

**Fetishism and the Moral Marketplace:
How Abolitionist Sugar Boycotts in the 1790s
Defined British Consumers and the West
Indian “Other”**

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Abstract

In the early 1790s more than 300,000 Britons boycotted West Indian sugar in one of the most impressive displays of public mobilisation against the slave trade. Many of those who abstained were inspired by William Fox's 1791 pamphlet *An Address to the People of Great Britain on the Utility of Refraining from the Use of West India Sugar and Rum*. The abstention movement gained momentum amidst the failures of the petition campaign to achieve a legislative end to the slave-trade, and placed the responsibility of ending slavery with all British consumers. This thesis draws from cross-disciplinary scholarship to argue that the campaign against slave sugar appealed to an idealised image of the humanitarian consumer and maligned slave. Writers such as Fox based their appeal on a sense of religious duty, class-consciousness and gendered values. Both the domestic sphere and the consumer body were transformed into sites of political activism, as abolitionists attempted to establish a direct link between the ingestion of sugar and the violence of colonial slavery. Attempts to encourage consumers' sympathetic identification with the plight of distant slaves occurred alongside attempts to invoke horror and repulsion at slave suffering. The image of the West Indian slave presented to consumers was one shaped by fetishized European imaginings. The decision to abstain from slave sugar, therefore, was not only motivated by genuine philanthropic concerns, but the desire to protect the civilised and refined modern consumer, from the contaminating products of colonial barbarity.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing to Josiah Wedgwood in January, 1792 Thomas Clarkson noted that, on his recent anti-slave trade tour, he had frequently encountered a pamphlet which was producing an “astonishing effect” upon the population of British towns and cities.¹ The “little work” to which Clarkson referred was William Fox’s *Address to the People of Great Britain on the Utility of Refraining from West India Sugar & Rum*.² The tract, published in 1791 by prolific abolitionist publisher Martha Gurney, became the most widely distributed pamphlet of the eighteenth century, surpassing even Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*.³ The most successful of the abolitionist tracts, the pamphlet was published in 25 editions and 70,000 copies were printed and distributed throughout Britain and North America in the first four months alone. Clarkson wrote that its influence almost uniformly corresponded to the extent of its circulation, claiming that in some places that he had visited, “not less than a hundred, & in others by report, not less than between two & three hundred persons have left off the use of Sugar & Rum” on perusal of the *Address*. The work’s immense popularity was even acknowledged by Fox’s opponents, one of whom wrote of “the rapid and extraordinary manner in which it has been circulated in all parts of the kingdom.”⁴

Fox’s *Address* resonated with the British public on many levels and across a broad social spectrum. Multiple authors cited the pamphlet as direct inspiration for their own anti-sugar tracts, many of which were also published by Gurney. In 1792 Andrew Burn commended Fox for rousing the public’s moral sentiments to exertion, referencing Fox’s work in his own pamphlet, entitled *A Second Address to the People of Great Britain: Containing a New and Most Powerful Argument to Abstain from West Indian Sugar. By An Eye-Witness to the Facts Related*.⁵ In his 1792 tract entitled *An Address to the People Called Methodists* Samuel Bradburn singled out Fox’s

¹ Thomas Clarkson, ‘Letter to Josiah Wedgwood’, Jan 9, 1792 in *Correspondence of Josiah Wedgwood*, Katherine Eufemia Farrer (ed.), Cambridge, 2011, pp.184-186.

² William Fox, *An Address to the People of Great Britain on the Utility of Refraining From West India Sugar & Rum*, 1st ed, London, 1791.

³ Timothy Whelan, ‘William Fox, Martha Gurney, and Radical Discourse of the 1790s’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol.42, no.3, 2009, p.397.

⁴ Charlotte Sussman, ‘Women and the Politics of Sugar, 1792’, *Representations*, No.48, 1994, p.51.

⁵ Andrew Burn, *A Second Address to the People of Great Britain: Containing a New and Most Powerful Argument to Abstain from West Indian Sugar. By An Eye-Witness to the Facts Related*, London, 1792, p.3.

principles and writing abilities as worthy of “particular honour” among the variety of anti-saccharite tracts.⁶ Slave-produced sugar became the subject of sermons by Dissenting clergymen who portrayed rejecting it as a type of eighteenth century sacrament, an “abstinence baptism”⁷ that was necessary to achieving individual and national salvation. Men told stories of arriving home to find their wives and daughters had exorcised their house entirely of the tainted produce of slavery, and women wore fashionable abolitionist cameos to visibly display their renunciation of sugar. Even the Queen launched a famous and oft-satirised campaign to convince the royal family to join her in forsaking sugar. Grocers and sugar refiners declared their resolution to only sell free sugar, and, according to Clarkson’s estimates, no fewer than 300,000 people rejected the previously popular commodity.

Sugar consumption had increased dramatically throughout the eighteenth century, a popular commodity that was immersed in social ritual and associated with prestige and expanding empire. Sugar’s status in British society, however, was radically reconfigured in the last decades of the century. By 1800 anti-saccharites had re-branded sugar to be a visible and confronting symbol of slavery in the British West Indies. Abstaining from, rather than consuming sugar became the ultimate demonstration of civil virtue. Fox emphasised the propriety and utility of abstaining from sugar by appealing to a sense of public guilt and empowerment in equal amounts. He stressed the innate complicity of the sugar eater in perpetuating the slave trade, but also the ability to mobilise practices of purchasing and consumption towards humanitarian ends. Fox’s arguments resonated particularly with politically marginalised segments of society, such as religious non-Conformists and women, at a time when petitioning and Parliamentary campaigns to bring about a legislative end to the slave trade had floundered.

William Fox’s *Address* built on a generation of abolitionist writings from both sides of the northern Atlantic. Pennsylvanian Quaker John Woolman had refused to purchase slave produce in the 1760s, and Joseph Priestley declared abstention a

⁶ Samuel Bradburn, *An Address to the People Called Methodists; Concerning the Evil of Encouraging the Slave Trade*, 3rd ed., Manchester, 1792.

⁷ The term “abstinence baptism” was used by Quaker Sarah Pugh at the third Annual Meeting of the American Free Produce Association in 1841. Pugh proposed that “the great mass of abolitionists need[ed] an abstinence baptism,” and to stop tacitly supporting slavery through the consumption of slave-produced goods. See Julie Holcomb, ““There is Death in the Pot”: Women, Consumption and Free Produce in the Transatlantic World, 1791-1848”, Presented at the University of Texas at Arlington in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a Doctorate of Philosophy, 2010, p.201.

Protestant duty in 1788. *An Address*, however, was by far the most influential of a vast number of tracts published by anti-saccharite authors in the late 1780s and early 1790s. Fox was uniquely celebrated by contemporaries and has become the central protagonist of subsequent historical scholarship on anti-saccharism. The unofficial endorsement of his pamphlet by prominent members of the London Abolition Committee such as Clarkson and Wedgwood⁸ contributed to the pamphlet's vast distribution and, to it being singled out by subsequent historians as representative of a broad discourse on anti-saccharism. While they may not have been as popularly received, or as well read as Fox's *Address*, pamphlets written by numerous other abolitionists such as Burn, Bradburn and Priestley provide important insight into the arguments made against slave-produced sugar in the 1790s.⁹

Commonly acknowledged as the first history of abolition, Clarkson's 1808 *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade, by the British Parliament*¹⁰, had important consequences for how the abstention movement was contextualised within the broader campaign against the slave trade. Clarkson noted the extraordinary fervour with which Britons relinquished sugar but, ultimately, saw the abstention movement as a marketing device for the petition movement and the legislative campaign against the slave trade. Because anti-saccharism did not have tangible legislative consequences and occurred outside the realms of conventional activism, it has been granted only a marginal role in parliamentary and economic-focused histories of abolition. In his analysis of the mobilisation of public opinion against the slave trade¹¹ Oldfield only gives intermittent mention to anti-saccharites, and Seymour Drescher also portrays abstention as supplementary to the mass mobilisation of the petition movement.¹²

⁸ In his January 1792 Letter to Wedgwood Clarkson requested that Wedgwood encourage his local bookseller to stock the pamphlet. In the letter Clarkson emphasized that he was writing from his own volition, rather than as a Committee member. Clarkson, 'Letter to Josiah Wedgwood', 1792 in Farrer (ed.), pp.184-186.

⁹ Burn, *Second Address*; Samuel Bradburn, *Address to the People Called Methodists*; Joseph Priestley, *A Sermon on the Subject of the Slave Trade; Delivered to a Society of Protestant Dissenters, at the New Meeting, in Birmingham; and published at their request*, Birmingham, 1788.

¹⁰ Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament in Two Volumes*, vol.2, London, 1808.

¹¹ J.R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807*, London and Portland, 1998.

¹² Seymour Drescher, 'Public Opinion and Parliament in the Abolition of the Slave Trade', *Parliamentary History*, vol.6, 2007, pp.42-65.

It is only more recently, since contemporary ethical trading movements have ignited interest in consumer politics and feminist historians have attempted to expose women's contribution to anti-slavery, that the anti-saccharite movement has become a subject of sustained scholarly interest. Scholars across a variety of disciplines, including Caroline Wright, Michele Micheletti, Kyla Wazana Tompkins and Mimi Sheller have emphasised the significance of the consumer and producer body to narratives of ethical consumption.¹³ Sheller and Micheletti draw explicit comparisons between late eighteenth century abstention and twenty-first century ethical consumption, presenting consumption as an inherently political behaviour, one that creates and reinforces power relations between moral consumer and distant producer. Authors such as Charlotte Sussman, Julie Holcomb and Clare Midgley also acknowledge the politically transformative powers of consumption practices, and have used the abstention movement as an example of how the eighteenth century domestic sphere could be transformed into a site of political activism.¹⁴

Drawing upon secondary and primary source literature, this thesis investigates how abstaining from slave-produced sugar challenged and reinforced hierarchical power structures in British domestic society and between Britain and the colonial West Indies. Abstention was a “self-defining” and “other-defining” act, which not only demonstrated humanitarian concern for slaves in the West Indies, but also helped to define the identity of the idealised pious, refined metropolitan subject.

In order to understand the vast popular appeal of the movement needs to be placed within its distinctly eighteenth century historical context. Chapter One describes how British anti-saccharism emerged as a response to and was informed by its eighteenth century social and political context. The eighteenth century saw sugar transition from an aristocratic luxury to a ubiquitous staple of middle class diets. Britain's rapacious sugar consumption enriched the national coffers and endowed the pro-slavery West Indian lobby with significant political influence. The sugar boycotts

¹³ Caroline Wright, ‘Consuming lives, consuming landscapes: interpreting advertisements for Cafedirect coffees’, *Journal of International Development*, vol.6, no.5, 2004, pp.665-680; Michele Micheletti, ‘Consumption and Capitalism: Anti-slavery and anti-sweatshop’, *Talk and Action*, 2007, pp.121-136; Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century*, New York and London, 2012; Mimi Sheller, ‘Bleeding Humanity and Gendered Embodiments: From Antislavery Sugar Boycotts to Ethical Consumers’, *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism and Development*, Vol.2, no.2, 2011, pp.171-192.

¹⁴ Charlotte Sussman, ‘Women and the Politics of Sugar’, pp.48-69; Holcomb, “‘There is Death in the Pot’”, Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870*, London, 1992.

therefore, represented a radical change to British dietary habits and a contentious attempt to undermine the economic foundations of plantation slavery. The abstention campaign built upon anti-slavery sentiment which emerged in the aftermath of American Independence (1783) and had galvanised into a popular abolitionist movement by the late 1780s. Following the failure of the petition movement and amidst growing disillusionment with the failure of Parliamentary campaigning, the boycott allowed consumers to collectively express their avowed opposition to the slave trade.

Chapter Two expands on David Brion Davis' assertion that "the full story of abolition cannot be told until more is known about the individuals who helped transform scattered anti-slavery sentiment into the successful national movement to end the British slave trade,"¹⁵ by trying to identify the common values and characteristics of the 300,000 individuals who abstained from sugar in the early 1790s. Dissenting Protestants, particularly Quakers were among the key constituency of the boycott movement. Anti-saccharism resonated with central tenets of Dissenting theology, particularly the emphasis on common Christian humanity and the ability to achieve a direct relationship with God through absolving oneself from the tarnishing material products of sin. Abstaining from sugar became a way to demonstrate one's religious credentials and moral self-discipline, an act which helped middle-class Britons to define themselves in opposition to the infamous gluttony and barbarism of the West Indian plantocracy. Authors appealed to women specifically, invoking their purported unique feminine capacity for sympathy and humanitarian concern. Women's involvement in the abstention movement became a subject of contentious debate, particularly when their activities were seen as challenging the acceptable boundaries of saccharine virtue.

The campaign against slave sugar reinforced the idealised image of the late eighteenth century Briton, and simultaneously cultivated a vivid image of the West Indian slave. Abolitionists encouraged consumers to sympathetically identify with the slave experience. Slave humanity, however, was acknowledged cautiously and selectively as discussed in Chapter Three. Abolitionists implored consumers to imagine their own wives and children in the position of the subjugated slave, and they

¹⁵ David Brion Davis quoted in Judith Jennings, 'A Trio of Talented Women: Abolition, Gender and Political Participation, 1780-1791', *Slavery and Abolition*, vol.26, no.1, 2011, p.55.

incited paranoia about African aggression and the potential for violent slave rebellion. Sugar was portrayed as literally and physically tainted with the horrors of slave suffering, and thus by consuming it, consumers themselves risked descending into the barbarous fantasy of African cannibalism. The consumer mouth and British tea table were quarantined from the contaminated goods of slavery, preserving a hierarchical boundary between the British metropole and the savage colonial periphery.

The sugar boycotts were a remarkable display of extra-Parliamentary political activism. The movement's core constituency included activists from traditionally marginalised groups, many of whom benefitted from the ideological outcomes of abolitionism. However, it is important not to romanticise abstention as an example of triumphant humanitarianism and political empowerment. The scope and nature of anti-saccharist activism was constrained and defined by reactionary forces as well as revolutionary ones. The revolutions in France and Saint Domingue not only undermined the economic impact of the boycotts by opening up the European sugar market, they also contributed to a sense of hysterical paranoia about radicalism that forced many abolitionist moderates to distance themselves from the abstention movement. While some individual women expressed their commitment to anti-saccharism in political terms, abstention writers most commonly appealed to as apolitical subjects and possessors uniquely feminine qualities of sensibility and sentimental compassion. Finally the West Indian slave was denied agency within the European humanitarian project. Slaves were presented as grateful recipients of European generosity rather than as central actors within the discourse about their own labour and suffering. In order to dissuade Britons from the use of West Indian sugar, anti-saccharite authors presented a specific, highly racialised image of the free African and the Caribbean slave, an image designed to elicit sympathy and sentimental identification as well as fear and repulsion.

CHAPTER ONE:

ANTI-SACCHARISM IN CONTEXT: POPULAR MOBILISATION AGAINST THE SUGAR EMPIRE IN THE LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

On the eve of the American Revolution in 1771, sugar occupied an esteemed position as the British Empire's greatest commodity. Following an increase and broadening of its consumption during the eighteenth century, sugar took pride of place at British tea tables, an esteemed, but accessible luxury that carried connotations of civility and refinement. The simple ritual of sweetening tea became enshrined as a virtuous and patriotic act, helping to sustain the West Indian sugar trade--the cornerstone of Britain's Atlantic Empire. Sugar's economic influence was pervasive. Towns such as Bristol thrived on the sugar trade, and absentee plantation owners grew opulently rich alongside those in related industries such as refining, shipping, and provisioning. In the political arena, the West Indian lobby--comprised of planters, merchants, and their representatives--exerted almost unmediated political influence, securing generous bounties and monopolies for Caribbean produce.

Few contemporaries could have predicted, therefore, the rate at which the sugar trade's seemingly unimpeachable reputation would unravel in the three decades following 1774. The American Revolution was the first in a series of events that challenged the economic prosperity and moral sanctity of the sugar trade, and by the turn of the nineteenth century, British public opinion was overwhelmingly opposed to the slave trade. American Independence resulted in the loss of a captive market for West Indian sugar, and challenged the moral foundations of the British Empire. The American Revolution can be seen as a watershed in British attitudes towards its Caribbean sugar empire. The isolated examples of anti-slavery opposition that existed for centuries began to be galvanised into popular movement in the last decades of the eighteenth century.

The anti-saccharite movement of the 1790s was made possible by broad changes that reconfigured British society and politics during the eighteenth century. Eighteenth century developments, such as the emergence of a popular print culture helped boycott leaders to mobilise vast numbers of individual consumers behind a common cause. Unlike the petition movement, however, which had faced rigid opposition and numerous Parliamentary setbacks, abstention placed the responsibility of slavery upon all Britons and empowered consumers as agents of abolition in their

own right. While abstention may not have been successful in bringing about a legislative end to the slave trade, it was a momentous exercise in consciousness raising. The abstention movement's greatest achievement was that it helped to broaden the sphere of political abolitionism—from the Houses of Parliament to the domestic tea-table and the consciences of everyday consumers. Because sugar was so visible in virtually all aspects of British life, associating sugar with slave suffering meant that reminders of the trade's barbarity dominated the visual, economic and social landscapes of 1790s Britain. Once the concept of "slave sugar" had permeated the British psyche, even the West Indian lobby's powerful political influence could not entirely eradicate it.

Patterns of British sugar consumption in the eighteenth century

The stereotype of Britons as sugared tea drinkers has its origins in the eighteenth century. From the capture of Britain's largest sugar colony, Jamaica, in 1655, sugar found pride of place at the domestic tea table. By the publication of Fox's *Address* in 1791, sugar was no longer restricted to the banquet tables of the aristocracy, but became integrated into the diets and entire lifestyles of the middle-classes. Sugar became increasingly accessible, but maintained associations with prestige and civility. The eighteenth century saw a democratisation of sugar consumption and the symbolic meanings that went with it.

The eighteenth century saw sugar transition from an aristocratic luxury to an ubiquitous article in British middle-class diets. Sidney Mintz's seminal 1985 work, *Sweetness and Power*, provides the most extensive history of sugar consumption, and offers insight as to how sugar became inextricably tied to slavery, consumerism and British national values during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Prior to the eighteenth century sugar was desirable, but used primarily by elites as a medicine, spice, preservative and decorative material. Mintz argues that the transition from sugar as spice to its popular consumption as "food" marked a revolutionary development in British gastronomic habits.¹⁶ As evidence of sugar's importance, Mintz refers to Hannah Glasse's famous 1760 cookbook and house-keepers guide *The Compleat Confectioner*. A craft manual as much as a cookbook, the publication

¹⁶ Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, New York, 1985, p.78.

showcases sugar as an article of admiration and consumption, presenting an astoundingly comprehensive catalogue of potential uses, from preservatives to “ornaments for grand entertainments.”¹⁷ *The Compleat Confectioner* was printed in more than a dozen editions and widely plagiarised. In the preface to its 1800 edition, editor Maria Wilson promoted it as a book of obvious importance to “all heads of families and all persons entrusted with the care of housekeeping.”¹⁸ Sugar was a common subject in discourse about health and nutrition, with its purported benefits including infantile nourishment and tooth-brushing.¹⁹ In 1792, an author of a series of strictures detailing the “impropriety” of Fox’s *Address* argued, based on their “experience and medical authority”, that sugar was a necessary of life, and that many persons had done themselves great injury by abstaining entirely from it.²⁰ By the 1790s sugar was consumed more often, in more ways, and by significantly more people.

The development of a British tea-habit was one of the primary factors behind sugar’s emergence as an article of mass consumption. Tea, especially sweetened tea, offered succour to a typically dull and nutrient-lacking diet. Data collected by Sir Frederick Eden in 1797 evidences the importance of tea and sugar to lower and middle class English consumers. In that year, a northern family of five, for example, spent £1 12s on tea and sugar and 8s on treacle--in total ten per cent of their cash purchases on food. In the same year one southern family of six purchased approximately 100lbs of sugar per year.²¹ These individual examples illustrate broader trends in sugar’s popularity. Per capita annual sugar consumption in the United Kingdom increased from 4lbs in the period 1700-1709 to 8lbs in 1720-1729, 11lbs in 1770-1779 and 18lbs in 1800-1809.²² By the late eighteenth century, sugar could no longer be a “superfluity” or an article of “caprice and effeminacy”,²³ but was

¹⁷ Hannah Glasse, *The Compleat Confectioner; or, Housekeeper’s Guide: To a simple and speedy method of understanding the whole art of confectionary; the various ways of preserving and candying, dry and liquid, all kinds of fruits, nuts, flowers, herbs etc. and the method of keeping them fresh and fine all the year round*, Maria Wilson (ed.), London, 1800.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Dr Frederick Slare (an ardent critic of Thomas Willis who conducted significant early research into diabetes mellitus) argued in favour of sugar as toothpaste in his 1715 *Vindication of Sugars*. Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chain: Profits and Rebels in the Fight to Free and Empire’s Slaves*, New York, 2005, p.195.

²⁰ Sussman, ‘Women and the Politics of Sugar’, pp.48-49.

²¹ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, p.116.

²² *ibid.*

²³ Anon., *A Vindication of the use of sugar and other products of the West Indian Islands*, London, 1792, p.20.

consumed rapaciously by the labouring classes. In response to growing social criticism about working-class tea habits, cleric David Davies asserted that “tea drinking is not the cause, but the consequence of the distresses of the poor.”²⁴ Moving from ostentatious luxury to habitual comfort, sugar was transformed during the eighteenth century from “a luxury of kings to a kingly luxury of commoners.”²⁵

As its popularity increased, sugar gained a symbolic significance that far surpassed its nutritional and practical value. For Mintz, sugar (alongside tobacco and tea) was one of the first commodities that conveyed that “one could *become* different by *consuming* differently.”²⁶ Sugar was the first exotic luxury to be incorporated into the daily rituals of a growing capitalist class who possessed the ability to elevate their own standards of living. Woodruff D. Smith similarly asserts that tea-sweetening rituals were part of a conspicuous attempt to display respectability. Tea ceremonies incorporated considerations of fashion, status, sociability, health and virtue. The tea table became laden with physical objects of status and refinement, such as sugar tongs, sugar caddies and silver tea trays, items which were often individually identified in wills.²⁷ Considered a more morally acceptable alternative to drinking alcohol, tea drinking was accessible (but not inexpensive) and allowed individuals to demonstrate refinement and self-discipline (moderating the quantity of sugar consumed) within the sphere of their own homes.²⁸ This association with respectability, Smith continues, that explains the continuously growing demand for sugar throughout the eighteenth century. Because sugar consumption was so ingrained in the social and moral identity and daily lives of the British middle-classes, it was immune to variations in fashion, trends, price and availability.

By 1791 sugar was one of the most visible commodities in British society. In many ways, the sheer scale of sugar consumption made abstaining from it such a powerful political statement. Furthermore, because sugar took on symbolic meanings beyond its physical and nutritional qualities, boycotting sugar represented a

²⁴ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, p.115.

²⁵ *ibid*, p.183.

²⁶ *ibid*, p.96.

²⁷ Clare Midgley, *Feminism and Empire: Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790-1865*, Abingdon, 2007, p.46.

