

PERSUASION, OPINION AND THE PUBLIC SPACE IN JOHN WOOLMAN'S *JOURNAL*.

Marie-Jeanne Rossignol
Université Denis Diderot Paris VII

The campaign led by British antislavery activists to end the slave trade starting in 1787 is known as one of the first modern 'public opinion' movements. It involved new techniques such as widescale petitions to lobby Parliament, publication and circulation of books and pamphlets and the active participation of women. More importantly it turned into a widely popular movement, with all sections of society taking part. Later abolitionist waves relied on these same techniques, but not always as successfully (especially in the United States). Yet due to the British campaign, antislavery is usually associated, from the eighteenth-century onwards, with a wish to change public opinion and alter legislation on the basis of a new, modified 'opinion'. The means to achieve this change in public opinion were interpersonal persuasion through arguments and evidence, as well as the occupation of public space.

The aim of this paper is to explore early facts of this dimension of the Atlantic antislavery movement through a close reading of John Woolman's *Journal*, published posthumously in 1774.¹ Woolman was a tireless advocate of antislavery and a Quaker. His action took place mainly within the Atlantic Quaker community. Indeed the *Journal* reveals Woolman's determination to convince as many members of his community as possible through personal conversations: this involved covering huge distances on foot, from New England to the Carolinas. Crossing the ocean was typical of the Quaker networks in the 18th century but traveling throughout the colonies anticipated methods used by Quakers and other abolitionists in Britain after 1787. Woolman also occupied the public space through the publication of pamphlets and his presence at general meetings of the Quaker community.

¹The diary was written from 1756 to Woolman's death in York, in 1772. Numerous English, Irish and North-American editions appeared, amongst which *The Works of John Woolman: In two parts*. Philadelphia: Joseph Cruikshank, 1774. A French-language edition was published in London in 1854: *Mémoire de Jean Woolman*. The diary has often been reprinted, the most famous edition being that of abolitionist poet John Greenleaf Whittier: *The Journal of John Woolman, with an introduction by John Greenleaf Whittier* (1871). I will refer to Phillips P. Moulton's edition (*The Journal and Major Essays*. 1971. Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 2007) and to an online version: *Journal of John Woolman* Woolman, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/> (February 20, 2010), based on *The Journal of John Woolman The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin; The Journal of John Woolman; Fruits of Solitude*, William Penn. Eliot, Charles (ed.), New York: P F Collier & Son, 1909. The Harvard Classics, Vol. 1.

Although the *Journal* describes Woolman's emotional evangelicalism as well as his antislavery campaign, my position is that Woolman's arguments evolved from the 1750s to the 1770s, from a religion-based rhetoric to a broadly-based and thus more secular array of arguments, reflecting the changes in the dynamics of antislavery over the decades: indeed my contention is that Woolman cannot simply be considered as having acted within the Quaker community, as his conversations and arguments took him beyond those circles in the decade leading to the American Revolution.² Woolman even came close to sharing, or at least understanding, the prevailing gradualism of the colonies: although Woolman certainly was a 'saint', his antislavery efforts deserve more than hagiography and must be replaced within North American and Atlantic intellectual and social development.

Finally we must also be attentive to Woolman's persuasion technique, as it can be considered as having heralded later North American civil rights methods in shaping public opinion, through a combination of Christian discourse, and more secular peace rhetoric and non-violent methods.

The Rise of Woolman's Antislavery Conscience and his Elaboration of a Persuasion Technique 1743-1756

-Early refusal to support slavery, development of rhetoric

John Woolman was working as a salesman in a Mount Holly, New Jersey, store in 1742, when his master asked him to draft the sales papers of a slave he was selling. Woolman, then 23, acquiesced, but protested that 'I believed slavekeeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion'. Soon afterwards, Woolman refused to draft property papers for a slave at the request of a young Quaker: 'I told him I was not easy to write it, for though many kept slaves in our Society, as in others, I still believed the practice was not right, and desired to be excused from writing [Moulton, 32-33]. His persuasion technique is to speak forcefully, but 'in good will'; as a result, he moves people to question their own positions: 'he told me that keeping slaves was not altogether agreeable to his mind, but that the slave being a gift made to his wife, he had accepted of her'. [33]

