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American Architecture in the Black Atlantic

William Thornton's Design for the United States Capitol

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In November of 1792, William Thornton (1759–1828) arrived in Philadelphia from a two-year stay on his family's slave-holding plantation on the island of Tortola in the British Virgin Islands. He carried his proposed architectural design for a new capitol of the United Sates. Thornton had lived in Philadelphia for four years prior and had found some success as a physician, inventor, and amateur architect, yet he had never planned on returning to the city. Instead, he had hoped to be sailing for western Africa with a contingent of freed slaves in order to participate in a new colony that would reconfigure the political geography of the Atlantic World.

This essay considers Thornton's design for the United States Capitol in relation to racism, slavery, and notions of American enlightenment. Against, and perhaps underlying, the multiple ideologies of freedom, liberty, and equality that have been projected onto the neoclassical architecture of the Capitol, it is well understood that this "temple of liberty" was in fact built by enslaved people. Enslaved laborers literally built the material edifice that presently stands in Washington, DC. We can equally say that slavery "built" the Capitol inasmuch as the national resources—financial and material—necessary for such an undertaking were provided by (that

is, appropriated from) enslaved people. This essay proposes a third register by which slavery "built" the Capitol: that slavery *construed* it by being foundational to the political imaginary within which it was formed.

This demands another mode of "reading" neoclassical architecture. Rather than parse the various significations intended in the spatial and formal organization of the building, I will attempt to define a horizon against which such an architecture could take form at the end of the eighteenth century. This entails privileging an understanding of the racial systems within which the Capitol is entangled over an examination of its autonomous form or content. I will examine how the Capitol operates among the set of cultural, economic, and material phenomena that configured the social imaginaries that we call racial whiteness and blackness.

Following W. E. B. Du Bois, I take this architecture to present a racial "double consciousness" by exemplifying hybridity of white and black subject positions in its monumental representation; following Paul Gilroy I situate this double consciousness within the Atlantic World.[1] The neoclassical design of the Capitol has been taken to represent the classical virtues of an American enlightenment. I argue that the proper subjects represented in this monument to representational democracy are not the citizens of the Republic, but the enslaved people excluded from political and architectural representation. By examining Thornton's preliminary designs for the Capitol in consideration of the greater trajectory of his philosophical projects and political activities, we can discern in this neoclassical edifice the terms of an irresolvable crisis between the enlightened Republic and its foundation within a regime of chattel slavery. In order to offer such an interpretation of the Capitol, I will first discuss Thornton's plans for slave manumission and his formulation of a universal orthography. These will shed light on the political and philosophical systems in which Thornton formulated his design.

Throughout his early life Thornton traversed a transatlantic network that was coextensive with the Second Atlantic system: he was raised in the British West Indies, educated in England, received his professional training in Scotland, began his medical practice back in England, and established his career in the United States.[2] We might say that Thornton was a subject of the Atlantic World, and as such, we can take his neoclassical design for the Capitol as a vision for the political and economic reorganization of that world during the final decade of the eighteenth century. In this moment, just after the ratification of the US Constitution, slavery remained a "peculiar institution" that could credibly have dissipated with the Slave Trade Act of 1794 that limited American involvement in the trade. But by the end of that decade the plantation system was firmly established in the American South with inland cotton becoming the nation's main export commodity for the global market.[3] The1807 Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves solidified the position of slavery in American economic development, as chattel slavery

became an inelastic market and a vehicle for investment capital.[4] In this essay, I read the implicit racial politics of Thornton's design for the US Capitol Building centrifugally through a unique set of archives—personal correspondences, legal proceedings, philosophical treatises, religious pronouncements, and architectural drawings—produced while he traversed this particular route across the Atlantic system.

William Thornton and Slave Manumission

What brought Thornton back to his childhood home in Tortola was a contact, made in 1788 through his mentor and fellow abolitionist John Coakley Lettsom, with Granville Sharp.[5] Sharp, who would become one of the founders of Sierra Leone, had in 1787 purchased an area of land on a West African peninsula from the local Temne chief King Tom. With the support of the British government, Sharp moved to relocate there some seven hundred to eight hundred "Black Loyalists" living in London—these were black Africans formerly enslaved in the United States who had fought for the British during the Revolutionary War with the promise of manumission. In England, they had largely been forced into a condition of indigence, and their presence was unwelcome by the political establishment. Sharp established the eponymous Granville Town as a site of black repatriation in Africa (figure 2.1).[6] Thornton sought to become involved in Sharp's settlement, and in 1789 he organized the "Union Society" in Newport, Rhode Island, to recruit two thousand free northern blacks to the cause while planning to join the settlement himself in the capacity of "superintendent."[7] His intention in travelling to Tortola was to manumit the seventy to eighty enslaved people bequeathed to him in the settling of his father's estate and to formally petition the legislature of the Virgin Islands to entrust him to lead an expedition, similar to Sharp's, to relocate them.[8]

