

"In Short, I am a West Indian"  
Planters, Performance, Anxiety, and Abolition in Georgian Britain

By  
Cameron Rohall

Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Department of History of Vanderbilt University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For Honors in History

April 2018

On the basis of this thesis defended by the candidate on

April 26, 2018


we, the undersigned, recommend that the candidate be

awarded High Honors

in History.



Director of Honors – Edward Wright-Rios



Faculty Adviser – Catherine Molineux



Third Reader – James Epstein

# “In short I am a West Indian”

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*Cover:* William Clark, "Cutting the Sugar Cane, Antigua," 1823, London, British Library.  
*Inside Cover:* Anonymous, "The Middle Temple Macaroni," 1773, London, British Museum.

## **Table of Contents**

Abstract	3
Introduction	5
1: Deflection	13
2: Rebuttal	33
3: Abolition	56
Conclusion	82
Works Cited and Bibliography	88

## ABSTRACT

Kathleen Wilson writes that the domestic elite of Georgian Britain sought a psychological "disavowal" of the West Indian planting class because elite flaws were reflected in the perceived degeneracy and excess of the planters, which aroused growing concern in the metropole. Though we cannot speak of an organized elite campaign in any sense, certain members of elite classes created and disseminated representations of West Indian planters that focused on perceived differences, especially as concerned the nexus of Caribbean climate, disease, and racial mixing. This public imagination, manifest in a set of tropes, codes, and expectations, entered British culture, and was firmly entrenched by 1771, as evidenced by Richard Cumberland's *The West Indian*.

West Indian planters entered into this negotiation of identity in self-defense, promoting depictions of West Indian life that denied fundamental difference from Britain and rejected charges of miscegenation and the negative effects of Caribbean climate. In response to domestic perceptions of the threat posed by mixed-race individuals, West Indians hardened legal divides between the races, demonstrating to a metropolitan audience their ability to manage the confusing racial environment that had developed by the 1760s. Nonetheless, planters were unable to alter domestic perceptions in a significant way.

As a result, abolitionists, emerging in force in the 1780s, deployed the existing cultural codes surrounding the planter in their own attacks on planter life in the West Indies. Though abolitionists broke new ground in attacking the brutality of slavery, planters featured centrally in their texts and in visual media that supported abolition. The planters portrayed in these documents were fundamentally legible to a British audience

because of the existing understandings surrounding the West Indian planter. Such modes of representation, enacted largely by sectors of the British elite in the first part of the eighteenth century, are thus partly responsible for the successful abolitionist assault on planter character. This new understanding of the cultural dynamics of British abolitionism offers an explanation to the "curious" decline in planter social standing that Trevor Burnard dates to the 1780s: planter character had already been traduced by a negative code of representation in the decades leading up to abolition. Abolitionists then altered and redeployed this code to their own ends.

## INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the seventeenth century, a small island nation on the fringes of Europe embarked on a centuries-long process of expansion, colonization, and domination that would make it the world's paramount power. Britain's many effects on the world it acquired have long been the target of historical studies, but only more recently have scholars turned their focus to the transformation that the expansion of empire wrought at home. In the eighteenth century, no colonies were richer or more important to Britain than the sugar possessions of the Caribbean, which fed an utter transformation in the European diet, and in which were created perhaps the most total slave societies ever to exist.<sup>1</sup> But the significance of these colonies was not limited to agricultural exploitation and economic gain. The complications, consequences, and confusions of this Caribbean empire found their way home to the streets of London and the estates of the British countryside. This thesis examines a unique class of Anglo-Caribbean men that developed to control and profit from the opportunities of the West Indies. It concerns the creole planter, as he was and as he was imagined – or, as was often the case, shaped by forces beyond his control. More broadly, it speaks to a nation undergoing rapid change as it moved toward the modern era and addresses ways in which the lasting impacts of empire were dealt with at home.

The planters of the Georgian-era Caribbean have few parallels in world colonial history. In early eighteenth century Jamaica, per capita white wealth was a staggering

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<sup>1</sup> Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny & Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and his Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 12.

£1,200; the comparable figure in the New England colonies was £32.<sup>2</sup> While much of that wealth accrued to the very top, the Caribbean islands were still the place to be for adventurers, outcasts, and second sons looking for a fortune. Thousands heeded the call. If one could survive the Caribbean's many perils – disease, slave revolts, piracy, hurricanes, and warfare among them – one could expect, with a little luck, to grow a fortune beyond what most could aspire to in Britain.

The name 'planter' bears definition. With the exception of Barbados, where the settler population thrived for a time, whites comprised small minorities in the Caribbean colonies essentially from the beginning. The Jamaican white population, which is most extensively documented, settled at around seven thousand by 1700 and grew to just over twelve thousand in the ensuing eighty years.<sup>3</sup> The white population trend was similar in the other British possessions: Anguilla, Antigua, the Bahamas, Barbados, Barbuda, the British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, Nevis, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent, in addition to a host of French, Spanish, Dutch, and Danish islands that rotated in and out of British control with the tide of war. Most of these white settlers were not landowners. A fair number were women, and many men worked instead as overseers, estate agents, lawyers, merchants, craftsmen, or soldiers. While the population was overwhelmingly rural, urban communities like Kingston grew over time, and non-landowning whites tended to congregate in towns. The capital required for the purchase of land, sugar works, and slaves was massive, and economic pressures gradually pushed toward the consolidation of sugar-cultivated land in the hands of a small number –

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<sup>2</sup> Trevor Burnard, "Prodigious Riches: The Wealth of Jamaica before the American Revolution," *The Economic History Review* 54, no. 3 (2001): 507.

<sup>3</sup> B. W. Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed: Plantation Maps and Plans of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2001), 8.



roughly one thousand in Jamaica, with about twice that number on the other islands combined.<sup>4</sup> This group of sugar planters was small but intensely wealthy – estate records from the 1770s suggest that the largest planters may have controlled land and slaves worth in excess of £300,000,<sup>5</sup> equivalent to about \$84 million today, adjusted for inflation.

The question of who exactly constituted a planter became more complicated as the eighteenth century progressed. Absenteeism, the practice among planters of permanently leaving their estates and moving to Britain, became a major phenomenon as colonial possessions came under firmer control. While historians have disagreed about the significance of absenteeism, there is little doubt as to its scale: by the 1760s, about one third of all plantations were held *in absentia*, and that proportion continued to climb into the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Complex webs of inheritance and estate sales often meant that absentees passed their land and slaves to men who had never been to the West Indies, and perhaps would never visit. Moreover, the clubby nature of the British elite meant that sources of wealth, including West Indian wealth, were hard to separate from more traditional holdings, and the bulk of propertied Britons likely had at least some financial stake in the Caribbean sugar colonies.

This thesis deals primarily with the planter in his Caribbean context. The domestic image of the planter that was crafted over the eighteenth century was predicated on physical presence in the zone of contact, and the intersection of cultures in the West Indies was the foundation of perceived planter difference. For these planters came to be

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<sup>4</sup> Burnard, “Prodigious Riches,” 519.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> J.R. Ward, *British West Indian Slavery, 1750-1834: The Process of Amelioration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 13.

much more than the foot soldiers of a growing empire. As Kathleen Wilson argues, the West Indies were a site of contestation, a place in which ‘British-ness’ was defined in terms of its contact with radically different cultures and an unorthodox social order. The men at the forefront of this delineation thus took on a role of critical importance, navigating and embodying the margins of British manhood. Planters, in this view, became a vessel for the very idea of British identity, and were uniquely meaningful in defining its boundaries. Wilson’s assessment of planters’ performance in this role does not grant them high marks. “The fabulously wealthy Caribbean planter that emerged in fact and fiction,” she concludes, “came to represent West Indian uncouthness, backwardness and degeneracy that inverted the acclaimed standards of English civility and culture.”<sup>7</sup>

The planter as he came to be seen in Georgian Britain threatened British self-understanding as a Christian country, civilized and civilizing. Moreover, elites looked at West Indian creole flaws and saw reflections of their own shortcomings: over-fondness for display and excess, liberal sexual behavior, class mixing, and more. These planters revealed the ‘secret, underground Self’ of eighteenth century British society, to borrow Wilson’s phrase. Elites back in Britain were accordingly eager to seek a kind of psychological disavowal of the planter class, precisely because their own flaws were so evident in the latter’s excess. Critically, this elite response to planter shortcomings – a deflection and projection of perceived negative traits – went beyond the realm of the abstract. A strategy of displacement was, consciously or unconsciously, executed in the quintessentially public venue of the British press. The planter created by these fantasies

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<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 130.

“was both a form of experience and a framework through which to experience imperialism.”<sup>8</sup> Sectors of the elite subtly crafted a planter so heinous as to secure their own place at the head of Britain. The representational framework around the planter – a set of tropes, forms, and understandings deployed over the eighteenth century – worked to undermine planter character long before abolition was considered.

Trevor Burnard, an essential writer on the plantation-era Caribbean, notes, like Wilson, that planters were the subject of a “battle of representation,” in Britain, one in which, “white West Indians came to be thought of ... as not really British.”<sup>9</sup> He diverges from Wilson, however, with the contention that though planters, “were not seen as ... what they wanted to be seen as: British gentlemen, of upright character, firm morals and capable of moderation, self-restraint and refined gentility,”<sup>10</sup> for most of the Georgian era, they were generally accepted as hardworking, if rough, men who did what they could for Britain. For Burnard, it was only after abolitionists, a small and severe minority, began to attack planter character in their drive for policy change that negative depictions of planters, particularly attacks on planters as non-British, began to permeate Georgian society. This attack was more salient, he claims, after planters’ slave-owning kin to the north became an enemy during the American Revolution. Burnard is right to suggest that planters were not seen they way they wished to be, and that the abolitionist movement represented a new and well-organized attack on planters. But we must also consider the representational reservoir that pre-dated abolitionism, and the subtle, subconscious efforts

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<sup>8</sup> Catherine Molineux, *Faces of Perfect Ebony: Encountering Atlantic Slavery in Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Trevor Burnard, “Powerless Masters: The Curious Decline of Jamaican Sugar Planters in the Foundational Period of British Abolitionism,” *Slavery & Abolition* 32, no. 2 (2011): 196.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 192.

on the part of domestic elites to craft a ‘West Indian’ so riddled with flaws that their own status would be safe – a performance of deflection and displacement. The primary executors of this performance were those among the British elite who were relative newcomers: strivers, bureaucrats, admirals, Scots, and the like. For them, perhaps, exclusion of the West Indian from British society was meant to solidify their own tentative claims to inclusion.

This work is bounded in the Georgian era because it more or less neatly encapsulates the rise of the planter class and the eventual elimination of the slave trade and later slavery itself. The first chapter will consider planter representation from the 1714 coronation of George I to about 1780, when trends and codes that had existed for decades began to accelerate and abolitionists organized seriously for the first time. I intend to show that elites played central roles in the publication of media centered on the central tropes of disease, climate, and racial mixing in the West Indies, which came to typify perceptions of the creole class. This effort sought to create a framework by which planters were understood by the public, partially to insulate elites from criticism for the same flaws evident in planters. By the 1771 premiere of *The West Indian* in London, these representational codes were firmly enough established that a West Indian planter was a legible character on the popular stage, understood as a ‘West Indian’ through a particular and negative characterization.

The second chapter addresses planter efforts to alter these codes of representation. In response to representations that stressed their difference, planters sought to demonstrate their similarity to metropolitan types, and denied claims of disease and miscegenation. Once again, these efforts were undertaken in the public press,

broadcasting the qualities of the planting class to the British public in an effort to demonstrate that planters were indeed Christian Englishmen.

Lastly, the third chapter will address the abolitionist movement, and particularly the way it engaged with the existing discourse around planters and the West Indies. Emerging in force over the 1770s and 1780s, the abolitionist movement was grounded in a purifying Evangelicalism that sought not only to eliminate slavery but also to incite a widespread moral reform of the British nation. In light of this goal, abolitionist attacks on planters are best perceived as part of a campaign against the wealth, luxury, and license that planters embodied, rather than a purely humanitarian anti-slavery crusade. But these attacks – on lax planter sexuality, frivolous display, exotic pets and the like – were based on the representational framework that had existed in Britain for decades. Though abolitionists certainly broke new ground in their attacks on the brutality of slavery itself, their campaign against planters was legible to the British public because of the lens through which creoles and the West Indies were seen, the groundwork for which was laid decades earlier.

My hope is that this thesis will contribute to our understanding of the rich and rapidly changing cultural world of Georgian Britain, and the ways in which the contradictions and confusions of empire came home in a broader sense. Lastly, it enhances our explanation for the “curious” decline of planter social standing that Burnard claims occurred almost immediately beginning in the 1780s. A cultural understanding – a reservoir of social meaning surrounding the planter – already existed by the time of abolition through a process of negotiation and confrontation between the domestic elite

and the planter. Abolitionists would redeploy this code to their own ends, drawing on it and altering it as they pushed for the end of slavery.

## 1: DEFLECTION

The West Indian sugar planter was a unique character in Georgian Britain, one whose characterization and representation would come to occupy a role of importance in the British creation of imperial identity. His wealth came not from staid, ancient landholdings, but from exploits in the exotic and dangerous Caribbean. Almost as soon as these planters became a recognizable type, however, they came under lasting suspicion at home. Planters who expected Britons to be appreciative of their brave work on the fringes of civilization saw their ambitions sharply disappointed. As Kathleen Wilson writes, West Indians came to represent “uncouthness, backwardness and degeneracy.”<sup>11</sup> Why was this the case? Colonialism’s expansionist impulse was foundationally justified by an ideology of British superiority over the seemingly backwards people of Africa and the Americas, as well as over European rivals, particularly the Catholic Spanish.<sup>12</sup> The domestic understanding of creole planters that developed over the eighteenth century was in part predicated on a disappointment of this implicit imperial construct. Planters living in the West Indies were perceived to be oversexed, irreligious, cruel, and drunk; numerous absentees who led colorful lives back home reinforced these perceptions. The British public, moreover, had spent decades consuming propaganda demonizing Spaniards for alleged cruelty and degeneracy in the Americas<sup>13</sup> - in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many Britons began to wonder how exactly the Caribbean and its planter elite reflected on the imperial project writ large.

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<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire, and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 130.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Jack P. Greene, *Evaluating Empire and Confronting Colonialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> “Black Legend,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (London: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016), Encyclopedia Britannica Online, accessed 19 February 2018.

“The British West Indies,” Wilson begins, “served a Janus-faced function in eighteenth-century British imagination.”<sup>14</sup> By this, she means that the British elite simultaneously saw in the West Indies its greatest successes (conquest, economic enterprise, prestige, the virtuous Empire) and its perceived moral failings (“sensuality, indolence ... love of luxury and display”). Planters, she contends, became anathema to wealthy Britons because they overtly displayed the covert failings of the British upper class, with its predilection for sexual intrigue, irreligiosity, and liberal drunkenness. In response, domestic elites met the imagined West Indian with “disavowal” and an ambiguous attitude that severed ties between Britons and West Indians in an effort to guard against a realization of this “secret, underground Self.” The West Indian was a “danger ... to the honor of the English nation” – he exposed “the acquisitive possessiveness of empire and its licensed rapacity” to an unwilling domestic elite.<sup>15</sup> The planter thus became a conduit by which proper British character (i.e. the way British elites would prefer to imagine themselves) could be reinforced through disavowal. The figure of the Caribbean planter became a battleground of identity.