As this reply shows, Woolman's fellow-Quakers were already sensitive to the question of slavery by the mid-1740s. Since the end of the 17th century, the community had addressed the problem on various occasions, in North America and Britain. Yet supporters of the abolition of the slave trade and

²John Woolman is usually credited with having convinced the Pennsylvania Quaker community of giving up both the slave trade and slavery. But Anthony Benezet is seen as having been more active in spreading his and Woolman's pamphlets beyond the North American Quaker community and beyond Quakers in general. According to Phillips Moulton, Benezet quoted Woolman's first pamphlet in his own, broadly-circulated, 1759 pamphlet. In the same way, when Woolman's second antislavery pamphlet was published, Benezet was already involved in the sending of Woolman's pamphlets and other North American anti-slavery material to British Quakers and other anti-slavery activists in Britain. Phillips Moulton (ed.), *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*: 13. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1969: 228-258.

slavery had not managed to sway the community to their position.³ But change was on the way as early as 1743: Philadelphia Quakers passed a resolution against slave purchases;⁴ as for John Woolman, he was accepted as a 'minister' by the Burlington Quaker community [Slaughter,102]: thus could he officially start a career as a preacher and travel on behalf of his church. In 1748, Montesquieu published *The Spirit of the Laws*. This famous work offered strong antislavery arguments which were then used by English-speaking activists, such as Anthony Benezet dans *A Caution* (1766); other Enlightenment figures were to take up the issue of slavery from the 1750s to the 1770s, such as Frances Hutchinson, Rousseau and finally Diderot and Raynal. Antislavery was thus developing as a rising concern in those years.

Now a minister, Woolman could proceed on a first religious journey to New Jersey (1743), where he sharpened his persuasion technique in a difficult situation: when confronted to what he perceived as violent conduct on the part of an angry but respectable Quaker, Woolman tried to reason this elder, with due respect to the other's age and experience and in a spirit of humility. Anger and disagreement could only be caused by a lack of proper discussion and explanation [Moulton 2007, 34]. Although Woolman was acutely conscious of the social hierarchies ruling society and his community in particular, yet he believed the non-violent truth must always be told, however painful this might be for him. True to Enlightenment values, he also believed that rational explanations could put an end to disagreements [Slaughter,132].

-First journey to the South

Although there were slaves in the North of the British North American colonies, still New England, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York could only be called 'societies with slaves', not 'slave societies' such as the Southern settlements which Woolman visited in 1746 during a long journey conducted with a friend (1500 miles and 3 months). After visiting fellow Friends on the Pennsylvania frontier, Woolman entered Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina, where he was not particularly well received and felt embarrassed at being entertained at the expense of slave labor. Woolman drew dire conclusions from his journey in the South, apocalyptically writing that the slave trade and slavery appeared to him 'as a dark gloominess hanging over the land' [Moulton 2007, 38]. At a time when slavery was thriving, Woolman observed that it encouraged 'vices and corruptions', thus heralding Thomas Jefferson's famous diatribe on the 'Manners' of Virginians in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785).

-The publication of Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes 1754 and a renewed Quaker community

When reading Woolman's long concluding paragraph on his visit to the South, one clearly realizes that his concern was not limited to the

³ Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Beautiful Soul of John Woolman, Apostle of Abolition*. New York: Hill & Wang, 2008, 106-117.

⁴ Phillips Moulton, 'John Woolman's Approach to Social Action : As Exemplified in Relation to Slavery', *Church History*, 35, 4 (Dec.1966), 407.