Thornton, like Sharp, imagined that the west coast of Africa would offer an alternative to the European mercantilist mode of the colonial project. It was to be a new kind of colony above the fray of the old-world battle for empire, populated by a new kind of colonist who would refuse any implementation of slavery. Granville Town, they hoped, would not be subject to any exclusive trade arrangements imposed by foreign powers, and would consequently be able to sign treaties and exchange goods with multiple nations. According to Thornton: "Every European power would, no doubt, be glad to accept, upon easy terms, the trade of one of the richest colonies in the world. They would have no expense to support, might send their own vessels, could never be jealous of a power which, whilst pacifically inclined, would never increase, and indeed the basis of the government would be founded in peace."[9] Set apart from Europe, the Americas, and, especially, the West Indies, an African settlement would be precisely the type of economic

Fig. 2.1 John Matthews, *A View of Sierra-Leone River, from St. George's Hill, where the free Black settlement was made in the year 1787*, 1791. Courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

free zone that could become the basis of a new laissez-faire political economy in the Atlantic.

In addition to the natural resources of Africa that had long been staples of the transatlantic trade—gold dust, ivory, gums, wood, drugs, and spices—Granville Town would import the trades and skills of the British West Indies, cultivating cotton and indigo for export to Europe and sugar to the United States. While former American and Caribbean slaves were to till the earth of Granville Town, freed northern American blacks would play much the same role as their northern white counterparts—taking part in trade and commerce and spreading the social and ethical values of enlightened citizens.[10] Freed northern blacks would thus serve as a proxy civilizing force for former slaves and Africans alike. Thornton explained, "The Negros of the Northern Countries, who have been amongst Christians . . . would easily be induced to live a regular life, and by example the rest, as well as the Natives, might become a sober religious people."[11] An independent colony of freed blacks would provide a model to replace the system of transatlantic slavery. According to both Sharp and Thornton, ideological claims of universal freedom and equality had been prevented from fully taking root in the Americas largely due to the presence of slavery. Their aim was to impart to Africa a version of American enlightenment that had thus far been inaccessible to the United States. Moreover, by removing and relocating American slaves, and thus

removing a foundational contradiction of American democracy, Thornton believed that the United States might also gain access to the promise of enlightenment that had eluded it.

While the commercial operations of the African colony would be overseen by free blacks from the northern United States, Thornton sought to draw its labor force from his own holding of slaves in Tortola. In his proposals to manumit these slaves we can locate a tension between enlightenment notions of individual sovereignty and a paternalistic treatment of freed slaves. Of the seventy to eighty enslaved people bequeathed to him in the settling of his father's estate, Thornton considered only a handful to be suitable for resettlement in Africa. Many, he believed, lacked the discipline or work ethic to be given immediate freedom; those whom he did not consider ready for independence in Africa were to remain in Tortola, but under modified conditions. He sought to adapt his inherited land toward "inducing the most ungovernable of [his] people to become good members of society." Thornton proposed to divide his estate into a number of lots, each to be offered, at a nominal fee, to an enslaved person for a period of six years. Those who "found the benefit of society" and "enjoyed the reward of their own labor" would be granted their freedom and have the option to remain on that plot indefinitely or to join the settlement in Africa. Those who refused to abide by the laws of the community or whose behavior remained "intemperate or improper" would be "fined in liberty or property," that is, they would lose their land and be returned to the condition of slavery.[12]

Whatever its pretense, Granville Town remained within the cold terms of exploitation founded upon multiple regimes of violence: violence upon the land that exploited mineral resources and razed native species to cultivate the products of the global marketplace; violence against individuals that displaced societies from territories staked for cultivation; and the racialized violence against subjects destined to toil for the cause of commerce.

Thornton's alternative to the large-scale plantation economy of the British West Indies consisted of a system of independent plots to be tended by freeholders who would engage in autonomous association through agricultural exchange. In effect, he would transform enslaved laborers into Jeffersonian yeomen. Yet the elimination of slavery by the removal of blacks from the United States squared neatly with the Jeffersonian mode of segregationist abolition that considered blacks to be morally and intellectually inferior and considered their presence—free or not—to be a barrier to establishing an enlightened democracy.[13] For Thornton, this effort was ultimately a disciplinary regime—an instrument of social reform devised to transform the corrupted and dependent enslaved peoples into social individuals. The violence of the plantation lurks behind this putative freedom. While the formerly enslaved peoples were to labor as "*free* tenants for life" they were not allowed

to leave the plantation; this freedom existed only inasmuch as they remained subjugated to the systems of Atlantic commerce in either the British West Indies or Africa. To leave this reorganized plantation—to either refuse labor or its social obligations—would be to depart from the freedom lent to them. Were any formerly enslaved people to disobey, they would lose their rights to property and to freedom.

