« Of a Negro, a Butler and a Grocer» - Ignatius Sancho’s epistolary contribution to the abolition campaign (1766-1780)

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In the course of this article, we are going to examine the numerous letters Ignatius Sancho, the first former slave now established grocer in London to have his correspondence published in England by two white editors. These letters were exchanged with his friends-cum-customers, as well as with two Black protegees and written in the course of several years from the moment he established himself as a grocer in London in 1773, with the financial support of his master the Duke of Montagu, to the time he died in 1780. Sancho was a prolific epistolarian though the content of his letters was not always remarkable in terms of literary or social reflections. He greatly admired Laurence Sterne to whom he wrote for the first time in 1766 to engage the reverend to write in favour of the abolition of slavery. Apart from this militant letter, Sancho hardly approached the question of slavery in his prolific correspondence. Sancho rarely adopted a militant or radical tone in his letters to prominent members of the society. But at times, when writing to a foreigner or some one residing outside of England or one of his Black protegees, Sancho expressed his views on the status of Black people in Britain, as well as on the fate of his African brothers transported to the West Indies. The analysis of this handful of letters evoking slavery will enable us to examine the uncomfortable position of this former Black slave, whose commercial and epistolary connections within London’s fashionable society led him to politely evade any unpalatable topics which might impair his business and his integration in those social circles, for whom the question of slavery and slave trade was far remote from their everyday concerns.

Dans cet article, nous allons analyser la correspondance d’Ignatius Sancho, publiée par deux éditeurs blancs après la mort de cet esclave africain ayant vécu toute sa vie sur le territoire britannique. Durant une dizaine d’années, de 1773 lorsque Sancho s’installe comme épicier à Londres jusqu’à 1780, l’année de son décès, l’ancien esclave désormais commerçant, correspond avec de nombreux clients de la meilleure société à Londres. Sancho les a rencontrés lorsqu’il était majordome du duc de Montague. Pour les deux éditeurs de Sancho, la publication de l’ensemble de sa correspondance mettait en accusation les thèses de l’époque selon lesquelles l’homme noir était inférieur intellectuellement à l’homme blanc, voire incapable de posséder une once d’intelligence. L’ensemble de la correspondance reste « décévante » pour l’historien à la recherche d’un engagement de cet homme en faveur de l’abolition de l’esclavage. Une grande partie de ses échanges épistolaires est destinée à des fins commerciales. Il est essentiel pour l’épicier de Westminster de rester en bons termes avec ses prestigieux clients. Cependant, certaines lettres échangées avec des correspondants vivant à l’étranger ou avec un des ces jeunes protégés noirs, portent sur l’inhumanité de l’esclavage dont ses parents et lui-même ont souffert. L’analyse de ces quelques lettres qui contrastent avec le ton poli des autres missives commerciales va révéler les difficultés qu’éprouve cet homme à s’intégrer dans la société blanche et huppée de Londres à laquelle il veut s’identifier. Pourtant son souhait d’aider ses frères africains le taraude. Il s’en ouvre à Laurence Sterne en 1766, sans grand résultat. Il ne souhaitera plus poursuivre cette cause trop militante par la suite, par crainte de compromettre son commerce puisque, la bonne société londonienne ne s’intéresse nullement à l’esclavage en 1780.

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« Of a Negro, a Butler and a Grocer ³ - Ignatius Sancho’s epistolary contribution to the abolition campaign (1766-1780)

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The National Portrait Gallery in London is missing one interesting portrait which is exhibited in the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. I am referring to the portrait of the “first Afro-Briton” as the Dictionary of National Biography describes Ignatius Sancho. His portrait was painted by Thomas Gainsborough in 1768, at a time when Ignatius Sancho was still employed by the second Duke of Montagu as butler. According to historian Vincent Caretta (Caretta, xii), the Duke of Montagu had his Black butler painted by Gainsborough in Bath in November 1768, in order to display his exotic servant and footman, usually associated with wealthy households. However, in this portrait, Sancho the butler is dressed as a successful gentleman, his right hand half hidden in his coat, posing as a navy commander. However this portrait which does not hang among other prominent figures’ portraits in the London gallery, reveals the ambiguity of the position and status of the first well know African in England. Sancho who became a character, having risen from bondage in the hands of three British ladies to the rank of butler in “one of the most prominent families of the kingdom” (Jekyll, vii), eventually established himself as a grocer in exotic goods in the most famous and fashionable London quarter of Westminster in 1773.