Southern Quaker community who had hosted him, but included 'these southern provinces' as a whole. As a result, Woolman drew the conclusion that he needed to broadcast his views to the public. Still in 1746 he submitted a twelve-page pamphlet on slavery to his father: *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*. In spite of his father's support [45], Woolman only presented his pamphlet to the Publication Committee of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting⁵ in 1753. The delay was probably due to Woolman's deep respect for social and group hierarchies: in 1746, two thirds of the Quakers in charge of publications owned slaves; but by 1753, many of them had been replaced by antislavery activists, amongst whom Benezet.⁶ Thus *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* was published in 1754 in Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin under the auspices of the Quaker authorities [195]. As the Seven Years' War began, devastating the frontier and marginalizing peace-loving Quakers, the community gathered around new spiritual and social values, giving up their traditional political control of the colony. Jointly with Benezet, Woolman became one of the pillars of the renewed Pennsylvania Quaker community, now officially committed to fighting the slave trade and slavery [Nash & Soderlund, 52].⁷

-The arguments in Some Considerations: religion, natural rights, and political economy

John Woolman first uses the standard Christian argument, monogenesis, to preach equality between men, and thus the necessity to emancipate slaves: 'all nations are of one blood' (Gen 3:20) [Moulton 2007, 200]. Although Christians⁸ may feel they benefit from some divine favor, yet their faith only imposes more responsibilities upon them, and does not constitute a sign of superiority.

The next step in the pamphlet is typical of Woolman's desire to demonstrate and convince in a quasi-experimental way: he suggests readers step into the slaves' shoes. He turns the usual presentation of slaves as lazy and ignorant on its head: Should we be treated like them, wouldn't we share their ignorance and laziness? Such a rhetorical process enables him to make masters face the concrete facts of slavery, not simply their spiritual dimension.

Then Woolman tackles the main pro-slavery argument of slave-owners in the mid-eighteenth century, when property was a central tenet of the rising liberal ideology: slave-owners argued that they had paid for their slaves and

⁵Jeanne Henriette Louis, *Les Quakers*, Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2005, explains that the monthly meeting is 'the basic gathering in the religious Society of Friends'. 'When there are several monthly meetings in a region or country, they usually assemble to form a yearly meeting.' [58-59]

⁶Gary B. Nash & Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, 51-52.

⁷In 1754, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting also endorsed the publication of another anti-slavery pamphlet, *An Epistle of Caution and Advice, Concerning the Buying and Keeping of Slaves*, by Anthony Benezet.

⁸Woolman clearly addresses the entire Christian community, not only Quakers: see the title of the pamphlet, 'Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes. Recommended to the Professors of Christianity of Every Denomination' [Moulton 2007, 198].

considered that the slaves' labor was due to them as a result. Woolman dismisses the argument, countering it with natural rights theory: 'If I purchase a man who hath forfeited his liberty, the natural right of freedom is in him' [204].

Such a combination of religious and natural rights arguments was none too original at the time, but Woolman goes further in a prescient analysis of the specificity of North American slavery and its consequences. According to him, it is enslavement (and the exploitation that accompanies it) that makes African labor more profitable than white labor, thus leading cupid North American colonists to people their country (not a distant colony) with a race they reject deep in their hearts [204]. This was in itself an original position, as Montesquieu, and later Adam Smith, claimed that only free labor could be efficient. But Woolman believes slavery is profitable. Should slaves benefit from the same treatment white workers enjoy, the added value of their labor would be much lower and only white workers would then be hired: 'It may be thought that to treat them as we would willingly be treated, our gain by them would be inconsiderable; and it were, in diverse respects, better that they were none in our country'.

The apparently paradoxical last part of the sentence in an antislavery argument deserves some explaining. Two years before, in 1751, Woolman's publisher Benjamin Franklin had also denounced slavery, the better to argue that the British empire would only prosper thanks to white Anglo-Saxon colonists.⁹ Now Woolman takes up Franklin's racist argument in his pamphlet ('and it were better that they were none in our country') in order to remind Christians that they must responsibly face up to the consequences of their actions: since they have introduced slaves in the colonies, British North Americans must not only emancipate them, but take care of them, whether they like them or not, and however difficult that may be. So he adds: 'We may further consider that they are now amongst us, and those of our nation being the cause of their being here, that whatsoever difficulty accrues thereon, we are justly chargeable with, and to bear all inconveniences attending it with a serious and weighty concern of mind to do our duty by them is the best we can do' [204]. Herein lies Woolman's truly original antislavery position (which he shares with Benezet and later North American Quakers¹⁰): he does not simply advocate emancipation, but considers that it must go together with a commitment to the moral and social regeneration of the former slaves. Although his perspective is steeped in religious and moral thinking, it is also pragmatically anchored in a particular vision of the political economy of slavery. As we saw during his visit to Virginia, he is concerned with the future of race relations in the country, and how they can concretely be patched up before disaster strikes.