This analysis of the social role of the West Indies and its inhabitants in eighteenth-century Britain, while penetrating, is somewhat ancillary to Wilson’s main focus. Her chapter deals with the life of Teresia Phillips, a Georgian-era writer, *bon vivant*, and Jamaican cultural official, and the complexities of gender in the Atlantic world; moreover, Wilson’s work is limited in its chronological scope. Ultimately, the saga of the West Indian planter culminated in the nineteenth century, beginning with the abolition of the legal slave trade in 1807 and concluding with emancipation in 1833. This

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<sup>14</sup> Wilson, 129.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson, 130, 144.



change in British policy was brought on by an organized public propaganda campaign, combined deftly with legislative strategy. First, abolitionists sought to attack planter character and, second they attempted to turn the British public against West Indian sugar and the enslaved labor that produced it. In the first goal, abolitionists followed elites of earlier decades; in the second, they sharply diverged. However much elite Britons might have sought distance from the uncouth planting class, they were thoroughly dependent on the economic complex the colonies and rarely conceived of an empire without slavery.

Indeed, while concurring with Wilson that planters uncomfortably mirrored the vices of the domestic elite, Trevor Burnard writes that “planters were generally accepted on their own terms, as Englishmen who, despite the perils of life in the tropics, did useful things for the Empire,”<sup>16</sup> until the advent of abolitionist propaganda in the 1780s shifted attitudes against planters permanently. But this argument does not tell the whole story. I contend that the anxious and distancing attitude that Wilson describes was not merely the rumination of an established elite anxious about the *nouveaux riche*. Instead, such displacement was enacted and performed in a wide range of media targeting the British public. British elites were sensitive, in an indirect way, to public opinion: “the authority they wielded ... had to be exercised in ways that commanded the respect of the governed. Consent was vital,”<sup>17</sup> especially as the eighteenth century progressed. There was both a psychological and realist need among elites to distance themselves from planters, assuaging their own anxieties about their shortcomings and presenting virtue that would

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<sup>16</sup> Trevor Burnard, “Powerless Masters: The Curious Decline of Jamaican Sugar Planters in the Foundational Period of British Abolitionism,” *Slavery and Abolition* 32, no.2 (2011): 185-198.

<sup>17</sup> Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny & Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and his Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 269.

justify their rule. Compounded over decades, one can see an effort on the part of some domestic elites to demonstrate their distance from the West Indian creole. This theater of difference, crucially, was performed for a non-elite audience: as Kay Dian Kriz writes, “there was a sizable public for West Indian imagery.”<sup>18</sup> Representation of the planter gradually created a set of tropes and codes – a shorthand for the unwelcome facts planters embodied. The abolitionist propaganda of later decades did not emerge in a vacuum. Abolitionists drew on this reservoir of meaning, which had been growing for decades and was legible to the broader public by the 1780s. What had begun as a battle of representation among elites – lords desperate to distance themselves from the vice and lethargy of the Caribbean – would be transformed into a popular contest for the British mind on the issue of slavery.

Burnard notes a “curious” and rapid decline in the social standing of planters from the 1780s onward. The speed of this change is perhaps made less curious when considering that the elite campaign of distance and ambivalence was, in large part, carried out in the public eye. It is manifest in the bawdy plays and sensational prints circulating around London in the lead-up to abolition. Critically, these representational forms were accessible to all and widely consumed. Richard Cumberland’s *The West Indian* (1771), for instance, may have been part of a contestation of British identity at the very top, but most of the seats at Drury Lane were filled by everyday Londoners, who absorbed its representation of the planter and the West Indies. The negative perceptions present in such media existed for decades before abolitionists took these codes and ran with them. The planter “in fact and fiction” – the meanings contested in planter

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<sup>18</sup> Kay Dian Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700-1840* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 5.

representation – entered popular discourse long before abolitionists embarked on their campaign. It is to these pre-abolitionist representations that we must turn to uncover the roots of successful abolitionist attacks in the 1780s and beyond.

‘CURST TROPICAL CONSTITUTION’

British elites seeking to distance themselves from planters in the early eighteenth century frequently fixated on the nature of the West Indies themselves. The obvious differences between the climate and disease environments of Britain and the Caribbean provided a convenient explanation of planter vice, which was rooted, some claimed, in the environment itself. Very early on then, the West Indies were presented as a dangerous place in which Englishmen became sick and prone to moral degeneracy. A 1714 pamphlet provides a good example of the early Georgian dialogue around West Indian health. Descriptions of horrible illness punctuate the text: in one case, an infant, saved from smallpox, nonetheless “contracted a violent Flux and Fever, of which she dy’d.” In another, the author describes a father who, distraught by the death of his son after a three-day illness, was himself thrown, “into a dangerous Fever, which ... very near cost him his life.”<sup>19</sup> The author’s premise was a complaint about a cabal of corrupt Jamaican administrators, and the text is presented as a letter from a presumably well-off planter to a prominent London official. Though all the actors in this drama (including the author) remain anonymous, the publisher’s note remarks, “I thought it might possibly be of some use of the Publick, to have it reprinted.”<sup>20</sup> A Londoner, and critically one with the means to have the pamphlet published, saw fit to distribute this depiction of life in the West

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<sup>19</sup> *The Groans of Jamaica, express'd in a letter from a gentleman residing there, to his friend in London.* (London: n.p., 1714), *Sabin Americana, 1500-1926*, accessed March 2, 2018, 36, 41.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Indies to the public, troubled as it is by colonial corruption and frightful disease.

Wittingly or not, the London gentleman who published this letter was contributing to the very beginnings of a public discourse questioning the nature of West Indian planters.

Through pamphlets like this one, charges of disease and sickliness percolated into public conversations about the West Indies and their denizens, and soon became a foundation for perceptions of difference between Britons and West Indians.

This presentation of the West Indies as a disease-ridden hellhole indeed had basis in fact: the West Indies were extraordinarily unhealthy, and disease was nearly always epidemic. Smallpox, yellow fever, and diphtheria were particularly common; the ailment described in the 1714 pamphlet was most probably yellow fever, which can kill a healthy human in just a few days and is spread by the tropical mosquito *Aedes aegypti*. The first known outbreak of yellow fever in the British Caribbean hit Barbados in 1647, just twenty years after the first English settlers arrived, and the disease remained a constant presence for three centuries, frequently mentioned in British texts about the West Indies.<sup>21</sup> Many Caribbean ailments, some with origins in Africa (like yellow fever), were unheard of in Europe, making sensational portrayals in British media even more fearful. Between 1655 (when England took Jamaica from the Spanish) and 1661, for instance, mortality among English settlers was around 75 percent, primarily due to yellow fever and other diseases.<sup>22</sup> Such mortality rates declined over time but remained very high in

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<sup>21</sup> J.S. Handler, "Diseases and medical disabilities of enslaved Barbadians from the seventeenth century to around 1838: part I," *West Indian Medical Journal*, 57, no. 6 (2008); J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empire: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 153;

comparison to Britain – in the mid-eighteenth century, 30 percent annual mortality was not uncommon, depending on the severity of the hurricane season and the corresponding flooding, which greatly worsened outbreaks of epidemic disease.<sup>23</sup> As Burnard writes on Jamaica’s failure to emulate the settler societies of North America, “The major problem that immigrants [to Jamaica] faced was precipitate death. . . . the West Indian islands,” had a clearly deserved reputation as, “killing grounds.”<sup>24</sup>

The observable unhealthiness of the Caribbean fit into a burgeoning pseudo-science surrounding the effects of climate on humans, which is evidenced in numerous medical documents and natural histories from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Sir Hans Sloane, perhaps the most famous chronicler of Jamaican natural life and himself a creole planter, was a physician. He devoted a great deal of space in his seminal work, *A Voyage to the Islands of Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers, and Jamaica*, to an account of the “diseases . . . of that place.”<sup>25</sup> “Tis usually argued,” Sloane writes of the climate, that Jamaican “air is corroding; but this I believe comes from the heat.”<sup>26</sup> Heat and humidity are the defining characteristics of tropical climates; as Karen Kupperman explains, “through the colonial period, excessive

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Trevor Burnard, “‘The Countrie Continues Sicklie’: White Mortality in Jamaica, 1655–1780,” *Social History of Medicine* 12, no. 1 (1999), 45–72.

<sup>23</sup> This figure includes both whites and slaves, and factors in an infant mortality rate around 371/1000, per Handler.

<sup>24</sup> Trevor Burnard, “Not a Place for Whites? Demographic Failure and Settlement, 1655–1880,” in Kathleen E. A. Monteith and Glen Richards, eds. *Jamaica in Slavery and Freedom: History, Heritage, and Culture* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), 80; Vincent Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Sir Hans Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands* . . . (London: B.M., 1707), Missouri Botanical Garden Archives, accessed 8 January 2018, ix.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

heat was seen as the major reason for southern sickliness.”<sup>27</sup> Contemporary medical science in the early colonial era centered on the four humors; a healthy patient’s humors were in balance, and an ill patient suffered from one or another imbalance. A rapid change in temperature was seen to induce illness by throwing the humors out of balance, thus causing disease.

Physician Thomas Trapham’s 1690s text *A discourse on the state of health in the island of Jamaica*, for instance, explained the persistent yellow fever outbreaks in Jamaica as a result of, “the great quantity of Choler abounding here,”<sup>28</sup> choler being the bodily humor associated with fire and heat. The operating assumption for much of the seventeenth and eighteenth century was that imbalanced humors led to devastating disease. Just as importantly, the public was often the intended audience of contemporary medical debates, which took place in pamphlets circulated in Britain’s major cities. Sloane’s work may have been cutting edge science at the time, but it was also a presentation on the state of the West Indies and the creoles who lived there; its audience was the wide readership of Georgian published works. The casual reader might not have understood the vagaries of the four humors, but certainly received the signal that the West Indies exposed white planters to serious danger through physical alteration.

A London advertisement from 1756, and dozens more like it, reinforced the connection between the West Indies, planters, and disease. “In June 1755,” it reads, “I was seized in Jamaica with a Bilious Fever, a disease VERY COMMON in that Island,

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<sup>27</sup> Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "Fear of Hot Climates in the Anglo-American Colonial Experience," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1984): 213.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Trapham, *A discourse of the state of Health in the island of Jamaica, &c.* (London: 1692?), *Early English Books Online*, accessed 5 January 2018.

and in a few hours was Delirious.”<sup>29</sup> Though the author, a Mr. Hamilton, was cured by a miracle powder sold in St. Paul’s Churchyard, advertisements like these, posted in newspapers of wide circulation, fed perceptions of the West Indies as places of constant sickness. The cumulative effect was the creation in some British minds of a set of interlocking perceptions. The heat of the West Indies, it was believed, caused literal physical change in the bodies of white planters, which in turn caused disease, widely evidenced by published accounts and advertisements. Readers were understandably prone to the assumption that the Caribbean was a bad place for whites to live. The physical changes to a planter’s body brought on by the West Indian heat, it was believed, caused insidious internal changes. The consequences of this idea, still embryonic in the early eighteenth century, would not be apparent for several decades. Of significance now however, is that this mode of representation, drawing on a truthful picture of disease in the Caribbean, entered the lexicon of the reading British public.

#### ‘I MUCH PREFERED A NEGROE WENCH’

Still more troubling for Britons than tropical climate and disease was the abiding and serious anxiety surrounding interracial sex in the colonies. Concern about white British planters having sex with enslaved Africans is present to some degree in virtually every major book and pamphlet on the West Indies published in London in the eighteenth century. Hilary McD. Beckles writes that “visitors to Britain’s West Indian plantations during the ... decades of slavery frequently commented on what they considered the

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<sup>29</sup> "Advertisements and Notices," *London Gazette*, London, May 25, 1756 - May 29, 1756, *17th and 18th Century Burney Collection*, accessed 7 March 2018.

culturally endemic ... sexual practices of white creoles,”<sup>30</sup> i.e. their sexual contact with black women. This sexual behavior by turns fascinated the British public with its exoticism and disgusted it with its uncomfortable implications for the perceived integrity of whiteness. Moreover, Wilson’s suggestion that domestic elites sought disavowal from planters because planters incarnated their own flaws and failings may be extrapolated here to sexual behavior. Attacking West Indians for their lax sexual mores was of paramount importance for a domestic aristocracy that was itself quite prurient.<sup>31</sup> This was not yet the staid aristocracy of Queen Victoria – the Duchess of Devonshire fit the mold of the era far better.

The unsettling nature of planter sexual practice, and the threat of parallels being drawn to domestic elites, generated a visceral response. “During the eighteenth century,” as Snait Gissis argues, “‘race’ was not a clearly defined category with a well-delineated reference.”<sup>32</sup> It was not seen to be purely a function of visible features like skin color and morphology. Instead, a complex of social and cognitive characteristics were combined with physical attributes to create racial categories that were fluid, and indeed could change over a single lifetime. This racial milieu created the worrisome prospect that white British men could ‘go native’ after an extended period in the tropics, as climate was also believed to “[shape] both individuals and groups ... This was a precondition for arguing for nonrigidity, plasticity, and even reversibility in the formation of [racial]

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<sup>30</sup> Hilary Beckles, “Property Rights in Pleasure: The Marketing of Slave Women’s Sexuality in the West Indies,” in Richard B. Sheridan ed., *West Indies Accounts: Essays on the History of the British Caribbean* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 1996), 169.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. Wilson, 131, 136.

<sup>32</sup> Snait B. Gissis, “Visualizing “Race” in the Eighteenth Century,” *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 41, no.1 (2011): 42.



features.”<sup>33</sup> This fluidity of features, and an understanding of racial categories built on behavior and socialization, combined to create the belief in some corners that planters transgressed the boundaries of the white race. Brooke Newman observes that, “... racial classifications developed against a backdrop of broader cultural assumptions that bloodlines delineated individual as well as national identity.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, the concern about racial and climatological degeneration was not limited to the planters themselves: the British nation itself was threatened. Domestic elites seized on this fact to shape yet another marker of difference.

As with the representational modes surrounding climate and disease, British elites frequently encouraged, or at least abetted, representations of creole planters that were sure to exploit this cultural anxiety. A text presented as a set of letters between Charles Leslie and Edward Vernon was published in London as *A New History of Jamaica* in 1740. Little is known of Leslie’s life: he was married in Barbados in 1710 and published his own account of Jamaica in Edinburgh in 1739. The Scottish connection suggests that he may have been born in Britain – as Edward Thompson remarked in the 1740s, most Barbadian estates were run by European-born Scots, relatively new arrivals to Britain’s oldest Caribbean colony.<sup>35</sup> In any event, Barbados was by far the colony most assimilated to English metropolitan culture. “Barbados,” Matthew Parker writes, “was less ‘Africanised’ than the other islands ... people even called Barbados ‘Little England’, not

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>34</sup> Brooke Newman, *A Dark Inheritance: Blood, Race, and Sex in Colonial Jamaica* (Forthcoming: Yale University Press, 2018), 16.

<sup>35</sup> Edward Thompson, *Sailor’s Letters, Written to his select friends in England, during his voyages and travels in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. From the year 1744 to 1759, 2 Vols*, (Dublin: J. Hoey and J. Potts, 1766).

a term that was ever applied to Jamaica ... everything was more settled.”<sup>36</sup> The relative British-ness of Barbados perhaps explains Leslie’s involvement in writing and publishing a text that frequently undercuts planter status.

If Leslie was a dubious elite, Vernon left no doubt as to where he belonged in the hierarchy of the British Atlantic. Born in London to William III’s Secretary of State, Vernon attended Westminster School before entering the Royal Navy. He rose to the rank of admiral and later parlayed his military successes against the Spanish into a prolonged career in Parliament. But for his lack of title, he embodied the British upper class of the mid-eighteenth century. We know that he was in London in 1740, and likely saw personally to the publication of Leslie’s writings, intermingled with his own observations and recollections.<sup>37</sup> The common thread of these men – the Barbadian who fancied himself more English than the other creoles and the admiral-politician in the halls of power – is the desire to perform their difference from uncouth, sickly, racially suspect planters. The text bears out such a goal. *A New History of Jamaica* opens, as many travelogues do, with a description of the place and its people. Among its first topics is the sensuality of the Caribbean islands, the sexuality of black women, and white male preference for miscegenation. “The Negro Women,” our authors proclaim, “go many of them quite naked; they do not know what shame is ... Their Masters give them a kind of

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<sup>36</sup> Matthew Parker, *The Sugar Barons: Family, Corruption, Empire, and War in the West Indies* (New York: Walker and Company, 2011), 264.