As we are going to examine his correspondence with his wealthy customers whom Sancho addressed as his “benevolent friends” (Sancho, 42), we will see that the contradictions found in the figure represented in the portrait by Gainsborough, a Black butler posing as an English gentleman, reflect the contradictions within the character of Sancho, more specifically that of a split identity between his African roots and his Englishness. We will come across the irreconcilable tensions raised by his status, that of an African living in a country where prejudice against Black men was ingrained in the best circles. Nonetheless, in his social ascension from bondage in an English household to freedom as butler and eventually to independent grocer in Westminster, Sancho did his best to assimilate the English virtues, reminding his prominent readers-cum-customers of his efforts to conform to their sensibilities. Hence if the portrait of Sancho was paid for his employer, the Duke of Montagu,

it is a Black gentleman sitting for his own portrait that the viewer could see, in the vein of other typical portraits of the kind which successful traders or wealthy members of the middling-sort had prominent painters execute (of themselves) to establish their posterity. In 1768, Sancho’s portrait had nothing in common with the previous representations of “Blackamoors” as little black pages or black footmen or hairdressers in livery, traditionally depicted in some of Hogarth’s scenes such as in the “Toilette” (or the “Countess’ Levee”), in the *Marriage à la Mode* series circa 1743.

We are going to examine the numerous letters Sancho exchanged with his friends-cum-customers, as well as with his Black protegees, Soubise and Charles Lincoln, in the course of several years from the moment he established himself as a grocer in London in 1773, thanks to the Duke of Montagu’s financial support, to the time he died in 1780. Sancho was a prolific epistolarian though the content of his letters was not always remarkable in terms of literary or social reflections. He greatly admired Laurence Sterne to whom he wrote for the first time in 1766 to engage the reverend to write in favour of the abolition of slavery. Apart from this militant letter, Sancho hardly approached the question of slavery in his prolific correspondence. Indeed, his purpose in maintaining a regular exchange with his correspondents seemed to have been commercially oriented. He regularly wrote to some of his benevolent customers in order to inform about their health or by sending them regards from his wife and himself when their wealthy customers resided on their summer estates. As we will see, Sancho rarely adopted a militant or radical tone in his letters to prominent members of the society. But at times, when writing to a foreigner or some one residing outside of England, Sancho expressed his views on the status of Black people in Britain, as well as on the fate of his African brothers transported to the West Indies.

Ignatius Sancho wrote at a time when Britain was engaged in a war against its colonists in America and Sancho’s comments on this uncomfortable situation for England, reveals his English patriotism which came naturally under his pen. Though at times, in the letters in which Sancho opens his heart on the question of slavery, we will see that Sancho naturally placed some distance between England and he, by resorting to some form of African humour which he himself claimed, was part of his own identity.

In 1783, his letters were posthumously published by Frances Crewe, one of his correspondents and dear client. The collection of letters which had not been intended to be
published by Sancho himself and which Crewe patiently collected from his correspondents, reflected the everyday concerns of a man whose extraordinary fate from slave to grocer, and from obscurity to fame (at least for a decade). They provide with the student of the 18th century debate on slavery, a great insight on the condition and status of one of the first African-Britons in a nation vibrant with prejudice against Africans and black slaves in general. The letters also reveal that shortly before the great public debate on the slave trade - which was officially launched in 1787 -, the English elite with whom Sancho corresponded, was not involved or not even concerned by the fate of the slaves in their colonies.

**Publishing Sancho’s letters, a challenge to anti-African prejudiced circles**

Frances Crewe, Ignatius Sancho’s friend and collector of his letters after Sancho’s death stated in the anonymous disclaimer found in the first edition of 1782 that “the author of these letters”, Sancho, had not planned to publish them. She insisted on the fact that she had been egged by a sole motive: “laying [the letters] before the public” with “the desire of shewing that an untutored African may possess abilities equal to a European.” (Crewe, iii-iv) Miss Crewe was concerned by humanist feelings towards Africans living in Britain as some of her contemporaries as we are going to see; but she also justified the publishing of these somehow equally interesting letters by her philanthropic motivations, those of serving “his worthy family”, as Sancho had left five children and a widow with hardly any money (Crewe, iv).

Miss Crewe seemed to know that the content of the letters would not be hailed as a great literary performance by the public, admitting to the fact that “the public has not been found inattentive to the voice of obscure merit.” (Crewe, iv) Clearly, Sancho’s correspondence did not deserve to be published for its intrinsic value. Nonetheless the publishing of his letters was a means of propaganda for a number of Evangelicals and humanists, in order to ridicule the current views circulating at home, under the pen of David Hume (Prum, 61) or Edward Long, exposing the inherent inabilities and deficiencies in intelligence of those called “Nêgers.”