This first pamphlet ends on a moral note. Interestingly, Woolman conjures up the image of slave-owners' children, whose morality must be corrupted

⁹ Benjamin Franklin, 'Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind', *The Portable Benjamin Franklin*, Larzer Ziff (ed.), New York: Penguin Books, 2005, 322-329.

¹⁰ Maurice Jackson, *Let This Voice Be Heard: Anthony Benezet Father of Atlantic Abolitionism*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.

by their childhood experiences [205].¹¹ But the New Jersey Quaker also appeals to the exceptionalist pride of his fellow colonists (also insisted on by Benjamin Franklin in his 1751 pamphlet): their exemplary prosperity must guide them toward more humility.

-Back to the Journal: Wills, the emancipation of slavery, a stronger Quaker community

In 1753, Woolman was asked to draft a will by a slave-owning Quaker who wanted to bequeath his slaves to his children. Woolman declined but his steady refusals to draft such wills, combined with his willingness to strike up discussions on the subject eventually caused some of his fellow Quakers to give up such plans. This inter-personal persuasion technique underlines Woolman's desire to effect emancipation in a peaceful way. From a pragmatic point of view, the drafting of wills was also a moment when owners could consider giving up their property in slaves without pain, thus it was a good time to free their slaves: typically, George Washington freed his slaves in his will.¹² Although Woolman was deeply shaken by all the conversations he had to conduct, it looks as his work of inter-personal persuasion were finally successful right at the time when the Quaker community was taking stricter measures: in 1755, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting decided to discipline any Friend taking part in the slave trade [Nash & Soderlund, 53].

Keeping on the good work, Woolman visits Long Island where he explains his antislavery views to slave-owning Quakers [Moulton 2007, 52]. During this journey he felt again called upon to visit the Southern churches whose situation worried him [53].

The Apex of North American Antislavery: Woolman's Persuasion Efforts at Work from the Southern Colonies to Britain, 1757-1772

-Words and conduct: how not to share the exploitation of slave labor in the South

Woolman left for the South in 1757 (two months, 1150 miles, with his brother). He knew that he would be hosted by his fellow Quakers but wanted to find a way to visit them without enjoying their hospitality based on 'the gain of oppression' [59]. Beyond inter-personal conversations, Woolman believed that the opinion of his fellow-men could also be swayed and shaped by his own behavior, a typical attitude in devout people but also in later non-violent activists: 'conduct is more convincing than language'

¹¹ From John Locke (1693) to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762), the education of the young was a central theme in Enlightenment thinking. This corresponded to the growing preoccupation with the child and family life in the eighteenth century as well (see Philippe Ariès, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*, 1960). Benjamin Franklin had broached the subject in 'Observations' in 1751 [324-326]. Thomas Jefferson was to highlight the connection between slavery, children and republican education in 'Manners': he thought slavery perverted children's moral and political sense. (*Notes on the State of Virginia* 1785, <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JefVirg.html> / 'Query 18' (February 20, 2010).

¹² Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves and the Creation of America*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003.

[60]. Yet Woolman did not want to give the impression he was morally superior to other travelling preachers. As a result, his solution out of this quandary was respectful of both his hosts and their bondspople: he gave financial compensation to the slaves for their work, and explained his position to their masters, in the end trusting both words and conduct to effect change [60-61].

Woolman's specific method, persuading his fellow men 'in private' (which avoids humiliation and thus conflict) thus resumed in the South and was combined to a pragmatic distribution of money. He thus clearly indicated that slaves were deprived of the just rewards of their labor, an abolitionist theme that was to enjoy greater popularity after 1830. Quaker masters apparently were not hurt by Woolman's audacious actions, since he radiated simplicity and a sincere, emotional faith based on both evangelicalism and sensibility [60-61].