<sup>37</sup> J. K. Laughton, "Vernon, Sir Edward (1723–1794), naval officer," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed 21 Mar. 2018.

Petticoat, but they do not care to wear it ... these are the Favorites of young ‘Squires, who keep them for a certain Use.’<sup>38</sup>

Here, frankly stated, is a declaration of white creole preference for black women, a behavioral trait that exposed whites in the West Indies to re-classification in racial categories built as much on behavior and culture as on physical characteristics. Here were nominally British men, beset by disease, who had undergone physical alteration from the climate, lived and worked among thousands of strange Africans and now, it was claimed, had gone so far as to take black mistresses. Given contemporary understandings of race, it is not farfetched to suggest that the metropolitan audience of this text might have come to see creoles in the Caribbean as something other than white and British, exactly the wedge that certain domestic representations sought to drive. At the very least, the charge of miscegenation on the part of planters gradually entered the lexicon and became a mode by which planters would be represented going forward. As we shall see, by the 1770s, the racial, climatological, and disease-based technology of creole difference had broad roots in British culture.

#### *THE WEST INDIAN*

The decade before the rise of organized abolitionism, beginning around 1765, provides ample evidence that the representational codes created around West Indian planters were entrenched and legible to the people of Britain. These years offer the proof,

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<sup>38</sup> Charles Leslie and Edward Vernon, *A new history of Jamaica, from the earliest accounts, to the taking of Porto Bello by Vice-Admiral Vernon : in thirteen letters from a gentleman to his friend ... in which are briefly interspersed, the characters of its governors and lieutenant governors*, (London: Printed for J. Hodges ..., 1740), *Sabin Americana, 1500-1926*, accessed 3 March 2018, 41.

so to speak, that the tentative and perhaps subconscious cultural efforts among some elites to deflect negative attention onto the planting class had been broadly successful.

British theater of the mid-eighteenth century was a rowdy place. Wealthy ticketholders sat in boxes with good views to the actors, the middling professional class – lawyers, bureaucrats, and the like – took up the pit, and the remainder of servants, artisans, and sailors occupied the galleries.<sup>39</sup> Unlike elite private salons or working-class pubs, theaters were a place where a broad cross-section of society gathered for shared entertainment. Moreover, Georgian Britain was, “preoccupied to the point of obsession with the theatre . . . The discourse, practices, and images of the theatre pervaded all aspects of the culture.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the theater was for most of the eighteenth century a place of contestation, “in which the polity could define its image.”<sup>41</sup> “The transgressive power of the theatre,” Wilson contends, “lay in its status as a forum where power was visualized and political meanings intensified.”<sup>42</sup> Plays that were enduringly popular thus evince topics of deep social and political meaning to a wide range of Britons, and such plays must be understood as a negotiation of national identity. It is intriguing for our purposes, therefore, that one of the most important plays of the 1770s centered on none other than a West Indian planter.

Richard Cumberland’s *The West Indian* premiered at the Drury Lane Theatre in London in January 1771, the same month, coincidentally, that Richard Arkwright opened

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<sup>39</sup> Gillian Russell, “Theatre,” in Iain McCalman, ed., *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age : British Culture, 1776-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001), *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, accessed 8 March 2018, 226.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 223.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Wilson, 163.

his first water mill, the spark that would light the Industrial Revolution.<sup>43</sup> Almost from the beginning of the Georgian era in 1714, the West Indian planter had at least been recognizable to Britons from what they heard and read, whatever their personal understanding of empire. By the 1770s, the character was legible enough to a diverse London audience that a West Indian planter could be the star of a comedy. This comprehension was brought on by the slowly growing representative reservoir that had been under construction for decades, and which was centered on charges of sickliness, ill temper, and racial confusion leveled by mainly elite publishers. We know from reviews of the day that the play was warmly received; one theater impresario commented that, “the success which has attended the performances of *The West Indian* has exceeded that of any comedy within the memory of the oldest man living.”<sup>44</sup> *The London Magazine* of January 1771, a well-circulated publication, offered its subscribers a full synopsis and review, which, while chiding the improbability of the play’s plot, concludes that, “[the play] was received with uncommon approbation ... it pleases very much ...”<sup>45</sup> *The West Indian* was popular, and we know that its popularity suggests meaning for a wide range of theatergoers. What did Belcour, the titular West Indian, signify? How was national identity – domestically and in the West Indies – contested through this play?

The action opens with Stockwell, a London merchant, revealing to his associate that Belcour, a West Indian planter, is his son. He was conceived, Stockwell recalls, out of wedlock years ago, while he accompanied his boss’s daughter on a voyage to Jamaica.

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<sup>43</sup> Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), 65.

<sup>44</sup> George H. Nettleton and Arthur E. Case, *British Dramatists from Dryden to Sheridan* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), 711.

<sup>45</sup> *The London Magazine, or Gentleman’s monthly intelligencer*, January 1771, (London: B. Baldwin), *University of Michigan Digital Collections*, accessed 12 January 2018.

“Early in life I accompanied [Belcour’s] grandfather to Jamaica as his clerk,” Stockwell recalls, “it was my chance (call it good or ill) to engage her affections.”<sup>46</sup> The West Indies are thus presented from the outset as a place of corruption, where even well-to-do children of the merchant class have their morals tainted. In discussing the deleterious effects of Jamaica on English women, Kathleen Wilson quotes Edward Ward, an early travel writer who reported that, in Jamaica “[English women] may be Wicked without shame, and Whore without punishment.”<sup>47</sup> Cumberland might just as well have placed the affair in Britain, but locating it in Jamaica played on the audience’s perceptions of the Caribbean as a torrid zone of lax sexual practice. Jamaica, the author impressed, is inherently corrupting to Britons, a place in which their actions become distinctly un-British. An explanation for such Caribbean degeneracy is offered in the play’s prologue: Belcour, born in Jamaica, is “hot as the soil, the clime which gave him birth.”<sup>48</sup> Here again we see the link between warm, tropical climate and innate changes to individual character and complexion, which are responsible in turn for suspect behavior. The representational codes of earlier decades are already at work. That Belcour’s character is immediately brought under suspicion confirms to the audience that no planter could enjoy the legitimate birth and lineage of Britain’s landed elite, vast wealth notwithstanding.

The arrival of Belcour’s baggage at his new London home provides another opportunity for a comedic but meaningful examination of the planter. A porter mentions Belcour’s pets in an inventory of goods, and Stockwell asks him, “Friend, what dumb

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Cumberland, *The West Indian*, (London: 1771), Act I, Scene 1, Lines 36-37.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Ward, *A Trip to Jamaica with a True Character of the People and the Island* (London: E. Ward, 1700), *British Library Digital Collections*, accessed 12 February 2018.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, Prologue.

creatures do you speak of; has Mr. Belcour brought over a collection of wild beasts?”

“No,” the man replies, “let me see; there’s two green monkees, a pair of grey parrots, a Jamaica sow and pigs, and a Mangrove dog; that’s all.”<sup>49</sup> Even in this brief, humorous episode, differences between the domestic and the imperial are being explored and social meaning is being claimed. As Ingrid Tague writes, the eighteenth century trade in exotic pets, “was ... inextricably bound up with slavery.” Slaves, she argues, can be seen as a kind of exotic pet, displayed alongside monkeys and parrots to constitute a living performance of imperial domination. Crucially, the foreign contact enabled by the colonies had made the display of exotic species possible. “Parrots, monkeys, and human slaves,” Tague contends, “joined tea, porcelain, and ‘japanned’ furniture as fashion statements.”<sup>50</sup> Cumberland’s audience had a firm grasp of this commentary because exotic animals and their display played an important performative role in British culture. As early as 1738, for instance, a chimpanzee displayed in London was a wildly popular social phenomenon. Belcour’s pets are another signal for the audience, a shorthand for the gaudy, unmanly display for which the West Indies were frequently derided, and a reflection on the unsettled question of slavery.

In the same exchange, Stockwell notes that Belcour’s porter speaks of him with a personal familiarity: “If the principal [Belcour] tallies with his purveyors,” Stockwell observes, “he must be a singular spectacle in this place ...”<sup>51</sup> In addition to his exotic flavor, the planter is suspect because of his mixing with lower classes, a signifier that he lacks the refinement that would be found in a native elite. Indeed, contemporary visitors

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<sup>49</sup> Cumberland, Act I, Scene 2.

<sup>50</sup> Ingrid Tague, *Animal Companions: Pets and Social Change in Eighteenth Century Britain* (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 51-52.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

to the West Indies often commented on the relative absence of clear social hierarchy among whites, an understandable consequence of living in a slave society in which whites comprised a small and shrinking minority almost from the beginning.<sup>52</sup> Eighteenth century Britain was strictly stratified – indeed even the seating for a performance of *The West Indian* was determined by social status. Stockwell’s comment is yet another signifier of difference between West Indian planters and domestic British elites, who knew their proper place in the hierarchy of nobility and gentry, and would never dream of “tally[ing] with their purveyors.”

After Belcour himself is finally introduced, the play takes off at a wild sprint: Belcour falls in love with Louisa, the daughter of a penniless but scheming older couple. He demonstrates his generosity (and the carelessness of planter wealth) by paying for a soldier to travel to Africa as a mercenary, not knowing that the soldier’s daughter is his own beloved Louisa. Charlotte, a daughter of London society, wishes to marry Louisa’s brother for love rather than status, while Charlotte’s mother tries to thwart Louisa’s elopement and arrange her marriage to Belcour, with the aim of getting her hands on his inheritance. Meanwhile, Stockwell tries haplessly to hold it all together and save his son’s fortune, Belcour’s naiveté complicating things every step of the way.

The play’s plot and characters, including the drunken Irishman (played, coincidentally, by a travelling actor who had performed in the theater of Kingston, Jamaica<sup>53</sup>), the scheming matron, and the star-crossed lovers, are largely recycled from older English comedies. In this sense, the play made use of tropes familiar to the audience to make the characters legible. What makes *The West Indian* unique among

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<sup>52</sup> Parker, 147.

<sup>53</sup> Wilson, 166.



contemporary comedies is the addition of the West Indian to this repertoire of meaning. Metropolitan understanding of the West Indian creole was a precondition of this play. Belcour is portrayed as ‘hot’ and passionate, born of an immoral liaison, prone to gaudy display, and irreverent of hierarchy. The broader meaning of such characteristics is evident in the play’s title: not ‘Belcour’ but ‘The West Indian.’ Any creole would suffice because the representational codes deployed were common to all creoles. This legibility could not have been achieved without a predetermined set of assumptions, crafted over the preceding decades by a subtle and perhaps even subconscious effort to craft a public imagination of the planter.

Cumberland fits the mold of prior authors we have explored in that his elite, non-slave holding background made him sensitive to the uncomfortable similarities between creole flaws and metropolitan failings. His father was a bishop in the Church of England and he claimed as an ancestor the statesman Oliver St. John, a close associate of Cromwell who had escaped exile after 1660 through a well-worded letter of apology.<sup>54</sup> His pedigree included the Westminster School and Cambridge, and he held a number of prestigious government sinecures to support his writing.<sup>55</sup> Though we know little of Cumberland’s personal politics, he was situated in a nexus of correspondence and friendship with a number of influential politicians, and it seems plausible that his presentation of Belcour was an intentional effort at delineation, securing the place of domestic gentility by excluding the exotic and unsuitable West Indian.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Heather Campbell, “Oliver Saint John,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, 8 Dec. 2006, accessed 13 March 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Richard J. Dircks, *Richard Cumberland* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976). 21.

<sup>56</sup> Arthur Sherbo, “Cumberland, Richard (1732-1811), playwright and novelist,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed 21 March 2018.

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Centered on the complex of disease, race, sex, and degeneracy that had been present in the British press for decades, these pre-abolitionist metropolitan representations evoke an unease regarding the place of planters in British society. While I concur with Wilson's argument that the contestation of British identity was particularly important for elites who saw in the vices of creoles a reflection of their own shortcomings, evidence exists that such attitudes percolated into the mainstream British mind. Cumberland's satire resonated with the British public beyond its entertainment value precisely because such representational meaning was already clearly legible in 1771. The planter as performed in *The West Indian* exists outside the boundaries of suitable British upper class life. More and more as the century progressed, these popular performances of difference worked to exclude the figure of the Caribbean planter from British elite identity, well before abolitionists began an organized campaign to end the slave trade and eventually achieve emancipation.

Planters were not, however, voiceless in this contestation of identity and imperial meaning. The next chapter considers planter self-representation, which consisted largely in the counter argument: why West Indian creoles belonged in British society and how they sought to deny domestic claims of their fundamental difference.

## 2: REBUTTAL

As the title and substance of *The West Indian* so succinctly demonstrate, by the 1770s, a mode of representation – a set of tropes for depicting the creole planter – was widely legible to the British public. This, Kathleen Wilson argues, was a public manifestation of the inner psychological need for ‘disavowal’ on the part of British elites. Because the flaws of creoles – conspicuous consumption, liberal sexual behavior, intemperance in food and drink – were mirrored in the British elite, the latter sought to distance itself from West Indians, upholding their own worthiness to lead Britain by selectively denying British identity to planters.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, this displacement was performed in a public campaign of representation, through which a domestic elite took pains to portray the planter as something other than a white, Christian, Englishman.

The broad appeal of *The West Indian* among a diverse London audience is evidence that pamphlets, travel writings, advertisements, and other publications from the early eighteenth century succeeded in crafting a particular and negative understanding of the planting class. The West Indian creole elite, however, was not a passive player in this ongoing negotiation of imperial identity. In response to intensifying negative characterization, creoles embarked on a media campaign of their own. Primarily through popular texts, creoles worked to demonstrate their similarity to domestic British elites, and to refute claims of planter unfitness for proper British society – this effort was simultaneously legalistic (in the West Indies) and performative (in Britain). This chapter reviews two seminal works of the pre-abolition British Caribbean to show that planter elites engaged in this contestation of imperial identity by denying claims of their

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<sup>57</sup> Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire, and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 130.

fundamental difference from domestic elites and attempting to portray legal actions in the Caribbean as a remedy to metropolitan concerns.

‘THE SPIRY CANE, SUPREME OF PLANTS’

James Grainger’s grandiose epic poem, *The Sugar Cane*, is among the most studied Anglo-Caribbean texts of the pre-abolitionist era. Its roughly 2500 lines offer a rich source for the historian on a range of topics, and scholars have deployed the text in histories of British medicine, literary analyses, and racial histories, among many others. From the perspective of planter self-representation, *The Sugar Cane* may be read as a planter’s rebuttal of the domestic disavowal and displacement he increasingly faced as the eighteenth century progressed. Grainger strove throughout his poem to demonstrate his inclusion and belonging in British society to the metropolitan audience of the poem. As Keith Sandiford writes, “The apologetic tone Grainger commonly adopts bespeaks an understandable sensitivity in the face of growing contempt for Creole cultural pretensions,”<sup>58</sup> i.e., their claim of belonging, rejected by those at home with whom they desired parity. Though resident in St. Kitts from 1759, Grainger was intimately connected with the elite British literary establishment of the mid-eighteenth century: he was friends with Samuel Johnson and Oliver Goldsmith, and enjoyed for many years the patronage of Thomas Percy, Bishop of Dromore and chaplain to George III, to whom Grainger’s final letter before his death was addressed.<sup>59</sup> These connections may have lent Grainger, a Scottish doctor, a personal sense of belonging to a metropolitan, rather than creole, elite,

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<sup>58</sup> Keith A. Sandiford, *The Cultural Politics of Sugar: Caribbean Slavery and Narratives of Colonialism* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 67.