Black Loyalists and freed slaves were not simply to be repatriated to some ethnically natural locale to revive a premodern mode of existence. They were to remain the immanently modern subjects of the Atlantic system: bodies transported *yet again* to alien lands in order to open up new resources for ballooning global commodity markets. The ambitions of this project, modeled on an American vision of free and open trade of agricultural goods by an autonomous people, were to produce model citizens of a global economic liberalism. But they would ultimately only have remained subjects of the racial violence of global commerce.

In mid-November of 1788 Thornton was hearing reports that the African colony was diminished by disease and threatened by "enraged and jealous natives."[14] He came nowhere near his goal of recruiting two thousand northern blacks to join his emigration company, and those he did recruit never made firm commitments. There remained too much uncertainty for the would-be settlers regarding whether Granville Town was to be a free settlement or a British colony. Free northern blacks would never submit to becoming colonial subjects of the British Empire in which slavery remained legal.

By the time Thornton departed for Tortola in October of 1790, Granville Town had collapsed. Of the 700 Black Loyalists and their descendants committed to leave for the colony only 440 were to be found on the day of departure—most of whom refused to embark and were rounded up by force. Only 276 survived the journey to Sierra Leone, with many of the remaining soon dying of disease. Within three years many of the white settlers had abandoned the settlement and taken up the slave trade. The settlement was conclusively dispersed after an attack by the neighboring Temne people in misdirected retaliation for two of their own villages being torched and plundered by French slave traders.[15] In 1791 an act of Parliament established the Sierra Leone Company, which placed the area under the mercantilist control of the British Empire. Sharp wrote to Thornton strongly advising him against travel to Africa.[16]

Upon his arrival in Tortola, Thornton's reason for returning there was already lost. Having abandoned his life in the United States and with no route to Africa, Thornton was left to flounder in the West Indies. He attempted to at least free the enslaved peoples he had inherited, but a provision of British Virgin Islands law stood in the way. According to the regulations governing slavery, anyone wishing to manumit their slaves had to pay a yearly security of ten pounds per person. The

intent of the law was to prevent plantation owners from freeing enslaved peoples who had either been maimed or were too old to be productive as a way of ridding themselves of the burden of their care. Thornton thus proposed to the legislature that this fee be lifted in the cases of former slaves who were of a productive age and could reasonably support themselves. At a time when the population of blacks and whites in Tortola was proportionately ten to one, the legislature of the British Virgin Islands rejected Thornton's proposal. Any freed blacks must leave the colonies, and with the option of Africa foreclosed, there was nowhere left for them to go. Having failed to accomplish any of his plans for slave manumission in Tortola, Thornton took up writing a manual on orthography and began his designs for the Capitol. Thornton redirected his considerations on slavery to a philosophical and aesthetic plane and through these projects we can examine the irresolvability of an enlightened democracy founded upon racial violence.

Universal Orthography as Enlightenment Desire

Thornton's chief philosophical work, *Cadmus, or, A Treatise on the Elements of Written Language*, received a medal from the American Philosophical Society in 1793. It indicates the larger philosophical system within which his design for the Capitol was conceived. As its extended title claims, Cadmus sought to "[illustrate], by a philosophical division of speech, the power of each character, thereby mutually fixing the orthography and orthoepy."[17]

For Thornton, orthography—the proper spelling of words—and orthoepy—their correct pronunciation—should be self-same. It was only by received convention that they became distinct fields. He considered the conventional understanding of speech—the set of vowels and consonants by which one could determine discrete syllables making up individual words—to be an inherited burden of Europe and proposed a universal orthography to reform writing. These claims illustrate both the ambitions and limitations of his philosophical system.

Thornton's orthography aimed to simplify writing by looking to the individual sounds produced in spoken languages. This system—in essence, a basic phonetic alphabet—was composed of thirty characters divided between vowels and aspirates, wherein "a vowel is a letter that is founded by the voice, whence its name. An aspirate is a letter that cannot be found but by the breath." Over time, Thornton's orthography would incorporate all of the world's languages into a single system. New words would not require transliteration and existing words, in any language, could be universally employed.[18] As Thornton put it: "If then we fix a certain character to each sound, there will be no more difficulty in writing with a correct orthography than in speaking with one, as we speak letters, which form words, that make sentences; and I must repeat that thus ought we, in reading sentences, to read words, by reading letters; and thus will the tongue and pen

express every idea with perfect uniformity."[19] Thornton sought absolute transparency between words and ideas. This writing derived from speech supersedes speech itself by serving as the common ground of a universal system.