-Beyond Quaker circles in the South: opening up to a variety of arguments

Woolman did not simply test his arguments on members of his community during this second journey south. He also reports his conversation with a militia colonel (some local notable, probably a slave-owner himself) who contends that slaves are lazy: according to him, a smaller number of white workers would do the same amount of work more efficiently. True to the views expressed in his first pamphlet against slavery, Woolman ironically agrees: slaves were bound to be lazy since they never received the just rewards of their labor.

Woolman reminds the planter that liberty is a natural right for all men, a position with which the other man has to agree. Natural rights philosophy was already well established in pre-revolutionary Virginia: the War of Independence and the immediate after-war period were to constitute a real opportunity for emancipation in the region. Still determined to thwart Woolman's argument, the militia colonel thus tries another tack: life in Africa is so difficult that Africans are better off as slaves in North America. Woolman's ironically retorts that compassion for Africans should urge Americans to make them happy, not slaves. Putting forward an argument that was to be at the heart of the crusade against the slave trade, and first expatiated on by Benezet in his various pamphlets, Woolman insists that the ills of Africa (wars) are caused by the Atlantic slave trade, not by 'domestic troubles' [62].¹³ At the end of the conversation, the planter agrees with Woolman that slavery can only bring tragedy to the south, long before the Abbé Raynal was to predict the coming of a second Spartacus,¹⁴ and in a harbinger of Jefferson's own dire prediction in *Notes on the State of Virginia*.¹⁵

When confronted to a Quaker supporter of slavery during that same trip, Woolman has to counter his fellow-Friend's biblical arguments, ('negroes were understood to be the offspring of Cain') using opposite examples

¹³ In *A Caution* (1766), Benezet provided large excerpts from the first European narratives on Africa and the slave trade on the African coast. He blamed African wars on the European involvement in the trade.

¹⁴ See Jean Mondot, in *Lumières*, janvier 2004 (3)

¹⁵ In 'Manners'. *Notes on the State of Virginia* 1785, [http:// etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JefVirg.html](http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JefVirg.html) / 'Query 18' (February 20, 2010).

drawn from his own knowledge of the Bible. Interestingly, Woolman eventually dismisses the Scriptures as a valid source of arguments ('weak arguments'), and he maintains that blacks have a natural right to liberty. Only cupidity explains slavery, he declares in a rare moment of anger: 'I was troubled to perceive the darkness of their imagination, and in some pressure of spirit said: "The love of ease and gain are the motives in general of keeping slaves and men are wont to take hold of weak arguments to support a cause which is unreasonable"' [63].

This second journey into the Southern colonies affected Woolman deeply [64]. In particular, he came to the conclusion that the spread of 'the same degeneracy in some parts of this newly settled land of America' was to be prevented [63]: indeed slavery was expanding in that decade in the British North American colonies. Woolman's apocalyptic vision interpreted slavery as a sign of America's or the Quakers' decline through its many ungodly manifestations: masters did not respect slaves' marriages and broke them up by selling or bequeathing bondsmen and women; fieldworkers were poorly fed and clothed; slaves were deliberately kept ignorant while they maintained their masters in comfortable, even luxurious, circumstances, although they were forced to come and work in America [65-66].

Most painful during this journey was a meeting of the Virginia Yearly Meeting when local Quakers tried to tone down antislavery resolutions coming from the antislavery Pennsylvania Meeting. Woolman then felt compelled to remind his fellow Quakers that slaves were captives of war: although this should have been an unacceptable situation for the peace-loving Friends, his audience greeted his admonitions in silence [66-67]. However Woolman left the South on a note of optimism [69-70]: after attending many Quaker meetings in the South, he realized that his fellow-Quakers in the region were on the whole concerned with the ownership of slaves, and in particular, with the state of ignorance in which slaves were kept: they wanted to give at least religious instruction to their bondpeople. Prior to the mid-eighteenth century, planters generally shirked even christianizing their slaves: this was starting to change.