<sup>59</sup> John Gilmore, *The Poetics of Empire: A Study of James Grainger’s ‘The Sugar-Cane’* (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 2; Gordon Goodwin, "Grainger, James (1721–1766), physician and poet," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed 1 Apr. 2018.

and imbue *The Sugar Cane* with additional representational meaning. Indeed, by comparison with other publications evincing creole “desire for metropolitan approbation,”<sup>60</sup> Grainger’s literary connections at home lend a performative and representational reading of *The Sugar Cane* added weight.

*The Sugar Cane* was published in London in 1764, though Grainger began composing it in 1759 after his first voyage to St. Kitts. He sent several full copies back to Britain for review by his literary circle, the first in 1762, and, on a brief return to Britain in 1763, assembled Johnson and other critics for a private reading.<sup>61</sup> This seeming effort to comport the text with elite expectations for a West Indian poem, while common in contemporary literary circles, hints at Grainger’s sense that elite approbation was desirable before the book went into wider circulation. The resulting dual audience for *The Sugar Cane* is deeply interesting. On the one hand, Grainger sought to publish a poem about the West Indies for the British public, which would portray West Indian planters in a positive light to counteract negative representations that had, by the 1760s, been circulating for almost fifty years. On the other hand, he consciously sought the approval and revisions of cultural elites, scions of a class deeply unsettled by the imperial meaning of the planter, in pursuit of the first goal. This tension between the performance of similarity to British elites on the one hand and a defense of the planting class on the other never entirely disappeared from planter self-representations, and complicate any straightforward reading of these texts.

For our purposes, however, it is enough to show that *The Sugar Cane* evinces a clear desire on the part of a British-born Caribbean planter, writing from St. Kitts, to

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<sup>60</sup> Sandiford, 67.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

confront and rebut the negative codes of representation that were firming up in the 1760s. From the outset, Grainger offers a caution to his readers, striking for the openness with which he exhorts the British public to reject its sense of difference between planters and native elites:

Thus all depends on all; so God ordains,  
Then let not man for little selfish ends,  
(Britain remember this important truth!)  
Presume the principle to counteract  
Of Universal love; for God is love  
And wide creation shares alike his care.<sup>62</sup>

Grainger begins with the nominally religious, but instrumentally economic argument that “all depends on all,” by which he meant that the West Indies and Britain were mutually interdependent, enhancing the stature of the colonies in the eyes of the domestic reader. The line rejecting ‘little selfish ends’ hints at a rejection of those who sought to undermine planter status. Grainger here suggests personal, rather than public, interests lie behind the figuration of creole unfitnes. Growing impatient, he exhorts the reader still more firmly to ‘remember this important truth’ of interdependence and consequent mutual respectability. Critically, the target here is *Britain*, not any one class or sect, though his intended audience was certainly better-read than the great majority of the British public. Still, on a fundamental level, Grainger seeks as his audience the reading public of Britain – the jury in a battle of representation between domestic elites and planters. “Wide creation,” inclusive of the West Indies, with their strange and unnatural ways, shares God’s care. This paean to equality in God’s eyes, however, necessarily

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<sup>62</sup> James Grainger, *The Sugar-Cane: A Poem in Four Books*, (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1764), *Early Americas Digital Archive*, University Libraries of the University of Maryland, accessed February 12, 2018, I: 462-7.

excludes Grainger's own household: by 1761, he had acquired several dozen enslaved Africans through marriage.

Sandiford claims that *The Sugar Cane* intentionally situates itself in “a developing mid to late eighteenth-century debate between the protagonists of empire and the antagonists of slavery,” prefiguring the abolitionist debates that would begin in earnest twenty years after its publication.<sup>63</sup> Grainger's elite readers in Britain were concerned, as many elites were, by the questions of cultural integrity and British identity raised by the colonial project.<sup>64</sup> This cultural anxiety is a central target of Grainger's poem, and he confronts head-on the main critiques leveled at planters. He begins from a place of recognition, accepting the differences between Britain and the colonies rather than attempting to elide them or portray the Caribbean as a ‘Little England.’ “My inducement to this arduous undertaking,” Grainger relates in the preface, “[was] that ... the face of this country was wholly different from that of Europe.” Moreover, the poem, he writes, is the, “result of Experience, not the production of Fancy.”<sup>65</sup> These prefatory remarks suggests a keen awareness of the manner in which the West Indies were portrayed in Britain, and an effort to replace the “Fancy” of prior depictions with a representation more truthful to Grainger's eyes, born of his years of residence in St. Kitts. Grainger accepts the obvious differences between Britain and its colonies while explicitly grounding his poem in the debate around the place of West Indians in British society.

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<sup>63</sup> Sandiford, 75.

<sup>64</sup> Kathleen Wilson, “The Good, the Bad, and the Impotent: Imperialism and the Politics of Identity in Georgian England,” in Ann Bermingham and John Brewer, eds. *The Consumption of Culture, 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text* (New York: Routledge: 1995), 237-262.

<sup>65</sup> Grainger, v.

One of the central metropolitan concerns with racial mixing was that white British men could become something other than white through residence in a tropical climate and allegedly degenerate behavior, including sexual contact with black women. In a note to the first book of *The Sugar Cane*, Grainger approvingly repeats a quote from Sir Hans Sloane's *Voyage to Jamaica*: "The inhabitants of St Christopher look whiter, are less sallow, and enjoy finer complexions, than any of the dwellers on [Jamaica]."<sup>66</sup> Grainger's quotation from Sloane is an effort to contradict the assertion that West Indian creoles had "gone native" and become less white, at least with respect to St. Kitts. The social landscape of the Caribbean as presented here is not "conditioned on the contested bodily site of ... Africans, but rooted in the beauty of the white ruling class."<sup>67</sup> No evidence suggests that miscegenation was any less common in St. Kitts than in any other part of the British Caribbean; by the 1760s, the familiar demographic trend of a shrinking white and growing African population had persisted for decades.<sup>68</sup> Grainger places his emphasis on representation: the way in which the West Indies and its inhabitants were portrayed to his British audience. *The Sugar Cane* never depicts black slaves in the sensuous terms favored by some domestic authors seeking to demonstrate creole sexual degeneracy. Absent is the trope of the 'Sable Venus,' or any reference to the beauty or sexuality of black women.

Instead, Grainger describes slaves in inhuman, indeed demonic, terms. Relating the story of a fire in the cane fields, he writes that, "From every quarter, in tumultuous bands, / The Negroes rush; and, 'mid the crackling flames, / Plunge, daemon-like! All,

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<sup>66</sup> Grainger, 206.

<sup>67</sup> Sandiford, 77.

<sup>68</sup> Douglas G. Hall, "Absentee Proprietorship in the British West Indies, To About 1850," *Jamaican Historical Review* 4 (1964): 15-35.



all, urge every nerve: / This way, tear up those Canes; dash the fire out, / Which sweeps, with serpent-error, o'er the ground."<sup>69</sup> The image conjured here – flames, demons, serpents – draws on Christian imagery of Hell and stands in sharp contrast to the idyllic image of the Caribbean presented frequently in British images. (This idealized imagery, always troubled by the erasure of slavery's violence, was itself an articulation of an imagined creole identity, predicated on the mixture of European standards of beauty and the exotic, alien colony.<sup>70</sup>) The difference, for Grainger, seems to be the explicit presence in this scene of enslaved Africans, whose labor is either glossed over entirely or portrayed as a happy state of subjection to white masters. To confront the charge that planters were in thrall to the sexual power of black women and thus compromising racial and national integrity, Grainger deployed a portrayal of slaves as subhuman demons, incapable of sexually attracting a white man. In conjunction with Sloane's line about the racial characteristics of St. Kitts, Grainger endeavored to show his British audience that racial propriety reigned, at least in his own tiny corner of the Caribbean.

The other major point of domestic critique – the venue in which British elites performed their difference from creole planters – was the complex of issues centered around climate and disease. While this nexus was not entirely insulated from concern about racial mixing, it bears mention in its own right because Grainger, like many writers on the colonial West Indies, was a physician. In the preface, he makes note of the fact that, "In a West-India georgic, the mention of many indigenous remedies, as well as

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<sup>69</sup> Grainger, 301.

<sup>70</sup> Geoff Quilley, "Pastoral Plantations: The Slave Trade and the Representation of British Colonial Landscapes in the Late Eighteenth Century," in Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz, eds., *An Economy of Colour: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660-1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 106.

diseases, was unavoidable.”<sup>71</sup> The georgic form, named after an ancient Virgil poem, was used to explore agricultural and rural topics, often with a didactic premise. It enjoyed a huge renaissance in eighteenth century Britain – the historiography of this rise encompasses the ways in which the form was adapted to include broader civic instruction, the growing British industrial sector, and the contestation of imperial meaning in the agricultural colonies.<sup>72</sup> Grainger’s use of georgic suggests a desire to deploy a familiar construction, grounded in shared understanding of the form’s Latin roots, while making use of its emphasis on civic discourse to instruct his reader as to how the West Indies ought to be perceived.

Grainger might have preferred to avoid discussion of Caribbean disease (the connotations of which he was surely aware, through his knowledge of English letters), but they are unavoidably central to his tale of West Indian life. Even with this recognition, he is sure to mention remedies first, in an effort to demonstrate that concomitant – indeed gentlemanly – efforts to acquire natural knowledge had brought the wild Caribbean disease environment under control. Grainger’s primary occupation in his early years on St. Kitts was as a doctor to slaves, and it is discussion of enslaved African, rather than white, illness that is central to *The Sugar Cane*. He noted that one “pest particular to the Æthiop-kind” (yaws) could be cured with leeches, live-silver, and flower of sulfur. Yaws is a tropical disease with origins in Africa; it quickly became a fixture of

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<sup>71</sup> Grainger, 2.

<sup>72</sup> Juan Christian Pellicer, "The Georgic," *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, in Christine Gerrard, ed., (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), *Blackwell Reference Online*, accessed 10 April 2018; See also, R. Crawford, “English Georgic and British Nationhood,” *English Literary History* 65, no. 1 (1998): 123-58; K. O’Brien, “Imperial Georgic, 1660-1789,” in G. MacLean, D. Landry, and J. P. Ward, eds., *The Country and the City Revisited* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 160-79.

the seventeenth-century West Indian landscape, and the word yaws even derives from the Carib word for ‘sore.’<sup>73</sup> The quintessentially European medical techniques Grainger describes, particularly the use of minerals like silver and sulfur, suggest to the reader that British scientific prowess extends so far as to have brought rampant disease under control.<sup>74</sup> To support this contention, Grainger avoids discussion of the plagues that continued to decimate the European population, particularly yellow fever, which featured heavily in elite domestic representations of West Indian life, and for which there was no viable treatment. A physician with direct experience of the West Indies could not have been ignorant of the fact that Britons most certainly did not have disease under control. Grainger’s discussion of illnesses in the West Indies must be read as a performance, demonstrating to the audience of *The Sugar Cane* that the metropolitan view of a disease-riddled West Indies was not the reality. It is a performance of the civilizing, British science of the planter-physician, and as such a rejection of planter corruption.

Though conceived in and vetted by an elite British literary circle, *The Sugar Cane* took clear steps to rebut two of the central contentions of alleged Caribbean corruption. First, the fraught charge of miscegenation is rejected outright; absent from Grainger is any nod to black female beauty and sexuality. In its place is a presentation of blacks as a demonic rabble, incapable of attracting the attentions of white men. Second, Grainger attempts to rebut perceptions of the Caribbean’s dangerous climate and terrifying disease environment by presenting the way in which he, a physician, had succeeded in treating slaves suffering from various tropical diseases with European and pseudo-indigenous

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<sup>73</sup> C. P. Davis and M. C. Stoppler, "Yaws," MedicineNet.com, accessed March 1, 2018.

<sup>74</sup> Steven W. Thomas, “Doctoring Ideology: James Grainger’s ‘The Sugar Cane’ and the Bodies of Empire,” *Early American Studies* 4, no.1 (2006): 78-111.

medicine. While Grainger omitted details of some of the most deadly Caribbean diseases, particularly yellow fever, he nevertheless showed that the diseased West Indies, as they were presented at home, were a fiction. Such colonial attempts at rebuttal would proliferate in the 1760s and 70s, reflecting continued attempts to negotiate an improved planter social status in Britain, even in the face of the hardening negative attitudes.

#### ‘HIS MAJESTY’S WHITE SUBJECTS’

While planters sought to alter domestic British perceptions through print and visual media, they also turned inward, firming up the legal structure of racial difference in the West Indies. These actions should also be seen as a presentation of sorts, whose audience was metropolitan Britain, though the task was given new urgency after Tacky’s 1760 slave rebellion shook Jamaican planters to their core. A sizable and growing mixed-race population had been the predictable result of interracial sexual contact in the Caribbean; on Jamaica, these individuals numbered more than 4000 in 1774, compared to just 12,700 whites.<sup>75</sup> As Brooke Newman observes, Jamaican officials had gradually given in to the reality of the situation, and permitted, “the statutory rebirth of ... mixed-race individuals ... as white British subjects.”<sup>76</sup> After innumerable failed attempts to attract more settlers and coerce planters into employing more whites, these legal actions were an admission that racial boundaries would have to be breached if nominal “whites” were to retain a manageable racial balance. But this blurred delineation of white racial identity had its drawbacks. As we have seen, concerns about miscegenation frequently hinged on questions of racial integrity – British publications

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<sup>75</sup> Brooke Newman, *A Dark Inheritance: Blood, Race, and Sex in Colonial Jamaica* (Forthcoming, Yale University Press, 2018), 17.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

broadcast the widespread concern that sexual contact with blacks in the colonies undermined British manly identity. “White male settlers’ sexual relations,” in this view, “threatened to erode ... the prominent place of West Indian colonists in the British Empire.”<sup>77</sup> The legal hardening of racial lines in the colonies was done in recognition of this domestic perception.

Increasingly stringent attempts to delineate racial boundaries and to concretize the categories of black slave and free white began in earnest only in the eighteenth century, accelerating sharply around the 1760s and 70s. Chattel slavery had existed in the British Caribbean as early as 1662 on Barbados; the timing of this legal trend suggests a motive beyond subjugation. Harder racial categorization in the mid-eighteenth century cannot be explained purely as an attempt to maintain white dominance after the chaos wrought by the Seven Years’ War, Tacky’s Rebellion, and the American Revolution. Instead, Newman argues, it was at least partly, “due to mounting concerns that [white settlers’] own identities as white British subjects were at risk,”<sup>78</sup> amidst the rise of a free, mixed-race population. The laws and ‘codes noir’ of this era are accordingly best seen as performative. They are an effort to demonstrate proper British whiteness to a British audience, and derived in part from planter anxiety surrounding the cultural trope that racial boundaries were being trespassed in the West Indies.

