

Moral Fibre: Women's Fashion and the Free Cotton Movement, 1830-1860

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Women played a vital role in the American and British antislavery movements of the nineteenth century. Among other strategies, American women's efforts included boycotting slave-produced goods and selling luxury items to raise money for the cause. Complicated by the nation's diverse religious landscape, popular attitudes toward dress rendered some forms of consumer advocacy more effective than others. Fashionable antislavery fairs provided significant financial support for political campaigns. Meanwhile, Quaker Christians and some evangelical groups, which valued plain dress, promoted abstention from all slave-produced goods and the genesis of an alternative free-labour cotton trade. Unlike the famous British boycotts of slave-produced sugar, American textile boycotts gained little support. This paper examines how the tension between American fashion and antifashion influenced the rise and fall of the free cotton movement.

"Isn't Miss Dorcas a beauty!" said Jim.

"Come now, Jim, no slants," said Alice.

"I didn't mean any. Honest now, I like the old girl. She's sensible. She gets such clothes as she thinks right and proper, and marches straight ahead in them, instead of dragging and draggletailing after fashion; and it's a pity there weren't more like her."

"Dress is a vile, tyrannical Moloch," said Eva. "We are all too much enslaved to it."

"I know we are," said Alice. "I think it's *the* question of our day, what sensible women of small means are going to do about dress; it takes so much time, so much strength, so much money. Now, if these organizing, convention-holding women would only organize a dress reform, they would do something worthwhile."

"The thing is," said Eva, "that in spite of yourself you have to conform to fashion somewhat."

"Unless you do as your Quaker friends do," said Bolton.¹

— Harriet Beecher Stowe in *We and our Neighbors, or The Records of an Unfashionable Street*

Harriet Beecher Stowe is best known for her antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Its premise, the injustice of slavery and the power of Christian compassion to overcome it, was something most abolitionists could agree on; how they meant to accomplish this differed greatly. The sentiment behind the above excerpt, although published after the abolition of slavery, reflects an attitude toward the dress that underpinned Stowe's support of a controversial antislavery strategy, the

¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *We and our Neighbors, or The Records of an Unfashionable Street (Sequel to My Wife and I)* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1873), 194-195, accessed December 7, 2012, http://openlibrary.org/works/OL15277183W/We_and_our_neighbors_or_The_records_of_an_unfashionable_street._%28Sequel_to_My_wife_and_I%29_A_novel_by.

movement to boycott slave-produced cotton. Drawing inspiration from the British boycotts of West Indian sugar, the American free-produce movement gathered some momentum, but never attracted enough support to threaten the institution of plantation slavery. In the nation's fledgling capitalist economy, efforts to create an alternative free-cotton fashion system were met with debilitating obstacles throughout the supply chain. Historians of commerce and antebellum politics have identified fatal flaws with attempts to supply this commodity. I will examine the free cotton movement from the demand side of the market. In doing so, I will show how competing fashion and consumption ethics among female abolitionists contributed to free-labour cotton's success among Quaker groups and failure in the mainstream.

Female Agency in Consumer Advocacy

From their inception, the antislavery movements in Britain and America were associated with qualities ascribed to women, particularly empathy and familial love. Although the two most prominent political crusaders for abolition were male (William Wilberforce in Britain and William Lloyd Garrison in the United States), women's antislavery societies on both sides of the Atlantic lobbied publicly and persistently in what had been a male-dominated sphere. Although not without controversy, women's presence in abolition politics was understood as an extension of the maternal compassion they bestowed upon their own children. They were also seen as having an advantage over male activists in that, because they could not vote or run for office, their non-partisan status proved the authenticity of their views.² Furthermore, it was not always necessary to choose between public and domestic duties. African American activist Harriet Purvis cared for five children, hosted abolition fundraisers, and gave public lectures.³ Women like Purvis participated in a wide range of abolitionist activities, including giving speeches, distributing pamphlets, and writing poems, books and newspaper articles. They also raised substantial funds for political action and humanitarian aid for runaway slaves. Garrison is said to have praised female anti-slavery societies in part because they "paid at least half his bills in any given year."⁴

While all forms of antislavery activism expanded women's agency in the political discourse of the period, some forms of abolitionist action were more public than others. Of the avenues for promoting social change, no aspect of the movement better bridged the gap between the domestic and public sphere than consumer advocacy. During the nineteenth century, the emergence of American capitalism reduced the likelihood that men and women would work alongside each other to provide for their families. This trend entrenched divisions between the man as breadwinner and producer and the woman as homemaker and consumer.⁵ Thus, female abolitionists who were uncomfortable with stepping outside gendered norms could combine the roles of mother, homemaker, and abolitionist through their consumption patterns. Fundraising bazaars, in particular, attracted women who sympathized with the cause, but preferred to support it within their private lives.⁶ Abolitionist consumer advocacy also appealed to mothers' sense of responsibility to raise

² Alice Taylor, "From Petitions to Partyism: Antislavery and the Domestication of Maine Politics in the 1840s and 1850s," *The New England Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (March 2004): 71.