Woolman also realized that others were now sharing his beliefs and like him, turning to passive resistance in order to put them into practice: during the trip, he is told about a Menonite (another peace church) who had preferred sleeping in the woods to accepting the hospitality of a slave-owner [73]. The time was ripe for a questioning of slavery: through his travels in the South and his position as a spokesman for the liberal Pennsylvania Quakers, Woolman thus played a role in the development of antislavery in the Southern Quaker community and beyond.

- Disciplining, Visiting, and Gradualism

Philadelphia Quakers intensified their doctrinal unification around antislavery in 1758: at the end of a meeting during which Woolman's arguments carried the day, the community decided that any Quaker selling, importing or buying a slave would be 'disciplined' (that is, excluded from taking part in religious assemblies without yet being excluded from the community). Visitors, including Woolman, were in charge of meeting with recalcitrant Quakers to convince them no longer to trade in slaves, a

tempting enterprise at a time when the Seven Years' War was depriving Quakers of European labor [91-93; Nash & Soderlund, 53-56].

Woolman became immediately involved in these private visits, in November and December 1758, January 1759, then during the summer and winter of 1759, when he tested the method he had been using since his early years as an antislavery activist. His goal was, not simply to convince his fellow-men, but to respect slave-owners and give them an opportunity to explain their point of view [Moulton 2007, 94-96, 102]. In 1759, the Pennsylvania Quaker Yearly Meeting reaffirmed the recommendations against any trade in, or possession of, slaves: these 'epistles' were also sent to European Quakers. Such official support for antislavery relieved Woolman greatly, after so many years struggling alone [97].

-Journey to New England

In 1760, Woolman started on a long journey North, from Long Island to Rhode Island. The North American slave trade was mainly carried on from Newport and Providence, and Quakers were involved in it.¹⁶ This situation aggrieved Woolman to such an extent that he would have liked to table a petition requesting an end to the slave trade before the Rhode Island colony [108-110]. Before leaving, he organized a meeting on the subject of slavery, which somewhat calmed down his fears [112]. His next stop was Nantucket, where the local fishermen fortunately had few slaves [115]). Whereas slavery and the slave trade hinted at a kind of lifestyle Woolman abhorred, the Quaker fishermen of Nantucket, like the Appalachian pioneers, embodied the kind of simple and austere lifestyle which he favored [114-115].¹⁷

-Considerations on Keeping Negroes, Part Second

In 1761, as Woolman was continuing his private visits to those Quakers who still owned slaves in Pennsylvania, he published the second part of his anti-slavery work, *Considerations on Keeping Negroes*. Although Quaker officials had offered to have the pamphlet printed at the expense of the community, Woolman declined this time. He knew that some Quakers had not freed their slaves yet, and may have been unhappy with financing his book. As a result, he decided to pay for the printing costs himself [117-118].

According to Nash and Soderlund, the context for the abolition of slavery was more and more favorable though: the end of the Seven Years War was making it possible for European immigration to resume. In addition, the spread of antislavery ideas now clearly reached beyond the Quaker community: Pennsylvania had increased taxes on slave imports, leading to a lower number of imported bondsmen and women [Nash & Soderlund, 72].¹⁸

¹⁶ Charles Rappleye, *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, The Slave Trade, and the American Revolution*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.

¹⁷ The population of Nantucket was mainly Quaker at the time, making their living on whale fishing: Louis, *Les Quakers*, 34.

¹⁸ In the years leading to the American Revolution, resistance both to Britain and slavery was expressed in North America through an increase (or requests for increases) of taxes on slave imports. Britain did not always agree, which provided

Like the first part, the second volume is aimed at Christians of all denominations, not only Quakers, thus indicating Woolman's will to reach beyond Quaker circles, and to create a Christian anti-slavery opinion. His goal is not to criticize slave-owners; they are probably the victims of 'the strength of education and tradition' [Moulton 2007, 211] which leads them to behave reprehensibly. Woolman admits that it is still difficult to oppose slavery, as the institution is very widespread [212].