In this sense, such laws are part and parcel with Grainger’s literary demonstration of the hard and unfailing divide between the white beauty of the planter and the demonic savagery of the black African. The publication of colonial assembly records in London, particularly of laws passed regarding slaves, underscores an understanding of the British

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 21-22.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

press as a zone in which planter identity was negotiated.<sup>79</sup> In one instance, Stephen Fuller, the Jamaican agent (i.e. lobbyist) in Britain and himself a plantation owner, personally saw to the publication of pamphlets containing a harsh new Jamaican slave law at no fewer than three London printers. The document's preface related that it was intended for, "the Satisfaction of the Public at large," and its front matter advertised the publisher's extensive catalog of Caribbean slave laws, copies of which were available for purchase. Together with the intentionally wide scope of publication, these documents can be read as an attempt to broadcast widely the message that racial boundaries in the colonies were firm and that white leaders in the colonies could be trusted to keep whiteness intact by drawing harder legal lines between black and white, negating the concern surrounding colonial miscegenation. The scholarship on race in the eighteenth-century Caribbean offers several explanations for the perceived hardening of racial animus and the development of stricter categorization beginning in the 1770s, but until now relatively few (with the noted exception of Brooke Newman) have identified the creole desire for social status in the metropolitan as a contributing factor. The metropolitan publication and circulation of legal documents showing a hardened divide between white and black must be understood at least partly as a reflection of a desire among planters to demonstrate to their British counterparts their worthiness for inclusion in British constructions of civility.

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<sup>79</sup> For instance, see: "The New Act of Assembly of the Island of Jamaica . . . for the better Order and Government of Slaves," (London: B. White and Son, *et. al.*, 1788), *University of Michigan Digital Collections*, accessed March 20, 2018.

‘A COMPETENT INFORMATION OF ... JAMAICA’<sup>80</sup>

No survey of planter writings in the eighteenth century is complete without consideration of Edward Long’s verbosely-titled *History of Jamaica. Or, General Survey of the Ancient and Modern State of That Island: with Reflections on its Situation, Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws and Government*. The *History* is an encyclopedic work, self-consciously mimicking texts like the 1768 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and seeking the same authoritativeness that such universalizing works sought to command. Long makes extensive use of the historical voice, rather than a narrative and literary construction like Grainger, in a further effort to cement his assessment of Jamaica as an authoritative and impartial relation of facts. Catherine Hall writes that Long had three goals in the publication of the *History*: “to convince his readers that slavery was a legitimate institution ... to demonstrate that Africans were suited to subjection; and to represent Jamaica as an excellent place of settlement for white Britons.”<sup>81</sup> She is right to recognize that the *History* is a work of representation and demonstration, not merely a presentation of facts about the state of life in Jamaica. It is undoubtedly a conscious effort to shape domestic perceptions of the West Indies, creole planters, and the institution of slavery. To her three goals, however, I would add a fourth: Long composed this text and presented it to the British public in an effort to confront and rebut the ongoing disavowal of the planting class by sectors of

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<sup>80</sup> Edward Long, *History of Jamaica. Or, General Survey of the Ancient and Modern State of That Island: with Reflections on its Situation, Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws and Government*, (London: T. Lowndes, 1774), *Princeton University Library Digital Collections*, 2.

<sup>81</sup> Catherine Hall, “Whose Memories? Edward Long and the Work of Re-Remembering,” in Donington, Katie, Ryan Hanley, and Jessica Moody, eds. *Britain’s History and Memory of Transatlantic Slavery* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 130.

British society, predicated on perceived creole unfitness for domestic British life. As Elizabeth Bohls writes, Long sought to, “project the identity of a highly civilized British gentleman, only to conscript that persona in the defense of Jamaica's most glaring and contentious difference from its mother country: the institution of colonial slavery.”<sup>82</sup> The *History* is a work of negotiation, carving out a place for planters among the unimpeachable domestic elite and attempting to negate criticisms of planter character that were centrally focused on the uneasy questions raised by West Indian slave society.

Long was the consummate planter. His family's progenitor, Samuel Long, had accompanied the English expedition that first took Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655. As gold was scarce during the English Civil War, the expedition's soldiers were paid instead in land grants, and Samuel Long received nearly 18,000 acres, some of which had been developed by the Spanish into a productive indigo plantation. Following agricultural advancements pioneered on Barbados and the Leeward Islands, the elder Long quickly turned most of his new land to cane sugar production, enabled by the gradual purchase of several hundred enslaved Africans. By 1700, the Long family was wealthy enough that Charles, Samuel's son, purchased an estate in Suffolk and moved permanently to England, living the life of a country gentleman off the profits of Jamaica. This absentee pattern would become more and more popular as the eighteenth century progressed, but the Longs were relatively early adopters.<sup>83</sup> Charles, however, eventually lost most of his fortune in the South Sea Bubble, forcing his grandson, Edward, to travel to Jamaica in

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<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth A. Bohls, “The Gentleman Planter and the Metropole: Long's *History of Jamaica* (1774),” in Gerald Maclean, Donna Landry and Joseph P. Ward, eds. *The Country and the City Revisited: England and the Politics of Culture, 1550–1850* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 180-1.

<sup>83</sup> Trevor Burnard, “Passengers Only: The Extent and Significance of Absenteeism in Eighteenth Century Jamaica,” *Atlantic Studies*, 1, no. 2 (2006): 178-195.



1757 and attempt, at the age of 23 and with no experience of plantation management, to wring a profit from the estates yet again. Edward's advantageous marriage the following year to Mary Ballard, daughter and heiress of the hugely influential Beckford family, aided in this goal and cemented the Long family's place at the very top of Jamaican society.<sup>84</sup> Perhaps no other planter-author had more at stake in the ongoing battle for inclusion in British society, and the *History* marks a new and aggressive rejection of elite disavowal of the planting class.

*History of Jamaica* appeared in London bookshops in 1774, just three years after the premiere of *The West Indian*, a comedy foundationally grounded on the legibility of 'the West Indian' as a figure imbued with negative social meaning that excluded him from British society. Long tips his hand early in the *History*, where he makes abundantly clear that his audience was the British reading public, and that his intention was to break with existing literary norms surrounding the creole planter. "Having spent some years of my life [in Jamaica]," Long related, "I thought I could not devote my leisure to better purpose, than endeavouring to give an idea of its .. importance to Great Britain."<sup>85</sup> But this work was not to be like other, dryer accounts of the West Indies. Though Long felt obligated to give at least some mention to the governors, admirals, and natural history that fill hundreds of pages in earlier accounts, his real goal was to,

"display an impartial character of [Jamaica's] inhabitants of all complexions, with some strictures on the Negroe slaves in particular, and freed persons, and the laws affecting them; and to recommend some ... cautions for preserving the health of those who come hither from Northern climates."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Hall, 133-135.

<sup>85</sup> Long, 1.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

From the inception of his massive work, Long laid out goals that constitute a direct response to the most salient charges and tropes circulating in the British press concerning planter character. Planters had been tarred as sexual degenerates, threatening the white race through their contact with African women and the mixed-race product of these liaisons; Long explicitly addressed the varied ‘complexions’ of Jamaica, including free persons of mixed race, in an effort to address these charges. Creole planters and the islands themselves had been tarred as unfit for European life for reasons of climate and disease; Long rebutted these claims with his own discussion of British health in the Caribbean. Even more self-consciously than Grainger, Long made a direct effort through the British press to combat the mode of characterization by which the West Indies and its inhabitants were understood in the 1770s.

Long was virulently racist; even by the standards of the eighteenth century, his attitudes towards black slaves stand out for their callous brutality. Moreover, Long’s views were imbued with a new type of intellectual and scientific racism, just beginning to germinate in the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>87</sup> But this racism and the great pains Long takes to demonstrate it in the *History* may tentatively be seen as a performance in their own right. We have seen that Grainger’s earlier attempt in *The Sugar Cane* to portray blacks as subhuman demons derived in part from an effort to dispute metropolitan notions that creole planters were overly fond of black women. A similar dynamic is at work in the *History*. Like Grainger, Long made no mention of black female beauty, despite the widespread sexual practice of planters and competing domestic representations to the

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<sup>87</sup> Hubert Villeneuve, “Richard Ligon and Edward Long: Relationships Between Race, Gender and Sexuality in Modern Natural Knowledge,” *Cahiers d’Histoire* 26, no. 2 (2007): 149.

contrary (e.g. Leslie and Vernon’s 1740 publication). Depictions of black female beauty were by no means uncommon, even much later in the eighteenth century: Regulus Allen writes of the 1790s that the so-called, “Black Venus remain[ed] a sexually desirable



Fig. 1. Thomas Stothard, *Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies*, 1794, London, Royal Greenwich Museum.

figure.”<sup>88</sup> The engraving above was one visual manifestation of such desire. But such depictions are entirely absent from Long’s *History*. In their place are presentations of black slaves, and particularly women, imbued with disgust and hatred. Black nipples were “large ... as if adapted by nature to the peculiar conformation of their childrens

<sup>88</sup> Regulus Allen, “‘The Sable Venus’ and Desire for the Undesirable,” *SEL Studies in English Literature* 51, no. 3 (2011): 667.

mouths.” Black men were obligated by “no moral sensations; [they have] no taste but for women,” and black women were ready partners in this degeneracy. All blacks had “a bestial or fetid smell.” Women went through labor, “with ... no more occasion for midwives, then the female oran-outang, or any other wild animal.”<sup>89</sup> Such dehumanizing descriptions of enslaved Africans continue throughout the text.

The overbearing nature of Long’s comments regarding black Africans suggests a purpose beyond mere conveyance of personal racism. Given the fairly open sentimentality with which miscegenation in the West Indies was frequently presented earlier in the century, Long’s 1774 text is more fully understandable as a recognition that creole sexual attraction to black women constituted a major threat to their social status in Britain. Long’s rather clumsy response was a vociferous denial of black humanity that excluded any notion of white attraction to black women. In so doing, he drew on Grainger’s softer disavowal of miscegenation’s appeal. I do not mean to suggest that Long was not motivated by personal racial hatred. However, in the context of the *History*’s wide circulation, prevailing domestic understandings of the West Indies as a zone of questionable sexual conduct, and hardening modes of representation that excluded planters from metropolitan society, the *History*, including its frequent and violent denunciation of black humanity, must be read in part as a presentation to the people of Britain. Africans, Long broadcasted, could not constitute a threat to the white race through racial mixing because they were hideous and utterly incapable of attracting white men, regardless of any domestic depictions to the contrary. With the *History*, he attempted to set the record straight.

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<sup>89</sup> Long, 260-352.

Having settled the question of interracial sex, Long turned to discussion of the other major marker of colonial difference, the nexus of climate and disease. Issues of disease were central enough to Long's understanding of Jamaica that he addressed them in the early paragraphs of his introduction, which further suggests their interest to the British reader. Long's handling of climate and disease was considerably more subtle than his discussion of race, and makes a few concessions to the prevailing discourse in Britain. The British anxiety regarding warm climates, ably explored by Karen Kupperman,<sup>90</sup> was prevalent throughout the eighteenth century, but Long attempted to play down the differences: "every day [the climate of Jamaica] from its mildness resembles the vernal season of England ... it is said to be the most delightful in the world."<sup>91</sup> Contrary to the realities of a tropical climate beset by violent hurricanes, Jamaican weather, he claimed, was "not subject to sudden and violent changes." In the gentle climate of the Caribbean, natives of Europe experienced instead "a lively flow of spirits ... even those persons ... who never shewed any symptom of extraordinary sprightliness."<sup>92</sup>

Though Long clearly boosted the qualities of the West Indian climate with his favorable comparison to that of England, he conceded that the climate had some innate effect on Europeans, that of enhanced 'sprightliness' and vivacity. But Long took a turn later in the text, describing climatological changes that Kay Dian Kriz describes as "indigenizing."<sup>93</sup> White West Indians, after their arrival from Britain, undergo a number of important changes. "Their cheeks," Long related, "are remarkably high-boned, and the

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<sup>90</sup> Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "Fear of Hot Climates in the Anglo-American Colonial Experience," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 41, no 2 (1984): 213-40.

<sup>91</sup> Long, 362.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Kay Dian Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies 1700-1840* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 183.

sockets of their eyes deeper than is commonly observed among the natives of England ... a light-grey and black are the more common colours of the pupil.” He explicitly ascribed these changes to the climate of Jamaica, reasoning reinforced with the example of an Englishman removed to China, who would soon, “acquire somewhat of the Chinese cast of countenance.”<sup>94</sup> This conception of climate’s effects on Europeans was a concession to the prevailing European consensus, and constituted an admission that, contrary to his earlier description of Jamaican climate, Long recognized that the West Indies were fundamentally different from Britain in terms of climate.

However, Long sought to break the necessary link between hot climates and devastating disease that had been so prevalent in earlier texts. The “anxiety” surrounding the climate-disease link, Kathleen Wilson writes, “was attributed by Long to the ‘irritable’ nervous system produced by the tropical climate,”<sup>95</sup> which brought about emotional excitability, in turn causing, “acute diseases ... solicitude, grief, stifled resentment, and vexation.”<sup>96</sup> While this testimony from a planter with experience of the islands might be seen to enhance, rather than downplay, existing metropolitan concern, most of the descriptions of actual disease in Jamaica appear in the sections of Long’s book concerning the early days of English colonization in the West Indies, or in reference to the Spanish colonies, which are presented as pits of disease by comparison to the British.<sup>97</sup> Prior texts published in Britain had portrayed disease in the British colonies in graphic terms. Long contended instead that disease was well under control by the 1770s,

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<sup>94</sup> Long, 262.

<sup>95</sup> Wilson, 252(n).

<sup>96</sup> Long, 267.

<sup>97</sup> 13 of Long’s 17 total mentions of ‘fever,’ for instance, occur in episodes before 1700 or episodes involving Spanish colonies, e.g. Porto Bello in modern Panama.

echoing Grainger's relation of the many cures available to white West Indians: "Fevers in the West-Indies," Long related, "seldom put on the appearances of inflammation ... this should not alarm and ... often subsides into a remittent," with a concoction of Madeira wine, sweet oranges, and a certain bark known to the African slaves.<sup>98</sup>

In Long's presentation, tropical illnesses were easily managed (ironically, with the help of the folk remedies of enslaved Africans). Mortal disease, he claimed, was mostly the province of new arrivals and Spaniards, rather than a constant and devastating presence in Jamaica and throughout the British Caribbean. "I knew an European gentleman in Jamaica," he continued, "who regularly drank ... orange-juice ... and enjoyed constant health,"<sup>99</sup> a remarkably easy way to avoid an ailment like yellow fever. While conceding, then, that the climate did indeed make physical changes to Europeans living in the Caribbean, Long attempted here to break the connection between climate and disease with a denial that the Caribbean was necessarily deadlier than Britain, so long as one cared for his health. Even in 1774, however, this was not an entirely truthful presentation of the health environment in Jamaica. As J.R. McNeill shows, though some long-resident creoles developed immunity to tropical disease, yellow fever and malaria continued to play a major role in the development of the West Indies and South America until the twentieth century, and thwarted a number of British military actions in the eighteenth century.<sup>100</sup> Just like Grainger in *The Sugar Cane*, Long took pains to deny to

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<sup>98</sup> Long, 531.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Trevor Burnard, "Not a Place for Whites? Demographic Failure and Settlement, 1655-1880," in Kathleen E. A. Monteith and Glen Richards, eds. *Jamaica in Slavery and Freedom: History, Heritage, and Culture* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), 82; J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

his metropolitan audience that disease was rampant and unmanageable in the West Indies, and that creole planters were necessarily tainted as a result.

