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0521841313 - White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity During the Age of Abolition

David Lambert

Excerpt

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Introduction: white creole culture, politics and identity

This book is concerned with the place of ‘whiteness’ in the controversy over the enslavement of people of African descent in the British empire during the ‘age of abolition’.¹ Focussing on the West Indian plantation colonies, this controversy comprised antislavery campaigning, proslavery lobbying, parliamentary debates, mass petitioning and imperial policy formulation, all in the context of ongoing and intensified resistance from the enslaved populations themselves.² As one of the ‘great debates of the age’, the issue of slavery raised questions about human nature, moral duty, free trade, colonial rights and Britain’s imperial future.³ A recurrent theme was the nature of racial difference and whether enslaved people of African origin were truly ‘men’ and ‘brothers’. The antislavery slogan ‘Am I not a man and brother?’, accompanied by the kneeling figure of a black enslaved man, evoked the essentially familiar, though culturally and morally inferior, ‘other’ that was at the heart of antislavery discourse. Grateful, redeemable and silent, the kneeling slave was a passive figure in this discourse – a passivity that was repeatedly contested by enslaved resistance. Against this, those involved in slavery and their supporters portrayed black people as subhuman, un-Christian units of labour who were better off in the colonial plantation societies than they would be in ‘barbaric’ Africa.

Yet ‘blackness’ was not the only issue of political and cultural controversy. The figure of the white West Indian master was also a locus of competing pro- and antislavery discourses. For abolitionists, the ‘un-English’ West Indian was a stock figure of humanitarian rhetoric. Despotic and morally degraded, he – and it was usually he – was symptomatic of a ‘bad’ white identity that many

¹ The ‘age of abolition’ in the British empire is often dated from 1787, which saw the creation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, to the imperial act of emancipation in 1833. In this book, 1780 provides a useful starting point as this was the year in which Joshua Steele first arrived in Barbados (see chapter 2).

² The word ‘enslaved’ is used in preference to ‘slave’ to emphasise that enslavement was a practice of subjection, not a state or condition.

³ G. K. Lewis, *Main currents in Caribbean thought: The historical evolution of Caribbean society in its ideological aspects, 1492–1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 100.

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metropolitan Britons, especially evangelicals, sought to distance themselves from. The West Indian planters and their metropolitan supporters rejected such assertions, of course, responding with campaigning to defend their rights, especially the right to possess property in people, by emphasising a shared British culture, common political traditions and their essential Englishness. Like black enslaved identities, then, white colonial identities were a site of struggle during the age of abolition.

The focus of this book is this ‘war of representation’ over the articulation and constitution of white creole culture, politics and identity during the slavery controversy in the British empire.⁴ In particular, it explores contested political and cultural discourses of whiteness produced in or about the British West Indian colony of Barbados from the 1780s to the imperial act of emancipation in 1833. Tensions between the British metropole and its West Indian colonies stemmed from questions of whether white slaveholders could be classed as fully ‘English’ and whether slavery was compatible with ‘English’ conceptions of liberty and morality. These tensions were particularly acute in the case of Barbados because its white colonists had long seen and portrayed themselves as the empire’s most loyal subjects – as evident in the self-description of the island as ‘Little England’, which gained currency in this period. In this context, what did it mean to be a white colonial subject in a place renowned for its loyalty and allegiance, and yet which was the target of increasing metropolitan attack over the issue of slavery?

In exploring the articulation and counter-articulation of colonising identities in Barbados, this book engages with two major themes. Firstly, there is the increasing attention being given to ‘white’ identities, which represents, in part, a welcome move beyond the focus on ‘white’ colonial representations of ‘other’ identities. To provide a localised account of the articulation of white identities in a broader British imperial context, the book engages with the field of ‘whiteness studies’, approaches to British imperial history informed by postcolonialism, and work on white identities in the Caribbean region itself. The second major theme addressed by the book is that of Atlantic networks. The rapid growth of ‘Atlantic world studies’, which addresses the circuits and spaces that connected Europe, Africa and the Americas from the early modern period, has been an important recent historiographical development. Framed by such perspectives, the book attends not only to the material and imaginative networks that bound the British empire together, but also the tensions that afflicted it, tensions that emanated from such issues as colonial slavery. Indeed, events in the single colonial space of Barbados were both linked to, and throw light upon, important cultural and political developments that were occurring in Britain and beyond.