Similarly, in the preface written by Joseph Jekyll, “Memoirs of his Life”, the lawyer and member of Parliament Jekyll insists on the fact that Sancho was himself the product of an “educational experiment” (Jekyll, vi), that of the first Duke of Montagu who contributed actively to establishing that Black men shared the same abilities of intelligence as any white men. As we noted earlier, Miss Crewe insisted on the fact that Sancho rose from “untutored”
African to the status of “man of letters” (Crewe, iv). In fact, Sancho had been tutored by the Duke of Montagu who from an early age had taken notice of the “little negro” (Jekyll, x), comments Jekyll, who lived in bondage in a household nearby, where he was exploited by three prejudiced women. Sancho had been brought to England by a white master at the age of two after his mother and father had died into slavery shortly after their passage from Africa.

The Duke of Montagu taught the young boy how to read and write, offering him to visit and study in his library when Sancho was able to leave his mistresses’ house for a few hours. The Duke’s “educational experiment” had already proven successful, at least to prove David Hume wrong when he affirmed that Africans and “Nēgers” could only be controlled by passion and impulses. In the early 1740s, Montagu had indeed brought back from Jamaica a young slave called Francis Williams whose intellectual abilities and whose verses he had admired when in the colony. Montagu had paid for his education at Cambridge where he studied the classics and mathematics. Williams had been the object of Hume’s racist criticism, the Duke continued to prove him wrong with the example of Sancho.

Through Jekyll’s narration of Sancho’s life story, we are given to see the strong prejudice against Africans that pervaded high society, even in the best religious circles. For instance, when young Sancho lived under the roof of three maiden sisters who had received the slave as a gift and had accepted the little boy out of charity, his mistresses were strongly defiant towards him and treated him harshly. The women opposed the educational project of the Duke, since they believed that “African ignorance was the only security for his obedience, and that to enlarge the mind of their slave would go near to emancipate his person.” (Jekyll, v) Clearly, Sancho was then held in bondage in the land of freedom, England, without any attempt on the part of his mistresses at alleviating his fate in the name of charity, religion or humanity.

In the same vein, when the Duke died, Ignatius, at the age of 20, flew to the Duchess of Montagu for protection, away from the house in which he was treated as a slave. But the Duchess chid him and refused to accept him in her house. She scolded him for having fled from his mistresses to whom he belonged. Jekyll mentions about this episode: “the Duchess dismissed him with reproof”. Sancho then tried to kill himself “in a state of despondency and stupefaction.” (Jekyll, vi) After this painful episode of attempted suicide, the Duchess “at length consented to admit him into her household” (Jekyll, vii), where she employed him as a
servant then a butler. Again, this goes to show that prejudice against black men and the lack of knowledge on the question of property and bondage in the best circles, did not promote any movement towards the freedom of black slaves in England in the 1750s and 1760s.

Jekyll himself accepted to write the preface to Miss Crewe’s collection of letters written by Sancho to counteract the ongoing criticism on the worth and merit of Black men living in England. However Jekyll himself succumbed to the prejudices circulating in the public sphere on the character of the “Negro”. Indeed in order to make his point, Jekyll insisted on the transformation of Sancho into a dutiful, deserving, industrious grocer after having spent part of his life dilapidating his small income in gambling or in his love for the theater. Jekyll described this profligacy as inherent to the African character, in turn revealing his limited views on the topic of races, adding “Freedom, riches and leisure naturally led a disposition of African texture into indulgences” (Jekyll, vii). According to his biographer, the Black butler having learnt a hard lesson by losing all his money in gambling, Jekyll analysed Ignatius Sancho’s subsequent redemption, insisting on the importance of his Christian education to fight his “natural passions”: “Sancho was determined to abjure the propensity which appears to be innate among his countrymen” (Jekyll, viii).

Clearly, even among the “friends of the Negro” as people like Montagu or the Quakers will come to be known, or among the humanists like Jekyll or Miss Crew, prejudice still ran high when they implied that “freedom” from bondage could lead Africans living in England to lose their bearings and their Christian values, and to fall back to their original character, the victim of their indigenous passions. In making this point, Jekyll the lawyer did not seem to take into account Granville Sharp’s demonstration according to which slaves should be of right freed when living in England and entitled to their civil liberties like any English subjects.

What fascinates Jekyll the most however is this moment in time when Sancho, now educated and redeemed, applied himself and his new family - since he eventually married Anne, a former slave from the West Indies -, to his business as a grocer. Then he displayed the English traits of “frugality”, “rigid industry”, leading “a life of domestic virtue”, meriting “public imitation.” (Jekyll, vi) Sancho deserved attention since he now conformed to the eighteenth century national virtues, having left behind his African traits and character. According to his biographer, Sancho was part of the society of sensibility, he was able to feel sentiments and to express his own inner conversion articulately. In fact, Sancho expresses his Evangelical views
in most of his letters. Slaves were said to feel no sentiment or pain on the plantations which hardly distinguished them from animals. Sancho now deserved to be considered an educated Afro-Briton.