²⁸ Woodruff D. Smith, ‘Complications of the Commonplace: Tea, Sugar, and Imperialism’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol.23, no.2, 1992, p.277.

comprehensive challenge to British social norms, as well as the economic foundations of slavery.

The sugar trade and the economy

Sugar was an integral part of dietary customs, but in 1791 it was also the economic cornerstone of Britain's Atlantic empire. The products of slave labour in the Caribbean were embedded into the fabric of Britain's domestic economy, supporting a large refining industry and enriching related industries such as provisioning, distilling, and insurance. The anti-saccharite movement not only aimed to change consumer behaviour, but also challenged the West Indian lobby, whose economic prosperity and elite connections granted the political power and institutionalised privilege.

The sugar trade was a driving force behind the expansion of Britain's Atlantic economy from establishment of Britain's first sugar plantations in Barbados in the 1640s and the capture of Jamaica in 1657. For Adam Hochschild, the importance of the West Indies to eighteenth century Britain was akin to the geopolitical significance of the Middle East in the twentieth century. "Just as oil drives the geopolitics of our time," Hochschild asserts, "the most important commodity on European minds then was sugar, and the overseas territories that mattered most were the islands so wonderfully suited for growing it."²⁹ In 1798 Pitt the Younger estimated that Britain's annual income from the West Indian plantations was £4million, compared with a total of only £1million from all other sources.³⁰ Jamaica was by far the dominant producer among Britain's Caribbean possessions, which in 1792 also included Antigua, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, Nevis, St. Kitts, Tortola and St. Vincent. The island produced one-fifth of all Britain's imports in the 1780s and 1790s, and received seven per cent of British exports during the same period.³¹ Jamaica produced the vast majority of rum, and between 40.1 and 52.7 per cent of the sugar exported from the West Indies between 1787 and 1793.³²

The scale of the West Indian sugar trade was so large that the London port was unable to keep pace. Authorised in 1799 and built between 1800 and 1802, the

²⁹ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, p.54.

³⁰ Elizabeth Abbott. *Sugar: A Bittersweet History*, Toronto, 2008, p.151.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*

London West India docks were at the time the largest in the world. The thirty-acre area could dock 200 ships, and the import dock had a line of five storey warehouses to store sugar, rum and other produce. In the West India Dock Act of 1799 The London West India Merchants were granted a 21-year monopoly on the use of the state of the art infrastructure. This act was the first Parliamentary, rather than municipal, act around dock-building, and the docks themselves were a physical symbol of Britain's political and economic investment in the West Indian trade.

As well as in commercial infrastructure, the wealth from the West Indies was visible in the ostentatious dress and lavish lifestyles of many absentee planters. The unpopularity of plantation owners within England helped make the sugar trade an easy target for abolitionists attempting to show that it was not in the national interest to continue a trade dominated by greed and exploitation. Anecdotal accounts of King George III's visit to Weymouth in the late eighteenth century claim that he became irritated at the conspicuous wealth of absentee planters, reportedly exclaiming, "Sugar, sugar, eh?--all that sugar! How are the duties, eh, Pitt, how are the duties?"³³ Although their wealth made them unpopular, West Indian planters still wielded considerable political clout. The West Indian lobby consistently and vocally promoted their economic contribution to empire, meaning that abolitionists had to challenge both the moral, political and imperial foundations of the sugar trade.

As well as financing Britain's overseas empire, the sugar trade also enriched the domestic economy, supporting a large refining industry and related industries of shipping, insurance and provisioning. Bristol was at the heart of the sugar industry in the eighteenth century, home to twenty refineries by 1750, more than any other British port.³⁴ Whereas in the late 1690s 7,230 hogsheads of sugar were imported into Bristol per year, Bristol's imports ranged from 10,000 to 22,000 hogsheads per year between 1728 and 1800.³⁵ Individuals involved in the sugar trade occupied Bristol's social and political elite--between 1633 and 1832 sixteen of the city's sugar refiners became Mayors of the City.³⁶ Furthermore, the Bristol trade employed number of individuals in the building, repair and manning of ships, as well as in insurance, security and other professions related to the importation, refinement, and distribution

³³ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, p.156.

³⁴ Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies*, London, 2003, p.86.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*, p.87.

of sugar. Bristol's burgeoning industry provided a pertinent example of how sugar had become embedded in the fabric of British society.

Like Bristol the city of London had prospered on the West Indian trade. London trading merchants Camden, Calvert & King (trading 1760-1824) were a success story of the late eighteenth century.³⁷ Initially involved in the shipping and provisions business, the firm extended their activities into slave trading and established connections in sugar refining, brewing, insurance, and finance. "The slave-sugar complex," notes Elizabeth Abbot,

was all-pervasive. It linked slaves and slave boilers to colonial carters and dock-workers, seamen, captains and ship's bursars to freight forwarders, insurance agents and customs agents; harbour officials, longshoremen and carters to refiners, grocers, confectioners; people who took sugar in their tea and spread jam on their bread to refiners, packagers and bakers; and shipbuilders and shipyard workers to brokers and commercial agents known as factors.³⁸

Britain's investment in the sugar and slave trade stretched far beyond the activities of merchants and plantation owners. Campaigns against slave sugar had to challenge a broad patriotic narrative (heavily promoted by the West Indian lobby) that placed sugar at the very heart of British industry and society.

Two key events in the late eighteenth century, however, changed the imperial relationship with the West Indies--American Independence and the Revolution in Saint Domingue. The American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) had a negative impact on the economic health of Caribbean sugar trade. Historians have referred to the post-American independence era as a "bronze", or even "lead" age for sugar, compared to the prosperous "golden age"³⁹ of the seventeenth century, and the pre-1783 "silver age."⁴⁰ In 1793 the anonymous author of *Memoir of the Sugar-Trade of the British Colonies* noted that "In 1774 and 1775 the average importation of Sugar to Great Britain was cwt. 2,052,395 on the medium of the two years, exceeding the average quantity imported in any two years since that time. From the period of the years 1774 and 1775, it may be assumed that the progress of the Sugar commerce to

³⁷ Kenneth James Cozens, *Politics, Patronage and Profit: A Case Study of Three 18th Century London Merchants*, Unpublished MA Dissertation, University of Greenwich, 2005.

³⁸ Abbott, p.148.

³⁹ David Beck Ryden, *West Indian Slavery, 1783-1807*, New York, 2010, p.8.

⁴⁰ Richard Pares, *Merchants and Planters*, Cambridge, 1960, p.40 in *ibid*.

Great Britain has been stationary...”⁴¹ American independence meant that West Indian planters lost their mercantilist trade with a captive North American market, especially for molasses. Additionally, Caribbean planters lost access to an efficient American fleet and cheap plantation provisions.⁴² Food became scarce, with large numbers of slaves starving to death during the 1780s. In Jamaica 15,000 slaves died of famine between 1780 and 1787, with mortality rates even higher in Barbados and the Leeward Islands. Several wartime factors, such as the conversion of commercial ships to naval vessels, and conflict around previously secure shipping lanes put an acute strain on the shipping of sugar. One Jamaican estate attorney remarked, “even at Kingston, it is a favour to get the Captains to take your sugars on board.”⁴³

America’s new independence threatened Britain’s self-perceived status as a bastion of freedom and liberty. British abolitionists employed shaming strategies to claim that ending the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was vital to restoring national pride and Britain’s international reputation. When the state of Rhode Island passed anti-slave trade laws, for example, British newspapers published pieces that implied that Britain no longer held a monopoly on freedom.⁴⁴ Brown argues that the American Revolution created a climate of anxiety and introspection within Britain, forcing Britons to evaluate their national crimes and to reevaluate their understanding of liberty. ‘Liberty’, as defined by abolitionists such as James Ramsay, Granville Sharp and John Wesley during the 1780s, was fundamentally incompatible with the British slave trade.⁴⁵ American independence from Britain was the first event to seriously undermine the sugar and slave trade’s previously unimpeachable reputation. While the sugar trade recovered economically during the 1790s, from the 1780s Britons were more aware of its economic vulnerability and fallibility. The American War of Independence laid the foundations of economic and ideological discord that was built upon by anti-saccharites two decades later.

⁴¹ Anon., *Memoir on the Sugar-Trade of the British Colonies; with tables, of the quantity of sugar imported to, and exported from Great Britain, in the years 1774, 1775-1788, 1789-1790, and 1791; and the importation of West Indian products in France in the year 1790*, London, 1793.

⁴² Ryden, *West Indian Slavery*, p.8.

⁴³ Elizabeth Boody Schumpeter, *English Overseas Trade Statistics, 1697-1808*, Oxford, 1960, pp.61-62.

⁴⁴ Ryden, ‘Does Decline Make Sense? The West Indian Economy and the Abolition of the Slave Trade’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol.31, no.3, 2001, p.367.

⁴⁵ Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, Williamsburg, VA, 2006 in ‘Introduction’, *Parliamentary History*. Special Issue: Texts & Studies Series 9: *The Correspondence of Stephen Fuller, 1788-1795: Jamaica, the West Indian Interest at Westminster and the Campaign to Preserve the Slave Trade*, Edited by M. W. McCahill, vol.33, 2014 p.9.

The economic recovery of the sugar trade in the late eighteenth century was caused by the slave revolt in Saint Domingue in 1791-1804, which resulted in a gap in European markets for West Indian planters to exploit. The slave revolt, which culminated in the founding of modern Haiti, cut French ties with its most profitable sugar colony. William Spence, writing in 1807, described the impacts of Haitian Revolution on the international sugar trade: “The mad introduction of “liberty and equality,” those watch-words of anarchy and devastation into the island of St. Domingo, at first diminished, and at length, in a few years, totally annihilated, the supply of 114,615 hogsheads of Sugar, which France and Europe had been accustomed to draw thence.”⁴⁶ Saint Domingue had previously been the largest provider of sugar to Europe, and its independence caused prices in Hamburg (the gateway to European markets) to sky-rocket. This allowed British sugar merchants to re-export significant quantities of muscovado for the first time since the Seven Years War (1754-1763).⁴⁷ The author of a 1793 memoir advocated that the British accelerate their sugar trade, as “because of the unhappy calamities in the French colonies, the European sugar market was laid open to British exports.”⁴⁸ Despite attempts by Pitt and other parliamentarians to regulate the re-exportation of sugar, the continental market re-invigorated the West Indian economy for at least a decade after the uprising. Seymour Drescher asserts that “St. Domingue sounded the death knell for abstention as an effective political tactic, because many of the erstwhile consumers of French slave sugar on the Continent more than compensated the British sugar business for any loss of consumers.”⁴⁹ The exuberant re-investment in the sugar colonies in the 1790s proved a short-lived economic windfall, but its timing was extremely unfavourable to anti-saccharites, whose domestic activities were undermined by the demands of the international market.

From 1790 the British sugar market became less insular, as sugar from the West Indies was re-exported outside the British Empire, and East Indian and North American products were imported in small quantities into Britain. The importation of East Indian sugar to Britain from 1790 challenged the essential monopoly of trade and parliamentary privilege that Caribbean planters had enjoyed throughout most of the

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ Boody Schumpeter, *English Overseas Trade Statistics*, pp.61-62.

⁴⁸ Anon., *Memoir on the Sugar-Trade of the British Colonies*.

⁴⁹ Seymour Drescher, ‘Women’s Mobilization in the Era of Slave Emancipation: Some Anglo-French Comparisons’ in *Women’s Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation*, Kathryn Kish Sklar, James Brewer Stewart (eds.), Yale University Press, 2007, pp.100-101.

eighteenth century. One of the motivations for looking East was the rise in sugar prices (prices in London rose from 28-46 shillings per cwt in 1790 to 47-65 in 1791 and 48-76 in 1792)⁵⁰ An experimental delivery of five tonnes of East Indian sugar was shipped to Britain in 1791, and, following the price-spike in 1792, it became economically viable to import in modest quantities.⁵¹ The nascent East Indian market sought to capitalise on abolitionist sentiment, by promoting ‘free-grown’ sugar from India as an alternative to slave produce, or to abstaining from sugar entirely. In Calcutta (the home of the East India Company headquarters) ‘free sugar’ was exalted as a blow to West Indian Slavery. In 1792 the *Calcutta Gazette* applauded the actions of British shopkeeper who sold only “EAST INDIA SUGAR! MADE WITHOUT SLAVES!!”, noting “it seems not improbable that the Spirit of an enlightened and generous People, by adopting this Measure, of substituting the Die of East India Sugar, which is made by Freemen, will effect the Abolition of Slavery, and the Slave Trade, which otherwise does not seem likely to be accomplished.”⁵²

In May 1792 the directors of the East India Company presented arguments to the Treasury, proposing that East India sugar should be subject to the same favourable terms of importation as West Indian products.⁵³ A submission to the *Derby Mercury* in 1791 advanced a similar argument that, by increasing trade with the East Indies, “sugar could be obtained more cheaply and more advantageously for those employed in its culture...”⁵⁴ Another submission to the *Derby Mercury* by the London Committee in 1792 expressed excitement about the manufacture of Maple Sugar in North America which, they hoped, “must prove highly injurious to the West India Planters...”⁵⁵ Sourcing sugar from the East and maple sugar from North America would help to reduce reliance on the West Indies, “where men of all kinds and colours, both diminish and degenerate, and which have long been considered as the tomb of the human species, the enemy of life, and the destroyer of virtue.”⁵⁶ While the term “free”, as applied to East Indian labour is worth critical investigation, importing sugar from outside the Caribbean was an attractive model. For many British

⁵⁰ Range of prices of raw sugar (cost, insurance, freight) in London in shillings per cwt.

⁵¹ Lowell J. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833*, New York, 1928, p.210.

⁵² Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772-1843*, Liverpool, 2012, pp.299-300.

⁵³ Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, p.57.

⁵⁴ *Derby Mercury*, Thursday May 5, 1791.

⁵⁵ The Committee of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, “Slave Trade”, *Derby Mercury*, 8.03.1792, p.3.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

consumers, trade with new regions allowed for consistently available, cheaper sugar, without the moral burden of the slave trade.

Free-market advocates and East Indian traders criticised the British government's protectionist loyalties to the West Indies. Abolitionist Macall Medford scathingly noted the constant attempts of the West Indian lobby group to gain Parliament's ear. "We see West India Merchants still living like princes," Medford commented, "but when they come before Parliament they have...the whining cant of beggars."⁵⁷ Influenced by political economist Adam Smith, James Ramsay argued in *An Inquiry into the Effects of Putting a Stop to the African Slave Trade* in 1784 that the overprotection of planters created little incentive for them to practice financial prudence or sustainability, thus leading to a preference for slave labour over the ultimately more productive labour of free men.⁵⁸ Without the capital and credit the West Indian interest received from Britain cultivation may not have been forced on "sterile rocks," and the "cultivation of cane have been peaceably carried on by the native inhabitants of the soil, to the increase instead of the destruction of the human race."⁵⁹ In an unlikely coalition, free-market economic interests converged with humanitarian ones to criticise West Indian dominance in the sugar market, and condemn slave labour as "in the end the dearest of any."⁶⁰

Despite the growing criticisms against them, the West Indian lobby remained the most powerful force in British politics in the 1790s. Agents, appointed by colonial legislatures, played a key role in the lobbying process, employed to impress the importance and expediency of West Indian demands on members of parliament who often knew little about the Caribbean islands and their economies.⁶¹ Edward Long, a member of the Jamaican Assembly and author of the first comprehensive history of the colony (1774),⁶² argued that "the colonies found, by experience, that, in order to forceful on these occasions [such as soliciting the passage of bills or the removal of

⁵⁷ Macall Medford, *Oil without Vinegar, and Dignity without Pride: or, British, American and West Indian Interests considered*, Philadelphia, 1807.

⁵⁸ James Ramsay, *An Inquiry into the Effects of Putting a Stop to the African Slave Trade*, London, 1784, pp.33-34; Ramsay, *A Letter to James Tobin, Esq.* London, 1787, p.16.

⁵⁹ *The Right of the West-India Merchants to a Double Monopoly of the Sugar Market of Great Britain and the Expedience of all Monopolies Examined*, London, 1793, p.17.

⁶⁰ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations in Two Volumes, Vol. 1*, 1776.

⁶¹ McCahill, 'Introduction', *The Correspondence of Stephen Fuller*, p.5

⁶² Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica: Or General Survey of the Ancient Modern State of that Island, with Reflections on its Situation, Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws and Government*, London, 1774.

duties], it was proper to make friends at court, or at least appoint a resident... to negotiate for them.”⁶³ In the face of these challenges the West Indian lobby was, at least in the short term, remarkably successful in convincing politicians that the slave-dependent sugar industry was essential to British prosperity. Even after the abolition of the slave trade in 1806-07 the West Indies maintained preferential duties on sugar imports until the Sugar Duties Act of 1846. East Indian sugar was imported into Britain from 1790, but due to the region’s economic disadvantage and the East India Company’s unwillingness to encourage large-scale cultivation, it comprised only a tiny percentage of the British market. While many anti-slave trade activists applauded trade with the East Indies, ‘free sugar’ was not readily available to replace slave sugar in the British diet. Thus, despite many abolitionists voicing their preference for free sugar where possible, a comprehensive boycott of sugar was deemed a more effective method of undermining the West Indian sugar economy, and thus of bringing an end to the slave trade.

Prior to the American Revolution, the West Indian sugar trade enjoyed a relatively unchallenged status as Britain’s most lucrative colonial enterprise. The American Revolution, revolutions in France and Saint Domingue, and the introduction of East Indian sugar to the British market all impacted upon the West India trade in different ways, but together exposed its economic vulnerability, and forced introspective inquiry into the morality of slave labour. While the West Indian lobby continued to exert powerful influence on the British legislature, international events from the 1770s onwards helped to undermine their monopoly on public discourse, and allowed anti-saccharites to capitalise on growing insecurities about the sanctity of Caribbean sugar.

Abstention as an abolitionist tactic

Abstention was a contentious and radical political tactic in the 1790s, but it was not without precedent. Inspired by collaborations with their North American counterparts, and dismayed at the failure of Parliamentary anti-slavery campaigns, abolitionists made a deliberate change in tactic in the mid 1790s. The abstention movement broadened the scope of activism, incorporating non-elite actors and

⁶³ McCahill, ‘Introduction’, *The Correspondence of Stephen Fuller*, p.5.

operating with public and private spheres. Anti-saccharism became embedded in the most intimate rituals of British lives, and had virtually no barriers to entry. Therefore boycott leaders, such as Fox, could emphasise that ordinary Britons were complicit in perpetuating the slave trade, but also possessed the ability to end it.

The decision of abolitionists to boycott sugar, over other slave-produced products, was informed by pragmatic considerations as well as symbolic goals. There has been little discussion in abolitionist historiography about why upwards of 400,000 people abstained from sugar, while the consumption of tobacco, coffee and cotton continued apace.⁶⁴ Drescher posits that anti-saccharites could put pressure on British slave interest without irreparably harming the domestic economy.⁶⁵ This argument is supported by entries from the diary of Katherine Plymley, the sister of Archdeacon Joseph Plymley and prominent Shropshire abolitionist.⁶⁶ When Clarkson visited the Plymley family in 1791, Katherine asked why there was no parallel boycott movement around cotton--a seemingly obvious question given that 70 per cent of cotton used in British textile mills was produced by slave labour in 1787.⁶⁷ Clarkson replied that large numbers of wage labourers depended on cotton, and damaging the textile industry would be disastrous for manufacturing towns such as Lancashire, which were strongholds of the abolition movement.⁶⁸ However, Drescher's argument is contradicted by instances where Britons seemingly undermined their own interests to support the abolition movement.⁶⁹ In 1789, for example, 769 metal-workers from

⁶⁴ In the 1790s commodities other than sugar (primarily cotton and coffee) made up 40 per cent of the exports from the British West Indian Islands. In the 1820s cotton replaced sugar as the region's primary export. McCahill, 'Introduction', *The Correspondence of Stephen Fuller*, p.9.

⁶⁵ Drescher, 'Women's Mobilization', p.101.

⁶⁶ Katherine Plymley (1758-1829) was a prolific diary writer. Her diary entries chronicled the lives of several prominent Shropshire families, and their role in a local abstention campaign that Dahn (2009) has called the "Shropshire enlightenment". Katherine venerated Clarkson, applauding him for "giving up everything the world calls pleasure" for the cause of abolition. Guided by their Evangelical Anglican beliefs, the Plymleys placed great emphasis upon self-discipline and their own social responsibility as gentry. For example, during times of food shortage among the poor, Katherine Plymley would abstain from eating bread. Kathryn Gleadle, "Opinions deliver'd in conversation": Conversation, politics and gender in the late eighteenth century', in *Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions*, Jose Harris (ed), Oxford & New York, 2003, p.66.

⁶⁷ James Walvin, "Freedom and Slavery in the Shaping of Victorian Britain" in Neta Crawford, *Argument and Change in World Politics: Ethics, Decolonization and Human Intervention*, Cambridge, 2002, p.168.

⁶⁸ Drescher, 'Women's Mobilization', p.101.

⁶⁹ Hochschild estimates that abolishing the slave trade and slavery cost British people an average of 1.8 per cent of their income over fifty years. Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, p.5. ; Kaufman and Pape refer to the abolition of the slave-trade as the mostly costly example of international moral activism in modern history. Chaim D. Kaufman and Robert A. Pape, 'Explaining Costly International Moral Action: Britain's Sixty-year Campaign Against the Atlantic Slave Trade', *International Organization*, Vol. 53, no. 4, 1999, p.631.

Sheffield (a town famous for making scissors, scythes, knives and razors, many of which were sent to the coast of Africa to be used as currency to purchase slaves) petitioned Parliament to abolish the slave trade.⁷⁰ While abolitionist strategy undoubtedly had to be pragmatic and strategic at times, explaining the abstention movement defies simple cost-benefit analysis. Furthermore, given that continental demand for sugar in the early 1790s undermined the economic impacts of the boycott movement, it is important to consider the symbolic motivations for targeting a dynamic and profitable trade.

The attitudes of British abolitionists toward sugar were in stark contrast to their French counterparts. When British abstention was peaking in the winter of 1781-1792, sugar was being rapaciously and patriotically consumed by French revolutionaries. In January-February 1792 citizens of the Faubourg Saint-Marceau district in Paris launched a *taxation populaire*, in which they seized goods from a warehouse to distribute to gathered crowds at a “just price.”⁷¹ Sugar was the primary good seized, and at a meeting of the Jacobin Society, a speaker beseeched the audience to “take a collective patriotic oath to abstain from sygar, except in cases of illness, until the price fell to its normal level.”⁷² Thus, despite Clarkson being jubilantly hopeful about the state of French abolitionism when he visited in 1789⁷³ his outlook deteriorated during the 1790s. Few of his French contemporaries made the causal link between the influence of French Revolutionary ideals of freedom and equality, and the rise in sugar prices post the Haitian Revolution. If French abolitionists were concerned about the contradiction between a demand for cheap sugar and an ideological opposition to slavery, this concern was not mobilised into a popular abstention movement as it was in England.⁷⁴

Although the term “boycott” did not enter the English language until the 1880s,⁷⁵ anti-saccharites could draw on historical precedents for consumer agitation.