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Planters were often cultured individuals. They frequently travelled back and forth to Britain, or at least maintained a transatlantic correspondence, and therefore were well-equipped to understand domestic cultural trends that were turning against them as the eighteenth century progressed. They were aware of the tropes and representational modes circulating in Britain that portrayed them as dissolute, diseased, and dangerous to the white race through their encounters with black women. Acutely nervous that they were seen to have 'gone native' in an irreversible way, planters embarked on a conscious public campaign to change the picture. Though the creole rebuttal took time to develop, it was undertaken in the same popular media deployed to metropolitan ends. Publications like *The Sugar Cane* and Long's *History* were a conscious denial of the tropes by which West Indians were understood. These authors sought to broadcast that, like elites back home, they too were disgusted by the notion of sex with black women, and demonized blacks in vociferous terms to demonstrate this lack of attraction. In response to metropolitan charges of the unique climate-disease nexus in the West Indies, planters responded with the contention that, while the climate presented certain unique issues, disease was, by the 1760s, mostly under control with the imposition of modern medical science. This assessment of the situation was an exaggeration; disease, particularly yellow fever and malaria, continued to claim an inordinate number of white West Indians. But the centrality of disease to these domestically published accounts evinces an



understanding that something had to be done to assuage metropolitan concerns on this front.

This negotiation of meaning, between sectors of British society eager to disassociate from the planter and creoles equally eager to retain their claim to British identity, raged in the public eye for decades, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century. But something else was brewing, far from the minds of the writers we have examined. The abolition of the slave trade and the eventual emancipation of slaves were, for most of the eighteenth century, radical prospects – the domain of Quakers and a few other fringe malcontents. Beginning in the 1780s, abolition would rapidly enter the mainstream. But the debate over abolition did not begin in a vacuum. It entered a British culture already saturated with the ongoing contestation of imperial identity between planters and their domestic detractors. The next chapter addresses the ways in which the existing representational codes by which planters were understood were retooled and deployed to the new end of abolition, and shows that planters' inability to win their battle for inclusion contributed to the use of prior representational modes in the abolitionist campaign.

### 3: ABOLITION

As the eighteenth century progressed, the domestic representation of the West Indian planter became an important site of contestation over belonging and inclusion in British society. By 1780, however, planters mostly appeared to be losing their fight for inclusion and respectability, especially after the American Revolution made plantation slaveholders an even smaller minority in the British dominion.<sup>101</sup>

Amidst this abstract contestation of inclusion and imperial identity, a far more immediate threat arose very rapidly beginning in the 1780s: a movement towards the abolition of the slave trade. Prior to and during the American Revolution, only a tiny minority had openly advocated abolition, either of the slave trade or of the institution itself. Most among the elite had no desire to see a change in the status quo. Though many wealthy Britons disdained and mocked planters, virtually all were enriched to some degree by the Caribbean plantations: Jamaica in particular was by far the most productive British territory globally, and a complex web of domestic finance, shipping, and insurance interests sustained and profited from the institution of slavery.<sup>102</sup> In light of this fact, the relative speed with which abolitionists eventually achieved their ends is all the more astonishing. Most authors have attributed this success to a skilled propaganda campaign, which was able to mobilize popular opinion against slavery and the slave trade, and a simultaneous lobbying effort in Parliament.<sup>103</sup> Mobilizing public opinion

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<sup>101</sup> Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

<sup>102</sup> See, for example, Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), Chapter 5, “Slavery Takes Command,” 98-135.

<sup>103</sup> Trevor Burnard, “Powerless Masters: The Curious Decline of Jamaican Sugar Planters in the Foundational Period of British Abolitionism,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 32, no. 2 (1998): 185-198.

through propaganda was certainly a key aspect of the abolitionist campaign from the 1780s on, but the historiography of abolitionist propaganda has neglected the role played by prior domestic concerns about imperial identity among white West Indians. The planter featured centrally in the discourse around abolition – as David Lambert has noted, the, “figure of the white West Indian master was ... a locus of ... antislavery discourse.”<sup>104</sup> Abolitionist propaganda did not appear in a culture previously unaware of the complications posed by imperial expansion in the West Indies. On the contrary, a rich representational reservoir surrounding the planter and his context already existed, a consequence of the psychological distance from the planter enacted in domestic culture and the eventual creole response to such displacement. As Catherine Molineux argues, though early eighteenth century “repudiation of colonial settlements ... did not pose a challenge to slavery ... latent within it was one.”<sup>105</sup> Abolitionists drew on this cultural milieu in their own depictions of the planter, deploying the latent possibilities of existing forms as they pushed for abolition of the slave trade in the 1780s.

‘SLAVERY ... AN AGRIVASION AND OPPRESSION’<sup>106</sup>

Before examining the ways in which abolitionists drew on the preexisting representational modes surrounding planters, a brief look at the movement itself is warranted. Outright opposition to slavery was present in Britain, if exceedingly rare, from the mid-seventeenth century, when some Quakers began mobilizing almost as soon as chattel slavery was introduced in the Caribbean. Their arguments were based in their

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<sup>104</sup> David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity during the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 12.

<sup>105</sup> Catherine Molineux, *Faces of Perfect Ebony: Encountering Atlantic Slavery in Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 2012), 119.

<sup>106</sup> William Edmundson, *A Journal of the Life of William Edmundson* (Dublin: Fairbrother, 1715), 56.

interpretation of the Bible: as William Edmundson, the first Quaker to proselytize in Ireland, wrote in 1675, slaveholders restrained “[slaves] in that which God allow'd and afforded to all Men,” namely the right to be fed, clothed, and afforded an opportunity to hear the word of God and be saved from damnation.<sup>107</sup> But such opinions were marginal; indeed many seventeenth-century writers justified slavery as an effort to *save* African souls, which was to be accomplished by removing Africans from their heathenish homeland, preventing their conversion to Catholicism by the Spanish, and baptizing them as Anglicans.<sup>108</sup> Virtually no mainstream writers or politicians espoused abolitionist views until much later. Indeed, Quakers were frequently the target of persecution themselves, partly as a consequence of their radically egalitarian views. In Trevor Burnard’s words, “until 1750, antislavery sentiment was close to nonexistent.”<sup>109</sup>

Nonetheless, abolitionist ideas very slowly worked their way towards greater respectability. Halting legal developments culminated in the famed *Somerset v. Stewart* decision of 1772, which held that the common law of England and Wales could not support chattel slavery. Lord Mansfield’s opinion that, “the state of slavery is of such a nature that it is incapable of being introduced on any reasons, moral or political,”<sup>110</sup> seriously undermined pro-slavery arguments. If slavery was so odious as to be indefensible in Britain, what justification could be provided for its continuance in the British colonies? This question was particularly troubling given planters’ continued

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<sup>107</sup> J. William Frost, “George Fox’s Ambiguous Antislavery Legacy,” in Michael Mullett, ed. *New Light on George Fox (1624-1691)* (York, England: William Sessions, 1994), 69-88.

<sup>108</sup> Molineux, 113-15.

<sup>109</sup> Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny & Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 105-106.

<sup>110</sup> 98 ER 499 (1772)

argument that they were entitled to the full array of English rights. Throughout the eighteenth century, planters consistently expressed their desire to remake the Caribbean colonies in the image of Britain, but simultaneously worked to preserve an institution that, after 1772, was legally antithetical to British society.<sup>111</sup> Quakers were gradually joined in their opposition to slavery by more and more supporters, including the reformist Wesleyan movement within and later outside the Church of England, certain Baptist preachers, and Moravians, who had caused consternation with their acceptance of the enslaved at Caribbean missions.<sup>112</sup> The ranks of these various nonconformist groups had swollen with the First Great Awakening in the 1730s and 40s, and growing numbers of Anglicans turned against slavery as well.<sup>113</sup> Before midcentury, Christian thought had often been deployed to justify slavery – opponents of slavery succeeded in reversing this politico-religious paradigm (though, as Christopher Brown cautions, the “intellectual traditions,” of abolitionism, “constitute just one part of the story.”)<sup>114</sup> By the 1780s, however, a formidable movement had begun to take shape, characterized by sophisticated political organization, skilled leadership, and a firm conviction of righteousness. The following decade saw the first anti-slavery petition laid before Parliament (by Quakers) and an explosion of printed material attacking planter society and advocating abolition.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Jack P. Greene, “Of Liberty and of the Colonies: A Case Study of Constitutional Conflict in the Mid-Eighteenth-Century British American Empire,” in *Creating the British Atlantic: Essays on Transplantation, Adaptation, and Continuity* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 155.

<sup>112</sup> Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 73.

<sup>113</sup> David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>114</sup> Brown, 40-41.

<sup>115</sup> See Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition*, (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1975), Chapter 4.

The nature of this movement is inseparable from the religious fervor of its leaders – whether Evangelical or Quaker. Indeed, British abolitionism is best conceived of as merely one plank in a far broader moral and religious agenda. Britain in this time was not yet steeped in Victorian propriety; women and especially men enjoyed relative license to eat, drink, gamble, and pursue pre- and extra-marital dalliances. This greatly troubled Evangelicals of the era, who felt that Britain had given into temptation and strayed too far from God. “Abolitionists,” Burnard notes, “were not just interested in ending the sin of slavery: they wanted to transform the morals of the British people.”<sup>116</sup> Eliminating the great sin of slavery was merely one step towards their goal of a godly Britain. This broader purifying motive was no secret – William Wilberforce and other leaders of the movement were open about their ultimate goal of a thoroughly sober, pious Britain. Wilberforce himself headed the Society for the Suppression of Vice, an anti-alcohol, anti-gambling, and anti-blasphemy lobby, in addition to his work on the abolition of slavery.<sup>117</sup> As a consequence, the leaders of the abolitionist movement were not a naturally popular group. Though opposition to slavery had been growing in the decades before the 1780s, abolitionists still comprised a minority, and a rather dull one at that. Planters, with their exuberant and luxuriant behavior, might have garnered sympathy from the British public when they came under attack from such a severe and fun-hating religious campaign.<sup>118</sup> That they did not underscores the deep antipathy that planters faced by the 1780s and the success of abolitionist propaganda that built on these negative perceptions.

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<sup>116</sup> Burnard, “Powerless Masters,” 188.

<sup>117</sup> John Wolffe, “Wilberforce, William (1759–1833), politician, philanthropist, and slavery abolitionist,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed 30 Mar. 2018.

<sup>118</sup> Burnard, “Powerless Masters,” 189.

Though abolitionists certainly had humanitarian motives in opposing slavery, the brutality of the institution was not their main complaint. They were most deeply concerned that slavery had undermined God's order for the world by making men subservient to other men and by keeping slaves from hearing God's word. Because all men were created in God's image, and intended to serve God alone, the institution of slavery was corrupting and sinful.<sup>119</sup> The 1788 poem *The Negro's Complaint* by William Cowper, an abolitionist writer and fervent Anglican, expresses this view: "Fleecy locks and black complexion Cannot / forfeit nature's claim; / Skins may differ, but affection / Dwells in white and black the same."<sup>120</sup> Here slavery is attacked not for its physical brutality but for its corruption of the idea that all men are children of God. 'Nature's claim' stands in for the notion of equality in the eyes of God - the fact of this equality is unaffected by the slave's 'fleecy locks and black complexion.' The 'affection' referenced in the final line is more ambiguous, but may be construed to represent the natural yearning for God which Cowper and his Evangelical allies believed was present in all men.

A sermon by William Agutter, an Anglican vicar in Oxford, given in 1788 and printed for publication later the same year, supports this reading of Cowper's poem. Agutter quotes Acts 17:26 – "[God] hath made of one blood all the nations of men, to dwell on all the Face of the Earth,"<sup>121</sup> – to ground his argument that, "there is no truth more obvious, than that the human race have natural rights, and common relations to each

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<sup>119</sup> David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780-1860* (London: Routledge, 2004), 16.

<sup>120</sup> William Cowper, *The Negro's Complaint*. (London: 1788), *British Library Digital Collections*, accessed March 20, 2018.

<sup>121</sup> Acts 17:26 KJV

other.”<sup>122</sup> These texts afford a sense of the theological underpinnings of the abolitionist campaign: all men are of the same Godly blood, and thus pine for salvation. Slavery, as a result, was sinful because it impeded the ability of God’s children to seek a connection with Him and placed one nation of men over another, upsetting their proper equality. This line of reasoning elucidates some of the Christian motives driving British abolitionists, and helps explain their choice of abolition as a primary goal, rather than eliminating alcohol, sexual license, gambling, or any other of the many sins they saw in British society.<sup>123</sup>

Once Evangelicals had coalesced around the issue of slavery, they quickly set to work. In 1783, a petition calling for the abolition of the slave trade was introduced to Parliament for the first time. Four years later, the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was formed in London. Though nine of the twelve founders of this group were Quakers, they took care to include Baptists, Wesleyans, and Anglicans as well, hoping to eliminate some of the anti-Quaker stigma around their campaign and to garner support in Parliament, from which Quakers were barred.<sup>124</sup> The Society, which would constitute the foremost lobby against the slave trade, worked towards two goals: first, supporting abolition in published works, posters, prints, and speeches, and second, campaigning for an anti-slave trade bill in Parliament. The political campaign,

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<sup>122</sup> William Agutter, *The abolition of the slave trade considered in a religious point of view. A sermon preached before the corporation of the city of Oxford, at St. Martin’s Church, on Sunday, February 3, 1788*, (London: J.F. and C. Rivington, 1788), *British Library Digital Collections*, accessed February 12, 2018.

<sup>123</sup> Christopher Brown also argues convincingly that political considerations also factored into Evangelicals’ decision to pursue abolition ahead of other moral reforms. See *Moral Capital*, 40.

<sup>124</sup> “Notes from the First Abolitionist Committee Meeting,” (London: British Library, 2003), accessed March 1, 2018.



spearheaded by Wilberforce and others, has been extensively detailed elsewhere. In keeping with the object of this thesis, my focus is on representations of planters put forward in the public anti-slavery campaign – the written and visual media deployed by abolitionists and supporters to further their cause. The abolitionist campaign, I contend, frequently attacked planters and slave traders directly, and drew on an existing reservoir of representative codes that had successfully traduced planter character in the public eye. ‘WHITE SAVAGE!’<sup>125</sup>

Beginning in the 1780s, dozens, if not hundreds, of abolitionist pamphlets and articles circulated within London’s print shops and coffeehouses, which played host to Britain’s public debate over the issue of slavery. The audience of these many texts was the British middle class: lawyers, artisans, bureaucrats, and the like, hungry for political reading. This class had greatly expanded over the eighteenth century, while the male literacy rate increased from just under 40 percent in 1700 to nearly 70 percent in 1780.<sup>126</sup> Technological advances had simultaneously made it easier, cheaper, and faster to produce print materials, increasing the scale and variety of literature available, especially in major cities like London. Abolitionists took advantage of these developments and readily produced pamphlets, articles, and books to press their agenda. For most of the 1760s and 70s, this popular press had been consumed with questions brought about by protest in and ultimately war with the North American colonies. Debates about the justice of slavery

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<sup>125</sup> Hannah More, *Slavery*, (London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1788), *Gale Primary Sources*, accessed March 30, 2018, 19.

<sup>126</sup> Mitch David, “Education and Skill of the British Labour Force,” in Roderick Floud, and Paul Johnson, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain, Vol. I: Industrialisation, 1700-1860* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 344.

and the slave trade had often been secondary, especially given the loyalty that the West Indian colonies had shown to London.<sup>127</sup>

But after the conclusion of the war in the early 1780s, abolitionist writings began to flood the British press, and many centered on the figure of the West Indian planter himself. Hannah More, a poet and playwright, is indicative of the abolitionist authors who contributed to this literary blossoming. Born into a Presbyterian family, she was motivated later in life by a growing Evangelicalism that brought her into the circles of abolitionists like Wilberforce, James Oglethorpe, and Granville Sharp, among others. She deployed her talents as a writer and her deep connections in the London literary establishment to the benefit of the abolitionist cause, penning many of the most eloquent attacks on slavery to be found in these decades.