³ Janice Sumler-Lewis, "The Forten-Purvis Women of Philadelphia and the American Anti-Slavery Crusade," *The Journal of Negro History* 66, no. 4 (Winter, 1981-1982): 285.

⁴ Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, "'Swelling That Great Tide of Humanity': The Concord, Massachusetts, Female Anti-Slavery Society," *The New England Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (Sep. 2001): 393.

⁵ Recker, Astrid, "To Market! Consuming Women in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *My Wife and I* and *We and our Neighbours*," in *Beyond Uncle Tom's Cabin: Essays of the Writing of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, ed. Sylvia Mayer and Monika Mueller (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), 2011: 210.

⁶ Petrulionis 393.

conscientious consumers. *The Antislavery Alphabet* published for an 1847 fair does not gloss over the impact of slavery in teaching young children their ABCs:

M is the merchant of the north,
Who buys what slaves produce –
So they are stolen, whipped and worked,
For his, and for our use.⁷

Most abolitionist consumer advocacy fell into one of three categories, although these approaches sometimes overlapped. The first was abstention from some or all slave-produced goods. British women were largely responsible for the best-known example of this in their boycott of West Indian sugar, starting in the 1790s. The second approach, usually building on the first, was a movement to provide alternative goods produced by free labourers. Between 1826 and 1867, there were more than 50 American free-produce stores.⁸ The third and most successful approach involved buying and selling goods, free-labour or not, to raise money for political action. This form of consumer activism was represented in antislavery fairs. Depending on their philosophy of consumption and especially fashion, female abolitionists participated in one or several of these activities.

At antislavery fairs, fashion was central. Organizers took great care to procure beautiful wares, often imported from Europe, which appealed to women outside the abolition camp. It was hoped that, in the process of gratifying their material desires, these women would be exposed to antislavery messages and persuaded to actively support emancipation.⁹ An article in the *Pennsylvania Freeman* about a Philadelphia fair points to the immaterial benefits of hosting the event.

We are well aware that numbers were present, who had never before been within the precincts of an Anti-slavery Fair, probably not in any Anti-slavery meetings! Slaveholders, too, were there, to read and hear our principles, to engage in earnest and familiar discussion, and to learn, in this free intercourse with us, that we seek to benefit, and not to injure them, that while we hate slaveholding, we love and pity, and desire to save the slaveholder.¹⁰

Apparently, the calibre of luxury goods was so great that wealthy women, who owned slaves themselves, actually funded efforts to undermine an institution that contributed to their lifestyle. The extravagance of these fairs varied geographically. Pennsylvania's Quaker presence influenced the

⁷ Hannah and Mary Townsend, *The anti-slavery alphabet [electronic resource]*. n.p.: Philadelphia : Printed for the Anti-Slavery Fair, 1847 (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson, Printers), 1847.

⁸ Lawrence B. Glickman, "'Buy for the Sake of the Slave': Abolitionism and the Origins of American Consumer Activism," *American Quarterly* 56 no. 4 (Dec. 2004): 890.

⁹ Julie Roy Jeffrey, "'Stranger, Buy ... Lest our Mission Fail: The Complex Culture of Women's Abolitionist Fairs,'" *American Nineteenth Century History* 4 Issue 1 (Spring 2003): 5.