Thornton's proposal for a new orthography, then, must be understood both as a continuation of European Enlightenment considerations of language and as a uniquely American rejection of old-world conventions. Hence his introduction declared to its intended audience of his colleagues in the American Philosophical Society: "You have corrected the dangerous doctrines of European powers, correct now the languages you have imported, for the oppressed of various nations knock at your gates, and desire to be received as your brethren. . . . The American Language will thus be as distinct as the government, free from all the follies of unphilosophical fashion, and resting upon truth as its only regulator."[20] Thornton was confident that his system would be effective in teaching the deaf to speak. The difficulty in teaching the deaf, he reasoned, lay in the impasse of the reproduction of sounds. If one could not reproduce a sound that one could not first hear, then a universal orthography preceding sound would resolve this impasse as pronunciation would become but the application of a written system. The practical claims of Thornton's system were that travelers could easily pick up languages with little instruction or assistance. As people would begin to write with a common orthography there would come to be no distinction in dialects between the different classes, and all people would easily learn to read.[21]

Thornton likely derived his ideas on orthography from the work of Thomas Spence, an English radical best known for his ideas on land reform. Like Thornton, Spence saw spelling reform as a project to release the natural capacities of the individual from inherited social constraints.[22] In his 1782 supplement to *Robinson Crusoe*, Spence imagined his orthography put into effect in the fictional worlds of Daniel Defoe: "As they could now learn as much in a Month, as formerly in a Year, the very poorest soon acquired such Notions of Justice, and Equity, and of the Rights of Mankind, as rendered unsupportable, every species of Oppression."[23] He thusly named his script Crusonean and published many of his political pamphlets (as well as the supplement to Defoe's novel) entirely in that script.

Thornton's understanding of the necessity for a rationalized orthography came about through a series of racial encounters. Two years before the publication of *Cadmus*, in a letter to the Council of the Virgin Islands in which Thornton discussed his plans to form a settlement of freed slaves in Sierra Leone, he mentioned his efforts to both learn the Temne language and devise a system of writing for it.[24] *Cadmus*, it seems, grew out of an effort to transcribe a language that he did not speak into a written language so that he could gain access to it. Yet despite this gesture toward African languages, Thornton's claims upon the universal actually normalize English as the universal standard of all human speech. He estimated

that a universal alphabet would contain fewer than fifty characters, the majority of which were already assigned as, he claimed, "the European may be considered as containing the great outline of all."[25]

While attempting to teach one of the enslaved men of his plantation to read he concluded that the only thing preventing the slave's realization of his natural capacities was an outmoded, inherited orthography. He describes this moment in a letter to Lettsom: "The cause of my considering the subject at all was the difficulty I had in teaching a negro servant to read. I was tortured by his want of intellect, and considering the subject, I found the language was faulty, for the man understood when I gave the words properly spelt."[26] In wiping away the received political and philosophical conventions that enforced such racial differentials, Thornton believed that he could unleash the natural capacities of the individual. At stake in this was the universal dissemination of knowledge within a new democracy. To offer universal access to both knowledge and public debate—regardless of race or class—would destroy systems of privilege and create an order in which all could participate on equal terms.

The system that would allow those without a voice to be heard is the same that would inculcate those without political standing into the universality of enlightenment. Yet Thornton would bring about no *ephphatha* by which the deaf were induced to speak; this universality was immanently *particular.* This universal system, ostensibly independent of class or race, fashions the racialized speech of white Europeans as normative. Thornton tried to teach an enslaved person to read in order to grant him access to enlightenment, but this enlightenment was univocal. Utterances are only possible within its particular language suppressing a bidirectional interaction, or a translational politics.[27]

Thornton's Capitol Building

When Thornton learned in early 1792 of the competition to design a new Capitol for the United States the deadline had passed and a number of designs had been submitted. None of these, however, was entirely satisfactory to Thomas Jefferson, who oversaw the project. Thornton had already proven himself as a capable architect in his design for the Library Company of Philadelphia, described by his contemporaries as the first American building in the "modern stile [*sic*],"[28] and Jefferson received Thornton's request to submit a late entry with enthusiasm. The frontrunner had been Étienne Hallet, a French-trained architect whose design combined an American Federalist architecture modeled on Pierre Charles L'Enfant's Federal Hall in New York (which served as the first US Capitol) with Louis Le Vau's baroque Collège des Quatre-Nations.[29] Hallet's layout for the Capitol arranged the American legislative system according to the organization of the French National Assembly, suggesting a precedent for American gover-

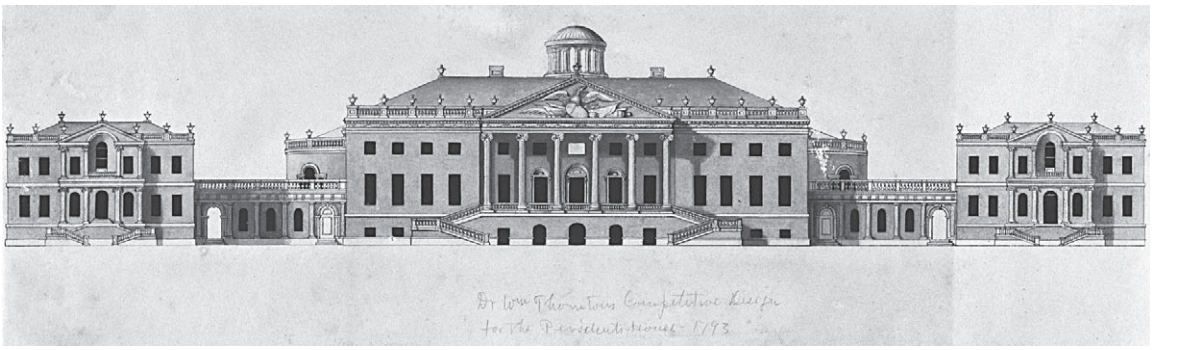

Fig. 2.2 William Thornton, United States Capitol, Washington, DC, elevation, "Tortola Scheme," 1793. LC-DIG-ppmsca-30938. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