In “Memoirs of his Life” prefixed to Sancho’s correspondence, Jekyll also insisted on Sancho’s multiple intellectual abilities as an epistolarian, but also as a musician, as Sancho had written two pieces of music for the stage. Sancho’s biographer’s final words which were added in the editions published after 1785, included a final attack against the “philosophers and anatomists” who condemned “the species” of African men (Jekyll, viii) as a “deterioration of the human race.” However Jekyll refused to get involved in the larger debate of slavery. Evoking the Quakers’s movement towards the abolition of the slave trade in 1785, “on commercial principles”, Jekyll praised the works of Labat, Ferman and Bennezet [sic]. Nonetheless Jekyll the member of Parliament refused to get involved in these debates which he saw as “an impertinent digression” in his preface, as if the political debate and the ongoing “vulgar prejudice and popular insult” against Black men he denounced earlier on, could somehow mar the literary performance and achievements of Ignatius Sancho (Jekyll, ix).

Jekyll’s only contribution to the beginning of the debate against slavery and the slave trade can be found in a paragraph referring to the early naturalists’ debates on phrenology, i.e. the physical connection between intelligence, the size of the skull and the degree of latitude where the people were born. Dismissing this theory as ridiculous, Jekyll nonetheless adds another naturalist explanation which does not seem very advanced either, but which denounces slavery in the sugar colonies as reducing Africans to the state of mere beasts of burden:

He who could penetrate the interior of Africa, might not improbably discover negro arts and polity, which could bear little analogy to the ignorance and grossness of slaves in the sugar islands, expatriated in infancy, and brutalized under the whip of the task master. (Jekyll, ix)

Jekyll clearly refuses to take part in the new public debate launched in Britain by the Quakers and sustained by legislative and legal discourses. In 1782 when the series of letters was published by Miss Crewe and Jekyll, one cannot speak of a global coherence or cooperation on the question of slavery or the slave trade in Britain. Jekyll in spite of his qualifications to lead a legal or political battle to remove slavery, refuses to engage on such a road preferring to remain on safe intellectual grounds: the naturalist debate.
“Of a Negro and a grocer”, of an Englishman and an African

When Ignatius Sancho opened his grocery shop in the wealthiest quarter of London, Westminster, he was helped by his benefactor the second Duke of Montagu. Hence members of the elite, men and women as well as Parliamentarians came to his shop to find many exotic products “tea, snuff and sugar” (Sancho, 49), produced by the slave trade, on slave holding plantations in the West Indies or in America. Sancho also sold tobacco, cocoa, sugar, spices in his shop. However, he never mentioned in his private correspondence the incongruity of selling goods produced by African slavery among whose victims his parents had been.

In fact, even though political correctness would not approve of this comment, I believe that the printing of this series of letters for the public, truly relies on the vested interests of people like Jekyll or Crewe whose concern was in demonstrating to philosophers, including Hume, that black men could write some decent prose. Therefore the actual content of this daily correspondence with Sancho’s customers and friends is very limited for historians today or for the militants of abolition at the time. Its literary merits have been discussed and debated at length in other places. All things considered, one must admit that the every day banting with friends or the routine letters inquiring about Sancho’s customers’ health remain of a limited interest for historians seeking information about Sancho’s position within the black community in London or his own views on the slave trade for instance.

Ignatius Sancho does not appear as a polemist and in spite of a few petulant moments of fiery comments on the American colonies at war, modern readers remain quite aloof from his “commercial” correspondence. By this I refer to the regular networking Sancho worked on with his most important customers including members of the nobility, people he might actually have met while working as butler to the Dukes or Duchess of Montagu. It seems that Sancho spent a lot of time inquiring about so and so’s health, sending him/her his family’s best regards... All in all, Sancho’s remarks on slavery take up four letters out of the 157 published in two volumes. Were topics which might bring his readers back to Sancho’s original status banned from the epistolary conversations ? Or did Sancho choose to deliberately erase topics which would sound too polemical or tiresome to his customers, preferring inquiring about their own health rather than expanding on his own views ? Here is a typical exchange between the grocer and one of his female customers or patrons, which one could liken to commercial banting over “teas”:
Dear Madam,

I and mine have a thousand things to thank you for – shall I say the plain truth, and own I am proud to know that you care for me and my little ones? Your friendly attention to our interests proves it – but mortals of your cast are oftener envied than loved [...] My business was to give you some account why I delayed the teas, and to thank you for your very noble order; H – desires his love to you and the worth partner of your heart, to whom I join with my spouse in wishing you every earthly felicity. [...] As to complain in trade, there is nothing else – we are all poor grumblers, all preaching economy – and wishing our neighbours to practice it [...] (Sancho, 213)