¹⁰ M. G., "The Fair," *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, Issue 52, December 24, 1846, http://find.galegroup.com/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/sas/newspaperRetrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DateAscend&tabID=T003&prodId=SAS&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchId=R16&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm¤tPosition=15&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3AFQE%3D%28TX%2CNone%2C16%29anti-slavery+fair%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28MB%2CNone%2C29%29%22SAS-1%22+OR+%22SAS-2%22+OR+%22SAS-3%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&userGroupName=edmo69826&inPS=true&contentSet=LTO&&docId=&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GB2500104463&contentSet=SASN&callistoContentSet=SASN&docPage=article&hilite=y, accessed December 13, 2012.

organization of less opulent events than those run by the antislavery societies in Massachusetts.¹¹ Historian Julie Roy Jeffrey attributes the financial success of large urban fairs to the fact that they embraced fashion and tantalized women of means with luxury products. “Increasingly, the fairs emphasized material gratification rather than self-denial and personal enjoyment rather than tears for slaves languishing in bondage.”¹²

On the opposite end of the consumer action spectrum were the hard-line abstentionists. They did not merely boycott slave-produced luxuries but luxuries altogether. Excess was considered immoral in and of itself. This view is associated with Quaker communities. Quakers, along with free black abolitionists, were among most ardent free produce advocates.¹³ While they were against consumption for consumption’s sake, they recognized the need for an alternative to slave-produced goods. Women played a key role in this movement, not only in promoting it and patronizing free produce stores, but also in acting as shop proprietors.¹⁴ Clothing, soaps, sweets, and various dry goods were among the free-labour products available to conscientious consumers.¹⁵ Unlike the finery of the antislavery fairs, the products associated with this branch of abolitionist consumption were rather utilitarian.

Abolition and the Politics of Dress

Attitudes toward fashion among abolitionist women were inextricably tied to morality, and nowhere was this more apparent than in the arena of dress. For Quaker and evangelical women, simplicity of dress carried tremendous spiritual significance. Plainness was meant to be a rejection of vanity and an expression of compassion for the poor. For black women belonging to these denominations, questions of piety and pursuit of racial equality jointly influenced clothing choices. The choice to reject or at least to subdue fashionable dress was not always welcomed in the broader society. Depending on who was judging, dressing below one’s means conveyed either self-sacrifice and social solidarity or self-righteousness and social marginality. In any case, abolitionist dress made a statement beyond aesthetic taste.

When Beecher Stowe went to London to promote free-labour cotton, American free-produce leader Elihu Burritt noted her plain, unassuming appearance and simple dress in his journal.¹⁶ In *We and Our Neighbors*, Beecher Stowe used fictional dialogue to air her own antifashion sentiment. Miss Dorcas, the old maid across the street, is praised for her principled dress by a group of much younger neighbours. The protagonist, Eva, on whom the allure of fashion is not lost, answers a friend’s idealistic call for dress reform by commenting that fashion is a social necessity and shunning it is unrealistic. Another friend chimes in that the Quakers manage to do just that. Stowe’s fictional conversation is emblematic of the nineteenth-century discourse around fashion and social reform. Perhaps the words of Eva best echo the religious aspect of these debates when she says, “Dress is a vile, tyrannical Moloch. We are all too much enslaved to it.”¹⁷ The biblical reference to Moloch, a pagan god that the Israelites were not to worship, associates the pursuit of fashion with idolatry.

Religious discourse linking fashion to slavery carried multiple layers of relevance for African American women, many of who used plain and modest dress to distance themselves from the

¹¹ Jeffrey, 3-4.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Glickman, 899.

¹⁴ Ibid., 893.

¹⁵ Ibid., 890.

¹⁶ Elihu Burritt, quoted in Louis Billington, “British Humanitarians and American Cotton, 1840-1860,” *Journal of American Studies* 11, no. 3 (Dec., 1977): 325.

¹⁷ Stowe, 194.

memory of bondage. Even as free women, the prevalence of sexual violence against black women made conservative dress a matter of safety.¹⁸ For Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, a former slave who eventually became Mary Lincoln's dressmaker, beauty was associated with danger. "I was regarded as fair-looking for one of my race, and for four years a white man – I spare the world his name – had his base designs upon me. I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain."¹⁹ On a more symbolic level, clothing provided to slaves by their owners was conspicuously unattractive.²⁰ Its tawdry anti-aesthetic qualities served to visually distinguish slaves from free blacks, in order to detect runaways.²¹

Whether for religious, social or practical purposes, resistance to fashion was associated with marginalized groups of women at the heart of the antislavery campaign. Yet, women who resisted the "tyranny" of fashion were not always plain-dress purists. In studying the tension between fashion, antifashion, and abolitionist consumer advocacy, it might be tempting to locate the divide on free produce between unfashionable Quaker and fashionable Garrisonian camps. However, this would overestimate unity within the more religious group on what to do about dress. Amanda Berry Smith, an African American evangelist, adopted the "Quaker style" of dress because simple clothes were economical as well as religiously significant.²² Yet, Smith wrote in her autobiography that an inordinate preoccupation with plain dress could constitute idolatry. To her, truly humble dress followed a middle road between fashion and extreme antifashion. An even more moderate stance is seen in the case of Philadelphia's antislavery fairs. For the region's Quaker culture to temper the degree of excess, there must have been a critical mass of Quaker engagement in these events, which encouraged consumers to buy elegant things they did not need.