nance in French political institutions. Jefferson, however, was never fully convinced by Hallet's design, perhaps finding the baroque monumentality ill-suited to his ambition for a "Temple of Liberty" appropriate to an agrarian democracy.

The Library of Congress identifies drawings of a sprawling Georgian complex as the scheme that Thornton brought back with him from Tortola in November of 1792 (figure 2.2).[30] On his return to the United States his work took on a decidedly neoclassical character. His approved design, formulated after 1794, organized the plan around two identical circular spaces. A central rotunda in the interior of the building was to serve as a gathering space for the separate branches of government. Directly adjacent to this, a cyrtostyle circular portico breaking the envelope of the building was to serve as a mausoleum, or "Temple of Virtue," for George Washington (figure 2.3).[31]

For Thornton the distinct branches of the federal government required neither separate sites nor distinct representation. In plan, the spaces required for each branch of government fit neatly into a unitary rectangular enclosure. A building to house the entirety of government was a unique problem in the 1790s. The Parliament at Westminster had stood in its then present form since the sixteenth century and architectural experiments for spaces of political representation were taking place in revolutionary France, yet each of these presupposed a unique representation for the people in contradistinction to a strong executive.[32] Jefferson's program, however, called for the executive to be absorbed into a building for the meeting of Congress. Rather than a house in which representatives of the people would balance out executive authority, all components were to operate in perfect accord; the two houses of Congress, the hall of the Supreme Court, and apartments for the executive are arrayed around the empty space of a central rotunda where all could gather.[33]

If the plan of the Capitol described the resolution of differences into a unity, the elevations speak to the tension at play in the slave-holding democratic repub-

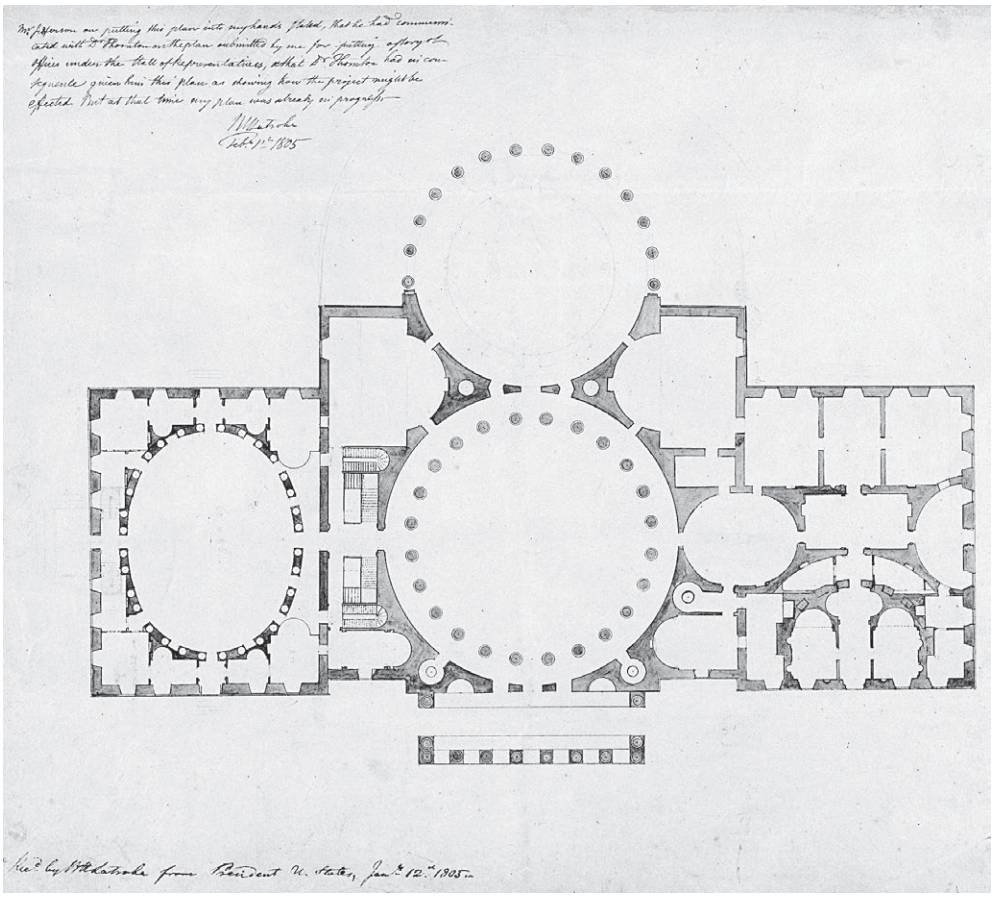

Fig. 2.3 William Thornton, United States Capitol, Washington, DC, floor plan, approved design, 1794–1797. LC-DIG-ppmsca-31440. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