Her powerful 1788 poem *Slavery* is particularly interesting in its handling of the planter himself, the perpetrator of the titular sin. “Hold, murderers, hold!” More exhorts, “nor aggravate distress / Respect the passions you yourselves possess; / Ev’n you, of ruffian heart, and ruthless hand, / Love your own offspring, love your native land.”<sup>128</sup> The reference to slave owners and traders as murderers is visceral and new, but More hints at the existing representational code surrounding planters as well. She bemoans the “wretch forlorn . . . to distant tyrants sold, in distant lands,”<sup>129</sup> a formulation which calls to mind the visual imagery of the planter deployed in James Gillray’s *Barbarities in the West Indies*, addressed below. We must bear in mind that More frequently addressed her criticism to slave traders operating in the Atlantic, rather than planters themselves, a

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<sup>127</sup> O’Shaughnessy, 178.

<sup>128</sup> More, 12-13.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

consequence of the abolitionist campaign's primary goal (i.e. the elimination of the slave trade) at the time of her publication. More's text, however, links the barbarous practice of the slave trade with the tyrannical behavior of planters in the West Indies, thereby demonstrating that each node in the system of the Atlantic slave trade shared responsibility for its cruelty and longevity. Abolitionists would ultimately extend this mode of argument to the consumption of West Indian sugar as well.

Another salient critique surrounding the character of the West Indian was an over-fondness for decadent display and consumption, both in the West Indies and among absentee planters in Britain. Enabled by the obscene profits of the sugar industry, planters, particularly those wealthy enough to maintain permanent residence in Britain, indulged in the finest of everything. This conspicuous consumption reached a peak just before the abolitionist campaign began; in 1778, for instance, William Thomas Beckford, heir to the largest Jamaican fortune, enjoyed a staggering £100,000 annual income, easily making him the wealthiest commoner in Britain.<sup>130</sup> The British aristocracy, hardly a penny-pinching lot, had always been anxious about the consequences of excessive display of wealth, a fear multiplied later on by the guillotines falling across the English Channel. Their disapproval of West Indian wealth, or rather the way in which West Indians handled wealth, had been a partial source of the psychological disavowal that is the impetus of this thesis, and featured in prior texts like *The West Indian*, in which Belcour is described as being so wealthy that he has, "sugar ... enough to make all the water in the Thames into a punch."<sup>131</sup> More drew on these critiques in her poem,

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<sup>130</sup> Anita McConnell, "Beckford, William Thomas (1760-1844), writer and art collector," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed 12 March 2018.

<sup>131</sup> Cumberland, Act I, Scene II, Line 18.

portraying planters as avaricious and consumed with their wealth. “Does thirst of empire, does desire of fame, ... our rage inflame?” she asks rhetorically. “No: sordid lust of gold their fate controls, / The basest appetite of basest souls, / Gold.”<sup>132</sup> Religious disinclination to great wealth may have factored into this fervent condemnation of planter greed, but More clearly positioned her critique in a literary milieu that encompassed frequent criticism of excessive planter wealth. This passage was legible to her audience precisely because the popular image of a West Indian creole was of a vastly wealthy sugar planter, though that description failed to reflect the reality of most white West Indians. Nonetheless, in its treatment of slaveholding wealth, this abolitionist text drew again on the representational modes surrounding the West Indian, deploying old forms in service of new political ends.

Even climate factored into More’s treatment of creole planters, if obliquely. The supposedly corrupting climate of the West Indies was a marker of West Indian difference, deployed by domestic elites to undermine planter reputation. More made a subtle argument grounded in this understanding, while subverting the intentions of prior representations in service of abolition. The universalizing liberalism she espouses in passages like, “Then bless’d Philanthropy! thy social hands / Had link’d dissever’d worlds in brothers bands,” is, “Careless, if colour, or if *clime* divide.”<sup>133</sup> [Emphasis added]. Domestic elites had ginned up concern about the implications of the climate-disease nexus on white West Indians, but such representations also offered a convenient excuse for planter behavior: that planters were not fully responsible for their actions because they had been physically changed by the West Indies. Such a subtext exists in

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<sup>132</sup> More, 13-14.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

*The West Indian*, and this line of reasons follows fairly simply from the climate-based charges leveled against planters. In this passage, More rejected the notion that planters should be held to different standards in the West Indies, positing instead that men ought to live together as brothers irrespective of differences in color or climate. Though this line of argumentation undermines the notion of West Indian difference as a consequence of the Caribbean zone, More's argument exists in reference to pre-existing British thought on the issue of the West Indies' climatologically-based difference. The universal brotherly love More describes rejects such distinctions in an effort to hold planters morally accountable.

‘SUGAR ... POLLUTED WITH BLOOD’

Packed into More's brief anti-slavery text, we find possible reference to each of the major metropolitan tropes concerning the West Indian planter. But abolitionist texts would become even more explicit in their attacks on planter character as time went on. *An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Propriety of Abstaining from West India Sugar and Rum* called on Britons to boycott Caribbean sugar products in 1792, four years after the publication of More's poem. The text was published anonymously but its authorship is ascribed to William Fox, a prolific abolitionist pamphleteer and likely Baptist. The text was phenomenally popular; in its first year, the pamphlet ran through twenty-six editions, both in Britain and in North America, selling more than 200,000 copies.<sup>134</sup> Planters feature centrally in Fox's methodical rebuttal of pro-slavery arguments, suggesting again the continued relevance and legibility of the cultural debate centered on the planter. Fox deftly drew on these existing codes to persuade his audience.

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<sup>134</sup> Timothy Whelan, "William Fox (fl. 1791-1794)" last updated July 11, 2008. <http://www.brychancarey.com/abolition/williamfox.htm>.

“It might be reckoned a degradation,” he remarked, “to mention the national dignity ... [but] that might induce us to counteract a powerful body of men, who are trampling underfoot the dictates of humanity, and the interest of the nation.”<sup>135</sup> The planters to whom Fox referred are couched from the beginning in terms of a threat to the nation – their actions undermine British society and their claims of inclusion therein. Just as in More, we see a new deployment of an existing paradigm – in this instance, the old notion that planter peculiarities constituted a threat to the British nation and therefore that planters merited exclusion – sustained and redirected to abolitionist ends.

Fox continued to condemn the obscene wealth of the planters and its protection by the British state, echoing More’s condemnation of planter greed and drawing on the popular perception of their extravagant wealth. “In 50 years,” Fox exclaimed, “[planters] have received for sugar alone, above 70 millions more than it would have cost at any other market.”<sup>136</sup> Though Fox cited no calculations in support of his claim, his readership would have been awed by such profit, galvanizing the middling classes against the perceived decadence of the planters. Fox also included the standard fare of planter cruelty, noting that “murder ... is to [the planter] but a secondary consideration,” when sugar profits were at stake, and that planters whipped their slaves so fiercely that, “at every stroke ... a piece of flesh is cut out.”<sup>137</sup> These descriptions of brutality are intended to shock, but Fox’s primary goal was not to advocate the abolition of slavery *per se*. His pamphlet was designed to convince the reader of the need to boycott West Indian sugar,

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<sup>135</sup> William Fox (Anonymous), *An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Propriety of Abstaining from West India Sugar and Rum*, (London: J. Phillips, 1791), *Boston Public Library Digital Collections*, 11-12.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 14.

which he attempted to accomplish by linking domestic consumption with the atrocities of slavery, in a direct and visceral way. “In every pound of sugar used,” Fox concluded matter-of-factly, “we may be considered as consuming two ounces of human flesh.”<sup>138</sup>

Re-imagining the consumption of West Indian sugar as cannibalism inverted the colonial narrative as it had been employed to justify slavery. The writings of James Grainger and Edward Long had presented enslaved Africans as beasts and demons, incapable of reason and therefore deserving of white control. Fox’s deployment of the ‘African’ trope of cannibalism against white Europeans drew on prior British anxieties about the purity of the British body. Charlotte Sussman writes that, “in order to make their moral point, [abolitionists] mobilized fears of bodily pollution,” occasioned by the perceived presence of black flesh among pristine sugar crystals on a British table.<sup>139</sup> Concern about the purity of white Britons living in the West Indies had been salient for decades – climate, disease, and interracial sex all purportedly threatened this ‘purity.’ To Kay Dian Kriz, consumption of figuratively bloody sugar was, “a type of miscegenation, but one that came from ingesting, rather than copulating with,” African slaves.<sup>140</sup> Once again, we see a redeployment of existing cultural anxiety surrounding white purity in the West Indies. This trope had come to characterize popular perceptions of the planter, who was seen as tainted by the climatological and racial environment of the Caribbean. Here, Fox transferred that anxiety to the sugar-consuming public writ large – in consuming sugar, the reader asked, am I tainting myself the way planters have? Once again, we see

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>139</sup> Charlotte Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender & British Slavery, 1713-1833* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 113.

<sup>140</sup> Kay Dian Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies 1700-1840* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 113.

an inversion and subversion of existing cultural tropes and memes surrounding the planter in abolitionist texts. Fox and More were keenly aware of the literary environment in the years before abolition, and understood the cultural anxieties surrounding British identity in the contested West Indian zone. In both texts, subtle revisions are made to this cultural code in service of abolitionist goals, and these texts were made more salient to their audiences by their reference to the existing cultural milieu around West Indians.

#### AN ENGLISH NEGRO DRIVER

Abolitionists produced many of their own texts in the years before abolition of the slave trade was achieved, but only rarely did they become directly involved in the thriving political-visual culture of the era (Josiah Wedgewood's famous *Am I Not a Man and a Brother?* medallion is a notable exception). Nonetheless, many prints and engravings from this era bear abolitionist content; as Catherine Molineux notes, "the iconographic traditions with which abolitionist ... advocates worked reached back into the seventeenth century,"<sup>141</sup> and the political salience of satirical prints in particular is widely noted.<sup>142</sup> Because such prints constituted satire, and were not produced by abolitionists in direct advocacy of abolition, questions of the printer's motivation are important, and analysis of these prints from an abolitionist stance must be contingent. According to Kriz, these prints, "did not fully adopt the abolitionists' tactic of demonizing planters."<sup>143</sup> Nevertheless, I contend that, despite their publication by enigmatic British printmakers, these prints offer a window into the abolitionist argument

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<sup>141</sup> Catherine Molineux, *Faces of Perfect Ebony: Encountering Atlantic Slavery in Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 243.

<sup>142</sup> "British Satirical Prints," British Museum, accessed March 18, 2018. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/British%20Satirical%20Prints.pdf>.

<sup>143</sup> Kriz, 112.



as it was carried forward in visual media and are accordingly indispensable in an assessment of the ways in which abolitionists and their supporters drew on the visual culture surrounding the planter. Indeed, as Kriz observes, this, “satiric wit and humor drove ... much of the visual imagery devoted to the West Indies.”<sup>144</sup>

James Gillray was one of the most well-known satirists of the era; his cartoons referenced a vast array of political and cultural events, and his work remains deeply influential in the sphere of political satire today.<sup>145</sup> His prints dealing with planters and slavery must be accorded consideration, even if their motivation is unclear.<sup>146</sup> Gillray’s personal attitudes towards the abolitionist campaign are opaque. In 1792, his print *Anti-saccharites* featured the Queen vainly attempting to convince a coterie of grotesque princesses whose physiognomy echoes racialized depictions of Africanized bodies, that sugarless tea was enjoyable, mocking Fox’s proposed boycott.<sup>147</sup> But this satire can also be read from the inverse, mocking the British upper class for its inability to suffer even the slightest inconvenience in defense of human lives. Such ambiguity also characterizes Gillray’s print *Barbarities in the West Indies*, which remains, “one of the most potent and politically perplexing prints concerned with the corruption and contamination of the West Indian plantation system.”<sup>148</sup> The text below the image details a Parliamentary report from 1791 suggesting that a Jamaican plantation owner had boiled one of his slaves in a

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>145</sup> Anita McConnell and Simon Heneage, “Gillray, James,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed 12 March 2018.

<sup>146</sup> Kriz, 7.

<sup>147</sup> M. Dorothy George, “Anti-saccharites, or John Bull and his family leaving off the use of sugar,” in *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the British Museum VI*, (London: British Museum, 1938).

<sup>148</sup> Kriz, 113.



debased, animalized forms of the very ‘savages’ [he] brutalized.’”<sup>149</sup> This reading of the print suggests an abolitionist motive, and underlines the continued salience of the imagined planter in pressing abolitionism. Gillray’s caricature proposed that Englishmen in the West Indies were transformed, taking on the Africanized, allegedly savage visage of the enslaved. It is abolitionist in a subversive manner, suggesting that colonial slavery was inherently corruptive. Most critically, the print drew on pre-abolitionist depictions of the planter, which were consumed by the anxiety of “going native,” i.e. whether an Englishman living in the West Indies could continue to claim British identity. The complex of white West Indian characterization, predicated on the idea that Europeans were physically changed in the West Indies and furthered their decline into savagery through sexual contact with blacks, was sustained in this print and redeployed to undermine the institution of slavery in the colonies.

The abolitionist bent of the anonymously drawn 1808 print *Johnny Newcome in Love in the West Indies* is similarly debatable, but the timing and context of this work present the possibility of an ideological agenda. The print told the story of the supposed Englishman, arriving in the West Indies and promptly smitten with a grotesquely depicted black female slave, ‘Mimbo Mampo,’ allegedly the daughter of a Congolese royal family. She massages his feet, and he consults an “obey man,” a type of Afro-Caribbean mystic and healer central to the Obeah spiritual practice, with advice on how

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 115.

to woo Mimbo Mampo. This reference to the practice of Obeah is in itself quite



Fig. 2: Anonymous, *Johnny Newcome in Love in the West Indies*, 1808, London. British Museum.

interesting; the religion was derived from West African practices and was the source of much consternation among white West Indians, who feared its power enough to ban it in Jamaica after its alleged inspiration of Tacky's Revolt.<sup>150</sup> The inclusion of Obeah in this cartoon hints at domestic fear around a type of religious miscegenation – whites tainting themselves with African religion in the colonies. Johnny finally succeeds in adding Mimbo Mampo to his harem, and the final two panels display the mixed-race products of their relationship. Though the print's creator is anonymous, and its content is not overtly

<sup>150</sup> Jerome Handler, *Enacting Power: The Criminalization of Obeah in the Anglophone Caribbean, 1760-2011* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2012), 34.

abolitionist in the manner of Wedgewood's medallion, publisher William Holland harbored radical tendencies, and had been briefly imprisoned in 1793 for publishing a banned pamphlet by Thomas Paine, a known abolitionist.<sup>151</sup> Like Gillray's earlier print, abolitionist motivation is found more readily in the subtext of *Johnny Newcome*, and the ways in the print would have been received and understood in its context.

The central trope of this cartoon is miscegenation in the West Indies, presented here not as a passing creole fancy, but as the planter's fixation, and perhaps even the impetus for his travel to the Caribbean. The planter is mocked for lusting after a grotesque figure like Mimbo Mampo, with her oversized eyes, turban, frightening grimace, huge frame, and comically oversized breasts. But mockery of the planter for sexual engagement with black slaves had been standard fare for the better part of a century, and miscegenation constituted a plank of the accepted representational code surrounding the planter. *Johnny Newcome* is at its most subversive in its final two panes, in which the mixed-race children of interracial relationships threaten the entire imperial project. In the caption, one of Johnny's nine mixed-race children is given the name Hector Sammy Newcome, with the secondary note that Hector is, "a child of great spirit, can already Damnme [sic] Liberty and Equality and promises fair to be the Toussaint of his Country." The success of the Haitian Revolution, led by former slave Toussaint L'Ouverture in 1804, had terrified British statesmen and planters: Haiti had been a productive, deeply exploitative colony, not unlike Jamaica or Barbados. In the massacre

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<sup>151</sup> "Leading Publishers in London and Paris," in *Vive la difference! The English and French Stereotype in Satirical Prints, 1720-1815. Online Collections*, The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, accessed March 14, 2018; Thomas Paine, *Letter to Benjamin Rush, March 16, 1790*, *Thomas Paine National Historical Association Digital Collections*, accessed March 15, 2018.

of French creoles, white West Indians saw the cataclysm they had feared for nearly 150 years.