A Complicated Consumption Ethic: Fashion, Antifashion, and Free Cotton

Generally speaking, the free produce movement was associated with Quaker-led reform, and the antislavery bazaars were the organized by abolitionist women who were part of, or nearer to, the mainstream material culture. We have seen that there were Quakers and evangelical Christians (Amanda Berry Smith was a Methodist) who valued simplicity, but saw spiritual and pragmatic value to tempering their antifashion tone. In the larger culture of dress, the Quakers especially, had an image problem. The stereotype of dullness and sobriety tainted the image of the larger abolition movement, which had been pioneered by Quaker communities. Women organizing antislavery bazaars hoped these lively events would help to dispel stereotypes of abolitionists as "irrational fanatics."²³ The notion of extremism, to which Quaker antifashion contributed, also extended to the free produce movement. William Lloyd Garrison, who initially supported the push for free-labour goods, later dismissed it as economically impractical and a distraction from more effective means of fighting slavery. Unfavourable perceptions of Quaker dress seem to have contributed to the social marginalization of the free produce movement. Historian Lawrence B. Glickman points to the perception of self-righteousness among the people advocating free produce as a factor limiting its acceptance. "Critics charged free produce supporters with reducing politics to personal morality,

¹⁸ Pamela E. Klassen, "The Robes of Womanhood: Dress and Authenticity Among African-American Methodist Women in the Nineteenth Century," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 51.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868): 38-39, <http://lit.alexanderstreet.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/blww/view/1000056378>, accessed December 9, 2012.

²⁰ Klassen, 60.

²¹ Ibid., 50.

²² Ibid., 56.

²³ Jeffrey, 4.

being fashionably antifashion and conspicuously self-denying, and for overemphasizing what William's son, Wendell Phillips Garrison, called 'outward style,' that is, practicing an ostentatious and pretentious simplicity."²⁴ This language suggests that abolitionism or religious antifashion, in its extreme, had more in common with fashion than its proponents would like to admit.

William Lloyd Garrison's chief critique of free produce was its impracticality. This especially applied to free cotton. It was simultaneously the least practical and the least fashionable product that free-produce stores had to offer. From a logistical standpoint, slave-produced cotton was more difficult to boycott than slave-produced sugar. After British abolition in 1833, free-produce shops needed only to import sugar from British colonies in the Caribbean, whereas America's cotton was produced domestically. Supply was extremely limited. During the height of the free produce movement in the early 1850s, free cotton producers exported only a few hundred bales to Britain, whereas slave-labour producers exported between 1,000,000 and 2,000,000.²⁵ Free cotton could be fed into the same supply chain as slave-labour cotton during the textile manufacturing process, raising questions of authenticity.²⁶ In order to solve this problem, not only did leaders of the free-produce movement have to create a new supply of cotton, but they also had to create a new supply chain. The nature of the product itself also made cotton difficult to boycott. Slave-produced Caribbean rum and sugar were luxury products; cotton was a necessity. Therefore, switching to free-produce cotton represented a much greater commitment than switching to free-produce sugar.

Clearly, the supply of free cotton posed challenges to the movement. Yet, some remained hopeful that, in a capitalist economy, supply would naturally follow demand. If advocates could stimulate demand for the product, surely the market would respond. An optimistic free-cotton pamphlet, published in 1860, painted this overly rosy picture of American supply before the Civil War: "It is an encouraging fact, that the free growers of the United States, stimulated by the vitality of the Free Produce question in Great Britain, have increased their cotton cultivation. This is precisely what we might have anticipated, as no axiom is of more indisputable truth than the mercantile one, that 'Demand creates supply,'"²⁷

Unfortunately for the free produce movement, its unfashionable image limited the demand for what little supply of free cotton clothing there was. This perception was not unfounded. British women, who were further removed from American religious culture and its antifashion leanings, were also reluctant to purchase free labour cotton. Shortly after Harriet Beecher Stowe visited England to promote free produce, a women's society set up a free-labour store in its temperance hall. This experienced some success, so a women's society in the city of Bath, which had a strong antislavery record, followed suit. However, the store in Bath failed in its effort to sell free-labour cotton goods, which were considered below the local women's tastes.²⁸

The products and promotional materials for American antislavery fairs provide evidence of aesthetic aversions to free-labour cotton among American women. *The Antislavery Alphabet* was published well into the free produce movement in the urban centre of Philadelphia, where these products would have been available. In condemning the "merchant of the North" for buying "what slaves produce," it attaches greater consumer guilt to some slave-produced commodities than to others. The author writes:

²⁴ Glickman, 893-894.