lic. The new Capitol was to be sited atop a landscaped berm that would front the urban space of Washington, DC, to the east and overlook a mall to the west.[34] This placement offered a complex architectural problem necessitating dual elevations that would be both intimate to the urban condition surrounding the building while maintaining the monumentality required for it to provide a visual terminus of the extensive mall. Few of the entrants capitalized on this opportunity; most offered centralized pavilion plans that treated the east and west elevations the same or (more often) ignored the west elevation entirely.[35] Thornton's design, however, offered a distinct architectural response for each of the two main elevations. In doing so, it proposes a dual character that mediates the urban and pastoral ambitions of American enlightenment.

Thornton's east, city-facing, rotunda supports a stepped dome fronted by a classical propylaea to replicate the Roman Pantheon between two mannerist wings (figure 2.4). This low, horizontal composition gives civic representation to

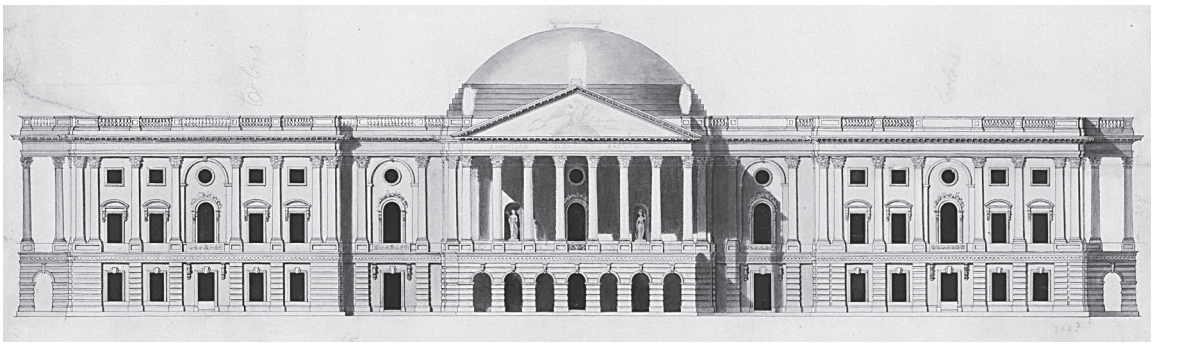

Fig. 2.4 William Thornton, United States Capitol, Washington, DC, east elevation, approved design, 1794–1797. LC-DIG-ppmsca-07219. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

the Capitol: its central portico is fashioned after L'Enfant's Federal Hall with its raised platform to serve as the public stage for presidential inaugurations.[36] It is one of the monumental edifices that would anchor a public square, per L'Enfant's vision, to establish a vast urban capital.[37] The west rotunda breaks the envelope of the building while projecting a colonnade topped with a classical tholos beyond its rectangular perimeter (figure 2.5). It forms a *tempietto* on the National Mall. This temple, like the many classical tholoi of eighteenth-century English landscape gardening, would rest atop a rolling pastoral landscape. Like those English gardens, this is not a productive landscape, but a pastoralism that could be configured precisely because the sites of agricultural production had been displaced to the slave-holding plantations of the American South.[38] In the English gardening tradition, the noble estates were transformed into picturesque landscapes as agricultural production shifted to the colonies. We might take this American counterpart to signal a similar misalignment between the sites of production and those of civic representation: while the plantation economy makes this picturesque landscape possible, all of its components have been removed from the capital.

This scheme is almost certainly modeled upon Charles de Wailly's 1764 design for the Château de Montmusard in Dijon, France. Montmusard is organized around two identical circular spaces determining the central axis of the building that each break its rectangular envelope. This design brings together two distinct chateau typologies: a cyrtostyle salon projecting east into the garden to evoke the feudal country estate and the compact single-story block of the western elevation recalling the urban typology of the Parisian *hôtel*.[39] An examination of the two faces of the Capitol presents a similar series of dialectical oppositions: L'Enfant's cosmopolitan urbanism and Jefferson's agrarian ideology, southern informal markets and northern finance capital, slavery and free labor. While these seem to be at odds, a look at the commodification of enslaved people within American chattel