Sancho’s style is rather humorous and his rambling thoughts often come forward as conversational. To many of his correspondents, he presents himself as the typical Blackamoor of comedy type or as “a poor African” (Sancho, 26). Sancho casts himself in the typical Black African character-type either in deference to the status of a prominent correspondent or when he believes he has left his thoughts ramble in a disorderly fashion, which he blaming in his “palabre” style. Sancho does not negate his African background but turns it into a pun once in a while to better enhance his own success as a former slave now patronizing London’s best society in his shop. Writing to Miss Leach he regularly closes his letters by the expression “I am, as much as a poor African can be, sincerely Yours to command, IGN. SANCHO” (Sancho, 26).

As for the rare instances where Sancho divulges his views on slavery, his correspondents are carefully chosen among either a Black man (Soubise), a young white sailor (Mr Brown) or a young gentleman working for the East India Company (John Wingrave). In the case of the last two correspondents to whom Ignatius Sancho opened up his heart on the question of slavery, the grocer tends to excuse himself for venturing beyond the rules of epistolary propriety after he developed his thoughts. For instance to young Wingrave, he adds after having explained to him the principles of English imperialism in India or Africa, “but enough – it is a subject that sours my blood and I am sure will not please the friendly bent of your social affections (Sancho, 131)”, thereby implying that his white correspondents might tire of him if he expressed his personal grudges as an African.

Similarly, Sancho tended to establish his network of customers and correspondents among the best white society of London. His support for other members of the Black community living in London, is limited to two young men, Soubise and Charles Lincoln. He introduced Soubise to his friend Jack Wingrave by describing him as “a little Blacky” (Sancho, 27) to which money should not be lent as he is too prompt to spend it. Soubise reminds Sancho of himself and he consequently played the part of mentor to the young man. His purpose in
corresponding with him is to remove the flaws of his African character in order to turn him into a proper English gentleman. Sancho prompted Soubise to read the Bible and to reflect on his actions in order to conform to the best society which Sancho hoped he would gradually be introduced to.

Sancho also became the mentor of Charles Lincoln, a sailor and a musician who immediately displayed some virtues which Sancho promoted with his friend Jack Wingrave, “he is honest, trusty, good-natured and civil. If you see him, take notice of him and I will regard it as a kindness to me.” (Sancho, 27) Sancho’s concern lies in supporting these deserving young Black men, lending them a supporting shoulder in the same way as the Duke of Montagu had promoted him to higher ranks. Sancho tried to facilitate this social ascension and integration in white British society for his proteges. Writing to Soubise on Octobre 11, 1772, he begs him to imitate his white benefactors:

> With awe and reverence look up to thy more than parents – look up to thy almost divine benefactors – search into the motive of every glorious action – retrace thine own history – and when you are convinced that they (like the All-gracious power they serve) go about in mercy doing good – retire abashed at the number of their virtues – and humbly beg the Almighty to inspire and give you strength to imitate them [...] If your conversion is real, I shall ever be happy in your correspondence. (Sancho, 46-47)

Sancho subsequently reminded Soubise that he, like him, has been blessed by Providence when they compare their fate to their fellow brothers in slavery. This passage is one of the rare open criticisms against slave owners and merchants which Sancho will ever put on paper in the course of his correspondence. Adequately, the freedom of his speech could only be found in a letter exchanged with a fellow Black man as such a remark against the English trade, would have been disrespectful towards the middling sort in any other letter with a white customer or patron:

> Happy, happy lad! what a fortune is thine! Look round upon the miserable fate of almost all of our unfortunate colour – superadded to ignorance, - see slavery, and the contempt of those very wretches who roll in affluence from our labours superadded to this woeful catalogue.(Sancho, 46)

In order to preserve this liberty, Sancho encouraged Soubise to obey and comply, to admire and imitate his patrons in the same way, one understands between the lines, as Sancho managed his own ascension among the powerful circle of the Montagus for which Sancho still worked in 1772 when this letter to Soubise was written.

Similarly, seeking a position as a footman or butler for another “little Blacky”, Sancho wrote to his friend Mr Brown in search of “a good master” for this “little fellow – with a woolly pate
Sancho evacuates the background of slavery in which this “Blacky” must have grown up in the French Antilles, to put forward the westernized qualities of the young valet who “can ride, can look upon a couple of horses, dresses hair in the present state – shaves light – and understands something of the arrangement of a table and sideboard” (Sancho, 60). Sancho’s promotion of the young man is furthered by the fact that he guarantees his “decent character.” He tells his friend Brown, “I like the rogue’s looks, or a similarity of colour should not have induced me to recommend him. (Sancho, 61)” In this specific case, the young valet is employable because he fits the image of the compliant, serviceable black boy which Sancho believes, is the only way out of slavery for black Africans.