⁴ C. Hall, *Civilising subjects: Metropole and colony in the English imagination, 1830–1867* (Oxford: Polity, 2002), p. 107.

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[More information](#)**Historical-geographical context**

The geographical focus of the controversy over slavery was the Caribbean region, where Britain's valuable West Indian colonies were located.⁵ Forged through settlement, enslavement, clearance and sugar monoculture from the beginning of the seventeenth century, these islands and territories produced large revenues and highly desired consumer products. The planters who resided in the region or returned to the metropole as absentee landowners enjoyed wealth and influence throughout most of the eighteenth century. The West Indian colonies were also the destination for millions of enslaved African men, women and children, most for work on the plantations. Through their labour, sugar cane was cultivated and its products sold on European markets to satisfy a growing 'sweet tooth'.⁶ Yet, although they were an integral part of the English, and later British, Atlantic world that developed from the seventeenth century, the West Indian plantation colonies occupied an uncertain place in the metropolitan geographical imagination. Located 'beyond the line' of European geopolitical certainties, with landscapes that were tropically 'other', and the source of wealth for *nouveaux riches* planters, the islands represented a 'different and disturbing culture'.⁷ Moreover, when the British Atlantic world was torn apart by the American Revolution, the colonial slaveholding interest was greatly weakened.⁸ The emergence of popular abolitionist sentiment in Britain from the 1780s, combined with the intensification of enslaved resistance in the Caribbean,⁹ put those involved in slavery on the defensive. The West Indian planters felt themselves to be an increasingly beleaguered colonial interest group and the region seemed ever more marginal to the fortunes of the empire.¹⁰

⁵ With a few exceptions, the term 'West Indies' refers to the islands of the Caribbean, including the Greater and Lesser Antilles. Throughout this book, the term will be used to refer to those Caribbean islands under English/British control. Owing to its common social and economic history, the continental territory of British Guiana, which was created in early 1831 from the unification of Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice, is usually also included.

⁶ M. Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to zombies* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 81–88. See also S. Mintz, *Sweetness and power: The place of sugar in modern history* (New York: Viking, 1985).

⁷ D. Arnold, *The problem of nature: Environment, culture and European expansion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); C. Hall, *Civilising subjects*, p. 70.

⁸ For a recent discussion of why the West Indian colonies did not also rebel, see A. J. O'Shaughnessy, *An empire divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

⁹ For example, there were revolts by enslaved people in Nevis in 1761, Surinam in 1763 and Jamaica in 1765. See M. Craton, *Testing the chains: Resistance to slavery in the British West Indies* (London: Cornell University Press, 1982).

¹⁰ C. L. Brown, 'The politics of slavery', in D. Armitage and M. J. Braddick (eds.), *The British Atlantic world, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); J. P. Greene, 'Liberty, slavery, and the transformation of British identity in the eighteenth-century West Indies', *Slavery and Abolition* 21 (2000).

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Although during the age of abolition Jamaica was the largest and economically most important of Britain's West Indian possessions, the 'original and quintessential British sugar colony' was Barbados. Colonised by the English from 1627, Barbados was a crucial site for the 'sugar revolution' of the middle of the seventeenth century. This development of a form of economic activity characterised by sugar and enslaved African labour made the island the 'foremost English possession throughout the seventeenth century'.¹¹ By the second half of the seventeenth century, the wealth produced by this 'fair jewel' in the imperial crown gave its plantocratic elite great political influence.¹² Yet, although the 'quintessential' sugar colony, Barbados was unique in many ways. Its more temperate climate and gently undulating terrain contributed to a widespread perception that Barbados was less 'tropical' than Britain's other Caribbean possessions. Demographically, Barbados was characterised by a relatively stable white population that was proportionally larger than that of other West Indian islands. It was also characterised by a lower rate of planter absenteeism, which in turn contributed to the strength and coherence of the white elite. By the eighteenth century, all these factors were seen as lending Barbados a 'civilised' character.¹³ For some present-day scholars, the colony's white culture was the nearest equivalent in the Caribbean to that of the American South.¹⁴ For such reasons, Barbados offers a fascinating opportunity to explore the articulation and constitution of white creole culture, politics and identity during the age of abolition.¹⁵

