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Vincent Brown [a]
[a] Department of History, Harvard University,

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EATING THE DEAD: CONSUMPTION AND REGENERATION IN THE HISTORY OF SUGAR

VINCENT BROWN
Department of History, Harvard University

In various scattered passages of Sidney W. Mintz's great work, *Sweetness and Power*, there are tantalizing allusions to the "association between sugar and death." These involved mostly the products of culinary artistry, such as candied funeral treats or the confections made for *dia de los muertos*. But by connecting the dots one finds in various of Professor Mintz's writings, one can see that the anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes was right to suggest that *Sweetness and Power* could just as easily have been titled "Sweetness and Death." For while sugar cultivation and the activities that surrounded it were enormously profitable for American empires, sugar was a catastrophe for the workers who grew it. Sugar was a cornerstone of Caribbean slavery and the slave trade, helping Great Britain to emerge during the eighteenth century as an economic colossus. The cost of this development was paid largely by men, women, and children on colonial plantations. Drawing examples from Jamaica, the eighteenth-century British Empire's greatest engine of creative destruction, it is also possible to consider in a bit more depth the social relation between sugar, death, and the social regeneration of the enslaved.[1]

Sugar was a murderous commodity. In the formative period of sugar cane's emergence in the world economy, from the mid-seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, American sugar plantations were among the most dangerous places a worker could be. Added to the hazards of rampant disease and the everyday violence of enslavement were the punishing demands of planting, tending, and processing the canes. Modern researchers have confirmed what contemporaries knew too well: Enslaved

Address correspondence to Vincent Brown, 1730 Cambridge St., S430, Department of History, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138. E-mail: brown8@fas.harvard.edu

workers were consumed in the cane fields. During one excellent crop year, the Jamaican planter Simon Taylor noted that the mill had been operating continuously for nearly nine months, "in which time the poor wretches of Negroes have not had above six hours of rest out of 24, & what with getting their little provisions etc. what time have they had to Sleep." Taylor hoped to hire someone else's slaves for the next round of planting, for the estate could not keep up the pace without, in his words, "murdering the Negroes."[2]

Even as sugar was subsidizing the energy needs of British workers, underwriting and preparing the way for England's industrial transformation, as Mintz's revision of the Eric Williams thesis showed, sugar was extinguishing workers on the plantations, those "syntheses of field and factory." As difficult as the work was, it might have been physically bearable if slaves had been well nourished, but the caloric content of their diets barely exceeded their energy needs. In other words, workers ate just enough to keep themselves working. In stressful circumstances—planting season, droughts, storms, speed-ups in production—slaves often starved. Moreover, hunger and poor nutrition impaired plantation workers' ability to resist illness. The African migrants who made up the bulk of sugar workers throughout the Americas were already threatened when they entered new disease environments, for which they had scant natural immunity; poor diets only aggravated the effects of bowel and respiratory diseases, which were among the most common immediate causes of death.[3]

It is clear that the imperial push described by Mintz "to seize more colonies, establish more plantations, import more slaves to them, build more ships, import more sucrose and other plantation products" that attended the economic rise of Great Britain and other European empires guaranteed the untimely deaths of millions. "By [the slaves'] labor power, wealth was created in the Americas," Mintz reminds us. "The wealth they created mostly returned to Britain; the products they made were consumed in Britain; and the products made by Britons—cloth, tools, torture instruments—were consumed by slaves *who were themselves consumed* in the creation of wealth." The expansion of Europe was facilitated by the destruction of black laborers.[4]

When Africans first came into the hands of European slave traders, the captives had often believed that the whites would

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eat them—a perception widely documented by historians of the transatlantic slave trade. We can now say, with only slight exaggeration, that this assumption was ultimately proven correct. American planters would exhaust black lives as productive capacity, grinding them into sugar, coffee, and other crops for export and consumption, primarily in Europe. Somewhere between the literal and the metaphorical, then, cannibalism is an appropriate term for the process outlined in *Sweetness and Power*.[5]

Professor Mintz insisted that the production and consumption of sugar be understood as part of the making of the British working class: "Sugar and other drug foods, by provisioning, sating—and, indeed, drugging—farm and factory workers, sharply reduced the overall cost of creating and reproducing the metropolitan proletariat." In this way Mintz describes the movement of energy around the world—from Africa to the Americas to Europe—the digestion of the enslaved to enhance the vitality of the proletariat. His concern was primarily to show how the enslaved people who produced sugar were "linked in clear economic relationships to the British laboring people who were learning to eat it." Here, however, I would like to briefly explore how this transfer of energy from colony to metropolis and from black people to white, affected African-American life in slavery. To be more specific, I'd like to speculate about how the consumption of labor demanded by this process was linked in turn with social reproduction, or rather, regeneration, among the enslaved.[6]