Residing in the constituency of Westminster where he paid a certain amount of taxes as proprietor of his grocery shop, though purchased for his family by the second Duke of Montagu, Sancho was able to cast his vote to elect a representative for Westminster in the House of Commons. Besides his commercial acquaintance with many grandee customers led him to closely follow parliamentary debates. Conformity can also be found in Sancho’s desire to pass for an English man taking position on political topics which concerned his nation. Most of his comments on the way the war in the American colonies was conducted or the lack of commandment in the British Empire for which he feared for his own trade, are pronounced out of strong patriotism and commercial concern. Sancho does not even question his belonging to the English nation, particularly as he can vote in an election unlike many white small artisans.

The rare distance which Sancho takes with his own country occurs when he discusses the involvement of Britain in the slave trade. There, in the four letters we are going to examine below, Sancho distanced himself from the expression “our nation” which he usually put forward in his analysis of England’s warmongering abroad. There he assumed his Black identity seriously and detaching himself from England, he positioned himself as “a resident” to better criticize the “sins” of England or more particularly of so-called Christian English merchants (Sancho, 213-214).

**Sancho on slavery and on England as a slave-trading nation**
As pointed out earlier, Ignatius Sancho seems remote from the inhumane trafficking in Africans in his daily correspondence with his friends and patrons. His concern revolves around the everyday domestic politics of his English nation to which he can take part as a voter. Apart from the humorous castigation of his own African traits in some passages, his own origins are hardly evoked in his letters.

The first instance of reference to slavery in Sancho’s correspondence may be found in a letter to some Mr Brown, written in July 1772, at a time when texts on the inhumanity of slavery were already circulating in Britain and more particularly at a time when the *Somerset Case* had recently been dealt with in June, in a London Court of Justice. Though writing to his friend travelling to the West Indies, Sancho makes no mention of the legal case, reminding his friend instead of sending him half a dozen of cocoa nuts. As to remarks about slaves which his correspondent must have made, Sancho replied with a series of remarks which seems to place him both within the African community and as a distant observer of the manners of his fellow men with whom Sancho has never lived. His comments sound very disparaging towards his fellow Africans in the West Indies. He does not question the state of slavery or bondage admitting it as a fact, and strangely adopting views circulating by planters:

> I thank you for your kindness to my poor black brethren – I flatter myself you will find them not ungrateful – they act commonly from their feelings: - I have observed a dog will love those who use him kindly – and surely, if so, negroes – in their state of ignorance and bondage will not act less generously, if I may judge them by myself [...] (Sancho, 45)

Nonetheless, Sancho assumes his double identity, that of African living in Britain to provide some criticism on British policies regarding the trade, slavery and human trafficking. Strangely enough, Sancho never refers to his own past and to the fact that his mother died on board the ship that was taking them across the “Middle Passage” or that his father killed himself as he refused to spend his life in slavery. There is no sentimental appeal to his reader or pathos. Sancho’s demonstration is based on facts, not on sentiment.

The most important letter revealing Sancho’s views on slavery is the well-known letter he wrote to Laurence Sterne in July 1766 (Sancho, appendix B, 331) when he was still working as a butler for Montagu. In this long letter he begged the reverend to continue to evoke slavery in his sermons in order to convince the hearts of English people of its cruelty. Sancho greatly admired Sterne’s work, particularly Sterne’s style which literary critics believe the budding author tried to imitate. Sancho first introduced himself to Sterne as “one of those
people whom the vulgar and illiberal call ‘Negurs’ (Sancho, 331)” After retracing his early years in the household of the three prejudiced maiden sisters, he evoked his life among “the best families in the kingdom” (Sancho, 331), as well as his discovery of books of which he declares himself a lover. Past this personal introduction which enabled Ignatius to present himself as an educated man, contacting Sterne as a literaty admirer, Sancho went straight to his point. He begged Sterne to continue his diligent attacks against slavery. Sancho quoted an extract from one of Sterne’s sermons in which the latter claimed:

> Consider how great a part of our species – in all ages down to this – have been trod under the feet of cruel and capricious tyrants, who would neither hear their cries, nor pity their distresses. – Consider slavery – what it is – how bitter a draught – and how many millions are made to drink it! (Sancho, 331)