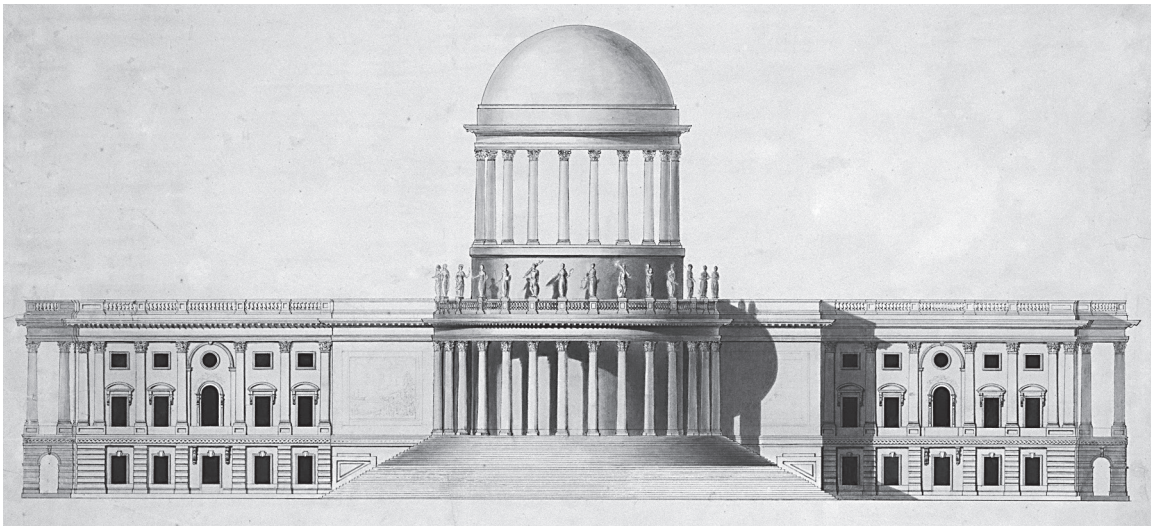

Fig. 2.5 William Thornton, United States Capitol, Washington, DC, west elevation, approved design, 1794–1797. LC-DIG-ppmsca-19858. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

slavery shows them to represent the two components of a contiguous system of wealth production.

As American financial infrastructure became increasingly dependent on the wealth contained in the personage of enslaved people, a means of securing that wealth proved necessary. Restrictions on the transatlantic slave trade beginning in 1794 created an inelastic market in chattel slavery, stabilizing the market so that the property value of the enslaved could operate as security for investment. This grew into a sophisticated financial operation. In its early phases the value of enslaved people was used to secure other investments, but it was soon realized that that value itself had to be secured. As slave capital was increasingly recognized as a mode of wealth like any other, the enslaved became fungible—transitioning from the material basis for securing wealth to a commodity itself to be securitized.[40]

Thornton, following Sharp, had understood liberal economics to be incompatible with monopolized labor.[41] In the final decade of the eighteenth century the incorporation of the violence of the plantation into systems of finance capital formulated a new type of subjecthood for enslaved peoples that was perfectly aligned with the slave regime. In a republic founded in the realization of the rights immanent to the individual, the enslaved were resolutely under the purview of their owners. Enslaved people had no explicit relationship to the republic—they were neither subject nor citizen, with no immanent rights and granting no legitimation to the state.[42] In a regime of individual sovereignty, slavery precipitated a dissolution of a sovereign individual in which enslaved peoples became biopolitical subjects regulated by free markets.

Two distinct readings of the Capitol become possible. The first presupposes a

(white) sovereign citizen of a democratic republic to be its proper subject. Two façades of the Capitol describe two distinct territorial configurations—the urban and the pastoral—representing two distinct social, environmental, and economic systems. Each with matching rotundas—one, the tomb of the first president and dedicated to Virtue, the other, a space for all of government to gather. These determine the central axis of a plan that configures the disparate branches of government into a unified design within a uniform envelope. This reading, which was presumably intended by Thornton, is an enlightenment vision that resolves different political and social configurations through symbolic spaces of representation and gathering within an ideal plan. It presupposes an enlightened subject: a sovereign individual with recourse to universal reason. This subject, however, is racialized in a system that excludes enslaved peoples from individual sovereignty.

Thornton's architecture of American enlightenment thus remains haunted by a racialized other, demanding another interpretation. This one situates the Capitol back at its origin in the Atlantic World and has enslaved peoples as its proper subject. Once the ideal plan of the Capitol proves a site of privilege, we can see it as maintaining a double bind that fashions its political order in a universality that is particularized in the condition of racial whiteness. This condition extends centrifugally to the opposing façades that place the civic pantheon where the different branches of government unite in dialectical relationship to the tholos of the landscape garden. The economic order displayed in the resolution of the urban and the pastoral could only have come through an abject configuration of enslaved peoples as commoditized subjects of a biopolitical regime. An incommensurability lies at the heart of Thornton's architecture: that the American enlightenment he tried to configure is negatively determined through the absolute rejection of blackness as a site of political sovereignty. This confluence of the ideal and the abject is, perhaps, its very modernity. The absence upon which this whiteness is configured never truly disappears; it manifests aesthetically at the very sites of its erasure.