Historically, communities have reproduced themselves through childbearing and childrearing, giving women a disproportionate role in social as well as biological reproduction. Sugar plantation work scrambled this pattern. No one has detailed the "grim realities" of life for women on Jamaican sugar plantations more carefully than Richard S. Dunn, who identified "exhausting manual labor, a lethal disease environment, savage physical punishment, inadequate food, sexual abuse, broken health, and infertility" as the distinguishing features of enslaved women's lives. Women worked disproportionately in field gangs, were largely excluded from highly skilled and high status jobs as craft workers, carpenters, coopers, boilers, and distillers, and were "subjected to an exhausting routine of manual labor throughout their prime child bearing years."[7] Dramatically low birthrates and high infant mortality were the result. Given the rates of infant mortality, the

birth of a child was more often seen as a prelude to a death than the beginning of a life. As historian Jennifer L. Morgan has argued for other slave societies, "the rarity of surviving infant births may have further highlighted the pragmatic and symbolic value of African women's reproductive potential" by heightening everyone's sense of the precarious nature of adaptation and inheritance.[8] At the same time, the primary mode of reproduction on sugar plantations was commercial rather than biological. Sugar's deadly toll required that the labor force be replenished by the slave trade, with planters externalizing the cost of raising children to African villagers. In this context, death organized social meaning among the enslaved more insistently than birth. Yet the rigors of plantation labor altered but did not reduce women's roles in enslaved communities. Women's relatively contracted role in child rearing was supplemented by their enhanced role in the communal social regeneration produced by burial rites.

When, in *The Birth of African American Culture*, Professor Mintz and Richard Price admonished scholars of slavery to pay close attention to processes of institution building, they recognized ceremonies for ritualizing death as among the foremost forms of social organization.[9] At the rate the enslaved expired, at the depth of their ubiquitous experience with dying and death, funerary rites were an urgent priority and were perhaps the most extensive bases of social communion. During funerals, the enslaved assumed and affirmed meaningful social roles. Articulations of kinship and ancestry during funerals yoked participants to their pasts, even in the accelerated world organized by slaveholders' expectant outlook. Communal values and material exchanges were intertwined, as people used death rites to define and signify categories of belonging, gender roles, measures of status, moral injunctions, and shared desires—in short, the ordering principles that helped to make society safe amidst catastrophe. Even as death tore communities apart, it brought the enslaved together. Black people did what they could to honor their friends, relations, and country folk, though life was fleeting and time was short. Funeral ceremonies, which had been perhaps the most important occasions for communal association in Africa, were made even more significant by demographic calamity in Jamaica. Rapidly changing enslaved societies therefore found enduring patterns—if not traditions—in ceremonies for the dead.

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Drawn from hundreds of villages, scores of polities, and numerous linguistic groups, Africans recognized categories of belonging in Jamaica that had not had the same purchase in the Old World. During dislocating migrations and desperate interactions, people from the environs of the Bight of Biafra and the Gold Coast congregated as Eboes and Coromantees, for example—new "nations" in the Americas. These and others forged emergent alliances from shared languages, similar principles of social organization, and similar memories of African landscape and territory. In order to cohere, however, people within these groups had not only to recognize similarities between members, they also had to mark their distinctions from outsiders. In this undertaking, the funeral ceremony was a primary locus of belonging and exclusion, an opportunity to express and enact ideas about group membership, social difference, and gendered being.[10]

Just as ritual participation helped to delimit national categories of belonging, it also exhibited internal hierarchies among the enslaved. Funerals did not eliminate social distinctions; in important ways, they reinforced them. Burial ceremonies affirmed the social status of the dead. Only well-liked or prominent slaves drew large crowds to their funerals. The most eminent could draw assemblies of more than a thousand, but for many, probably most, burial was completely unceremonious. Certainly those who died shortly after arrival, before they had time to form a significant network of social ties, received minimal honors at death. Slaves who had few friends or relatives were interred quickly and simply: An overseer might dispatch a couple of available men to bury the corpse in a crude pit. For others, the extravagance of the ceremonies, as well as the size of the gatherings, indicated the popularity and importance of the deceased. As one observer commented: "The expense with which the funerals of the better sort of negroes upon a plantation are attended, very often exceeds the bounds of credibility."[11]

Quite apart from their functions in the plantation economy, slaves assumed meaningful social roles during the performance of ritual obligations. Planters generally did not care who among their slaves were the best dancers, drummers, or singers, though they might be amused by their performances. Black people, on the other hand, recognized the indispensable contributions of

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these performers. In the context of a burial ceremony, musicians and dancers bore the responsibility for structuring emotions and communicating with the spirit world. Their skills managed what black people generally viewed as the most important stage in the life cycle. A gendered division of labor organized ritual music production. The drummers were nearly always male, women generally led the singing and accented the rhythm with hand claps and rattles. Dancers were both men and women but each performed different styles of movement. Establishing gender distinctions at ceremonies was but one aspect of a larger process of assuming meaningful roles that could rebut the degradations of abject bondage.[12]