⁷⁰ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, p.5.

⁷¹ Drescher, ‘Women’s Mobilization’, pp.100-101.

⁷² *ibid*, p.100.

⁷³ Clarkson remarked that he “should not be surprised if the French were to do themselves the honour of voting away this diabolical traffic in a night.” Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, p.182.

⁷⁴ France did abolish slavery in the French colonies in 1794 and extend citizenship rights to Africans and mulattoes. However, the largely unchallenged re-introduction of Caribbean slavery under Napoleon in 1803 suggests that initial abolition may have been a reaction to the situation in Haiti, rather than an ultimate triumph of abolitionist sentiment.

⁷⁵ The origins of the word stem from the Irish Land Wars of the 1880s, when tenant farmers (represented by the Irish Land League) refused to work for land agent Captain Charles Cunningham Boycott, demanding lower rents and higher wages.

The tactic had been used frequently by American revolutionaries from the mid-eighteenth century. American republicans refused to buy British goods in protest against imperial intervention in the form of the Stamp Act of 1756 and the tea tax. Collective abstention helped to develop a new national identity among North American colonists, most notoriously during the Boston Tea Party.⁷⁶ The Boston Tea Party involved an emphatic rejection of colonial imports, and the meaning that these goods embodied—a values display that bore striking parallels with the later British sugar boycotts. Furthermore, the rejection of British imports by American patriots was one of the first displays of political consumption that extended beyond a limited locale. Early modern American boycotters challenged the political obstacle of distance in two ways: they mobilised activists from across vast distances into collective action; and targeted not individuals, or companies, but an entire colonial institution based on the opposite side of the Atlantic. Glickman argues that “by expanding the fields of ethics and action, the patriots suggested that not only could they ostracize a distant malefactor but that they had the moral obligation and power to do so.”⁷⁷ This sense of consumer ability and obligation to enact change across geographical distance was frequently invoked in anti-saccharite discourse, tied to ideas about individual responsibility, national salvation, and shared humanity.

Numerous historians have attempted to identify the first instance of consumer activism, particularly as modern consumer movements attempt to draw upon a venerable tradition of moral activism. Identifying the specific origins of consumer activism, however, is neither clear-cut nor useful. Historians have tended to focus on heroic British humanitarianism or enshrined boycotting as a distinctly American tradition, thus ignoring the importance of trans-Atlantic anti-slavery cooperation. The French-born, London raised Pennsylvanian Quaker Anthony Benezet helped set the tone of anti-slave trade discourse on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1760s and 1770s. Benezet’s focus on the slave-trade allowed him to criticise its geographically vast moral footprint, from the capture of slaves in Africa, to their sale in the West Indies, and the perpetuation of the slave trade through public and legislative behaviours in Britain and North America. Benezet’s works received considerable recognition in Britain, and he sent several of his anti-slave trade pamphlets to Granville Sharp, who

⁷⁶ Michele Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism and Collective Action*, New York, 2003, p.40.

⁷⁷ Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America*, Chicago, 2009, p.55.

arranged to have them reprinted in London.⁷⁸ Alongside John Woolman--a Quaker from Philadelphia who refused to purchase goods from slave labour from as early as 1762--Benezet made frequent trips to Britain to collaborate with local abolitionists.⁷⁹ While anti-saccharites of the 1790s focussed primarily on British “national guilt” and “national salvation”, much of their rhetoric and tactics had their origins in early abolitionist and proto-abstention activities in North America. The anti-saccharite movement was far from the first boycott movement, but it was certainly the first to be so widespread.

The abstention movement mobilised so many Britons because it capitalised on existing grass-roots sentiment, had virtually no barriers to entry, and could be conducted outside the sphere of conventional politics. Boycotting was the most direct and effective way to link consumer actions to international political change. Not only did focussing on sugar emphasise individuals’ complicity in perpetuating the slave trade, boycotts also presented an opportunity for political engagement and collective action during a period where the democratic franchise was extremely limited. Whereas petitioning was almost entirely closed to women, the boycott movement provided British women with a tool for political expression and participation. Abstention, Drescher asserts, “was an organised, unobtrusive, and nonviolent form of collective action. It did not even require the contentious political gatherings that preceded other forms of antislavery agitation like national petitioning. The movement operated through private encounters, door to door, family to family, and dinner table to dinner table.”⁸¹ Boycotting allowed for such widespread participation, that when Equiano visited the Plymley family, six-year old Panton Plymley announced that he

⁷⁸ Benezet’s *A Short Account of that Part of Africa Inhabited by the Negroes* was first published in Philadelphia in 1762 and by Granville Sharp in London in 1768. *A Caution to Great Britain and her Colonies, in a short representation of the calamitous state of enslaved negroes in the British dominions*, was published in 1766 and in London in 1767, 1784 and 1785. *Some Historical Account of Guinea* was published by Benezet in 1771 and by Granville Sharp’s publisher and Quaker publisher James Phillips in London in 1778. Benezet’s, *The Case of our Fellow Creatures, the Oppressed Africans, respectfully recommended to the serious consideration of the legislature of Great Britain* preceded the first petition of British Quakers to Parliament in 1785 by two years. See Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759-1815* Burlington, VT, 2009. pp.52-53.

⁷⁹ Crawford, *Argument and Change*, p.176.

⁸⁰ Transatlantic cooperation also worked in the other direction. Many British abolitionists expressed solidarity with their American counterparts, as evidenced by Fox and seven English Baptist ministers joining the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in 1794. Holcomb, “*There is death in the pot*,” p.11.

⁸¹ Seymour Drescher, ‘Two Variants of Anti-Slavery: Religious Organisation and Social Mobilisation in Britain and France, 1780-1870’, in Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (eds), *Anti-Slavery, Religion, and Reform*, Hamden, 1980, pp.43-63.

had stopped polishing his shoes because someone had told him that shoe polish contained sugar.⁸² Fox's tract was distributed widely in Scotland where, in 1792 an abolitionist recorded "the vast circulation & great attention wh[ich] had been paid to a little tract ag[ains]t the use of sugar..." The abolitionist noted that when he "Dined with the Rev. Mr. Alice... His grandson 10yr. old, won't taste sug[a]r since he read Fox's tract."⁸³ Consumer activism was a versatile and inclusive political tactic. Participating in the abstention movement provided a sense of collective agency and individual moral affirmation, and enabled action-based participation without necessarily needing to comprehend the complexities of the wider anti-slavery cause.

The anti-saccharite movement was therefore a logical response to growing disillusionment with the use of parliamentary channels for anti-slave trade agitation. The London Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, founded in 1787, coordinated a sustained and sophisticated to mobilise public opinion. Founded by a number of prominent abolitionists, including Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharpe, and Josiah Wedgwood, the London Committee worked alongside provincial abolitionists to organise large-scale petition campaigns. These petitions received resounding levels of support, particularly from provincial elites. The 1787 Manchester petition, for example, attracted 10,700 signatures from a town of 50,000.⁸⁴ A year later, 102 petitions were presented to Parliament, with the names of 60,000 signatories.⁸⁵ The 1791-1792 petition campaign produced 519 petitions, with more than 390,000 signatures—slightly less than 20 per cent of Britain's adult male population.⁸⁶ Writing in 1788, Joseph Woods noted the fervent enthusiasm for the abolition movement, describing it as a "tinder which has immediately caught fire from the spark of information struck upon it."⁸⁷ Despite the tangible public support given to the petitions, they still faced rigid opposition from pro-slave trade lobby groups, and parliamentary avenues proved obstacle ridden and frustrating for abolitionists.

Parliamentary petitions proposing the abolition of the slave trade were repeatedly met by opposition, set-backs and defeat during the 1790s. With the West Indian lobby and slave trade interests represented strongly in both houses it took twenty years from the formation of the London Committee to the passing of the

⁸² Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, p.195.

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ James Walvin, 'The Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1787-1807', *Historian*, no.93, 2007, p.15.

⁸⁵ Kaufman and Pape, 'Explaining Costly Moral Action', p.649.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, p.7.

Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807. The first bill proposing to end the slave trade was brought before Parliament in the spring of 1791 and rejected by 88 votes to 163. This defeat prompted Wilberforce to revive the petition campaign and another bill was brought before the House of Commons in 1792. During the 1792 debate, a letter submitted by Liverpool's new member, Colonel Tarlton, accused petition organisers of soliciting the signatures of school-boys and their friends in order to "procure all the names they possibly could, real or imaginary..."⁸⁸ Tarlton's accusations were directly countered by Samuel Whitbread, an early supporter of abolition and Member of Parliament for Steyning, who asserted that "there does not exist more respectable names in the kingdom than those of the persons which have signed that petition."⁸⁹ The heated debate resulted in the passing of an amended bill which proposed the gradual abolition of the slave trade by 1796. The bill, however, was quashed by the House of Lords on the grounds that they were entrusted to defend the "traditional imperialist interest" of the nation.⁹⁰ The rejection of the already compromised plan for gradual abolition was a strong blow to the parliamentary campaign against the slave trade. Many MPs who had given their support to the 1792 bill withheld their endorsement for the subsequent succession of bills that Wilberforce submitted in 1793, 1795, 1796, 1798, and 1799.

Despite the continued failures of abolition campaigns within Parliament, popular support for abolition remained strong and was channeled into the campaign to boycott slave produced sugar. In the first paragraph of *An Address*, Fox stated that "Notwithstanding the late determination of the House of Commons on the Slave-Trade, we may hope that the discussion it has received will not be useless; and that the public attention has not been excited in vain..."⁹¹ The London Committee published a similar statement in the *Derby Mercury* in March, 1792, declaring their resolution to "persevere in asserting the claims of Humanity..." and maintaining that

We cannot persuade ourselves that the prosperity of the West India Islands depends on the misery of Africa; or that the luxuries of Rum and Sugar can only be obtained by tearing asunder those ties of affection which unite our species, and exalt our nature...Tenets like these will not, we believe, long maintain their influence in a free

⁸⁸ *The debate on a motion for the abolition of the slave-trade; in the House of Commons on Monday the second of April, 1792*, London, 1792, p.85.

⁸⁹ *ibid*, p.99.

⁹⁰ Ryden, *West Indian Slavery*, p.179.

⁹¹ Fox, *Address*, p.1.

country and enlightened age. And we trust that every friend to the cause will concur with us in the resolutions we have taken, to repeat our appeal to the consciences of our countrymen, till this reproach on our national character be completely removed.⁹²

The dismay with Parliamentary activism in the early 1790s saw a tactical transition from trying to end the slave trade through legislative means, to attempting to undermine its social and economic foundations through collective action.

While it roused monumental public interest and support, the abstention movement failed to economically undermine or abolish the slave trade. The movement faced significant criticism from slave-trade apologists who accused Fox and other leaders of co-opting ignorant citizens into populist agitation. Abstention also alienated some moderates who were scared of radical associations in a climate of anti-Jacobin paranoia. Nonetheless the abstention campaign was a vastly successful exercise in conscience raising. Boycotting created an opportunity for a diverse group of consumers to personally affirm and publicly declare their convictions within a marketplace of morality.

Eighteenth Century Context

Understanding the motivations and methods of anti-saccharism requires placing the movement in its unique eighteenth century context. Anti-slave trade sentiment had existed on some level in Britain for centuries, but in the late eighteenth century occasional criticisms transformed into a fully-fledged political movement, and brought to the forefront of public discourse. J. R. Oldfield has extensively detailed the contextual factors that made mass anti-slavery activism not only possible, but popular from the 1790s onward. Oldfield demonstrates that moving beyond Williams' economic determinism allows investigation into the broader social, demographic and ideological currents that shaped the sugar boycotts. Consumer activism required the emergence of a consumer culture that was dominated by an increasingly literate, connected and politically engaged middle class. Quakers, in particular, galvanised early public support for anti-slavery and, alongside early radicals such as John Wilkes, helped not just to popularise abolition, but redefined the nature of protest and politics in Britain.

⁹² The Committee for the Society of the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 'Slave Trade', *Derby Mercury*, 8 Mar.1792, p.3.

The emergence of a consumer culture in Britain in the eighteenth century allowed for unprecedented levels of collective action. While some historians have questioned the usefulness of terms such as “consumer revolution,”⁹³ few refute that some connection existed between capitalism and antislavery. J.R. Oldfield holds that “during the eighteenth century more men and women than ever before in human history enjoyed the experience of acquiring material possessions.”⁹⁴ Rising consumerism occurred alongside a demographic explosion in Britain. The population of England and Wales almost doubled during the eighteenth century, with the highest growth in the northern and north-eastern manufacturing towns, including Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham.⁹⁵ As the population increased, a vast number of new occupations emerged, from innkeepers, to clerks, druggists, and grocers.⁹⁶ These middle-class individuals possessed the ability to accumulate and acquire, lifting them out of the “mechanick of mankind,”⁹⁷ and allowing them the opportunity to make conscious decisions about how their spending shaped their lifestyles. In a 1772 publication of *Letters Concerning the Present State of England...* one correspondent noted that even the “inferior tradesmen” now lived in comparative luxury: “...as much ceremony is found in the assembly of a country grocer’s wife, as that of a countess.”⁹⁸ Consumption of goods was taking place at an unprecedented rate, in new environments and for more purposes. More importantly, as Oldfield argues, the birth of a consumer society brought with it an arsenal of new marketing techniques that were then adopted by reformers and political activists.⁹⁹

A strong print-culture developed alongside the marketisation of Britain, providing boycott leaders with a broad-reaching platform to promote their cause and challenge official discourse on the West Indies. Historians have estimated that by 1800, more 60 to 70 per cent of adult males and 40 per cent of adult females in England and Wales could read.¹⁰⁰ This larger reading audience supported a national

⁹³ E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, London, 1991, pp.18-19.

⁹⁴ Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, p.3.

⁹⁵ *ibid*, p.7.

⁹⁶ John Brewer, ‘English Radicalism in the Age of George III’, in J. G. A. Pocock (ed.) *Three British Revolutions*, Princeton, 1980, p.333 in *ibid*, p.8.

⁹⁷ Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London, 1660-1730*, London, 1989, pp.4-5.

⁹⁸ Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, p.8.

⁹⁹ *ibid*, p.3.

¹⁰⁰ Lawrence Stone, ‘Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900’, *Past and Present*, XLII, 1969, pp.104-109; J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Context of Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, New York and London, 1992, pp.66-73; David Cressy, ‘Literacy in Context: Meaning and Measurement in

boom in newspapers, booksellers and publishers. By 1760 there were 35 country newspapers in England, a number which had increased to 50 by 1780. Several cities supported several newspapers; for example in the 1790s Manchester printers produced the *Manchester Mercury*, the *Gazette*, and the *Herald*.¹⁰¹ The work of some journalists, such as the radical John Wilkes, helped to forge a new style of politics, one that was “broad-based, entertaining and sociable.”¹⁰² Wilkes produced a range of political paraphernalia, including medallions, badges, prints, flagons and tankards during the 1760s and 1770s. His use of protest merchandise strongly influenced the culture and style of political activism from the mid-eighteenth century onward. Activists increasingly incorporated market-place tactics into their campaigns, and, by the 1780s, John Brewer argues, “a market in politics and a market in protest existed for abolitionists to exploit.”¹⁰³ In the 1790s, anti-saccharism adopted its own visual culture. The rejection of slave sugar was accompanied by an earnest consumption of abolitionist trinkets, such as hair-pins, snuff boxes and cameos. As shall be discussed further in chapter three, anti-saccharism existed within, and contributed to a market-place of morality, where consumption and abstention were far from mutually exclusive.

Alongside the mid-century Wilkite agitation, the French Revolution spurred abolitionist fervour in England and raised the possibility of more radical forms of activism, such as abstention. However, radicalism also proved an Achilles heel for abolitionists as pro-slavery writers capitalised on rampant anti-Jacobin paranoia to conflate abolition with violence and social disorder. So damaging was the potential association with French radicalism that Clarkson felt compelled to publicly deny his membership of the Jacobin Committee of Paris in 1792.¹⁰⁴ In response to the execution of the French king in 1793, the *Times* declared that “Every bosom burns with indignation in his kingdom against the ferocious savages of Paris.”¹⁰⁵ The French ambassador was expelled and, on February 1, 1793 France responded by declaring

Early Modern England’, in Brewer and Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods*, pp.305-319.

¹⁰¹ Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, p.10,

¹⁰² Wilkes is often seen as a forefather of British radicalism due to his controversial and colourful campaigns to reform Parliamentary representation, and his attacks on the tyranny of George III. *ibid*, p.4.

¹⁰³ John Brewer, *The American Experience: The Collected Essays of J.H. Plumb*, Athens, Georgia, 1989, p.151.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*, p.56.

¹⁰⁵ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, pp.226-234.

war on Britain. In contrast to the conservative condemnation of French revolutionary radicalism, William Fox adopted a strong anti-war stance. In *Thoughts on the Death of the King of France*, published in 1793, Fox ridiculed British politicians for concerning itself with the affairs of other European nations, while neglecting its own moral failures in continuing to support the slave trade.¹⁰⁶ Fox's sentiment, however, was among the minority.

Holcomb argues that abolitionist appeals based on sympathy became less effective after 1793 as violence against slaves slid down the "hierarchy of suffering."¹⁰⁷ Revolutions in France and Haiti not only fuelled fears about the dangers of radicalism, but reports of violence against Europeans on the continent and the colonies distracted Britons from the violence against Africans under slavery. There was tangible unease within the London Committee about the abstention movement. A draft proposal recommending "to the Friends of the Abolition of the Slave Trade to abstain from the use of West India sugar and rum" was abruptly pulled in June 1793, likely due Wilberforce's intercession.¹⁰⁸ Abolitionists, therefore, needed to reconcile the need to dismantle the entrenched institution of slavery with the risk of alienating moderates and the political elite required to do their legislative bidding.

On a more philosophical level, the growth of industrial capitalism gave rise to Enlightenment ideology, and value change around slavery. Oldfield claims an indisputable link existed between industrialism and abolition, as industrialisation changed perceptions about labour and property.¹⁰⁹ Micheletti likewise describes capitalism as a "hotbed of humanitarianism."¹¹⁰ Eighteenth century capitalism, Micheletti asserts, spurred abolitionism in two primary ways: a shift in economic values created an "other-oriented, public virtuous perspective" that preferred free labour to slave labour, and; capitalist thinking taught a "widening of causal horizons and heightened awareness of the remote consequences of one's actions."¹¹¹ Fox's *Address* attempted to instill this sense of causal responsibility among consumers, claiming that the consumer is "...the original cause, the first mover in the horrid process..." and thus "with us it rests, either to receive it and be partners in the crime,

¹⁰⁶ Holcomb, "There Is Death in the Pot", p.42.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, p.62.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p.2.

¹¹⁰ Micheletti, 'Consumption and Capitalism', p.122.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

or to exonerate ourselves from guilt.”¹¹² Furthermore, a consumer’s removal from the physical sites of sugar production did not make them any less complicit in perpetuating slavery. “The offices of humanity and functions of justice,” Fox argued, are not “circumscribed by geographical boundaries.”¹¹³ Here Fox echoed John Woolman’s attempt to break down the obscuring veil and moral anesthesia of geographical distance, instead holding that “...unrighteousness to the injury of men who live some thousands of miles off is the same in substance as... the injury of our neighbours.”¹¹⁴ The politicisation of purchasing and consumption practices during the eighteenth century implied that consumers could affect change through their behaviour. For eighteenth century England the notion of consuming sugar and other colonial products carried multiple and conflicting meanings: spending allowed people to elevate their standards of living, and to contribute to Britain’s economy, but it also implicated them in a system of exploitation and suffering.

The abstention movement had strong antecedents in the activities of religious Dissenting groups, particularly Quakers. Transatlantic Quaker activists Woolman and Benezet formed a vanguard for popular anti-slavery. Their activities inspired Protestant Dissenting groups, including Quakers, Baptists, Methodists and Congregationalists, who had gained increasing prominence and influence in Britain in the eighteenth century. Large Non-Conformist communities formed in Nottingham, York, Exeter and Manchester, and James Bradley estimates that “altogether Dissenters at some point in the eighteenth century sat on corporations of at least twenty-eight Parliamentary boroughs, or one in five or every borough in which they had established meetings.”¹¹⁵ The Dissenting community’s large publishing and pamphleteering network was important for disseminating abolitionist material and provided a de facto marketing platform for abstention.

¹¹² Fox, *Address*, p.4.

¹¹³ *ibid*, p.10.

¹¹⁴ Thomas L. Haskell, *Objectivity is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History*, Baltimore, MD, 1998, p.278.

¹¹⁵ James Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and Radicalism*, p.167 in Oldfield, pp.127-128.

William Fox and Martha Gurney

There is little biographical information available about William Fox, but we do know he was active within the Dissenting publishing community. Whelan, a scholar who has provided a significant contribution to the study of late eighteenth century radicalism, claims that both William Fox and Martha Gurney are yet to receive the “historical recognition they deserve.”¹¹⁶ Both figures have been marginalized or obscured in scholarly histories of abolition, and, for decades Fox’s was consistently confused with three other individuals of the same name who were published between 1796 and 1813.¹¹⁷ The anti-saccharite pamphleteer, William Fox, was a bookseller prior to becoming a pamphleteer, and he is listed as the seller on at least 56 titles published between 1773 and 1794.¹¹⁸ Whelan points to Fox’s involvement in the publication of Thomas Southerne’s *Oroonoko*¹¹⁹ in 1785 as the earliest indication of his interest in anti-slavery. Fox’s immensely popular 1791 *Address*, was his first and most popular self-authored pamphlet. It was almost his most explicitly abolitionist work.

Between 1791 and 1794 Fox collaborated with publisher Martha Gurney on sixteen pamphlets on topics including the war with France and the perversion of national fast days.¹²⁰ Gurney who published under the androgynous title of M. Gurney was a prolific publisher of abolitionist texts, second only to the Quaker James Phillips (the Abolition Society’s official printer) in the number of abolitionist works sold in London between 1787 and 1794.¹²¹ Gurney’s strong abolitionist stance is evident in her publishing catalogue. The first political pamphlet she published in 1788 was an anti-slavery sermon given by her pastor, James Dore, printed on behalf of the Baptist Congregation of Southwark in collaboration with the Society for Effecting the

¹¹⁶ It is interesting to note that Fox’s name appears as a seller of Hannah Glasse’s, *The Art of Cookery, Made Easy* (1778) but it is unlikely that he was active in the publishing community when her earlier book on sugar *The Compleat Confectioner* was published in 1760. Whelan, ‘William Fox’ p.398.

¹¹⁷ William Fox, the author of the 1791 abstention pamphlet is frequently confused with William Fox, attorney-at-law; William Fox, Baptist layman and founder of the Sunday School Society; and William Fox, Jr., the latter’s son. *ibid*, p.404.

¹¹⁸ *ibid*, p.399.

¹¹⁹ Fox collaborated with four other booksellers to publish Thomas Southerne’s play, which was based on Aphra Behn’s novel *Oroonoko*. The play was received popularly by the abolitionist community, because it describes the noble character of an African-born prince who captured by slave-owners in Surinam. *ibid*.

¹²⁰ *ibid*, p.398.

¹²¹ Timothy Whelan, ‘Martha Gurney and the Anti-Slave Trade Movement, 1788-94’, in Clapp and Jeffrey, p.45.