Sancho then proceeded to congratulate Sterne by placing him as the most prominent among his contemporaries for having had the courage to denounce slavery. Among the others, Sancho noted “not one had drawn a tear in favour of my miserable black brethren – excepting yourself, and the humane author of Sir George Ellison” (Sancho, 74). In other words, Sancho believed that English men and women would be sensible to sermons appealing directly to their religious sentiments. Sancho continued his praise of Sterne’s powerful prose by “beseeching” him to “give one half hour’s attention to slavery, as it is at this day practised in our West Indies. (Sancho, 74, italics mine)”

Though not able to tackle the task himself by promoting his own views on slavery among his own correspondents for the various reasons we have observed above, such as trespassing the rules of propriety, Ignatius Sancho had set the task for Sterne as early as 1766 and the last part of the letter was devoted to convincing Sterne that his voice, his literary aura, his sentimentalism would work wonders among his fellow English men:

> That subject, handled in your striking manner, would ease the yoke (perhaps) of many – but if only of one – Gracious God! – what a feast to a benevolent heart! – and sure I am, you are an epicurean in acts of charity.
> You who are universally read, and as universally admired – you could not fail – Dear Sir, think in me you behold the uplifted hands of thousands of my brother Moors. – Grief (you pathetically observe) is eloquent; - figure to yourself their attitudes; - hear their supplicating addresses! – alas! – you cannot refuse. Humanity must comply – in which hope I beg permission to subscribe myself. (Sancho, 74)

Here, in this letter to Sterne in order to convince him to work for the promotion of abolition lies Sancho’s main effort in 1766 to appeal to the hearts of English men, while himself remained aloof in his private correspondence with his customers. Sancho’s main concern there was to subsist in his business, regularly complaining to friends of his dependence on international trade, “I labour up hill against many difficulties” and in the months following the
beginning of the war of independence in the colonies, “trade is duller than ever I knew it and money scarcer” (Sancho, 213). Instead of promoting the end of slavery, Sancho acted as a staunched imperialist and devoted patriot by defining “the outline of a plan for establishing a most respectable body of Seamen, to the number of 20,000, to be ever ready for the manning of a fleet upon twelve days notice” (Sancho, 106). This fleet could easily intervene to promote trade and protect colonial markets either in the Americas or in India; “that this cursed carnage of the human species may end – commerce revive – sweet social peace be extended through the globe – and the British Empire be strongly knit in the never-ending bands of sacred friendship and brotherly love” (Sancho, 106).

Sancho actually planned to send his outline to The General Advertiser in 1777 when the first British defeats in America became known in London. As we can see Sancho was not ashamed of publicizing his ideas in newspapers when it came to saving his commercial interests and its nation’s positions overseas to save “the honoured name of England (Sancho, 82)” At the same time as he was publicly promoting the greatness of the English Empire, the following year, Sancho wrote to young John Wingrave based in India and tried to define the flawed principles of the same Empire. In this letter, Sancho reacted to Wingrave’s complaints about the greedy “deceitful people” of India, “mostly blacks” (Sancho, 130). Sancho reminded his young friend about the fact that greed and deceit had first been introduced to Asia or Africa by European Christians:

> My good friend, you should remember from whom they learnt those vices: - the first Christian visitors found them a simple, harmless people – but the cursed avidity for wealth urged these first visitors (and all the succeeding ones) to such acts of deception – even wanton cruelty. (Sancho, 130)

In the previous letters which closed volume I, Sancho had expressed his support of his English nation. In this letter, opening the second volume, written a few months later, Sancho detached himself from England’s practices abroad and expressed his freedom of speech by writing to a young man living abroad whose imperialism he wished to moderate with Evangelical exhortation. This remains the sole instance of moral detachment Sancho felt towards England in the course of his published correspondence, placing himself on the side of the “colonized”:

> I am sorry to observe that the practice of your country (which as a resident I love – and for its freedom – and for the many blessings I enjoy in it – shall ever have my warmest wishes – prayers – and blessings), I say it with reluctance that I must observe your country’s conduct has been uniformly wicked in the East – West Indies – and event on the coast of Guinea (Sancho, 131)
In a second letter written to a foreigner, an American Quaker, Mr Fisher, on January 27, 1778, Sancho opened up to his correspondent about slavery and safely develops his arguments on the topic, by referring to the pamphlets circulating in England, under the pen of members of Mr Fisher’s “sect”. Sancho thanked him for books sent to England which the Black author believed could only convert to anti-slavery any hard-hearted reader and even “produce remorse in every enlightened and candid reader” (Sancho, 110). Here, to an outsider, Sancho evokes his personal sentiments on slavery and the tragic story of his family which was brought back to his mind when reading what seems to be one of Benezet’s essays on the slave trade:

The perusal affected me more than I can express; - indeed I felt a double or mixt sensation – for while my heart was torn for the sufferings – which, for aught I know – some of my nearest kin might have undergone – my bosom, at the same time, glowed with gratitude – and praise toward the humane – the Christian – the friendly and learned Author of that most valuable book. Blest be your sect! (Sancho, 111)

Dreaming of circulating the book among the powerful parliamentarians, some of whom he counted as his customers, royalist Sancho had faith in his representatives in 1778. He writes to Mr Fisher:

I could wish that every member of each house of Parliament had one of these books. – And if his majesty perused one through before breakfast – though it might spoil his appetite – yet the consciousness of having it in his power to facilitate the great work – would give an additional sweetness to his tea.(Sancho, 112)

Conclusion – Sancho’s posterity?

Ignatius Sancho in spite of his lack of involvement on the question of slavery in the public sphere, was nonetheless preoccupied by it. The close reading of his correspondence revealed some sparse intents at promoting the cause of the abolition but never directly. Sancho’s position as a “right thinking savage” turned into a London grocer-cum-author, with acquaintances in the “best circles”, meant that in order to conserve or preserve this social opportunity that Providence had given him, he had to keep quiet on topics which might frustrate his customers or embarrass them, or remind them of what he originally was: a “Nèger”. The general picture which can be drawn from this portrait gathered between the lines, is that of a compliant man, having assimilated the keys of success in eighteenth century England. However his concern for his own people, combined with his Evangelical approach, his late conversion to Wesley’s church, all point to a silent desire to save his brethren from slavery by resorting to various means to promote the cause.
One must add that the militants or those upon which Ignatius Sancho might have relied to promote the cause of freedom in the West Indies, like Laurence Sterne, did not get involved as much as he hoped they would in relaying ideas on slavery. If we take the case of Reverend Sterne, his answer to Sancho’s pleading letter about his involvement in pamphlet-writing on slavery, seems quite typical of the lack of concern or involvement of authors in the 1770s. Sterne replies to Sancho’s letter by declaring that black slaves are his brothers too, adding humanistically “it is by the finest tints and most insensible gradations, that nature descends from the fairest face (about St James’ park) to the sootiest complexion in Africa: at which tint of these, is it, that the ties of blood are to cease?” (Sancho, appendix B, 332). Sterne replied to Sancho’s demand by indicating that he will labour with his pen in the novel he was writing, *Tristam Shandy*, at advancing the cause of “our Brothers and Sisters” (the episode of the black girl⁴). In typical Sternian humour, though useless in Sancho’s case, Sterne concluded he would “set upon a pilgrimage to Mecca for their sakes” if he knew it would change the slaves’ fate. (Sancho, appendix B, 332).

In 1784, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson tried to evaluate the values and virtues of each race living on the American continent from white men to Indians and eventually Black slaves. As part of his demonstration, he analysed the capacities of each race to produce pieces of art. Among the little literature that Black men and women had produced, Jefferson stated: “never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration” (Jefferson, 141). Sancho’s letters were part of his sketchy overview. He criticized Sancho’s style as the black man was affecting “a Shandean farication of words.” Though praising his merit in publishing these letters before the public and thus exposing himself to its judgement, Jefferson belittled Sancho’s contribution to his enlightened nation, Britain, as the letters did “more honour to the heart than the head.” Jefferson classified Ignatius Sancho at “the first place among those of his own colour”, but “at the bottom of the column”, far behind “the writers of the race among whom he lived.” (Jefferson, 142)

In the case of British militants like Thomas Clarkson who launched into the campaign in 1786. He only briefly quoted Ignatius Sancho’s work in his first prized *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species Particularly the African*. According to Clarkson, Sancho had already clearly and forcefully expressed his views on slavery, “his letters are too

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well known to make any extract, or indeed any further mention of him necessary” (Clarkson, 18). But Clarkson did not refer to these ideas, or to the experience of former Black slaves living in Britain in the course of his work. Some vague acknowledgement of Sancho’s contribution seemed to have been sufficient for the abolitionist. Similarly, Clarkson did not call upon the other Black contributors to the slavery debate, Equiano or Cugoano, in his collection of proofs and testimonies before the Privy Council in 1789.

As for Gainsborough’s portrait of Ignatius Sancho, it will prompt Equiano and Cugoano to have their portraits composed in the same style, thus establishing themselves as Afro-Briton gentlemen in the English tradition, posing for posterity.

Bibliography


Thomas CLARKSON, An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, particularly the African, translated from a Latin Dissertation, which has been honoured with the first prize in the University of Cambridge, for the year 1785, London, T. Cadell and J. Phillips, 1786.