The printmaker exploited this anxiety: by naming a mixed-race child of a planter the next Toussaint, he questioned the sustainability of colonial slave society as a whole, particularly one in which miscegenation was rampant. The African royal lineage of this future revolutionary echoes rumors that L'Ouverture was descended from African royalty, and underscored European inability to understand slave and mulatto origins and motivations. Mulattos in particular constituted, “a powerful and unpredictable force,” and British observers saw in the growing mulatto population a threat to metropolitan authority.<sup>152</sup> Daniel Livesay has studied the presence of mixed-race individuals in metropolitan Britain in this period and similarly concludes that “mixed race migrants [to Britain] stood at the most contentious intersections of,” racial and familial categorization – “officials worried that their education . . . in the metropole might eventually lead to a Caribbean rebellion.”<sup>153</sup> As in Gillray's print, then, we see in *Johnny Newcome* the redeployment of existing tropes around the planter used to interrogate the entire enterprise of slavery. This print would not have been legible except to an audience that had already absorbed representations of West Indian miscegenation. Though it derived from pre-abolitionist representations of the planter, its timing just after the abolition of the slave trade and the known radical beliefs of its publisher suggest that an abolitionist motive is possible. Even if it does not overtly advocate the emancipation of West Indian

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<sup>152</sup> Kriz, 111.

<sup>153</sup> Daniel Livesay, *Children of Uncertain Fortune: Mixed-Race Jamaicans in Britain and the Atlantic Family, 1733-1833* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 4.

slaves, its satire is subversive, suggesting that the miscegenation of creole planters fundamentally threatened the colonial project.

The grotesque portrayal of the black body in *Johnny Newcome*, and the overall increase in the ugliness and disgust with which blacks were portrayed beginning in the 1770s, poses an interesting question. Scholars have debated the meaning of this shift in visual culture amidst a political environment that was increasingly favorable to abolition. Most have suggested that developments in biological theories of race, which flowered with the rise of scientific thought in the late eighteenth century, contributed to such depictions.<sup>154</sup> Partly as a consequence of this hardening racial hierarchy, Felicity Nussbaum writes that, “by the 1780s ... as the movement for abolition began to gather force, the tide began to turn toward thinking that ... mixed-race couples were ... gnawingly unnatural.”<sup>155</sup> Though anxiety about miscegenation and its consequences was nothing new, the rise of scientific racism offers an explanation for the accelerating trend towards hideous depictions of black women and men that emerged over these decades. Abolitionists, moreover, bought into such representations for their own ends. Catherine Molineux writes of the “narcissism and even pornography of abolitionist images that wallowed in the persistence of inequality.”<sup>156</sup> As a result, even prints like *Johnny Newcome*, which opened the door to abolitionist interpretations, were permitted to portray the black figure with callous racism. Creators of abolitionist imagery did not seek a recognition of black equality, merely the “promise of a new association between

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<sup>154</sup> Trevor Burnard, “Powerless Masters,” 194.

<sup>155</sup> Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race, and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 187, 250–1, 255.

<sup>156</sup> Molineux, 241.

Britons and Africans,” one in which adapted “older iconographies of master-slave relationships to a new imperial order.”<sup>157</sup> Racist depictions of Africans would persevere in British culture during and after the campaigns for abolition of the slave trade and emancipation.

‘DO JUSTICE AND LOVE MERCY’<sup>158</sup>

In late spring of 1807, George III gave his assent to “An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade.” The political prong of the abolitionist campaign had slowly built a coalition in Parliament, and took advantage of Lord Grenville’s<sup>159</sup> relatively weak political position to successfully press the Abolition Act, first introduced thirty-four years earlier. But passage of this act was not the end of the abolitionist campaign. Key figures in the movement, like Wilberforce, began pushing almost immediately for the final elimination of all chattel slavery in the British Empire.

This second campaign offers an epilogue to this thesis. Even as late as 1823, when Wilberforce published *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, in Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies*, the cultural motifs, tropes, and norms surrounding the West Indian planter were crucial to abolitionist attacks on the planter, evincing an abiding relevance to British understandings of empire and identity even 100 years after representations of planters began to enter the mainstream press. Wilberforce inadvertently revealed the centrality of planters to the abolitionist campaign when he admonished his fellow abolitionists to, “treat with candour and tenderness the characters of the West-Indian proprietors,” and to

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Mic. 6:8 KJV

<sup>159</sup> I.e. Prime Minister William Grenville, 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Grenville



attack only, “the evils of the system itself.”<sup>160</sup> This self-reproach confirms for the historian that abolitionists were cognizant of the extent to which attacks on planters characterized their public antislavery campaign; such attacks were often grounded in negative representations of planters firmly entrenched in the British mind well before the 1780s. Yet again, Wilberforce referenced and criticized planter wealth, suggesting that while, “in a worldly view, [the West-Indian system] has been eminently gainful ... to individuals,” maintenance of the sugar colonies had come at an unacceptable cost to human life. “It would have been a strange exception,” he continued, “to all those established principles which Divine Providence has ordained ... if ... personal prosperity were generally and permanently ... to arise from injustice and oppression.”<sup>161</sup> In the waning days of Caribbean plantation slavery, there was no longer any elision between the exploitation involved in slavery and the fabled West Indian wealth displayed by the likes of Belcour. The image of creole wealth – blazed into the mind of the British public – was shown to be the product of cruelty.

Moreover, Wilberforce’s manifesto was saturated throughout with a sense of West Indian difference. In the broadest of terms, this foreign nature – the sense that white West Indians were fundamentally different from Britons – is the ultimate product of the contestation of British identity fought during the pre-abolitionist years. Wilberforce wrote that it would be an “error” to believe that white West Indians would, “think and feel like ourselves.”<sup>162</sup> Though he writes in reference to a particular slave amelioration law, this

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<sup>160</sup> William Wilberforce, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, And Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, In Behalf of the Negro Slaves In the West Indies*. A new ed. (London: Printed by Ellerton and Henderson, for J. Hatchard, 1823), 55.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

phrase encompasses the culmination of the abolitionist, and ultimately British, attitudes towards the planter. Amelioration was a purported effort by planters to improve the condition of West Indian slaves after the slave trade had been abolished, though planter promises of more humane treatment always outstripped the reality on the ground. Later planter writings, like Matthew Lewis' 1833 *Journal of a West India Proprietor* sought to head off emancipation by presenting the image of a reformist, wholesome plantation; Wilberforce's 1823 text is a rebuttal of such effort. Even after the abolition of the slave trade then, imaginations of the West Indian planter remained salient in the British public, and planters remained engaged in efforts to improve their standing in the metropole. When emancipation finally did come, however, slave owners were nonetheless able to secure sizeable reparations from the government for lost "property." This payoff speaks to the enduring importance of slave wealth to much of the British elite, rather than to the esteem of the planter in Britain by the 1830s.<sup>163</sup>

What had begun with disassociation from the planter by elements of a British elite content to deflect negative attention ended with a nation moving rapidly toward emancipation, the cataclysm that planters had labored for decades to avoid. By the early nineteenth century, British society had defined itself to the exclusion of the West Indian creole, despite failed planter attempts to assuage metropolitan concern. This negotiation of imperial identity left a reservoir of representational motifs, tropes, and codes by which the planter was understood, and this reservoir was tapped by abolitionists for their own ends. In Burnard's words, "the West Indian planter cut a sad figure from the late

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<sup>163</sup> Nicholas Draper, *The Price of Emancipation: Slave-Ownership, Compensation and British Society and the End of Slavery*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

1780s.”<sup>164</sup> The scope of British debate around imperial identity, both before and after abolitionists entered the mainstream, ensured such an end came to pass.

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<sup>164</sup> Burnard, “Powerless Masters,” 195.

## CONCLUSION

Public imagination is central to cultural history. The assumptions and understandings that underlie cultural forms help to explain events, including events as momentous as the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. The Georgian era, which encompasses the scope of this thesis, was a time of rapid, dramatic change in Britain. At the 1714 coronation of King George I, England and Scotland had been unified a mere seven years. The British colonial empire in the Americas was dwarfed by those of France, Spain, and Portugal. It was not at all clear that the small island nation, clinging to the edge of Europe, would come to dominate the globe - after all, the Dutch and Swedish had entertained major ambitions in the New World, only to see them crushed. By 1833, when all enslaved persons in the British Empire were finally emancipated, there was little question as to which nation ran the world. Despite the loss of the United States, Britain had vastly expanded its empire with the addition of Asian, Pacific, and Caribbean territories. France and Spain, moreover, were on their knees, the former as a result of political turmoil and defeat in war, the latter thanks to colonial revolution. Britain's transformation - from one of several nations jockeying for position in the Americas to clear global forerunner - necessitated a major cultural adjustment at home. New understandings of Britain's place in the world and the relations between Britons and peoples across the globe emerged in response to this demand. This cultural development included the emergence of what has been termed an imperial imagination. The implications of this cultural phenomenon, for the course of British history and the rise of the modern world, are immense.

This thesis concerns one instance of that imperial imagination: the forms, tropes, understandings, and anxieties that came to characterize the West Indian creole planter in certain segments of British society. Unsuccessful in their initial hunt for precious metal, Caribbean colonists had turned to agriculture, at first attempting to grow profitable tobacco and indigo crops. But the turning point for Britain's Caribbean colonies and their residents was the discovery that sugar cane, a crop originally from India, grew readily under the warm sun of the West Indies. Sugar production was intensely laborious, and provision of labor quickly became the dominant concern among plantation owners. Nearly from the beginning, settlers turned to enslaved Africans to satisfy this demand. Sugar and slavery became inextricable. Much has been said about plantation slavery in the Caribbean and its consequences. In this thesis, I turn my attention instead to one important politico-cultural implication of West Indian colonization - the imperial imagination of white West Indians.

The implications of this imagination help elucidate the Georgian era. Early in the eighteenth century, just as plantation slavery was exploding in the Caribbean, the "planter" began to enter the British cultural conscience. This planter was a figure partly real and partly imagined. As most Britons would never travel to the West Indies to meet a planter in person, the popular imagination of the planter hinged on portrayals in domestic media, which often blurred the distinction between fact and fiction. Over the eighteenth century, certain modes came to dominate the presentation (and consequent domestic understanding) of these unique men. Central to the "planter" in British imagination was the perception of personal and cultural degradation through sexual contact with African and Afro-Caribbean women. Interracial sex was a fact of life in the West Indian colonies:

planters faced few to no constraints on their behavior towards slaves, and white women were scarce. Such circumstances lent themselves to the emergence of interracial sexual relationships, some of which were long-term, and all of which were exploitative by their nature. Of interest to a study of domestic culture, however, is the way in which such relationships were perceived in Britain. Starting in the early eighteenth century, miscegenation was presented as a persistent failing of the white West Indian. The suggestion that white men could be allured and tainted by interracial sex led to a sense that the entire British nation was threatened by such behavior. Racial mixing was a threat, in the view of many, because racial categories were perceived to be fluid, shaped as much by climate and behavior as by descent. If white British men could devolve into blackness, reasoning went, the entire nation was at risk. This nexus of climatological and racial degradation combined moreover with the truthful observation that the West Indies were a pit of disease, in which the white body was exposed to decay and death. The perception that West Indian planters were tainted by their presence and actions in the Caribbean grew over time, and typified metropolitan attitudes towards creoles by the 1770s. The ‘Middle Temple Macaroni,’<sup>165</sup> a foppish and dissolute figure, stood in for the planter in popular imagination. (His association with the Middle Temple hints at the striving, middle-class connotation around the planter as well: who better to personify this group than a lawyer?) The image’s caption says it all: “In short,” the macaroni exclaims, “I am a West Indian.”

Such depictions of the West Indian planter were not automatic. They were *enacted* through the British media. Kathleen Wilson’s observation that certain segments

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<sup>165</sup> Image on page 1.

of the domestic elite sought “disavowal”<sup>166</sup> from the planter rings true - many of the documents reinforcing the trope of the tainted planter were put forward or abetted by members of an elite threatened by the increase in West Indian wealth and prestige.

Wilson suggests that domestic elites, troubled by the potential consequences of their own lax sexual behavior, dissolution, drunkenness, and frivolous display, aided in the creation of an imagined West Indian to deflect attention toward a distant punching bag. In this view, some among the elite sought (perhaps subconsciously) to deflect from the parallels between their own culture and that of the white West Indian. I do not mean to suggest that the elite, however defined, embarked on an overt campaign to disavow the planter through an organized media assault. The impetus behind these early depictions was nothing like that surrounding the abolitionist campaign of the 1780s. I merely suggest that some among the elite were more than happy to deflect concern over perceived shortcomings onto the distant planter. Over time, depictions of the planter crafted a figure so flawed as to solidify elite standing in Britain and undermine the threat posed by these *nouveaux riche*.

Planters were not oblivious to this cultural trend. Understanding the importance that imperial imaginations played in determining their status, planters made efforts to refute the claims circulated in domestic media. In British publications, they downplayed the severity of Caribbean disease, denied that they harbored attraction to black women, and demonstrated their willingness to draw hard racial boundaries through colonial slave laws. I term the second chapter a ‘rebuttal’ because planter depictions of West Indian society existed in clear response to the technology of difference established by depictions

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<sup>166</sup> Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 130.

of the creole. In the final chapter, I seek to answer the question of salience. What were the consequences of this abstract battle over planter character, and why did it matter that planter character was so successfully traduced? The answer to those questions is found in the Evangelical and Quaker campaign for abolition that began in earnest around 1780. Abolitionist propaganda centrally featured the planter, and attacks on white West Indians were integral to abolitionists' overall effort to achieve the abolition of the slave trade. Trevor Burnard has ascribed the decline in planter social status in the late eighteenth century primarily to the success of this organized campaign to tar planters. Before abolitionists, he claims, planters were generally accepted on their own terms.<sup>167</sup> But this does not tell the whole story. My observation is that abolitionist attacks on planter character were grounded in the pre-abolitionist cultural modes by which planters were understood. In abolitionist texts and visual media supporting abolition, there is a continuation and redeployment of old tropes surrounding the planter, used to new effect in service of abolitionism. For decades, media had portrayed the planter as dissolute, racially suspect, and diseased – this specific, negative characterization had been seared into the British consciousness. Abolitionists drew on this code, taking advantage of its legibility to their audience in an effort to garner support for the controversial idea of abolition.

Others, including Catherine Molineux, have recognized that abolitionist media (particularly visual media) drew on prior trends.<sup>168</sup> My thesis seeks to elucidate and

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<sup>167</sup> Trevor Burnard, "Powerless Masters: The Curious Decline of Jamaican Sugar Planters in the Foundational Period of British Abolitionism," *Slavery & Abolition* 32, no. 2 (2011): 196.

<sup>168</sup> Catherine Molineux, *Faces of Perfect Ebony: Encountering Atlantic Slavery in Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 243.



expand on this theme, showing the specific trends carried over from pre-abolitionist depictions of planters, tracing the origins of negative planter characterization, and showing that planters were also participants in the domestic imagination of their class. I also seek to expand on Wilson's suggestion of the disavowal and distance manifest in early eighteenth century depictions of the planter. Together, these strands enhance our grasp of the complex cultural milieu surrounding the British West Indies and abolition, and examine the formation of an important aspect of British imperial imagination and the negotiations involved in crafting it. Moreover, I hope that this thesis will contribute to our understanding of Georgian culture at a unique juncture in the development of the British nation and add to a growing body of work addressing the truly transnational Atlantic moment of the eighteenth century, the implications of which continue to shape our world.

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