Abolition of the Slave Trade. In 1789 Gurney displayed the image of the slave ship *Brookes* in her shop window.¹²² Gurney's contribution to the abstention movement should not be underestimated. She is listed as the publisher of several anti-saccharite pamphlets, including those by Burn, Bradburn and William Allen.¹²³ Gurney's work epitomizes how several eighteenth century developments converged to shape the abstention movement. She was a highly literate religious Dissenter, and successfully used late eighteenth century publishing and distribution networks to publish radical political and anti-slavery works.

Conclusion

The abstention movement was not an anomalous triumph of humanitarianism within a context of expanding empire and profiteering. Certainly anti-saccharites faced strong institutionalised opposition from planters and other economic beneficiaries of slavery, but their campaign must be understood within a wider context of eighteenth century social transformations and reform. The rise of market capitalism meant that goods of empire were consumed at an unprecedented rate by an emergent middle-class who could curate their own lifestyle through purchasing decisions. Within this, increasingly literate middle-class groups of activists began to appropriate the tools of the market, such as advertising and merchandising, to promote social and political agendas. Within this context, it is important to see some prominent abolitionist groups, such as Quakers, as social reformers rather than saints. While the French Revolution caused a retreat from radicalism, anti-saccharism was an important development in the history of consumer activism, and in popular politics. Boycotts did not directly result in the abolition of the slave trade, but they helped to spread anti-slavery from elite parliamentary circles, to an issue which concerned all Britons and therefore was much more difficult to quell. Conscience-raising was one of the most important elements of the abstention movement, as, even while political campaigns lost momentum, the link between sugar and slavery remained inextricably and problematically associated in people's minds.

¹²²Whelan, 'William Fox', p.401.

¹²³ M. Gurney's role in the London publishing community was significant, and perhaps merits further investigation in a thesis of broader scope.

CHAPTER TWO:

DEFINING THE IDENTITY OF THE VIRTUOUS BOURGEOIS CONSUMER

Introduction

Clarkson's 1808 history featured what has become one of the most famous visual artefacts of the abolition movement, his River Map of Abolition. The map, designed to resemble an African river system, presented the contributions of prominent British and North American abolitionists as tributaries to the broad stream of anti-slave trade activism. He attempted to present the story of abolition, by means of an annexed map, "together in a single view."¹²⁴ Clarkson's biographical river resembles Elizabeth Abbot's later depiction of the movement to a "hybrid spider propelled by unmatched legs."¹²⁵ From the middle of the 1750s the legs of the abolitionist arachnid would grow, shrivel up and regenerate as groups demonstrated their varying commitment to abolishing the slave trade. This chapter focusses on one particular leg of the abolitionist spider, the British consumers who abstained from the use of slave produce sugar in the 1790s. Religious Dissenters, the urban middle-classes and women formed the core constituency of the 300,000 strong abstention movement. Writers portrayed abstaining from slave sugar as a necessary duty of the modern British subject, appealing religious values and class and gender sensibilities. Boycotts on slave produced sugar helped to define the image of the modern, virtuous bourgeois consumer, an idealised identity that was defined in direct opposition to the colonial other.

Religious non-conformists made a significant contribution to the abstention movement. In the late eighteenth century the numerous sects that made up Britain's Protestant Dissenting community were diverse in their religious principles and political outlook. The boycott campaign became a rallying point within the broader

¹²⁴ Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament in Two Volumes, vol.1*, London, 1808.

¹²⁵ Abbott, *Sugar*, p.225.

Dissenting movement, drawing upon a mutual desire to abolish the slave trade and absolve the sins of the British nation. Many Dissenting authors were driven by humanitarian concern about the suffering and enslavement of their fellow brethren as well as by a more parochial desire to reform domestic society. Fox, Priestley, Allen and Bradburn had strong non-conformist credentials. For many religious sects, such as Quakers, General Baptists, Unitarians and Methodists,¹²⁶ anti-saccharism was a part of the “struggle for the soul of England”¹²⁷ against the sinful conduct of the West Indian planters, the British legislature and the established Church. Anti-saccharites eliminated the polluting influence of West Indian slavery from their own lives as part of an attempt to exonerate themselves from the sinful burden of slavery, and bring both themselves and the British nation closer to religious salvation.

Starting with Clarkson, however, many historians have singled out the role of Dissenting groups, particularly Quakers, in helping to mobilise public support against the slave trade. In 1975 Davis published *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*,¹²⁸ in which he identified the rise of religious Dissent and the emergence of industrial capitalism as interlinked forces which had a powerful effect on the ideological development of abolitionism. Davis argued that abolitionist ideology had significant social consequences for domestic class-relations, and that Quaker capitalists were some of the primary beneficiaries of these changes. Davis’ link between capitalism and religious humanitarianism has been subject to rigorous scholarly critique from authors such as Haskell and Ashworth, but one of his most pivotal contributions to abolitionist historiography has been to place religious Dissenters at the centre, rather than margins of scholarly interest.¹²⁹

Abstention was an overwhelmingly middle-class movement. The ability to make purchasing choices based on ideological commitments rather than practical necessity was a luxury that differentiated the eighteenth century bourgeoisie from their working class counterparts. Abstaining from sugar allowed the middle-classes to demonstrate their civility and self-discipline as part of an active attempt to differentiate themselves from the old aristocracy and the barbarous colonial plantocracy. Rejecting slave sugar became a performative practice, through which

¹²⁶ It is important to remember that Methodists did not consider themselves Dissenters.

¹²⁷ Kaufman and Pape, ‘Explaining Costly Moral Action’, p.645.

¹²⁸ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*, Ithica, NY, 1975.

¹²⁹ Thomas Bender presents the debate between Davis, Haskell and Ashworth in his edited compilation, *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation*, Thomas Bender (ed.) Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1992.

individuals could demonstrate their anti-slavery commitment and their social sophistication. Abstention became so popular that it developed a fashionable merchandise of its own. By 1800, Wedgwood's slave cameo, rather than West Indian sugar was the commodity that the bourgeois purchased to demonstrate their social status and moral refinement.

Female consumers had a powerful influence on the abstention movement. The campaign against slave-grown sugar has become a common focus for scholars seeking to investigate women's involvement in the abolition movement. Holcomb, Sussman and Coleridge are among many scholars who have noted women's active participation in the abstention campaign, but stop short of equating their activist activities with modern interpretations of feminism. As the primary architects of the domestic sphere, women made decisions about sugar's place in the British diet. Anti-saccharism politicised the day-to-day rituals of the domestic sphere, and transformed the tea table into a site of humanitarian activism. While the campaign against slave sugar empowered women in some respects, female anti-saccharites were still limited by eighteenth century gender prejudices and constraints. Authors often appealed to women as models of saccharine virtue and moral piety, rather than as rational political actors. When some women attempted to combine their anti-slavery activities with the struggle for their own rights, they generated reactionary criticism about the dangers of female activism.

In order to encourage British consumers to abstain from slave-produced sugar, writers appealed to a distinctly eighteenth-century value system—one that emphasised Christian piety, civil refinement and domestic virtue. Anti-saccharism not only involved rejecting the physical products of slavery from British life, it also helped to define the identity of the conscientious consumer as not only separated from, but superior to the colonial "other."

Religious Dissent and the Sinful Burden of Slavery

It is impossible to access the abolition movement without acknowledging the importance of religion as its primary moral impetus. The historiography of popular abolition has been dominated by the activities of powerful Christian groups: the Evangelical 'Clapham Sect', who championed the anti-slavery cause within the

houses of Parliament; and the Quakers, who, through religious zeal and grass-roots organisation, successfully mobilised public opinion against the slave trade. The Society of Friends were a key part of the abstention movement, and their efforts—campaigning, pamphleteering, and preaching—must be recognised as the primary reason why more than 300,000 people boycotted West Indian sugar in 1792. However, like most abolitionists, Quakers did not act within a socio-political vacuum, nor were their actions shaped solely by religious imperatives. Quakers were vocal advocates of abstention, but were not the only Dissenting sect to call for a rejection of slave-produce. Abstention was not only characterised by its cross-denominational involvement, but appealed to religious values alongside Enlightenment ideology and practical concerns. Dissenting Christianity was particularly inclusive of philosophical and scientific thought, and thus the religious impulse behind boycotting sugar was supplemented by civic duty. Thus, rather than being antithetical to modernity, the abstention movement was vital in helping shape the identity of a modern, English abolitionist, whose religious prerogatives were entirely compatible with the demands of a civilized, capitalist society.

Most scholars portray abstention as a Quaker dominated movement. David Brion Davis notes that although Quakers did not make a collective commitment to disengage from the slave trade until the American Revolution, by the late 1780s Quakers were unique in their dedication and organisation.¹³⁰ Roger Anstey, who once referred to himself as a ‘working historian who is also a believer,’¹³¹ asserted that any study of the change of attitudes around slavery in the late eighteenth century must give primacy to the Quaker community as a nursery for hardening anti-slavery resolve.¹³² The scholarly emphasis on Quaker activity derives support from the exaltation of the Society of Friends in eighteenth century abolitionist discourse.

¹³⁰ The Quaker commitment to anti-slavery was not an immediate or uniform development. In the early eighteenth century some radicals within the Society of Friends were denouncing slave ownership and cutting their personal ties with the slave trade, while other Quakers were counted among plantation owners in the West Indies or were slave merchants in London. It was not until the American Revolution brought a new urgency to the antislavery cause, and an increase to transatlantic dialogue, that the Quakers presented a united political front against the slave trade and its produce. David Brion Davis, ‘The Quaker Ethic’, in Bender (ed), *The Antislavery Debate*, pp. 27, 29.

¹³¹ Davis writes that Anstey actively avoided sermonizing but, as a believer in “history as the Providence of God,” his works always reflected his world view as a devout Protestant. Davis, ‘An Appreciation of Roger Anstey’, in Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (eds.), *Anti-Slavery, Religion, and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey*, Kent, 1980, p.12.

¹³² Roger Anstey, ‘The Pattern of British Abolitionism in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries’, *Anti-Slavery, Religion, and Reform*, in Bolt and Drescher (eds.), p.21.

Clarkson published a three volume *Portraiture of Quakerism* in 1806, in which he declared that, “if others had put their shoulder to the wheel equally with them [to push to abolish the slave trade] on the occasion, one of the greatest causes of human misery and moral evil, that was ever known to the world, would have been long ago annihilated.”¹³³ Joseph Priestley, a philosopher, chemist, and theologian who founded England’s first Unitarian congregation in 1774 specifically noted the contribution of Quakers to the early abstention movement. Priestley credited Quakers for their unique contribution, as “the first to shew themselves friends to the rights of humanity...and to decline any advantage which they, in common with others, might have derived from this inhuman traffic with our own species.”¹³⁴ Quaker commitment to anti-saccharism was unparalleled in its influence and scope. Contemporary writers on abstention, however, came from a variety of Dissenting backgrounds. As Evangelicals have been triumphed as the heroes of abolition’s parliamentary progress, Quakers have been enshrined as the heroes of abolition’s popular mobilisation. The emphasis on the work of the Society of Friends has led to an obscuring, almost erasing, of the involvement of other Dissenting denominations as proponents and active participants in the campaign against slave produce.

A comprehensive analysis of sugar boycotts must take into account the contribution of Baptists, Congregationalists, Unitarians, and Methodists. The participation of a number of different denominational groups reflected a pattern of consensus and cooperation to end the slave trade and England’s involvement in it. Priestley, for example, declared his joy at the respectful cooperation of Dissenters in what he deems the universally Christian cause of abolishing slavery. Priestley implored his audience to put aside sectarian differences in the name the West Indian slave: “This is not the cause of unitarianism, or arianism, or of trinitarianism, but simply that of *humanity*, and our common *christianity*.”¹³⁵ Fox’s own church affiliations are unknown, but he maintained a close political and professional relationship with Baptists Martha Gurney and James Dore.¹³⁶ Fox’s *Address*,

¹³³ Thomas Clarkson, *A Portraiture of Quakerism, Taken from a View of the Moral Education, Discipline, Peculiar Customs, Religious Principles, Political and Civil Economy, and Character, of the Society of Friends: In three volumes*, 3rd ed, London, 1807, p.vi.

¹³⁴ Priestley, *Sermon on the Subject of the Slave* p.31.

¹³⁵ *ibid*.

¹³⁶ While we do not know Fox’s own sectarian affiliations, his publisher, Martha Gurney was a member of the Baptist church at Maze Pond. Fox’s name does not appear on Church records for Maze Pond or the records from any other London Baptist congregation. In 1794 Fox joined the Pennsylvania Society

distributed to thousands of Britons of all religious backgrounds, contained a section specifically aiming to enlist the support of Methodists, appealing to their directive to propagate the Gospel. “May we not also hope that the Methodists,” wrote Fox, “who appear to feel forcibly in their principles, will seriously consider it? They are so numerous, as to of themselves to destroy that dreadful traffic, which is the sole obstacle to their ministers spreading the Gospel in the extensive continent of Africa; and, however others may affect to degrade the negroes, they are bound to consider thousands of them as their brethren in Christ.”¹³⁷ Fox’s appeal to Methodists (whose membership was the highest of nonconformist Churches in the 1790s, followed by Congregationalists and Baptists)¹³⁸, represents the importance of theology and practical cooperation for Dissenters. Population estimates place non-conformist membership at less than 5 per cent of the English population in the 1790s, with Quakers making up an estimated 0.21 per cent in 1800.¹³⁹ Although their business connections and predominantly urban concentration enabled Dissenters to exert political influence disproportionate to their demographic share, their united front against the West Indian trade was born not only out of shared religious concern, but also out of pragmatic necessity.

Engaging in activism through self-deprivation, or boycotting, was not only a religious duty, but an uncompromising act of moral conscience--a rejection of temporal pleasures in the pursuit of spiritual virtue. William Allen’s 1792 speech on *The Duty of Abstaining from the Use of West India Produce* (Allen was only 22 at the time) exemplified Clarkson’s characterisation Quakerism as “...the most strict profession of practical virtue under the direction of Christianity...” Allen, a devout Quaker, philanthropist, scientist, and pharmaceutical pioneer proclaimed that,

I feel a considerable degree of pleasure in being able to say, that I rank among the number of those who abstain from the Consumption of

for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery alongside Maze Pond’s Baptist minister James Dore, and Martha’s brother Joseph Gurney.

¹³⁷ Fox, *Address*, quoted in, *Address to the People Called Methodists*, p.19.

¹³⁸ A.D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change, 1740-1914*, New York, 1976.

¹³⁹ Statistical analysis of baptism and burial records as population indicators show that the number of non-conformist baptisms was equivalent to 3.68 per cent of Anglican baptisms and non-conformist burials to only 1.17 per cent of Anglican ones between 1790 and 1799. Quakers were not included in baptism and burial statistics because records were taken at birth and death. Instead Quaker populations were measured by registration at monthly at quarterly meetings. E. A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England: 1541-1871: A Reconstruction*, Cambridge, 1981, p.92.

West India Produce—that I am induced to this, not from an affection of singularity, but from a firm persuasion of Duty—and that I regard it as a duty which no considerations of pleasure, or convenience should set aside.¹⁴⁰

The Christian duty to abstain from slave produce, Allen argued, was authorised by scripture, referring to Chronicles, where David, although desperately thirsty, refuses to drink water acquired by his troops breaking through a garrison of Philistine troops.¹⁴¹ When presented with West Indian produce, Allen asserted, Christians should “turn indignant from the sight, and exclaim with David... *My GOD forbid it me, that I should do this thing: SHALL I DRINK THE BLOOD OF THESE MEN!*”¹⁴² By refusing the ‘blood-stained’ commerce of the West Indies, anti-saccharites were not only attempting to free slaves from suffering, but also to free themselves from the sinful burden of West Indian slavery.

The emphasis on the complicity of consumers in perpetuating the slave trade and their subsequent duty to seek its abolition was a common feature in the writings of anti-saccharites. Sugar was portrayed as a virulent symbol of sin, and its consumption presented as complicity to murder. Bradburn, in *An Address to the People Called Methodists*, impressed upon consumers that could never use slave produce with a good conscience. “You cannot pray in faith for a blessing upon them,” Bradburn asserted, “and whatsoever is not of faith is sin.”¹⁴³ Fox appealed to Dissenters directly, noting that their already anti-establishment stance put them in a position of duty to criticise the sinful misconduct of the national church. Fox considered it “at least requisite” for non-conformists to abstain from sugar and rum (the products of the greatest national crime) to avoid “taking offence at the religion of their country, while they can conform, without scruple, to its most criminal practices.”¹⁴⁴ Abstention offered the opportunity to redeem the moral character of the English nation and influence legislative action without having to engage (at least directly) with Anglican religious and political institutions. The “guilt of the oppressors and the misery of the oppressed,” Priestley argued, was laid at the door of all the English people, not merely those who had immediate interests in the trade.

¹⁴⁰ William Allen, *The Duty of Abstaining from the Use of West India Produce*, Jan 12. 1792, pp.15-16.

¹⁴¹ 1 Book of Chronicles ii:19 New International Version

¹⁴² Allen, *Duty of Abstaining*, p.16

¹⁴³ Bradburn, *Address to the People Called Methodists*, p.20.

¹⁴⁴ Fox, *Address*, p.15.

Abstention was an empowering tool for those disillusioned with or excluded from Parliamentary politics, as, at minimum, it allowed individuals to absolve their own moral conscience: “This is least we can do to wash our hands, and assert our innocence,” Priestley remarked.¹⁴⁵

Abolitionist Dissenters were motivated by concerns with England’s moral character as much as they were by humanitarian concerns about the actual conditions of slavery in the West Indies. Kaufman and Pape argue that Dissenters were driven to abstention “less by other-regarding cosmopolitanism than by a parochial religious and political imperative to reform their domestic society.”¹⁴⁶ Many Dissenting sects believed in the existence of an activist God who would exact divine vengeance for both individual and national wrongs. Many Quakers, for example, viewed the Napoleonic Wars as a punishment for England’s continued involvement in the slave trade. The impetus for moral rectification became urgent by the 1790s, Whelan argues, especially as events in America, France and Saint Domingue helped convince Britons that an “era of amelioration” in the state of society, religion and international relations was imminent.¹⁴⁷

Anti-slave-sugar campaigns spurred domestic reform as well as damaging Britain’s international slave and sugar trades.¹⁴⁸ By sacrificing the worldly indulgence of sugar, non-Conformists challenged institutionalised power structures. They challenged the subjugation of slaves to plantation owners and distant consumers, and challenged both the authority of the legislature and the interests of the West Indian lobby. Although we cannot dismiss or discredit the existence of genuine compassion for West Indian slaves, the abstention campaign was also an exercise in conscience-clearing and moral narcissism. Non-conformist campaigns were highly concerned with improving the moral character of the English nation and, in many ways, resembled a form of nascent nationalism. However, because Dissenters necessarily operated outside of the national establishment, abstention also had an inward and anti-nationalist element to ensure that one’s own soul was cleansed of the sin of slavery, even if the nation’s was not.

¹⁴⁵ Priestley, *Sermon on the Subject of the Slave Trade*, p.12.

¹⁴⁶ Kaufman and Pape, ‘Explaining Costly International Moral Action’, p.646.

¹⁴⁷ Whelan, ‘William Fox, Martha Gurney’, p.398.

¹⁴⁸ Kaufman and Pape, ‘Explaining Costly International Moral Action’, p.632.

In a more temporal sense, the abolition and abstention campaigns helped to reinforce the impressive economic positions of Quaker capitalists within England. Davis argues that Quakers, although officially excluded from public office, universities and many professions, had achieved a “pragmatic accommodation with the British political order” and could use informal mechanisms of influence to maintain a situation favourable to their continued economic prosperity.¹⁴⁹ The banks Lloyd’s and Barclay’s, for example, owe their names to Quaker families who made their fortune in the eighteenth century. In fact, the overwhelming and often historiographically omitted characteristic of Quakers was that they were incredibly successful business people.¹⁵⁰ The involvement and contribution of Quakers to political affairs was not always welcomed. Wilberforce once wrote to William Allen, that he wished “for your own sake, and that of the world [that]...your religious principles and my own were more entirely accordant.”¹⁵¹ Quaker Richard Reynolds was quick to respond that the Friend’s campaigns had helped to secure Wilberforce’s election in Yorkshire, a response which reveals the degree of leverage Quakers exerted at elite-level politics.¹⁵²

While there were some instances of hypocrisy,¹⁵³ the Quaker’s economic prosperity was not considered antithetical or even incongruous with their religious mission. In ‘The Quaker Ethic and the Antislavery International’, Davis proposed that Quakers benefitted from antislavery because it helped to distract attention from class concerns at home and helping to maintain the domestic economic order.¹⁵⁴ Abstaining from luxuries such as sugar not only aimed to undermine the slave trade but was part of a wider project to encourage self-discipline, temperance and industry. Anti-slavery allowed Quakers to demonstrate their Christian and humanitarian credentials, while pursuing economic interests of their own. The earnest and often socially performative

¹⁴⁹ Davis, ‘Quaker Ethic’, p.35.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p.45.

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*, p.57

¹⁵² *ibid.*

¹⁵³ The Quaker Hanbury family founded a tobacco empire in America prior to the Revolution; Liverpool abolitionist William Rathbone, a wealthy timber merchant and abolitionist, received England’s first consignment of cotton grown in the United States; American Quaker, Moses Brown, was the organiser of the Providence Society for Abolishing the Slave Trade, and a leader of the antislavery movement in New England. He supported these anti-slavery causes with money made from rum distillation and the fortune he had made in the West Indies prior to his conversion to Quakerism in 1773. *ibid.*, p.48.

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p.57.

act of abstaining from sugar provided “proof of one’s humanitarianism.”¹⁵⁵ Whether anti-saccharites were conscious of it or not, their sacrifice helped to reinforce a power dynamic of its own. West Indian slaves became the grateful recipients of virtuous European philanthropy, deprived of any sense of agency or autonomy in their own right. As Davis notes, “there can be no greater disparity of power than that between a man convinced of his disinterested service and another man who is defined as a helpless object.”¹⁵⁶

To illustrate his connection between Quaker humanitarian and economic interests, Davis profiles William Allen who, in his view, embodied the marriage between Quaker philanthropy, science, and a capitalist mentality. Allen’s family were wealthy silk manufacturers in Spitalfields, London. Silk-workers in the eighteenth century were subjected to notoriously exploitative work and living conditions, and the Spitalfields of Allen’s upbringing was the centre of a significant and sometimes violent industrial war.¹⁵⁷ At age twenty-two¹⁵⁸ Allen left the silk-mill to work for Quaker Joseph Gurney Bevan at the pharmaceutical company Plough Court. Inspired by individuals such as Rebecca Jones, George Dilywn and John Pemberton as models of Quaker piety,¹⁵⁹ Allen began a process of moral self-improvement, which included a vow to abstain from sugar until West Indian slaves had been emancipated. Allen kept this vow for forty-three years, including a famous incident when he declined sweetened tea from Russian tsar Alexander I during a meeting in Verona.¹⁶⁰

Some historians have claimed that anti-slavery activities of businessmen such as Allen attempted to divert attention away from the sufferings of English workers. E.P. Thompson, writing in 1963 quoted an address to the public from a “journeyman

¹⁵⁵ *ibid*, p.61.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid*, p.64.