²⁵ Billington, 315.

²⁶ Ibid., 316.

²⁷ "Conscience versus cotton: or, The preference of free labour produce," *Wilson Anti-Slavery Collection* (1860): 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/60227946>, accessed Nov. 25, 2012.

²⁸ Billington, 326-327.

“S is the sugar that the slave
Is toiling hard to make,
To put into your pie and tea,
Your candy and your cake.”²⁹

These verses clearly connect children’s consumption with the guilt of contributing to slaves’ suffering. Cotton is also part of the alphabet but it is treated differently:

“C is the Cotton-field, to which
This injured brother’s driven,
When as the white man’s slave, he toils
From early morn till even.”³⁰

Here, C is not for cotton itself but for the field where slaves work. The injustice takes place in a separate location and is not described as being intertwined with the clothing children wear. With a descriptive, rather than didactic tone, the author does not address the child directly. Conversely, the verse on the letter S emphasizes that slave-produced sugar is “put into your pie and tea, your candy and your cake.”³¹ Free produce sweets were certainly present at the Philadelphia fairs.³² However, the fairs, in general, did not advertise free produce textiles.³³ An article in the *National Anti-Slavery Bazaar Gazette*, published in 1846, calls for donations of “American bleached cottons” to beautify the hall.³⁴ There is no mention of a preference for free-labour cotton.

The free-cotton movement was not entirely without success. Most free produce stores sold textiles,³⁵ and the prevalence of fraudulent labelling in mainstream stores indicates that women wanted free cotton clothing provided the price and the product were right. The 1860 tract *Conscience Versus Cotton* warns about unscrupulous merchants. “We mention, especially, that no ladies should allow themselves to be imposed upon by the offer of goods merely stamped, ‘Free Grown.’ This is Not Sufficient. The draper should shew the stamped certificate of the manufacturer, or Free Cotton Agent, with whom he deals, and should prove that he understands the movement, and is in some measure acquainted with its details.”³⁶ The fact that merchants applied false “free-grown” labels to cotton products indicates that aesthetic qualities were an important barrier to the success of the free produce movement. All other things being equal, enough women would have favoured a product with a free-produce label for some businesses to forge one. But all things were not equal. Free-produce textiles were unsurprisingly more expensive than their slave-grown counterparts. Yet, cost was not an issue for many of the women who supported the cause at antislavery fairs. Purchasing free-labour cotton represented more than a financial sacrifice. The fact that religious communities, which valued frugality, led the free produce movement indicates that aesthetic qualities, rather than cost alone, were a major deterrent among women who would have otherwise purchased free-labour textiles.

²⁹ Townsend, 13.

³⁰ Ibid., 5.

³¹ Ibid., 13.

³² Jeffrey, 15.

³³ Glickman, 901.

³⁴ “To Friends Having it in their Power to Make Donations of American Bleached Cottons,” *National Anti-Slavery Bazaar Gazette* 1, no. 2 (January 1846): 002, *American Antiquarian Society (AAS) Historical Periodicals Collection: Series 3*, EBSCOhost, accessed December 9, 2012.

³⁵ Glickman, 890.

³⁶ “Conscience versus cotton,” 10.

Conclusion

The personal nature of dress placed cotton in a free-produce category of its own. It was one thing for a fashionable woman to switch to a different source of sugar. To build a wardrobe from a marginal source of textiles was another matter. Before taking this step, she had to know that her choice would make a difference. The fact that free cotton represented a small fraction of the textile industry undermined perceptions of its potential impact. Meanwhile, antislavery fairs successfully funded abolitionist literature and other campaigns by catering to consumer desires for fashionable goods. It might be correct to attribute the failure of free cotton as a social movement to economic and political factors. However, a closer look at the politics of abolition fashion reveals the importance of dress in forming a subculture of consumer advocacy. Because the free cotton movement relied on the creation of a parallel fashion system, it was inherently disadvantaged in an environment where its core supporters placed tremendous value on frugality and inconspicuous dress.

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