Preparations for burial also reinforced the significance of kinship and friendship. The role of blood relations in funeral ceremonies re-established some small measure of stability in family organization, even while it accepted intimate acquaintances into family membership. The integrity of enslaved families was extremely tenuous: The slave trade severed ties to African ancestors, child mortality blocked the lines of descent that might have extended into the future, and the dictates of plantation managers trumped the authority of parents. Yet there is reason to believe that high mortality in Jamaica strengthened affective ties between kin, both genetic and "fictive." Family and friends were responsible for wrapping the body in linen, when they could afford it, and decorating it with possessions that the deceased valued in life. Between a month and a year after interment select friends and family returned to the grave, "congratulating the deceased on her enjoyment of complete happiness," according to one account. In turn, as another witness reported, "each of the party then expressed his wishes of remembrance to his kindred, repeated benedictions on his family, promised to return to them, repeated promises to take care of her children, and bade the deceased an affectionate farewell."[13]

Interment of the dead usually involved feasting; sharing among the mourners was an essential activity. After the burial, one observer noted, "cool Drink (which is made of the *Lignum vitae* Bark) or whatever else they can afford, is distributed among these who are present; the one Half of the Hog is burnt while they are drinking, and the other is left to any Person who pleases to take it." These exchanges indexed and reinforced

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ties of reciprocity as people signified their affiliations through their participation in meaningful meals. Ritual eating marked communal associations between the living and the dead no less than among the living. Burial rites nearly always included sacrifices and offerings: the blood of animals, offered to protect the living from the angry dead, foodstuffs, tobacco, and drink to nourish the spirit on its journey to the other world. For favored slaves, planters provided rum, Madeira, sugar, or flour for the feasts and offerings, but most of the contributions—chickens, a hog, fruits and vegetables—were the products of slaves' own efforts.[14]

These goods came from provision grounds, barters, or petty thefts. Men and women with fruitful provision grounds knew they would be able to supply for their own burial ceremonies when the time came. So, underlying all this regenerative activity was an economic institution, the Jamaican internal marketing system, which Professor Mintz has described in several important essays, that method of provisioning the enslaved with desperately needed nutrition, but also with the sacrificial foodstuffs required by their participation in mourning rites. Within Jamaica, the enslaved carried on a dynamic internal commerce. On larger plantations they were allowed houses, gardens, and provision grounds. Imported food was expensive, so planters compelled the slaves to help feed themselves by farming small fruit and vegetable gardens adjoining their houses and larger plots of land set aside for their use. On the one day during the week that they had to provide for themselves, enslaved men and women raised livestock, tended food crops, and set their skills to petty manufactures, hoping to produce more than they needed to survive. They took the products of their labor to great Sunday markets where the most well supplied, energetic, and shrewd could generate meager profits to support their relations. While it is not clear that women outnumbered men at these markets during slavery, as they certainly came to do after emancipation, there can be no doubt that they played vital roles both as cultivators and traders in this system.[15]

In short, because of the "demographic disaster" wrought by sugar production, the regeneration of social roles, including gender roles, in enslaved communities was accomplished in the course of burial ceremonies as much as in the rearing of children. For the social reproduction of enslaved communities, women's

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roles as cultivators and marketers was equal to, or perhaps even more important than, their role in childbearing. And women's participation in burial rites as suppliers of crucial sacrificial goods, or as singers of dirges, or tenders to the burial grounds that became ancestral land by marking the location of new lineages, was as important in shaping the contours of enslaved communities as their role as wives, mothers, and workers in the cane.

Sweetness and Power recounts an important chapter in the broader history of energy usage—sugar's high calorie count has been key to its world historical importance. As such, the history of sugar production, consumption, and social meaning tells much about how the drive to harness energy-yielding products animates great human endeavors and shapes patterns of social life. Even if, as Professor Mintz worried when he ended the book, it appears to a few readers to be just another "chorus of the bone song—the hip bone's connected to the leg bone, etc." —sugar's story nevertheless epitomizes one of the most profound modes of analytical storytelling available to us: the articulation of global relationships through the history of commodities. As the U.S. occupation of Iraq continues on, perhaps indefinitely, we are reminded of how the consumption of fossil fuel has been closely associated with the machinery of death, and of the importance of mortuary rites in organizing communities suffering the effects of war or mobilizing their compatriots and coreligionists for insurgency and martyrdom. Oil and sugar would seem to have little in common. Yet as we learn that sugarcane-based ethanol is now being touted as a sustainable solution to humanity's ever-increasing hunger for convertible energy, one is compelled to wonder what historical role sugar might play in the future, should the world's great consumer societies continue to eat the dead.[16]

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Notes

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12. James Stewart, *A View of the Present State of the Island of Jamaica* (Edinburgh, 1823), pp. 270, 274–276; Leslie, *A New and Exact Account of Jamaica*, p. 326.
13. Charles Leslie, *A New and Exact Account of Jamaica* (Edinburgh, 1740), p. 325; James M. Phillippo, *Jamaica: Its Past and Present State* (London, 1843), p. 246.
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