¹⁵⁷ There were major riots in Spitalfields in 1763 and 1769. In 1763 2,000 workmen, disguised as sailors broke the factory looms and on several other occasions riots were met by forces of regular troops. Worker agitation was responded to with draconian legislation—The Spitalfields Act of 1773 set the wages of silk workers at a fixed rate, thus allowing manufacturers to maintain a consistent price for their wares. Many historians have cited the Spitalfields agitations as the early beginnings of trade unionism. Mark W. Steinberg, ‘The Roar of the Crowd: Repertoires of Discourse and Collective Action among the Spitalfields Silk Weavers in Nineteenth-Century London’ in *Repertoires of Cycles of Collective Action*, Mark Traugott (ed), Durham, North Carolina, 1995, p.57; J. H. Clapham, ‘The Spitalfields Acts, 1773-1824’, *The Economic Journal*, Vol.26, no.104, 1916, pp.459-471; Gerald B. Hertz, ‘The English Silk Industry in the Eighteenth Century’, *The English Historical Review*, Vol.24, no.96, 1909, pp.710-727; S.R.H. Jones, ‘Technology, Transaction Costs, and the Transition to Factory Production in the British Silk Industry, 1700-1870’, *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol.47, no.1, 1987, pp.71-96.

¹⁵⁸ Allen made his speech at Coach-Masters’ Hall in the same year.

¹⁵⁹ Allen was particularly moved by Pemberton’s account of visiting and helping slaves in Philadelphia.

¹⁶⁰ Mike King, *Quakernomics: An Ethical Capitalism*, London and New York, 2014, p.71.

cotton spinner” who critiqued the hypocrisy of campaigning for slave freedom in the West Indies, despite visible worker suffering at home:

The negro slave in the West Indies, if he works under a scorching sun, has probably a little breeze of air sometimes to fan him: he has a space of ground, and a time allowed to cultivate it. The English spinner slave has no enjoyment of the atmosphere and breezes of heaven. Locked up in factories eight stories high, he has no relaxation till the ponderous engine stops, and then he goes home to get refreshed for the next day; no time for sweet association with his family; they are all alike fatigued and exhausted.¹⁶¹

There is no evidence, however, that Allen’s anti-slavery activities distracted from his programme of domestic philanthropy and reform. An 1848 posthumous biography of Allen by Charles Gilpin declared that there was “literally no end to his devices to do good,” and that records of philanthropy “groan under the weight of his activities.”¹⁶² Among the extensive list of Allen’s achievements was the establishment of the Spitalfields Soup Society (later the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor), as well as a journal *The Philanthropist*, which included articles on topics ranging from the reform of the criminal code, the Poor Laws and the slave trade.¹⁶³ While the extent of Allen’s benevolent endeavours may have been unique, he serves as a pertinent example of how Quakers benefitted from the broader consequences of anti-slavery. Allen’s campaign against slave sugar brought him into regular contact with prominent legislators, helped to restore the sanctity of his own religious conscience, and to ensure his commercial position was enhanced by his moral reputation.

Despite the benefits they reaped from the abolition campaign, Davis does not argue that Quakers were cynically motivated in their anti-slavery activities. The premise that anti-slavery was motivated by attempts to preserve their own economic interests, he argues, is one that is too simplistic to entertain. Bender notes that Davis’ thesis has been well-received by historians because his approach avoided both naïve idealism, and reductive materialism.¹⁶⁴ Davis does not attack the motivations for Quaker activism, but examines the social consequences of anti-slavery. Through communicating with political elites, reaffirming their moral reputation, and distracting

¹⁶¹ E. P. Thompson quoted in Davis, ‘The Quaker Ethic’, pp.53-56.

¹⁶² Charles Gilpin, *William Allen: His Life and Labours*, London, 1848, p.17.

¹⁶³ Davis, ‘Quaker Ethic’, p.56.

¹⁶⁴ Bender, ‘Introduction’ in Bender (ed.) *Antislavery Debate*, p.4.

from class interests that threatened to undermine their economic prosperity, Quakers successfully solidified their tenuous position of wealth and influence within England.

For Haskell, however, the argument that Quaker abolitionists were unaware of the ideological implications of the antislavery programme is sophisticated but ultimately unconvincing. Haskell's response to Davis, 'Capitalism and the Humanitarian Sensibility,' utilises philosophical examples and historical sociology more than primary source evidence. For Haskell, abolition was not motivated by unconscious class interests. Rather, Quaker abolitionism resulted from the marketization of the eighteenth century, which led to an expanding of causal horizons and the sphere of moral responsibility.¹⁶⁵ This extension of moral geography empowered individuals to respond to evils that had previously been deemed remote or irreconcilable.¹⁶⁶ For Haskell, the market itself was the medium of expanding political action rather than the opposite.¹⁶⁷ Haskell argues that, rather than focus on the subliminal class interests of antislavery reformists, historians are better served to focus on the capitalist conventions that made the continuation of the West Indian slave trade untenable.

It is impossible to assert what exactly motivated Britons to abstain from slave sugar on such a large scale. The multitude of sermons and speeches from the Dissenting community on the topic indicate a pressing urgency to distance individuals and the entire English nation from the sin of slavery. Religious anti-slavery rhetoric appealed to both genuine concern for distant slaves, and more self-serving motives, such as severing any personal implication in slavery to develop a closer relationship with God. Davis' focus on the social functions of ideology is important and revelatory, especially given the historiographical tendency to idealise abolition's moral component. The domestic consequences of abolition, however, must be distinguished from its motivations, and Haskell is at his most convincing when he argues that it is difficult, even futile to try to identify the existence of class-interests of which even historical actors themselves may have been unaware. Rather than seeking to retrospectively apply class-based motives to abolitionists, the abstention campaign needs to be viewed in the context of 1790s class relations and identity.

¹⁶⁵ Haskell, 'Capitalism and Humanitarian Sensibility, 1', in Bender (ed.) *Antislavery Debate*, p.133.

¹⁶⁶ Bender, 'Intro', *Antislavery Debate*, pp.6-7.

¹⁶⁷ Seymour Drescher, 'Antislavery debates: Tides of Historiography in Slavery and Antislavery', *European Review*, vol.19, no.1, 2011, p.138.

Refinement and the Bourgeois Consumer

The issue of class was inescapably present in discussions of slavery, abolition and abstention in the 1790s. The ability to make decisions on one's dietary habits based on reasons other than nutrition or affordability indicates a privileged entry-point for the abstention movement. At a time when sugar was still used widely, and its supposed nutritional values were espoused by many, boycotting was a privilege reserved primarily for the middle and upper classes. For the bourgeois middle-classes in particular, active self-deprivation for the cause of philanthropy helped to demonstrate a degree of restraint and civility in a society which rapaciously consumed the products of empire. Abstention was a distinctly metropolitan phenomenon, and helped modern, civilised metropolises to separate themselves from what was increasingly portrayed as the barbarous West Indian planter class. Pro-slavery writers also employed class based rhetoric to criticise the abstention movement, frequently arguing that slaves in the colonies experienced better conditions than workers in England. According to slave trade apologists, boycotting West Indian produce was an unpatriotic act that symbolised the insulated position and naive idealism of the urban middle-classes.

The ability to make ethically-informed decisions about purchasing and consumption relies heavily on access to resources such as information, money and alternative products. A 2005 study on the subjects and spaces of ethical consumption in twenty-first century England bears remarkable parallels to the sugar boycotts two centuries previous.¹⁶⁸ Barnett and his co-authors approach ethical consumption from the discipline of social geography and attempt to problematise the assumption that consumer decisions are a product of rational decision making. Rather, they argue, ethical consumption requires prerequisite access to a number of practical devices which facilitate decision making, and the availability of options through devices such as the internet (for information and ordering), brand awareness or independent supermarkets.¹⁶⁹ The socio-cultural and economic resources necessary to engage in self-conscious ethical practices are “unevenly distributed across lines of class, gender, race and ethnicity.”¹⁷⁰ For consumers in late eighteenth century, it was uneven rates, rather than internet access that determined access to information about slave produce,

¹⁶⁸ Clive Barnett, Paul Choke, Nick Clarke and Alice Malpass, ‘Consuming ethics: Articulating the subjects and spaces of ethical consumption’, *Antipode*, vol.37, no.1, 2005, pp.23-45.

¹⁶⁹ *ibid*, p.35.

¹⁷⁰ *ibid*.

and the real threats of malnutrition and hunger may have taken precedence over ethical commitments for many English workers.

For the consumers who could afford to either abstain from sugar, or had access to East Indian produce, boycotting involved a performative element. As sugar consumption was a part of domestic ritual as well as sociable tea-drinking and entertaining, abstaining from it required an explicit commitment in public and in private. Kyla Wazana Tompkins asserts that the differing imperatives for eating (or abstaining)--hunger, necessity, pleasure, nostalgia and protest--carry significant meaning.¹⁷¹ For most consumers throughout the eighteenth century, sugar was a desirable necessity, but for anti-saccharites in the 1790s, the refusal to eat sugar became an important signifier of religious, social and class identity.

As boycotting sugar became increasingly fashionable, the practice developed a degree of cultural and moral capital of its own. Simon Gikandi argues that amidst the eruption of prosperity and the emergence of new marketing techniques in the eighteenth century, “culture acquired new value because it was now considered to be a commodity.”¹⁷² Grocers and refiners often publically advertised their explicit commitment to only free sugar, marketing that suggests that there was profit and positive brand association to be gained from aligning themselves with the abstention movement. Benjamin Travers, a London sugar refiner, advertised to abstainers in provincial newspapers across Britain in the 1790s. In 1791 Travers declared his intention to only sell “FREE SUGAR” imported by the East India Company, his declaration appearing also in the *Newcastle Courant* and *Ipswich Journal* in 1792.¹⁷³

The best example of the convergence of culture and politics into commerce, Gikandi argues, was the famous ceramicist and abolitionist Josiah Wedgwood’s slave cameo. Clarkson sent a copy of Fox’s *Address* to Wedgwood on Jan 9, 1792, declaring the pamphlet’s “extraordinary effects” and proposing that Wedgwood help organise its local distribution.¹⁷⁴ Wedgwood’s entrepreneurialism is evident in his reply where he proposes the addition of a wood cut, featuring a kneeling, shackled slave and the words “Am I not a man and a brother,” to the pamphlet’s frontispiece. The print, Wedgwood wrote, would “perhaps increase its effect somewhat, without

¹⁷¹ Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion*, pp.6-7.

¹⁷² Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, Princeton, 2011, p.20.

¹⁷³ Benjamin Travers, “Free Sugar”, *Newcastle Courant*, Sat 11 February, 1792; *Ipswich Journal*, Sat 14 Jan, 1792.

¹⁷⁴ Thomas Clarkson to Josiah Wedgwood, Jan 9, 1792 in *Correspondence of Josiah Wedgwood*, Katherine Eufemia Farrer (ed.), Cambridge, 2011, pp.184-186.

being a great additional expence.”¹⁷⁵ Wedgwood’s cameo had also been adopted as the Abolition Society’s seal in 1787, and became one of the most famous artefacts of the abolition movement, appearing on fashionable items such as bracelets and hair-pins. Wedgwood’s design became so popular that Clarkson begrudgingly noted that “fashion...was seen for once in the honourable office of promoting the cause of justice and, humanity and freedom.”¹⁷⁶ Fashionable cameos did more than demonstrate an individual’s commitment to anti-saccharism: they took on the prestige and status of the class that consumed them, thus endowing the movement with the 1790s equivalent of positive brand association. For Gikandi, Wedgwood’s contribution to the abstention movement was vital: “he had a proper understanding of fashionable markets wherever he could find them--in the dining rooms of the wealthy as well as in the hearts of abolitionists.”¹⁷⁷¹⁷⁸ Ironically for a boycott movement, abstention relied heavily on the convergence of capitalist desire and humanitarian concern. Savvy abolitionists helped to create a marketplace of morality, where the philanthropic endeavours of the middle-class were transformed into performative practices which reaffirmed their moral rectitude and societal status.

If anti-saccharism became a movement associated with metropolitan refinement, it was necessarily contrasted with the barbarous and gluttonous lifestyle of the wealthy planter class, the plantocracy. By the 1790s the institution of slavery seemed entirely anachronistic to the pious, tasteful, and learned identity that upwardly mobile middle-class sought to cultivate. “Modern identity,” Gikandi asserts, was “premised on the supremacy of self functioning within a social sphere defined by humane values.”¹⁷⁹ By this definition, the plantocracy, who were increasingly associated with despotism, excess and immorality, were the very antithesis of civilised society. Especially after their economic position was damaged by the American Revolution, planters and their opulent lifestyles became the subjects of metropolitan disdain.

¹⁷⁵ Jan 18, 1792, in *ibid*, p.187.

¹⁷⁶ Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament in Two Volumes*, vol.II, London, 1808, p.154.

¹⁷⁷ Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, p.20.

¹⁷⁸ Oldfield also describes Wedgwood’s contribution to the abolition movement as one of “innovative genius, perfectly attuned to the rigours and demands of eighteenth century business.” J.R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, Princeton, NJ, 2011, p.2.

¹⁷⁹ *ibid*, p.4.

Burnard and Follett note that concerns about sexual immorality in the West Indies caused particular consternation.¹⁸⁰ Planters' sexual depravity was seen as an example of their moral laxity. "At a time when the ideal English gentleman was increasingly portrayed as a happily married man..." Burnard and Follett argue, "the fast-living, sallow-faced, gluttonous West Indian planter whose major vice was illicit sex with allegedly promiscuous black women was the obverse of what an ideal Englishman ought to be."¹⁸¹ Joseph Priestley also voiced concern with the West Indian lifestyle, focusing on labour relations which he deemed to unnatural and reminiscent of the old feudal system. Priestley claimed that both masters and slaves were damaged by the relations of plantation slavery. In his 1788 sermon, Priestley argued that

Such a power as that which a master exercises over a slave necessarily makes him haughty, cruel, and capricious, unfit for the society of his equals...Persons who are bred in the West Indies, and have long been in the habit of being served by slaves, are easily distinguished from other men of the same nation. They are not themselves aware of how much their natures are debased, and how offensive their behaviour is to others.¹⁸²

Plantation slavery in the New World invoked horror among abolitionists, not only because of the treatment of slaves themselves, but because of reports about the nefarious behaviour of European planters. Abstention therefore represented the desire to quarantine the tasteful and civilised metropole from the savage colonial periphery. By refusing to consume slave sugar, anti-saccharites were attempting to undermine the institution of slavery, but were also avoiding contaminating their lives with products associated with European cruelty and impropriety.

Slave trade defenders claimed that anti-saccharites had been blinded by the fervour of naive idealism, and were undermining Britain's national interest in the colonies, while marginalising the working classes at home. Jesse Foot, a surgeon who had served in Nevis for three years, published the popular *Defense of the Planters in the West Indies* at the height of the abstention campaign in 1792. Foot echoed the sentiment of other pro-slavery writers, such as Gilbert Francklyn and William Knox, when he asked "Are we not compelled by the force of reason to correct the desperate conditions of those in our own state, and below our own noses, before we are

¹⁸⁰ Trevor Burnard and Richard Follett, "Caribbean Slavery, British Anti-Slavery, and the Cultural Politics of Venereal Disease", *The Historical Journal*, Vol.55, no.2, 2012, p.430.

¹⁸¹ *ibid*, p.431.

¹⁸² Priestley, *Sermon on the Slave Trade*, p.21.

authorized, in conscience, to examine farther off?”¹⁸³ Accusations of irrationality dominated both sides of the sugar argument. James Tobin, a West Indian merchant-planter responded to James Ramsay’s 1784 and 1788 anti-slavery pamphlets by describing Ramsay as a “traducer, ranter, and incendiary,” whose writing was “much more like the impotent railing of an enraged old woman, than the manly resentment of the liberal mind.”¹⁸⁴ When Tobin learnt that Ramsay had served as a surgeon in the West Indies, and had made an unsuccessful bid for a position at the King’s Council, Tobin implied that, Ramsay sought vindication by trying to undermine the status of fortune of those he had sought to join.¹⁸⁵

Pro-slavery writers attempted to cultivate an almost hysterical fear that abolitionists were privileging the rights of slaves over the rights of English workers. Chimney sweeping, for example, was frequently referenced as an occupation with conditions comparative to slavery. Not only was chimney sweeping characterised by child labour, high mortality rates and unhealthy work conditions, Byrcchan Carey argues that the image of soot-covered faces was used to claim that workers had been degraded below the status of an African slave.¹⁸⁶ Late eighteenth century caricature highlights (although necessarily exaggerates) the sensational and sometimes bizarre nature of the debate around slave sugar. William Dent’s 1789 satirical cartoon *The Abolition of the Slave Trade or the Man the Master* (Figure 1.) depicts a black man (assumedly a former slave) dressed in regal garb, beating a kneeling white man (assumedly a former master) who kneels in nothing but a loin cloth. Dent’s image portrayed fears that abolition would lead to a radical and violent inversion of power relations in the West Indies, a fear that was only exacerbated by the revolution in Saint Domingue in 1792. For Swaminathan the most interesting interaction in the image, however, takes place on the left side, where John Bull declares “Why if I have my Rum & Sugar and my Tobacco at the old price--I don’t care if the Slave Trade is abolished.”¹⁸⁷ In this representation, John Bull assumes the role of the self-interested consumer, and the West Indian planter is portrayed as a persecuted victim whose

¹⁸³ Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840*, Athens, Georgia, 1987, p.82.

¹⁸⁴ Tobin’s attack was based upon common gender prejudices which assumed women were irrational and prone to hysterical overreaction. *ibid*, p.83.

¹⁸⁵ *ibid*.

¹⁸⁶ Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility*, London, 2005 in Holcomb, ““There is Death in the Pot””, p.32.

¹⁸⁷ Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*, p.163.

security and livelihood to the wanton desires and conscience-shifts of metropolitan society.¹⁸⁸ As apologists attempted to diminish the horrors of slavery within the context of worker exploitation and planter victimisation they reinforced what Carey terms a “hierarchy of suffering.”¹⁸⁹ Ultimately, with the tide of public opinion against them, planters found it virtually impossible to convince consumers that the problems of domestic workers and the protection of the colonial interest should take precedence over abolishing the slave trade. Nonetheless, anti-saccharism was a defining element of the bourgeois identity, which helped to their privileged status vis-à-vis impoverished working class.

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Carey in Holcomb, “There is Death in the Pot”, p.32.



Figure 1. William Dent, *Abolition of the Slave Trade or The Man the Master*, 1792, accessed from the Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/95503383/>.

Whereas at the beginning of the eighteenth century, consuming sugar was an act which symbolised privilege, civility and refinement, by the 1790s, choosing to abstain from slave-produce sugar was increasingly becoming an indicator of moral rectitude and social esteem. Boycotting sugar was part of a process of differentiation, not just between the self-sacrificing philanthropic individual, and victimised, passive slave, but between the British middle class and the colonial plantocracy. The abstention movement contributed to the formation of a modern, metropolitan identity that actively distanced itself from the archaic institution of slavery and the depraved excesses of the colonial lifestyle.

The Domestic Activist and Feminine Sensibility

Recently, scholars have highlighted the activities of female activists, often excluded from parliamentary histories of abolition, in the campaign against slave-grown sugar. Abstention politicised the rituals of the domestic sphere, and, as the primary actors within that sphere, women were able to transform the tea-table into a site of everyday activism. Abstention pertained to women, not only because it shifted the barriers of decision-making into the private realm, but also because the practice was associated with purportedly “feminine” qualities of empathy and compassion. In the late eighteenth century discursive explosion about the slave trade, women’s minds and bodies became sites of political contestation. The hope that women could harness and embody the transformative political power of consumerism, however, existed alongside deep anxieties about the corruptibility and mental fragility of the female subject. Especially as some female activists began to link anti-slavery to the struggle for their own rights, women’s involvement in the abstention campaign drew criticism from writers of both genders, and on both sides of the slave trade debate. Abstention gave women the opportunity to make political statements through their (and their families’) consumption practices, but the experience was far from universally empowering. The nature and parameters of female agency were clearly defined within boycott literature, and women challenged the acceptable conventions of feminine behaviour were often depicted as irrational and detrimental to the cause.

Unlike other forms of abolitionist agitation, such as petitioning or parliamentary lobbying, the abstention movement gave women the opportunity to

challenge the institution of West Indian slavery from the intimacy of their own homes. Over the course of the eighteenth century sugar had become an esteemed commodity and the tea table was the locus of many women's lives. A letter from a John Careful to Eliza Heywood's *Female Spectator* in 1775 claimed that women believed a well-equipped tea-table was as important as a wedding ring.¹⁹⁰ The frontispiece of Fox's *Address* (alongside Wedgwood's wood-print and Cowper's poem, *The Negro's Complaint*) noted that the pamphlet offered a "Subject for conversation and reflection at the tea table." Sugar consumption was so deeply embedded in the British lifestyle that, once abolitionists had exposed the conditions of its production, women were inescapably confronted with the problem of slavery in private rituals as simple as drinking tea.

Abstinence eroded the distinction between the public realm and domestic sphere, challenging the image of women as apolitical subjects who lived in pious domesticity, removed from the masculine concerns of the outside world.¹⁹¹ In *A Poem on the African Slave Trade*, written when she was just seventeen, Dublin Quaker Mary Birkett urged women to take a public stand against consuming sugar and rum, and to combine feminine compassion with a sense of political awareness "not readily allowed to them."¹⁹² Birkett rejected the generally accepted constraints on female influence:

say not that small's the sphere in which we move,
And our attempts would vain and fruitless prove;
In all the evils--all the wrongs they bear,
And tho' their woes entire we can't remove,
We may th' increasing mis'ries which they prove,
Push far away the plant for which they die...¹⁹³

Women such as Birkett, Sussman argues, were profoundly influential in mobilising individuals and their most everyday rituals in the service of anti-slavery. The semantics of the term "domestic" is significant to Sussman, who investigates the

¹⁹⁰ Holcomb, 'There is Death in the Pot', p.19.

¹⁹¹ Women's moral concerns were often portrayed as apolitical, even when they related directly to highly politicised subjects such as the slave trade. For example, an anonymous submission to the *Manchester Mercury* in 1787 claimed that women were capable of a more "authoritative moral consistency" against slavery than men, because men were "too much involved in the cares of the world of the world, the bustle of trade...to have time to consider the humanity of commerce." Julie Holcomb, 'Blood-Stained Sugar: Gender, Commerce and the British Slave-Trade Debates', *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, vol.35, no.4, 2014, p.620.

¹⁹² Josephine Teakle, 'Mary Birkett Card (1774:1817): Struggling to become the Ideal Quaker Woman', *Quaker Studies*, vol.14, no.2, 2010, p.184.

¹⁹³ Holcomb, 'Blood-Stained Sugar', pp.620-621.

linkage between “the domestic,” meaning British national territory, and “the domestic,” meaning the interior of the family.¹⁹⁴ Once the campaign to end the slave trade had extended beyond the frontiers of parliament and into people’s homes it became an irrepressible force.