However slavery and the slave trade represent serious mistakes 'like dark matter gathering into clouds over us', a recurrent image in Woolman's writings [212]. Woolman considers that slavery is always reprehensible, even when some declare keeping their slaves out of paternalism, considering African-Americans 'are persons who have need of guardians, and as such take care of them' [213]. Paternalism was to become a central element of the slavery creed in North America only later: what is interesting is Woolman's sensitivity to this apparently Christian argument, and his early response to it.¹⁹ In this second volume Woolman reasserts that slavery is a mistake. Maybe it could be understood if only criminals were enslaved, but there is simply no justification for the enslavement of children: the Bible does not justify such a behavior, Woolman explains, once again refuting all the supposedly Biblical evidence used by his opponents [214-217, 220]. Slavery is robbery, even when practiced by God-fearing souls [220]. Those who claim to save Africans from misery and paganism when enslaving them should rather go to Africa and convert them, instead of profiting by their sale [221]. From this argument one realizes that the origins of modern colonialism are indissociable from the rise of the antislavery argument at the end of the eighteenth century.²⁰

After their transportation to North America, Woolman explains, slaves are treated so harshly that this dehumanizing treatment impacts the manners of slave-owners, dehumanizing them too, and leading to the introduction of torture, so contrary to the principles of English liberty, as punishment [221-222]: 'The English government hath been commended by candid foreigners

the revolutionaries with a convenient antislavery argument against Britain (see Thomas Jefferson, *A Summary View Of The Rights Of British America*: 'The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies, where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state. But previous to the enfranchisement of the slaves we have, it is necessary to exclude all further importations from Africa; yet our repeated attempts to effect this by prohibitions, and by imposing duties which might amount to a prohibition, have been hitherto defeated by his majesty's negative: Thus preferring the immediate advantages of a few African corsairs to the lasting interests of the American states, and to the rights of human nature, deeply wounded by this infamous practice. Nay, the single interposition of an interested individual against a law was scarcely ever known to fail of success, though in the opposite scale were placed the interests of a whole country. That this is so shameful an abuse of a power trusted with his majesty for other purposes, as if not reformed, would call for some legal restrictions'.

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/jeffsumm.asp (consulted November 11, 2009).

¹⁹ Jeffrey Young, *The Domestication of Slavery: The Master Class in Georgia and South Carolina, 1670-1837*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

²⁰ Yves Bénot & Marcel Dorigny (eds.), *Grégoire et la cause des Noirs (1789-1831): Combats et projets*, Paris: SFHOM, APECE, 2000.

for the disuse of racks and tortures, so much practiced in some states ; but this multiplying slaves now leads to it'.

However Woolman insists that slaves suffer more than their masters in this process as they are also deprived of normal family relations. This theme inscribes Woolman's argument in the rhetoric of sensibility and the preoccupation with family relations which was so typical of the second half of the eighteenth century, as we have seen before. Later escaped slaves (Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown) and their white abolitionist supporters (Harriet Beecher Stowe) were to place this concern with private affections and family members at the heart of the nineteenth-century abolitionist doctrine, probably giving it a Victorian twist (especially white abolitionists).

Once again, drawing moving testimonies from contemporary travels to Africa, Woolman concludes that the only reason that causes us to enslave Africans is covetousness [227], a vice which entails the most deadly consequences for the distant and little-known continent: 'and thus luxury and oppression have the seeds of war and desolation in them' [228]. Woolman selects excerpts from travel narratives to Africa which depict the devastation caused by the international slave trade: the indirect wars in Africa triggered by European demand, the wars started directly by the English and finally the heartless treatment meted out to slaves on slave ships [228-229]. Although Woolman does not exonerate Africans from their own involvement in the trade, he is indignant that Christian nations should comfort the barbaric practices of local slave-dealers instead of thwarting them: 'with a view to outward gain we have joined as parties in it, that our concurrence with them in their barbarous proceedings has tended to harden them in cruelty and has been a means of increasing calamities in their country [...]' [231]. This peace-loving Quaker then depicts the scenes of war in which the English take part from safe posts on the coast, without ever having been under attack [232-233]. He thus concludes his pamphlet by asserting that 'liberty is the right of innocent men' [236]; thus, 'Negroes are our fellow creatures and their present condition amongst us requires our serious consideration' [237]. Such is John Woolman's message: beyond abolishing the trade and liberating slaves, he wants to take care of those Africans who have been torn away from their continent and ill-treated in America.