¹¹ Craton, *Testing the chains*, p. 105; A. L. Stinchcombe, *Sugar island slavery in the age of Enlightenment: The political economy of the Caribbean world* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 54, 95, 133. See also D. Eltis, 'New estimates of exports from Barbados and Jamaica, 1665–1701', *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd Series 52 (1995), 631; R. Sheridan, *Sugar and slavery: An economic history of the British West Indies, 1623–1775* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 124.

¹² Cited in L. Gragg, *Englishmen transplanted: The English colonization of Barbados, 1627–1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 1.

¹³ K. Watson, *The civilised island, Barbados: A social history, 1750–1816* (Bridgetown: Graphic Printers, 1979).

¹⁴ Craton, *Testing the chains*, p. 254. Andrew O'Shaughnessy argues that one of the main differences between the island and mainland colonies of British America was that former were dominated by 'British sojourners' who continued to see Britain as home. Along with dependence on the protected British sugar market and their vulnerability to enslaved revolts, he argues that 'the strength of the social and cultural ties with Britain restrained the development of a nationalistic Creole consciousness among whites and was a contributory factor in the failure of the British Caribbean to support the American Revolution'. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that, of all the West Indian colonies, it was Barbados that came close 'to developing a creole society of committed settlers'. See O'Shaughnessy, *Empire divided*, pp. 4, 6.

¹⁵ Much of the historiography of the British West Indies is, perhaps understandably, dominated by case studies of Jamaica or regional generalisations that draw heavily on Jamaica. For example, in the recent multi-volume collection, *Slavery, abolition and emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic period*, the work of the Jamaican writers Edward Long and Bryan Edwards are afforded representative status as white West Indian writing. See D. Lee (ed.), *Slavery, abolition and emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic period – the emancipation debate*, 8 vols., vol. III (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), p. xxvi. Yet neither Jamaica nor the other colonies were 'typical' of the region as a whole – at least not by every measure. Certainly Barbados offers an interesting contrast with

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[More information](#)**Summary of the book**

The central argument of this book – that the controversy over slavery was fundamentally bound up with the contested articulation of white colonial identities between colony and metropole – is explored in relation to a chronological series of key individuals and episodes. Some are some famous, others are buried deep in the footnotes of history, but all are illuminating because they ‘expose important contradictions and tensions’ within the contemporary discourses of whiteness, colonialism and slavery.¹⁶ The five episodes addressed here were part of, and shed light upon, broader political and cultural debates. Each was a juncture of textual, causal and thematic density. Within the controversy over slavery, certain texts occupy a prominent position, something reflected in the frequency with which they were referred to in contemporary texts and the attention given to them by modern scholars. These are explored not only in terms of their textual content, but also the web of intertextuality that constituted the political and cultural controversies. The key episodes examined also revolve around events that attracted attention in Barbados and beyond, acting as foci for discussion of slavery, freedom and the colonial order. Some of these events – criminal trials, an enslaved revolt, missionary persecution – were local occurrences with reverberations across the Atlantic world, whilst others – the 1807 Abolition Act, the 1823 ameliorative proposals, the 1833 Emancipation Act – originated in the imperial metropole and impacted upon Barbados. All had causal significance and shaped the development of the slavery controversy. The final enframing feature is a series of key themes, namely contested discourses of whiteness, conflicts between metropolitan and colonial representations of whiteness and the role of non-white subjects in the articulation of white identities.