Abolitionists frequently appealed to women’s uniquely “feminine virtues” and enlisted women as exemplary models of compassion and ethical consumption. The white feminine subject as the embodiment of modesty, sobriety and piety was a common trope in late eighteenth century literature. A 1792 address to the immensely popular Duchess of York entreated her to lend her “powerful aid and support” to the boycott campaign. The appeal’s anonymous author portrayed women as particularly affected by the immoralities of the slave trade:

I cannot suppose there exists a female, possessing a heart of sensibility, who can consider at length the detail of the facts which I have now hinted at, without many a deep sigh, without many an earnest wish, that the world may be fairly rid of a traffic which involves in it such complicated villany; without feeling the deepest anxiety that the guilt of it may no longer belong to the land of her nativity....”¹⁹⁵

Queen Charlotte was a common subject of caricatures on anti-saccharism, including James Gillray’s *The Anti-Saccharites, or, John Bull and His Family Leaving off the Use of Sugar* (1792) (Figure 2.). The Queen is pictured at the centre of the image, exalting the joys of unsweetened tea to her unimpressed daughters and obliging husband, “O, my dear Creatures, do but Taste it! you can’t think how nice it is without Sugar;--and then consider how much work you’ll save the poor Blackemoors by leaving off the use of it! and above all, remember how much expence it will save your poor Papa!...” Here the Queen is depicted, not only as the noble example of anti-saccharism within her own home, but also to the entire nation. Despite her dominance at the dinner table, however, the Queen is still the subject of Gillray’s satire. Her zealous enthusiasm for abstention is contradicted by the obvious distance between her lifestyle and those of “the poor Blackemoors.” Queen Charlotte’s frugality, portrayed as a source of dismay to her daughters, was a frequent subject of Gillray’s caricatures.

¹⁹⁴ Sussman, ‘Women and the Politics of Sugar’, p.48.

¹⁹⁵ *An Address to Her Royal Highness The Dutchess of York, against the use of sugar, 1792*, p.10



Figure 2. James Gillray, *The Anti-Saccharites, or, John Bull and His Family Leaving off the Use of Sugar*, 1792, accessed from The British Museum Collection Online, reference no. PPA83378

Anti-slavery writers often cultivated an image of women as pillars of morality and restraint within a commerce-driven society. Pamphlet literature flatteringly, though condescendingly, indulged the idea of the female as the beau ideal of British charity. William Allen, for example, emphasised the opportunity, even obligation, for women to act as models of philanthropic virtue;

They are universally considered as the MODELS of every just and virtuous *sentiment*--and we naturally look up to them as PATTERNS in all the softer *Virtues*. Their EXAMPLE, therefore, in ABSTAINING FROM THE USE OF WEST INDIA PRODUCE--must silence every murmur--must refute every objection--and render the *performance* of the Duty as UNIVERSAL as their INFLUENCE.¹⁹⁶

Writers such as Allen employed heavily gendered rhetoric in order to appeal to a female audience. Holcomb notes the substitution of the words “utility” with “propriety,” and “refraining” with “abstaining,” in the seventh edition of Fox’s *Address*. Whether the change was proposed by Fox himself, or another abolitionist (perhaps Gurney) is unclear, but, Holcomb argues, the edit indicated a discursive shift away from anti-saccharism’s practical utility towards its moral necessity.¹⁹⁷ Women were actively recruited by anti-saccharites, but the parameters of their involvement were largely pre-defined by eighteenth century gender conventions. Appeals to women as sentimental, rather than rational actors, attempted to enlist their support while pigeon-holing their contribution into safe, apolitical roles.

Some of the primary concerns about women’s participation in the abolition movement stemmed from the same characteristics to which anti-saccharism attempted to appeal. Many late eighteenth century writers argued that women’s heightened emotional awareness caused them to base their conduct on fleeting trends and hysterical overreaction. Both advocates and opponents of abstention cautioned that women were more enticed by its fashionable nature than by a genuine opposition to the slave trade. One critic suggested that women had often been duped into boycotting by scheming abolitionists, many of whom had made their fortunes “in cotton and other things provided by the Negroes labour.”¹⁹⁸ A review of Fox’s *Address* called the pamphlet “the effusion of some fond zealot” who hoped to destroy the trade “by a serious dissuasion of our wives and daughters from the use of sugar!”¹⁹⁹ These

¹⁹⁶ Allen, *Duty of Abstaining*, pp.22-23.

¹⁹⁷ Holcomb, ‘There is Death in the Pot’, p.27.

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.*

accusations fed into wider concerns about the corruptibility of the female subject. Female poets and novelists in particular were often the subject of contempt. James Boswell protested against what he perceived as the “pernicious impact of the poetic power of female abolitionists”, while himself outlining an extended metaphor which compared slavery in the West Indies to the subjection of a “love-struck swain to his mistress.”²⁰⁰ Slavery, in Boswell’s view, was akin to the surrendering one’s own liberty in a romantic relationship--a sacrifice which he claimed was often unpleasant, but served a wider long-term good. While Boswell’s verses were intended to be satirical they reveal deep-seated prejudices against both women and the abolition movement. Boswell portrayed abolition as weak movement, dominated by intellectual women who threatened to undermine the natural institution of slavery and weaken the political ambitions of men.

While scholars have overwhelmingly portrayed women as supporters of abstention, it is important to note that all women could not have supported boycotts. Female opposition to anti-saccharism is not mentioned by scholars who address the problem of women’s exclusion from the traditional anti-slavery narrative. Historiographical trends aside, primary source evidence of women’s opposition to abstention is extremely scarce. This scarcity may be because female writers published under pseudonyms, but so did anti-slavery authors. The only published criticism of Fox explicitly written by a female author is often brushed aside. Holcomb is the only scholar who devotes significant analysis to the original pamphlet, entitled *An Answer to a Pamphlet Intituled An Address to the People of England against the Use of West India Produce*, published by W. Moon of Whitechapel in 1791.²⁰¹ In this work, the female author employed primarily economic arguments, often considered the territory of male abolitionists. She argued that a boycott on slave-produced sugar would either bankrupt planters, or force them to seek new markets for their produce, ultimately “cramp[ing] the spirit of industry and enterprise” in England. The author also refutes Fox’s claims of West Indian slavery’s unparalleled cruelty, referring to English miners as “underground slaves”. Confusingly, however, the author declares that although she does not support the boycott, she does not necessarily endorse slavery, suggesting that the continued availability of sugar signifies a divine sanction of consumer goods.

²⁰⁰ Judith Jennings, ‘A trio of talented women’, p.65.

²⁰¹ Holcomb, ‘Blood-Stained Sugar’, p.622.

Richard Hillier responded to the work in his own pamphlet, entitled *A Vindication of an Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Use of West India Produce, In Reply to a Female Apologist for Slavery*. While the female author challenged the appropriate conventions of women's protest writing, Hillier's response was steeped in gender prejudice. Hillier accused the woman of lacking true benevolence, and chastised her for discussing topics outside of the feminine realm. He declared, "Your charity, my good Lady, may *begin* at home, and *end* at home, and *stay at home forever*."²⁰² Hillier continued by referencing oft-cited evidence presented to the House of Commons about the alleged cruelty perpetrated by colonial women in the West Indies. This section of Hillier's response was an aggressive attack, not directed at the female apologist herself, but at the female character more generally. "The ladies in the West-Indies have a happy dexterity in flipping off their shoes, and beating the heels of them about the heads of their negroes," he wrote. "Now, with a very little practice upon your bed-post or dressing table, you will make a tolerable proficiency in the art."²⁰³ Scholars have frequently cited Hillier's pamphlet in discussions of anti-saccharite literature but rarely provide context about the pamphlet to which he responded. There is little attention given to the identity or even the argument of the mysterious "female apologist."

Referencing the cruelties perpetrated by women in the West Indies was a common tactic used by abolitionist writers to both demonstrate the extent of societal degradation in the Caribbean, and to inspire "civilised", metropolitan women to undo the cruelties of their colonial counterparts. In 1792 Benjamin Flower implored "*THE LADIES*" to pause before sweetening their tea, after considering "the conduct of some of the West Indian Ladies towards their slaves--with what horror and anguish must they behold a system which divests the sex of their peculiar glory, their amiableness, their sensibility; a system which transforms the loveliest part of God's creation into savages and brutes!"²⁰⁴ Mary Wollestonecraft also criticised the diminished moral character of colonial women, claiming that, having inflicted "unheard of tortures" upon slaves, they "exercised their tender feelings by a perusal of the latest novel."²⁰⁵ The demonisation of women's behaviour in the colonies had profound implications

²⁰² *ibid*, p.623.

²⁰³ *ibid*.

²⁰⁴ Deirdre Coleman, 'Conspicuous Consumption: White Abolitionism and English Women's Protest Writing in the 1790s', *ELH*, Vol.61, no.2, 1994, p.355.

²⁰⁵ Holcomb, 'Blood-Stained Sugar', p.617.

for women in the metropolitan centre. It emphasised women's guilt in perpetuating slave suffering--complicit because of their consumption of slave produce, and as direct perpetrators of violence. It also stressed the fallibility of female sensibility, suggesting that, without appropriate self-restraint, women could become guilty of the most vicious savagery. "When reading the tales of inhuman cruelty of the planters' wives and daughters," Coleridge argued, "the English woman is advised to look into the mirror of her own barbarity."²⁰⁶

Criticism of women's roles in anti-slavery became pronounced when women attempted to combine the cause of anti-slavery with attempts to improve their own situation. Abolitionists frequently portrayed campaigns for women's rights as a selfish distraction from the more important issue of abolishing the slave trade. Coleridge declared his frustrations at women's activism, mocking the novel-reading lady for nursing her own sorrows "like the Princes of Hell in Milton's Pandemonium... while the miseries of our fellow creatures dwindle into pigmy forms, and are crowded, an unnumbered multitude, into some dark corner of the Heart where the eye of sensibility gleams faintly on them at long intervals."²⁰⁷ Hannah More, a conservative Evangelical and the most historiographically conspicuous female abolitionist, deplored the attempts of women to redirect antislavery agitation towards improving their own position. More's tract, *The White Slave Trade. Hints towards framing a Bill for the Abolition of the White Female Slave Trade, in the cities of London and Westminster*, published in 1792, satirically asks those working towards West Indian abolition to first "consider the abolition of slavery at *home*—a slavery the more interesting."²⁰⁸ More intended her tract as scathing satire, ridiculing the arguments of other late eighteenth century women writers. Mary Ann Radcliffe, for example, rebuked abolitionists for putting the cause of illiterate slaves before that of their countrywomen. "What are the untutored wild imaginations of a slave," Radcliffe asked, "when put in the balance with the distressing sensations of a British female, who has received a refined, if not a classical education, and is capable of the finest feelings the human heart is susceptible of?"²⁰⁹ More and Coleridge's arguments were both part of the ongoing attempt to pigeon-hole women's anti-slavery activism within the acceptable constraints of their gender identity. Women were actively encouraged

²⁰⁶ Coleman, 'Conspicuous Consumption', p.355.

²⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p.351.

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p.354.

²⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p.354.

to contribute to the abolition movement, but only in ways which reaffirmed, rather than challenged the ideal of virtuous domesticity.

Despite the widespread debate about the appropriateness of female activism, some women attempted to use their participation in the anti-slavery campaign to actively redefine their social position. Mary Knowles, a well-respected writer and third generation Quaker who moved within London's intellectual elite,²¹⁰ was particularly vocal in her opposition to the slave trade and her support of women's rights. When she was asked to write a poetic inscription for a tobacco box in 1788 (a common request made to recognised writers), Knowles used the opportunity to campaign against slave produce. The proposed inscription, which was unsurprisingly never used, included the lines "O, May the hands which rais'd this fav'rite weed/Be loos'd in mercy and the slave be freed!"²¹¹ Knowles' assertiveness was not limited to her writing; in the same year she famously argued with Samuel Johnson over the unequal liberties afforded to each sex, citing social standards around alcohol consumption as an example. Knowles, whose profound commitment to Quakerism influenced her political views, proposed that not only women, but all Christians (including converted slaves) be afforded equal liberty. According to Anna Seward's recollections, Knowles's suggestion was instantly rebuked by Boswell,²¹² a fellow dinner guest: "That is being too ambitious, Madam. We might as well be equal with the angels."²¹³

Scholars have often been tempted to equate the actions of women such as Mary Birkett with a modern interpretation of feminism, Phyllis Mack argues that many female abolitionist believed they acted as instruments of divine authority, rather than individual autonomy.²¹⁴ Mack holds that abstention actually offered an opportunity for women to "affirm her own nullity" and feel her "superficial desire for

²¹⁰ In 1771 Knowles was commissioned 800 pounds from the royal family to do a needlework portrait of the King. While this commission allowed Knowles to live comfortably for the rest of her life, she experienced ongoing discomfort about receiving royal patronage. As a Quaker she was concerned that royal patronage constrained her individual liberty, and created a relationship of dependence akin to slavery. Jennings, 'A trio of talented women', p.58

²¹¹ *ibid.*, p.64.

²¹² James Boswell was recorded as present at a meeting of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787, but Clarkson reported that by 1788 Boswell had become inimical to abolition. In 1791 he published a poem entitled, "No Abolition of Slavery: Or the Universal Empire of Love." It is unclear, but also inconsequential to this argument what Boswell's opinions on slavery were at the time of this meeting (12 April, 1788), because female anti-saccharites faced ardent criticism from both those who supported and opposed the abolition of the slave trade.

²¹³ Jennings, 'A trio of talented women', p.61.

²¹⁴ Phyllis Mack, 'Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency: Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Quakerism', *Signs*, vol.29, no.1, 2003, p.156.

self-gratification overcome by her deeper love of universal truth.”²¹⁵ An interpretation of abstention as the abnegation of slave produce and of the temporal self, however, should not lead us to automatically diminish women’s contributions to the abolition campaign. Rather than seek explicit examples of female self-assertion under male patriarchy, Mack argues, it is important to look at how female agency was informed by, and in turn reformed the late eighteenth century social and religious climate.

Conclusion

Britons abstained from sugar in such large numbers in the 1790s in part because anti-saccharism resonated so strongly with the value systems and social priorities of the middle-class consumer. Boycott leaders understood that patterns of purchasing and consumption could be manipulated in the service of political ends, and presented abstention as a defining feature of the modern, virtuous subject. Abstention, in this respect, was not anti-capitalist. Rather, Fox and other boycott leaders invoked the power of the modern middle-class consumer to challenge the archaic, autocratic institution of slavery. Some entrepreneurial activists, such as Josiah Wedgwood and Benjamin Travers recognised the moral capital that abstention had acquired and helped to transform abstention into a fashionable practice. The campaign against slave-produced sugar helped to define an idealised image of the pious, civilised bourgeois subject, an identity that existed in direct opposition to the colonial “other.”

²¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.153.

CHAPTER THREE: HOW CONSUMERS DEFINED SLAVE HUMANITY

By the end of the eighteenth century, sugar was inextricably associated with slavery in the West Indies. Slave-produced sugar was the most politicised commodity in Britain, central to concerns of empire and domestic ritual. Sugar could no longer be viewed as an abstract commodity, separated from the human costs of its production. While the physical distance between Britain and its Caribbean colonies remained as vast as ever, the moral geography of the slave trade was altered dramatically in the late 1780s and the 1790s. Abolitionists were extremely successful in highlighting the inhumanity of the slave trade and the instrumentality of British consumers in perpetuating its continuance. Day-to-day, previously apolitical rituals such as tea-sweetening were heavily laden with moral, social and political significance.

The abstention movement, however, did more than question the legitimacy of separating commodities from their conditions of production: it relied on presenting a certain image of the West Indian slave and the British anti-saccharite. Boycott literature, as discussed in Chapter Two, appealed to notions of religious duty, and middle class and feminine sensibilities, portraying slave-sugar as a potentially contaminating threat to the sanctity of modern, civilised Britain. Dissuading metropolitan subjects from the use of sugar also required abolitionists to cultivate a vivid image of the slaves who produced the commodity. Abolitionist writers attempted to expose the barbaric conditions of slavery and render African slaves figuratively, sometimes even physically, present in every teaspoon of sugar consumed.

Depictions of the cruel “realities” of the Caribbean, however, were often obscured by the veil of distance and distorted by European prejudices. Whereas abolitionists were frequently accused of dramatizing (sometimes even fabricating) anti-slavery testimony to advance their political agenda, scholars are more concerned with how information was subconsciously framed, manipulated and re-interpreted by abolitionist writers and their public readership. Testimony about the West Indies was informed by the racial imaginings of its white authorship, as much as it was by fact. The popular image of the West Indian slave was continually sculpted and redefined

by European ideologies about race and gender. While abolitionists de-fetishized sugar by exposing the social relations behind its production, this transformation of understanding occurred alongside a simultaneous refetishization of sugar and the slave body.

The projection of European fantasies onto narratives of West Indian slavery was more than a rhetorical strategy. While attempting to help abolish the slave trade, anti-saccharites also reinforced notions of hierarchy and difference and reinforced a power dynamic where slaves were passive recipients of European manumission. The abstention movement helped to create a ventriloquizing structure where philanthropic, civilised Europeans spoke on behalf of enslaved Africans. Abstention has become a symbol of public opinion and virtuous collective action in the grand historiographical narrative of British abolition—a narrative from which slaves themselves are largely excluded.

The mouth as a political orifice

Any study of the anti-saccharite movement requires an analysis of the politics of eating, and the acknowledgement of consumption as an inherently political act. The abolitionist campaign to boycott sugar involved more than an attempt to undermine the economic foundations of the slave trade: it also revealed a preoccupation with the body. Late eighteenth century writers vividly (sometimes grotesquely) linked sugar with the bodily experience of slaves in the West Indies. They often portrayed eating sugar as a physically aggressive act and the consumer mouth as a weapon capable of inflicting direct suffering upon distant slaves. Despite the obvious corporeal fascinations of anti-saccharite writers, historians have devoted surprisingly little attention to the body-politics of abstention. Instead they have tended to approach the sugar boycotts on a macro level, either attempting to contextualise them within the wider abolition movement or analysing the contribution of broad social groups, such as women and Quakers. Very few historians have interrogated how micro-level decisions about consumption were informed by, and in turn influenced, understandings about the racialised body.

It is thus useful to draw from disciplines such as gender studies, sociology, English literature and art history, where scholarship on the abstention movement has placed discussion of the human body at the fore, rather than the margins of analysis.

Charlotte Sussman, an English professor who specialises in eighteenth century literature, presents a detailed analysis of the treatment of the female body in discourse about sugar in 1792.²¹⁶ Mimi Sheller, who has a background in sociology and Caribbean studies, identifies continuities between anti-slavery sugar boycotts and contemporary ethical trading movements. She argues that the images of gendered consumer and racialized slave that were constructed by late eighteenth century abolitionists continue to exist as tropes in 21st century humanitarian discourse.²¹⁷ Marcus Wood focuses on the visual culture of abolition, investigating not only how the slave body was depicted in 1790s art, such as Wedgwood's cameos or Gillray's caricatures, but how these abolitionist artefacts have shaped the historical memory of slavery.²¹⁸ Although she focuses primarily on nineteenth century United States, Kyla Wazana Tompkins' *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* provides articulate insight into the power-relations of eating.²¹⁹ Many reviewers have lauded this work as a successful response to Sandra Oliver's 2006 criticism that food historians have failed to adequately interrogate the political drivers and social consequences of dietary habits.²²⁰ Tompkins combines food studies with critical race theory, feminist and gender studies to attempt to move beyond the preoccupation with the skin that has dominated body studies. Instead *Racial Indigestion* offers an "orificial" reading of historical eating practices, looking at the importance of "food" and "flesh" in shaping power-dynamics and identity. By thinking about the physical act of consumption, we recognise an important dialogue--between self and other, animal and human, slave and consumer--which renders our bodies vulnerable to each other.²²¹

For Tompkins, eating patterns are politically charged because of their inherent ties to trade and economic systems. The mouth, for Tompkins, is a powerful site, a physical and symbolic arbiter of what foods are ingested or rejected. Eating therefore, is never truly private or apolitical. Rather, eating is a performative act, a "social practice that confirms and delineates difference, demarcating social barriers and

²¹⁶ Sussman, 'Women and the Politics of Sugar', pp.48-69.

²¹⁷ Mimi Sheller, 'Bleeding Humanity'.

²¹⁸ Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865*, (Manchester: Routledge Inc, 2000).

²¹⁹ Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion*.

²²⁰ Sandra Oliver, "Ruminations on the State of American Food History," *Gastronomica*, no. 6, no. 4, 2006, pp.91-98.

²²¹ Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion*, p.3.

affirming group formations.”²²² Tompkins argues that the act of eating involves multiple considerations and processes (both conscious and unconscious;

...it is not simply the ‘what’ of what one eats that matters. It is the ‘where’ of where we eat and where food comes from; the ‘when’ of historically specific economic conditions and political pressures; the ‘how’ of how food is made; and the ‘who’ of who makes and who gets to eat it. Finally, and most important, it is the many ‘whys’ of eating—the differing imperatives of hunger, necessity, pleasure, nostalgia, and protest—that most determine its meaning.²²³

Mimi Sheller also argues that food and drink mediate an intimate and mutually shaping relationship between consumers and distant others. Edible substances not only take on symbolic meanings based on the ‘what’, ‘where’, ‘when’, ‘how’, ‘who’, and ‘why’ of their consumption, but represent a material and corporeal exchange between producers and consumers. Slave-produced sugar was especially laden with hysterical imaginings about a commodity’s potential to corrupt and transform the body.²²⁴ Sugar entered the body passed from the slave’s hand to the consumer’s mouth, thus blurring and confusing the experiences of satiation and suffering.²²⁵

The notion of embodiment was not only relevant to negative experiences of shame and suffering, it was also necessary to transform guilt into sympathy and philanthropic action. For Sheller, “the humanitarian narrative relies on the personal body, not only as the locus of pain but also as the common bond between those who suffer and those who would help.”²²⁶ As early as 1759, Adam Smith theorised that slavery was the first example of suffering to evoke fellow-feeling. Smith’s essay ‘Of Sympathy’ proposed that sympathy was informed by subjective experience, requiring not only an understanding of another person’s circumstances, but the ability to imagine oneself in that circumstance. For Debbie Lee imagining oneself in the situation of another requires a transcendent bodily experience, “an altering of selfhood on the most fundamental level.”²²⁷ “Though our brother is upon the rack,” writes Smith, “it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations...By imagination we place ourselves in his situation...we enter as it were

²²² *ibid.*, p.4.

²²³ *ibid.*, p.4.

²²⁴ Sheller, ‘Bleeding Humanity’, p.178.

²²⁵ *ibid.*

²²⁶ *ibid.*, p.171.