Just as in his colonization schemes and his work on orthography, the otherness that needed to be expunged from Thornton's Capitol was never actually resolved—it was merely displaced. His colonization schemes would rid the republic of its bad faith while perfectly maintaining the networks of global capital and the place of blacks within them. His orthography privileged European speech under the guise of universal participation, formulating a colonial double bind by presenting its unequal access to knowledge as a failure on the part of the excluded. The absolute transparency between citizen and state fashioned in the Capitol claims to provide universal access to government, but it ultimately renders unseen and unheard the multitude of the unrepresented enslaved—robbing them of their voice. It fashioned a regime of violence as disinterested reason of the democratic republic.

The Universalization of the American Republic

In 1800, after all of his plans for manumission and black resettlement had come to nothing and his design for the Capitol had been taken over and altered by others, Thornton extended his political ideas into a proposal to unify the entirety of the Americas into a single order. His "Outlines of a Constitution for the United North and South Columbia" described a united political body encompassing the entire Western Hemisphere.[43] The continents would be divided into thirteen states: North Columbia with five (largely adhering to the present-day latitudinal divisions between Canada, the United States, and Mexico), South Columbia with seven, and the "all of the West India and Islands" comprising the thirteenth. A capital of the unified continent, the District of America, would be centrally located at the Isthmus of Darien (presently, Isthmus of Panama). Much like its American model, the federal district would lie outside of the political determination of the states.

The boundaries of the individual sections were to be demarcated along geographic coordinates rather than natural boundaries. The division of states was explicitly imaginary, serving only to determine political representation. For Thornton ideal governance would become the new universal measure: "The cosmometry or measurement of the world, with relation to longitude, shall commence at the Supreme Seat of Government."[44] No conflict between states would arise as commerce would pass freely between them and all would offer equal protections; "whoever is a citizen of one, is a citizen of all; and . . . his rights extend through the whole!"[45] The government of the Columbias would mirror that of the United States, with a president, fifty-two representatives, twenty-six senators, and thirteen federal judges—four, two, and one from each state, respectively.

In his plan for a unified North and South Columbia, Thornton sought to universalize the political system of the United States to encompass the New World. The empire would be divided into states (thirteen no less) whose abstract political boundaries would allow for the greatest political representation while not interfering with commerce. A federal district of "Americus" would be located roughly at the center point of the empire, and government would be divided between its executive, a legislative, and judicial branches. But in this scaling of the American political system from the particular to the general, something, he hoped, would change as geographical conflicts might dissipate at greater scales. Perhaps for Thornton it is the particularity of American democracy itself that engendered a north–south divide. Perhaps remaining imbued within the European order—its networks of trade, its construction of the Middle Passage, and its ongoing battle over colonies—prevented the fulfillment of the United States' democratic self-realization.

The slave regime that was most foreign to Thornton's personal vision was sustained by the exchanges between the agricultural wealth of the New World and the economic power of the Old. Thornton's scheme necessitated the abolition of this other space of slavery while maintaining the global commercial order that it engendered. Here we must recall that Thornton's American enlightenment was, in the last instance, the purview of planter and merchant interests. Moreover, Thornton's home in Tortola—from which he penned his treatise on orthography and drafted his design of the Capitol—was a mere 250 miles from revolutionary Saint-Domingue, directly in the path of the maritime routes that transported commerce, refugees, and revolutionary ideas between Europe's West Indian colonies. In this light we might take all of Thornton's plans as attempts at a moderate revolution that might resolve burgeoning racial tensions before they brought about a generalized insurrection.

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Thornton, in his classicism, might best be understood as a failed Ulysses of the Atlantic World. He pursued his ever-receding horizon of abolition from the sugar colonies of the British West Indies, to the English Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade and the French Société des amis des Noirs, to the intellectual abolitionist circles of the American republic, to his unrealized journey to the fleeting free black colonies of western Africa, to the center of the American government. But Hermes, the God of commerce, always steered the winds to his disfavor and his ambitions remained just beyond his bow. The legislature of the British Virgin Islands rejected his petition to manumit the enslaved, the Girondists of the Société des amis des Noirs were killed by the Terror, the Union Society of Newport dissolved, Granville Town was overrun, and, finally, his Capitol was left unrealized. In the wake of these failures his vision only expanded, as if the scale of the Atlantic was not too vast, and the mercantile institutions of the Middle Passage not too embedded, but his ambitions simply too limited; his enlightenment vision could only operate at the scale of the universal. He ended his hapless pursuit of the receding horizon of manumission and determined that all would adhere to the absolute. His vision expanded outward from the capital of his Americus at the Isthmus of Darien, to encompass the Western Hemisphere in its entirety. All would have an equal voice in the universal tongue. The manumission societies and free settlements would be proven unnecessary. The moderate revolution would be won, and the West Indies would become a state within a hemispheric republic. We can look out at this expanse from the Capitol, with its immanent incommensurability expanding centrifugally with the enlightenment reason that it instantiates.