Chapter 1, ‘The geographical “problem of slavery”’, situates the five subsequent substantive chapters in relation to the histories and geographies of whiteness, post-colonial theories, Atlantic world studies and the histories of slavery. In particular, it uses David Brion Davis’s argument about the ‘problem of slavery’ as a basis for thinking about the contested articulation of whiteness between colony and metropole, as well as the role of competing notions of place and belonging in this. The historical and geographical focus of the book – colonial Barbados – is then introduced, with particular attention paid to the formation of the settler society, the entrenchment of African slavery, colonial relations with Britain and the emergence of the campaign against slavery. The chapter closes by considering

Jamaica. On the historiography of the region, see B. W. Higman, *Writing West Indian histories* (London: Macmillan Education, 1999).

¹⁶ F. Driver, ‘Geography’s empire: Histories of geographical knowledge’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 10 (1992), 30. Bonham Richardson has argued that the relationships between ideas, popular thought and policy ‘are perhaps clearest in specific places, at particular times, and when set in motion by real people’: B. C. Richardson, ‘Detrimental determinists: Applied environmentalism as bureaucratic self-interest in the fin-de-siècle British Caribbean’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86 (1996), 214.

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how white colonial identities in Barbados can be approached, particularly through theories of ‘creolisation’.

Chapter 2, ‘Joshua Steele and the “improvement” of slavery’, has two main aims: firstly, to trace the initial impact of the emergent British antislavery campaign on Barbados and, secondly, to examine the response of the island’s white society. It does both by focussing on the efforts of a metropolitan reformer, Joshua Steele, who came to the island in 1780 to take direct control of a number of sugar estates that he owned. Influenced and feted by leading figures in the British antislavery campaign, Steele sought to promote particular forms of ‘improved’ and ‘enlightened’ plantation management, including the gradual ending of slavery. He did so through the creation of the Barbados Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, which lobbied local political institutions and provided financial rewards for innovation in plantation management practice. He also used his own estates to demonstrate the benefits of his reforms. Despite considerable political, financial and persuasive efforts made by Steele to promote an ‘enlightened’ vision for Barbados, his actual accomplishments were modest. The chapter describes the emergence of local opposition from Barbados’s conservative planters at the end of the eighteenth century and the renewed hostility that accompanied the attempts of the British antislavery movement to revive his ideas in the 1820s. To account for this opposition, two main articulations of white colonial identity are considered. The first, ‘white supremacism’, was apparent in opposition to Steele’s attempts to challenge taken-for-granted racial hierarchies, such as banning the use of the whip on his estates. The second – the ‘planter ideal’ – comprised notions that slavery was a paternalistic system based on a long history of local expertise. Committed to the amelioration of slavery, white planters already saw and styled themselves as enlightened masters. Steele’s new, ‘rational’ proposals for the reform of slavery were opposed because they ran counter to local notions of how a ‘good master’ ran ‘his’ affairs. Both these discourses can be understood as setting limits to the ‘improvement’ of slavery and the reforms that were conceivable in Barbados. Steele challenged both discourses, but his inability to destabilise them indicates their strength and accounts, in part, for the failure of his ‘enlightened’ vision. By examining the local response to Joshua Steele’s reformist efforts, the chapter considers the most salient articulations of white creole culture in Barbados that were mobilised to defend slavery during the age of abolition.

Turning from differences between colonial and metropolitan visions of reform, chapter 3, ‘Making a “well constituted Society”: the ambitions and limits of white unity’, turns to tensions *within* white Barbadian society in the decades either side of 1800. This period witnessed intensive antislavery campaigning, a reactionary backlash in Britain and the eventual abolition of the British slave trade in 1807. The particular focus of the chapter is John Poyer, author of the *History of Barbados* (1808). Poyer was an important middle-class commentator on local affairs and was at the forefront of efforts to racially re-order the colonial society by marginalising the island’s free coloured population and promoting its poor whites. This

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project was based on notions of an idealised, unified white population in which race – rather than class or status – was the primary marker of identity and privilege. Yet Poyer's efforts received a mixed response from elite white planters and his racialised vision was challenged in a petitioning campaign launched by the free people of colour. Poyer's failure to realise his vision underlines the ambitions and limits of 'whiteness'. Whilst chapter 2 explores the tensions between a metropolitan-originating project of 'improvement' and local ideas of race, slavery and plantation management, chapter 3 examines how the uncertain place of two 'liminal' groups – the poor whites and free people of colour – revealed tensions *within* the local articulation of white colonial identities. These tensions centred on the issue of whether society should be organised around the control of enslaved labour, irrespective of the 'race' of the slaveholders, or whether whiteness should be the basis of social authority, despite socio-economic differences amongst whites. By exploring the representations of, and acts towards, the liminal figures, these competing visions are considered, including the active role played by the poor whites and free people of colour in contemporary debates.