²²⁷ Debbie Lee, *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002) p.35.

into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him.”²²⁸ While Smith’s theories about concern for a remote ‘other’ seem at odds with the laissez faire capitalism of his later work, *The Wealth of Nations* (1779), his ideas about projecting one’s own values onto the body of another were relevant to the practice of anti-saccharism. In 1802, for example, Coleridge bemoaned the impossibility of fully divesting one’s own prejudices from our imaginings of distant others. Coleridge argued that “It is easy to clothe Imaginary Beings with our own Thoughts and Feelings; but to think ourselves into the Thoughts and Feelings of Beings in circumstances wholly and strangely different to our own...who has achieved it?”²²⁹ Anti-saccharism required that consumers actively imagine the situation of slaves in the West Indies. The imagining of the slave body involved practices of both self-identification and othering, processes which often occurred simultaneously. Sympathetic identification with certain elements of the slave experience, such as the separation of mothers from their children, existed alongside active revulsion at others, such as the contamination of sugar with slaves’ sweat and blood.

The bodies of slaves and consumers became contested sites in the slave-trade debates of the 1790s. Pro-slave trade authors encouraged people to eat sugar as a patriotic act—one which helped strengthen individuals’ constitutions and support Britain’s empirical expansion. For some abolitionists, abstaining from sugar represented an active refusal to inflict slave suffering, as well as a physical rejection of morally corrupt goods. By focusing on the guilt of the consumer, abolitionist writers sometimes omitted the role of slave traders, merchants and plantation owners as “middle-men,” portraying the consumption of sugar as an act of direct physical violence against slaves. As the abstention movement grew, the ostensibly private act of eating became a one of public proclamation and moral surveillance. Whether one took sugar with tea was not merely a matter of personal preference but a matter of public concern. Planters, abolitionists and slaves all had vested interests in British dietary habits. Consumers, therefore, could demonstrate their political allegiances and alter their relationship with distant slaves by regulating what they put into their bodies.

²²⁸ *ibid.*

²²⁹ *ibid.*, p.32.

Commodity fetishism: exposing the slavery behind sugar

Highlighting the connection between sugar and the torturous exploitation of slaves in the West Indies allowed anti-saccharites to challenge the separation of the commodity from its conditions of production. The obscuring of the commodity chain under capitalism was a process later described by Marx in his theory of commodity fetishism. Marx's theory on 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret', published in *Capital Volume One*, holds that the practice of consumption relies on an implicit denial of the relations of labour that produce the commodity in the first place.²³⁰ Because producers rarely come into contact with consumers under capitalism, their lives and their labour are often rendered invisible. Consumers mistakenly see commodities as having inherent qualities of their own, rather than as a product of social relations and human labour. Wright defines Marx's commodity fetishism as "the endowment of commodities with properties assumed to be intrinsic to them, alongside the concealment of the social relations involved in the human production of the commodities."²³¹ As commodities are assumed to have a natural, rather social value, exchanges then become a relationship of goods and money, rather than a relationship between people.

While it would be idealistic to retrospectively attribute Marxian logic to late eighteenth century writers, Marx's theory of commodity fetishism does provide a useful tool for analysing the rejection of slave-produced sugar in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The slave trade has been a subject of interest for many Marxist scholars, such as Robin Blackburn,²³² but until recently, scholars have applied Marxist theory only to the liberation struggles of oppressed populations or to the economic decline of the plantation system.²³³ The Fair Trade movement has prompted renewed scholarly interest²³⁴ in ethical consumption, and in the last two decades

²³⁰ Robert Cluley and Stephen Dunne, 'From Commodity Fetishism to Commodity Narcissism', *Marketing Theory*, Vol.12, no.3, 2012, p.253.

²³¹ Caroline Wright, 'Consuming Lives', p.669.

²³² Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848*, (London and New York: Verso, 1998).

²³³ Many historians have debated whether Eric Williams can be considered a Marxist historian. For an in-depth analysis of Williams' ideological leanings, see *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams*, Barbara L. Solow and Stanley L. Engerman (eds.), Cambridge and New York, 1987.

²³⁴ For an analysis of the defetishization of commodities in the contemporary Fair Trade movement see Ian Hudson and Mark Hudson, 'Removing the Veil?: Commodity Fetishism, Fair Trade and the Environment', *Organization Environment*, 2003, vol.16, pp.413-430; Gavin Fridell, 'Fair Trade Coffee

historians have begun to apply the idea of commodity fetishism to slave produce. Even as scholars attempt to trace a geneology of ethical consumerism, however, the 1790s sugar boycotts are often excluded from the narrative or referenced as a precursor to the American free-produce movements of the 1820s and 1830s.²³⁵ This omission may, in part, be explained by analytical considerations. It is much easier to compare contemporary alternative or ethical trading movements with a campaign centred on alternative purchasing options for consumers than with anti-saccharism, which, aside from occasional references to East India Sugar, promoted a rejection of the commodity entirely. Sheller is one of the only scholars to place the origins of ethical consumerism firmly in the 1790s, and she notes that the limitations of eighteenth century activism continue to be relevant to contemporary humanitarianism.²³⁶

Many late eighteenth century writers claimed that sugar had only been palatable because the geographical distance between England and the West Indies kept consumers blissfully ignorant of the realities of plantation slavery. Kay Dian Kriz's analysis of the visual culture of slavery and sugar notes that the material products of West Indian slavery saturated eighteenth-century Britain.²³⁷ Not only was sugar a household staple, but profits derived from the West Indian trade funded the construction of private and public buildings, the purchase of luxury goods and patronage of the arts. Produce and capital were extracted from the West Indies and transformed into symbols of civility and prestige that had little resemblance to their original form. Kriz argues that "sometimes refining the forced labour of African slaves into metropolitan ornaments involved suppressing the subject of empire, slavery, and the colonial trade altogether."²³⁸ Because the government placed much higher duties on the importation of refined sugar than crude muscavado, the refining process occurred primarily within England. On reaching England raw sugar was

and Commodity Fetishism: The Limits of Market-Driven Social Justice', *Historical Materialism*, vol.5, 2007, pp.79-104; Wright, 'Consuming Lives'; Céline Cravatte and Nadège Chabloz, "Enchantment and solidarity: Which dream does 'fair tourism' sell?", *Tourist Studies*, 2008, no.8, pp.231-247.

²³⁵ Both Glickman and Faulkner express concern with the marginalisation of nineteenth century free-produce movements within histories of consumer activism, and yet refer to the 1790s boycotts only fleetingly crediting them as inspiration for the movements of the 1820s and 1830s. Lawrence B. Glickman, "'Buy for the Sake of the Slave': Abolition and the Origins of American Consumer Activism", *American Quarterly*, Vol.6, no.4, 2004, p.889; Carol Faulkner, 'The Root of the Evil: Free Produce and Radical Antislavery, 1820-1860', *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol.27, no.3, p.400.

²³⁶ Sheller, 'Bleeding Humanity'.

²³⁷ Kay Dian Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700-1840*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008) p.4.

²³⁸ *ibid*, p.3.

cleansed of impurities and refined into a white, pure substance that, as it increased in quality, bore less and less resemblance to its natural form. The literal and figurative process of refinement helped to preserve the false distinction between the sugar of the colonial cane fields, and sugar as it appeared on the English tea table.

One of the primary tasks of the abstention movement, therefore, was to ‘defetishize’ sugar by rendering the social relations and physical geographies of its production visible. In his own words, Coleridge aimed to convert “the produce into the things producing, the occasioned into the things occasioning.”²³⁹ By the last decade of the eighteenth century, Sussman argues, abolitionists had made sugar an important symbol of the “proliferating chains of interdependence” between the colonial sites of production and the metropolitan sites of consumption.²⁴⁰ The pleasure of eating sugar would be entirely diminished by an understanding of the horrific conditions of its production. “If ignorance and inattention may be pleaded as our excuse hitherto, yet that can be the case no longer,” Fox noted. “The subject has been four years before the public. Its dreadful wickedness has been fully proved. Every falshood, every deception with which it has been discuised, has been completely done away; and it stands before us in all its native horrors.”²⁴¹ Fox disputed that the physical and social distance between England and the West Indies justified the uncritical consumption of sugar, asking “Are then the offices of humanity and functions of justice to be circumscribed by geographical boundaries?”²⁴² The anonymous author of a 1792 address to “Christians of every denomination” acknowledged that the public had become habitually accustomed to using West India produce, a practice which had developed because of a lack of information about the slave trade. The author proposes that if consumers had known about the “treatment of the tormented negroes” when sugar was first introduced to the market, they would have rejected it with abhorrence.²⁴³

The abstention campaigners of the 1790s successfully attempted to reconfigure the relationship between England and the West Indies. Despite the attempts of the West Indian lobby to emphasise the importance of the Carribbean

²³⁹Deirdre Coleman, ‘Conspicuous Consumption’ pp.348-349.

²⁴⁰ Sussman, ‘Women and the Politics of Sugar’, p.48

²⁴¹ Fox, *Address*, p.10.

²⁴² *ibid.*

²⁴³ Anon., *Considerations Addressed to Professors of Christianity of Every Denomination, on the Impropriety of Consuming West-India Sugar & Rum, as Produced by the Oppressive Labour of Slaves*, (Dublin: W. Porter, 1792) p.5.

trade, anti-saccharites had helped to change the dominant public image of the West Indies from one centered around economic commodities to one centered around the suffering inflicted for those commodities. While abolitionists narrowed the awareness gap between consumer's understanding of sugar production and reality, they also created an augmented reality, which emphasised the horrors of slavery but cultivated a racialised, dangerous and exotic image of the African slave.

Refetishization: how anti-saccharites imagined African humanity

Convincing sweet-toothed Britons to abstain from one of the most appealing commodities in their diet required cultivating a graphic visualisation of the sugar islands which would illicit emotive responses of sympathy, concern, and disgust about the treatment of slaves. While abolitionists may have defetishized sugar in Marxist sense, they simultaneously refetishized the narrative of sugar production with European fantasies about the slave body and the experience of suffering. Abstention writers attempted to make sugar not only undesirable but a potent symbol of cruelty and suffering. Descriptions of sugar production in the West Indies often reflected the darkest possibilities of the European imagination as much as they did reality. Writers employed two main tactics to discourage Briton's from consuming sugar: they made sentimental appeals to a sense of common humanity between the consumer and slave; and, often simultaneously, they played upon dehumanizing racial phobias to imply that Europeans could be contaminated by consuming the products of African labour. "The belief in a common humanity, the sentimental identification of the African as brother," Mimi Sheller argues, "coexisted with a panicky and contradictory need to preserve boundaries and distinctions."²⁴⁴ In the 1790s sugar was "re-branded" in order to serve a new humanitarian rather than commercial agenda.

Abolitionist portrayals of the West Indian slave were influenced by a burgeoning scientific discourse concerning the African body. This pseudo-science, as we would term it today, often attempted to justify or condemn the slave trade based on differentiations between the free and enslaved Africans. Writers frequently referenced Scottish explorer Mungo Park's recollections from a trip to Gambia in

²⁴⁴ Sheller, 'Bleeding Humanity', p.171.

1794-1797 as evidence of the debasing effects of slavery on the body and character.²⁴⁵ Park, who had previously only read about Africans as slaves, proclaimed his surprise at the “kindness,” “hospitality,” and “benefactress” endowed upon him, testimony which contradicted common arguments about the “civilizing” nature of slavery.²⁴⁶ The influence of early biological and proto-anthropological research is evident in the arguments made for anti-saccharism. “No longer can it be pretended,” Fox asserted, “that Africa is a barbarous, uncultivated land, inhabited by a race of savages inferior to the rest of the human species.”²⁴⁷ Coleridge’s pamphlet on the duty to abstain from slave sugar further advanced this argument, claiming that slavery negatively effected the character and intellect of the African, whose natural state was similar to the lifestyle of European peasants. Coleridge portrayed Africans “who are situated beyond the contagion of European vice” as “innocent and happy,” existing in a peaceful, self-subsisting and Pantisocratic²⁴⁸ state.²⁴⁹ Abolitionist pamphlets played upon phobias about the exotic tropical climate of the Caribbean and prejudices against the “uncivilised” colonial planter to portray the West Indies as a morally and physically corrupting environment. The West Indies, Kriz argues, was central to the formation of a “West-Indian-ized” racial category different to that of the sub-Saharan African.²⁵⁰ This racial category was not a “static, closed body type,” but a “constellation of attributes” that was constantly reshaped by art, caricature, public opinion, scientific discourse and political agendas.²⁵¹

Consumers were encouraged to sentimentally identify with slaves based on the idea of their common humanity. While not all activists granted slaves equal status to

²⁴⁵ Park travelled to Africa on behalf of Joseph Banks. On Park’s return in 1797 the African Society immediately set about publishing his experiences. Bryan Edwards (the author of *History, Civil and Commercial of the British West Indies*) was recruited as a ghost writer. Edwards aimed to ensure that the narrative was “interesting and entertaining”. Lee, *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination*, pp.23-24.
²⁴⁶ *ibid.*

²⁴⁷ Fox, *Address*, p.10

²⁴⁸ Pantisocracy was a utopian scheme devised by Coleridge and fellow poet Robert Southey in 1794. Under a pantisocratic system private property would be abolished and all individuals would govern equally. Coleridge’s pamphlet advocating abstention was published after he and Southey had begun to consider practical plans for establishing a pantisocratic community. Plantation slavery represented the very antithesis of Coleridge’s ideal society, and he argued that the divisions of labour within a plantation economy prevented slaves from obtaining the “acuteness of intellect” seen amongst self-subsisting Africans who developed a variety of skills.

²⁴⁹ Coleridge’s description of Africa is taken from Swedish abolitionist and naturalist Carl Wadstrom’s 1794 *Essay on Colonization*. Wadstrom, who describes himself as “a zealous friend to the Africans” proposed the colonization of Africa as a morally and commercially prudent alternative to slave labour in the West Indies. Coleman, ‘Conspicuous Consumption’, pp.345-346.

²⁵⁰ Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar and the Culture of Refinement*, p.43.

²⁵¹ *ibid.*, p.71.

Europeans, many attempted to arouse moral discomfort by highlighting the common characteristics between the white sugar consumer and the enslaved African. It was only through transposing the conditions of slavery into a familiar and relatable context that activists could confront the British public with the real consequences of their sugar habit. Fox, for example, implored readers to “suppose our wives, our husbands, our children, our brethren swept away, and the fruit of their labour, produced with agonizing hearts and trembling limbs, landed at the port of London...should we say, sugar is a necessary of life, I cannot do without it?”²⁵² By encouraging his readers to imagine themselves or their family members in the position of slaves, Fox was attempting to help British subjects at least theoretically understand a degree of suffering that was almost entirely incomprehensible. Marcus Wood argues that the slave experience “was unrepeatable, irreducible and unreproducible,” and thus neither abolitionists nor subsequent scholars have ever been able to adequately describe subjective slave suffering.²⁵³ Anti-saccharites attempted to relate to slavery by substituting the African victim with a figurative European one. In doing so, however, they diminished the legitimacy of black suffering as a problem that merited sympathy in its own right. The imagined white experience took moral primacy over the realities of African enslavement, thus reinforcing the “hierarchy of suffering” that dominated late eighteenth century philanthropy.

Abstention campaigner-strategists aimed to invoke a sense of philanthropic obligation based on a universal bond of shared gender identity. While the abolition seal, bearing the words “Am I not a Man and Brother?” provides the most famous and explicit example of the appeal to a universal sense of fraternity,²⁵⁴ appeals were more commonly gendered towards women. This gender bias was partly a tactical attempt from anti-saccharite authors to gain women’s support, but also because the oppression of women under slavery was seen as *prima facie* evidence of the trade’s barbarity. Published in 1792, Burn’s *Second Address to the People of Great Britain* made a

²⁵² Fox, *Address*, p.5.

²⁵³ Wood, *Blind Memory*, p.8.

²⁵⁴ In the 1820s the Birmingham Female Society for the Relief of British Negro Slaves created an alternative version of the seal that depicted a kneeling female slave and the words “Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?” This version was reproduced in Britain and America and was used as the frontispiece for George Bourne’s 1837 pamphlet, *Slavery Illustrated in Its Effects Upon Women and Domestic Society*. Bourne’s pamphlet also featured a quote from Lydia Maria Child that dramatically described the particular suffering of women under slavery. “By virtue of special contract, Shylock demanded a pound of flesh cut nearest to the heart. Those who sell mothers separately from their children, likewise claim a legal right to human flesh; and they too cut it nearest to the heart.” Sheller, ‘Bleeding Humanity’, p.177.

visceral appeal for maternal solidarity.²⁵⁵ He described how “the tender mother with her sucking infant tied to her shoulders is obliged to work equally hard...And when the hardened Wretch of a Driver cuts his dreadful whip across her back, of which he is not sparing, we cannot suppose him always so dexterous as to avoid touching at times, the harmless innocent at the breast. Think on this, ye Mothers who use Sugar!”²⁵⁶ Cruikshank’s satirical cartoon entitled ‘The Gradual Abolition of the Slave Trade. Or Leaving of Sugar By Degrees’ (Figure 1) satirises concern for slave womens’ suffering. The image depicts Queen Charlotte, who is trying to encourage her family to gradually reduce their sugar consumption, declaring in an imitation black dialect: “Now my dears, only an ickle Bit, but do tink on de Negro girl dat Captain Kimber treated so cruelly.”²⁵⁷ The Queen refers to a well documented incident when Bristol slaving captain John Kimber whipped an African girl to death for refusing to dance on deck.²⁵⁸ Here Cruikshank ridicules the unwillingness of the princesses to make the minor sacrifice of abstaining from sugar, as well as contrasting the Queen’s self-righteous and privileged philanthropy the extreme bodily suffering experienced by slaves. Cruikshank implies that even as anti-saccharites attempt to address the problem of slavery, they do so from behind an insulating barrier of privilege.

²⁵⁵ Burn, *Second Address*, p.4.

²⁵⁶ *ibid.*

²⁵⁷ Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870*, (London: Routledge, 1992) p.38.

²⁵⁸ This incident was described to Parliament by Wilberforce in Parliament in 1792 and was the subject of another of Cruikshank’s cartoons, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade*, published in London the same year. After Wilberforce’s speech Kimber was charged with the murder of two female slaves on his ship, but was exonerated with the jury concluding that they died from disease rather than mistreatment. See S. Swaminathan, ‘Reporting Atrocities: A Comparison of the Zong and the trial of Captain John Kimber’, *Slavery & Abolition*, vol.31, 2010, pp.483-499.

By selectively and sentimentally identifying with distant slaves, British anti-saccharites successfully defined their relationship with the African and West Indian on their own terms. Lynn Festa argues that eighteenth-century abolitionists attempted to delineate the parameters of slave humanity based on what would most excite the concern of metropolitan readers.²⁵⁹ By promoting sentimental identification with slaves, abolitionists generated sympathetic support for their cause while avoiding the broader implications of what acknowledging slaves as rights-bearing individuals actually meant.²⁶⁰ Both Sheller and Festa problematise sentimental humanitarianism, noting that it produces subjects of suffering and immobilises these subjects within a narrative of victimhood.²⁶¹ “The ventriloquizing structure of sentimental,” writes Sheller, “traps the slave in a structure of grief that cannot be converted to grievance, of complaint that never leads to vindication.”²⁶² Marcus Wood supports this victimhood “trap,” noting how the presence of a disempowered and suffering black victim became a trope in late eighteenth century abolitionist literature. He argues that “the black as a cultural absentee, the black as a blank page of white guilt to inscribe emerged as a necessary pre-condition for abolitionist polemic against the slave trade.”²⁶³ Abolitionists transformed the slave into a passive symbol of suffering, reconstructing the slave experience in a way designed to illicit maximum sympathy from a British audience. By bestowing certain characteristics upon slaves, anti-saccharites treated the slave body as a fetishized object which could be used to incite sympathy based on reflexive understandings of humanity. Attempts to illustrate the humanity of slaves coexisted with an underlying desire to preserve hierarchical racial barriers and the moral and physical superiority of the European over the racialised “other”.

Blood sugar and racial contamination

Anti-saccharites presented abstaining from sugar as a way to protect the moral and physical sanctity of the European body from potentially contaminating

²⁵⁹ Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth Century Britain and France*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2006) p.154.

²⁶⁰ Following the French and Saint Domingue Revolutions many writers expressed concern that granting slaves too much freedom would lead to radical insurrections and violence against Europeans.

²⁶¹ Sheller, ‘Bleeding Humanity’, p.177,

²⁶² Festa, *Sentimental Figures*, p.203 in *ibid*.

²⁶³ Wood, *Blind Memory*, p.23.

associations with African labour. Writers attempted to portray slave-produced sugar as figuratively tarnished by its connection to slave suffering; many claimed that sugar was literally contaminated with the blood, sweat and tears of the African labourer. Timothy Morton describes the frequent reference to bodily fluids in abstention literature as a “blood-sugar topos,” a tactic designed to render sugar nauseating to the consumer.²⁶⁴ Many authors equated eating sugar with cannibalism, a provocative accusation which brought the British sugar eater uncomfortably close to the image of the brutal savage.

Phobias about cannibalism in the Caribbean long predate the sugar boycotts of the 1790s. Abolitionists conflated historical accounts of the pre-colonial Caribbean with pseudo scientific theories about African cannibalism and testimony of slave barbarity to create an archetypal image of the “West Indian savage.” Peter Hulme identifies references to cannibalism in Columbus’ account of his first voyage to the New World in 1492-1493.²⁶⁵ Despite the apocryphal nature of these accounts, the Caribbean savage became a recurring character in colonial literature. In Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, for example, they appear in Crusoe’s imaginings as “savage wretches,” enjoying “inhuman feastings upon the bodies of their fellow-creatures.”²⁶⁶ Late eighteenth century writings, such as Edward Long’s *The History of Jamaica* (1774) and Bryan Edwards’ *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (1793), describe instances of cannibalism among the diasporic African slave population. Long outlines the dietary customs of those from “Guiney, or Negro-Land,” noting “their old custom of gormandizing on human flesh.”²⁶⁷

In the 1790s anti-saccharites invoked the ever-present hysteria about colonial cannibalism. Anti-sugar tracts often incited paranoia about the reversal of the cannibalistic myth, proposing that through the improper consumption of colonial products, British consumers could literally and figuratively consume the body and blood of the slave. Coleridge implied European cannibalism by contrasting unsanctimonious sugar consumption with the eucharistic rites. He addresses

²⁶⁴ Timothy Morton, *The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p.174.

²⁶⁵ Peter Hulme, “Columbus and the Cannibals” in Carl Plasa, ‘Stained With Spots of Human Blood’, *Atlantic Studies: Global Currents*, vol.4, no.2, p.227. Also see Plasa, *Slaves to Sweetness: British and Caribbean Literatures of Sugar* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009).

²⁶⁶ Plasa, ‘Stained with Spots’, p.228.