--1764-1772: Gradualism and Renewed Commitment

Indeed by 1764, the Philadelphia Quaker community had published a report condemning those influential members who still owned slaves. Interestingly Woolman did not support excessively harsh condemnations of those masters, as he thought one cannot discount the amount of capital slaves represent for their masters: 'it is impracticable for them to set their slaves free without changing their own way of life' [141]. In order to make it possible for slave-owners to get rid of their slaves smoothly, Woolman thus recommended financial compensation, an argument that was to be found in the writings of various other antislavery activists later.

One might wonder whether this position was not contradictory with his previous analysis of slavery as based on robbery. Even though one cannot

'own' one's fellow-man, yet Woolman did not intend to dismiss the claims of those whose wealth and social life depended on the institution of slavery. As emancipation was getting to be a reality, Woolman's thinking was moving to gradualism: slave-owners could not be forced to liberate their slaves without compensation. When one reviews Woolman's positions on this subject, one realizes that he had never been interested in forcibly depriving his fellow Quakers from their livelihood: the best proof of it is his relying from the first on wills to end slavery in a family.

The more Woolman evinced understanding toward his fellow Quakers, the more he used exacting standards of behavior toward himself. Thus he started going on his round of private visits to slave-owning Friends on foot [145], all the way to the east side of Maryland: 'by so traveling I might have a more lively feeling of the condition of the oppressed slaves[...]'. As he walked on his spiritual errands, he inclined toward leniency as regards those masters who understood they were mistaken, repented and treated their slaves well, even if they did not liberate them [147].

Still, material prosperity based on slavery kept embarrassing him [149]: 'coming amongst people who lived in outward ease and greatness, chiefly on the labor of slaves, my heart was much affected'. And he said so to the local Quakers [150]: 'Under this exercise I attended the Quarterly Meeting at Gunpowder, and in bowedness of spirit I had to express with much plainness my feelings respecting Friends living in fulness on the labors of the poor oppressed negroes'.

As emancipations multiplied in 1769, Woolman remembered he had encouraged a young free black to serve until the age of thirty, at the time he was drawing up wills [152]. He was then only following the provisions of the law [152]: 'As persons setting Negroes free in our province are bound by law to maintain them in case they have need of relief, some who scrupled keeping slaves for term of life (in the time of my youth) were wont to detain their young Negroes in their service until thirty years of age, without wages, on that account'. Filled with remorse ('to make some restitution' [153]), Woolman thought he should embark for the Caribbean and preach there. Since he had wasted this man's youth, he should now spend time in regions that were more resistant to antislavery ideas. Travelling and preaching away from an essentially redeemed Pennsylvania was Woolman's way of embodying his spiritual beliefs.

As he read Anthony Benezet's pamphlet *A Caution*, Woolman was confirmed in his denunciation of Caribbean slavery: trade between the British Caribbean and the British North American colonies was to be rejected as goods produced by slaves should not be consumed or transported by antislavery Christians. Thus Woolman started having private conversations on this subject with ship-owners plying the trade with the Caribbean. In the end, Woolman did not go to the Caribbean, probably because he was taken ill. In 1772, Woolman sailed for Britain on what was to be his last journey. This experience provided him with an opportunity to express his indignation at the sailors' working conditions and the false hopes of prosperity they placed in the slave trade [171]:

Cercles 19 (The Occasional Papers Series)/ 278

A great trade to the coast of Africa for slaves, of which I now heard frequent conversations amongst the sailors !

A great trade in that which is raised and prepared through grievous oppression !

A great trade in superfluity of workmanship, formed to please the pride and vanity of people's mind ! [172]

Indeed the journey was an opportunity for Woolman to listen to the sailors give details about their Atlantic crossings. The diary ends with Woolman crushed under the realization of how important the slave trade had become for British Quakers and the British economy as a whole [184].