The fourth and fifth chapters move the discussion squarely into the realm of the trans-Atlantic campaign over slavery and form the substantive core of the book. Whilst Barbados's planters had been fairly unperturbed about the abolition of the slave trade, because they had a self-reproducing enslaved population, the antislavery campaign increasingly turned its attention to the internal state of the West Indian societies. It was this 'interference' that planters blamed for inciting the 1816 rebellion, the largest slave revolt in Barbados's colonial history. Although it was suppressed within a matter of days, the uprising became a key moment in the controversy over slavery. In its aftermath, opponents and supporters of slavery tried to establish a dominant account of the rebellion to influence the imperial authorities and British public opinion. Chapter 4, 'Locating blame for the 1816 rebellion', explores the competing accounts and narratives of the rebellion and its origins, as produced by the planter authorities, British abolitionists and the Afro-Caribbean rebels. These competing representations of enslaved resistance were associated with different ways of imagining the connections between Britain, Barbados and other Atlantic sites, such as Haiti. They were also related to differential constructions of white identity. By focussing on the 1816 revolt – sometimes known as 'Bussa's Rebellion' – the chapter provides a theoretically informed re-reading of one of the most significant events in Barbados's history. This is explored as an intense moment of identity-formation, in which different forms of white colonial identity were articulated, enacted, disturbed and challenged. The connections between self-representation and the representation of others are traced and related to acts of enslaved resistance, white violence and pro- and antislavery campaigning. By analysing these, some of the themes addressed in chapters 2 and 3 are revisited. Most importantly, the chapter shows that the enslaved Afro-Caribbean rebels articulated different discourses of whiteness by mocking and provoking colonial notions of sexual propriety, questioning the 'Englishness' of white

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Barbadians and marginalising the importance of white people in their struggle for freedom.

The year 1823 saw the resurgence of the British antislavery campaign and a reformist shift in imperial policy. Chapter 5, 'Anti-Methodism and the uncertain place of Barbados', uses local opposition to this metropolitan-originating reformism to explore the status of the colony within a changing British empire and the consequences this had for the articulation of white creole identities. The main focus of the chapter is on the persecution of the local Methodist community by sections of the white population. This included the destruction of a chapel and subsequent flight of the missionary, as well as the circulation of anti-Methodist propaganda and official harassment by the island's authorities. By relating these various forms of anti-Methodism to broader opposition to the antislavery movement and considering the responses in Britain that this colonial opposition engendered, the chapter explores the ambivalent relationship between the articulation of white Barbadian and white British identities. The extremes and limits of white creole identities are evident in chapter 5. Echoing John Poyer's desire for racial re-alignment, anti-Methodism was an expression of a white supremacist identity in opposition to religious Dissent and metropolitan abolitionism. This identity was deeply ambivalent because it combined colonial loyalty with colonial opposition. The latter aspects of the Methodist persecution were seized upon by abolitionists, who challenged white Barbadian claims that they were loyal Britons overseas. This was recognised by upper-class planters in the island, who desperately sought to repair Barbados's reputation by distancing themselves from 'the rabble', whom they blamed for the religious persecution. The ambivalence of anti-Methodism and the elitist response to the metropolitan criticism that it engendered reveal not only class tensions in Barbados, but more general uncertainty about the nature of white West Indian identity in terms of its place within a changing British empire.