²⁶⁷ *ibid.*

Christians specifically, claiming that it is futile to seek God's blessing for food procured through unchristian means:

Gracious Heaven! ...A part of that Food among most you is sweetened with the Blood of the murdered... O Blasphemy! Did God give Good mingled with Brothers blood! Will the father of all men bless the Food of Cannibals—the food which is polluted with the blood of his own innocent children.²⁶⁸

Speaking in Bristol in 1795, Coleridge used extended metaphor to dramatically compare the consumption of sugar to, what Coleman terms, a “blasphemous eucharistic feast.”²⁶⁹ The consumption of sugar, Coleridge implies, is a direct offense to God and a bodily attack on slaves. In a self-proclaimed “turbid Stream of wild Eloquence,” Coleridge announced,

This is a true Lord's Supper in the communion of Darkness! This is a Eucharist of Hell! A sacrament of Misery!—over each morsel and each Drop of which the spirit of some murdered Innocent cries aloud to God, This is *my* Body! & This is my Blood!²⁷⁰

Coleman presents a detailed analysis of Coleridge's horror-invoking rhetoric, noting his constant comparisons between European culinary practices and the torture of slaves. “Seasoning,” for example, could refer to a 2-3 year period where slaves were subjected to “light labour” on arrival in the West Indies, and “boiling” was “common punishment” for slaves according to evidence put forward to the House of Commons in 1791 and 1792. One can read Coleridge's metaphor, Coleman argues, as “a diabolic inversion of the Eucharist” in which “the black African is a type of crucified Christ, the eating of whose body brings damnation rather than salvation.”²⁷¹ The act of eating sugar was the exact opposite of Christian piety: it was closer to a Thyestean feast²⁷² than a blessed ritual.

Many of Coleridge's contemporaries deployed different levels of allegory to describe sugar as potential cross-contaminator—a substance which transferred the undesirable characteristics of the slave into the sinful consumer. Coleridge's

²⁶⁸ Coleman, ‘Conspicuous Consumption’, p.348.

²⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p.349.

²⁷⁰ Lewis Patton and Peter Mann, ‘Editor's Introduction’, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Vol.1, Lectures, 1795: On Politics and Religion*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971) p.xxiv.

²⁷¹ *ibid.*

²⁷² The term “Thyestean Feast”, derived from the Banquet of Thyestes in Greek mythology is used to refer to the (sometimes unknowing) consumption of human flesh. In *Verses Inviting Stella to Tea on the Pubic Fast Day* (1781) English poet Anna Seward compared the chaos of the Boston Tea Party to the Banquet of Thyestes. In tea, Seward claimed, Americans “saw poison in the perfumed draught.” See Morton, *The Poetics of Spice*, p.171.

metaphorical reference to boiling slaves probably drew on James Gillray's 1791 satirical cartoon 'Barbarities in the West Indies' (Figure 4). Gillray's image depicts dismembered parts of black bodies pinned to a wall, while a furious overseer stirs a flailing slave into a large copper filled with boiling cane juice. The treatment of the slave seems to be a vindictive and counterintuitive punishment for being unable to work, with the overseer exclaiming, "B—t your black Eyes! what you can't work because you're not well?—but I'll give you a warm bath to cure your Ague, & a Curry-combing afterwards to put spunk into you." Like all effective satire, Gillray's 'Barbarities' is open to multiple interpretations. Gillray highlights the depravity of the West Indian planter, and may have also intended to highlight the absurdity of abolitionist testimony against the slave trade.²⁷³ Gillray's most important point, however, is that sugar was literally defiled by contact with the slave body. The cauldron in the image was an important part of sugar production but also had proverbial associations with torture and witchcraft. Sugar needed to be boiled in the crystal's refining and purifying process, but, as Gillray states, sugar could never be pure while obtained through the system of slavery.

²⁷³ Kriz notes that the accuracy of abolitionist claims was often questioned. An account of 1791 Parliamentary debates published in the *Annual Register* noted "...we have found for certain, that, although not a few barbarities said to have been committed were exaggerated, and yet sometimes distorted into shapes very different from their original and natural appearances, yet enough of reality remained to prove how largely human beings participate in the ferocity of animal nature!" See Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar and the Culture of Refinement*, pp.113-114.

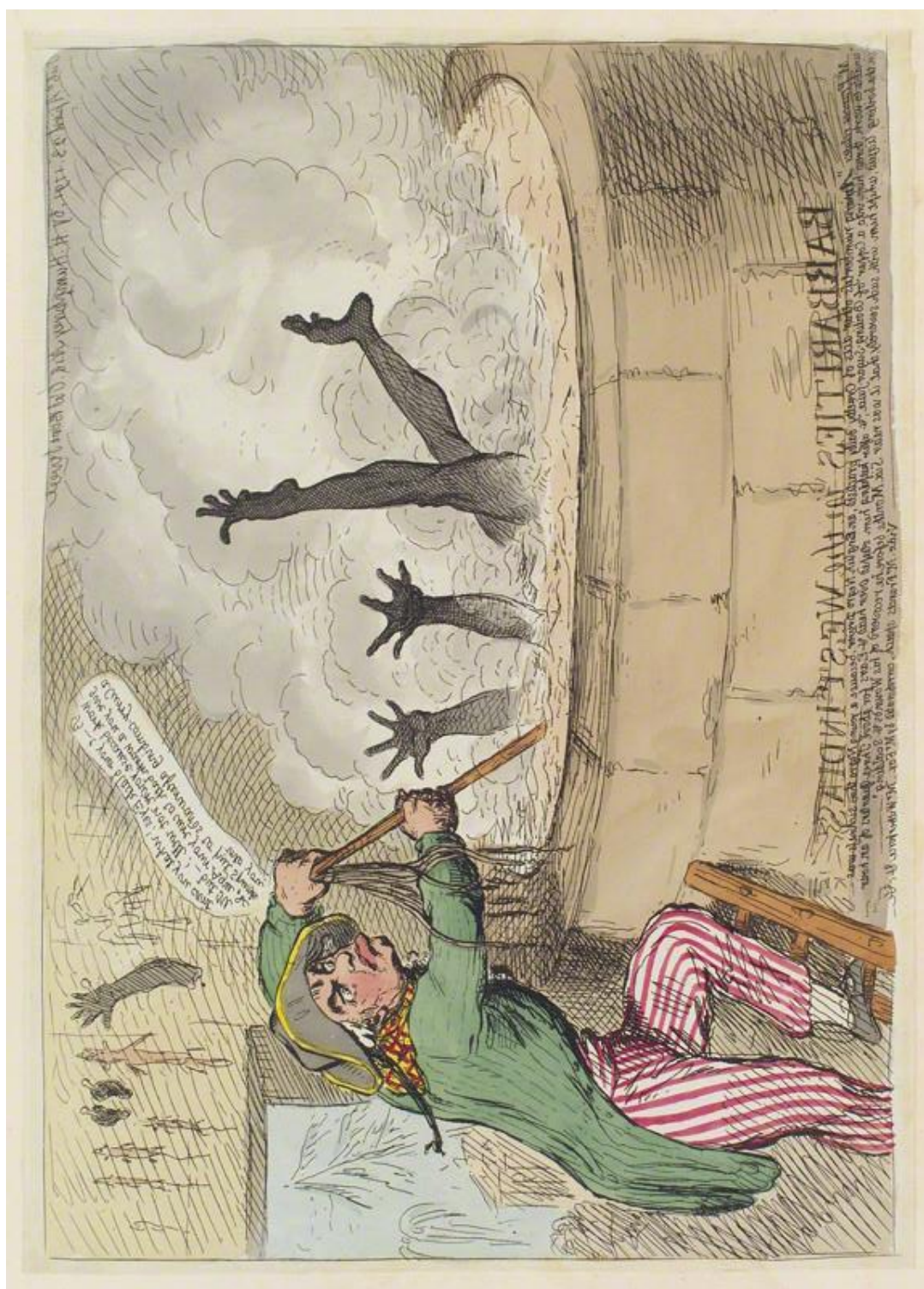


Figure 4. James Gillray, 'Barbarities in the West Indies', London, 1792, Accessed from National Portrait Gallery, London, <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw61443/Barbarities-in-the-West-Indies>

While many writers made implied accusations about the cannibalistic aspects of sugar consumption, few described the contaminating processes of slave labour as explicitly as Andrew Burn. In *A Second Address to the People of Great Britain: containing a new and most powerful argument to abstain from the use of West India sugar, by an Eye Witness to the facts related*, published by Martha Gurney in 1792, Burn adopted the deliberate tactic of shocking his readers into abstaining from sugar.²⁷⁴ Noting that “neither motives of humanity nor conscience” were sufficient to encourage his acquaintances to abstain from sugar, he instead attempted to demonstrate to those who use sugar that, in doing so, they literally “eat large quantities of that last mentioned Fluid [blood], as it flows copiously from the Body of the laborious Slave, toiling under the scorching rays of a vertical Sun...”²⁷⁵ Rather than base his appeal on sentimental logic, Burn openly incited fears about the absorption of African flesh. Burn’s cannibalistic accusations relied on recognition of Africans as human, but he presents their humanity as purely corporeal. The black slave in Burn’s address is thus simultaneously humanised and commodified, described only in relation to his labour and the “nauseous effluvia” his body emits.²⁷⁶ The preeminent postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon has scrutinized the depiction of the black body in Western culture, noting that it has been defined in binary opposition to whiteness. Fanon condemns the racialised treatment of the black body in abolitionist literature, claiming that “it is in his corporeality that the Negro is attacked...the Negro is only biological....[he] symbolises the biological.”²⁷⁷ While Burn’s rhetoric was vastly different to that of more sentimental writers, he was similarly unwilling to, or incapable of imagining the full scope of African humanity.

While the explicit descriptions of Burn’s argument may have been unorthodox, his pamphlet fits within a broader discourse about white cannibalism, one promoted by Equiano. Equiano’s famous description of the Middle Passage in his best-selling *Interesting Narrative* played a significant role in challenging the prominent racist stereotype of African cannibalism, as it inverted the fears about violent African animalism in pro-slavery discourse. Equiano, having fainted upon first seeing a slave ship, describes waking up in terror of being eaten by his barbarous

²⁷⁴ Burn, *Second Address*.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, p.2.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, p.7.

²⁷⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin: White Masks*, trans. C. L. Markmann, (London: Pluto Press, 1952) pp.163-167.

captors. “When I recovered a little,” narrated Equiano, “I found some black people about me... I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair?”²⁷⁸ The savage white sailors to whom Equiano referred were almost as far removed from the desirable image of the morally and physically healthy metropolitan subject. Anti-saccharite authors such as Burn, Coleridge and Fox presented abstaining from slave-produced sugar as a way to avoid corporeal contamination produce of slavery, but also as a way to distinguish their superiority over depraved and uncivilised whites (such as planters, slave masters and sailors) and the imagined African savage. By refusing to eat sugar, consumers were physically and socially dispelling the threatening and potentially contaminating presence of the African “other”.

Conclusion

By the end of the eighteenth century, no Briton could claim ignorance about sugar’s connection with slavery. The abstention movement had successfully “defetishized” sugar by making the commodity synonymous with the West Indies and the institution of slavery. Anti-saccharites exposed the social relations of sugar production to the British public in order to illicit visceral reactions of sympathy and horror about slave suffering. In order to encourage sentimental identification with slaves, anti-saccharites selectively emphasised their common humanity with consumers. Meanwhile abstention writers incited paranoid fears about sugar as a cross-contaminating substance, polluted with the literal and figurative blood of suffering slaves. They played on hysteria derived from a literal interpretation of the concept that “you are what you eat.” The concurrent tactics of encouraging sympathetic and repulsive reactions to the slave experience seem antithetical, but

²⁷⁸ Plasa notes that Equiano’s description of the Middle Passage not only suggested that whites could be imagined as cannibals, but that slaves could be disassociated with the act of eating altogether. Equiano describes how, after having initially refused food because he was too ill to consume it, he and many others refused to eat as an act of defiance, choosing to starve themselves rather than become the means of production that satisfied the European need for sugar. See Plasa, *Slaves to Sweetness*, p.38; ‘Stained with Spots’, p.232. The iron masks used in West Indian sugar plantations were another example of how European slave masters tried to ensure that slaves remained alive and healthy enough to labour. Slaves who tried to commit suicide by eating dirt were often forced to wear an iron mask that prevented them from swallowing anything. Slave mouths were literally controlled and restricted to keep slaves alive for the purpose of procuring Europeans with sugar. See Wood, *Blind Memory*, p.225; Hershini Bhana Young, *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text and the Black Diasporic Body*, (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006) p.42.

were mutually influential in informing racialised British understandings of the African and West Indian body. Racism, George Mosse argues, is a “scavenger ideology, capable of drawing on all sorts of materials”²⁷⁹ and is capable of disregarding illogical discrepancies within the identity stereotypes it creates.

Anti-saccharites, therefore, while invoking arguments about universal humanity, projected their own fantasies and fetishes onto the slaves for whom they campaigned. They attempted to humanise slaves, but defined the parameters of their humanity in ways that were comprehensible to the European. Thus, despite ostensibly appealing to ideas about universal humanity, anti-saccharites preserved an important racial and civilisational distinction between the enlightened, philanthropic Briton, and the victimised, but potentially dangerous slave “other.” The abstention movement fed into a wider narrative about the triumphant humanitarianism of British abolitionism, a narrative in which slaves were rendered eternally manumissant to European philanthropists.

The representation of the black slave in abolitionist literature as a corporeal commodity, an uncommunicative victim of colonial cruelty and grateful recipient of metropolitan generosity, has had significant post-colonial consequences. According to Frantz Fanon, the idea of white man’s gift of emancipation to slaves “forever compromised and destabilised black access to pure rebellious hatred.”²⁸⁰ He implores historians to see European concern for black slaves as nothing less than a brilliantly constructed aesthetic system for the control of white guilt and black suffering.²⁸¹ Writing in the 1950s Fanon described the lasting legacy of the fetishised preoccupation with African corporeality:

I was responsible at the same time for my body, my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichsim [sic], racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else: above all: “Sho’ good eatin’.”²⁸²

²⁷⁹ George Mosse, *Towards a Final Solution: A History of European Racism*, 1978, p.234 in Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar and the Culture of Refinement*, London, 2008, p.73.

²⁸⁰ Fanon in Brycchan Carey and Peter J. Kitson, ‘Introduction’, *Slavery and the Cultures of Abolition, Essays Marking the Bicentennial of the British Abolition Act of 1807*, Carey and Kitson (eds.), (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007) p.19.

²⁸¹ *ibid*, p.20

²⁸² Fanon, *Black Skins*, p.112.

Fanon's "objective examination" reveals a black identity that has been defined by colonial and post-colonial oppression. As a psychiatrist and political philosopher, Fanon has thoroughly scrutinized the black subject's lived experience of racism. A century and a half after the abolition of the British slave trade, Fanon's own ontological perceptions were heavily shaped by the tropes of fetishism and erasure that dominated eighteenth century abolitionist discourse.²⁸³ In the 1790s both slave masters and abolitionists objectified colonized blacks, though in different ways. This objectification, Fanon argues, has resulted in a legacy of racial essentialisation and cultural domination. British anti-saccharites presumed the right to speak on behalf of the slave and, in doing so, perpetuated the narcissistic myth of black gratitude and white cultural superiority.

²⁸³ Importantly, however, Fanon argues that it is possible for the black individual to reject the objectifying influence of the white gaze. When presented with the dominant narrative about his primal state and everyday identity Fanon chooses to self-assertively reject them. "I wanted to a man, nothing but a man." *ibid.*

CONCLUSION:

Published in 1791, Fox's *Address* stressed the propriety and utility of abstaining from slave-produced sugar and implored British consumers to mobilise in direct opposition to West Indian slavery. Writing in the aftermath of the defeat of Wilberforce's first parliamentary abolition bill, Fox empowered the individual consumer to bypass legislative channels for political activism. Abstaining from West Indian sugar allowed the public to absolve themselves and the nation from sinful complicity in the slave trade. Fox argued that consumers were the primary movers in a chain of exploitation that stretched from the British tea-table to the Caribbean plantation. He wrote,

They may hold it to our lips, steeped in the blood of our fellow-creatures; but they cannot compel us to accept the loathsome portion. With us it rests, either to receive it and be partners in the crime, or to exonerate ourselves from guilt, by spurning from us the temptation.²⁸⁴

Sugar, Fox claimed, was stained by the suffering of distant slaves and its consumption placed the burden of abolitionist responsibility not just with political elites, but with every Briton.

Fox's call to action was received with popular fervour from the British public. *An Address* reached a vast and diverse readership, becoming the most widely distributed pamphlet of the eighteenth century. In an extraordinary mobilisation of popular abolitionist sentiment, over 300,000 Britons forwent the use of sugar. This boycott required a radical upheaval of British dietary patterns—throughout the eighteenth century sugar had become an essential ingredient in a thirsty national tea habit. By abstaining from the colonial commodity, abolitionists also challenged the power of the West India lobby who emphasised the importance of sugar to Britain's empire and domestic industry ad nauseam.

The historical context of late eighteenth century Britain was vitally important to the emergence and popular reception of the boycott campaign that Fox inspired. Abstention occurred within a climate of radicalism. Anti-saccharites were influenced by the tenets of Dissenting theology and anti-slavery activities of Quakers such as Benezet and Woolman who formed a popular vanguard for transatlantic abolitionism. The American Revolution forced many Britons to question the moral and economic sanctity of the West Indian trade, and cultivated an anxious desire to revive Britain's

²⁸⁴ Fox, *Address*, p.2

status as a bastion of liberty and freedom in the wake of American Independence. Anti-saccharite authors of the late 1780s and early 1790s built upon a generation of anti-slavery activity, and combined religious rhetoric with Enlightenment and French Revolutionary ideology which enshrined universal fraternity and the pursuit of liberty.

Ideological, religious and political radicalism existed in conversation with conservative dialogues in 1790s Britain. Paranoia about Jacobinism permeated British politics and society, and caused contention about the place of radicalism within the abolition movement. In 1793 Fox criticised the British establishment for being more concerned about the death of the French monarch than the murder of slaves in the West Indies.²⁸⁵ In the same year the London Committee withdrew their proposed endorsement of the abstention movement citing the difficult political situation which they found themselves in.²⁸⁶ Not only did the French Revolution incite fears about radicalism within England, the slave uprising in Saint Domingue cultivated fears about the potential for violent slave rebellion. Even radical abstention authors such as Burn selectively and cautiously acknowledged the parameters of slave humanity.

Slave trade advocates used fears about slave violence to criticise anti-saccharites for their idealism and blind humanitarian concern. They portrayed boycotters as failing in their patriotic duty to support the West Indian planters, and accused them of prioritising the rights of distant and potentially dangerous slaves over the suffering of the English working poor. Furthermore, many female anti-saccharites were attacked for their anti-slavery activism. Women who challenged the boundaries of conventional feminine behaviour, such as Mary Birkett, were reprimanded for their “irrational tendencies” and for straying beyond their “natural” place within the domestic sphere. The images of British consumer and West Indian slave that the abstention movement cultivated were shaped by a convergence of both radical and conservative ideas on race, gender and religion.

The campaign against West Indian sugar resonated strongly with the idealised image of the virtuous bourgeois consumer in the late eighteenth century. By abstaining from slave-produced sugar, Protestant Dissenters sought personal absolution from the sins of the slave trade and attempted to atone for the moral

²⁸⁵ In his 1793 pamphlet *Thoughts on the Death of the King of France*, Fox ridiculed Parliament for giving more significance to the execution of Louis XVI than to “those murders which occur every hour of the day in our West-india islands, and in the holds of our Corsairs.” He also wrote a pamphlet in defence of the word “Jacobin.” Whelan, ‘William Fox’, pp.403-404.

²⁸⁶ Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, p.62.

corruption of the British establishment. Abstention was a distinctly middle-class phenomenon, and became associated with the civility and refinement of the middle class. Especially by exalting purportedly feminine sensibilities of self-discipline and philanthropic virtue, anti-saccharites defined the ethical consumer in contrast to the barbarity of the old autocracy and West Indian plantocracy. In many respects anti-saccharites were social reformers as much as they were abolitionists. The boycotts targeted the unparalleled horrors of West Indian slavery, but secondarily and sometimes unconsciously helped to create a more pious, disciplined and civilised British society.

The abstention campaign relied upon British consumers comprehending the slave suffering involved in every spoon of sugar. Anti-saccharite authors presented vivid portrayal of the slave experience in order to illicit responses of sympathy and horror from British consumers. They encouraged Britons to sentimentally identify with certain aspects of slave humanity while, simultaneously depicting sugar as contaminated by contact with the slave body. British anti-saccharites presumed the right to speak on behalf of the slave and, in doing so, perpetuated the narcissistic myth of black gratitude and white cultural superiority.

The 1790s sugar boycotts generated important debate about the possible shape and scope of political activism. Anti-saccharism represented a radical departure from Parliamentary-oriented politics and successfully mobilised groups such as Dissenters and women who were often marginalised from political dialogue. One of the most significant consequences of the campaign against slave-produced sugar was that it acted as a catalyst for political and social movements. Anti-saccharism in the 1790s inspired later free-produce movements in Britain and America from the 1820s to the 1840s. Many scholars have credited Elizabeth Heyrick for starting the second British campaign against slave produce with the publication of her pamphlet, *Immediate, Not Gradual Emancipation* in 1824. Heyrick's work bore significant similarities to late eighteenth century abstention literature. Like Fox, she emphasised consumer responsibility, claiming, that it was only through "the united exertion of individual resolution" that Britons could challenge the "hydra-headed monster of slavery."²⁸⁷ Heyrick's appeals to female consumers also bore similarities to the discourse of the 1790s. In *The Hummingbird*, published in 1825, she described female sympathy as

²⁸⁷ Elizabeth Heyrick, *Immediate, Not Gradual Abolition; or, and Inquiry into the Shortest, Safest, and Most Effectual Means of Getting Rid of West Indian Slavery*, London, 1824, p.23.

flowing outward from the home to the “verges of the earth.”²⁸⁸ Some of Heyrick’s arguments, however, differed radically from those made three decades earlier. Heyrick openly criticised Wilberforce and Clarkson’s gradual approach to abolition and was the first white Briton to demand that slaves were immediately emancipated and given a just wage for their labour. Like Fox’s *Address*, Heyrick’s 1824 pamphlet featured a version of the abolition seal as its frontispiece. In the original abolition seal, the slave is presented as a passive, shackled victim who pleads for the European viewer to recognise his humanity. In the later version of the image, an autonomous former slave stands confidently in the centre of the image, with arms outstretched and a whip and shackles at his feet. Rather than asking, “I am a not a man and a brother?” he states “I am a man, your brother.”²⁸⁹

While Heyrick’s arguments have their own limitations, her chosen image implies the potential for radical change in the power relationship between consumer and slave. The importance of disrupting the dominant narrative of abolition—one which portrays slaves as passive recipients of virtuous European philanthropy—is one of Fanon’s core arguments. In the 1790s both slave masters and abolitionists objectified slaves in different ways. This objectification, Fanon argues, has resulted in a legacy of racial essentialisation and cultural domination.²⁹⁰ While the tropes of fetishism and erasure that dominated late eighteenth century anti-saccharite discourse continue to inform post-colonial ontological perception, Fanon argues that the black can reject the structuring influence of the white gaze by demanding to be “a man, nothing but a man.”²⁹¹

²⁸⁸ Holcomb, “‘There is Death in the Pot’”, p.50.

²⁸⁹ Carey and Kitson, *Slavery and the Cultures of Abolition*, pp.35-36.

²⁹⁰ David Trotter, ‘Fanon’s Nausea’, *Pharallax*, vol.5, no.2, pp.32-50.

²⁹¹ *Ibid*, p.40.

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