirit of 45*. How can I *but* love this spirit that has carried me and mine through sickness, poverty and ignorance – the spirit of the monster out of place. But its egalitarian impulse and generosity are not to be relied upon. Incarnated in blood-bonds and security threat, it all too easily takes horror stories and the splitting of skin for acts of redemption. Ripped from the materiality of the common world, this spirit seeks expression in the intensity of other matter. Invested in the materiality of collective bodies, it renders lived bodies intensive sites of concern – concern that becomes the desire to control, extract and eliminate as readily as it does that to foster. Passionate intensity without the spacing of solid matter to hold the tension in place can collapse into hunger for pure life, the new, exhaustion. The drive for pure life is always also the drive for exposure to death. War drums beat the heart of the collective body. My hope for common-ist politics today is that the reinvestment of spirit in worldly matters of place – in the ecological pragmatics of collaborative property distribution, creation and interconnection rather than the processuality of infinite growth, wealth and health – will conjure rhythms, stories and songs that drown such Sirens.

Notes

- 1 Reprinted from *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Anzaldúa 1987).
- 2 References to William Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming' are commonplace (for example Žižek 2015). The poem was written in the aftermath of the First World War and is taken as an ominous premonition of the movements of fascist passionate intensity that were soon to follow. It has become something of an anthem for critiques of modernity, capturing a sense of the tragedy (or spiritual crisis) in which – it is said – that liberal indifference and indecision abound alongside totalising and violent fascistic tendencies. The famous first stanza reads:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre,
The falcon cannot hear the falconer.
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, whilst the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

- 3 As we know, commons are frequently incorporated into money making-ventures and capitalised and important arguments exist concerning the dialectical co-constitution of capitalism and the common (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2009). However, I do not wish to replicate the dialectical analytic of capital versus the commons, or the idea of incorporation, which tend to suppose a false opposition between power, on the one hand, and

commoning, on the other, as well as a capitalocentric analysis (Gibson-Graham 2006). As Bresnihan and Byrne (2015) explain, commoning practices generate and confront their own problematics of governance and power. Power, capture, heaving into being, are crucial for all forms of community building and empowerment (Pearce 2013). ‘Capture’, then, is not the evil other of a ‘liberating’ force of the commons. In using this term my intention is to point to the significance of spirituality in the creation of spaces and social forms (‘social reproduction’ as Bresnihan and Byrne might put it) as well as to the perpetual ambiguity, angst and frailty with which such forms and their norms are imbued.

- 4 John Wesley himself was a great advocate of the salvific potential of money economy, stating: ‘Money is of unspeakable service to all civilized nations in all the common affairs of life. It is a most compendious instrument of transacting all manner of business, and (if we use it according to Christian wisdom) of doing all manner of good. [It is] . . . food for the hungry . . . raiment for the naked . . . [and] father to the fatherless’ (cited in Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 170).

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