The final chapter, "'Days of misery and nights of fear": white ideas of freedom at the end of slavery', has twin aims: firstly, to revisit and connect some of the themes discussed in previous chapters and, secondly, to explore how attempts to shape Barbadian society as the end of slavery approached were framed by earlier articulations of white creole identity. With the emancipation of the enslaved West Indian populations becoming inevitable by the early 1830s, white Barbadians sought to ensure that their socio-economic dominance would be maintained afterwards. To this end, they promulgated favourable representations of slavery to secure financial compensation for the 'loss' of human property. Such efforts involved mobilising the planter ideal discussed in chapter 2 by drawing contrasts between the 'improved' nature of plantation management on the island and the supposedly more brutal forms practised elsewhere in the British West Indies. The chapter goes on to consider the socio-racial implications of 'freedom' for white Barbadians. The importance of a high-profile case in 1832 in which an enslaved black man, Robert James, was tried and convicted for the rape of a poor white woman, Mary Higginbotham, is emphasised. The chapter shows how the James

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case came to serve as an omen for white supremacist fears about the dangerous, free black person. Ideas of domestic defilement and the loss of home were prevalent in representations of the case, which, in turn, were linked to white concerns that 'freedom' would change Barbadian society for the worse. The chapter then turns to consider the response to the James case by analysing the public demonstrations that greeted the remission of James's death sentence and a stage play performed in this period. Both forms of political and cultural practice are shown to be bound up with the fashioning of a new form of white colonial identity on the threshold of emancipation that was more racially supremacist in outlook. This is a theme that is pursued further in the Epilogue.

Together, the substantive chapters address a series of key episodes during the controversy over slavery in Barbados that throw light upon the articulation and constitution of white creole culture, politics and identity in the age of abolition. Investigating these moments provides a means of writing a grounded, postcolonial account of white colonial identities in the Atlantic world.

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The geographical ‘problem of slavery’

The circuits of capital, commodities and labour that integrated Barbados into the Atlantic world and beyond also formed the basis for ‘new habits of causal attribution that set the stage for humanitarianism’ in late eighteenth-century Britain.¹ The trade in enslaved people and the chattel slavery that it supplied in plantation societies such as Barbados was the most emotive of all the transactions in which Britons engaged in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Indeed, David Brion Davis has argued that the mass enslavement of (racialised) others had always been a ‘problem’ in Western culture.² Nevertheless, it was not until the 1760s and 1770s that there emerged a ‘widespread conviction that New World slavery symbolized all the forces that threatened the true destiny of man [sic]’.³ In discussing the shift in attitudes towards slavery, Davis argues that it involved

a profound change in the basic paradigm of social geography – a conceptual differentiation between what can only be termed a ‘slave world’ aberration and the ‘free world’ norm.

This ‘invidious demarcation’, as Davis terms it, was predicated upon a developing consensus in metropolitan Britain that colonial slavery was antithetical to ‘human

¹ T. L. Haskell, ‘Capitalism and the origins of the humanitarian sensibility, part 2’, *American Historical Review* 90 (1985), 535. See also C. A. Bayly, ‘The British and indigenous peoples, 1760–1860: Power, perception and identity’, in M. Daunton and R. Halpern (eds.), *Empire and others: British encounters with indigenous peoples, 1600–1850* (London: UCL Press, 1999); H. V. Bowen, ‘British conceptions of global empire, 1756–1783’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 26 (1998); T. L. Haskell, ‘Capitalism and the origins of the humanitarian sensibility, part 1’, *American Historical Review* 90 (1985); M. Ogborn, ‘Historical geographies of globalisation, c. 1500–1800’, in B. Graham and C. Nash (eds.), *Modern historical geographies* (Harlow: Prentice Hall, 2000); S. Thorne, ‘“The conversion of Englishmen and the conversion of the world inseparable”: Missionary imperialism and the language of class in early industrial Britain’, in F. Cooper and A. L. Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of empire: Colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

² D. B. Davis, *The problem of slavery in Western culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966).

³ D. B. Davis, *The problem of slavery in the age of revolution, 1770–1823* (London: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 41. See also D. Turley, *The culture of English antislavery, 1780–1860* (London: Routledge, 1991); J. Walvin, *Black ivory: A history of British slavery* (London: Harper Collins, 1992).